



Robert Gibbings

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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

ROBERT GIBBINGS
(1889 - 1958)

A thesis submitted to:
The Faculty of History of Art and Design & C.S.
in candidacy for the Degree

Faculty of Design
Department of Visual Communication

by
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MARCH 1988

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INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century has witnessed the internationalisation of art. No longer are we the isolated Irish or British school. A major artist is an international figure, and major movements are international movements. This has been the century of schools and 'isms' and such a profusion of styles that in the eyes of art historians only the biggest and most important movements will be constantly recorded and recalled. In the international context of Picasso and the German expressionists it is inevitable that more local artists and the smaller movements should be overshadowed. But to the British or Irish historian it is important that the native schools are not forgotten, however small or insignificant they may be in an international context. Their influence on native artistic activities is always worth documenting and they are important for the art they produced as well as an expression of the social and cultural climate of the time.

The British wood-engraving revival in the first thirty or forty years of the twentieth century is a good example of a movement which was not of tremendous international significance but should be remembered as an important period in the history of our own vernacular art. It emerged at the time when Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism were establishing a reputation. From 1913 to 1920, Edward Wadsworth, one of Lewis's group, worked on a series of wood-engravings based on industry and engineering (Fig. 1). His work is an early example of the use of wood-engraving as a creative process, but Wadsworth was not essentially concerned with wood-engraving as an art in itself, but only as a tool to serve his purpose for a while. The English

wood-engraving revival emerged very independently of Vorticism or any other international movement. It was genuinely local school and grew from a group of Central School graduates.

Robert Gibbings does not rank in the international classifications. His name is not immediately familiar. Yet his work as a graphic artist throughout the first fifty years of this century is of unquestionable local significance. His achievements as a wood-engraver and book



(fig 1) Edward Wadsworth: *In Dry Dock*, 1918

designer introduced a whole new audience to good quality art and design, educating their aesthetic sensibilities. His work as an art-director with the Golden Cockerel Press and later, Penguin books, heightened the awareness and appreciation of good design amongst both publishers and their public alike. I wish in this monograph to highlight his achievements as an engraver, designer and art-director, and remember him as one of the finest British graphic artists of this century.

Gibbings, born in Cork in 1889, was a multi-talented man whose skills ranged from book design and decoration to wood-engraving and to writing. Because of the scope of his talent to categorise him is both difficult and confusing. I want primarily to examine his work in the context of graphics - of visual communication and design. I do not see Gibbings as a fine artist. His wood-engravings were fundamentally illustrations or decorations and as such differ from some of the work of his contemporaries. Eric Gill and the Nash brothers were much more interested in wood-engraving as a means of self-expression. Books and literary communication were inextricably linked with the engravings of Gibbings, and the constraints of the letterpress were one of the greatest directional influences on his work. Gibbings' art was of significance as an aesthetically satisfactory solution to all these

related problems and constraints. His art cannot be fully appreciated except within the context of book production. It is much to the detriment of the books by Patience Empson and Thomas Balston that they virtually ignore the typography and book design of Robert Gibbings and concentrate almost exclusively on his wood-engraving, looking on them as an end in themselves. Once his involvement in book production began Gibbings very rarely produced independent wood-engravings. One of the great difficulties in researching his work has been finding reproductions of his engravings within their intended typographical context. It is impossible to analyse the success of an illustration or decoration when it can be seen only in isolation. It is not what Gibbings would himself have intended.

Patience Empson and Thomas Balston give satisfactory biographical outlines of the life of Gibbings. Their quite limited texts complementing the collections of wood-engravings give a general introduction to the work of Gibbings the engraver. Albert Garrett places him in the context of the Wood-engraving School. It is on his

engraving as an element of book-production that I wish to elaborate. I will draw a picture of Gibbings the graphic artist and designer.

It is because Gibbings has been regarded purely as a wood-engraver that his reputation has waned. His wood-engraving is of outstanding quality, but of a quality which grows from the constraints of book-production. It must be seen as such to be fully appreciated. As an engraver alone he falls foul of art historians who dismiss him as a mere illustrator. To book critics he is an author and his engraving is of peripheral interest. It is up to the historians of graphic design and visual communication to knock the dust off the reputation of Robert Gibbings. And it is the responsibility of Irish historians

in particular to begin this work since Gibbings was an Irishman and one of whom we can justly be proud.

Between his birth in Cork in 1889 and his death in England in 1958, the full and varied life of Robert Gibbings can be broadly divided into three phases. The first, which lasted until 1924, sees Gibbings set foot upon the wood-engraving path, along which he became a founder member of the Society of Wood Engravers in 1919. In 1924 his life took a fresh turn and his engraving became permanently linked with book production. Gibbings purchased the Golden Cockerel Press and became an art-director in the best modern sense as he co-ordinated the production of superb books for the following nine years. And in 1933, on the sale of the Press, he began his third and final career as an independant designer, illustrator and writer. During this final period, which lasted until his death in 1958, he reconciled all the conflicting elements of book production and enjoyed his greatest achievements. He died a successful and highly-regarded artist whose place in the history of British graphic art must be guaranteed.

CHAPTER ONE

Robert Gibbings was born on March 23rd 1889, a son of the Reverend Edward Gibbings, Canon of Cork Cathedral. He was educated locally at day and boarding schools and his first attempt at a career brought him to Cork University where, after passing his first year Arts examinations he subsequently failed his first Medical examination three times in the next two years. Obviously not cut out for an academic career, Gibbings eventually decided to follow his natural inclinations and became a late recruit to the artistic profession, much against his father's better judgement who feared both a pauper existence and the immorality of drawing nude women. Nevertheless the Reverend Gibbings did nothing to stand in his son's way, but the financial aid which he could afford could buy only lessons from a local landscape painter, Harry Scully RHA. Not until Gibbings was 22 did he eventually get the money together to go to London and study at the Slade. Henceforth his career was in England but the importance of Cork and the Irish environment on his subsequent work cannot be over-estimated. Gibbings was always an intensely spiritual character, or, as he put it himself, 'a close to nature fellow'(*1). His temperament was fostered unimpeded during those first 22 years of his life when Gibbings had time to ramble and observe and develop a life-long interest in the detail and richness of ordinary everyday life and his environment. Like so many of his fellow Irishmen- Kavanagh, Joyce and Jack Yeats- he never lacked inspiration since he had learned to tap the most infinite of all artistic resources.

Resourcefulness was always one of Gibbings' strongest qualities and

in order to get together the money for study in London he sold a heifer and reared some pointer pups. Off he went, armed with a three guinea commission to design a book-plate for a local lady. Arriving in London he attended classes at the Slade and without delay designed the book-plate. But there was something obviously lacking and all Gibbings could do was hope that his line might be reinforced by the platemaking. Instead, the platemaking served to underline the weaknesses. The design looked worse. Displaying a degree of self-criticism and a desire for perfection which were to become a hallmark of his work, Gibbings decided against posting the designs. Discounting the financial loss he took the plate along to the Slade



(fig 2) Noel Rooke; Zinal Rothhorn

and asked for advice. It proved one of the best investments of his life. There he was ruthlessly told that his line was 'weak and virile'(*2), an extraordinary comment in the light of his subsequent outstanding draughtsmanship. But, one of the most important jobs for an artist is to find a suitable medium, without which all the talent in the world can be wasted. Gibbings was recommended to go to etching classes in the Central School of Art. There he resurrected the bookplate fiasco but, more importantly he recognised the quality of the medium and its potential for lending strength to his drawing. Although his financial resources fell far short of his unlimited energy and enthusiasm, Gibbings calculated that on top of his life-drawing at the Slade and his etching at the Central he could still just afford the fee for 2 half-days in the Central's design class. There he was instructed by Noel Rooke and his career took a new direction which was to lead him to all his future success.

Noel Rooke was the father figure under whose eye most of the eventual exponents of the wood engraving revival were to flourish. Noel Rooke, together with Eric Gill, had been a student in the new calligraphy

class at the Central School in 1899. The teacher was Edward Johnston who made the simple and fundamental discovery that the nature and form of a letter is dictated by the form of the tool used to make it. This discovery led to the foundation of modern calligraphy. For Rooke and Gill it was to alter forever their concept of type. Rooke applied the same principle to another form of expression - wood-engraving. Rooke, at the time when so many artists were dissatisfied with the status to which wood-engraving had been reduced by the Victorian technicians, redefined wood-engraving. By his own reckoning an engraving could only be an original work of art if it was designed and executed by one man, burin in hand, with the tool and the wood working together to dictate the eventual manifestation of the idea. Rooke had invented a burin-designed technique which depended upon white line as opposed to the black-line facsimile reproduction techniques of the nineteenth century victorian engravers. His own work is an example of the freedom and simplicity, the strength and boldness offered by this form of engraving. Zinal Rothhorn (Fig 2) is merely a massing of black shadows which strikingly denotes the snowbound mountain landscape in all its expanse.

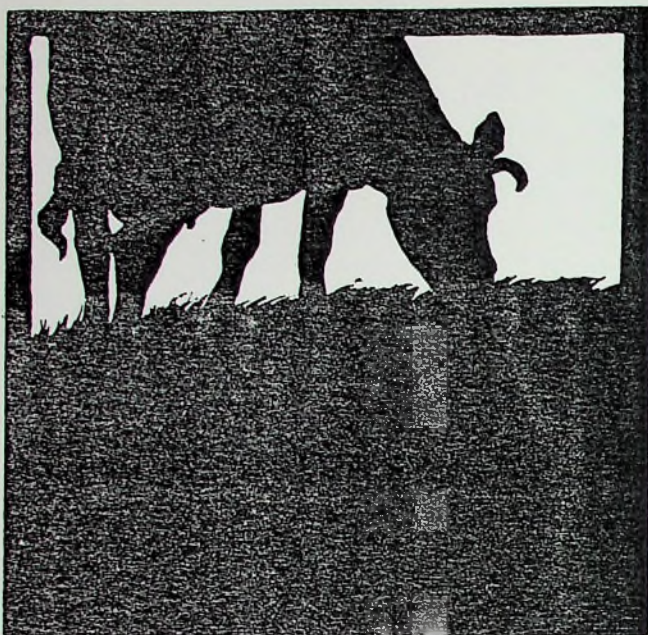
In 1905 Noel Rooke became a teacher of book illustration at the Central School and in 1912 was permitted to teach wood-engraving.

Henceforth he instructed his pupils in accordance with his own concept of engraving and from their ranks sprang the new twentieth century wood-engraving revivalists.

Robert Gibbings was one of the fortunate artists who found a medium with which he could reconcile his skills and his style to perfectly interpret his subject. Gibbings was the archetypal twentieth century engraver who utilised the innate qualities of both wood and graver to

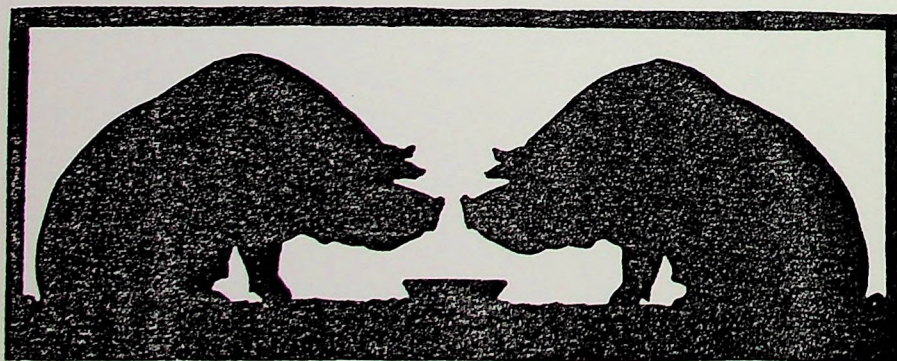
capitalise upon his own skills of draughtsmanship. The Victorians had forced wood into subservience while they produced fine line drawings, instead of acknowledging the potential for fluidity and naturally harmonious line within wood. Gibbings worked together with his medium and used its qualities to determine the ultimate form of his expression. This is a fundamentally modern characteristic and the one to which much of the freedom and creativity of modern art can be attributed. In the early nineteen hundreds it was still a very new idea. But wood-engraving is a difficult craft and one which demands much skill and practice. It demands quite different, and possibly less rapidly acquired skills to painting and sketching. Robert Gibbings begins his *Recollections**(3) with the phrase 'festina lente' - make haste slowly. Despite his eternal enthusiasm and energy, it was his belief in this philosophy which made him such a suitable student of wood-engraving. He was the first to acknowledge his own technical limitations and hence worked within the limits of his abilities at all times, gradually increasing his experience and developing his repertoire of subject matter accordingly. Just as a photographer must learn to see with the eye of a camera, and a painter always with a paintbrush in mind, so must a wood-engraver learn to spot subjects sympathetic to the wood and graver. Gibbings had an engraver's eye. From the outset he could pick out subject matter suitable to his level of expertise.

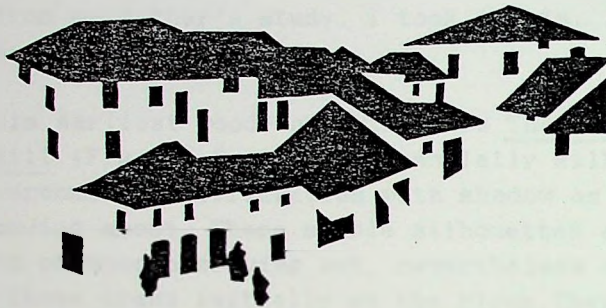
In 1913 Gibbings was back in Cork for his holidays and was free to indulge his interest in nature. He began to see his environment in a new light. The fields of cows and pigs were now material for the engraver. In his brief recollections he tells a captivating childhood anecdote about practically asphyxiating his science class as he burnt the trimmings from their cow 'Spot's' horn. But Spot was also the



(fig 4) *The Crest of a Hill*, 1913

(fig 3) *The Two Pigs*, 1913





(fig 5) *A Street in Macedonia, 1920*

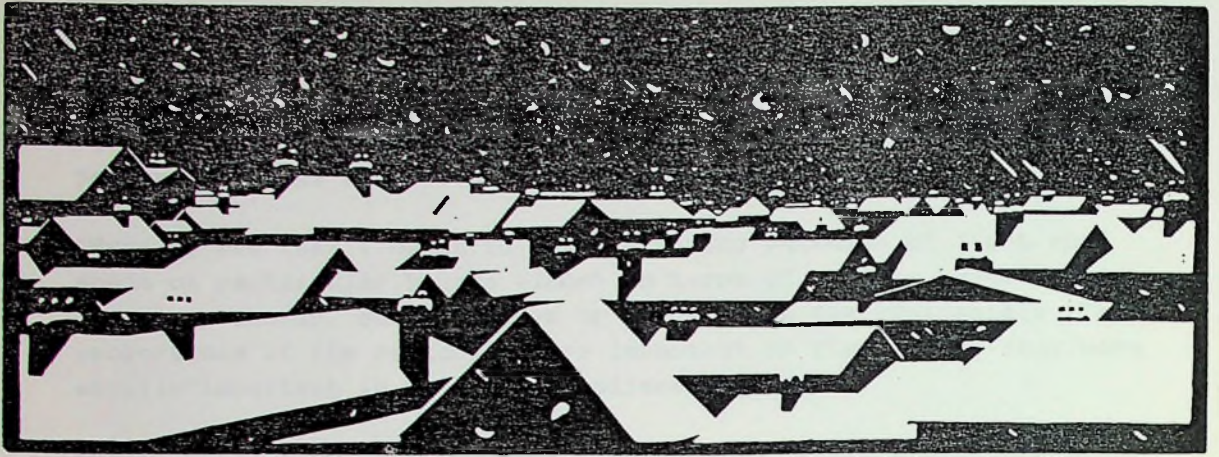
subject of one of his first engravings.

"It was one day while looking out of a rectory window that I noticed her on the grass chewing the cud, and, liking the pattern of her markings, I made a drawing of them in simple black and white, no attempt at lighting. That evening, looking at my drawing, I thought "that makes sense with wood-engraving". I hurriedly wrote to London for a block and when it came I engraved it. Then, using an old letterpress from my father's study, I took proofs. That was really my first wood-engraving".

Also amongst his earliest wood-engravings are The Two Pigs and The Crest of the Hill (Figs 3 & 4) both essentially silhouettes, thus rendered to overcome the difficulties with shadow as the animals persisted in moving about. These simple silhouettes are the most elementary form of wood-engraving but, nevertheless are essentially free from any lines drawn initially on the block. They are unquestionably burin-designed and therefore very much a product of the new school of thought. Here we have the simple massing previously seen in the landscape of Noel Rooke, and before that in the pioneering work of the Beggarstaffs. It was probably the Beggarstaffs who first brought to the commercial art world this new love of wood, of its inherent tactile and personal quality. Gibbings had, in common with Rooke and the Beggarstaffs, a capacity to see subject matter in terms of black and white masses, in terms of light and shade, positive and negative shapes.

Gibbings returned after the holidays to London for another session at the art colleges before war broke out and he was to sign up with the Royal Munster Fusiliers. He got himself a commission and was a well liked and competent officer. In 1918 he was invalided out of the war

and again turned his attentions to wood-engraving. His days in the army had been constructively spent and his note books were full of material which he could now put to use. His visits to Malta and the whole Mediterranean area had filled his mind with images of light, shade and pattern. Once he allowed the pattern to take priority over the subject matter, Gibbings began to develop as a genuinely innovative engraver. Working with black and white masses he avoids the technical difficulties of handling the light with which the burin infuses the wood and yet builds up strong patterns of light and shade suggested by the fall of light on rectangular Mediterranean houses. A Street in Macedonia (Fig 5) is completely free from any detail



(fig 6) *Dublin under Snow, 1918*

and it is only the skillful handling of black mass that creates the striking impression of houses. In lending importance to shapes and pattern Gibbings reinforces the expression of the subject.

"Here it was that I began to see the strong patterns of light and shade on rectangular houses almost in terms of music - major chords and minor chords, small windows or archways as the accidentals. The proportions of the rectangle were important in themselves: they were equally important in relation to adjacent shapes".

Dublin under Snow (Fig. 6) is a fine example of his discarding of all irrelevant detail and his progressive move towards abstraction and design. Here we see the first evidence of the vanishing line a technique whose invention is attributed to Gibbings. Wherever one plane is partly in front of another he discards the boundary line of the front plane and leaves it to the spectator to imagine the completed shape and separate planes.

"Where one white surface, such as of snow, is seen against another,

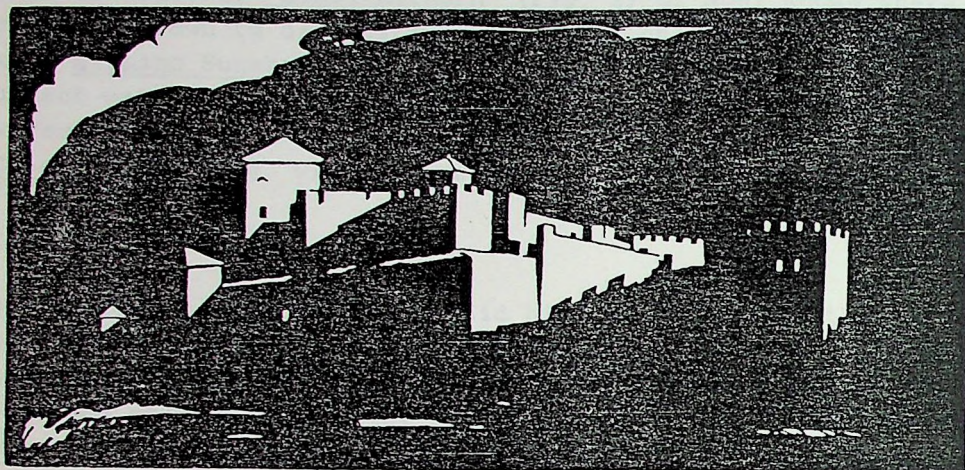
the line of demarcation is often so faint that it is all to the good if it can be omitted and the variety in plane or perspective expressed by other means. An accidental shadow, or a window or doorway, may give all that is needed of definition".(*4)

While now we are so familiar with work in black and white, Gibbings' work was original at a time when such massings of blacks and whites was not common. At the time of Dublin under Snow Gibbings, quite remarkably, had never encountered any Cubist work. Thomas Balston notes:

"In it he had succeeded in imposing an almost cubistic design upon a fundamentally impressionistic conception without sacrificing atmosphere or texture."(*5)

Cubism is one of the rare exceptions where a parallel may be drawn between the wood-engraving revival and the major international movements. Wood-engraving is an essentially linear discipline and many of the foundation principles beneath the new movements were not workable in wood, a medium so totally different to paint.

The concept of pattern, black and white, is the keystone of City



(fig 7) *The City Walls, Salonica, 1918*

Walls Solonica (Fig. 7) where Gibbings again employs the vanishing line, this time using only the black planes. He has taken quite a step forward from Zinal Rothern (Fig. 2) of Noel Rooke where lines are still drawn to delineate the outlines of the slopes against the sky. Evening Sunshine (Fig. 8) by Gibbings deals with similar subject matter and Gibbings allows himself use only solid shadow to express the form of the mountain. There is no outline. Similarly in Clear Water (Fig. 9) the form of the girl's arms are left to the

spectator's imagination, with solid black mass guiding the eye towards the direct conclusion. Light is of fundamental importance in these engravings. Gibbings is preoccupied with the relationship between space and solids, with light as a physical manifestation. Beginning with an empty woodblock, he engraves with the burin, allowing the white light to permeate and redefine the form. Light is never negative. In Evening Sunshine virtually luminous light is equally positive and important in defining the form as is the black shadow. This concept of physical light was the keystone of the wood-engraving revival.

Thanks to the teaching of Rooke and to the working example of artists like the Beggarstuffs, Edward Johnston, Lucian Pisarro and Gordon Craig, all of whose engravings display the burin-designed technique, the upcoming generation including Gibbings employed the expressive white line technique. At this time the Society of Painter-Etchers existed but Gibbings, realising the need for a wood-engraving society, soon took the initiative and organised a meeting between himself, Lucien Pisarro, E. Dickey, Noel Rooke, Sidney Lee and Philip Hagreen. It was as a result of this meeting that the Society of Wood Engravers was formed in 1919. It was agreed that the members should meet in each other's studios and this practice was maintained into the nineteen seventies. Eric Gill, John Nash, Gwendolen Raverat, Sturge-Moore and Gorden Craig - all modern engravers - were invited to foundership and accepted. Thus was the establishment of a group of artists who sought to revive wood-engraving and develop it as a proper artform. At a time when art had broken its traditional boundaries, the wood-engravers sought the use of the technical limitations of wood-engraving to produce a personal, sincere style. They sought limitations and boundaries as a means of forcing more



(fig 8) *Evening Sunshine*, 1920



(fig 9) *Clear Waters, 1920*

intense expression. Their approach was diametrically opposed to that of Expressionism, one of the great international twentieth century movements, but their objective was similar. The society's policy was laid down in a resolution expressed by Gill:

" The purpose of the Society is to hold exhibitions devoted solely to wood-cutting and engraving by the European method. Membership of the Society is confined to those who use the European method of wood-engraving. This method, distinguished from the Japanese or Eastern method by the fact that prints are obtained by means of a printing press, is suitable to the tradition and temperament of European artists, and is of greater utility in connection with book production and decoration".(*6)

This latter statement was particularly relevant as the majority of members would eventually engrave for book illustration. Gibbings in particular pursued this subject and virtually subordinated his wood-engraving to the overall design of the book. His endeavours as an art director kept him closely in contact with the more fine art orientated engravers and helped co-ordinate the relationship between the publishing and printing houses and the illustrators and designers. In the more immediate future his association with the Society of Wood Engravers and his contributions to their exhibitions helped disseminate the modern engraving concept amongst the general public and won approval which marked a change of aesthetic opinions from the Victorian days.

The exhibitions of the Society of Wood Engravers were to become an important part of the British arts calendar. Gibbings, as first Honorary Secretary did much to promote the activities of the Society and was actively involved in organising tours and visits to regional

galleries so that the engraving would be seen by a wide audience. The first exhibition in the Chenil Gallery in Chelsea was a resounding popular and critical success. Gibbings was one of the biggest contributors. In the first exhibition in 1920 he contributed his war-travel inspired prints. His work was noted for its energy even within the confines of small format. The Prints exploited the effects of engraving, not the effects of drawing. In an article in The Architect of 1920 Eric Gill wrote:

"The modern world has been led to attach an absurd value to mere representation and to judge all works from a mere imitation of natural form. There is however, at the present time, by the mercy of

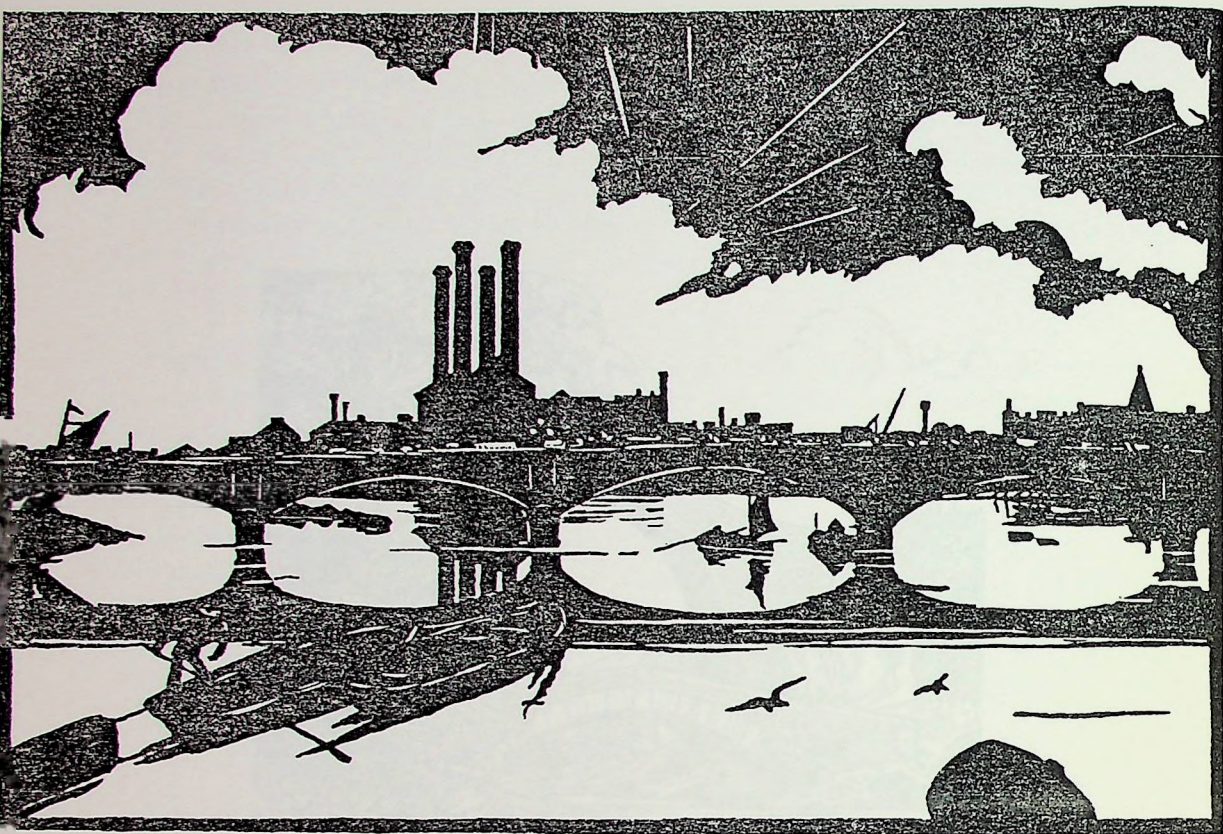
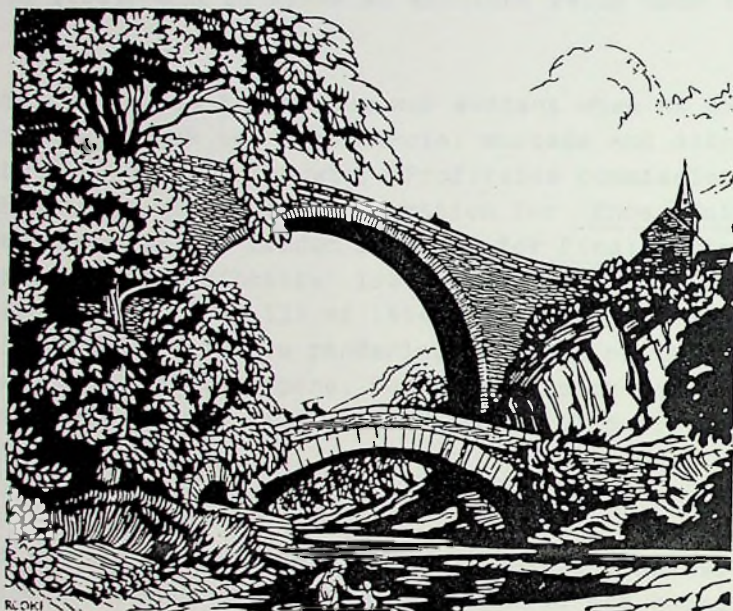


fig 10 London Bridges,



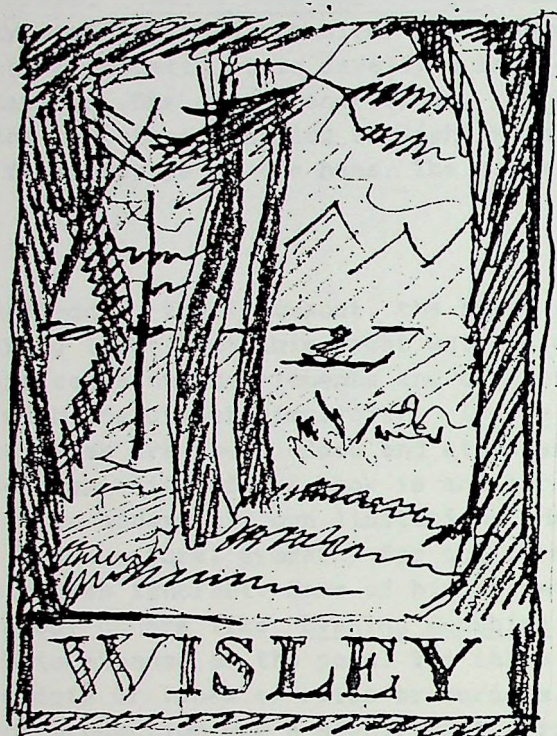
(fig 11) Noel Rooke: *The Two Bridges*, 1914

God, a tendency to realise again the intrinsic value of a work of art as opposed to its extrinsic or sentimental value, and, in this matter, wood-engraving is especially valuable, for the exact imitation of nature, which in painting or etching is comparatively easy and natural, is in wood-engraving both difficult and unnatural. The wood-engraver is forced by his material to have some respect for the thing in itself and to place an absolute value upon the art of drawing".

Gibbings ability to use the medium was evident when he exhibited in the 1920 show. His work was a commercial success and didn't pass unnoticed by the world of industry. Profitable commissions came the way of Gibbings. He worked on illustration for Enos Fruit Salts, and executed a series on London Bridges for Findlater's Port. It is interesting to compare Gibbings' 1920 London Bridges (Fig. 10) with the The Two Bridges (Fig.11) of 1914 by Noel Rooke. Rooke displays a technical competence in his rendering of light on the foliage, stonework and water of the scene. But his approach is more realistic than that of Gibbings who is at this stage still preoccupied with the

massing and abstraction of shadow. Here Gibbings displays an energetic and unrefined strength which balances his comparative lack of technical skill. In later years he consistently redefined his massing of shadow but retained a perfectly harmonious engraver's line while treating his subjects with more detail and realism. The London Bridges series are less geometric and regular than the earlier war engravings but are still essentially of the silhouette style.

With his commercial work there is a problem finding reproductions. One poster is included in the collection of the Victoria and Alberts Department of Prints and Drawings (Fig. 12). Printed from colour woodblocks, it measures 29 1/2" x 19 1/2" and displays a capacity to use the poster format effectively. Gibbings frames a simple blue and green lake scene within strong black silhouetted tree shapes and uses a bold, bright yellow to set off the entire picture. The only type is a large, simple "WISLEY" printed at the base of the picture. It is a simple and effective, if not a revolutionery poster for the Underground Electric Railways Co. of London. Had Gibbings been born twenty years earlier he would have probably have jumped quite effectively on the poster bandwagon which rolled freely through the artistic circle at the turn of the century, recruiting such artists as Cheret and Lautrec in France, the Beggarstaffs and Hardy in



(fig 12) Poster for the Underground Electric Railways Co. of London. (sketch)

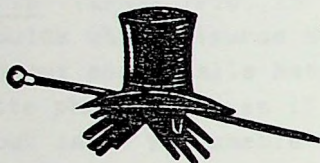
England. It was the profits that accrued from such commissions that enabled Gibbings to produce his own book in 1921. Beautifully printed by the Baynard Press, Twelve Wood-Engravings consists of small works in the style of the 1920 exhibits. They represent the perfection of the silhouette style developed as a concession to technical limitations. One of the engravings, Scraps (Fig. 13) is an example of the competent handling of light within this simple style. A woman feeds scraps to the hens. The black areas are very

minimal - the half-door, the fencepost, the hut - and the technique gives such a strong light that this might well be a snowscene. The black outline contains the elements and completes a very striking scene rendered with the utmost simplicity. Twelve Wood-Engravings has no text. The pages are rough edged and stitched-bound in a grey/brown cover. The simplicity of the book is another example of Gibbings' ability to accept his own limitations. He knew little about book design but had a natural sympathy for the form and chose not to interfere where he was ignorant. Some of his engravings are composed within rough frames; others like Evening Sunshine (Fig. 8) stand freely in the white expanse of the page. The table of contents is appropriate - no dots or lines or rules or borders. This first endeavour in book production was a significant signpost towards the subsequent career of Gibbings.

However, commercial success was, through no fault of Gibbings, very short-lived. Recession in 1921 saw a widespread tightening of belts and Gibbings soon ran out of commissions. Before long he was looking for bookwork. In 1922 he illustrated Erewhon (Fig. 14) for Jonathan Cape. For the first time, Gibbings expands upon his technique of simple silhouette and introduces an element of white line into his solid blacks. He discovers the white line method of achieving texture and depth. But in Erewhon the result is not at all conclusive and in fact the illustrations drown in the gap between two styles. Gibbings has departed from the sound, silhouette style. But where he was in silhouette an accomplished master, he is with white-line engraving, a complete novice. The Erewhon vignettes lack the boldness of the earlier work. They are not completely suggestive but try instead to present detail of texture and form. They fail to achieve this and seem much more "ordinary" in the light of the accomplished silhouette



(fig 13) *Scraps*



(fig 14) Erewhon, 1923

work. But the doors had been opened and Gibbings had found himself with the potential to engrave with the firmness and cleanness which he sought. But it would take time, with patience and perseverance. He was eager to progress:

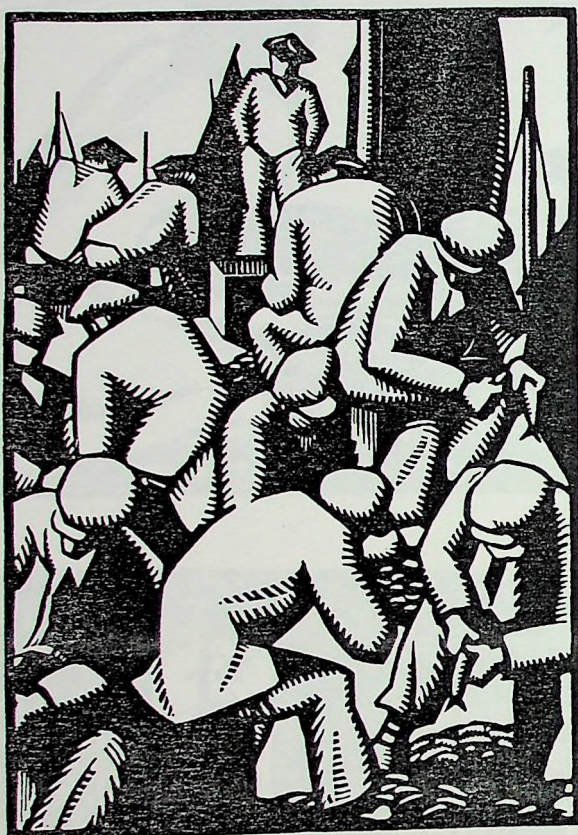
"But eagerness when not controlled may be more of a curb than a spur. Looking back now, it seems that the desire to do well put a brake on my ability to do so".(*8)

The early twenties were a time of creativity and experiment. As technique improved Gibbings extended his repertoire of subject matter and style. On the Slip (1923) (Fig. 15) displays further development and in it Gibbings moulds white figures out of black shading. The result is interesting but again falls between two poles. Having departed his silhouette phase it is as if Gibbings sees clearly what he wants to achieve but is as yet unable to achieve it. The figures in On the Slip have a rudeness which even the most basic of the earlier silhouettes could avoid. Gibbings is experimenting very healthily with technique and does not suffer by what might seem a temporary regression in his work. Any progressive artist will consistently juggle the constituents of his art to seek an improvement.

His illustrations for La Vie de la Dames Galantes in 1924 are more attractive examples of this moulding technique. The hatching lines are finer and less rude. But still the overall effect is not convincing. In Fig. 16(b) the shadow on both the naked body and the back of the onlooking figure seem completely detached from the rest of the body. The three dimensional effect intended is lost. Fig. 16 (a) is more successful but here Gibbings is resorting to an outline while still retaining heavy black shadow. The mixture is not entirely

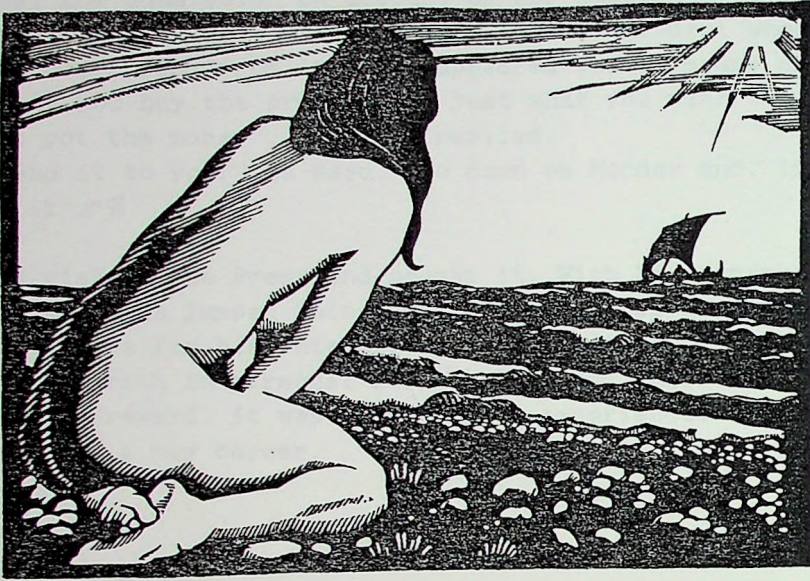
happy and there is an absence of the harmony which was later to become such a feature of Gibbings' work

Gibbings worked at his book under difficult circumstances. His income depleted, he and his wife were living with his inlaws. Gibbings' puritanical father-in-law would have found the subject matter of the engravings preposterous. It was extremely distressing when Mrs.

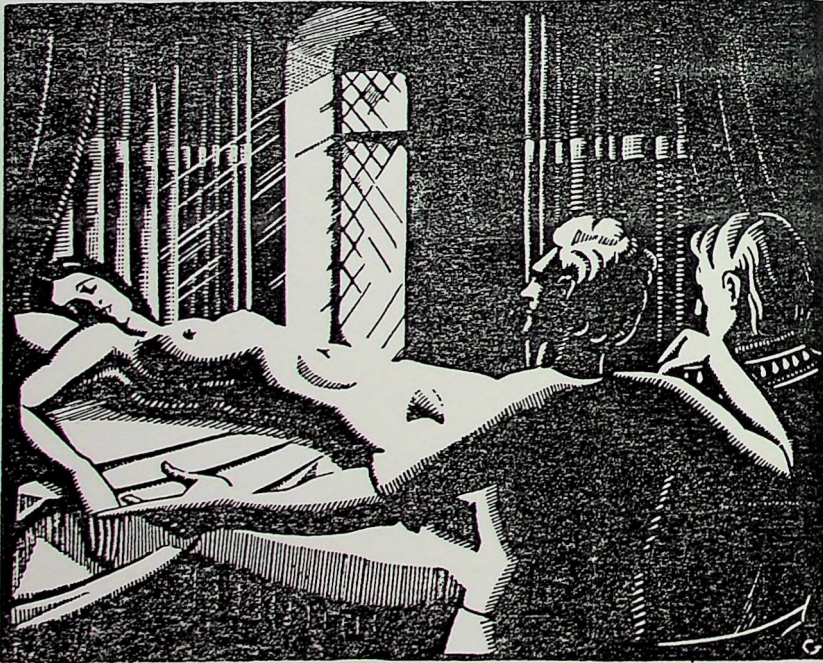


(Fig 15) *On The Slip*, 1923

(a)



(b)



(Fig 16) *La Vie de la Dames Galantes*, 192

Harold Midgely Taylor of the Golden Cockerel Press contacted Gibbings to cancel the commission on account of her husband's illness. The press was being closed. Gibbings recalls the incident where Herbert Pike, an old friend from Ireland, appeared on the scene and asked: "Why don't you buy the press? It's just what you want". "Haven't got the money", Gibbings replied. "I'll lend it to you," he said. "Go down on Monday and, if you like it, buy it".(*9)

Gibbings visited the Press and bought it. With his remarkable energy and enthusiasm he jumped into the thick of things and found the perfect vehicle for his interest in book production. This enterprise was to prove rich in personal satisfaction and achievement but poor in financial reward. It was above all an experience. Gibbings had embarked upon a new career.

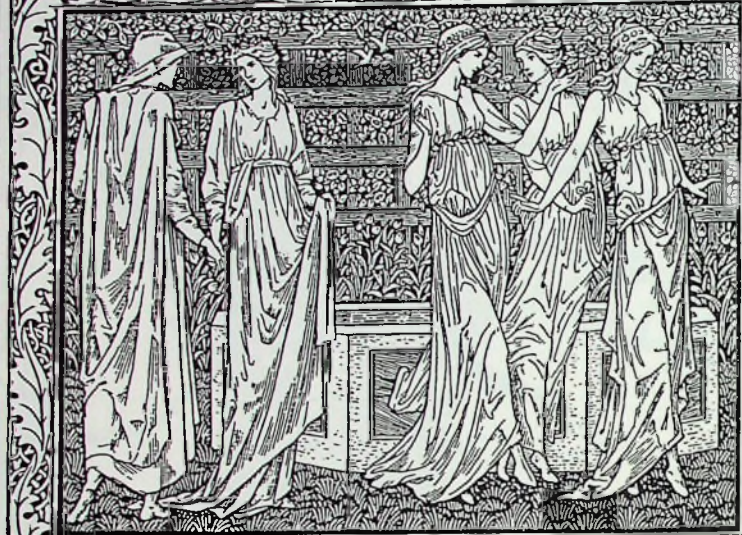
CHAPTER 2

The relationship between wood-engraving and book production was always a close one during the twentieth century revival. Noel Rooke learned his most important lessons in conjunction with type and then applied them to engravings. There was a whole new printing movement as publishers sought to escape from the monotonous and unimaginative technical illustrations of the Victorians. William Morris was the outstanding figure in the late nineteenth century private press movement, while Ricketts was the major force in the commercial press, the predecessor of the Golden Cockerel. While Morris's Chaucer was acclaimed as the principle of the Arts and Crafts movements' achievements, the engravings in this Kelmscott edition were exactly the type of reproductive illustration which brought down the name of wood-engraving. Chaucer (Fig. 17) was a uniform grey and succeeded in initiating a uniformity in the printed book but did not help the artist to produce the kind of books which were to feature in the twentieth century revival. But Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement stimulated a lot of interest in well designed books amongst both private and commercial publishers. It was Durer's concept of the artist designed and produced book which was to be adopted by Gibbings and his contemporaries. It was probably the Beggarsstaffs in the first decade of the century who made the first steps in this direction with books designed entirely by themselves, using hand-cut illustrations and type printed from wood onto coarse, tactile paper, (Fig 18).

The Golden Cockerel Press had been established in 1920 by Harold Midgely Taylor at Waltham St. Lawrence. Taylors intention was to get

young authors who he thought would work as a team to set up the type for their own books, do the printing and the binding, and so minimise the costs. This idealistic enterprise was not financially successful and soon Taylor employed tradesmen to do the printing. It was in this form that Gibbings bought the Press in 1924.

Gibbings now had the opportunity to pursue his interest in the printed book as a whole. For the next nine years he was in control of the design and manufacture of seventy two books. Forty eight were decorated, nineteen by himself, nine by Gill and the remainder by thirteen others. He worked constantly as an engraver, book-designer,



Have litel thought but on hir play.
 Hir lemman was bisyde alway,
 In swich a gysc, that he hir kiste
 At alle tymes that him liste,
 That al the daunce mighte it sec;
 They make no force of privetee;
 for who spak of hem yvel or wel,
 They were ashamed never a del,
 But men mighte seen hem hisse there,
 As it two yonge doues were.
 for yong was thilke bachelere,
 Of beaute wor I noon his pere;
 And he was right of swich an age
 As Youthe his leef, and swich corage.

THE lusty folki thus daunced there,
 And also other that with hem were,
 That weren alle of hir meynec;
 ful hende folki, and wys, and free,
 And folki of fair port, trewely,
 Ther weren alle comunly.

HAN I hadde seen the counte-
 naunces
 Of hem that ladden thus these
 daunces,
 Than hadde I wil to goon & see
 The gardin that so lyked me,
 And loken on these faire loreses,
 On pyn trees, cedres, and oliveres.

The daunces than y ended were;
 for many of hem that daunced there
 Were with hir loves went away
 Under the trees to have hir play.

A lord! they lived lustily!
 A gret fool were he, sikerly,
 That nolde, his thanks, swich lyf
 lede!

for this dar I seyn, out of drede,
 That whoso mighte so wel fare,
 for better lyf thurte him not care;
 for ther nis so good paradys
 As have a love at his devys.

OUT of that place wente I tho,
 And in that gardin gan I go,
 Pleying along ful merily.
 The God of Love ful hastily
 Unto him Swete/Loking clepte,
 No lenger wolde he that he hepte
 his bowe of golde, that shoon so bright.
 He bad him bende it anon/right;
 And he ful sone it sette on ende,
 And at a draid he gan it bende,
 And took him of his arowes fyve,
 ful sharpe and redy for to dryve.
 Now God that sit in magestee
 fro deedly woundes hepe me,
 If so be that he wol me shete;



(fig 18) Beggarsstaffs: Don Quixote, 19

typographer and publisher. His ability to successfully commission engravings from other artists marked him as a distinguished art director in a thoroughly modern sense.

Gibbings' own activity as an engraver was now subject to varying constraints. The Press was a commercial venture and money at times determined the quality of the engravings produced. Poems, by Swift (Fig. 19) includes engravings which lack the craftsmanship of which Gibbings had proved he was capable. The illustrations are weak when examined out of context but it is easy to accept Patience Empson's opinion that they succeed within the book, where their crude, broadly humorous style is appropriate. What a pity Empson fails to present the wood-engravings of Robert Gibbings in context. Virtually all of his work was intended for examination within text. His whole style evolved around the printed page and while his engravings stand out well even as independent prints, their merit is much more appreciable when seen within their intended environment.

Type was the most important self-imposed constraint now placed on

Gibbings' technique. The integration of his engraving with the printed page was a challenge. Working with type helped to modify his style and provided another parameter within which he moved towards a completely personal and convincing style. The strong blacks of his earlier work could not be reconciled with the letterpress. Type demanded calculated restraint from the decorator.

"Type has taken centuries to reach its present form, and its chief fault is its almost too perfect finish" (*10)

Gibbings had now to perfect the finish of his engraving and adapt his style to accommodate the printed page. There was no hard and fast rule. Each book demanded its own layout and design which in turn dictated the finish of the illustration. Shortly after the acquisition of the Golden Cockerel Press in 1924 Gibbings commenced work on Samson and Delilah (Fig. 20). His interest was in the problem of echoing with his engraving style the underlying theme of the story i.e. the strength and weakness of human nature. In the consequent engravings the black and white masses are relieved by greyer areas. The result is a significant improvement upon the Erewhon vignettes (Fig. 14). The composition of Fig. 20(a) has a strength which seems to evolve out of the same concepts as those behind a renaissance artist like Uccello. In Fig. 20(b) the two



(fig 19) *Swifts Poems*, 1928



(fig 20) *Samson and Delilah*, 1925

characters have an almost sculptural strength with only a few areas (Delilah's hair being one) relieved by white line. There is little evidence of any frailty in these illustrations. Human strength rather wins the day, but Gibbings has achieved quite a successful decoration for the text. It is still overpowering, lacking in harmony with the form of type. This would be immediately obvious if the engravings were shown in context.

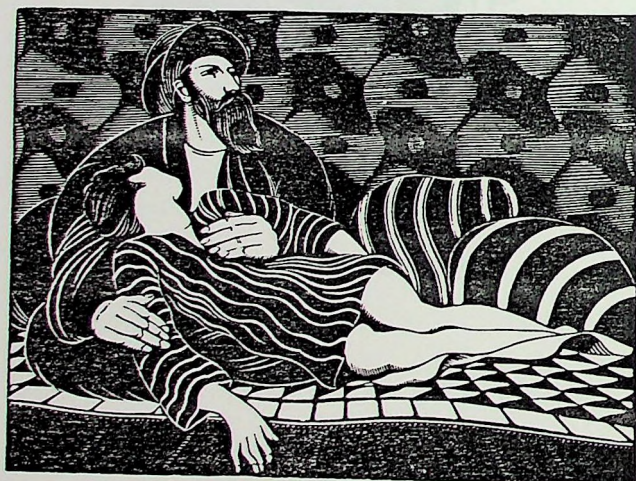
The range of material handled by the Press demanded a great versatility of technique from Gibbings and as a result he acquired a scope which he might otherwise have missed. After Samson and Delilah Gibbings turned to cutting fairly sensuous blocks for Redwise 1926 (Fig. 21). These display a further refinement of his style. The white line technique is used to great effect in building patterns and rhythms on materials, in hair and in backgrounds. The engravings are full of atmosphere and feeling. Gibbings' line has a strength, confidence and fluidity which had not previously been accomplished. Long lines in engraving are a significant feature of the twentieth century revival.

The book illustrated in 1927 for Hodder and Staughton introduced Gibbings to subject matter which demanded further experiment and development of his technical skill. The Charm of Birds and the Falloden Papers, both by Lord Grey, introduced Gibbings to the subject of birds. He realised the suitability of wood-engraving for achieving their clearly defined textures. The illustrations are largely successful.

Fig. 22(c) is particularly worth noting for its balance and harmony and clarity. Figs 22(a) and (b) seem a little less natural but have a conviction which was lacking in earlier work. Gibbings commented on them himself:

"...in most of them my proportions lacked accuracy and my textures variety. Those strong blacks and whites of earlier days still had their hold on me" (*11)

As a result of the American edition of the Charm of Birds Gibbings was commissioned in 1929 by its publishers to travel to Tahiti in order to collaborate with James Norman Hall on a new book. This



(fig 21) Redwise, 1926



(a)



(b)



(c)

(fig 22) *The Charm of Birds*, 1927

excursion came as a welcome diversion to the over-worked Gibbings. In Tahiti, Gibbings worked directly from nature, engraving firsthand from observation. His mature work would prove that he was always at his best when working directly from source material.

Two years after the Tahiti expedition James Norman Hall had still not produced a text to accompany the engravings done by Gibbings. Eventually the American publishers asked Gibbings if he might contribute text as well. Iorana was the result, published in 1930. Gibbings in retrospect hoped that the book would never be reprinted. His view was probably based on the text - largely imaginative - rather than the engravings. It would be interesting to see the engravings for Iorana in context. Presumably if the publishers were American then Gibbings could not have designed the edition. A comparative analysis with a Golden Cockerel book would be worthwhile if possible. But Gibbings would almost certainly have included layout sketches with the engravings and text going to the States. He was consistently thorough.

Earlier, in 1929, Gibbings produced a little volume called The Seventh Man based on his trip to Tahiti. It contains 189 words and fifteen engravings. In these engravings the black masses are again reduced and there is more linework (Fig. 23). Although they are small these are very interesting illustrations. The compositions have great rhythm. The line is easy and accomplished. Several devices lend depth to the illustrations. In Fig. 23(a), the cut off feet juxtaposed around the solid black central figure, whose back is turned, create space. Jungle, trees and foliage are used equally effectively in the others.

A noteworthy aspect of Gibbings work is its freedom from the

influence of other engravers. He was one of the earliest modern engravers and thus was spared the distraction of other styles and techniques. In terms of reputation his greatest rival is Eric Gill and it is Gill's influence which is detectable in one or two of Gibbings' books. The two were in fact great friends and collaborated closely on much of the Golden Cockerel's best works. In essence their work was very different. Their inspiration was not shared. Eric Gill was a great religious artist. In his History of British Wood-Engraving, Albert Garrett has this to say:

"There is a certain coldness in the perfection of Eric Gill's craftsmanship and there is a flawlessness in his skill which gives his



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)

(fig 23) *The Seventh Man*, 1930

work a certain God-like character which some people cannot recognise. In his art and writing Gill expressed a way of life in which art and religion were inseparable".(*12)

Gill was essentially a fine artist in that his work was an end in itself, an expression of his self; a medium through which he sought self-realisation. His exploits as a designer were secondary to his ultimate objective. Gibbings was, on the contrary, the most straightforward of artists. His philosophy was never complex. He had an appetite for life and was a "doing" person more than a philosopher. His engraving was not an end in itself. It was illustration, visual communication; it was just one element in the production of a book; it was another component to be considered in the "unit of texture" of the printed page. Gibbings engravings are accessible to everybody. Gill's are more personal and subjective and introspective. As such they find favour with modern critics whereas Gibbings seems of less consequence because he is accessible. Gibbings, by modern standards, is a mere graphic artist, a visual communicator.

There is a similarity between the rhythm and pattern in Gill's illustration for Song for Songs 1925 (Fig. 24) and Gibbings' illustrations for Redwise of 1926 (Fig. 21). In Lamia of 1928 (Fig. 25) the sensuous black line of Gill's work is detectable.

Eric Gill illustrated nine of the Golden Cockerel books produced during Gibbings' directorship. There was intense collaboration between 1927 and 1931. The greatest achievement was The Four Gospels of 1931 (Fig. 26). It stands as a monument to Gibbings as a producer of books and co-ordinator of artist, text and print. While Patience Empson and Thomas Balston virtually ignore the book-production work of Gibbings' Golden Cockerel years, this writer firmly believes that the example he set as an art director and book designer has been of immense significance. Awareness of typography as a creative, aesthetic phenomenon was scarcely alive in the commercial presses of the twenties and thirties. Letterpress was a very different proposition to today's computer type-setting where spacing and layout and size can so easily be controlled. Albert Garrett makes virtually no other reference to any other press of the same period. The Golden Cockerel under Gibbings' direction, was an outstanding example during a time when commercial presses and reasonably priced

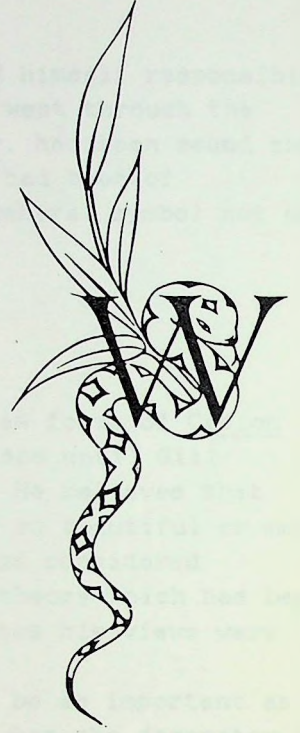
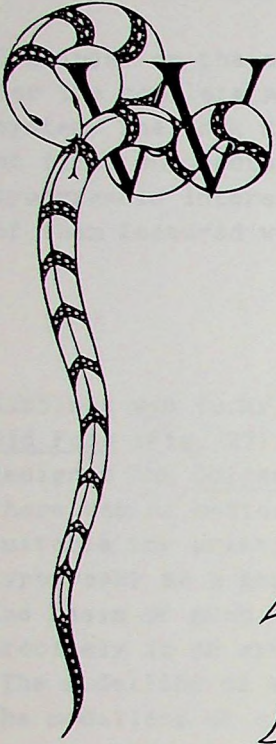


(fig 24) Eric Gill: *The Song of Songs*, 1925



DEEP in the shady sadness of a vale
 Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
 Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star,
 Sat gray-hair'd Saturn, quiet as a stone,
 Still as the silence round about his lair;
 Forest on forest hung about his head
 Like cloud on cloud. No stir of air was there,
 Not so much life as on a summer's day
 Robs not one light seed from the feather'd grass,
 But where the dead leaf fell, there did it rest.

(a) (fig 25) *Lamia*



(b) (fig 25) *Lamia*

books were becoming increasingly important.

Gibbings, on the acquisition of the press, found himself responsible for the complete production of every book which went through the system. The work done by his predecessor, Taylor, had been sound and at first successful but not one of his editions had been of typographic interest. Beyond the small Golden Cockerel symbol not one of them featured wood-engraving.

Gibbings was lucky to inherit with the press a few fonts of Caslon Old Face (Fig. 27) and he never used any other face until Gill designed the Golden Cockerel typeface (Fig. 26). He believed that there was no better type face than Caslon - none so beautiful or more suitable for printing the classics *(13). Gibbings considered typography as a form of artistic expression - a theory which has been the basis of much contemporary graphic art. He states his views very precisely in an article in The Colophon 1931:

"The modelling of a page to a typographer should be as important as the modelling of a limb to a sculptor, and only when the decorator is in very close contact with the compositor can the best results be achieved" *(14).

He found it extraordinarily difficult to get the artists from whom he commissioned work to take into account the limitations of printing. Often he would receive a dozen or so blocks engraved in any random format and no considerations given to page-size, layout of text or other problems involved with making books. He could not abide artists who failed to accept the limitations of the craft within which they worked and insisted that all illustrators, himself included, should consider "the unit of texture" *(15) of the finished printed page. "Illustrator" is perhaps the wrong term since what really concerned Gibbings during the period was the "decoration" of letterpress. All constituents were sub-ordinate to the book as a whole. For Gibbings, wood-engraving was the ultimate medium for decorating letterpress. Wood-engraving has an advantage over any other form of decoration. The design can actually be "sculpted" onto the wood in the same way that the punches of type-founders are sculpted from metal. Thus, if a designer really knows his medium he can obtain an incisive line of



(fig 26) *The Four Gospels*, 1931

14 Point

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And his half-sisters SARAH THOMPSON and MARY READ. By payments amounting to nearly £11,000, all other claimants to the estate were paid off within seven years, while the freehold land on which the workshops stood was acquired by the foundry on 29th April, 1845 in the name of JOHN STEPHENSON. The two remaining heirs,

10 Point

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joined with JOHN STEPHENSON in 1841 to form the new partnership of *Stephenson, Blake & Co.* Eventually a fourth partner was admitted to the firm in the person of HENRY BARNISTER SMITH, the representative resident in London. The principal partner and the fourth partner were to receive a salary for their services. H. B. SMITH, who in the 1850's lived at 149, Aldersgate Street, only a few yards from the spot which the firm ultimately selected as its London address, was an energetic traveller who greatly increased the hold of the firm over the metropolitan market.

8 Point

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a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z æ œ ð ã ä å æ ç

On reaching his majority HENRY STEPHENSON joined the partnership in 1848 with a sum of money transferred to him from his father's account, and a new agreement, similar in its general provisions to the previous one, *divided the profits in ratio*. A renewal of this agreement, five years later, raised his share of the profits. Further changes were made in 1858 and 1863 regarding the distribution of profits,

6 Point

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a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z æ œ ð ã ä å æ ç

Throughout these years the basic provisions remained unchanged, and HENRY STEPHENSON who took over the practical management of his father's business, also drew his salary as working partner, and undertook the firm, not only in the 1850's but also in the 1860's. In the early years of JOHN STEPHENSON'S management had been years of *uninterrupted progress*, while the capital of the firm increased between 1839 and 1841, and the value of the stock in 1841 and 1842, also during the same period, the value of outstanding debt rose considerably.

14 Point

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This expansion was continued in the following decades, and was shown in the further spectacular growth of the stock of punches and matrices, and the conversion of the foundry to machine operation, but the growth of nominal capital after 1847 was hidden by a more conservative accounting policy and a very rigid writing down of values. This policy may

10 Point

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Have been a reflection of Henry Stephenson's impatience with anything less than perfection, even in book-keeping; it was adopted at the same time as the old habit of ploughing back dividends was terminated, and was perhaps a reform induced by Mr. Gladstone's new income tax, but its merit was that it ensured that each book entry was adequately covered by full saleable value of stock. The firm's capital, which had risen to £23,000 in 1848, stayed at that level for 18 years. The new policy appears clearly in the valuation of the stock and of punches and matrices. The latter had been valued year by year

6 Point

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which had risen to £23,000 in 1848, stayed at that level for 18 years. The new policy appears clearly in the valuation of the stock and of punches and matrices. The latter had been valued year by year

8 Point

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Until the year 1861, when they had grown to £2,271, a book value which was kept on in the return for the next six years. In 1858 a complete list of all punches and matrices in the possession of the firm which is still in existence, was drawn up, and at the instigation of Henry Stephenson book values were drastically reduced to very safe levels, to then, after an interval of seven years, they were

cleaness and quality identical to that of type. With the movement of the burin he can automatically echo the natural relationship of thick and thin of the letters in his line. So if the skill of the artist was sufficient, the harmony and "unity of texture" which Gibbings sought could certainly be achieved. He could not abide bad workmanship. Wood-engravers must display mastery over, as well as sympathy with their wood:

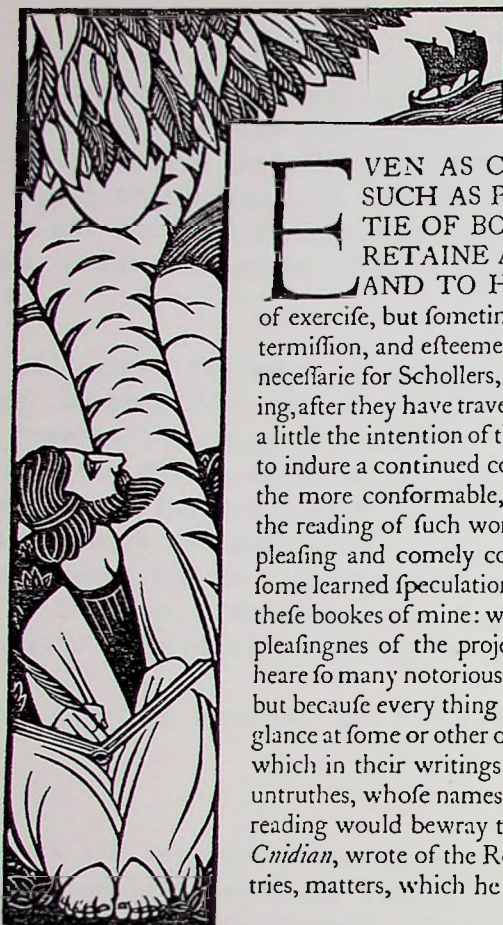
"To suggest that rough cutting retains the quality of the wood is like demanding from an etching the smell of nitrous fumes so that the quality of the acid can be retained".*(16)

To the critics who suggest that the Expressionists achieved a great quality from their wood, it can be pointed out that the Expressionists were primarily wood-cutters, not wood-engravers. It is a different art form dependant upon knives and gouges, not the burin. And the Expressionists recognised the importance between type and illustration. They cut their type from wood also. Their wood-cuts could never have been used in conjunction with letterpress, or standard commercial printing.

With Gibbings setting such high standards for his work it is not surprising that the letterpress books of the Golden Cockerel were outstanding for their time. Gibbings had modern concepts. Lamia (Fig. 25 a/b), despite the resemblance of its engravings to those of Gill, is an excellent example of decorated letterpress. The distribution of black and white is confidently handled. Hyperion (Fig. 25a) from Lamia shows accomplished integration of illustration with weights and forms of type. It echoes Gibbings' belief that the line in the engraving should harmonise with the weight and variety of the line within the type. The decorated

capitals demonstrate simple but strikingly effective decoration, excellently balanced (Fig. 25b).

Gibbings, during his years at the Golden Cockerel Press, never published a book which had not been completely set-up and printed in his own workshop -with one exception- Lucian's True Histoire of 1927. This was because the text was printed twice, simultaneously in English and in Greek (Fig. 28). Gibbings used the decorative borders to fill the pages so that the Greek and English versions corresponded on every page. Gibbings was able to use every device to produce the harmonious printed page which he sought. The decorative quality of



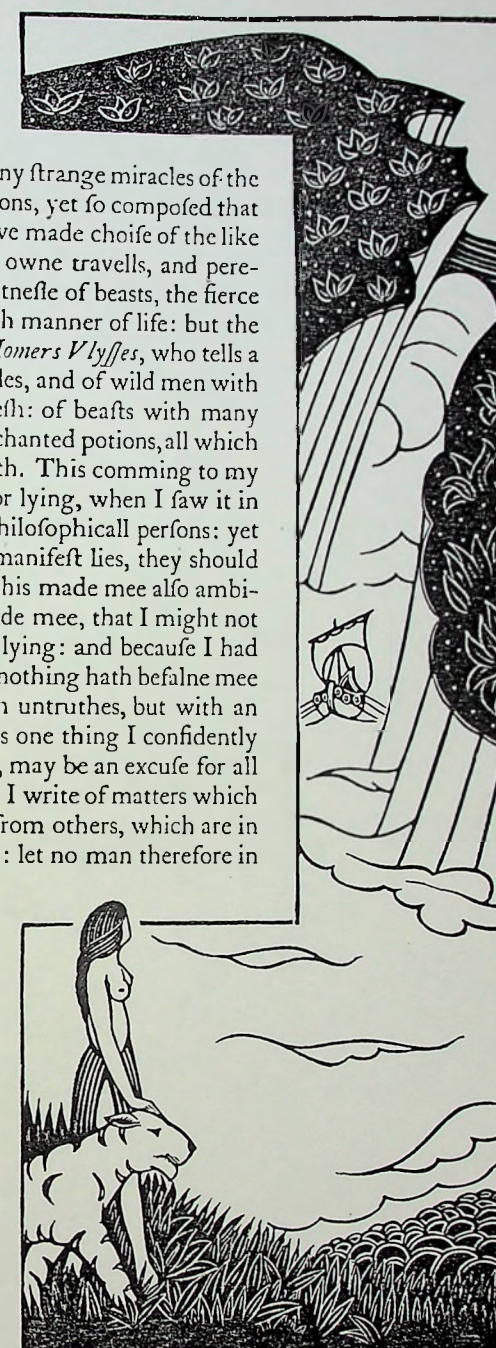
EVEN AS CHAMPIONS, AND WRAS TLERS, AND SUCH AS PRACTISE THE STRENGTH AND AGILITIE OF BODY, ARE NOT ONELY CAREFULL TO RETAINE A SOUND CONSTITUTION OF HEALTH, AND TO HOLD ON THEIR ORDINARIE COURSE of exercise, but sometimes also to recreate themselves with seasonable intermission, and esteeme it as a maine point of their practice: so I thinke it necessarie for Schollers, & such as addict themselves to the studie of learning, after they have travelled long in the perusall of serious authors, to relaxe a little the intention of their thoughts, that they may be more apt and able to indure a continued course of study: And this kinde of repose vvill bee the more conformable, and fit their purpose better, if it be employed in the reading of such workes, as shall not onely yeeld a bare content by the pleasing and comely composure of them, but shall also give occasion of some learned speculation to the minde, which I suppose I have effected in these bookes of mine: wherein not only the noveltie of the subject, nor the pleasingnes of the project, may tickle the Reader with delight, nor to heare so many notorious lies delivered perswasively and in the way of truth, but because every thing here by mee set down, doth in a Comickall fashion glance at some or other of the old Poets, Historiographers, & Philosophers, which in their writings have recorded many monstrous and intolerable untruthes, whose names I would have quoted downe, but that I knew the reading would bewray them to you. *Ctesias*, the sonne of *Ctesiochus*, the *Cnidian*, wrote of the Region of the *Indians*, and the state of those Countreies, matters, which he neither saw himselfe, nor ever heard come from

ΩΣΠΕΡ ΤΟΙΣ ΑΘΛΗΤΙΚΟΙΣ ΚΑΙ ΠΕΡΙ ΤΗΝ ΤΩΝ ΣΩΜΑΤΩΝ ΕΠΙΜΕΛΕΙΑΝ ΗΣΚΗΜΕΝΟΙΣ ΟΥΤΗΣ ΕΤΕΞΙΑΣ ΜΟΝΟΝ ΟΥΔΕ ΤΩΝ ΓΥΜΝΑΣΙΩΝ ΦΡΟΝΤΙΣ ΕΣΤΙΝ, ΑΛΛΑ ΚΑΙ ΤΗΣ ΚΑΤΑ ΚΑΙΡΟΝ ΓΙΝΟΜΕΝΗΣ ΑΝΕΞΕΩΣ — ΜΕΡΟΣ ΓΟΥΝ ΤΗΣ ΑΣΚΗΣΕΩΣ ΤΟ ΜΕΓΙΣΤΟΝ ΑΥΤΗΝ ΤΠΟΛΑΜΒΑΝΟΥΣΙΝ — ΟΥΤΩ ΔΗ ΚΑΙ ΤΟΙΣ περὶ τοὺς λόγους ἐπισυνδύουσιν ἡγεῖσθαι προσήκει μετὰ τὴν πολλὴν τῶν σπουδαιτέρων ἀνάγκῃσιν ἀνιέναι τε τὴν διάνοιαν καὶ πρὸς τὸν ἔπειτα κάματον ἀκμαιοτέραν παρὰ σκευάξιν. γένετο δ' ἂν ἐμμελὴς ἡ ἀνάπαυσις αὐτοῖς, εἰ τοῖς τοιούτοις τῶν ἀναγνωσμάτων ἐμμελίσιν, ἀμὴ μόνον ἐκ τοῦ ἀστέϊν τε καὶ χαριέντος ψιλὴν παρέξει τὴν ψυχὰς γωγίαν, ἀλλὰ τίνα καὶ θεωρίαν οὐκ ἄμεινον ἐπιδείξεται, εἴον τι καὶ περὶ τῶνδε τῶν συγγραμμάτων φρονήσιν ὑπολαμβάνω· οὐ γὰρ μόνον τὸ ξένον τῆς ὑποθέσεως οὐδὲ τὸ χαριέν τῆς πραιρέσεως ἐπαγωγὸν ἔσται αὐτοῖς οὐδ' ὅτι ψεύσματα πικρὰ πιδανῶς τε καὶ

ἐναλγῆως ἐξηγητόχαμεν, ἀλλ' ὅτι καὶ τῶν ἰστορουμένων ἔκαστον οὐκ ἀκωμωδῆτως πρὸς τινὰς ἡνικταὶ τῶν παλαιῶν ποιητῶν τε καὶ συγγραφέων καὶ φιλοσόφων πολλὰ τεράστια καὶ μυθώδη συγγεγραφότων, οὓς καὶ ὀνομαστὶ ἀνέγραψον, εἰ μὴ καὶ αὐτῷ σοὶ ἐκ τῆς ἀναγνώσεως φανεῖσθαι ἐμμελλον. *Κτησίας* ὁ *Κτησιόχου* ὁ *Κνιδίος* συνέγραψε περὶ τῆς Ἰνδῶν χώρας καὶ τῶν παρ' αὐτοῖς ἀμύτων αὐτὸς εἶδε μήτε ἄλλου εἰπόντος ἤκουσεν. ἔγραψε δὲ καὶ Ἰαμβούλος περὶ τῶν ἐν τῇ μεγάλῃ θαλάττῃ πολλὰ παράδοξα, γνώριμον μὲν ἅπασιν τὸ ψεύδος πλασάμενος, οὐκ ἀτερπὴ δὲ ὅμως συνθεῖς τὴν ὑπόθεσιν. πολλοὶ δὲ καὶ ἄλλοι τὰ αὐτὰ τοῖς προεσόμενοι συνέγραψαν ὥς δὴ τινὰς ἐαυτῶν πλάνας τε καὶ ἀποδημίας θηρίων τε μεγέθη ἰστοροῦντες καὶ ἀνθρώπων ὁμοιότητος καὶ βίων καινότητας· ἀρχηγὸς δὲ αὐτοῖς καὶ διδάσκαλος τῆς τοιαύτης βωμολοχίας ὁ τοῦ Ὀμήρου Ὀδυσσεύς, τοῖς περὶ τὸν Ἀλκίονου διηγούμενος ἀνέμω τε δουλείαν καὶ μονοφθάλμους καὶ ὁμοφάγους καὶ ἀγρίους τινὰς ἀνθρώπους, ἔτι



the mouth of any man. *Jambulus* also wrote many strange miracles of the great sea, which all men knew to be lies and fictions, yet so composed that they want not their delight: and many others have made choise of the like argument, of which some have published their owne travells, and peregrinations, wherein they have described the greatnesse of beasts, the fierce condition of men, with their strange and uncouth manner of life: but the first father and founder of all this foolerie, was *Homers Vlysses*, who tells a long tale to *Alcinous*, of the servitude of the windes, and of wild men with one eye in their foreheades that fed upon raw flesh: of beasts with many heads, and the transformation of his friends by enchanted potions, all which hee made the silly *Phæakes* beleefe for great sooth. This comming to my perusall, I could not condemne ordinarie men for lying, when I saw it in request amongst them that would be counted Philosophicall persons: yet could not but wonder at them, that writing so manifest lies, they should not thinke to bee taken with the manner; and this made mee also ambitious to leave some monument of my selfe behinde mee, that I might not be the onely man exempted from this libertie of lying: and because I had no matter of veritie to imploy my penne in, (for nothing hath befallen mee worth the writing) I turned my stile to publish untruthes, but with an honeste minde than others have done: for this one thing I confidently pronounce for a truth, that I lie: and this I hope, may be an excuse for all the rest, when I confesse what I am faultie in: for I write of matters which I neither saw nor suffered, nor heard by report from others, which are in no beeing, nor possible ever to have a beginning: let no man therefore in any case give any credit to them.



δὲ πολυκέφαλα ζῆα καὶ τὰς ὑπὸ φαρμάκων τῶν ἐταίρων μεταβολάς, οἷα πολλὰ ἐκεῖνος ὡς πρὸς ἰδιώτας ἀνθρώπους ἐτερετεύσατο τοὺς Φαίακας. τοῖς οὖν ἐντυχὼν ἅπασιν τοῦ ψεύσασθαι μὲν οὐ σφόδρα τοὺς ἀνδρας ἐμμεψάμεν ὁρῶν ἤδη σύνθεσις οὐ τοῦτο καὶ τοῖς φιλοσοφεῖν ὑπισχνουμένοις· ἐκεῖνο δὲ αὐτῶν ἐθαύμαζεν, εἰ ἐνόμισαν λήσσειν οὐκ ἀληθῆ συγγραφόντες. διόπερ καὶ αὐτὸς ὑπὸ κενοδοξίας ἀπελιπεῖν τι σπουδάσας τοῖς μεθ' ἡμᾶς, ἵνα μὴ μόνος ἄμειρος ὦ τῆς ἐν τῷ μυθολογεῖν ἐλευθερίας, ἐπεὶ μηδὲν ἀληθὲς ἰστορεῖν εἶχον—οὐδὲν γὰρ ἐπεπόνθειν ἀξιόλογον—ἐπὶ τὸ ψεύδος ἐτραπέμην πολὺ τῶν ἄλλων εὐγνωμονέστερον· καὶ ἐν γὰρ δὴ τοῦτο ἀληθεύσω λέγων, ὅτι ψεύσομαι. οὕτω δ' ἂν μοι δοκῶ καὶ τὴν παρὰ τῶν ἄλλων κατηγορίαν ἐκφυγεῖν αὐτὸς ὁμολογῶν μηδὲν ἀληθὲς λέγειν. γράφω τοῖνυν περὶ ὧν μήτε εἶδον μήτε ἔπαθον μήτε παρ' ἄλλων ἐπυθόμην, ἔτι δὲ μήτε ὅλως ὄντων μήτε τὴν ἀρχὴν γενέσθαι δυναμένων. διὸ δει τοὺς ἐντυχάνοντας μηδαιῶς πιστεύειν αὐτοῖς.

type is immediately evident when the Roman and Greek alphabets are seen side by side. The engravings are quite simple without much white line being worked into the black mass. The composition is good and the layout of the pages is aesthetically pleasing. Perhaps there is just a bit too much text on each spread. Had Gibbings designed this volume in later years he might have been a bit more generous with space.

With Gill there followed Troilus and Criseyde , 'Sonnets and Verses' by Enid Clay and The Song of Songs . Then Gibbings published The Passion , printed in Latin. The article in the Colophon explains the design which capitalised upon the predominance of round letter forms like m,n,u,with very few ascenders and descenders. Gibbings found the composition of the type pleasing and stimulating. It encouraged him to dispense with justification on the right hand side of the text -"entirely a convention"*(17)- and set the text closely to capitalise on the interplay between words and letters.

In 1930 Gibbings produced and illustrated Milton's Paradise Lost

(Fig. 29) and once again the integration of both text and illustration is consummately handled. It bears a resemblance to Lamia with its vegetation and langourous bodies. The snake is beautifully used to join decoration and type.

Meanwhile Gibbings worked with several other artists as well, notably Noel Rooke (The Nativity), John and David Nash, David Jones and other contemporary wood-engravers. The ultimate achievement of the Golden Cockerel Press was executed in conjunction with Eric Gill. In The Four Gospels of 1931 (Fig. 26) artist and typographer unite. Type and engraving blend to perfection. Gibbings considered the engravings Gill executed for The Four Gospels to be his finest exercise in that medium. The book can be ranked alongside the Kelmscott Chaucer and the Dove's Bible .

The volume is printed in the Golden Cockerel typeface designed by Gill and is decorated by forty-one of his engravings. Gill was one of a number of typographers and stone-cutters who had been inspired by the lettering on Trajans Column. The Golden Cockerel typeface is one of classical beauty but its individual character comes from its elongated serifs and elegant extended capitals (Fig. 26). When Gill had determined broadly the mass of his decoration Gibbings then set



OF MANS First Disobedience, and the Fruit
 Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal Tast
 Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
 With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
 Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
 Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
 Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
 That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
 In the Beginning, how the Heav'ns and Earth
 Rose out of chaos: or if Sion Hill

(fig 29) *Paradise Lost*, 1930

the type before Gill completed the page with the finished engravings. Again Gibbings dispenses with the convention and opts for aesthetically attractive close spacing in preference to justified type. Gill embellishes the angularities of large capitals or single words with appropriately composed and conceived scenes and figures. Like the arrival of the shepherds, the Deposition takes place above the word "And", as does the Burial of Christ. The crucifixion occurs over the word "Then". The entire book is an integrated whole and

displays every quality which Gibbings demanded of the letterpress. Every expression of human life and emotion is exposed within the parameters of good design. Empson and Balston ignore the volume.

Things were not going well at the Press. Despite several years of prosperity and growth, of full order books and ambitious projects, the depression was taking its toll. Gibbings worked on relentlessly. In 1932 he organised a journey, this time to the West Indies in return for work executed during the expedition. The subsequent XIV Engravings on Wood represent the level of expertise which Gibbings had achieved as an engraver during his years at the Press. These are independent engravings like those in his own Twelve Wood Engravings (Fig. 13) of 1921. He has retained the power and strength of those enthusiastic early prints but has so much more in addition.

Long, fluid lines and infinitely varied textures indicate that his technical proficiency was now reaching an outstanding level.

Mediterranean Calm (Fig. 30) demonstrates restrained but dynamic composition and the distribution of black and white has a classical balance which perfectly suggests 'calm'. The fish in Mid-Coral Caves, Bermuda (Fig. 31) are rendered with a technical expertise which captures life and movement and texture, while the picture works simultaneously as pure pattern and design. Gibbings could now capture life as well as just texture and bulk.

In 1933 Gibbings had finally to succumb to the depression. He sold the Golden Cockerel Press for whatever it would fetch. He was virtually penniless. For nine years he had devoted every moment of time and energy to the Press and while eventually it lost him a fortune financially, it owed him nothing. From his time with the press Gibbings had discovered his own talents as a book designer,



(fig 30) *Mediterranean Calm*, 1932



(fig 31) *Mid Coral Caves, Bermuda, 1932*

typographer and art director. His wood-engraving, channelled along a very specific route, had been improved and refined and he was now a highly skilled engraver. His competence in both technique and expression was outstanding.

The years at the Golden Cockerel had been intensive and wearing. It broke Gibbings' heart to sell the Press but as a person remarkable for his clarity of vision and grasp of life, he was able to see himself that the enforced sale was not an entirely negative step. Gibbings was hungry for time. He was objective enough to recognise that:

"now I was free, and as I stood up 'naked before the Lord' my work improved".*(18)

CHAPTER THREE

His Press, house and belongings sold Gibbings now retired to Cornwall, penniless and in poor spirits. However he was relishing the increased freedom and spare time of life without the Golden Cockerel. He continued working on two books which were published in 1934 by the Golden Cockerel Press - Glory of Life (Fig. 32) and Beasts and Saints (Fig. 33). Gibbings had evidently profitted from his increased leisure time. He was free to wander and observe, to engrave with the time and pleasure which had eluded him in his years at the Press. The subject matter of these books appealed to him and as he worked on the pictures of birds, fish and other animals he must have been reminded of his pleasant childhood in Cork. The quality of engraving in these two books is outstanding. In Figs 32 and 33 there are beautifully balanced concentrations of blacks and whites. Movement and life breath from the trees and snakes, and the seagull alights with majesty. The engravings are essays in control. Gibbings is also making good use of different marks obtained with the burin - the pocking on the peculiarly rooted tree is a good example. The foliage is substantial and lively. These compositions are filled with character and humour. They reflect the delight which Gibbings now experienced as he went about his work. Glory of Life was a hymn of praise by Gibbings' friend, the poet Llewelyn Powys. Beasts and Saints was a collection of stories telling of the mutual charities between men and animals. Both were subjects which appealed specifically to Gibbings, and of his illustrations he could say: "The engravings in these two books were the best that I had so far accomplished, and gradually the sadness that I had felt at losing my

press was dissipated".(*19)

The Golden Cockerel Press was taken over by Christopher Sandford and Owen Rutter. As a partnership they maintained the high standards which Gibbings had established. Gibbings did a considerable amount of work for the press under its new directors and still kept in close contact with the design of his books. In 1934 came The Voyage of the Bounty's Launch and in 1935, The Wreck of the Whaleship Essex. The quality of the engravings is excellent. The Journal of James Morrison (Fig. 34) is of particular interest because it evolved out of Gibbings' personal literary research. He was fascinated by the



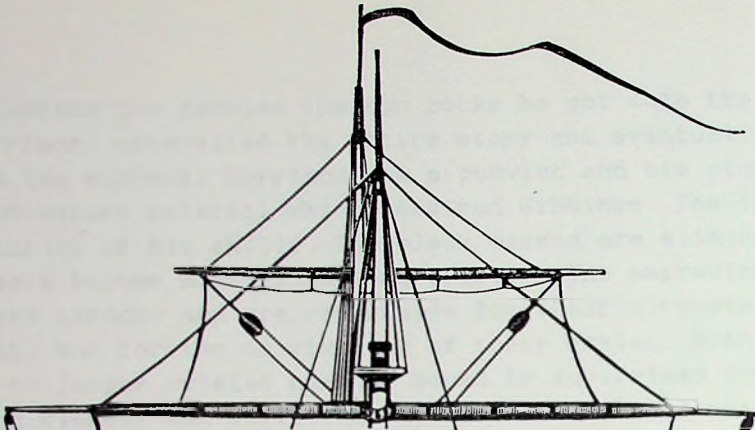
(a) (fig 32) *Glory of Life*, 1934



(b) (fig 32) *Glory of Life*, 1934



(fig 33) *Beasts and Saints*, 1934



THE JOURNAL OF JAMES MORRISON

BOATSWAIN'S MATE OF
THE BOUNTY

describing the Mutiny & subsequent
Misfortunes of the Mutineers
together with an account of the
Island of Tahiti

With an Introduction by
OWEN RUTTER

and four engravings by
ROBERT GIBBINGS



Printed & made in Great Britain by
THE GOLDEN COCKEREL PRESS

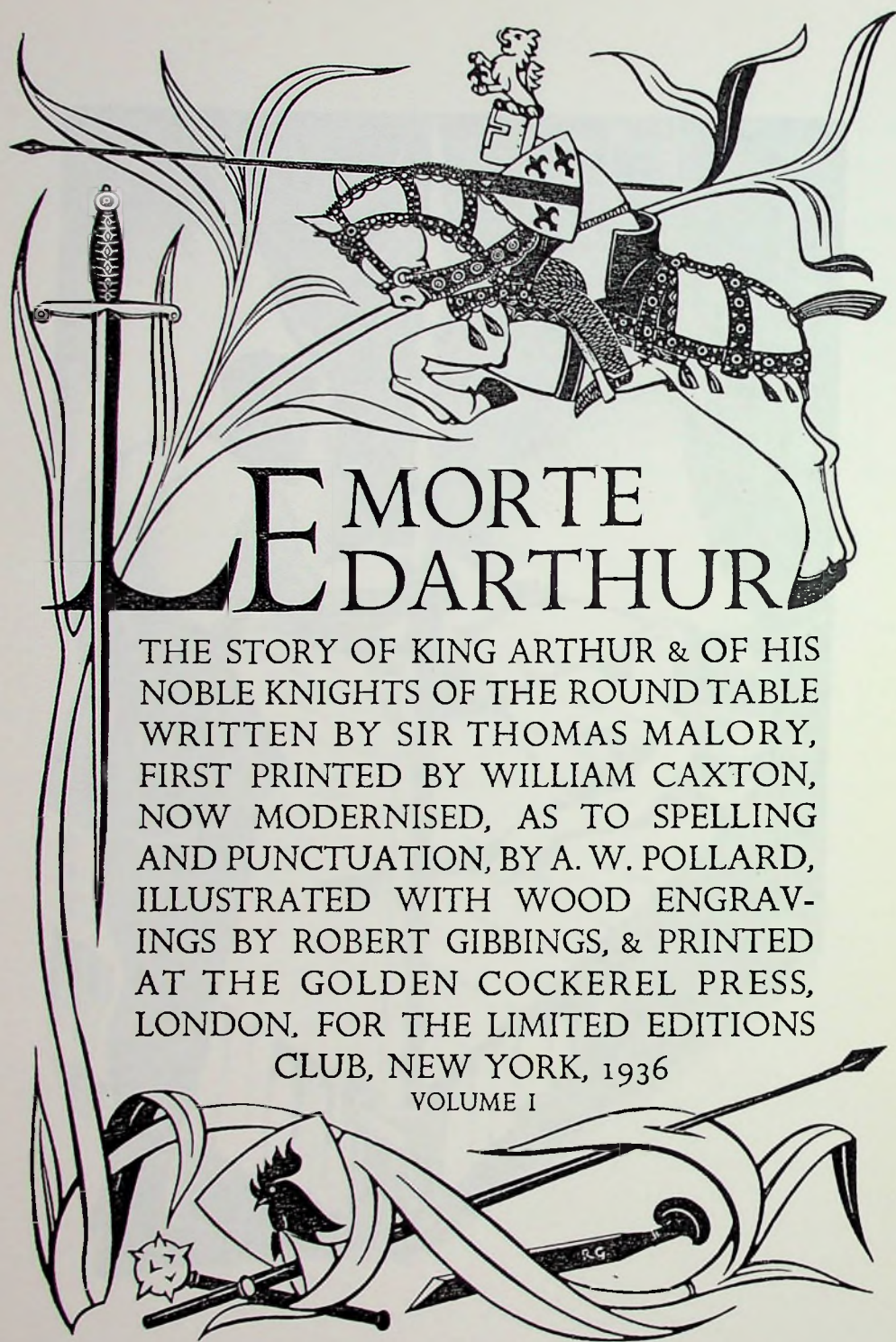
1935

subject. During his rambles through books he got onto the trail of James Morrison, unravelled the entire story and eventually completed a book on the subject. Morrison was a convict and his story was classic adventure material which inspired Gibbings. The illustrations saw a maturing of his skills. The black masses are eliminated and the designs have become more linear and complex. The engravings have balance and harmony and are remarkable for their strength with refinement, and for the originality of their design. Even though Gibbings no longer printed his own books he supervised their production closely and still undertook the layout and specifications for layout and type. The elegant and thoughtfully integrated title page of The Journal of James Morrison is proof of Gibbings' continuing attention to overall book design.

In 1936 came Le Morte d'Arthur for the Limited Editions Club of New York. This is a totally different book to The Journal of James Morrison. While the Journal is steeped in the personality and character of the artist, Le Morte d'Arthur shows Gibbings floundering in unknown territory. The historic and distant nature of the subject

matter could not inspire him and there was no possibility of turning to observation of the natural environment for relief. Instead, Gibbings must refer to other earlier illustrators for inspiration. As a result the work lacks Gibbings' personal stamp and individual character. The illustrations are quite stilted. Some are awkward. Fig. 35 shows a rather stiff, stylised horse. The designs are shallow and lack the depth of thought and planning which went a book like the Journal. Its interesting to note the inclusion of the Golden Cockeral device, as well as Gibbings' own emblem, at the foot of the title page. The typography is good and the general layout is of sufficiently high standard to pull the book together, lend it uniformity, and thus divert attention from the rather weak decoration. The title page is a good example, with its interesting sword-initial and layout of the title in total.

In the same year Gibbings illustrated Othello (Fig. 36). He might easily have been caught in the same referenceless trap but instead produced a book which stood out as one of his own favorites. The engravings in Othello are much less stylised and a great deal more individual. In an article in later years Gibbings has this to say: "Wood engraving is essentially white on black. For dark skinned people it is a perfect medium because with them it is a matter of engraving



LE MORTE D'ARTHUR

THE STORY OF KING ARTHUR & OF HIS
NOBLE KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE
WRITTEN BY SIR THOMAS MALORY,
FIRST PRINTED BY WILLIAM CAXTON,
NOW MODERNISED, AS TO SPELLING
AND PUNCTUATION, BY A. W. POLLARD,
ILLUSTRATED WITH WOOD ENGRAV-
INGS BY ROBERT GIBBINGS, & PRINTED
AT THE GOLDEN COCKEREL PRESS,
LONDON. FOR THE LIMITED EDITIONS

CLUB, NEW YORK, 1936

VOLUME I



(fig 36) *Othello*, 1940

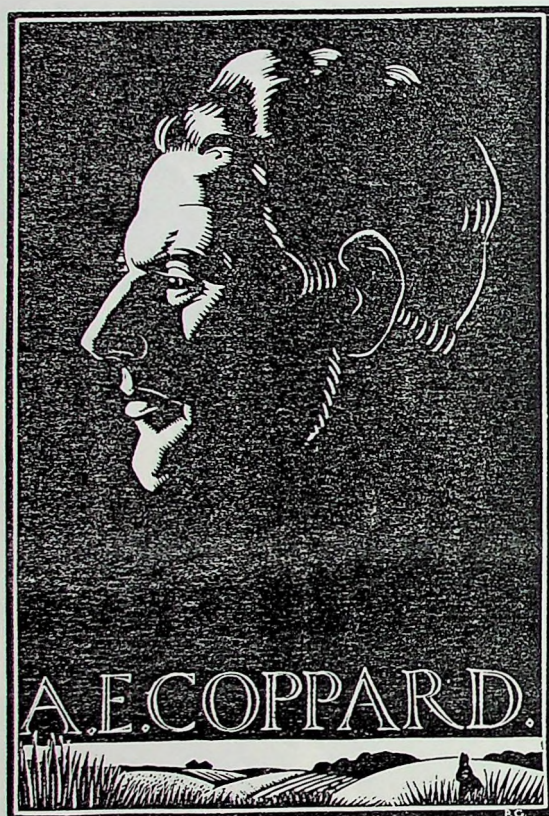
lights on darks. But for light skinned people one needs dark accents on white, and you cannot engrave dark accents; you can only engrave round them, and I have always disliked the black line".*(20)

Therein lies the reason why Othello inspired Gibbings. He had a fascination with dark-skinned people and he had plenty of first hand observational practice at rendering them during his visits to Tahiti and other foreign islands. Unlike Gill, Gibbings avoided the human

form in most of his work. There are almost no examples of portraiture among his engravings but the one of A.E. Coppard (Fig. 39) from 1928 which demonstrates his ability to negotiate the difficulty with black line. Here he casts the whole face into dense black shadow and sculpts the profile in white most effectively.

The years from 1936 to 1940 saw financial problems stabilise for Gibbings. He was offered a lectureship at Reading University. He accepted this and taught book production at least three days a week on condition that he could always "keep one eye cocked on typography" *(21). The lecturing hours allowed Gibbings time to think even during term time, and, as a bonus, he had long summer holidays which he could now afford to spend indulging his love of travel. His lecturer's salary was supplemented by commissions from publishers. Just as at the Golden Cockerel Press, there was an inconsistency about some of his commercial work. Much of it was hurried. Money buys time, and many of the publishing houses wanted Gibbings' work, but could not afford to buy his time. Not all the books illustrated during this period reflect the impeccable standards of which Gibbings was capable.

During the summer of 1937 Gibbings travelled to Bermuda where he pursued his love of observation yet further, descending twenty feet below the surface of the sea. He stayed at the Marine Biological Station where he borrowed diving apparatus to enable to draw from life the fantastic marine activity of the warm seas. He engraved later from the drawings he made with pencil onto xylonite as he explored the coral reefs. The engravings became, in 1938, the illustrations for his first significant literary work, Blue Angels and Whales. The book is notable for a number of reasons. The



(fig 37) A.E. Coppard, 1928



(fig 38) *Bermudian Fish*, 1938

illustrations were of the finest quality, refined, detailed and full of life. Although not actually included in the book, Gibbings made three large, independent engravings of fish which he considered^{amongst} his finest (Fig. 38). The composition of these engravings is such that the spectator feels that he himself is twenty feet down, amongst the fish and the coral reefs. The handling of light is impeccable. The observation is accurate enough to merit inclusion in a scientific handbook, yet these are very definitely Gibbings' fish, filled with the character which he saw within them.

The smaller illustrations might equally well stand as independent prints. But here for the first time, the engravings are a very necessary element of the book. This is not decoration of letterpress. This is illustration in the truest sense. All through his Golden Cockerel years, and even after leaving it, Gibbings' primary concern was the embellishment of letterpress with decoration. But Blue Angels and Whales demanded serious illustration to make the text entirely lucid and comprehensible. Thereafter, Gibbings' work was primarily that of an illustrator. He was always to be a design biased illustrator but this new slant gave continuing impetus to his long career.

The other significant point to be remembered about Blue Angels and Whales is that it was published as the first sixpenny Penguin Special. This was a venture to which Gibbings gave considerable thought before getting involved. He refused to surrender his work to the perils of a commercial printing house without guaranteeing that he should have control over the layout and production of the book. The standard of book production at this level could never match Gibbings' Golden Cockerel standards, yet the typography was very good.

despite the paper and the machining. Blue Angels and Whales was a great success. Gibbings was greatly encouraged by both the popular success of the Penguin and also by the quality of the work which a very commercial printing house could when properly directed. He was also appointed to the art-directorship of this new sixpenny enterprise -the Penguin Illustrated Classics series. From this position he commissioned such engravers as Gwendolen Raverat, Helen Binyon, Douglas Percey Bliss, Ethelbert White, Iain Macnab, Gertrude

Hermes and others to illustrate these immensely popular books. Gibbings was transferring his skills from private press days to the commercial press of the future. Penguin has been the most influential publishing house of the last fifty years, introducing good literature to a vast new book-buying public. Gibbings' art-director role was highly significant.

Recognising the potential of this new book-buying public, Gibbings became interested in the idea of writing and illustrating another book of his own for production under similar circumstances. Simultaneously, despite thoroughly enjoying his work as a teacher, traveller, engraver, Gibbings felt a great need for yet more peace and freedom:

"In the early days of 1939 there arose in me a great desire to find peace beside a river. I wanted more than ever to get that same closeness to nature to which I had referred..."*(22).

From 1939 until his death in 1958 Robert Gibbings pursued his instinctive desire to get close to nature. His travels took him from England to Ireland, from France to Tonga. The product of these years were his eight finest books. His literary efforts provided the perfect vehicle for his wood engravings. Now he became an illustrator

in the fullest sense as he engraved descriptive pictures to enhance and elucidate the captivating stories of all that he met, saw and experienced on his travels. The quality of his engravings reached a level of perfection which was unsurpassed by any of his contemporaries and unequalled, except perhaps by Gill. Gibbings' long standing friendship and association is reflected in his work. Gone is the direct influence evident in Lamia. In its stead is a certain similarity in perception and interpretation. The austerity and taught line of Gill's engravings and sculpture manifests itself as a clear, precise, incisive definition in Gibbings' work.

In August 1939 Gibbings embarked on an exploration of the Thames in a small flat-bottomed boat:

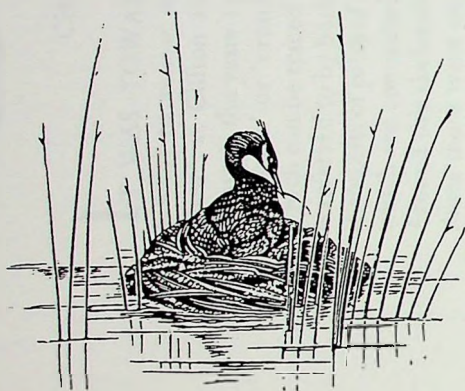
"I planned to float down-stream at the river's own pace, and to look for nothing but what I might see as I moved along, consigning all guide-books to the devil, and offering the same hospitality to insistent and obtrusive advisors".*(23)

like the ditch side of a fence,' said Mr Fred Cook, the local gamekeeper, to whom I mentioned it. Then he took me to a clearing in a wood and showed me where every year a pair of partridges nest, and where every year their brood gets drowned in a dike which separates the woodland from the open country. He said that as soon as the clutch is hatched the parents make for the fields, calling to their young to follow them. But, though the water is no obstacle to the old birds, it is too big a jump for the fledgelings. And thus the annual disaster takes place.



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Of another pair he tells how they both dived and brought to the surface beakfuls of dark ribbony weed, after which, having swum towards each other, they lifted themselves so high out of the water that only the tips of their tail ends remained below the surface. In this position they rocked gently from side to side 'as if swaying to the music of a dance.'



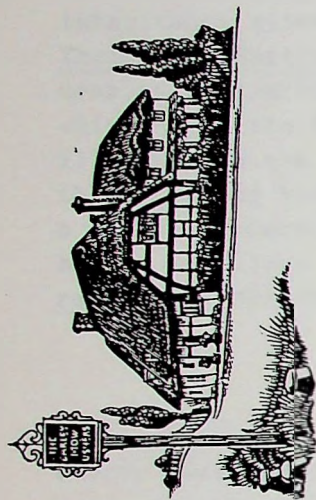
Finally Professor Huxley describes the actual act of mating. 'Sitting on the bank one day, looking out over a broad belt of low flags and rushes, I saw a grebe come swimming steadily along parallel to the bank, bending its head forward a little with each stroke, as is the bird's way in all but very leisurely swimming. I happened to look further on in the direction in which it was going, and there, twenty or thirty yards ahead of it, I saw what I took to be a dead grebe floating on the water. The body was rather humped up; the neck

hedgerow the parasol mushroom shows its ruffled cap, and dead twigs are bejewelled with 'coral spot.'

Each season of the year, as it comes round, is the best. Each day, each hour that we are alive is the richest. For what is yesterday but a memory, and what is to-morrow—which may never come?



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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IT WAS TOWARDS the end of the year when I went to renew my acquaintance with the 'Barley Mow' at Clifton Hampden. This house dates from between the years 1320 and 1350, and is a fine example of 'cruck' or 'crutch' building, a form of architecture which can be traced back over two thousand years, and is referred to by both Ovid and Vitruvius. In principle it consists of pairs of crooked trees set up to form arches which are connected at their summits by a ridge-pole. Around this skeleton the house is built. In the earliest times there were no vertical side walls to buildings of this kind, the construction following the bend of the timber; but at a later date horizontal tie-beams were added to the arches, and these projecting on either side were fitted into upright walls built to receive them. As the engraving shows, this feature is clearly seen in the gable end of the inn.

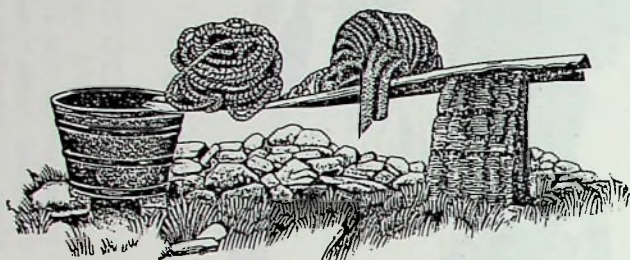
Jerome K. Jerome wrote that this house is 'the

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His compelling account of all that he encountered and observed revealed an author of genius in his genre. His language was easy and lyrical and his descriptions brought the country-side and its inhabitants alive for all his readers, urban and rural alike. Sweet Thames Run Softly published in 1940, was a massive success and despite the wartime paper restrictions it went through ten large editions in the following seven years. The engravings liberally illustrating the text are of superb quality. So great is his skill at this stage of his career that to pick out particular examples becomes a matter of personal choice. Landscapes, riverscapes, houses, birds, beasts and flora are all beautifully rendered. The nest amongst the reeds (Fig 39) shows the long, fluid, curving line of the skilled

engraver. Such a simple little picture is brought to life by the very energy expended by the artist as he pushes the burin against the wood. One can sense how he holds his breath as works carefully over the detail of the nest, and then the zest with which he renders the sweeping leaves of the reeds. Similarly, he imbues his Grebe (Fig.40) with character and life as he rests upon his nest. Simple, beautifully executed vignettes, e.g. the mushrooms (Fig. 41) are dropped in at intervals, and the layout and balance of book matches anything available from a private press. Through his relationship with J.M. Dent and Sons and the Aldine Press, Gibbings ensured the continued quality of the production of his books and set a very high standard from which the other commercial printing houses could only benefit by following.

A series of books followed in which Gibbings gave accounts of journeys down various rivers, each superbly illustrated with sensitive engravings remarkable for their clarity. It seemed natural for Gibbings to return to Ireland where he spent fifteen months in his native Cork and subsequently produced Lovely is the Lee (1945). The book reads like a tribute to the country and people which were so important to him. It is a book which must be read to appreciate the depth of Gibbings' empathy with his environment. Lovely is the Lee is a captivating collection of descriptions, scenery, anecdotes, conversations, folk-lore, history and accounts of all types of flora, fauna and human life. It is a book full of his own virtually pantheistic spirituality. The engravings with which it is illustrated are of a harmonious perfection which springs from years of technical practice combined with a perfect range of subject matter. Compare the illustration (Fig. 42) of ropes and fishing nets piled upon a



Curraghs, like stranded whales, lay at the head of small beaches, beaches jewelled with shells. A net and a coil of rope, recently tanned, and now resting on a sheet of corrugated iron, drained their superfluous liquid back into the ran tub.

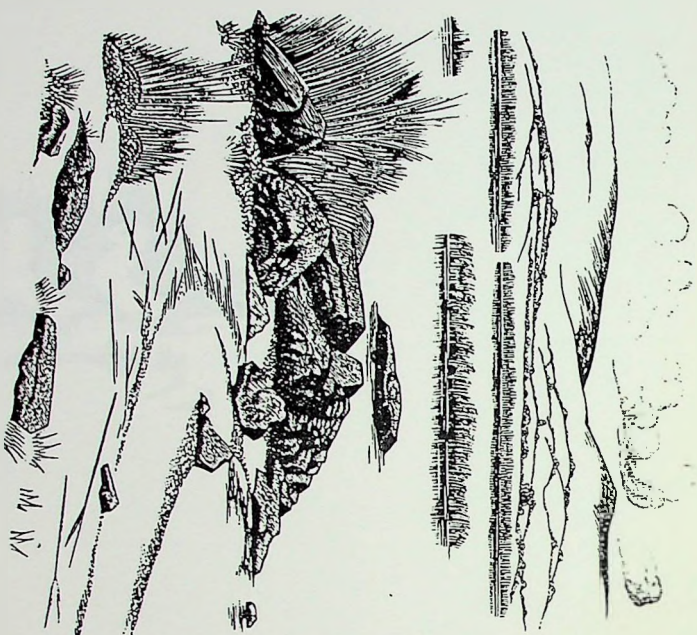
Along this coast it is considered most unlucky to save a man from drowning. 'The sea must have its due.' If you save a man, you or one of your family will most certainly be taken instead. The same belief is held in the Orkney and Shetland islands, and there are many people, on the east coast of Scotland, who will not even lift a dead body from the sea into a boat. 'It belongs to the sea.' Among some of the tribes of central and south-east Africa there is a similar reluctance to help a drowning man. To do so will bring misfortune on the rescuer. Closely connected with this idea was the custom among the vikings of Scandinavia, as it was also among many primitive people, to fasten one or more human beings to the rollers over which a ship, or war canoe, was launched. They were offerings to the sea. It was, no doubt, a survival of a similar belief that, till recently, caused two or more of the ship's apprentices to be ducked in the bow wave of the Peterhead whalers as they were launched from the shipyards at Aberdeen. Orkney boys fishing with the line throw back the first fish caught. It will bring luck, this offering of first fruits to the sea-god. And there are parallels to be found all over the world. In Morocco if the water in certain wells is scarce it will

So I sat there, outside my tent, listening to the lapping of the water, to the cries of the gulls, to the love song of a sand-piper, 'Ssisis-see-si sisis-see-si', to the heavy beat of a pigeon's wings, to the sweetest of all music, the song of the willow wren. Overhead, there was a sky such as one glimpses through a door or window in an early Italian painting. Close by my feet a brimstone butterfly fluttered over the yellow flowers of the trefoil which broke through the grasses among the juniper and sapling birch-trees. While I watched, a mallard with her brood of youngsters swam close to the shore. Through my glasses I could see a redshank feeding on the shore of another island. It had sensed a worm in the mud. Time and again it probed, getting more and more excited each time. But the worm eluded it and the bird continued its peregrinations. Then, in the field beyond, a grey donkey brayed. From half a mile away a small black jackass answered. The two ran towards each other and, meeting, rubbed nose to nose, affectionately.

As the evening wore on I wandered into the wood. It was to me a miniature primeval world. Deep in this small jungle, creepers struggled for supremacy over a carpet of ferns, dead leaves, and nighshade. Ivy and clematis festooned fallen trees, smothering branches already fleeced with moss and lichen. Everywhere a network of interlacing timbers. Deep shadows under thick holly-trees, glims of sunlight on sprays of birch.

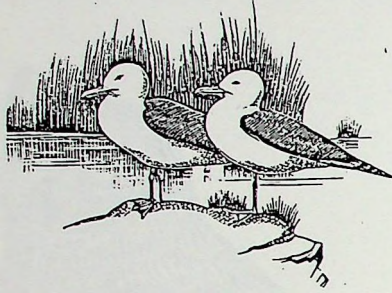
In a glade I closed my eyes to the sudden glare of the sun. When I opened them, dazzled, the thicket seemed ablaze with stars. White flowers of strawberry, white flowers of spindle-wood, cool blue of speedwell, yellow of cinquefoil. Flowers of the blackthorn, catkins of alder. Wild thyme and sweetbrier scenting the air.

At the far side of the wood I looked through a curtain of sunlit leaves to a lake whose calm water seemed on fire. The western sky was radiant, but darkness was growing in the stones at my feet. The wind rustled in the trees, a black-bird sang, a moorhen clucked, a heron croaked. Trees grew

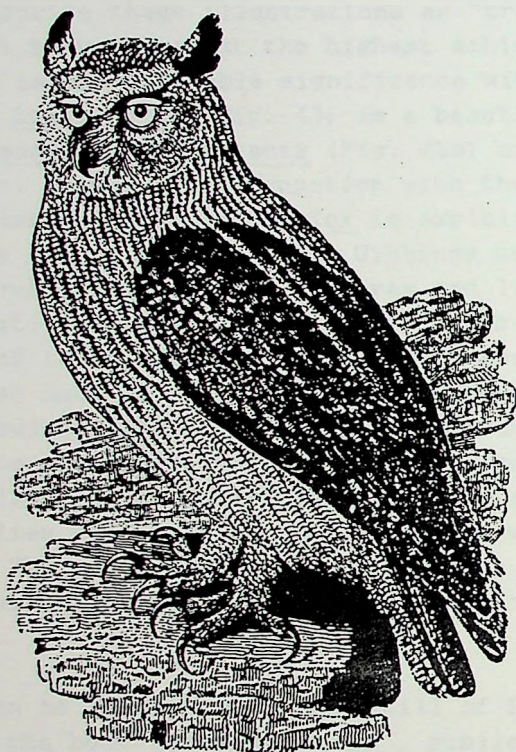


CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AT FIVE O'CLOCK in the afternoon of the 16th May I sat in glory. I had pitched my tent on an island in Lough Carra, and I was surrounded by an aureole of last year's reeds, golden in decay, rising from a turquoise lake. To the west a line of distant hills might have been islands in the Aegean Sea. Pale green lights in the water suggested the shelving sands of coral lagoons. Behind me, to the south, a thick, almost impenetrable wood. To the east, beyond a haze of tall tasselled reeds, the home of my host Robert Rutledge. He had given me the island, he had given me a boat. When I wanted food there was a chair at his table.



(b) (fig 43) *Lovely is the Lee*, 1945



(fig 44) Thomas Bewick: *The Eagle Owl*, 1797

makeshift bench with the earliest Erewhon vignettes (Fig. 14). The

former has a clarity and definitiveness borne of outstanding craftsmanship, close observation and unlimited fascination with the subject. Basketry, rope, net and wood are all rendered skillfully. It is easy to catagorise these illustrations as "traditional". They are traditional -but they represent the highest achievement in a tradition which is of undeniable significance within British vernacular art. Lough Carra (Fig. 43) is a beautifully composed landscape. His seagulls and insects (Fig. 43b) are in the very best Bewick tradition. It was a preoccupation with the details of structure and texture which led Bewick to exploit the white-line technique in his engraving (Fig. 44). Gibbings uses it to the same effect, for expressing materials, textures and light. He uses white line as illumination upon a surface that reveals the detail. Despite the similarity of technique and aspiration in the work of Bewick and then Gibbings, so much later, both these artists produced highly individual engravings. The prospect of two engravers producing identical work is simply impossible within the burin designed technique. The fact that an engraver must grasp a burin and make a line in wood defies copying since no two bodies will achieve an identical line. The movement of the hand against the block is not a mechanical operation and the curve is always changing with the rhythm of the engraver.

If a pinnacle can be identified in the skill of Robert Gibbings then surely it is in the book Over the Reefs, published in 1949. Gibbings could afford to spend three years travelling, researching, and, most importantly, observing before writing this book. It was his triumph as a writer, as an engraver, and as a book designer. It is remarkable for its well balanced pages, whatever the format or layout of the text and illustration (Fig.s 45 and 46). Chapter headings,

tail-pieces and all other illustrations are superbly integrated (Fig.s 47,48 and 49). Gibbings has supervised everything. Over the Reefs represents perfect harmony between engraving and letterpress in the field of commercial publishing. The engravings have become lighter, more refined and more detailed. Wood-engraving is the language of light. The concept of light is as fundamental to wood-engravers as it is to the French Impressionists. But the form of

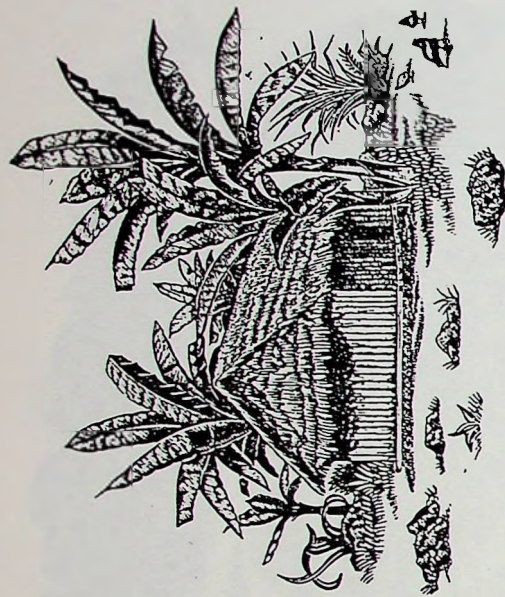
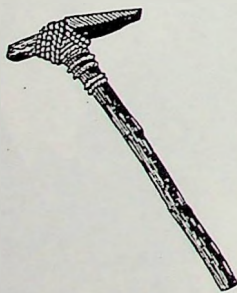
there was none of that devastating annihilation of white marble.

'What would you like for yourself?' said my host, a cheerful trader. 'I'll have it put in hand for you.'

'Well,' I said, 'what about a cherub in a green shirt, with a pencil behind one ear and a graver behind the other and he busy with a piece of indiarubber wiping out the smudges on a sheet of white paper?'

'Wouldn't you like any flowers?' he asked.

'Put a little shamrock at my feet,' I said.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

SURE ENOUGH, there was a welcome for me on Mangaia, though not quite as Andy had predicted. The missionary at Rarotonga knew of the books that Eric Gill had illustrated for me when I owned the Golden Cockerel Press. He knew, too, that Eric had been a relative of the Rev. Wyatt Gill, one of the early missionaries, who had spent the greater part of his ministry on Mangaia. So a message had been sent to the native pastor on Mangaia that a friend of the 'Gilli' family was coming to the island. A few days after my arrival I received the following letter:

'Sir, The Pastor, Dickons and all the Members of the London Missionary Society of Oneroa are inviting you to attend to the Morning Service next Sunday at 9 a.m. and also to be at the Mission House for Meal at 12 noon. We shall be too please if you accept our kind invitation without fail. Please reply before your decision.'

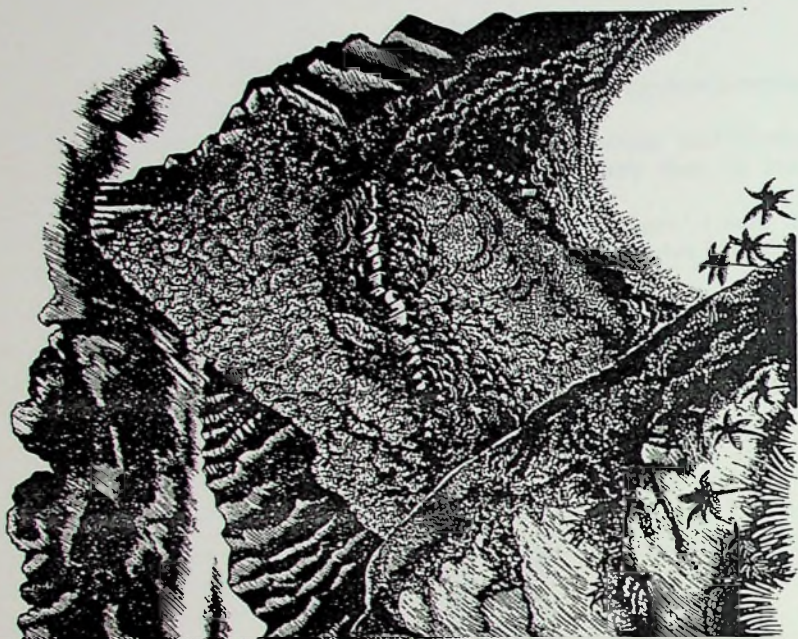
O.R.—6*



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE EIGHT-HUNDRED-MILE FLIGHT from Samoa had been uneventful save for a few moments when the vast dunes of snow-white vapour over which we passed had parted and, far below, we could see Palmerston Atoll, its lagoon a pale translucent green as we approached, an intense electric blue as we looked back, amid the deep ultramarine of the sea. The plane circled the high volcanic peaks of Rarotonga, and came to earth on the long strip

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cut in the belt of luxuriant vegetation that follows the shore-line of the island. No sooner had I alighted than I was aware of incongruity. I was still more aware of it when I reached the town. Every man was wearing shirt and trousers, every woman a European frock — there wasn't a *lava-lava* to be seen. And instead of the gentle 'Talofa!' with which I had been greeted everywhere in Samoa, it was now a crisp 'Good morning' or even a curt 'Hallo!'

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OVER THE REEFS

'In England.'

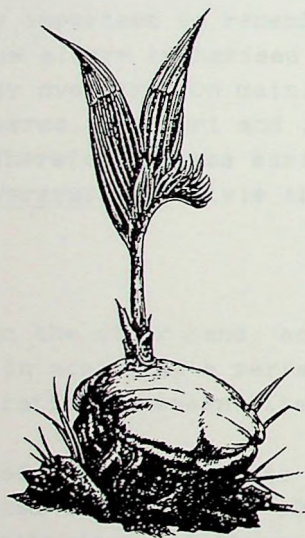
'England far away,' she said, with a long-drawn emphasis on the 'far.'

'But I can't see the need of abstraction,' said Harding, recalling my thoughts more appositely than he knew. 'Isn't nature good enough?'

'It certainly is pretty wonderful at times,' I said, 'but I'm not sure at this precise moment whether it is always wise to follow it.'

'I think you're tired,' said Harding.

We climbed out of our long cane chairs, and I said good night to the two girls. Sina seemed a little surprised, a little puzzled; but when I saw her next day she smiled at me as she went by. Bless her little heart.



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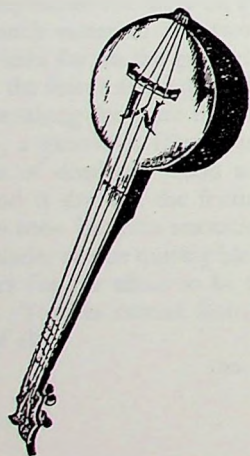
light is very different. The Impressionists were concerned with the defraction of the beam. Albert Garrett*(24) explains that the engraver, on the other hand, deals with three different types of light. The untouched woodblock is an area of black space in which all light is absorbed. Through the burin light is admitted. It may enter at a minimum level through the pointed beam; or it may sculpt form through a series of parallel beams. Alternatively, the form can be revealed by flooding it with a full light source, developing an environment around the object. Most engravers will become particularly accomplished in one technique especially. Gibbings uses all three techniques extensively and to perfection. His control of light is what marks him as an outstanding engraver. Draughtsmanship is an essential skill and Gibbings excelled when drawing on the woodblock. Any of the engravings in Over the Reefs will stand up to the closest technical scrutiny. The variety of the illustrations is outstanding. Combined with harmonious type, the whole book becomes an example of what can be achieved within the limitations imposed by the commercial press. It is important to remember that the British publishing tradition has always emphasised the importance of literature as a priority over art. On mainland Europe, in France and Germany, it was the reverse, with art and illustration always given preference over text. Therefore it was easier to include illustrations in the Expressionist style and allow them dominate the

production. Gibbings, on the other hand, acknowledges the British tradition yet succeeds in achieving a perfect balance and harmony between text and illustration, between literature and art.

Robert Gibbings continued to travel, write and engrave until his death in 1958. He returned to Ireland in 1958 and wrote Sweet Cork of Thee . His energy, enthusiasm and thoroughness never declined. In Sweet Thames Run Softly he had "found himself". He had found a medium in which Gibbings the author, the observer, the craftsman, the decorator and the illustrator were all united. They remained united in all his subsequent work until his long and accomplished career ended in 1958 with Till I End my Song . It was a suitable book on which to close -its title came from the verse which had also marked the first step upon the final stage of his distinguished association with the pen, the burin and the woodblock:

"Sweet Thames run softly, till I end my song".*(25)

That morning the work had been to interview a man whose pig he had shot. Though it is against the law in Samoa for pigs to be kept near the houses, there are few villages in which a pig may not be seen roaming. Occasionally the edict is sent forth that any of these animals seen in a village are to be shot by the local constable. 'Last week I shoot pig,' said Joane. 'Kovana (governor) say shoot all pig in village. I shoot pig. To-day man belong pig come along, he say he vely solly. He say him no fault, he say me no fault; he say just pig he make mistake.'

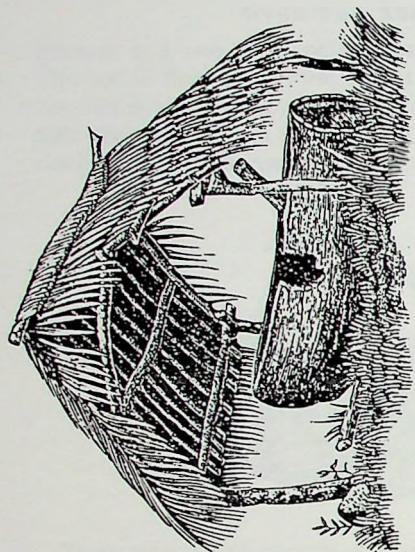


All the time music. From the early hours of dawn the notes of a guitar or ukulele coming from a *fale*, or from youth or maid who, passing, touches lightly on the strings. Even a mother while suckling her baby will play softly on her guitar; even a child picking his steps towards the 'little house' that stands in the lagoon will tinkle as he goes, will tinkle also while he sits.

Most of these instruments are home-made; the half-shell of a coco-nut gives pleasant tone as a sound-box, an empty pilchard tin gives a more metallic note. It is not generally known that the word ukulele was originally a nickname for a sprightly young Englishman who, about the year 1879, was chamberlain to the jovial King Kalakaua of Hawaii. In contrast to the king, who was heavy and stately, this young man was extremely agile in his movements, so much so that he became known, affectionately, as 'jumping flea'—in Hawaiian *ukele lele*. Because he was

rarely seen without one of the small guitars that at that time were being introduced from Portugal, those instruments acquired the same name.

There is great peace at Fangamalo. Save for the music, an occasional murmur of human voices, and the far rustle of the reef, there is no sound. Only at rare intervals does one hear the drums, the big *lali* to summon the people to

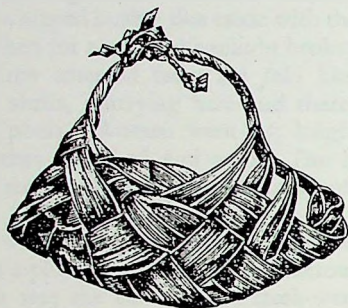


church, the smaller hand drums to call the children to school. And everywhere a glow of colour, colour that is alive and changing. At one moment the hibiscus flowers are a vivid crimson, at the next a scarlet, bright as flame. The swathes of lilies on the lawns are the colours of hydrangeas, blue or pink according to the light. Day after day the lagoon shimmers, a moonstone blue.

At almost any hour of the day there are fishermen in the lagoon. It may be a solitary youth with a throw-net in the shallow water; or it may be men, far out on the reef, hurling their spears into the on-coming waves. Sometimes in the early morning there is a procession of canoes: singly or by twos or threes they pass. At a given point they will deploy, closing in again, later, to form a circle. Inside that circle are heaped up coral rocks. The plan is

OVER THE REEFS

bananas and taro on a pole across his shoulders, for a distance of four miles. He said it was an average load. An eleven-year-old boy carried half that weight with as little thought. There may not be much working to the clock in Samoa, but there is plenty of work.



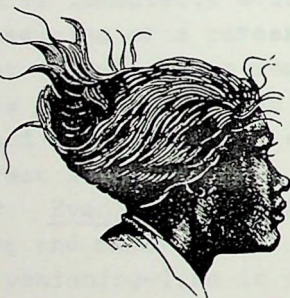
There was always something to watch in the village, if it was only a man weaving an eye-shade from a fragment of palm frond, or another making fire with two sticks, or a couple of youths preparing the daily oven, or women grating arrowroot, or, among the nobler callings, men building a house.

A box of matches is a rarity in Sa'anapu. Instead of being dependent for them on a store several miles away, it is so much easier to rub two sticks against each other. One is held flat on the ground with the foot, the other is held in the hands and rubbed backwards and forwards, at an angle, along the piece that lies on the ground. As this is done, a groove is formed in the lower unit and small particles of displaced wood accumulate there. Provided the wood is dry and the friction steadily increased, those particles soon begin to smoulder, and with the addition of a little tinder can be quickly blown into a flame. It is only necessary for the effort to be made once each day in the village. Torches carried from house to house supply the needs of all.

OVER THE REEFS

like, the houses clung to their stony platforms. Except for small openings on the sheltered side, all the blinds were let down and made fast. Men climbed on to the roofs and fastened coco-nut fronds over weak places in the thatch, or hung banana stalks or baulks of wood across the ridge. Palms with their yielding fronds were like umbrellas blown inside out; wind-whipped bushes like cattle with their backs to the storm. When for a moment sunlight broke through the clouds, children emerged from the *fales* like hermit crabs from their shells, scurrying here and there, naked, splashing in the pools. Women went by, laughing and jesting, their clothes drenched and torn. The booming of the surf on the reef was like the distant rumble of wagons in convoy.

By midday the wind had dropped, but the rain continued to fall, straight as a plumb-line, a heavy thunderous down-pour. For me it was the chance of a fresh-water bath. By the time I reached the shore I was wet enough to wash. After a good lather, a swim in the lagoon removed the soap, and then two minutes in the rain removed the salt water. When I re-entered the *fale*, Tupe, one of my attendant maidens, was there, preparing the table for lunch. It didn't matter to her that I wanted to dry myself and dress; those are things that any Samoan can do in public with perfect propriety. Anyway, her thoughts were far away. For long periods she would stand gazing abstractedly out of the *fale*. Then she would rearrange the knife, fork, and plate on the table, then she would rearrange her hair; then she would move the flowers on the table, taking one of them and putting it in her hair, then she would relax again and rest after her efforts. Her first job every morning, even before she brought my breakfast, was to sit on the



CONCLUSION

"Sixty-one books are credited to Gibbings, many of them written and illustrated, designed and printed by him -given the opportunity he might well have considered making the paper too. His is an unrepeatable and tremendous output for any one life-time".*(26)

The career of Robert Gibbings came to an end in 1958. Those sixty-one books are a monument to the achievements of Gibbings in the field of book-production and wood-engraving. The books coming off the presses of modern commercial publishing houses stand also as part of his extensive legacy. His insistence on high standards of typography, and his concept of "unity of texture" throughout a book has had a significant influence on commercial printing. His position as an art-director with the Golden Cockerel Press and, later, the Penguin Classics series has helped establish the importance and potential of such a post.

The progression of Gibbings' work is immediatly evident. Those early independent engravings mark the begining of a career which became consistently more specialised, yet one which was remarkable for the sheer diversity and variety of its output. Gibbings chose to divert his energies to book production and his style and technique were adapted appropriatly, and with great individuality. He accomplished much in both phases of his career. Evening Sunshine (Fig. 8) is, for this writer, the most striking and memorable of his independent engravings. In it his use of the vanishing-line is progressive and

innovative. The expression of light is outstanding. The illustration and design in his river books and Over the Reefs mark the ultimate achievement of his career in book production. The Four Gospels (Fig. 26) is the greatest example of his competence as an art-director. As an illustrator and designer his skills improved and progressed consistently throughout his long career. Beyond the restrained influence of Gill, his work remained personal, sincere and individual.

Gibbings was a graphic artist who respected tradition and through working within its parameters he helped extend and develop the

concept of book production and modern publishing. He strengthened the established foundations and built upon them. He was a graphic designer whose origins and traditions were of immense importance. There can be no doubt that he was a British designer. His concepts were quite different to those of contemporary mainland Europe. The importance he placed on the book was peculiarly British.

As an engraver his skill cannot be faulted. His competence with wood and burin grew out of a respect for materials. Wood-engraving became the interpretive medium for his exceptional interest in, and knowledge of, nature and the environment. His work is a physical manifestation of the delight he had in life, of his warm personality, and of his consistent demand for the sincere interpretation of his world. His engravings have a clarity and definition which is the product of thinking, planning and observing before engraving begins. When burin is eventually put to woodblock the control of the light is total.

Commercial publishing does not enjoy a particularly flamboyant

position in contemporary graphic design. Book covers are increasing in interest but typography and general design get little publicity. Possibly this is because standards are in fact quite high, a feature which may be traced to the influence of Robert Gibbings, for one. Good book design is virtually taken for granted. Perhaps if some more attention were given to the history of design for mass publishing then Gibbings' name might enjoy a renaissance. A special place in the history of British graphics in the twentieth century is no more than his due. His achievements as a wood-engraver, illustrator, typographer and book designer must surely guarantee the survival of his name.

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