

1. *A Neglected and Degraded Art*

LATE ONE MORNING in the summer of 1781, Horace Walpole, his complexion displaying its usual unhealthy pallor and his swollen ankles and feet lapped in his favourite ‘bootikins’, was carried fussing and powdered and perfumed into his library. His esteemed Swiss manservants ensconced him comfortably behind the ornate ormolu escritoire and were peremptorily waved away. He was the kingdom’s supreme aesthete and arbiter of good taste and for the last quarter of a century had been a martyr to the gout.

Sunlight streamed fitfully through the stained-glass windows of his renowned country house at Strawberry Hill, twelve miles west of London. It reflected upon the glazed bookcases – shaped (according to the spirit of the Gothick) like medieval cathedral choir stalls – and picked out the rich morocco bindings in their serried ranks within. Through one window, flung wide to admit a breath of fresh air, could be glimpsed manicured lawns stretching almost to the Thames which here ran sweetly, a few skiffs and ferryboats conveying passengers downstream for Richmond, Kew, Westminster and the City.

Walpole was not there to admire the view. The booksellers of London were clamouring for a new edition of his *Catalogue of Engravers*, previously only published in very limited editions at his private press at Strawberry Hill. In truth it was hardly Walpole’s work at all, the title page clearly announcing ‘Digested by Mr Horace Walpole from the MSS of Mr George Vertue’. As for the introductory matter however, that was Walpole’s alone. The original edition had been compiled in less than ten weeks in the late summer and early autumn of 1762; revisions were now called for. One glaring omission concerned wood engraving; it was barely mentioned. This Walpole now proposed to rectify.

Apart from the arrival of a new lapdog called Tonton, the summer had been a trial, Walpole himself recording that there had been ‘two or three mastiff days, for they

were fiercer than our common dog-days'.¹ Moreover he was more than usually piqued with the gout, especially in his right hand. By early September one finger had 'opened with an explosion of chalk-stones: five have come out, and it is still big with another'.² To add to his woes, dictation was out of the question: Thomas Kirgate, his faithful printer-secretary, was enjoying a rare leave of absence in Warwickshire. Bearing all this in mind, it will be appreciated that Walpole was not in the best of humours when, struggling to hold his pen, he proceeded not so much to write on wood engraving but rather to write it off:

I have said, and ... shall say little of wooden cuts; that art was never executed in any perfection in England... Whoever desires to know more of cutting on wood should consult a very laborious work ... called *Traité historique & pratique de la graveure en bois*, par Papillon, Paris 1766. The author will probably not, as he wishes, persuade the world to return to wooden cuts; but he gives examples of vignettes to books in that manner, which ought to make editors ashamed of the slovenly stamps that are now used for the fairest editions.³

To underline his disenchantment with the topic, Walpole relegated this passage to a footnote. The body of his text remained aloof from a discussion of wood engraving. The subject was beneath him.

Those readers who, following his condescending advice, perused the *Traité Historique* of the distinguished wood engraver Jean Papillon would have found this art, his art, castigated as

un Art si négligé, avili & presque méprisé d'un chacun, autant par les mauvaises productions de plusieurs ignorans, la plupart originairement Ouvriers de la Casse & du Barreau qui s'en veulent toujours mêler, que par les mauvaises impressions qui se faisoient & se font presque toujours des Gravures en bois. †⁴

Papillon held wood engraving dear to his heart and his provocative remarks (made in 1738, but not published for another thirty-two years) were intended to encourage its development, not stifle it. Determined to show engravings on wood could be as finely realised as copperplates, his own cuts are extraordinarily skilful but suffer from being highly formalised and from being executed upon the side grain rather than the much denser end-grain of boxwood. Lacking vitality and with negligible dramatic or narrative content, they rarely involve the viewer but remain essentially and dutifully decorative in the French 'rocaille' tradition. Papillon's ambitions were also frustrated

† 'such a neglected and degraded Art, despised by almost everybody as much for the shoddy output of many ignoramuses (the majority Crate and Barrel Makers in origin, always eager for a slice of the action) as for the wretched impressions that they seem to have taken – and almost always continue to take – from Wood Engravings.'



St Nicholas' Church looking up the Side from Sandhill, Newcastle,
engraved after Thomas Allom, 1834

by the still developing printing and papermaking techniques of the day, which seldom favoured the minute detail of his highly-wrought images and devices.

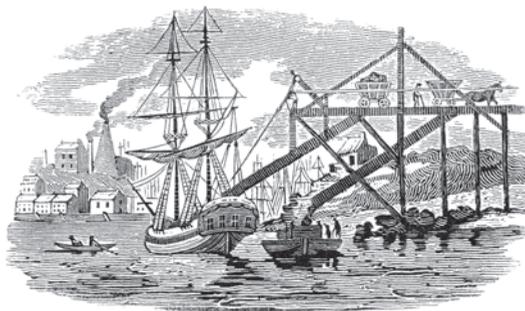
As Walpole was putting pen to paper, away to the north in a setting as far removed from the neo-Gothick confection of Strawberry Hill as it is possible to imagine, a broad-backed young tradesman who was as stalwart as Walpole was puny but whose face was much pitted with the pox, crouched at his workbench. He was bent intently over a rectangular fudge-coloured block of Turkey boxwood not much larger than a match-box. A pencil design for one of Aesop's fables – the fox and grapes perhaps – had been lightly sketched upon its smooth, densely-grained upper surface and it was intended to illustrate an inexpensive child's spelling-book or 'reading-easy'. Such educational books were then greatly sought by a newly emerging lower-middle class of respectable shopkeepers, tradesmen, artisans and craftsmen (and most emphatically, their children). Accordingly provincial printers the length and breadth of the country, were making a good living by satisfying this demand.⁵

The engraver, for such was the young man at his bench, eased the block this way and that upon its support, a lead-shot filled leather cushion, effortlessly cutting, hatching, shading and 'lowering' the design.⁶ His big hands, 'as hard & enlarged as those of a blacksmith',⁷ held the block and guided the graver (or burin) about its business as if by second nature. He whistled as he worked. Compared to the bottle moulds, coffin plates, steel stamps, bookbinder's letters and brass clock faces which his twelve-hour working day was spent engraving (and which littered his work bench), this was

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a joy. Here no manicured lawns or strutting peacocks greeted the open, unshuttered window. Directly in front, soaring above clustered pantiled roofs and their projecting spouts, rose the distinctive lantern-topped spire of St Nicholas' Church;⁸ from the windows at the back of the workshop loomed the forbidding bulk of the old castle and narrow cobbled streets and chares – 'almost always covered with smoak'⁹ – could be glimpsed stepping precipitously down to the Close, the Sandhill and the Key, beside which flowed the 'coaly Tyne' with its staithes, colliers and keels.

This was Newcastle. The engraver upon wood was Thomas Bewick. Within a decade he would – untutored – raise wood engraving to new heights. In his hard yet sensitive hands, a maligned and discredited craft would achieve the level of art, a quintessentially English art. Modest in scale, closely observed, sympathetic to the human condition, Bewick's engravings celebrate the everyday but are far from commonplace. Occasionally brutal, frequently earthy, mischievous but never frivolous, bitter-sweet but never saccharine, Bewick's images embrace 'truth and its everyday paraphernalia'.¹⁰ Like Hogarth, he was driven by a vocation to 'entertain and Improve the mind'.¹¹ Like Stubbs, he believed 'nature ... is always superior to art'.¹² Like Constable, he found his art 'under every hedge and in every lane'.¹³ But unlike any of them, his intended audience was the common man.





2. *Making his Mark*

FOR THOSE WITH EYES TO SEE, the seeds of Bewick's greatness had already taken root, aided by his great good fortune in having been in the right place at the right time. Nothing whatever in his background would have suggested Bewick's later course in life. The lively, not to say wayward son of a respected Eltringham smallholder who (like his father before him¹) had taken the lease on a modest landsale colliery at Mickley² (and actively worked it as a manager³), Bewick had been expected to earn his living betimes; amongst his earliest memories 'was that of lying for hours on his side between dismal strata of coal, by a glimmering and dirty candle, plying the pick with his little hands'.⁴ But his father, as well as consigning him to dismal shifts in his mine, also opened his eyes to 'a most ardent admiration of nature in all her parts', albeit 'in a simple untaught way'. Early every morning, Bewick senior would return from his rounds of the property for breakfast, over which he would 'recount all, that he had seen on his rambles, describing in such glowing and rapturous terms, the economy of nature, & the habits of nature's creatures'.⁵ So it was to the influence of Bewick's father, a man close to the soil – both above and below ground – that a later commentator close to the Bewick family attributed the young Thomas Bewick's first stirrings as a naturalist.

In the meantime however, Bewick spent much of his childhood playing truant, running free along the banks of the Tyne and stoutly resisting all attempts to rein him in. His favourite summer pursuits, sometimes alone, at other times with kindred spirits of the village, numbered fishing, birds-nesting and climbing trees. In winter he enjoyed herding sheep, amongst which was his own small flock. His early freedom engendered a sturdy sense of independence, of self-reliance and confidence in his abilities and judgement which he was never to lose. He grew to be a strapping boy, unafraid to settle disagreements with his fists, a redoubtable defender of his beliefs and a formidable opponent of injustice. Beneath the unprepossessing exterior, however, a perceptive and reflective personality was unfolding. If he was passionate about fishing he was equally so about drawing, or what he termed 'a propensity of mind of