

## Little Nemo

By Daniel Eagan

*Excerpted by permission of the author from America's Film Legacy 2009-2010: A Viewer's Guide to the 50 Landmark Movies Added to the National Film Registry in 2009-2010, Bloomsbury Academic, 2011*

Winsor McCay was not only the most advanced animator of his time, he was also a canny marketer who knew how to promote himself and his products in newspapers, vaudeville, and on film. McCay didn't invent comic strips, but he was the first to realize their full potential, both artistically and economically. He brought the medium to a level that illustrators today are still trying to match. Similarly, McCay wasn't the first to perform a "quick sketch" stage act. In 1894, J. Stuart Blackton drew what he called "Lightning Sketches," accompanying them with patter. But it was McCay who developed the idea into a viable touring act, working up a narrative framework that could be inserted into vaudeville programs.

Finally, McCay wasn't the first to use animation in films, but he was the first to show the world the form's artistic and narrative possibilities. In a sense, animation had been an important technique almost since the invention of motion pictures. Stop-motion animation allowed filmmakers to move objects to simulate a beheading or pretend that a character had been thrown from a train. They could move furniture, make objects appear or disappear, even transform a toadstool into a chorus girl.

For his stage act, Blackton offered jokes and comments while he drew caricatures on a sketchpad. He performed part of his act in three short pieces filmed for the Edison company in July or August, 1896. The films necessarily had to dispense with his stage patter, reducing his act to the equivalent of a sidewalk portrait artist whose main talent is speed. Still, "Edison Drawn by 'World' Artist" (Blackton was a cartoonist at the time for the "New York World" newspaper) became enough of a hit for the artist to bring it to Keith's Union Square Theater, a top vaudeville stage. It was after showing the film that Blackton and his partner Albert E. Smith purchased their own camera and projector — the beginnings of what would evolve into the Vitagraph studio.



Winsor McCay's hand draws Impie, The Princess and Little Nemo.

French illustrator Émile Cohl used animation somewhat differently. An admirer of the famous caricaturist André Gill, Cohl participated in various art movements, like the "Incoherents," that made fun of traditional art, often transforming it with new irreverent elements. In "Fantasmagorie," finished in 1908, Cohl took like drawings based on stick figures and geometric shapes and transformed them from one object to another — from a head to a toy, for example. In his drawings, he could imply depth through the use of perspective, but like Blackton he characteristically worked on one plane. Cohl's drawings were "flat" in the sense that he didn't try to move them forward or backward in space.

When Cohl and Blackton were making their films, McCay was experimenting with animating objects in a different medium, the comic strip. McCay's first successful strip was "Little Sammy Sneeze." In this and its follow-up, "Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend," McCay toyed with sequential action, distorted shapes, and even altered the frame of the panels holding his drawings. "Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend" was so popular that Edwin S. Porter directed a live-action version for Edison in 1906. (This title was added to the Registry in 2015.)

McCay's masterpiece was "Little Nemo in Slumberland,"

an all-color, full-page strip that debuted in the New York "Herald" on October 15, 1905. In "Nemo" episodes, McCay drew fabulously intricate worlds that bordered on surrealism: buildings that could walk, a cavernous dragon's mouth used as a carriage, people flipped out of proportion as if by fun-house mirrors. The strip featured recurring characters, including Nemo, who dressed like Little Lord Fauntleroy; the Princess; Impie, a politically incorrect jungle savage; Flip, a green-faced, cigar-smoking clown who started out as Nemo's enemy but later became his friend.; Dr. Phil; and others.

On top of his work for the "Herald," McCay began performing a "lightning sketch" act in vaudeville in 1906. (Earning \$500 a week, he performed on a bill with W.C. Fields.) In 1907, Klaw & Erlanger announced that they were mounting a musical adaptation of "Little Nemo" on Broadway, with a book by Harry B. Smith and music by Victor Herbert. Little Nemo was played by Gabriel Wiegel, a midget who previously starred as "Buster Brown." A critical success but not a financial one when it opened in 1908, the play toured for two years. When McCay was prevented from taking his vaudeville act to London, he left the "Herald" to work for William Randolph Hearst.

At some point in 1909, McCay also began to think about animated films. He later said he was inspired by his son Robert's flip books, but it's probable he had seen films by Cohl and Blackton. He ended up working with Blackton, and befriended Cohl when the French animator worked in the Eclair studio's New York office. In his study of McCay, animator John Canemaker suggests that McCay may have turned to film as a way to spruce up his vaudeville act.

McCay signed a contract with Vitagraph, and had Blackton direct his first film, which was modeled after Blackton's "Humorous Phases of Funny Faces" (1906). In the live action portion of his film, McCay is enjoying drinks at a club when he bets disbelieving visitors that he can finish the 4,000 drawings needed for an animated film in one month. (The onlookers include cartoonist George McManus, who created "Bringing Up Father," and the florid John Bunny, perhaps Vitagraph's biggest star at the time.)

Animation takes up only four minutes of the eleven-minute film, but it is animation of an originality and vigor that had never been seen on the screen before. McCay first featured three of his "Little Nemo in Slumberland" characters: Nemo, Impie, and Flip. They stand in a row and proceed to tumble, gyrate, somersault, and stretch with lifelike precision. Suddenly animation has depth, and operates on more than one plane. Canemaker notes the work's "naturalistic movements, realistic timing, and a feeling of weight in the line drawings." Nemo later "draws" the Princess, who comes to life; they depart in the mouth of a dragon.

Vitagraph released the film on April 8, 1911, and by April 12, McCay was screening it in his vaudeville act. Reviews were glowing. "Motion Picture World" called it "an admirable piece of work," adding, "It should be popular everywhere." McCay was so happy with the public response that he paid to have his prints hand-colored.

In 1909, the "Little Nemo in Slumberland" strip was perhaps more popular with artists than the public, but its influence has been pervasive, in characters like Ojo the Unlucky from L. Frank Baum's "Oz" books; Maurice Sendak's "In the Night Kitchen;" references on "The Simpsons;" popular songs by groups like Genesis; and animation by Hiyo Miyazaki. McCay's next films, particularly "Gertie the Dinosaur," contain further breakthroughs in animation.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Daniel Eagan has worked for Warner Bros., MGM, and other studios as a researcher and story analyst. He edited HBO's Guide to Movies on Videocassette and Cable TV (Harper Collins) and MGM: When the Lion Roars (Turner Publishing), to which he also contributed articles. His work has appeared in Smithsonian, The Nation, The Hollywood Reporter, and other outlets.*