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R E V I E W

Richard T. Godfrey, *Printmaking in Britain: A General History from Its Beginnings to the Present Day*

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the end." And, finally, the analysis finds significance in the very fact that the data are non-significant. If the first movement and the second movement had each contained exactly twenty-six rhymes, it is hard to imagine that Wittreich would have chided Milton for a lack of subtlety.

It is the duty of the reviewer to bring up such

questions, but it is also the duty of the scholar to push his thesis to its limits. If *Visionary Poetics* occasionally oversteps the bounds of the convincing, in the process it also discovers a number of significant connections and cites a wealth of valuable material. Not only Milton scholars, but specialists in Blake and the Romantic period as well should find this study stimulating and rewarding.

Richard T. Godfrey. *Printmaking in Britain, A General History from Its Beginnings to the Present Day.*

Oxford: Phaidon Press Ltd. New York: Dutton, 1978. 224 pp., 168 illus. \$24.50. £9.95.

Reviewed by Andrew Wilton

It is hard to believe that Richard Godfrey's book is the first to cover the subject of British printmaking as a whole from its origins in the woodcuts published by Caxton and Wynkyn de Worde to the present day. There have been numerous accounts of special aspects of the print, particular processes or periods, and catalogues of the work of individual artists; European surveys, like A. M. Hind's *History of Engraving and Etching* of 1908, have dealt very fairly with the principal masters (though even Hind limits himself to only two techniques). But never before has it been possible to read uninterrupted and undistracted the story of the print in the British Isles as a cultural achievement worthy of independent consideration.

PRINTMAKING IN BRITAIN

A GENERAL HISTORY FROM
ITS BEGINNINGS TO THE PRESENT DAY

BY

Richard T. Godfrey



It is an achievement of great interest and importance. The British school has not perhaps been in the van of European art, for the most part, but its significance for both Europe and America in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century is perfectly clear, and at that time the British were, of all nations, most assiduous in disseminating their culture through the medium of the print. They developed and exploited new processes; their artists evolved distinctive relationships with engravers in response to the economic conditions created by rapid industrial and colonial expansion. The mass production and popular appeal of the print are perfect mirrors of the predominant characteristics of the new middle-class democracy, and it might fairly be said that the print is the art form which

most accurately sums up the needs and tastes of that society.

Certainly the British have produced an immense variety of prints, in a great range of techniques, and treated a correspondingly wide array of subjects. The problems of presenting such a diverse mass of material are formidable. Should one simply list all the artists with whom one wishes to deal, and discuss their work individually? Should one investigate movements, fashions, technical developments? Is every practitioner to be mentioned regardless of importance, or are only the most eminent names to be cited? Mr. Godfrey has chosen what may be described as a modified version of Hind's approach. He attempts a full account, written in narrative form, in which a large number of artists are dealt with in groups or individually depending on their importance, while the salient technical developments are summarized as they crop up. Although the list of names is inevitably a selection, it is far from being obtrusively discriminatory: there are few people missing from this account that one would wish to see included on any score other than that of total comprehensiveness. The lover of sporting prints will complain that James Pollard and a number of similar figures have been ignored; this is a genre that the author explicitly omits as "mainly decorative"--a decision with which one will either sympathize or not. Since his field is decidedly more limited than Hind's it is easier for Mr. Godfrey to sustain the continuity of narrative; he does not adopt Hind's device of indicating the artists as he deals with them by means of marginal titles, which makes his book rather less easy to use as a work of quick reference, but much more enjoyable as informative reading. There is in any case an index of all the artists mentioned, as well as a good selected bibliography and a perhaps rather too brief glossary of technical terms and processes.

The subject is tackled directly and logically in broad periods, each of which forms a chapter. The first treats the origins of British printmaking, the Elizabethans and the foreign engravers on whom they relied for inspiration and example. The "Native Tradition" proper Mr. Godfrey deems to have begun with that most endearing of all "foreign" engravers, Wenceslaus Hollar, and his successors in the second half of the seventeenth century. Thereafter the early eighteenth century, "The Age of Hogarth," and the late eighteenth century form two chapters, and the nineteenth century is similarly divided into halves. The twentieth century is the subject of the final chapter, which he entitles "The Limited Edition." It is in some ways unfortunate that he has felt the necessity to invent titles like this, for one cannot really hit on a phrase which will adequately comprehend all that one has to say about, for instance, the romantic period: Chapter five is "Visions and Caricatures"--a fine encapsulation of the art of Blake, Fuseli, Palmer, Gillray and Cruikshank (though only by a willing suspension of disbelief do we accept that these are all artists essentially of the early nineteenth century), but hardly a clear signpost to Constable, Bonington or Bewick.

But this is a small disadvantage beside the readability of the chapters themselves. When the text consists almost exclusively of names and dates with brief and much condensed accounts of lives and works, the first essential is a lively pace and a vivid command of language. Each artist is to be characterized in a few words which must hit their mark at once or merge into an inert mass of hopelessly dull prose. Mr. Godfrey has the happy gift of being able to bring a particular style, an individual artistic temperament, alive with a minimum of pithy phrases, and this is really what makes his method succeed. When he describes the woodcuts of Ricketts and Shannon, for example, as "beautifully cut outlines, accentuated by occasional flurries of sloping lines, defining the skinny little figures in the grip of exquisitely fretful passions," he evokes sharply both the mood and the technique of these works. Such crisp concreteness is amplified by well-selected but not over-profuse quotation. There is a restraint about the whole exercise which is very satisfying; an enormous subject is compressed into small space and yet we feel that something useful is added to what we already know. This is largely because much of the material is, if not in itself new, placed in fresh perspective by the very nature of the work. The crowding of artists together, especially in the illustrations, produces juxtapositions that greatly enrich one's understanding of what was achieved: all the variety and contrast of the British school as a whole is to be found here.

The specific merits of engraving, etching and mezzotint cannot of course be adequately reproduced by means of halftone plates, and the numerous illustrations can serve at best only as reminders of the images themselves. In general the standard of reproduction is fairly high, given the moderate price of the book. Oddly enough it is often the smaller plates that are the most successful. Plates 20 (Place after Greenhill) and 50 (Earlom after Zoffany) are instances of beautifully crisp reproduction. On the other hand, the enlarged details, like the blown-up corner of a Cotman etching (fig. 3), are not so good; this illustration is particularly blurred, leaving the advantage of showing such a detail much in doubt. The choice of illustrations is stimulating, mixing, as the author says, "familiar imagery with prints that are less well known." Readers of this journal will be interested to know, for example, that Blake is represented by the line engraving of a *Head of a Damned Soul* after Fuseli (Keynes, *Separate Plates*, XXXIV); *Ezekiel* (Keynes VIII); a proof without the text of plate 47 of *Jerusalem*, "The Spectres of the Dead"; "Then went Satan from the presence of the Lord" from *Job*; and rather surprisingly the "Yearly wakes and feasts" block from the Thornton set of woodcuts. This last is not well reproduced and is an unexpected selection, especially as it has been chosen to show the influence of Blake on Calvert and Richmond. On the whole, indeed, Mr. Godfrey betrays a rather greater interest in the Ancients than in their Master. He is as usual lively in his description of the technique of such plates as the *Ezekiel* or the *Jerusalem*, but enthusiasm is tempered with a certain distaste (of which perhaps the choice of this particular plate from all the beautiful

images in the *Jerusalem* is perhaps an indication): "The musculature of the figures . . . is defined by twisting cords of thick line, reminiscent of mannerist prints after painters like Spranger or Cornelisz van Haarlem, the coarseness of certain details being redeemed by Blake's never-failing energy of conception." There is nothing that quite approaches the enraptured penetration of minute detail that he brings to, say, Calvert's *Ploughman*.

One may always, of course, question particular preferences in a book of this kind. It seems strange that James Ward's marvellously romantic set of lithographs of *Celebrated Horses* (1824) should be mentioned without any comment at all; but such things are incidents of personal taste and do not obscure the generally just and accurate picture that is painted. It is less understandable why Thomas Bewick is given so little prominence. Historically, he was an enormously influential figure, changing the appearance of English books and periodicals for half a century or more; absolutely, he was among the greatest and most universal of British artists, with a breadth of scope and human compassion worthy of the most showy of his romantic contemporaries. The succinct paragraph devoted to him is less than an adequate recognition of his genius.

In the twentieth century, it is much to Mr. Godfrey's credit that he is able to handle a more recent period with the same measured and historical objectivity as the earlier ones, without sacrificing something of the special feeling of pleasure that is always involved in making choices entirely on our own, without the aid of hindsight and historical perspective. Inevitably, when a consensus has still to be reached as to the relative importance of artists in their time, opinions will differ as to any one choice. But Mr. Godfrey traces a coherent thread which convincingly evokes the enormous quantity of work produced in this century, giving a just prominence to those who are now considered the most distinguished artists--though one wonders whether the time-lapse that enables him to give space to wood-engravers like Gertrude Hermes and Blair Hughes-Stanton will operate to maintain in prominence the figures he selects for the later part of the century: Moore, Hockney, Kitaj, Hamilton, Paolozzi. He could not mention all the minor printmakers now at work, but it is almost too safe a game to concentrate only on the most celebrated contemporaries. However, a number of lesser lights flash past our view: Birgit Skiold, Colin Self, Peter Freeth, Valerie Thornton and Norman Stevens, for instance, provide a suggestion of the welter of activity that has contributed to the great boom in printmaking of the post-war years.

It has unfortunately to be recorded that the book is peppered with small errors and misprints, nearly all of which are unimportant, though they detract from the ease and pleasure of reading to which it otherwise in all respects conduces.

J. C. F. Harrison. *The Second Coming, Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1979. xvii + 230 pp. (with 8 pp. of illus.). \$19.50.

Reviewed by Morton D. Paley

As Professor Harrison points out in his "Bibliographical Note," the subject of popular millenarianism has not been given serious attention by scholars until comparatively recent times. This is to distinguish *popular* millenarianism as a field of study from millenarianism in the Old and New Testaments and in the early Christian church. The latter has always been a respectable subject for research, but the former has all too often been relegated to what Harrison calls "the semi-popular synopsis which provides a rag-bag of freaks, curiosities, imposters and 'unbelievable' characters" (p. 264). Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, first published in 1957, was perhaps the first book to study popular millenarianism with the seriousness that had previously been given to theological millenarianism. Cohn's work, however, is mainly devoted to the medieval period; and its argument that the movements it studies were precursors of modern totalitarianism may be more pertinent to the Middle Ages than to the seventeenth century and after. Christopher Hill's work on seventeenth-century radicalism includes much of the greatest interest on millenarianism during the Puritan revolution.¹ For the period in which Blake lived, the indispensable book on this as well as other aspects of social history is of course *The Making of the English Working Class* by E. P. Thompson, first published in 1963. More