

WOODCUTS IN EARLY CHILDREN'S BOOKS

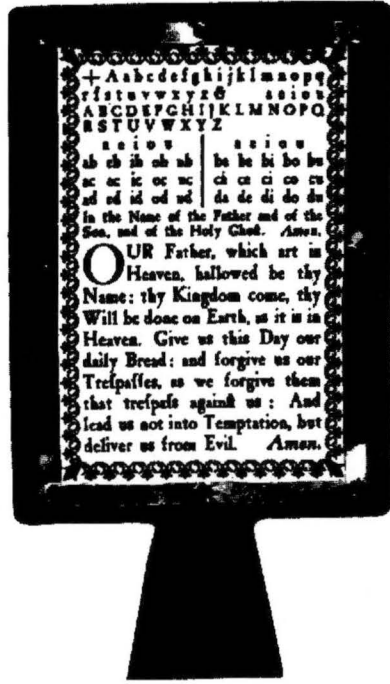
Marilynne Black

AS WITH ALL FORMS OF ART, the illustrations in children's books have evolved to reflect different times and styles, but from the earliest books until the present day woodblock prints have been a medium for illustration. Some writers who have discussed this topic erroneously use the term woodcuts and wood engravings interchangeably. While both use a block of hardwood to make a print, they are, however, two opposite techniques. Woodcutting is a process in which a block of hardwood has a design drawn on it and the unwanted spaces cut away. When inked and printed, a black line drawing results. On the other hand, as with those done on metal, for wood engravings the drawing is etched into the block of wood to create a negative. This allows them to be much more finely detailed. Where the ink is absent, that is where the design is cut, the inking results in a print displaying a white line. These have sometimes been referred to as white-line woodcuts. Within just a few hundred years the crude wood block prints had evolved into colored prints and intricate wood engravings

The first woodcuts were simple and crudely done, often with the one or two word text carved on the same block. Dürer (1471-1528), however, set a high standard, one that only a few other artists seem to have attained. Walter Crane was influenced by prints of seventeenth century Japan, which "pioneered the creation of full-color woodcuts." These require a different block for each separate color. Prints were also hand painted at times through cottage industries. At about the same time as Crane was producing his works, the designer and decorator William Morris also influenced illustrations as did all major art movements.

Until the invention of the printing press by Johann Gutenberg in about 1436 all books were hand lettered, a laborious and time-consuming undertaking. Monks hand copied books adding exquisite illuminations in vibrant colours. At the opposite end of the literary world was the simple hornbook, first hand-lettered on parchment or vellum. Since it was a single sheet mounted on a paddle-shaped board and protected by a thin sheet of horn, it could not be said to be a book. It can be said, however, to be the first instructional material made solely for children to handle themselves. It was not many years before education was available to the

masses. With this development came more readily available printed matter in the form of these hornbooks, as well as battledores and chapbooks. All were instructive in nature. Early hornbooks contained the alphabet, common letter combinations, and a prayer; they were not illustrated. Battledores, a triple-folded sheet of heavy paper or cardboard, contained much more print than the hornbooks. John Newbery's *Royal Battledore*, for instance, had a homily, the alphabet in both upper and lower cases, vowel-consonant combinations, an illustrated alphabet such as "a Apple, b Bull, c Cat... v Vine" with a crude woodcut of the animal or plant as well as prayers. The printing of cheaply produced books, later referred to as chapbooks, followed and they consisted mainly of folklore and nursery stories previously from the oral tradition. The crude woodcuts for the illustrations were often reused for different stories.



Thomas Caxton brought the first hornbooks to England in about 1476. He also produced many chapbooks. He was a printer of folktales and nursery rhymes and illustrated them with crude woodcuts. David Bland, in *A History of Book Illustration*, says, "Caxton himself was primarily a man of letters, concerned more with his texts than their presentation. The result was that English illustration began with a handicap that lasted almost to the nineteenth century." Caxton produced such books as *Reynart the Foxe* in 1481, *The Fables of Aesop* and *Canterbury Tales* in 1484, and *Speculum Vitae Christi* in 1486, which contrary to what has just been stated, "contains some small cuts of a delicacy hitherto unknown in English books." It should be noted, however, that it was not uncommon to acquire blocks from abroad for use in illustrating books. Such may be the case with the previously mentioned title.

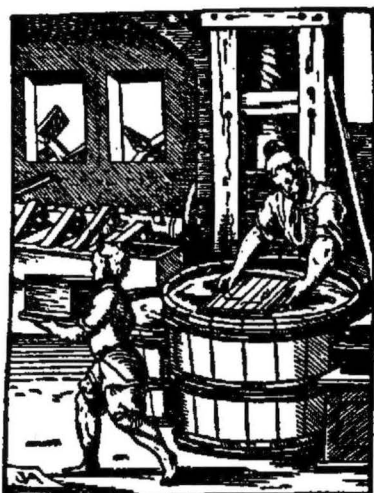
European woodcutters such as Eckert von Homborch of Antwerp and Jost Amman were very skilled and their work would have been much in demand.

“In the fifteenth century, the black and white woodcuts of German artist Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) brought this medium to a new level of sophistication in early Europe.” As with most other artists of the time, his woodcuts were religious in nature. A goldsmith by training, “his mastery of the graphic arts” resulted in such fine woodcuts as *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* and the engraving *Melencolia I*. “Technically, Dürer’s woodcuts are of a virtuosity that has never been surpassed.”

By adapting to the woodcut the form-following hatching from Schongauer’s engravings, Dürer converted the former primitive contrasts of black and white into a sliding scale of light and shade, achieving a quality of luminosity that had never been seen in woodblock prints.

Dürer produced illustrations for books but also sold single prints from these books, bringing the buying of good art within the means of many. His work and his writing about art had an influence on both art and books.

Donna Norton, in her introduction to children’s literature, cites Eric Quale’s identification of the first picture book for children as *Kunst und Lehrbuchlein (Books of Art and Instruction for Young People)*. Published



Making Paper in the 16th Century
Woodcut by Jost Amman

in 1580, by German Sigmund Feyerabend, the woodcuts by Jost Amman are full-page and detailed. Generally, however, Johann Amos Comenius “is credited with having written the first non-alphabet picture book that strove to educate children.” Printed in 1658, *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, reflects Comenius’s philosophy of exposing children to nature. Containing simple sentences accompanied by crude woodcuts, the book remained popular with children for over a century.

In a recent lecture Judith Saltman stated, “Children’s books mirror the society that

produces them; they are a social history of how adults perceive children, what they need and what they want.” Religious instruction and morality, manners and behaviors were the main topics of early books. Instruction, not enjoyment, held sway for hundreds of years. During the 16th century the Puritans had a profound influence on children’s literature and, in turn, what was illustrated. It wasn’t until after the 17th century that changes began to occur. Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719, and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, published in 1726, are but two books written as adventures for adult reading, but



The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe
Printed at the Ship in Pater Noster Row in 1719

which quickly became popular with children. Over one hundred years later the opposite occurred when *Treasure Island* was first published in a serial publication in 1881 and 1882 in a children’s magazine. Stevenson’s tale was quickly embraced by adults.

John Newbery (1713-67) was a noted printer, publisher, and bookseller in England. In her lecture, Professor Saltman also stated that Newbery’s books were the first secular, rather than strictly religious, literature for children. Like many books of the time they were, however, didactic in nature. His *A Pretty Pocket Book* was published in 1744 and



Little Goody Two Shoes
Published by John Newbery in 1765

Oliver Goldsmith's *Little Goody Two Shoes* was published in 1765.

Another Englishman, Thomas Bewick (1753-1828), had a profound influence on early illustration. Rather than the crude woodcuts of previous centuries, he “revived and extended the old art of wood engraving.” Norton refers to his work as “skillfully executed woodcuts.” Whatever the designation, his work reveals a sophistication of line which is able to depict subtleties of shading. He was a craftsman, not an artist; even as an apprentice his engravings were of a superior quality. Like others mentioned previously, he “didn’t intend to produce fine books but to ad-

minister instruction to youth.” His illustrations are, however, a marked improvement over those preceding his. Because he oversaw the actual printing of the books, he was able to maintain a high quality. His illustrations have a sense of realism and depth to them, rather than the simple black-line depictions of objects. Bird feathers and the foliage of plants, as well as background details, add to the complexity and interest of the pictures. In 1771 he produced *The New Lottery Book of Birds and Beasts*, Croxall’s version of *Aesop* in 1772, *A Pretty Book of Pictures for Little Masters and Misses or Tommy Trip’s History of Birds and Beasts* in 1779, John Gay’s *Fables* in 1784, and *Life and Adventures of a Fly* in 1789.

Marilynne Black was a teacher-librarian for 25 years in B.C. elementary schools. She now conducts workshops on children's literature at conferences and school professional days. She is also completing her master's degree in children's literature at UBC.