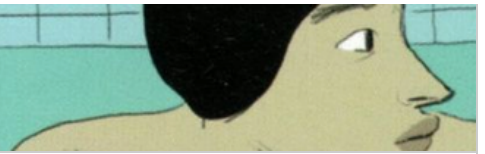


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Mel Calman on Oil

BY JAMES BAKER ON SEPTEMBER 19TH, 2011 NO COMMENTS



The late [Mel Calman \(1931-1994\)](#), co-founder of the Cartoon Art Trust, was honoured in 2006 when the relocated [Cartoon Museum](#) (London) named its temporary exhibition space 'The Calman Gallery'. Since this time 'his' walls have been graced by the works of William Hogarth, George Cruikshank, [Pont](#) (my personal favourite), [Ralph Steadman](#), [Steve Bell](#), and many more. Occasionally those walls even play host to a Calman.

It is odd how in a museum which celebrates the diversity of British cartoon art, these peculiar designs always appear incongruous to their surroundings – small, unfussy, and minimalist pockets of soft pencil sketchwork in a sea of colour and bombast. Yet this form was precisely the unpinning of Calman's brilliance – a mastery of understated satirical communication where the lightest of puns could open cavernous spaces for rhetoric and discourse.



Calman, Mel (1981) "Untitled", in *The Times*, 8 October 1981
(University of Kent: British Cartoon Archive) (c) S & C Calman

Take for example the above design where Calman, in his distinctively minimalism style, imagines oil weeping from the television screen the very moment 'THE NEWS' flashes onto the screen. This transgression is not something to be marvelled at, and neither, as the glum disposition of Calman's ever-present everyman suggests, this is something to be celebrated. There are no hoots and huzzahs at having struck oil. Oil is instead a foreboding presence.

We can of course resist opening Pandora's box (or, perhaps more appropriately, [Baldrick's](#)

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Trousers) by reaching for an obvious reading – oil was on the news a lot in 1981. But the weary resignation of Calman's protagonist begs a question which forces the box open – why is he so resigned when faced with such a dark and looming substance?

This problem allows the reader to move freely between various meanings and contexts. For it is clear that for many commentators in the early 1980s, oil was associated with volatility, both as a commodity and as a substance. The **Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)** oil embargo of October 1973 to March 1974 had exposed the delusion of cheap oil, and was followed by a further oil crisis in 1979 which effectively bookended a decade of energy concerns.

Few countries escaped without a story to tell. Not least Britain, whose political landscape, under the shadow of the three-day week and later Winter of Discontent, oscillated wildly between social-liberalism and neo-conservative protectionism in a few short years. Finally in 1981, when Calman penned this design, crude oil prices reached a peak of nearly 40 dollars per barrel, in excess of double what they were just two years previous.

So on one hand then the cartoon has an economic story to tell. Yet, as the recent furore surrounding Hurricane Katrina reminds us, narratives of oil and economics lead inexorably to considerations of the conflict between global capitalism and environmental legitimacy. 'Globalisation' was hardly a buzz-word of the early 1980, but the energy crises of the 1970s forced Europe and the United States to look outside of OPEC for sources of oil. Norway, Mexico and Nigeria become key foci of free-market expansion, causing in turn the oil glut of the 1980s.

In the case of Nigeria, where drilling had in fact begun in 1958, Shell and BP aggressively accelerated their pursuit of fresh oil reserves. This was conducted at a staggering environmental cost. Lax operation standards, particularly regarding corroded pipework, caused nearly 1.8 million barrels of oil spilt into the Gulf of Guinea between 1978 and 1981. Indeed 241 near shore spills in 1980 resulted in 600,000 barrels of oil polluting this coastline, damaging people's livelihoods and the ecosystems they depend upon for food and other resources.¹

Alongside this global narrative, Calman recalls more parochial concerns. In his design Britons are shown to be helpless as the growing pool of oil laps right up to our feet. This plays into the previous point – showing that in 1981 the global face of oil was literally brought home via the medium of televisual news.


























But this micro-narrative also functions as a reminder of a time when the environmental politics of oil were physically on Britons doorstep. On 18 March 1967 the supertanker Torrey Canyon struck rocks between the Scilly Isles and Cornwall. It was the first major commercial disaster of its kind, and Labour Prime Minister **Harold Wilson** was widely criticised by commentators at first for his inertia, as exemplified by the Garland cartoon below.



Garland, Nicholas (1967) "Untitled", in Daily Telegraph, 20 Mar 1967 (University of Kent: British Cartoon Archive) (c) Telegraph Media Group Ltd.

Once Wilson did decide to act his efforts were quickly branded as calamitous. He steered an ill-fated military clean-up operation which sought initially to disperse and later to destroy the oil slick in English waters, but ultimately resulted in a toxic combination of oil and cleaning agents wrecking the Cornish coastline.

Indeed, as **Patrick Barkham** writes, the incident is still with us today as 'living proof that big oil spills plague ecosystems for decades. Forty-three years on, the crude from the Torrey Canyon is still killing wildlife on a daily basis'.

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Calman's design touches on this cacophony of pessimism. But if his work is masterful for allowing us room to explore this multitude of perspectives, it is also masterful for allowing the reader a moment of levity while they do so. For all the darkness and provocation Calman's is not a hopeless manifesto. Instead he asks the reader to extrapolate this comic scenario onto a realist setting, and ask themselves whether the relationship humans have fostered with oil is not equally absurd.

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1. Corporate obfuscation makes precision in these matters difficult to achieve. For an environmentalist perspective on the activities of western conglomerates in Nigeria see UP International 2010 and Nwilo and Badejo 2008. ↔



About the author

James Baker has published 4 articles on this journal.

I am an Associate Lecturer in School of History at the University of Kent, Canterbury, Project Manager of the ESRC funded 'City and Region, 1400-1914' project, collaborator with the British Cartoon Archive, and lead investigator of 'Cradled in Caricature' (symposium June 2011; conference Spring 2012). In September 2010 I completed a PhD in Cartoons and Caricature at the University of Kent, Canterbury, the title of which was 'Isaac Cruikshank and the notion of British Liberty, 1783-1811'. My thesis explored liberty through fashion, gender and custom, and sought to apply economic and technological exigencies to our understanding of the processes of print production. My interests include Georgian visual satire, the Covent Garden old price riots of September 1809 to January 1810, diachronic themes with respect to the construction and communication of humour in graphic discourses between the seventeenth and late-nineteenth centuries, and the digital humanities. In what spare time is left I moonlight as a neurohumanities skeptic.

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