

Emerging from the Willows

Artist Charles van Sandwyk talks about illustrating a new edition of *The Wind in the Willows* and following in the footsteps of masters like Rackham, Potter and Shephard. By Rollin Milroy

LAST SPRING, at a public talk about creating the illustrations for his new edition of *The Wind in the Willows*, Charles van Sandwyk touched on a point that is key to understanding his art and career: the difference between an illustrator creating scenes from a story and an artist working in collaboration with the story. Van Sandwyk has often declared his lack of interest in being an artist for hire. "Illustrating has been the exception rather than the rule in my career."

Herein lies the story of a still-young Canadian artist who has succeeded in working by his own rules, outside the formal art world of galleries and curators; how he created the opportunity to illustrate the book that since childhood represented his ideal of how life should be lived; and his two-year effort to make the exception exceptional.

The Wind in the Willows was written by Kenneth Grahame and first published in 1908. It was not immediately a best-seller, but like many classics, it built momentum. It is the story of spring awakening, the evergreen friendship of Ratty and Mole, and the ribald antics of Toad. Since its first appearance at least 50 illustrated editions have been issued, and to this day the book reportedly sells more than 100,000 copies annually.

Born in South Africa in 1966, van Sandwyk was introduced to the book by his father at the age of eight. His course to becoming an artist was set at a young age, and the book remained a strong influence. The family moved to North Vancouver in 1977, and during high school van Sandwyk started the intaglio printing for which he would first become known. (Lacking a proper press, he printed his plates by driving the family car over them in the driveway.) It was during his final year in Capilano College that he crossed over to the world of books, creating the manuscript copy of *Neighbourly Birds*, with coloured etchings and calligraphic text. The work won a national award and sufficient prize money to have the text printed letterpress, and in 1986, the book was issued in a limited edition of 126 copies. By the time the last copies sold, when he was just in his early twenties, van Sandwyk had begun to establish his reputation for technical skill with the etching press, a virtuosity for using colour, and a style reminiscent of the period when *Willows* was first published.

Since then van Sandwyk has self-published nearly 20 elaborate productions with his own verse and illustrations. He has also issued several more deluxe limited editions, by himself and in collaboration with others. But the first commission he accepted to illustrate someone else's story came in 2003, when the Folio Society asked him to work on a new edition of *The Blue Fairy Book*, one in a series by Andrew Lang. Although fairies have long



been a favourite topic for van Sandwyk, he clearly was playing the long game in accepting the commission...

You've said that you've always wanted to illustrate The Wind in the Willows. How did the opportunity finally come about?

"When I had finished *The Blue Fairy Book*, Joe Whitlock-Blundell, the production coordinator at Folio, said to me in his English fashion, 'Right, well, now I think you should do *The Pink Fairy Book*.' I just saw ahead of me a line of fairy books, and I said, 'Oh, pleeeeeease no...' And so he asked what I'd like to illustrate, and I said, 'Could I please do *The Wind in the Willows*?' He said, 'We've already got one of those.' (They had quite a good one done about 10 years ago by a painter who, remarkably, had not been aware of the book or previous illustrated editions, and he took a very fresh approach; the animals were unclothed, which in my mind is unheard of.) I said, 'Yes, but you can have more than one of the same title by different people.' I thought we could do a more traditional version. So Joe invited me to London to talk about it.

"I sat down in his office and he said, 'Right, we'd like another fairly modest version, because we'd like children to be able to buy it, maybe eight or 10 paintings.' I thought to myself, *Oh dear, I want to do so many things here*. I said, 'Please listen.' He looked at the door, and then at me, and said, 'Right, what do you want?' And in a great rush I said, 'I want two-colour gold blocking on the cover. I want lots of green cloth that looks like willow leaves. Inside, the flyleaf paper should smell and taste completely different than what's in the middle, and there should be the smell of very expensive glue. And there should be at least 100 paintings or drawings—one for every year I've missed doing *The Willows*, which is almost 100 years. And I think we should have a little engraved tipped-on label for the cover.' He agreed to take it to the board, and I don't think I've ever seen anyone so relieved when I left their office."

Why this book? Why has it had such a sustained influence on you as an artist?

"Susan Cooper said, 'It's a magical book with perhaps the best first chapter ever written,' and I can wholeheartedly agree. Every spring a number of my friends and I read it, and it's a beautiful way to start the year. Certainly it's number one on my list of favourite books."



"I have known at least three Toads in my lifetime, in a way that helped me understand expression and character."

So once the Folio Society agreed to your plan, how did you begin? All of a sudden you got what you'd been wanting, but it came with a deadline.

"I put the moment of terror on hold till I'd fleshed out my first characters, and I thought that would be when I'd know if I should be worried or not. When I'd been in England for the meeting with Joe, I took the opportunity to spend some time along the river where Grahame lived and based the story, getting a sense for the countryside, its wildlife, and especially the willows. So when, a few months later, the Folio Society agreed to my plan and vision, I started by visiting my parents in Perth, Australia, to work up sketches for the three main characters, Ratty, Mole and Toad. Then I carried on to my studio in Fiji and started working on the more complicated drawings and paintings.

"The exciting thing about *The Willows* is I took it at a time when I could cope with the structure and follow through it required—working for two years and keeping the level of delight going all the way. I wouldn't have had the tenacity to pull this project off four or five years ago. But now the thing about this is, I feel I could do this book all over again, and do a better version, making the scenes a little wilder, a little woollier. I'm not finished with *The Willows* yet. There's still a lot of it in me. Maybe it's the kind of thing you can do more than once in your life. Maybe I can do it again when I'm 75, a different version, an even more intense version."



Samples of the artist's working sketches (right) and final art (left).





How did you decide what parts to illustrate, and how to illustrate them? How free were you in use of colour vs. black and white? Why did you choose to do some illustrations as etchings — seems much more work than just doing a drawing?

“It was left entirely up to me by the Folio Society. And I might add that I wouldn’t have done *Willows* with any other publisher. Folio has such high production standards, and Joe shares such a keen sense of fun in creating beautiful books. They basically wanted to see that I’d got the characters nailed in a way that was effective for everybody, and after that they gave me free rein.

“In my mind’s eye, I saw each illustration already finished in the medium it was going to be in, and I think that also comes from having thought this book through for 30 years. Etchings are cer-

tainly more work, but they’re a lot more fun. I think my favourite images are the ones I decided to do as etchings, because etching is one of my favourite mediums.

“I also liked to break the rules in this a lot. My approach was to not always follow a pattern, but do whatever tickles you at the moment. There’s another aspect of this that I think is important with *The Willows* but wouldn’t work so well with something else, and that is, having a remarkably good illustrating technique would not necessarily enhance a book like this. Having drawings that are not necessarily perfectly done, that are lacking in some way, gives them a more human quality, which I think is much more endearing than something that comes out slick. I didn’t want to dwell on consistency, I wanted to dwell on what was a perfect joy. And somehow different drawings came out in different techniques, trying to reflect that joy.”

There have been many illustrated editions of this book already, including several by artists who have had tremendous influence on your work. Did you ever have any trepidation about following in their footsteps, or maybe just wonder how to set yourself apart, given you were working with the same source material?

“Artists often feel the need to make their own independent mark on a text, to make something a little different that’s exclusively ours. *Wind in the Willows* is no place to do this, because it is Moley and Ratty and Toad who dictate how they ought to look. Also, it’s previous masters of the craft who dictate the look. Folio was a little worried that the mantle of Ernest Shephard, the man who drew *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *Wind in the Willows*, would rest a little too heavily on my shoulders, as would my master and mentor Arthur Rackham. Not to mention the greatest painter of children’s animals, Beatrix Potter. But to my mind, these are all huge velvet cushions that supported me.





And if you see influences of Rackham or Shephard or Potter, I would be more than delighted. Because I think a version of *The Willows* where you're aiming for something a little old-fashioned and classical has to exist in tandem—or maybe, in my case, four or five steps back in the shadows of—but still without competing with those books by Rackham and Shephard.”

Books have always appealed to you. Why is that? What do you, as an artist, get from working in books that maybe painting or printmaking doesn't offer?

“I think every artist has stories to tell, at least visually. So I tell my stories with paintings. But I also have a love of the language. I'm not a good writer, but I've forced it for so long that it comes out as an acceptable enough form to print. And a book allows you the opportunity of multiple layers; you can flesh out an idea over four or five paintings, a few chapters of words, far more than a picture on the wall. Now the

other side is that one painting can tell the whole story, if it is done well, and narrative is one of your interests.

“But with a book, you have the choice of working with lovely papers, binding—all the lovely organic tangible parts that are really exciting. Along with painting, there's the thrill and challenge of constructing your first prototype, putting the paper together—you're problem solving all the time. And the end result has a depth that my independent paintings don't have. And other books have inspired my craft.”

When you worked on this book, who did you see in your mind's eye as the person it was for? Another eight-year-old boy, or a 40-year-old?

“I illustrate for grown-ups who remember what it's like to be a child. What do we do for the child in the grown-up these days? Nothing. The only thing you need to do differently as a grown-up than when you are a child is to understand the responsibility of structure and follow through.

Do what you say you're going to do, be responsible for yourself, for your family. The rest of you can still be a big kid. But somehow we kill that in ourselves, or we sublimate it to such a great deal that it only comes out through our children.

“None of my work is for children, so you can imagine how I love it when kids like my work. And there are a small number who are interested in it, but mostly it's grown-ups. I've tried to take subject matter that is enduring, that perhaps kids might like, but on a more sophisticated level. It involves all aspects of my life. I like drinking, I like collecting antiques, I like old

cottages, and I try to put all of those things into my paintings.”

HAVING INVESTED TWO years in the project, van Sandwyk is understandably enjoying the international attention that the book's success has generated since its release in the fall of 2005. (A second printing is already in the works.) But he's also had time to release a revised second edition of his book *Sketches from the Dream Island of Birds*, and work on a project that will record his *Willows* experience.

This is planned as a large, deluxe limited edition, containing all of the etchings created for the book along with excerpts from his sketchbook. Printed in a combination of intaglio, relief and letterpress, the edition will be just a few dozen very expensive copies. Publication is at best several years away, but van Sandwyk is having fun planning the book, following the same principle that has guided all of his previous books: “Each time pen goes to paper, the general idea is to try to make the most beautiful book in the world. I've failed every time, but it's still the impetus.”

For details on Charles van Sandwyk's art and books, see www.jwprintsandmaps.com. For information on his edition of *The Wind in the Willows* and the Folio Society, see www.foliosoc.co.uk.

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