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## Review of *A Funny Bone That Was: Humor Between the Wars* Edited by David C. Jones

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*A Funny Bone That Was: Humor Between the Wars.* Edited by David C. Jones. Illustrated by Vance Rodewalt. Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Ltd., 1992. Foreword, illustrations. 156 pp. \$15.95 paper.

A. J. N., or "Alf," Terril, editor and manager of the *Medicine Hat News* in Alberta, Canada, created a humor column called "The

Office Cat," which ran from 1921-1951. "To every thing there is a season," says Ecclesiastes, and these seasons knew not only war and peace, drought and dust, but flappers and Prohibition, saxophones and silk stockings, automobiles and jazz. Evangelists like Billy Sunday railed against a steamy entertainment industry symbolized by Mae West and the scandal magazines, and efforts at social and political reforms of all kinds went forward, and succeeded—or failed. At any rate, Terril, "The Office Cat," saw it all and didn't miss a thing.

The man emerges through his humor; he was customarily genial, wry, and balanced. He could be saucy about flappers but also gently amused:

A hundred years ago today a wilderness  
was here;  
A man with powder in his gun went forth  
to hunt a deer.  
But now the times have changed somewhat  
Along a different plan;  
A dear with powder on her nose goes forth  
to hunt a man.

Terril was sexist, says Jones, because he "took swipes at **both** sexes": "Women's faults are many; / Men have only two— / Everything they say, and / Everything they do."

Jones provides useful historical contexts for Terril's humor; painful details about the Depression, for example, explain why most of the "jokes" about it are subdued. As Ma Joad says, however, "We're the people that live . . . we go on," and they did so, partly through laughter. "The reason there were fewer wrecks in the old horse-and-buggy days was because the driver didn't depend wholly upon his own intelligence." "Fifteen percent of school children are below normal mentally, we are told. That's too high a figure. We don't need that many members of Parliament." In giving "new edges to old saws," Terril writes, "Two pints make one cavort."

This book is useful because it reminds us there are seasons we should never forget, and

delightful because it shows the irrepressible human spirit. Even the exertions of "professional reformers" can't stifle the voice of the individual. "The soapbox orator was haranguing the crowd on the dangers of the devil. 'The devil is chained to the wall,' he cried, 'but he can step forwards and get you; he can step backwards and get you; he can step to the right or left and get you, if you do any mischief.' Then a voice from the crowd piped: 'The damn thing might as well be loose.'"

Maybe he was.

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