



Artist in Wood: Jonathan Gibbs

Wood cuts come in all sizes, as Fi Martynoga finds out.

You may not know him by name but you will surely know his work. Jonathan Gibbs is a wood engraver and an eminent illustrator. He works for many top publications: *The Guardian*, the *FT*, the *New Yorker*, the *New Scientist*, for example, and many top publishers such as Penguin, Hamish Hamilton, Faber, the Folio Society, and Jonathan Cape. If you have read Mark Cocker's *Crow Country*, you will remember his cover design of flocking corvids, and if you have recently acquired Robert Macfarlane's latest, *Landmarks*, take a close look at the illustrations inside. The nine small, evocative, landscapes and the nine tiny marginal decorations are all by Gibbs.

Working on that Macfarlane book was right up Gibbs' street. "I like working on commissions. You might think it was constraining and did

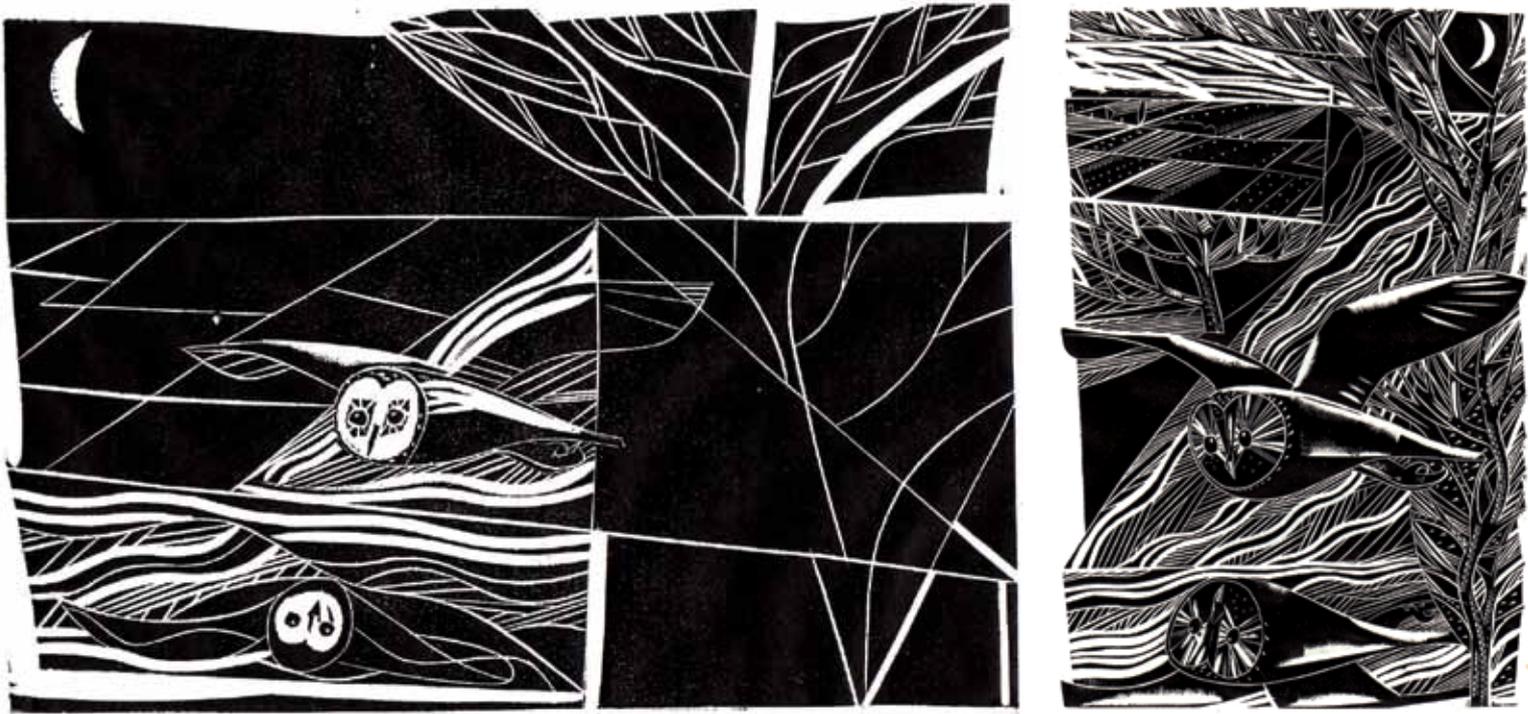
not require the full working of the imagination," he says, "but it really is a collaboration with another artist". The precise brief, the deadline, and the necessity of reading other's writing he finds challenging and very satisfying. *Landmarks*, which looks at words relating to nine different British landscapes, instantly engaged Gibbs' imagination. "I love differentiating landscapes, drawing flatlands, or mountain country. I might have done these engravings of my own accord," he reflects, "though I might not have finished a series of nine". Robert Macfarlane was very pleased with the results, which are typical Gibbs products, being slightly abstracted although fully and instantly recognisable and informed by reality.

Proper and precise observation and constant practice of drawing are

important to Gibbs. He is Head of Illustration at Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) and has been teaching students for many years. "I tell them about my current commissions and describe all the processes involved in acquiring them and executing them to a publisher's satisfaction". It is an oblique way of educating students about some of the realities of the world of illustration and showing them how to present themselves. "The need for skills such as understanding perspective, form, and tone is now highly debated but it seems to me that drawing is like music, you cannot play well or start to compose until you have acquired a set of skills and practiced them many times over".

Gibbs does practice daily, getting up very early to work on his own material. He may make initial drawings for an engraving one day, develop them the next, then transfer them to a block and do the cutting on subsequent days. Towards the end of a week he will get to inking the block and taking a proof of the print. He does this by hand, using the back of a bone spoon to 'burnish', that is press the paper down firmly and evenly

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over the whole block, so that all the details of the image will be transferred to the paper. Only rarely does he use his printing press, and then for making editions of prints, rather than for proofing them.

Life is but a dream

There is one print he certainly did not make using his press and I had an indirect hand in bringing about. Last October Jonny Gibbs noticed a very large plank of laminated wood that was cluttering up my garage. I was delighted to give it him and thought he would make a bench. But no, it was to be a block. A van was found and the curious plank, 14 foot long by 20 inches wide, with a taper from three inches at one end to two at the other, and bolt holes only in the thicker end, went away to East Lothian where Gibbs lives. A phone call came: "Do you think it was a diving board?" Well, the plank came from Duddingston Mill 30 years ago, when the building firm that owned the mill was moving out. They had done all the repair work on Edinburgh state schools, so yes, it probably was a diving board. Duck boards, acquired at the same time, seem some sort of confirmation.

The plank soon became a huge block. The print, *Life is but a Dream*, is a wood cut done with chisels on the flat of the wood, rather than a fine engraving done on the end-grain. It is inspired by the song 'Row, row, row your boat' and is executed on a large piece (16 foot long!) of fine Japanese paper specially sent from China by his son's girlfriend. As an exercise in scale, Gibbs also made a tiny engraved version of the image. He exhibited both in ECA earlier this year and sat, playing his guitar, as people walked round, looking at the small and large versions of his allegory of life, and at all the richness of the other prints and paintings. Trees, woods, seas, fish, and objects on tables often figure in his prints. The paintings are usually more abstracted, with a delicate and muted palette of blues, greys and reds. All convey a sense of the artist's enjoyment of his media, but the prints most of all: "I like the physical nature of engraving, the co-ordination of hand and eye. Everything can be done on a table, using simple tools and materials. They are portable, and there are no chemicals". Gibbs makes some of his own blocks from box, holly and pear from his own garden. The small size, and sometimes the shape, of an engraving may be dictated by the nature of the branch from which it is cut.

How did East Anglian-reared Gibbs come to be in Scotland? He has been here 25 years. His wife, Jessie, is from East Lothian and studied in Edinburgh, so he had exhibited in the city before he worked there. One of his first commissions for illustration came from Canongate Publishing in the heady days of its expansion under Stephanie Wolfe-Murray in the 1980s. The eight engravings for that collection of poems by Tom Pow, *Rough Seas*, really set him on his course, "I realised I liked illustration. It's an interesting life, always turning your mind to a new subject. I didn't have that plan at all when I left art college, but it crystallized around then". Art college for Gibbs started in Lowestoft, and continued in the Central School in London, with his post-graduate studies at the Slade. Now he is a very well-respected figure in Edinburgh, where the quality of work shown by students of the School of Illustration in their degree shows suggests that he is a very successful tutor and head of department, as well as fine artist.

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Fi Martynoga is a freelance museum researcher and writer based in the Scottish Borders. More of Jonathan's work can be seen at <http://www.centralillustration.com/illustrators/jonathan-gibbs>.

Images, left to right: Oak tree; The sound of trees; Claxton back cover; Claxton front cover.