

A Collection of Printing From Woodblocks on a Diversity of Papers

by Graham Williams

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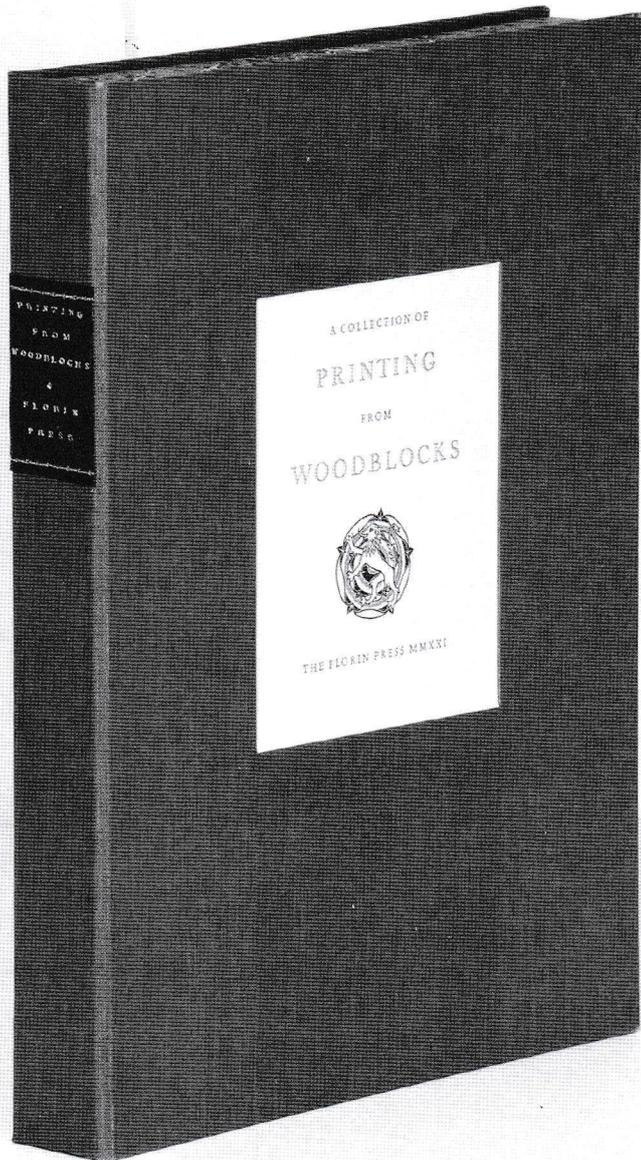
This is the third and last-to-be-published panel of Graham Williams' 2021 triptych – *Thomas Bewick, Engraver, & the Performance of Woodblocks* (see *Multiples 50 and 51*), a weighty and expensive volume; *Understanding Paper* (*Multiples 52*), a paperback *vade mecum*; and now, *A Collection of Printing from Woodblocks*, a limited edition portfolio of loose sheets in a handsome solander box.

The box opens to a neat stack of 8 specimen pages of type and image, each printed on clearly different papers; most consist of an aphorism and two engravings. The number of papers and sheets varies; from box 1 with 96 sheets testing 40 papers through four variations, to box 75 with 35 sheets testing 20 papers; I'm looking at no.18 which has 61 sheets and 31 papers. Sounds complicated but it's really just 'the more you pays the more you gets'.

What do we get? To take but one example, the first page (with, in fact, just one engraving) printed on paper number 27: held in a slanting light, the edges of the deeply impressed letters sparkle like a Schubertian brook, glitteringly legible. Bewick's wood engraving *The Fox and the Briar*, on the other hand, is deprived by this laid paper of the full black which would make it sparkle too. Papers 31 and 36 sustain a better black but at the price of being fractionally heavier prints overall (distant trees are tonally closer to nearer ones), not helped by the cool colour of the papers. Printed on papers 34 and 35, the sky and distant trees sink back into paleness, the space opens up, the fox escapes through rich foreground foliage based in a deep black, and the huntsman is tonally set exactly in the middle ground. That's papers 27, 31, 34, 35 and 36. 34 is a warm white which seems so right as to be self-effacing; the cream of 35 warms the whole scene. 35 is Basingwerk Parchment, no longer made, 34 is Canaletto, from Cordenons in Italy. A booklet identifies the papers, blocks and typefaces.

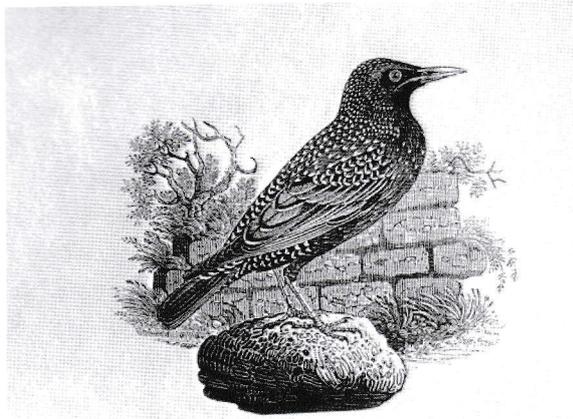
Now imagine six or seven variations on each of the eight pages, amounting to 61 sheets, each one of which can be directly compared with the 60 others. Consider what an education for the eyes that is.

We cannot reproduce these subtleties with the technology used for *Multiples*. At a price, they are astonishingly well carried over into reproductions in *Thomas Bewick, Engraver* (*Multiples 50*). However, *Printing from Woodblocks* really shows that the achievement of nineteenth century engravers is unsurpassable and that relief printing is a sort of absolute. However digital technology



may enable us to print things we have not been able to print before; the relief printer's impress will never be seen off by the screen printer's wipe.

This impress, of block and of type, can be felt on both sides of the paper in most cases. 'You print with pressure, not with ink' as the late Michael Mitchell put it. 'Very stiff highly pigmented ink renders tones from fine engraving with less ink squash' is Graham's version. The stone on which Bewick's *Starling* sits is so deeply impressed that it becomes a mound; side-lighting reveals a third dimension. Graham Williams proves that printing as hard as that into damp paper can still yield the delicacy Bewick's engraving requires.



PAPER

shines through the printing

carries the light

These sheets deepen the meaning of the word 'proof'. Deriving directly from Graham's experiments which answer the questions which arose in printing Bewick, they do not just *report* the answers, as *Understanding Paper* does: they *are* the answer – trial, evidence and verdict – in themselves. One has the feeling of standing behind the printer's shoulder, watching him pursue perfection and receiving each sheet from his hands as it comes off the press. What they offer is *proof* – some papers have allowed him to find perfection, while others haven't. When they accused Michelangelo of trifling with details, 'Trifles make perfection', he is said to have replied, 'and perfection' he added, 'is no trifle'. Not all engravers or even printers aim for the sort of perfection Graham Williams has aspired to. This is a production to be bought and studied by those that do; and a vivid example for the rest of us of what can be achieved.