

Representing the Victorians - Illustration and *The ILN* by Brian Maidment

The wood engraving tradition and the *ILN*

From its first issue, published on the fourteenth of May 1842, the *Illustrated London News* insisted, by means of its opening editorial as well as by its evident practice, on the topicality, immediacy and authenticity of its wood engraved illustrations:

.....we do hold it as triumphant that WE are, by the publication of this very newspaper, launching the giant vessel of illustration into a channel the broadest and widest that it has ever been dared to stem...The public will have henceforth under their, and within their grasp, the very form and presence of events as they transpire.

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By 1842 it was perhaps possible to consider the wood engraving as an unproblematic and triumphantly naturalistic medium in this way. It was certainly, given its speed of execution and linear simplifications, the best available medium for documentary reportage. As a relief method of print making, where the white areas were cut away from the surface of a box-wood block and the image thus printed off the remaining inked surface of the block, wood engraving enjoyed the inestimable advantage of being able to be printed alongside type set material to make up the page. A box-wood block was capable of producing a durable image suitable for long print runs without any serious degradation in quality. Wood engraving was also a relatively quick, although labour intensive, medium for the production of illustrations. By the early 1840s, the considerable labour force of jobbing engravers necessary for the mass production of graphic images had been established and centralised in London.

The wood engraving as a new medium in the early nineteenth century

Despite these obvious and valuable claims on the attention of magazine editors, the wood engraving had in the previous thirty years struggled to impose itself on readers more accustomed to copper engravings, etchings or even the immensely laborious mezzotint for their visual entertainment and graphic information. The high cultural status of the hitherto ubiquitous single plate etched or engraved print was not easily overthrown, although the cheapness and speed of execution of the wood engraving were widely acknowledged. One early commentator, writing in *The Edinburgh Magazine* in 1798, estimated that wood engravings cost 'one fiftieth part of copper-plate engravings of the same size' and that the saving on any one copper-plate engraved for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* would have 'exceeded ten guineas', and the saving overall on one impression of the whole work 'would have exceeded four thousand guineas'. [*Edinburgh Magazine* April 1798, 249.] Its use as a medium even for such complex tasks as scientific delineation was thus grudgingly becoming accepted.

Wood engraving after Thomas Bewick

The key figure in such changing attitudes towards, and the rapid appropriation of the wood engraving was, of course, Thomas Bewick, who had, in using the highly finished and minutely observed wood engraved vignette for his books on British animals and birds, combined an exquisite aesthetic achievement with both scientific accuracy and widespread commercial appeal. The tradition of the wood engraving before Bewick was essentially vernacular, even vulgar, a fact echoed or embodied in the crude linear techniques and lack of finish inherent in the form. Yet even the introduction of the more tonally sophisticated medium of end grain wood engraving still found itself forced to engage with ideas of vulgarity usually disguised as aesthetic debates about 'finish' or quality. Here, for example, is part of an editorial note from an octavo 3d. weekly illustrated miscellany *Bonne Bouche* published in November 1823:

"We feel great pleasure in presenting to our Readers our long-promised engraving; which we give *distinct from, and in addition to, a full sheet of letter-press*, without any increase of price. We are confident, that when the expense of engraving a Copper-plate in so highly finished a style, and of striking off so many thousand impressions, be considered, it will be acknowledged that we have fully redeemed our pledge of rendering the *Bonne Bouche* worthy, *with respect of graphic illustrations*, of the liberal and extensive patronage which the Public have bestowed on its humble and unassuming literary merits. In giving the present Engraving, we

have been actuated, besides, by a wish to ascertain, *whether the Public would be more pleased with a very superior Copper-plate or lithographic Embellishment* given once in every two or three Numbers, than with mere *Wood-cuts, glaring to the eye*, but from the low price at which they must be executed to allow of their being given every week, *degrading to any work* which possesses ought to recommend it to a place on the book-shelf of the humble, or in the libraries of the rich.”

A number of issues are of interest here – the willingness of the magazine’s editor to negotiate its format with the readership, the agonised debating of the relative claims of cheapness and artistic worth, the faux humility of editorial tone, and uncertainty over the precise social status of the readership. But there is also a clear sense in which aesthetic arguments are elided into issues to do with social class – the ‘degrading’ quality of wood engravings, described with startling self-critical candour as ‘glaring to the eye’, are out of place in ‘the libraries of the rich’.

The wood engraving and magazines 1820-1840

But by 1842 any fretfulness about the appropriateness of the wood engraving as a medium for the production of mass circulation images had been swept away by the recognition in the 1820s and 1830s of its value as both a didactic and as a decorative medium. The unstoppable shift to the wood engraving for magazine illustration was inaugurated by a new generation of weekly miscellanies and specialist information bearing magazines of the 1820s., such as *The Mirror of Literature* and the *Mechanic’s Magazine*, which sought a major extension of the reading public beyond the wealthy and the genteel. An immediate recognition of the value and power of the wood engraving as both an expository medium through which the shapes and textures of the material world could be represented and explained and as a visually appealing element to attract even barely literate readers led to the adoption of the medium by the new mass circulation weeklies of the early 1830s., of which *The Penny Magazine* and *The Saturday Magazine* are the best known examples. Projected by entrepreneurs and organisations interested in the spread of a ‘useful’ and socially cohesive print culture to a mass reading public, magazines of this kind were hugely dependent on illustration to temper the rather dry and politically uncontentious information that formed their central content. *The Penny Magazine* in particular was extraordinarily self-referential in content, and issued supplements describing its own production, which helped to render wood engraved illustration as not so much commonplace as inevitable.

The ILN, wood engraving and respectability

Such was the immediate history of the wood engraving as an illustrative medium for periodicals to which the *Illustrated London News* brought its new and bold project. The remaining issues standing in the way of the acceptance of the wood engraving by relatively sophisticated readers were vestigial anxieties about its perceived vulgarity and a wariness about the simplifications implicit in its linear, monochrome and tonally challenged mode of manufacture. The *Illustrated London News* met these challenges largely by making the wood engraving larger, more highly finished, and more profuse than any previous publication. An additional issue was the Stamp Duty, a tax imposed by the government during the Napoleonic Wars and encompassing all publications that depended on ‘news’ or topical political and social reportage, and still in operation in the 1840s. The *Illustrated London News* was already expensive at 6d. per weekly issue, however, and the addition 1d. Stamp Duty only confirmed its chosen appeal to the comfortably off middling and genteel classes. Thus the *Illustrated London News*, drawing on the widespread validation of the expository wood engraving by mass circulation magazines founded during the 1830s, adapted the medium to topical reportage for a relatively sophisticated readership, stressing accuracy and immediacy as its dominant characteristics. The *Illustrated London News*, along with the innovations of *Punch* in producing illustrations that sought to exploit the potential of the wood engraving as a medium for comic art, inaugurated an era in the magazine and periodical market in which the wood engraving reigned triumphant – at least until the widespread introduction of photo-mechanical reprographic media twenty years later. Central to this dominance was the *Illustrated London News*’s repeated claims for the authenticity, realism and topicality of its illustrations.

Building the illustrated page

The illustrations to the *ILN* are too easily viewed as a unified mass of undifferentiated wood engravings. While the images in the magazine share the basic characteristics of the wood engraving – they are all monochrome and dependent on the linearity of their mode of making – they represent in fact a broad range of generic possibilities which intersect with, or even nullify, their easy characterisation as ‘reportage’. Indeed the first visual impression offered by the wood engraved illustrations for the *ILN* is not so much of authenticity or naturalism but rather of their centrality and versatility as a mechanism for constructing the large, multi-columned page central to the identity (and the project) of the *ILN*. The shape-shifting ability of the wood engraving, its capacity for being manipulated into extremely large images through the use of multiple blocks locked together as well as its ability to be inscribed into the page amidst type-set text, mean that many of the illustrations write about the page or else dominate and bully the surrounding text into compressed and unexpected columnular shapes.

Do all the illustrations in the *ILN* look the same?

Many *ILN* illustrations are constructed out of the competing generic possibilities to be found in the wood engraving medium, ranging from highly finished, tonally complex ‘art’ images to drawings using almost a shorthand code of a few simplified lines. Portraits, public events, and topographical or seasonal subjects tended to demand the full tonal and aesthetic resources of the medium, while more vividly topical reports of fires, accidents, and topical events tended to be drawn in a more sketchy manner in keeping with the excitement of the moment. Many images combined humour with reportage, using a range of graphic possibilities from caricature to whimsical flights of fancy. Despite such evident variety, the determination of the magazine to characterise its illustrations as essentially ‘naturalistic’, in order to authenticate its central claims to topicality, accuracy and authenticity remains a central aspiration. . However, many of its illustrations are self-evidently simplifications of complex realities, closer to diagrams than to true representations of events. While these form attempts to represent actuality through the shapes and forms of the observable world, such attempts are significantly mediated through the simplified linearity of the wood engraving in order to clarify and explain. Many other illustrations draw on a repertoire of posture, gesture and staging learnt from the theatre, and share the exaggerations and over-statement characteristic of theatrical melodrama. Other ‘aestheticised’ images, often large in scale and commissioned from well known artists such as Sir John Gilbert, seek to exploit the tonal, compositional, symbolic or allegorical potential of images, and thus reclaim the wood engraving for the realm of ‘art’. The title pages of the volume issues of the magazine offer good examples of this kind of ambitious use of the wood engraving, but full page images in this mode turn up frequently elsewhere. The *ILN* also had a considerable interest in the use of comic images, and, especially in the early years, commissioned comic artists of the standing of Kenny Meadows and Richard Doyle to draw full page or even double page spreads that drew on both the inherited caricature tradition and the Victorian delight in whimsy. Thus, even when the structural necessity of the wood engraving to the identity of the magazine has been acknowledged, it is still clear that the wood engravings in the *ILN* do not inevitably disclose themselves as naturalistic in method or reportage in mode—they need to be read in all their variety. The readers of the magazine were undoubtedly sophisticated enough to acknowledge the generic complexity of the wood engraving, and, much in the manner that we read the photograph today, to understand that the extent of the ‘truth’ of the images they saw was a matter of agreed convention.

Did the *ILN* artists really see what they drew?

It is difficult to evaluate the *ILN*’s insistence on the visual authenticity of its reportage. Its triumphalist early declaration of the power of the wood engraving to represent events naturalistically on behalf of the reader was later reinforced by the magazine’s famous and self-advertised deployment of ‘special artists’ to newsworthy locales regardless of danger or difficulty of access. Its reports on the Crimean War formed an early vindication of this policy, and the use of experienced ‘specials’ such as Frank Vizetelly, one of three brothers all of whom were closely involved with the *ILN*. Vizetelly sent back reports and drawings from, successively, the Italian *Risorgimento*, the American Civil War and the Spanish Revolution of 1868, and thus gave credence to claims of immediacy and truthfulness. Yet it is not difficult to find images offered without editorial comment as eye-witness reports that show events that cannot have been seen by the artist. Reports from abroad were particularly prone to invention. While the *ILN* had representatives and correspondents even in countries that were highly difficult to enter, such as Japan, the images and reports that were sent back to London for publication could sometimes only have been guesswork. Reports of the ‘Namamugi Incident’ in Japan

in 1862, for example, in which a British subject called Richardson was killed, would have had to invent images and details of his murder at which no reporter was present. Nonetheless, the execution of Richardson's assassins three years later was witnessed by an *ILN* artist. Equally, some of the most dramatic reports of historic events, such as the brilliant drawings by Gavarni and Hoffman of events of 1848 in France, were offered through melodramatic and fine art graphic conventions that compromise their status as 'authentic' reportage. Similarly, images and articles that presented themselves as gritty social realism, such as Kenny Meadows's short series of 'Characters About Town', in fact combined elements of caricature with social realist conventions.

Who drew for the *ILN*?

The *ILN*'s rapacious need for images to fill its elaborately structured pages of illustrations drew in many major artists of the nineteenth century as well as a mass of now little known illustrators and engravers. The engraver and entrepreneur Henry Vizetelly, the most celebrated of the three Vizetelly brothers, was part of the founding partnership for the magazine, and his large scale engraving workshop, along with those of Ebenezer Landells and Stephen Sly, developed the capacity needed to maintain the constant demand for finished blocks produced to tight deadlines, although many other engravers such as W.J.Linton and Mason Jackson were also extremely active. As well as established artists such as Gilbert, Gavarni, Meadows and Birket Foster, and lesser known but highly competent regular contributors such as Henry Anaelay or H.G.Hine, there were specialist contributors like John Archer who drew animal subjects during the 1840s or W.Biscombe Gardner who undertook large scale portraits and ambitious double page reproductions of paintings in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Few jobbing artists and engravers evaded the reach of the *ILN*, many of them appearing anonymously in its pages.

Wood engraving, the *ILN* and middle class taste

Gerry Beegan has recently noted that the use of wood engraving in the *ILN* was central to its development of a 'middle-class character'. 'Wood engraving' he notes 'with its aesthetic links to fine art prints and books seemed thoroughly respectable' – at least by comparison with the cruder woodcuts to be found in the down market press. He concludes that 'wood engraving became the means through which middle-class readers expected to see their world depicted'. The *ILN*'s belief in the value of the wood engraving as an authentic and truthful, if not necessarily naturalistic, medium for reproducing reality was unwavering, and its achievement in convincing its readers of this belief is a major factor in the magazine's sustained hold over the British middle class world view throughout the Victorian period.

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For more information on the *ILN Historical Archive* visit our website at:
www.gale.cengage.co.uk/iln