

# *The Old Stile Press and ‘the liberated book’*

*Edited text of a talk given by Nicolas McDowall*

When thinking what angle to follow in this talk, I decided that I would avoid what is perhaps a usual introduction to an outfit like ours – in other words, when did we set up the press and what machinery do we use? One good reason for this thought is the fact that we published, in the year 2000, *The Old Stile Press in the twentieth century* – a bibliography of our first twenty or so years – which we had tried to put together in a fun and unstuffy way. All that sort of information was detailed there. Here incidentally is Clive Hicks-Jenkins’ painting for the cover of it. Comparing it with the photograph you will see that it is a somewhat fanciful view of where we live. There again, looking at a corner like this, I’m not sure it *is* all that exaggerated!

I thought it would be rather more interesting if I was to address the slightly deeper questions that people seem to be asking us more and more these days, namely . . . ‘why do you publish the kind of books you do publish and where do you get your ideas from?’

To approach these questions obliquely, I will talk a bit about what books are for me and what I mean by the concept of *the liberated book* . . .



*Cover of The Old Stile Press in the twentieth century by Clive Hicks-Jenkins*





*Two favourite illustrated books*

Any thought of actually printing something myself was preceded by at least ten years of pretty manic, but wonderfully enjoyable, rootling through bookshops in a search for early twentieth century illustrated books. This had not become a popular field by then so the prices were generally quite low and only a very few choice items would be promoted to the locked bookcase by the proprietors desk. Treasures, as far as I was concerned, could be found anywhere and labels on shelves had usually to be ignored. Of course I had my mental shopping-list and a silent shout of joy was emitted whenever my fingers closed on a book that had long eluded me. For instance, I was happy to find this in an ordinary poetry section, treated (and priced) as a straightforward William Morris reprint. Even then the artist Jessie M. King's books were pretty pricey in the UK, especially this one.

For the rest, though, my rules were simple. If time allowed, I would examine every book in the shop. If I came upon an illustrated book I did not know, I would look at it, outside and in, and I would know, somehow, whether to buy it. Finding out about its text, artist, publisher and so on were pleasures for the future . . . the book itself just had to engage me in order to get purchased. Over the years I can remember leaving, at the altar as it were, books with great texts and worthy artists – but which bored me – while taking to my heart



*The Defence of Guenevere*

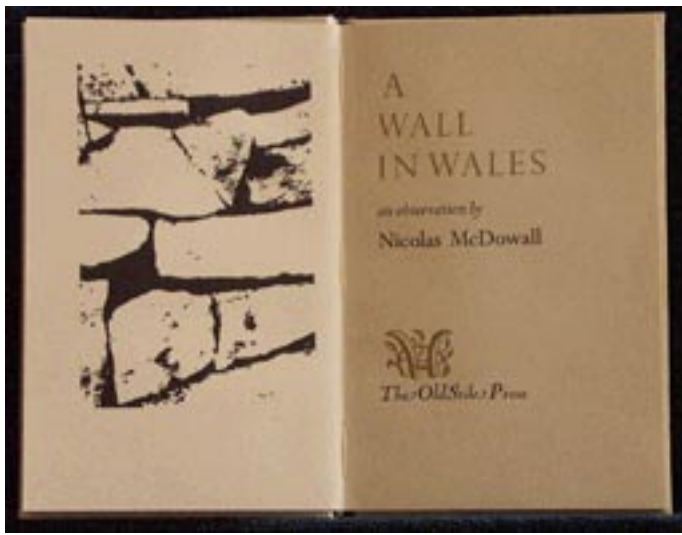
some book which was maybe imperfectly printed and ill put together but which appealed to me in some way. What was that appeal? It was personality, individuality, a spark of originality. As simple as that. It was the fact that *this* particular book, in some tiny way, is different from every other book I have seen and somehow excites me. Perhaps it makes me think in a new way about the text it offered. Maybe its format is arrestingly in harmony with the poems it housed. Whatever its secret might be, it would certainly not have been put together in a safe, run-of-the-mill way, it would not be predictable and, above all, it would not rely upon tradition or lavish display to hide the *lack* of that spark of originality.

When I did start to print (a year or so into my forties) . . . first of all it was endless exercises to find out how my small Albion printing-press, dated 1864 (and, later, a Vandercook SP15) worked. Then there were the arts of inking, impression, packing, roller height etc. to contend with – one of the subtlest collections of balancing acts I have ever tried to master. It is like trying to walk on half a dozen tightropes at the same time – with them all seeming to want to swing off in different directions. I, still, simply fall off most of the time . . . but I think I am at least beginning to see where most of the tightropes are.

When it came to contemplating the making of our first books, I am sure that,



*The Cross Purposes by Betty Swanwick*



at least unconsciously, I was keen to engender this elusive spark myself. I certainly wanted our books to proclaim their existence and not to be shy about their individuality. I also felt that I did not mind at all if some people felt negatively towards our books or had harsh words to say about them. As some wise person said, 'If you're working on things that everyone accepts, you're not working on anything.'

I had always been drawn to books with images or printing of whatever sort *on their covers* that prepared the incipient reader for what they would meet within. By the same token I had felt somehow short-changed by books bound with smart, but interchangeable, conformity. In a room full of immaculately be-suited men, I will always gravitate to the odd-ball in the corner wearing corduroy and characterfully unfashionable shoes!

It was later, and slowly, that the concept of the book being liberated came into our minds. My time as an educational publisher overlapped with the rise of the computer. Cassandra figures who claimed 20-20 foresight proclaimed then that the book is dead. How wrong that was can be seen by a visit to

Amazon.com or to any Waterstone's or other bookshops with their coffee and club-like facilities. What *has* happened, though, is that books are simply not *needed* any more for the doing of a great many tasks in people's lives. Given this state of affairs, one possible outcome is

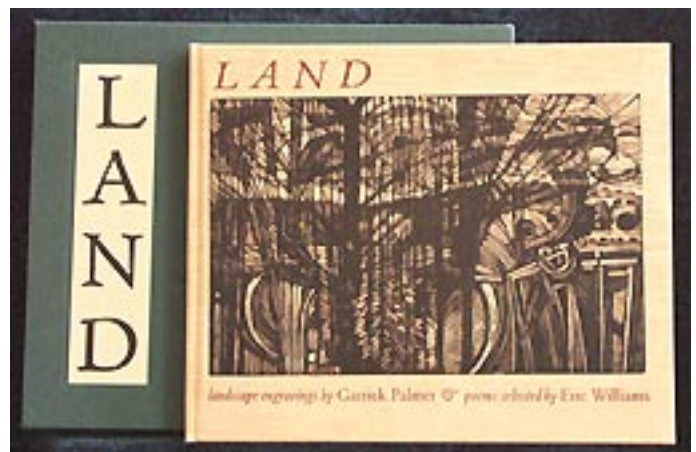


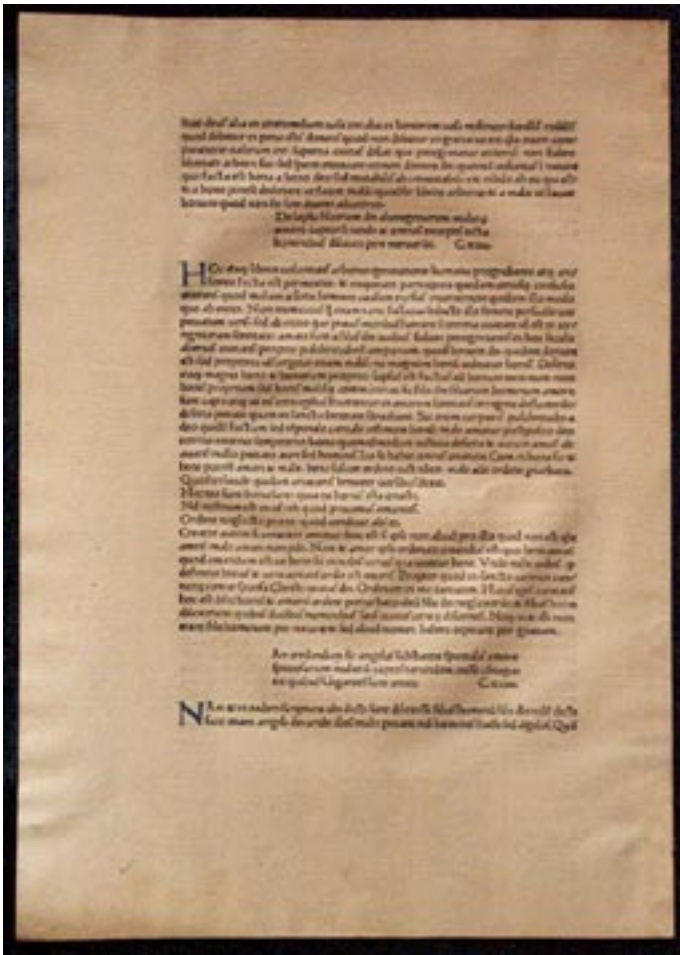
*A wonderful example from France*

that those lives might simply begin to *lack* books in any worthwhile numbers – only buying the odd paperback at the airport for poolside reading.

This scenario could be cause for hand-wringing among bibliophiles and civilized people at large. We, on the other hand, choose to see it as a point of creative departure and an opportunity for making new friends. If, because of IT developments and what not, books are not the integral part of the business, professional or even domestic lives of all of us that they used to be, then, lo and behold, they are freed . . . they are released . . . to fulfil a number of different, specialist roles. For example, books can be dreamed up and carefully crafted, simply as an expression of the creativity of one or more people . . . and such books can be acquired by, and give pleasure to, open-minded collectors and museum curators.

Throughout history most pots for the table, smart or mundane, were made by individual potters. In the Industrial Revolution, however, factories began to turn out thousands, if not millions, of identical plates or cups and what happened? . . . there was a great flowering of ‘Studio Potters’ who created an antidote to this uniformity. The objects they made often did not have a useful purpose and were often regarded as crazily weird and wonderful by the more conventional of connoisseurs. Many are still regarded as crazily weird





A leaf from City of God, Rome 1470

and wonderful now but some have finally come into their own, are regarded as valuable parts of the story of the particular craft and their perpetrators are seen as, at least minimally, egregious. Perhaps I would like to see myself as some sort of 'studio printer'. Indeed *studio press* may be the term I have so long been looking for to describe my avocation – instead of the, to my mind, seriously pretentious and self-satisfied terms like *private press*, *fine press* etc. There are a number of commercial printers I know who would never describe themselves as 'fine' but whose work is, in all sorts of ways, far superior to many so-called 'fine' presses. The other term I rather liked was *book-maker* – but that, sadly, cannot really be used because of its other connotations. Even more recently I have homed in on the term *book-builder* which pleases me most of all – not least because of the overtones attached to its sounding like *boat-builder*. Around the world there are found an infinite range of contraptions made of wood, metal or whatever designed and made to travel on water. However strange any one might be to look at, however, we can, somehow, immediately tell that it is a *boat*.

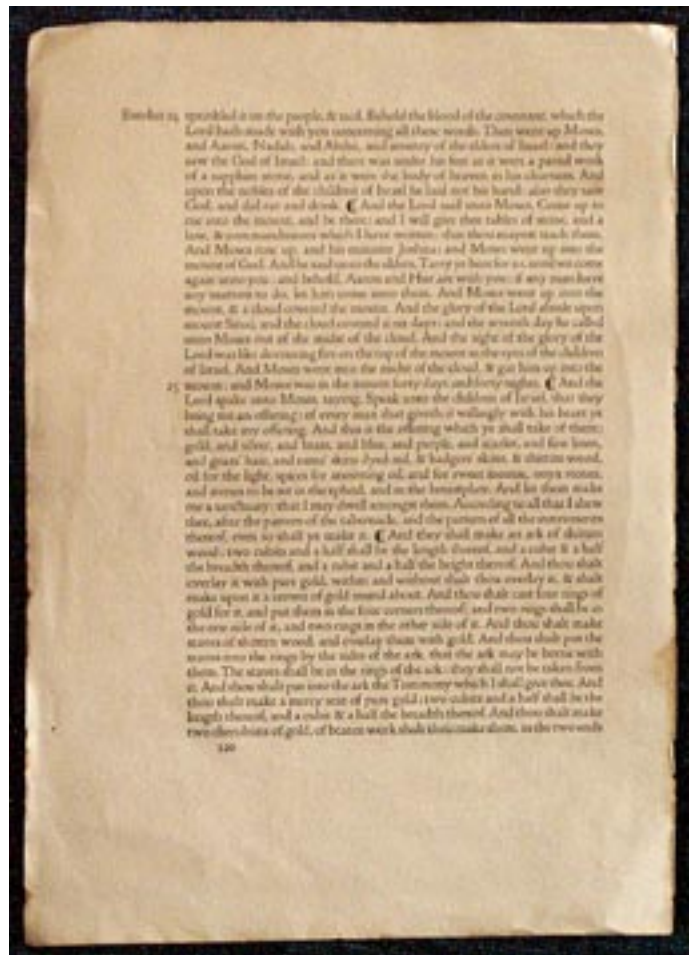
I have similar feelings about the book . . . which might have been designed as ultra-traditional or state-of-the-art but will nevertheless have been put together by dedicated and experienced craftsmen to take its place, without question,

within the race of books.

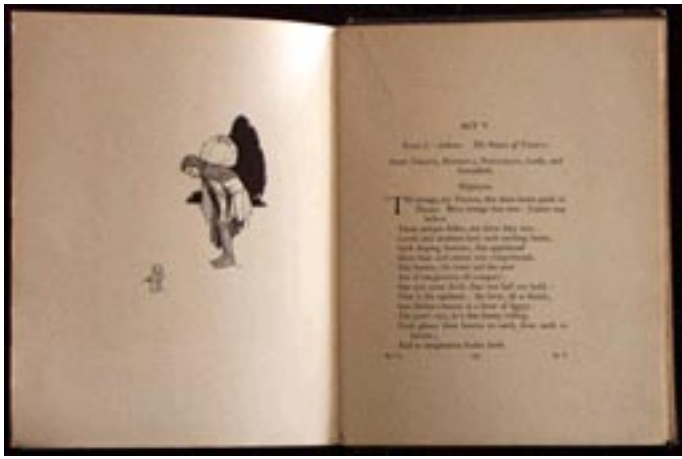
I see myself, therefore, as a 'maker of books' or 'book-builder' – but clearly not any old book.

I cannot for instance see much point in my spending an age producing by hand a hundred copies of some book which could have been produced just as well (or better) by a commercial machine. Obviously the single word 'letterpress' now sums up what is usually the essential difference between the commercial printing world and folks like us. For me, though, I have to admit that 'just text' does not really get me going. Of course I go weak at the knees when contemplating a leaf of incunabula printing like this (where the margins have clearly been imported without hesitation from the scriptorium with utterly sublime results – in this case only about 15 years after the invention of movable type) or the radiant purity of a Doves or Ashendene page but . . . , for me, a really interesting book is one that has images in it. That was the case when I was a boy and it still is . . . now that I have got my bus pass . . . for, at my best, I am still something of a wide-eyed child.

*Images*, therefore, (and not, incidentally, 'pictures' and certainly not 'illustrations') . . . and *images* on pretty well every page and *images* involved in subtle balancing acts with blocks of type and all-important areas of white space. How disappointing I used to find so-



*A leaf from the Doves Press Bible*



A Midsummer Night's Dream, William Heath Robinson

called 'illustrated editions' of massive novels where maybe a dozen full-page 'illustrations' had been commissioned but where you had to use the 'table of contents' to find where they had been buried . . . for otherwise they would simply be a dozen needles in a haystack.

In the first few pages of Dorothy Harrop's essay in our *Bibliography*, she describes my early fascination for William Heath Robinson's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Ferdinand*. Other memorable adventures were had when I opened the covers of a *Babar* book. I mean, look at that. I still find that spread as exciting as when I was in single figures.

As a child, I also loved listening to the radio . . . and some of the images created in my mind by plays on Children's Hour or by *Dick Barton* – *special agent* stay with me still. In a sense, though, opening the pages of a favourite 'text-and-image' book then was an equivalent to turning on the, as yet unavailable, television. If it was one of the many excellent examples of children's books, even though the images were provided, the imagination would still be stimulated, excitement experienced and memory traces could remain even after many years.

In the main, therefore, our chosen universe of activity is that of books in which images are as important as text and the artist is on a par with the writer and the printer/designer/publisher. At a time when seriously purposed



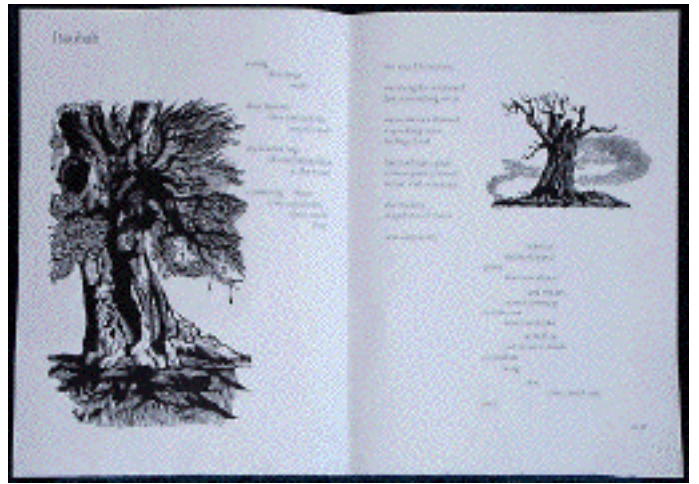
Barbar's Travels, Jean de Brunhoff

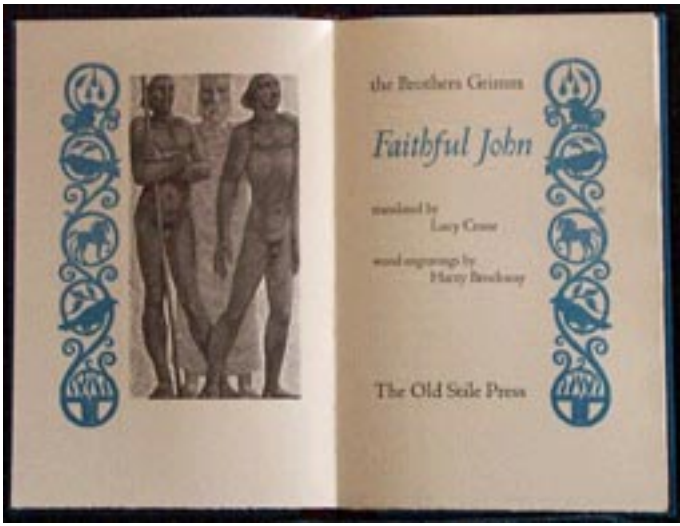
illustrated books for adults, with images by artists as a main ingredient, are almost nonexistent in the lists of commercial publishers, this is a fascinating field and one which could keep me happy for a good few lifetimes.

One good example of how these books come about is *The Abstract Garden*. This is an exciting project in which a poet (Philip Gross), a wood engraver (Peter Reddick) and an impresario/printer/designer – me – nicknamed by the others ‘the spaceman’ – fling emails back and forth to develop spreads of a book in which image, word and the space between are seen as equally important. This ‘trialogue’ (as we term it, when not making jokes about ‘the three witches’!) proved quite fascinating and each learned much from the other two.

I am not for a moment saying that this area of image-rich books is one that I (let alone anyone else) *should* operate in . . . it is just one that fascinates me. I am deeply in awe of those who can use letterpress to print a sonnet with heart-stopping perfection – but I don’t want to aim wholly in that direction myself. I am more than aware of the fascination and value that lies in the gathering, editing and publishing of esoteric texts about other texts or the oeuvre of a rediscovered wood-engraver . . . but that also is, usually, not for me.

The images from our artists are not just ‘in the book’ but almost always were cut or otherwise made ‘for the book’ and





Faithful John. Wood engravings by Harry Brockway

indeed almost always cut for a particular area of a particular page in the book and to sit in relation to precisely this poem or to balance, or strive against, (or whatever may be the appropriate relationship is) this exact area of white space.

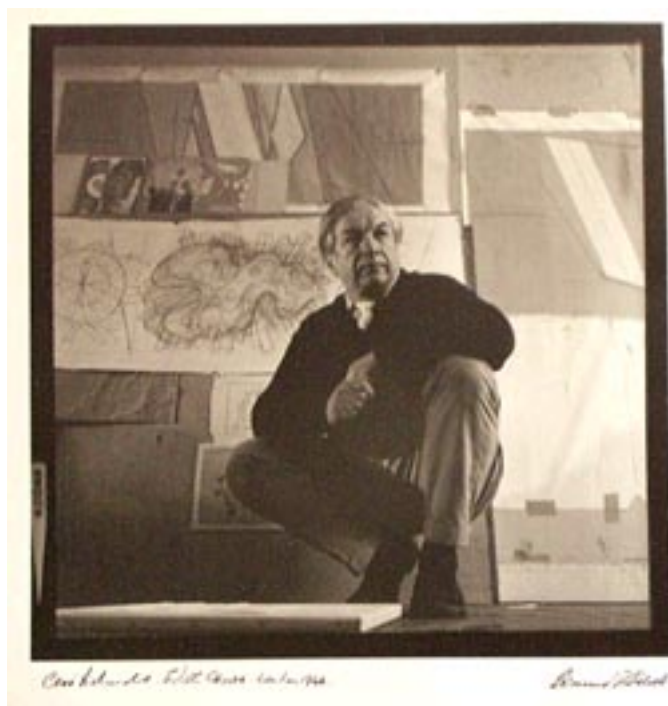
So *that* is the sort of book we seek to publish and, although the reasons why each book has got into our catalogue seem entirely logical to me, it has to be admitted that the range of books that we have published is pretty wide. How, therefore, do we come to publish what we do publish?

The, perhaps rather unhelpful, first answer is that there are no rules, no starting points and not much normal practice. As I have said, I have the devil's own difficulties with printing type to even a *semi*-professional level of competence (while there are angel-printers around who can gain near perfection seemingly without straining at all!). On the other hand we do not even have to *think* much about where the next thrilling books are coming from . . . they just sort of materialize! And I don't mean that beautiful jewels come through the door . . . for we don't even consider unsolicited MSS, let alone pre-done sets of images. Quite simply, it is usually a matter of many things moving, like God, in mysterious ways.

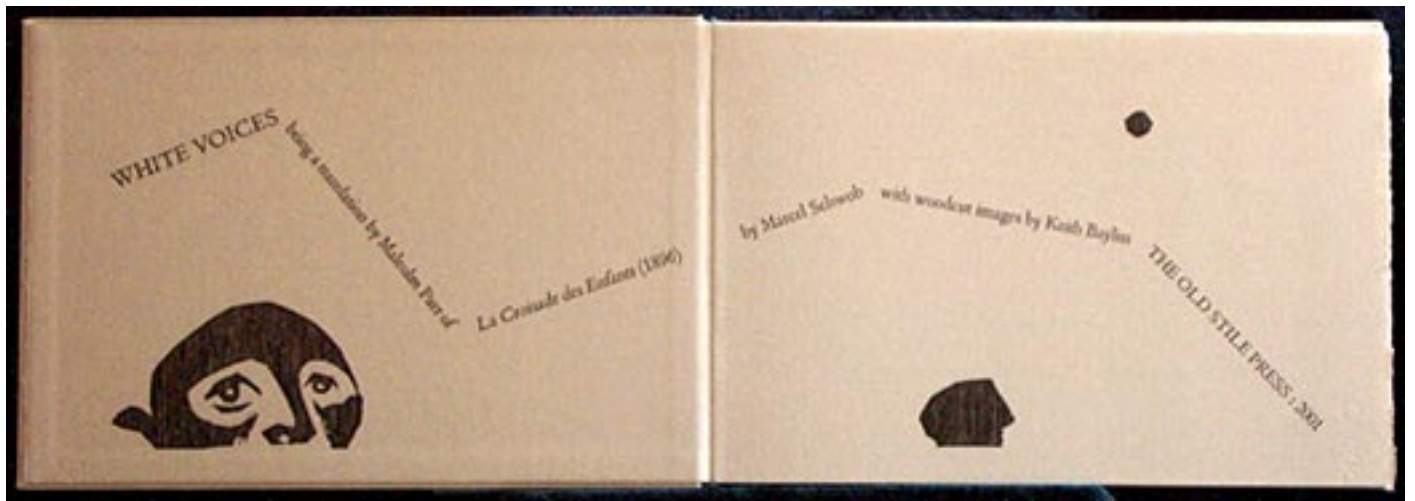
I think it most helpful if I were to tell the story of how a particular, recent book actually came about. Its story is perhaps

more convoluted than many but it will show what I am getting at.

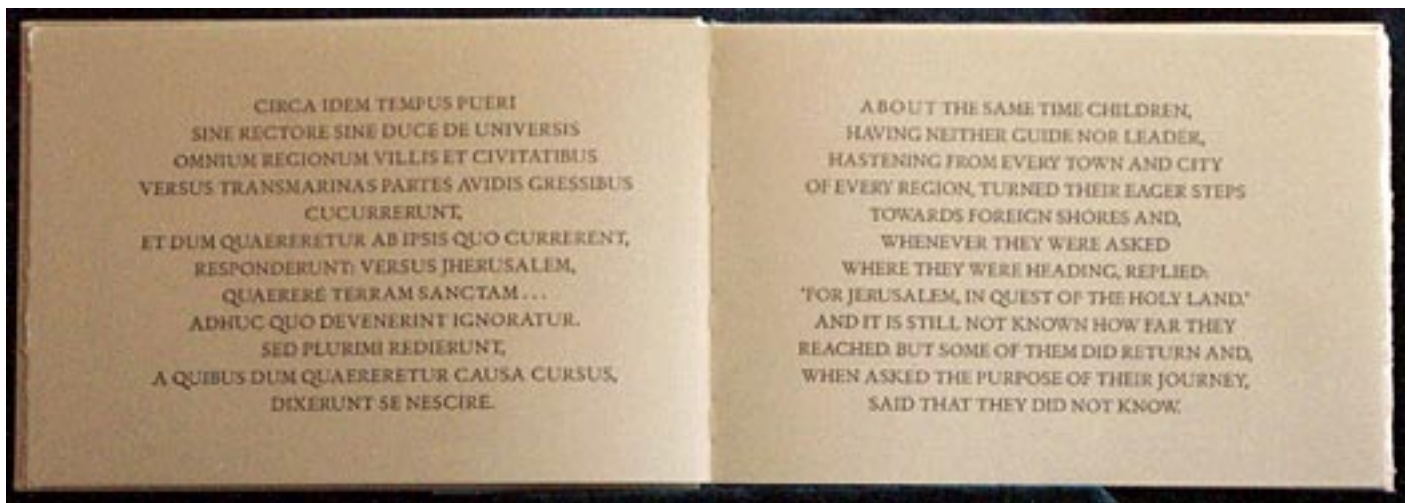
Bernard Mitchell is a photographer in Wales whose main interest in life is to photograph Welsh artists and suchlike for an archive in the National Library. He also 'knows everybody' and loves nothing more than to bring people together . . . especially when he feels that a creative spark might arise. One day he was visiting us to take photographs (some of which are in our *Bibliography*) and he mentioned his friend the painter Keith Bayliss, saying that he was sure we would get on well together. We realized that we had seen some drawings by Keith in an exhibition and had been very moved by them. Particularly when we were told that he did on occasion make woodcuts, we were indeed keen to meet. Almost immediately, *there* was Bernard again at our place for lunch bringing Keith and Keith's longstanding friend and mentor, the writer and translator Malcolm Parr, together with a portfolio of drawings to do with the Children's Crusade. It turned out that, back in the 1970s, Malcolm, researching something else, had come upon 'a tiny masterpiece' by Marcel Schwob, the French Symbolist writer, on this subject, and had translated it. Feeling that its form made it suitable as a 'play for voices' (in the mould of *Under Milk Wood*), he contacted the BBC. They sounded excited, kept it for three years and then said it was not suitable!



*Photograph of Ceri Richards by Bernard Mitchell*

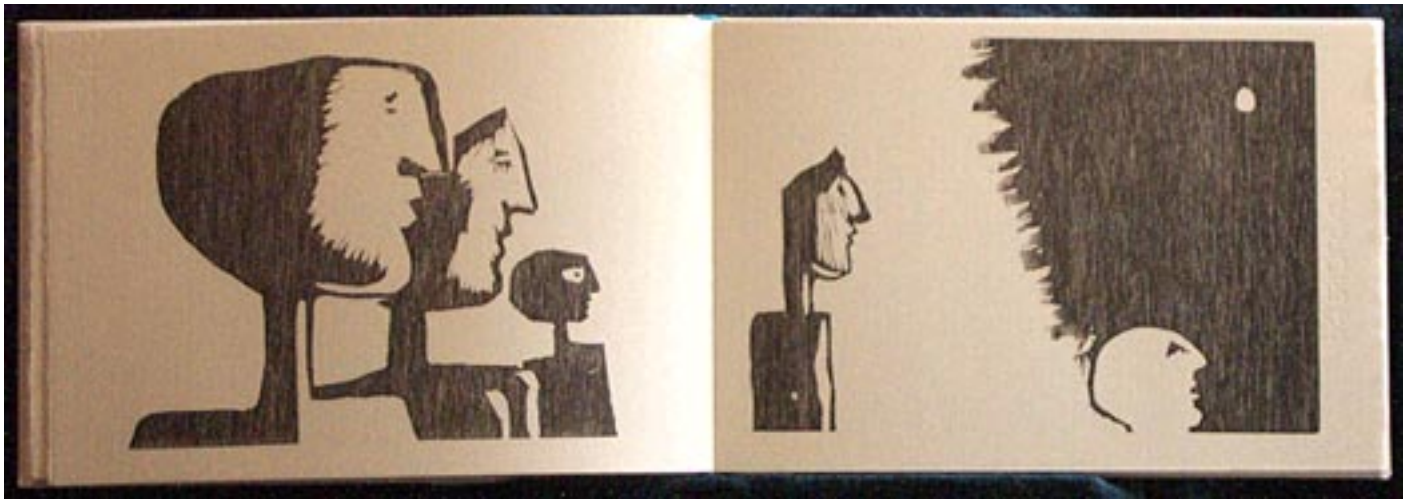


When we read the little monologues in Malcolm's translation we were very moved. We thought they did constitute a tiny masterpiece, that Keith's 'take' on the work would be a perfect accompaniment to the text and that we very much wanted to try to make a book of it all. I could immediately think of some straightforward ways of producing the piece but I really wanted it to be entirely unusual. Behind the monologues there needed to be understood the extraordinary fact of thousands of children walking through France to embark for the Holy Land without knowing why they were going, how they would manage the trip or even what they were trying to accomplish. I felt that, most importantly, there needed to be established a sense of this journey . . . 'ever onward', if you like. I found a sheet of printmaking paper which could be made to yield an exaggeratedly 'landscape' format. I decided to have no separate endpapers but to launch straightaway into the strangest title page that I have been responsible for which is,

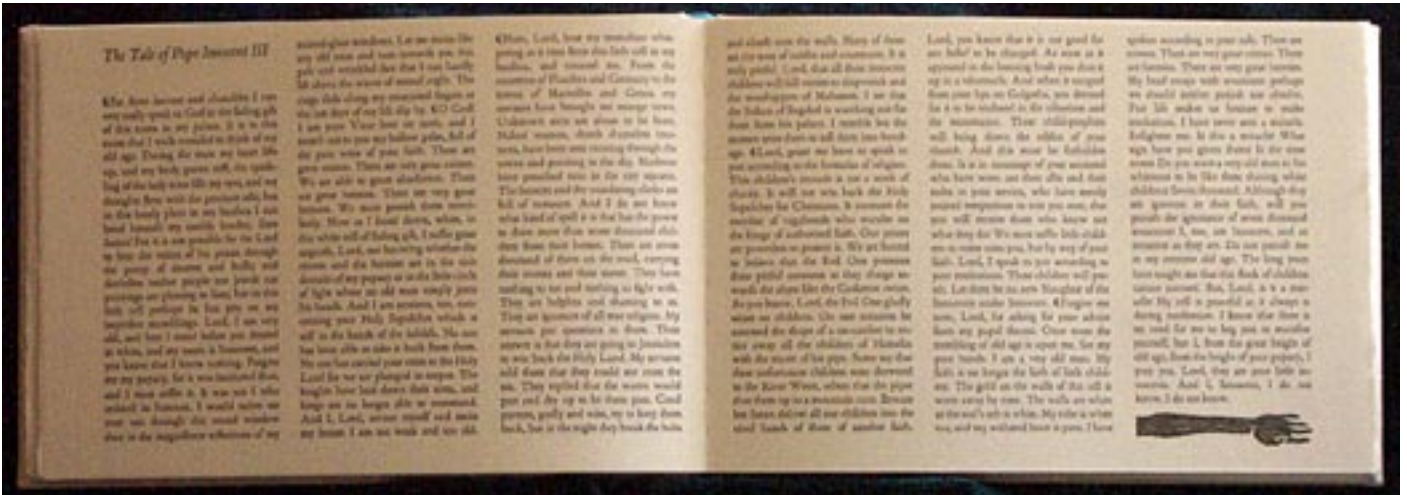


of course, meant to give an ‘over hill and over dale’ idea right at the beginning. At the head of the MS was a small paragraph in Latin, designed to set the scene. This could have been put neatly on the verso opposite the first page of text. I decided to make something much more of it, and to add to the historical atmosphere by seeing it, together with a translation into English, as an inscription. (Incidentally, this seems a good example of the advantages offered by my current approach to obtaining type for letterpress printing – in other words, good Monotype fonts in the computer and the capacity to produce photopolymer blocks in house. This is all set in 28pt Poliphilus caps and, as we happen to be at the centre of a section here, we would want to print the spread all at once. How incredibly difficult, if remotely possible nowadays, to achieve this in hot metal.)

The main design breakthrough for me, though, concerned the relationship between text and image. One normally thinks, I would reckon, of the text



running through the book being ‘interrupted’, as and when, by images. In order to carry on that idea of a ‘journey’ going on and on, I decided on the opposite approach, namely to see a sequence of double spread woodcuts marching inexorably through the book and being ‘interrupted’ by the little bits of text – which, rather than being strung out, would be restricted each to a single spread. The ‘chapter’ which was the longest dictated the type size for the rest and all the shorter chapters, by definition, left spare space – which could be used for imagery. As I came to lay these pages out, I also found that this space could be allocated to the spread’s six columns in different ways so that each could have a different pattern . . . which could be exploited at a later stage by Keith when he came to plan the images for these pages. Incidentally the ‘full’ chapter filled the spread but for two lines in the final column. I had thought that would be full enough but, having seen it proofed, I rang up Keith and asked whether he could produce a



block of some sort to fill this 'vast gap'. He obliged with an arm. I am not totally sure of its significance but I do know it improves the appearance of the spread hugely . . . balancing the heading apart from anything else.

This layout stage completed I could set the type and give Keith a complete paste-up so he could concentrate entirely on designing and making his woodcuts . . . each at a particular size and in a specific place.

That left the binding . . .

From what I said earlier, it will not surprise anyone that we did not go for a quarter cloth with boards covered with marbled paper. I evolved the idea that



we could have a rather exciting transformation effect (as in the Victorian Toy Book) – with the slipcased binding offering the image of, perhaps, rather a fun trip in the sun across the Mediterranean in a jolly little boat. Removal of the slipcase, however, presents the shocking image of small, naked bodies tortured in the desert by a very different aspect of the same sun. I am pleased with this but it does need explaining and pointing out to many people. I have seen even some of our most experienced, generous-minded and sensitive collector friends just ripping the slipcase off one of our carefully planned productions while still talking and only starting to look at the book properly when the title page was reached. This to me is like getting seated at the Opera in the middle of the overture but I know I have an uphill task in educating people in how to experience this sort of book fully. Also high on the list of those I love to hate is a dealer who spied *White Voices* at a fair just after it was published and said in a loud and patronising voice, ‘Oh gracious, what on earth justification *could* there be for having a slipcase like that’. He had not even looked at the book and he did not wait to hear an answer let alone to find one for himself. I suppose I approach our bindings much like a film director might approach a film’s initial title and credit sequence . . . as an opportunity for building up excitement and creating an appropriate

atmosphere for the work to have its best effect.

Clearly this was not a book that had a clearly definable market – but this has not been known to stop us in the past. Sometimes our books fit into one of the number of themes or strands which are detectable in our list and we can identify a number of customers who probably ‘can be relied upon to purchase’. Many books, though, very much rely on making their own own way in the world – although I am much gratified and happy to be able to say that there is a growing number of collectors and, perhaps especially, museum and library curators, around the world who pronounce themselves interested in our work, whatever it is.

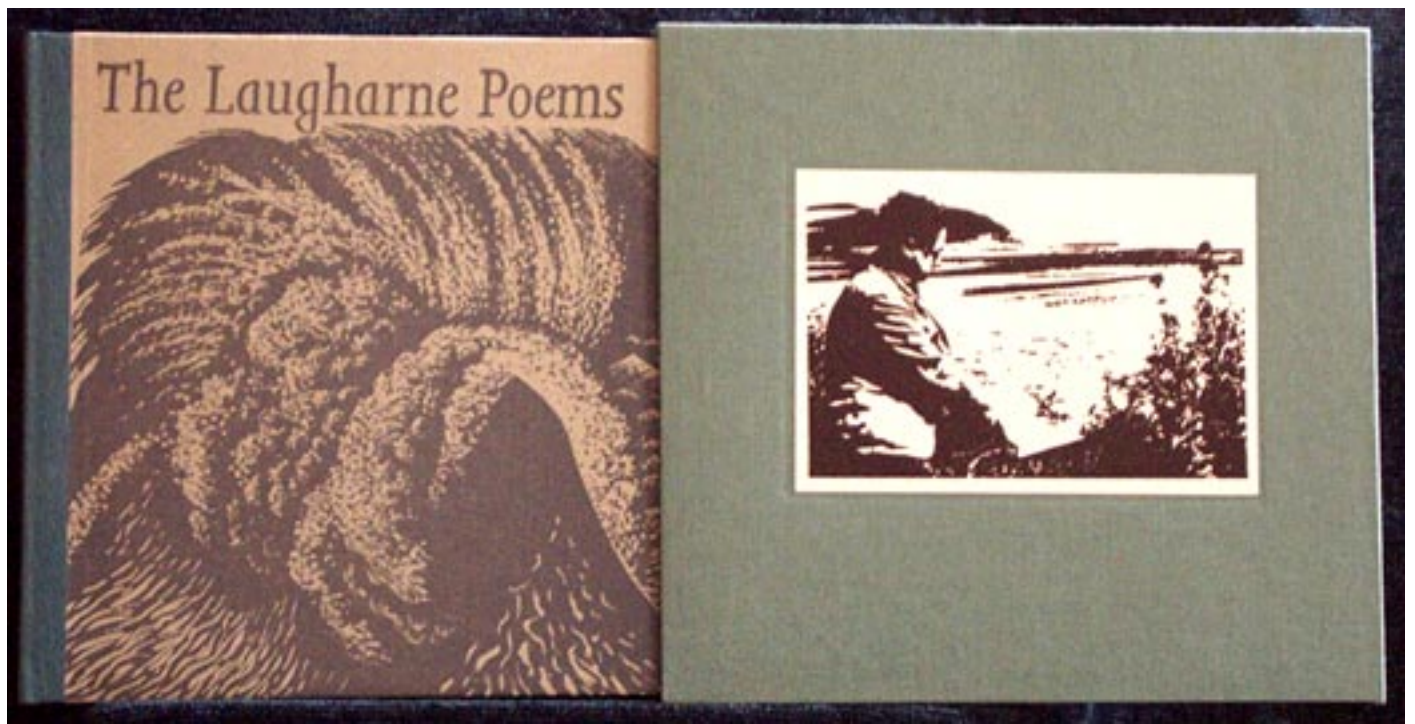
In my collector days I had been told that, in the heyday of the private presses of the past, editions would have sold out many times over before publication. What of now? I am sure there *are* presses who sell out before publication. I am sure there are others who say they do this but actually don’t. I freely admit that we have never done this . . . or anything like. We think we have done just fine if we recoup the actual outgoings of a particular book (paper, binding &c) during the first flush of publicity . . . after which it joins the ranks of our ‘backlist’. Although, recently, substantial numbers of our titles are finally going ‘out of print’, the ranks of our backlist are quite substantial. No doubt any

hard-nosed accountant in the commercial publishing world would have called for pulping years ago but we reckon the wide range still available (some have been on the list for twenty years!) is a jewel in our crown. Despite the tireless work done by Frances in extending the circle of those who know us and like what we do, we reckon that the world out there is still chock full of prospective customers and slowly but surely we meet them – perhaps via our extremely successful new website – and are pleased to hear expressions of amazement that such riches had been available for so long without them knowing etc etc.

Our website, incidentally, was created for us by Michael Hutchins, whose Chimæra Press influenced me greatly in my early printing days. When we were thinking of getting help with making a site, we dreamed of finding someone who was at home with hot metal type and an Albion but also knew his mouse from his modem. Impossible? No . . . Michael Hutchins!

*White Voices* has performed more than creditably, I am happy to say, from the sales point of view but the pleasure for me has been in watching people of all sorts give themselves up to the book and be clearly moved by taking the journey set up by Marcel Schwob and the four of us in Wales.

We don't usually have launch parties for our books – largely because our



collector friends are so far-flung – but, as the creators of *White Voices* were all so close, we did have a most enjoyable event, involving an exhibition and readings, at *The Dylan Thomas Centre* in Cardiff. We were back there again this year, the fiftieth anniversary of the poet's death in New York, to wet the head of a more recent baby, *The Laugharne Poems*, which is a collection of Dylan Thomas poems written while he lived in Laugharne – with wood engravings by the late John Petts. I was first entrapped by the magic of these poems in my mid-teens so it was a true work of love to produce this book and to hear, at this party, *Fern Hill* read beautifully to us by the poet's daughter, Aeronwy, was a moving consummation of all our labours.

After Dylan Thomas came William Shakespeare but here we, in conjunction with Chris Nurse, who is a consummate





relief printmaker, took the somewhat irreverent decision to make a book out of the play-within-a-play *Pyramus & Thisbe* while leaving the rest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on the cutting-room floor, as it were! His powerful set of chiaroscuro woodcuts are among the best prints I have seen for years and I am happier than usual with the printing and other aspects of my input.

Finally, and I only came to realize this fact clearly as I was preparing this piece, we do indeed 'work with artist/print-makers' (as one of our blurbs goes) but they are only rarely the sort of artist who turns *first* to an engraving tool or indeed to book pages as a 'canvas'. They are far more likely to be painters (or sometimes sculptors) who usually face large canvasses (or pieces of rock) but who are persuaded (if we succeed) to cram all that creativity into the restricted compass afforded by even a large-format book. No wonder, perhaps, that some of our books are a bit unruly and a touch 'different'. This is the point. There will always be people who do not like our books but this is fine by us for the comfort of universal acceptance is not exactly high on our list of priorities.