

# View from Walden Puddle

**CALL ME WHEN YOU FIND AMERICA.** By G. B. Trudeau. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. Unpaginated. \$1.50

**THE FIRESIDE WATERGATE.** By Nicholas von Hoffman and Garry Trudeau. Sheed & Ward. 110 pp. \$4.95

By J. D. O'HARA

REMEMBER WHEN ADULTS preempted the comics from their offspring to follow the misdeeds of Flattop or the absurdities of Jiggs and Maggie and the current Sadie Hawkins Day race? Those innocent days when the comic pages provided mild escapist amusement and adolescent adventure for children of all ages? Ho-hum. But then it began to dawn on publishers that adults were reading the comics, and soon those adults began to notice that Senator Phineas Phogbound was like some real senators and that the comic strips were hinting at relevant ideas, especially this strip out of the Okefenokee Swamp. By the time of the McCarthy hearings and similar delights of the '50s, Pogo and Li'l Abner were previewing the freak/hardhat confrontations of the '60s, and



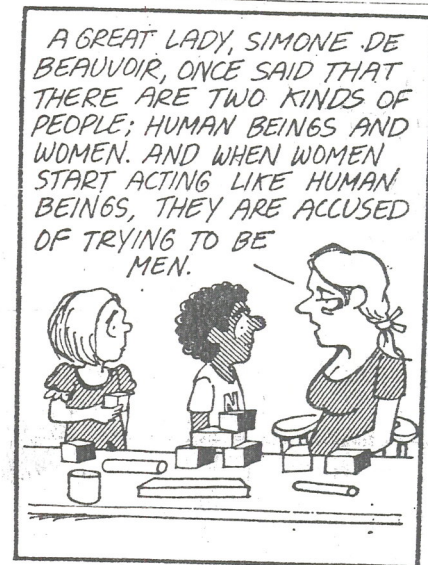
the comic strip as a continuous editorial

was in full bloom. Others joined in: The Wizard of Id, B.C., Beetle Bailey, Tumbleweeds . . . mostly written in a pseudo-childish idiom but mainly for adults.

They all turn at least occasionally and obliquely to immediate issues; but their pose is that of September Morn. Broom-Hilda drinks beer and latches after men, and the King of Id cheats and lies, but both keep a prudish distance from the front-page news. Only Beetle Bailey has succeeded in introducing a genuinely comic black character and satirizing discrimination from both sides. Most strips dodge the subject as they do politics and our Asian war (after all, many southern newspapers canceled Beetle Bailey when Lieutenant Flap appeared), although Peanuts—consistently a saccharine non-entity among these strips—shyly added a shaded kid with a completely bleached-out personality. (So far, none of the other kids has noticed his color—or anything else, except themselves.)

Meanwhile the Yale Daily News began to publish the shabbily drawn encounters of one Michael J. Doonesbury, vague adolescent liberal, with his protofascist quarterback roomie B.D., B.D.'s bubble-headed and -breasted girl Boopsie, campus radical Mark Slackmeyer, freak Zonker Harris, ghetto kid Thor (who changed his name from Rufus because "every other kid on my block is called 'Rufus.' I guess it's a cultural thing") and

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a crowd of others. They and their creator began to speak more directly about the events of the day, with edgy irony that the established strips weren't often risking and that the underground comics were too crude to match. So a nice thing happened: Doonesbury went national, became syndicated and soon appeared in over 200 newspapers. And an even nicer thing happened: Garry Trudeau lived up to his opportunity. He took on more subjects: the war, women's lib, dope, politics, race. His ear for oddities and absurdities of speech and thought sharpened, his dialogue got better and better, and even his drawing improved, a little. He managed to do what hadn't been done since the palmy days of Pogo and Li'l Abner—he offended his audiences. Indignant letters appeared in newspaper offices, and the strip was censored by some newspapers. The Hartford Times, for instance, refused to print a Watergate sequence last summer (explaining, in effect, that comics readers were more gullible than news readers), and then took to printing the strip on its editorial page.

Newspapers are transient items; happily, some Doonesbury is available in paperback. The first collection, *Still a Few Bugs in the System*, is prentice work, and *The President Is a Lot Smarter Than You Think* is transitional. *But This War Had Such Promise* and the just-published *Call Me When You Find America* contain some of his best sequences. Not all, alas; fans will seek in vain for such delights as Zonker's grass bust and trial, Joanie Caucus's divorce and Pat Nixon's appearance before the Ervin committee.

Watergate brought out, and still brings out, some of his best perceptions. Early on, he had the wit to realize that his old

cast of characters needed to be supplemented, and he took his strip directly to Washington, showing us the CREEPS, the presidential staff, the Ervin committee and the White House itself, a blank facade from which issue marvelously absurd conversations. Some of these—far too few of these—adorn the pages of *The Fireside Watergate*, along with some rather hasty one-panel cartoons done to accompany the other half of the book. That other half is an equally hasty burlesque by Washington Post columnist Nicholas von Hoffman in which the events of Watergate are reported in a jazzy style, with comic names and flourishes of imagined events, up to the point at which the Defrocked Quaker had his two faithful German shepherds, H. R. Bob and Ehrlichman, put away. At this point the narrative veers off into a black-comic apocalypse.

There are lots of funny moments in Von Hoffman's narrative, but it suffers from that sad fact plaguing all satirists nowadays: truth is sicker than fiction. From police sergeant Leerer's account of the capture ("... we responded back out to the stairwell and while Officer Barrett responded to the 9th floor, Schoffler and myself responded down to the 7th floor") to Ron Ziegler's operative and inoperative ungrammatical truths, and to almost any of the CREEPS and White House staff members, and to all of the dirty tricks, reality is simply too dazzling; these can't be improved on, even by Von Hoffman. He works hard at it, but our tragic comedian in the Oval Office has beaten him to the tape. □