Make-Ready – An essential skill for wood engravers and letterpress printers
by Graham Williams

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I don't think I'm the only one whose initial impression of 'make-ready' (the process of raising or lowering elements of a block to improve definition) was an arcane and even mysterious business. As one who couldn't tell her underlays from her overlays, the need for simple and clear instruction was obvious. A reassuring tone to guide the beginner and demystify the process was also needed – and that is exactly what Graham Williams provides in this exemplary account.

By taking the reader on a step by step journey from preparing the press to assembling and applying the make-readies, he has succeeded in making the whole process understandable and accessible.

For the complete beginner or for an experienced practitioner, the aim is the same: 'to allow the block to perform the magic engraved in it.'

To create this magic, you do need a press, and the first chapter contains a clear, well-illustrated description of the preparation required, using an 1828 Albion as an example. This provides a level surface to allow you to build up pressure on certain areas of the block by applying layers of thin paper to the back (underlays) or above the paper (overlays) thus varying the density of the impression itself.

Having established the basic process of how to use make-ready, the rest of the book is devoted to describing the various approaches adopted by wood engravers and their own interpretations of the basic idea.

Starting with Bewick and his development of lowering, the rest of the book works chronologically through examples of make-readies devised by some of the great engravers of the 20th century and finishes with some of the leading members of the Society of Wood Engravers today.

If, like me, you were a little unsure about venturing down this particular path I can't do better than to quote the words of the man himself:

> 'What I showed was simple enough, understanding what make-ready
> does takes the experience of doing it.'

In summary this is a masterly distillation of some 200 years of printers' experience, most of which I have never seen written down before.