

Thomas Bewick Engraver & the Performance of Woodblocks Graham Williams, The Florin Press

297 × 215mm. 286 pages, 437 illustrations. £125.00. Prices include postage, packing and insurance within the UK. Postage for orders from overseas will be quoted individually.

SIMON BRETT

Thomas Bewick's *Hoopoe* is reproduced twelve times in this book, representing twelve different proofs or printings. As what distinguishes each one is pointed out, you can see it on the page. Every time. The beautiful layout of the book by Susan Wightman at Libanus Press deserves all praise. She has married the author's careful photographs and the press-work of Hampton Printing of Bristol to achieve almost unbelievably sensitive reproduction and she matches image to text seamlessly. The book could not exist without that three-way teamwork. Partly an affectionate account of Bewick's formative years and partly the record of Graham Williams' deeply researched fifty-year obsession with finding the perfect way to print his work, this is the second remarkable book about wood engraving to appear this year. It is as different as can be from Jim Horton on commercial engraving, but the two writers share a fascination with how work was actually done in particular circumstances.

Not that Bewick was uncommercial. His work-list for November 1774 – September 76 (he was 23 in '76) is given here, it consists overwhelmingly of engraving arms and cyphers on everything from sauceboats to saddle nails (whatever they were). His wood engraving was mostly done after hours, by candle-light when necessary. Graham Williams calls him '*an artist among artisans*'. A cult figure in his lifetime, he has been so ever since, quite over and above his position of artistic and historical importance. One may be a follower of modern engraving without ever encountering the specialist researches of Bewickiana; and vice-versa. This book must surely be a major contribution to that literature (which, to prove my point, I am ignorant of, so am unable to judge its place there). It also crosses the divide. If artists of today want to learn anything from Bewick's foundational handling of the medium, this is where they will find it.

In his chapters about Bewick's apprenticeship and early years Graham writes as one who has trawled the archives and has also read widely the researches of others, bringing primary and secondary sources fluently together. Though to the hand the book feels as solid as a small paving slab – and about as heavy – its narrative voice is as light as a soufflé. The reader bounds along, hardly realizing how much information is being absorbed, whether it is a detailed examination of Bewick's work on *Gay's Fables*, largely done while still an apprentice (early evidence of the gifted illustrator) or a joke about adding bread and onions to your oil when making ink, which prompts the observation that history is often written by the observer rather than the participant.

Already though, he has taken us through Bewick's toolbox as it survives and described the

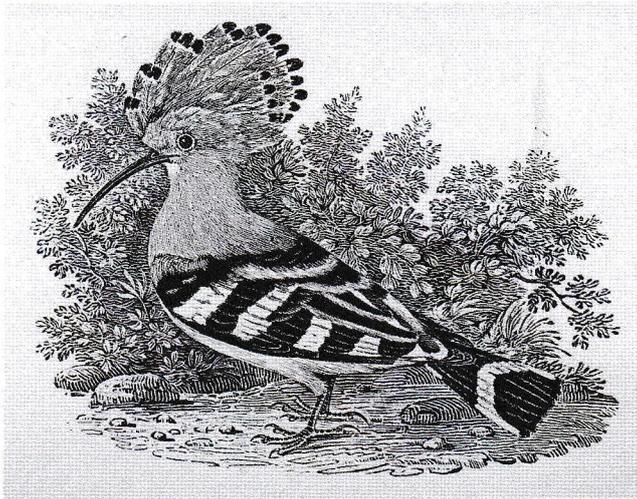
tools we all use – the only part of the book where, as an engraver, I found myself thinking ‘But I know all this’; the engraving procedures are almost all exactly what we do today – and has begun to describe his system of lowering. The book becomes more and more a personal quest as it goes on, the research increasingly by practical experiment. Blocks are examined in slanting light, printed on various papers and with different tympan. Degrees of lowering are measured, in fractions of millimetres. The effect – the block’s performance in the resulting print – is clear. The development of presses, of paper (a ‘galloping history’) and of ink is gone into. Graham worked through over 40 recipes for ink, seeking the right degrees of blackness and viscosity (he left out the onions). He is modest in what he claims to know but forthright in his opinions when sure. I have always thought underlay was the sophisticated part of make-ready, what the grownups in print did, but no: ‘*never anywhere near as effective as overlays, it is a sloppy, shortcut practice*’. I’m relieved to know it.

Grahams’ activities may occasionally seem pedantic but the book is never dull. It is ambitious – the summing-up of a life’s work, of hands-on experience, of extraordinary attention to detail – but never exhausting (compare Richard-Gabriel Rummonds’ definitive, exhaustive *Printing on the Iron Handpress*). Critical of much nineteenth-century press-work, Graham only just stops short of saying, so far as fine printing goes, today ‘You’ve never had it so good’.

That may be certainly be said of the presentation of the engravings, both in Graham’s printing of them and in the reproduction of those prints in the book. Comparing them with Reynolds Stone’s collotype reproductions (1953) they seem mark-for-mark identical, almost; yet there is a greater richness here, tones sliding into tones like glissandi on a piano, a colouristic grandeur that draws one back to look again. The reproduction of these photos (for that is what they are) takes account of the colour of the paper on which the impression was made and hence of the ink as well. Bewick’s black and white images, processed in colour, have never looked better. Jim Horton says that when wood engraving won out over photography in the commercial world, it was because it dealt with tone as a line-block rather than in half-tone, and so preserved the crisp detail needed for advertising even in the poorest printing conditions. Graham Williams treating Bewick, the commercial engraver, as the artist he also was, moves in the other direction, towards perfect printing conditions.

Faint pencilled letters on a ‘prentice proof allow him to imagine Beilby leaning over Tom’s shoulder and saying ‘*Not like that, lad, like this. That’s how you draw a D...*’. We, his readers, seem to be at the great engraver’s shoulder too. Seeing what Bewick did in planning his lowerings to various depths leads to recognising the clear intentionality of his work. We see how he saw the world, in graded tones receding in space. When a subject was light in colour, he would scoop a shallow depression in the middle of the block and engrave into that. He wanted the drawing he worked from coloured so he could respond in black and white to that colour. He engraved his make-ready into the block. Time and again the result is to ‘make the figure stand out from the background’, a simple enough aim but also a metaphor for all our lives. Artists take simple truths and make them profound by taking them very seriously.

One does not have to want to engrave like Bewick or make images like his to be able to learn from watching his hands and mind at work. Graham Williams has enabled us to do that to an astonishing degree by his close reading of the wood. He even gives clues, in Bewick’s training in



Hoopoe Thomas Bewick 58 × 80mm



The Fisherman Thomas Bewick 65 × 90mm

rococo ornament – ‘scrowls’ he called them – as to why he drew as he did, though the evolution of styles is really outside his brief. It’s a costly book by everyday standards. But it is unique, a phenomenon. For many engravers, and for non-engravers who want to understand history from a participant’s point of view, it will be essential and well worth its weight.

Graham’s experiments cannot be confined to just one book. He is also publishing two other items, a fine press portfolio of papers and a book on paper:

A Collection of Printing from Woodblocks a diversity of papers printed from the original woodblocks

This collection of prints is the result of a long preoccupation with everything involved in giving life to woodblocks. It began with Thomas Bewick’s blocks and expanded to include older blocks and contemporary wood engravings. There is a real delight in seeing an image well printed and sitting happily on carefully chosen paper.

The edition is of seventy-five collections. Every collection includes multiple examples of all nine designs on a diversity of papers, the exact numbers TBC, and the hand-printed eight-page booklet of Notes.

Working backwards, thirty-five collections numbered 41-75 contain 33 prints on 18 different papers. £485.00.

Twenty-five collections numbered 16-40 contain 55 prints on 29 different papers. £865.00. Fifteen special collections numbered 1-15 are each contained in a drop back box, nos. 6-15 contain 70 prints on 33 different papers. £1,355.00, nos. 1-5 contain 89 prints on 41 different papers. £1,995.00

Understanding Paper assessment and permanence for artists and fine printers, with a chapter on ink

If we value our work we should have respect for what it sits on. For this book, thirty-four of the papers involved in *A Collection of Printing from Woodblocks* were assessed and half of them analysed by two independent laboratories: thirteen European handmade papers, a dozen mould-made papers and eight machine made, but much of the book is concerned with what we can assess ourselves.

There will be a hardback edition, an, affordable paperbound edition intended for students and a few special copies, hand-bound. Further details TBC.

For further updated details of all three books, or to order please see the website below

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