



## Printmakers in the Dalziel Archive

**PRACTICAL** Contemporary wood engravers were invited by **Dr Bethan Stevens** to collaborate with the Prints and Drawings Department of the British Museum on a project focusing on Victorian trade engravers, the Dalziel Brothers

The Dalziel Archive is a collection of around 54,000 proofs held in 49 volumes in the department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum. Dalziel Brothers is the Victorian firm famous for wood engravings after Tenniel for Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books, as well as stand-out series like the *Parables of Our Lord* (after Millais) or *The Dalziel's Bible Gallery* (after artists including Frederic Leighton, Simeon Solomon and Ford Madox Brown). Dalziel made all sorts of other illustrations, from stark technical diagrams, to adverts for Liberty's and Cadbury's, to reproductions of Giotto's frescos. They have often been dismissed as 'facsimile' wood engravers, but their archive presents them as printmakers who were absorbed in form, in the serendipity of visual narrative and in practical experiments; for instance, in a volume of illustrations for a family magazine, *The Pictorial World*, we find colour prints that mix wood and aquatint.

I have been collaborating with the British Museum to document and write about the Dalziels. One of the most stimulating aspects has been working with contemporary printmakers to re-evaluate how this archive can inform artwork today. Neil Bousfield, Louise Hayward, Chris Pig and Peter Smith are four of these artists, and each has recently made new work responding to the Dalziels.

**Chris Pig's** *Tiggy's Funeral, the burial of a goldfish* (2017) shows a row of serious, conflicted children, an invisible adult, and a lost fish. Its melancholy hilarity is reminiscent of many Victorian depictions of burial such as Dalziel's memorable engraving of Edward Lear's design of a man shutting a woman

in a box/coffin (for *A Book of Nonsense, 1861 edn*). Out she pops, the return of the repressed.

Since exploring the Dalziel Archive, Pig has extensively researched Victorian printmaking. He invested in a set of nineteenth-century tools, and experimented with William James Linton's techniques for protecting the drawn surface of a woodblock while cutting (using paper to mask the block, with a small hole to cut within). Pig writes, 'my working practice has changed. I now work up every composition first in boxwood with the Victorian tools.' He then copies his design directly onto lino to re-work it. This brings a fresh perspective on scale and medium, 'the problem with wood engraving is that it's an art form on a lyric scale when today we are used to epic scales. In fact, the best wood engravings are epics on a lyric scale, while much of contemporary art is concerned with lyrical subjects on an epic scale (many large photos do this).'

Pig's first finished work in this dual mode is *Tiggy's Funeral*. This pair links the intimate wood engraving to the spectacular, exhibited print. It raises related questions about framing and form. The rectangular linocut has a controlled stillness, full of squared-off frames, from the shed's planks to the distant attic windows. In contrast, the trunk-shaped wood engraving is framed by a frenetically interrupted edge – often approaching a vignette. In this open form, lines tend to explode outwards chaotically, as if the whole design were about to fly apart.

**Louise Hayward** often begins a print by re-working photographs, printing them on tracing paper and scoring lines through onto a block. She's curious

about the history of the Dalziels transferring photographs onto woodblocks – a practice that began in the late 1850s. This becomes a useful alternative history to conventions about wood engraving that focus on artists like Bewick or Ravilious. Hayward feels there is a still lingering assumption that 'if you're a proper artist you draw – if you're someone who uses photography it's not quite the proper thing.'

For both Hayward and Dalziel, photographic methods are especially good for architectural subjects – monumentally scaled buildings re-imagined as tiny, wondrous objects. For Hayward, Dalziel's architectural work is astonishing because 'they seem to get so much in (you can make a large print with a lot less in it).' Her first response to encountering the archive was to buy a new magnifier, 'I recently started to make some smaller work which is quite exciting as I've not worked on such a small scale for some time and I feel this may be a different phase of work for me.'

Hayward taught herself wood engraving, after rescuing a copy of Clare Leighton's 1944 manual from a skip. Leighton advises readers to learn by looking, and that's what Hayward gets from Dalziel, 'Zooming into examples from the archive, the engraving is so controlled with incredibly systematic approaches to elements such as tonal variation.' In *Tustin Estate* (a work-in-progress), there are nineteenth-century influences in the hypnotic delineation of cloud – a traditional approach unusual for Hayward. She has started experimenting with floral borders from the archive: Dalziel's decorations re-made as dark, otherworldly frames to her own urban visions. Hayward is struck by textures, like hatching that seems to be laid over other layers. She sees a body of techniques in the Victorian profession that are inspiring but also daunting – without the commercial infrastructure the Victorians had around their craft, and without their team-work, will we lose those skills?

**Peter S Smith's** latest work in progress is *Dalziel's Apprentice*. The Dalziels were linear artists, their work raising questions about how apparently simple



lines are shaped and con-toured; a line has more *dimension* than we might think. Smith's response offers a tactile experience – your vision hits a line and is beguiled down mazy paths, through open white ground. The work is a love-song to black line (utterly unexpected as a contemporary wood engraving). Lines taper and bend to thinness, then expand into odd, anti-autographic shapes, like musical notation.

Printmakers working with the Dalziel Archive have been shocked at the skill (and thankless labour) that went into producing most work in black-line rather than white. We spent time discussing the factory system, whereby anonymous employees working for Dalziel produced lines that were ultimately credited to famous artists like Tenniel or Rossetti. The distinctiveness of line has been important during the Dalziel Project in reclaiming authorship for the facsimile engraver; Peter S Smith's new work explores this in a visual language that words cannot approach.

He began by excerpting and copying a tiny portion of drapery background from an apparently banal Victorian illustration. Improvising on this during the drawing process, he exaggerated appealing shapes, kinks and hiccups. While many backgrounds are mechanical, others are unexpectedly experimental. Smith had been 'looking for the bits where an engraver in the Dalziel factory could have a bit of fun – some freedom.' He speculated, 'even though I imagine there was strong quality control in the bits that are key to the main narrative, there was probably room for inventiveness by engravers whose task was to engrave backgrounds.'

Neil Bousfield is known for layered colour prints, with mesmerising palettes. Although Dalziel worked with black ink, for me there is a chromatic sympathy in the way the trade engravers depicted the coast with Bousfield's *What Hope For Holding Back The Sea (Ballot)* (2017). Bousfield approached the Dalziel Archive as a location for narratives, curious about how prints relate to people's experiences of place. He writes of *Ballot*, 'This place is both my local polling station and an evacuation

site as designated within the flood plan drawn up by the environment agency... I was drawn to the idea of grids and mapping, and the obvious impact of this upon the idea of location.'

*Ballot* responds to a large Dalziel illustration of a seascape of several blocks bolted together. Different engravers would be responsible for cutting each block (join lines are clearly visible). In the proof, the devastating shipwreck remains untitled, geographically unlocated, but in Bousfield's reading it becomes anchored in place, in historical wrecks off the coast of his home region of Norfolk. For him, the joins of the blocks were interesting not as a technical story of print production, but poetically and iconographically in the way they resemble grid-lines on a map. Bousfield's work alerts me to a peculiarity within Dalziel's shipwreck, in which that grid of block-lines dislocates the integrity of what should be a tragic image. The traces of the joined blocks become another layered image that – because they narrate something *else*, i.e. the engraver's office – distance us from pictorial representation. These aspects are revisited and repaired in the stunning layers of Bousfield's work, which bring a specificity of place, from the personal (the house) to the regional and political, inscribed on the work in its text and grid.

Bousfield's work makes me think afresh about the way grid systems work as tools of translation, transposition and impossible replication. Grids are used by printmakers to copy drawings (a process that both perpetuates and defaces) and in mapping to transpose place – an astonishing feat of scaling down, as well as a laughably impossible one, like Alice's task in entering Wonderland.

Numerous prints in the Dalziel Archive complement this work by Bousfield, Hayward, Pig and Smith. But one 1856 burnished proof by Dalziel after Myles Birket Foster seems particularly apt, in its play with the extremities of scale, its astonishing monochromatic palette, its technical virtuosity and its deathly coastal theme, *The Course of Time* (1856). Foster was popular for landscapes, but here he uses his skills to make a human

apocalypse. The wood engraving is about 11 centimetres high, full of astonishing detail. It calls out for magnification, to reveal how the tiny human figures structure that awful cliff face, or that luminous sky. Magnifier in hand, we discover a beautiful awkwardness and a tendency to abstraction in the falling figures. The soft paper emphasises the varying tones created by tiny changes in the white flecks and lines (reminding me of Smith's search for 'ambiguous and organic' surfaces). This builds the print's magical sense of multiple depths. A slight unevenness in the burnished proof highlights this, in comparison with the brittle linearity of published impressions. Smudgy greys and luminosity intrigue us about the colours to be found in monochrome.

It is hoped the Dalziel Archive continues to be useful to printmakers. Also contributing at our initial artists' workshop in April 2017 (written up by Simon Brett in *Multiples*) were Hugo Chapman, Sheila O'Connell and Isabel Seligman (British Museum); George Mind (University of Sussex); and printmakers Alex Binnie, Simon Brett, Peter Lawrence, Keith Pettitt, Maggie Storm and Jazmin Velasco. The Dalziel Archive is open to all. More information about the project can be found at: [www.sussex.ac.uk/english/dalziel](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/english/dalziel)

#### Images

*Tiggy's Funeral, the burial of a goldfish* (2017) by Chris Pig. Linocut, 340 x 500 mm

*On Addiscombe Road* (2017) by Louise Hayward. Wood engraving, 210 x 135 mm

Illustration for 'Days in North India' in *Good Words* (1870) by Dalziel from a photograph, 92 x 67 mm. Ref. 1913,0415.187

*Dalziel's Apprentice* (work in progress) by Peter S Smith. Wood engraving, 140 x 90 mm

Illustration for *Good Words* (1870) by Dalziel after Francis A Fraser, 110 x 140 mm. Ref. 1913,0415.187

Illustration for *The Pictorial World* (1879-1883) by Dalziel after Edwin Hayes, 340 x 530 mm. Ref. 1913,0415.200.

*What Hope For Holding Back The Sea (Ballot)* (2017) by Neil Bousfield. Wood engraving, three blocks (top) 150 x 210 mm (bottom right) 95 x 155 mm (bottom left) 95 x 50 mm

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