

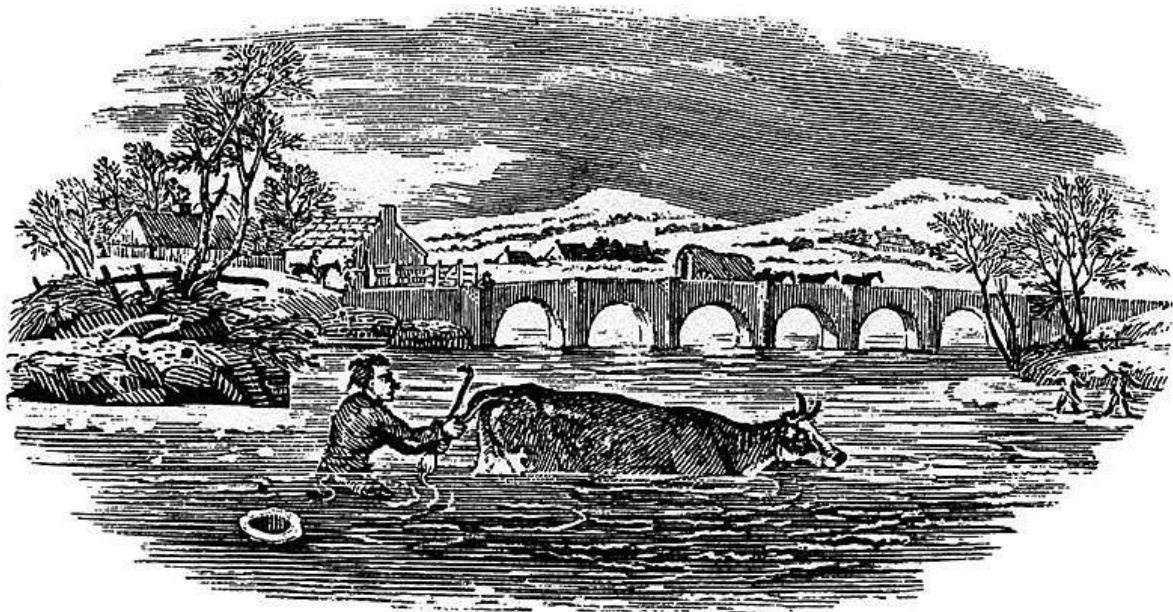
Going Against the Grain by Benjamin Parkes

More than two hundred years ago, against the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution in England and the struggle for national independence in America, a rebellious farmer's son from Northumberland who spent his childhood in the country on the banks of the River Tyne, went against the grain to transform one of the oldest crafts, in the process becoming the founding father of what is now called wood engraving.

Thomas Bewick was born in 1753, and by the time he died aged 75, he had taken wood engraving to the pinnacle of its artistic potential, leaving behind a trove of work inspired by a deep love of nature (both its beauty and severity), and his close observation of the honest relationship between living things in a natural landscape: particularly trees, rivers, birds, animals and people.

The old way of life he captured in his bucolic tableaux, was slowly being trodden under foot by the industrial revolution, the ongoing theft of land from the common people known as enclosure, and fierce political and religious power struggles both at home and abroad.

Against this backdrop, he mastered techniques and established traditions that were taken up by the artistic generations to follow. This is the story of one such craftsman, a wood-engraver by the name of Georgina Heywood-Smith, and the unique piece of artwork she created for me. More of which later



Saving the Toll, from *A History of British Birds* by Thomas Bewick (1804).

First let's return to the work of Thomas Bewick: in the scene above, a parsimonious drover attempts to skimp on the toll charge by driving his animal through the river instead of using the bridge. He's having trouble. In his determination to keep the cow moving, with encouragement from the stick, he's lost his hat and it seems to be floating away. The trees on the riverbank are

bare. Is that snow on the hills? If it's cold, that explains his swollen nose. A figure on the bridge hangs off a parapet above the first arch and harangues the penny-pinching peasant. In the background a sensible traveller on horseback can be seen approaching the crossing. On the right-hand side, two boys on the bank do what boys have always done since time immemorial - throw stones into the river.

This piece is called *Saving the Toll*, featured in the second volume of *A History of British Birds* (1804). It's classically Bewick in its style and in its ability to tell a story, and delight while doing so. What do you see?

Here is a different bridge scene, this one by Heywood-Smith, an engraving entitled *Storm Over Clifton*, selected for the Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition (2022).



Storm Over Clifton by Georgina Heywood-Smith.

A moody sky casts an eye over Clifton Suspension Bridge. Swirls of cloud low on the horizon form a foundation for the storm building above. The heavenly eye is trained on a phallic symbol of man's folly and hubris, Isambard Kingdom Brunel's suspension tower, one of two, its arrogant pride cast in shadow.

Something is brewing. The gods are stewing over some tumescent transgression. A chastening is imminent, a rebuff. The scene is pregnant with drama.

The Industrial Revolution, of which this bridge is a feature, would go on to transform 'in the span of scarce two lifetimes the life of Western man, the nature of his society, and his relationship to the other peoples of the world.'

Conceived in 1753, construction of the bridge only got underway in 1831 and was immediately sabotaged by political and social upheaval when five hundred young men came together to fight back against the corrupt power wielded by those with vested interests for financial gain who had unfair representation in the House of Commons - a situation not entirely unfamiliar in our own contemporary society.

The rebels wanted a say in how their society was run, and when the House of Lords rejected the second Reform Bill, which would have redistributed power amongst them more democratically, the incensed activists went native.

Three days of rioting ensued, during which time official buildings symbolic of corrupt power were looted and torched along with the homes of the wealthy elite. Caught up in the conflict, Brunel was sworn in as a special constable to help police the disorder.

The uprising was eventually put down at the point of the sword when the 3rd Dragoon Guards, on horseback, led a violent charge through the mob, killing four men and wounding a further eighty-six.

Although he didn't live to see it, I dare say Bewick would have been sympathetic² to the ideals of the protesters who forced Brunel to take off his engineer's stovepipe hat and put on the policeman's helmet to protect the interests of the industrial revolutionaries, and while I don't know what Heywood-Smith was thinking when she created her stirring piece, it speaks to me of divine judgement and the promise of violent retribution imparted by Mother Nature.

Bewick himself was dismayed at what was happening to the natural places around him: nothing hurt him more than the enclosure acts that drove the cottagers from the common. His desire to preserve and cherish what remained was strong, indeed, he captured it in his work - evidence of his soulful striving to stand against the proliferating ugliness in the world.

This is a thread that unites Bewick, Heywood-Smith and myself: taking a stand against so-called progress; a protest at what is being done to nature, community and people for the benefit of the few; and a determination to walk a path of integrity instead - pursuing meaningful work, creating beauty and celebrating quality.

Or, to put it another way - going against the grain.

I contacted Heywood-Smith during the summer of 2024 to ask whether she would create a wood engraving for me. To my delight, she agreed.

Wood engraving is at once the simplest and yet one of the most exquisite forms of printmaking. First, the reversed design is engraved into the mirror-smooth surface of a block of end-grain wood. Next, the block is rolled up with ink and printed onto paper. The cuts engraved in the wood come out as white; the remaining top surface which gets inked, as black. The artist is, in effect, drawing with light – a white mark as opposed to the black mark that comes from a pencil, brush or pen.



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Untitled vignette by Thomas Bewick (1818)

What distinguishes the early wood cutters from the later wood engravers is that the latter experimented with using the dense end grain of wood, going against, rather than along, the grain. This is the technique Bewick pioneered, and is the method used by contemporary engravers like Heywood-Smith, as she explains here:

‘Engraving is done on the end grain and has more detail. The wood has to be hard to make the lines clear and the square block is sanded down so it is really smooth. Originally the wood was sliced off the end of a log and that’s why the old images you see were end-of-log shaped.’

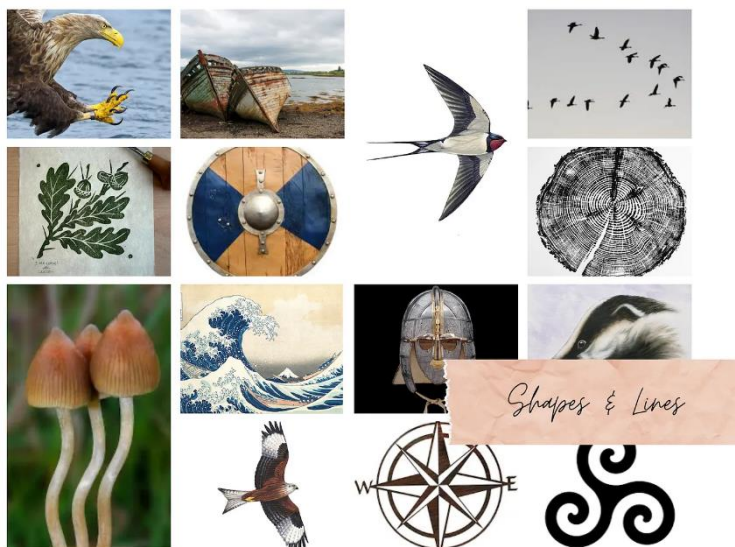
The finished wood engraving I would eventually receive from Heywood-Smith has the feeling of a dark-firmament, onto which a spell of light has been magically cast.



To create it, we initially worked together to gather inspiration, before she took over. Heywood-Smith doesn’t do commissions, because ‘people don’t want you to create something, they want you to do what they want you to do’ so we had to be deft in our collaboration, which was intended to evoke the spirit of my written work as *The Rover*.

Upon request, I provided a collection of images that allude to the themes and ideas that I weave together in my writing.

St Cyriac's Church, Lacock by Georgina Heywood-Smith.



Based on these, Heywood-Smith sent me a collection of rough sketches and we selected one to develop further.

Box is the best for wood engraving because it grows so slowly that the growth-lines are very close and on its hard surface engravers can use fine tools similar to those employed on silver or copper.

The buxus, box or boxwood, is a slow-growing evergreen shrub or small tree, which boasts seventy different species within its family. The block used in this instance was made from a number of different pieces of boxwood put together.



Before engraving, Heywood Smith inked the final artwork design onto the block. There is always a difference between the ink drawing and the final print because the marks made by the pen are replaced with marks engraved onto the wood.

This is the point at which the engraving begins: Heywood-Smith uses superbly named tools called spitstickers and scorpers to gouge the lines.

There are two ways of working. The black-line technique, when printed, results in an image closely resembling a pen and ink drawing, with black lines on a paper-white background (this is how Bewick worked).

The other is white-line engraving, which involves taking the white away, so that when printed the design appears as white lines on a dark background. Heywood-Smith uses both techniques.





'I have produced wood engravings by taking the white away but I never think in technical terms with definitions when producing my work, I just do what feels right. When I look at something I see the complete item and the shades within it. It's not a line drawing. I'm not constructing from a-to-b-to-c in one continuous line. I think of the whole rather than the part.'

'Sometimes, it's what I take away that creates the image. It's a way of looking at the world. Having said that, recently I have been looking at the work and thinking in the opposite way. This is the beauty of art. It is forever changing and artists are always developing, twisting and turning. That's how the work progresses.'

The time taken to complete one piece of work ranges from weeks to months. The more simplistic a piece appears, the longer it takes to make.

'Wherever the print is white, I have to take that all away. If you go wrong while engraving you can't rub it out, it's bugged, unless you try to adapt the mistake and make a tree into a fish, for example.'

A few days went by while Heywood-Smith made her marks.

Toward the end of June I received a message:

'I'm ready to take the first print proof to see how it's looking.'



To make the print, she inks the block with black relief print making ink and uses an old Victorian nipping press, similar to an old book binding press, to transfer the ink, under pressure, from the block to the best quality Japanese paper: cream, white or pink, depending on the work.

'Printing comes with experience, it's a feeling more than a formula. You can feel if there is too much or too little pressure. I can print twenty copies and sometimes I have to bin half of them immediately.'

'If you don't have all the printing equipment you can just use a wooden spoon. Once you've inked up the block and placed the paper on top, the back of the spoon is used to transfer the ink.'

Once the ink has been transferred to the paper, the print is revealed.

The first couple of proofs were propped up for a few days while Heywood-Smith considered the overall impression and mulled over whether to make further cuts.

A few days later, she showed me the finished print. For the first time I was able to linger over this newly-created piece of art, taking in every magical detail.



Here then, is the finished article: *The Rover* by Georgina Heywood-Smith (2024).

In the following weeks, we came together to share our reflections. When I look at the artwork Heywood-Smith created, I see a figure (me) considering a journey. Something ineffable is beckoning him and he looks over the ocean toward the mountain and realises that to reach his destination he must cede to the contours of the land. There is no direct path. There is no choice but to detour.

He has to follow the line of the coast, walk the beach, bow to the demands of the place where land meets water: the edge-land, the threshold, where the wild things are.

What is the mystery he seeks? The stormy swirls in the sky suggest the answer: consciousness.

Consciousness is everywhere, expressed through all things, wherever we are.

I find it is more abundant and easier to access in nature's wild and remote places. In our system world, the wild has been excluded, and there are consequences, as Darren Allen notes in his new book:

Now you live in a world without the wild, which means without death, without freedom and without real mystery. That's why you are all so bored, and so boring.

In the print, the swirls in the sky represent this continuously flowing vibe. Vivid, ever-present, always stilling, it is, paradoxically, both serene and violent. It is both the storm that sweeps through your soul like a gale, clearing you out to make space for new guests, and the silky secret whispered on the breeze, that breaks your tender heart.

I asked Heywood-Smith if she would let me in on her thoughts:

'Well, it was created for you. The part of me that knows you, the essence, visuals and feelings, as well as lots of different influences, all went into it. I didn't give it a name. It's for you to name.'

'There's a journey, it's open, expansive and wild. I wanted to include the sea because it is obviously important to you from what I read in your writing. You're thinking far and wide.'

'The mountain is your solidity, steadiness and reliability. It's also the hard place, the bit that's hard to deal with.'

The sky is storm, hurricane and death. Without that sky the piece wouldn't be what it is.'

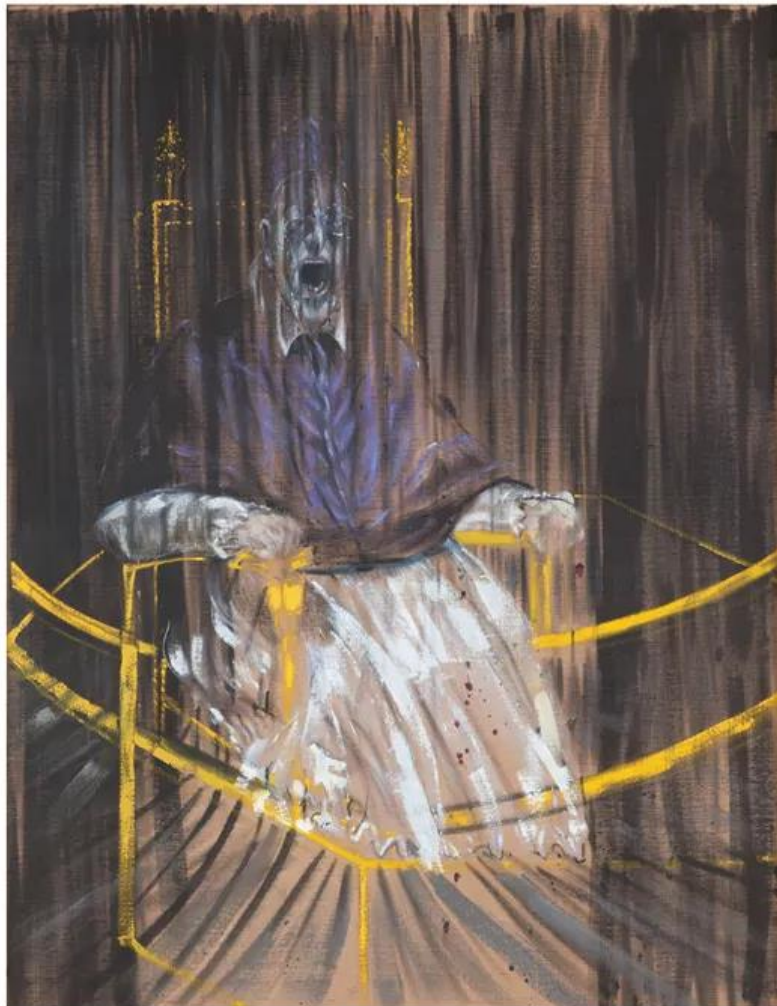
Here Heywood-Smith reveals a little of her own journey.

'I can't communicate in words but I'm always creating, making, because there's always something I'm trying to communicate. I'm trying to create something within and something without. What I find is when I create something inside it reflects back at me.'

'It changes all the time. I produced an unusually massive piece recently which came out of life being a bit difficult with big choices to make. I went into the studio and this huge piece came out of me. Other people in the studio see it and wonder if I'm alright.'

'It's nice to touch on people's feelings and I recognise that it can be scary for people and stir emotions they did not expect or want to feel. I've seen people cry over art I've produced. You can reach someone in random places.'

'Death is taken away from us: myself, I like Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X by Francis Bacon. I love his work but it's terrifying and petrifying.'



Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X by Francis Bacon (1953).

'People are too scared to have problems and issues and it's all hidden behind social media. I'm interested in what it is to be human, to understand ourselves, to question, to release, to touch people where it's difficult to reach. If that happens I feel like I've done something worthwhile, even if it's just a memory invoked.'

'If you're not authentic it's just a commodity.'

Heywood-Smith has become well known for her signature black and white engraved artworks, all inspired by her surroundings throughout the south-west of England.

Born in England, she has touches of Scottish and Swedish running through her ancestry (somebody once told her she had Swedish mannerisms without knowing it).

After leaving her nine-to-five job, she was looking for a way to be creative again. Long interested in different styles of print, she signed up to do a wood engraving course guided by Chris Pig at the Black Pig Printmaking Studio in Frome.

The Black Pig Printmaking Studio



'There was no planning. Previously everything had an end goal but the thought process here was simply to create. I wanted to carry on but I needed money. I get that by selling my artwork.'

'I'm content, it's enough for me to be creating art. I don't need lots of material possessions, the art serves what I need.'

'If I were to reduce life down to the bare essentials it would be food, water, shelter and engraving.'

'I've had to give up a lot to get here, but I've had the support of my partner. I've had to let go of things but I've never really been driven by the same things as other people.'

'Since going into this I see more clearly how some entrenched aspects of modern life can sap energy out of me.'

'I think we all have a special talent and it's a shame that some of us never get the chance to do it or be it because we have been taught to be a certain way. Our generation is so obsessed with cheap Chinese shit, it distracts from the core of us, what would really feed our soul.'

When Bewick began his transformative work in the 1700s, wood engravings were regarded as the plain man's art, dismissed by the critic Horace Walpole in a cursory footnote as 'slovenly stamps'.

On the contrary I say: Bewick's work vibrates with quality and intensity. By all accounts he was a physically robust man with a powerful presence. He channelled this prowess through the fine point of his tools to create wood engravings overflowing with life-force.

There is elan in Heywood-Smith's art too, of a style all her own, which reflects what I know of her life experiences and outlook.

I also aim for fervour in my work, leaning into heretical ideas like truth, love, life, beauty, freedom and death, all of which can be sensed in the engravings of Bewick, Heywood-Smith, and embodied by anyone else who stands against the soulless status quo, picks up a spitsticker (or their own tool of preference) and goes against the grain.

An Article and Interview published in The Rover and reproduced with permission of the Author and Georgina Heywood-Smith

To view the original Article and further links to Galleries of the Artist's work, follow this link:

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