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Wood from Newcastle

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CARRYING coals to Newcastle has been regarded for so many, many years as a foolish waste of labor that, if some friend of the Colby College Library had recently carried a single coal to Newcastle, we would here preserve a discreet silence about it. But Colby Library Associate T. Raymond Pierce, member of the Class of 1898 and member of the Board of Trustees, has not done the foolish or the conventional thing: he has carried no coals to Newcastle, but he has brought wood from Newcastle, and wood of such precious quality as to demand some horn-blowing about its arrival on Mayflower Hill. The wood we are talking about consists of little blocks delicately carved by one of the most famous wood-engravers of all time, an Englishman named Thomas Bewick who lived and worked in Newcastle during the period of the American and French Revolutions. Some readers of this page may find it helpful if a few words are said about him before we proceed to a further comment on the wood-blocks that Mr. Pierce's generosity has now brought to Colby College.

Thomas Bewick was born near Newcastle on August 12, 1753. As a small boy he showed a mania for drawing and at fourteen was apprenticed to an engraver in Newcastle. He eventually set up business for himself and showed amazing skill in cutting wood-blocks for use in printing the illustrations in books. From the time he was thirty until his death in 1828, he was busily engaged in the creation of woodcuts or wood-engravings (he made no distinction in his use of these two terms). In 1784 he illustrated an edition of Select
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_Fables_ of Aesop and others, and in 1790 _British Quadrupeds_ appeared with exquisitely done woodcut illustrations by Bewick; and this work was followed in 1797 by _British Birds_, likewise illustrated by Bewick blocks. When, in 1795, the publishing house of William Bulmer issued an edition of _Poems by Goldsmith and Parnell_ which has been described as the first “fine” English book illustrated with woodcuts, the publisher declared in his “Advertisement” of the book:

> The ornaments are all engraved on blocks of wood. . . . They have been executed with great care, and I may venture to say . . . that they form the most extraordinary effort of the art of engraving upon wood that ever was produced in any age, or any country. Indeed it seems almost impossible that such delicate effects could be obtained from blocks of wood.

Chatto and Jackson’s _Treatise on Wood Engraving_ (1861) reports the incredulity of King George III, who would not believe that the impressions in the _Poems_ of 1795 were from engravings on wood until he had been shown the actual blocks.

When the _British Birds_ of 1797 eventually made its way to America, there was one young man with eyes alert for its excellent illustrations. Everyone now knows who that young man was: John James Audubon (1785-1851), whose _Birds of America_ appeared in 1827. Audubon exhibited his paintings of American birds at the Royal Institution in Edinburgh in 1827, and from Edinburgh he went to Newcastle and there met Thomas Bewick. The meeting was a very happy one on both sides. Eight years later, in the third volume of his _Ornithological Biography_ (1835), Audubon published his “Reminiscences of Thomas Bewick.” He described him as

> a tall stout man, with a large head, . . . a perfect old Englishman, full of life, although seventy-four years of age, active and prompt in his labors. Presently he proposed showing me the work he was at. . . . It was a small vignette, cut on a block of boxwood not more than three
by two inches in surface, and represented a dog frightened at night.
... This curious piece of art, like all his works, was exquisite.

It was characteristic of Bewick to be found cutting a sketch of an animal. The "dog frightened at night" is an example of the sort of thing he enjoyed doing throughout his long life. He studied birds and quadrupeds with the close attention of a scientist, but his representation of them in his engravings was done with the imagination of an artist and poet. And, as Llewelyn Powys once remarked,

The subjects he chose for his engravings are ... blunt, direct and shrewd, and ... he derived a peculiar satisfaction from portraying ... man or beast: a stray dog limping off and three men after it with gun and sticks; ... a cat in a tub drifting out to sea, the wretched creature on its hind legs peering into the water, its cottage home still just in sight on the shore, and darkness coming on.¹

This description by Llewelyn Powys brings us back to our starting-point—Mr. T. Raymond Pierce's gift of a number of Bewick's woodcuts. For the "cat in a tub drifting out to sea" is the subject of one of the blocks now owned by Colby College. It is here reproduced,
so that readers may see for themselves just what is meant when enthusiasts exclaim over "such delicate effects obtained from blocks of wood."

One other thing may be seen at the same time—evidence of the longevity of a mere piece of wood. It is now one hundred and sixty-five years, more or less, since Thomas Bewick carved this unfortunate cat, yet the delicate lines cut by the engraver's tools are still serviceable, and if we (and our printers) are careful, this woodcut still has many years of usefulness ahead of it. Bewick's own words on this subject are worth quoting:

A woodcut, with care, will print an incredible number [of impressions]: how many it may be difficult exactly to say; but it once happened that I had the opportunity . . . of guessing pretty nearly at this. . . . A little delicate cut—a view of Newcastle—was done for Mr. H[odgson] many years before, as a fac[simile] for his newspaper. I . . . turned to the date in my ledger, when he calculated exactly, and found it had printed above 900,000. This cut was continued in the newspaper several years afterwards. . . . This cut is still kept; and . . . might . . . yet print many thousands.

A Frenchman named Papillon once claimed that over a million impressions had been made from one woodcut engraved by his grandfather. It is pleasant, therefore, to think that Mr. Pierce's generous gift to the Colby College Library has equipped it not only with several precious wood-engravings by a master, but also with blocks that have many years of further printing-usefulness ahead of them. We plan to illustrate later issues of this quarterly with impressions from the other blocks which Mr. Pierce has given us.

One final word about the engraver. How have you been pronouncing his name? According to the contemporary American artist and engraver, Rudolph Ruzicka, there is just one way to say Bewick. "The first time that I heard the name Bewick," says Mr. Ruzicka, "was in the wood-engraving department of a large engraving house in Chicago where I was apprenticed, unindentured and unpaid,
for one year. There the name was pronounced 'Bee-wick' and that is the way I pronounced it until quite lately, when I learned, to my secret regret, that it should sound something like the name of a motor-car." Well, when better Bewick cuts are printed, Colby will print them—thanks to T. Raymond Pierce!

TWO MORE "TORRENTS" TURN UP

Our attempts at compiling a census of extant copies of Edwin Arlington Robinson's *The Torrent* and *The Night Before* (as reported in these pages: see issues for February and August 1947 and February and August 1948) brought the total number of copies, by the date of our last report, up to sixty-two. We are now able to list two more *Torrents* as having survived.

In our very first report Barrett Wendell was listed as No. 111 among the recipients of copies of *The Torrent*, but his copy was not listed in the census for the simple reason that it was not known to have survived. It has now turned up, quite as it should, at the door of the Harvard Library, and is here added to the Colby census as Copy No. 63. This copy is inscribed to "Professor Barrett Wendell / with compliments of E. A. Robinson." It must have been sent to Wendell early in December 1896, for on the eleventh of that month Robinson wrote to him to thank him for his "wholly unexpected praise of my experimental poems."

Copy No. 64 has recently arrived at The Newberry Library in Chicago. Mrs. Gertrude L. Woodward, Custodian of the Rare Book Room in that library, reports that this copy is in fine condition. It is inscribed on the title-page to "R. Sturgis, with compliments of E. A. Robinson. 16