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POGO'S POLITICAL PROTEST

The storyline begins in 1953 with the introduction of Mole McAroney who arrives in the swamp seeking to root out what is and isn’t “American” and which creatures of the swamp are “native” or “migratory.” These were Disney-style funny animal strips, but Kelly’s myopic germophobe Mole couldn’t have been mistaken for mere comedy. He advocates in one strip the burning of a book that does not agree with his worldview. Even couched in the established visual world of Pogo, the politics in question would have been unmistakable, but it was the subsequent introduction of Simple J Malarkey, a character directly lampooning, and resembling, recently re-elected Senator Joseph McCarthy, that truly created controversy.

Despite some attempts at censorship, the strip was popular, so it endured. In a 2003 article for the Journal of American Culture, “Subversion in the Swamp: Pogo and the Folk in the McCarthy Era,” Eric Dussere writes: “Kelly’s subversive activities were made possible through his invocation of peculiarly American mythologies about ‘‘the folk,’’ through a representation of leftist politics as good old American common sense.” His skill as a gag cartoonist and storyteller didn’t hurt, as the strips are formally amusing and internally cohesive. Any child could follow along, and laugh at, the stories without the first idea of current events, though that is surely what made them so subversive. Of course these “leftist politics” were simply a repudiation of McCarthyism, a position that is hardly considered radical today. Part of what stands out to me now is that Pogo was so unique in calling out obvious miscarriages of justice. But the comics page by the 1950’s had developed into an anodyne form of entertainment, so much so that Kelly’s allegories periodically landed Pogo on the editorial page, just as Gary Trudeau’s Doonesbury would several decades later. But despite occasional banishment to the editorial page, Kelly returned to political stories over the strip’s remaining 2 decades, satirizing J Edgar Hoover and Spiro Agnew, among others.

The Mole McAroney/Simple J Malarkey storyline could be a good way to discuss satire and political rhetoric in a historical context that has implications for, but does not directly address, some of our current issues. Kelly also has the formal chops to be worth studying on his artistic merits; the strips are expertly fashioned, providing potential lessons in caricature, basic cartooning, lettering, dialogue, composition, serial narrative, and visual storytelling.

Here is a link to a blog with readable scans of the strips: <http://dallapoza.blogspot.com/2009/07/1.html>

Fantagraphics Books has republished these strips recently in Pogo vol. 3: Evidence to the Contrary, which is widely available.