



THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

An exhibition of the illustration of John Lawrence

27th November 2006 – 4th May 2007

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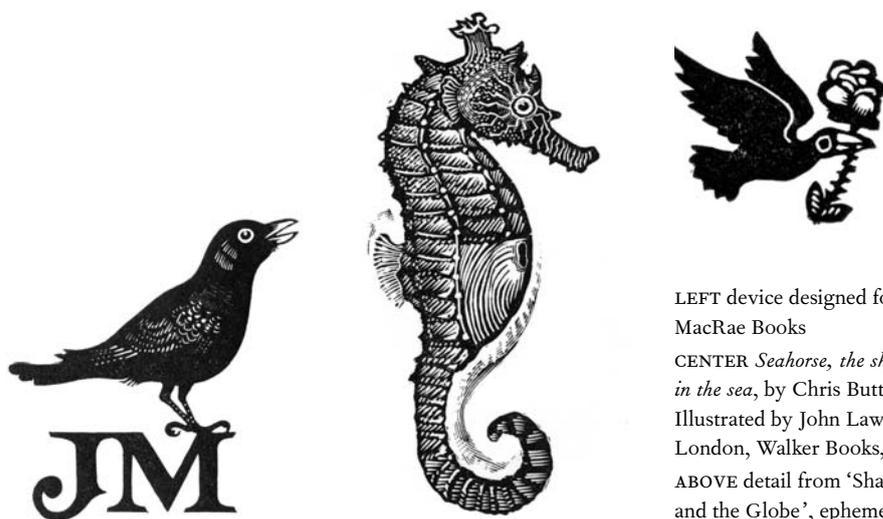
FRONT *London Snow*, by Paul Theroux with wood engravings by John Lawrence.
London, Hamish Hamilton, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1980

TOP *Sword of Honour* by Evelyn Waugh. London, Folio Society, 1969

ABOVE *The Diary of a Nobody*, by George and Weedon Grossmith, drawings by John Lawrence.
London, Folio Society, 1990

BELOW *Rabbit and Pork. Rhyming Talk* by John Lawrence. London, Hamish Hamilton, 1975





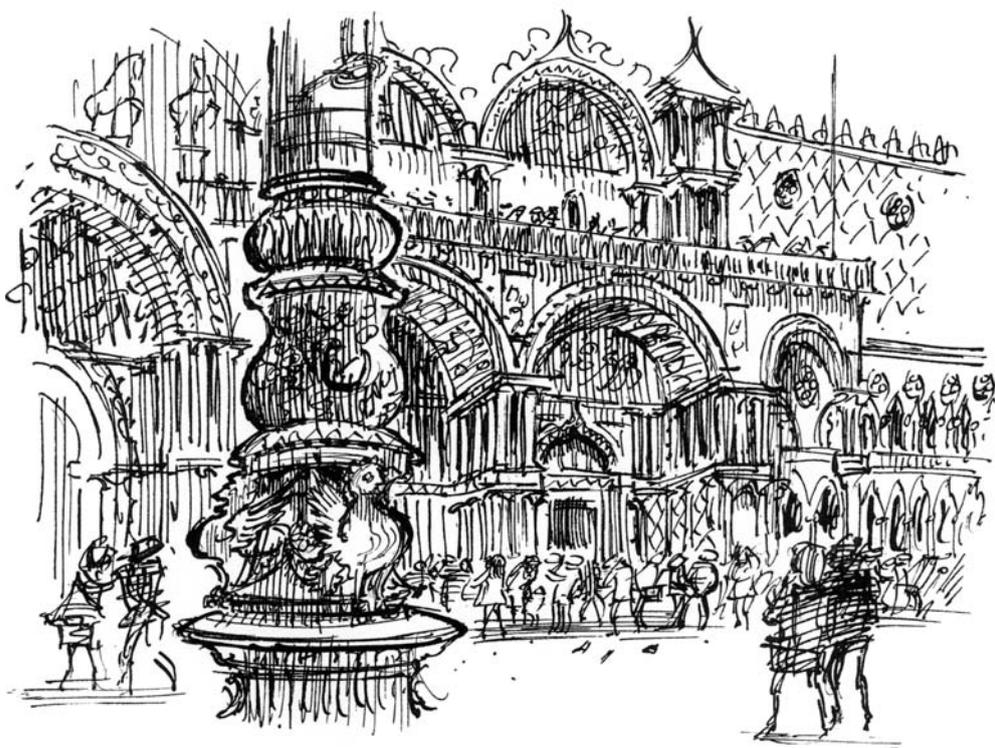
LEFT device designed for Julia MacRae Books

CENTER *Seahorse, the shyest fish in the sea*, by Chris Butterworth. Illustrated by John Lawrence.

London, Walker Books, 2006
ABOVE detail from 'Shakespeare and the Globe', ephemera

JOHN LAWRENCE WAS BORN IN HASTINGS IN 1933. After secondary education he entered Hastings School of Art where the Principal, Vincent Lines, supported by a small group of teachers, introduced the students to what Lawrence later described as 'wider horizons and basic skills'. Following this, Lawrence felt a need to complete his studies in a cosmopolitan setting but, as the local authority refused him a grant to attend a London art college, he would be unable to attain this objective for some time. His National Service, from 1953 to 1955, was spent mainly in the Royal Sussex Regiment in West Africa, where he was captivated by 'the brilliant light and colour, and the depth of shadows'. He used all his spare time in drawing. It was this application, John believes, 'which got him into the Central', and it was at London's Central School of Arts and Crafts where he met his future wife, Myra, a fellow student.

The responsibilities of marriage ensured that Lawrence did not waste his time. While on the Illustration Course, he studied under Keith Vaughan and Laurence Scarfe. The course, which included painting and drawing, also benefited from the teaching of Keith Vaughan, Patrick Heron, William Roberts and David Haughton. At the same time, Lawrence was learning lithography under Clarke Hutton and enjoying evening classes in wood engraving



Venice, by Jonathan Keates. Illustrated by John Lawrence. London, Sinclair Stevenson, 1994



Device designed for the Camberwell Press



Device designed to mark the 50th anniversary of the publisher Hamish Hamilton



John Lawrence's personal device

under Gertrude Hermes. The mastery of wood engraving was to play an increasingly important role as his career in illustration progressed. While at the Central, he came to admire the work of Edward Ardizzone, Edward Bawden, Anthony Gross, Eric Ravilious and John Minton. As a student, he succeeded in placing drawings with *The Argosy*, the leading British short-story magazine. While on the post-graduate course, during which he received an award for being best student of his year, he found himself unable to complete due to financial pressure. Myra was expecting their first child and the need to support a family became the paramount consideration. In 1958, with the blessing of Colin Forbes, who at that time was head of his department, Lawrence set himself adrift with his portfolio. Forbes, in collaboration with Alan Fletcher and Bob Gill, was shortly to set up the design studio which later evolved into the internationally acclaimed Pentagram organisation. Lawrence did not forget that many of his early assignments were due to Forbes, among which were commissions for the house journals of the industrial giant, Imperial Chemical Industries. Lawrence took his portfolio to the Saxon's Artists' Agency who, while liking his work, regretted that it could not take him on to their books. However, the Agency referred him to William Worthy who, with R. J. Unstead, was compiling a children's encyclopaedia and was looking for possible illustrators for this substantial undertaking. He was asked to provide the cover design and also illustrations for two of the twelve volumes which became *Black's Children's Encyclopaedia*, a fresh and lively reference work published in 1961. A further children's book for A & C Black, *Denys Darlow's Musical Instruments*, contains one of his first linocut illustrations. In the following year, Gertrude Hermes introduced him to Benson's, one of the biggest advertising agencies of the day, who employed him to engrave a full-page magazine advertisement for Shell-Mex and BP. Through his own efforts, he placed some Christmas drawings for publication in *The Tablet*, a leading Catholic periodical. At this time, Lawrence was taken on by B. L. Kearley, Ltd., an agency which represented him for the next decade. Mrs. Kearley introduced his work to publications issued by the BBC.

In common with most artists endeavouring to make a living from illustration, Lawrence found that such work alone would not pay the household bills. In 1958, William Stobbs, Principal of Maidstone School of Art, engaged him to teach wood engraving and linocutting. Following a disagreement over course content, in 1960 Lawrence moved on to part-time posts teaching wood engraving and linocutting at Brighton School of Art, where he had eight productive years, and at Camberwell, where he had a close association which lasted for some thirty years. In 1966, he found inspiration in *South of the Zambesi*, a book of poems by Guy Butler, which he enlivened with eight linocuts. This was excellent preparation for his first venture with the Folio Society. After some precarious years, the book club achieved stability and has been a major outlet for British book illustrators for over half a century. In 1967, Kearley's representative, Patsy Lamb, introduced John to Peter Guy of the Folio Society, who invited him to illustrate Defoe's novel, *Colonel Jack*. This was his first opportunity to illustrate a book with wood engravings and the twelve, exciting two-colour illustrations for this work brought Lawrence into prominence as a serious book illustrator. Published in 1967, the book was to be awarded second prize in the 1972 Francis Williams Book Illustration Awards. In 1968, Lawrence cut twelve attractive wood engravings for *A Fish Calendar*, issued by the Millbrook Press. Ever busier, Lawrence found artwork for the bookjackets of Cassell and Company to be a welcome challenge and for each of these, the artist was paid a not ungenerous eighteen pounds. In the same year, John took a dummy of a children's book, *The Giant of*

Grabbist, which he had both written and illustrated, to Michael Brown, production manager at the publishing house of Hamish Hamilton. Brown enthused over the work to Julia MacRae, the newly appointed Children's Book Editor and this led to a long and productive relationship with the firm. *The Giant of Grabbist* and *Pope Leo's Elephant* were published in 1968 and 1969 respectively. Peter Guy described them as both bold in conception and execution, giving Lawrence visual fun with scale, the artist offering, in return, tumultuous use of colour. The printing, however, left much to be desired. Patrick Hardy, another creative mind and purposeful individual, was responsible for Kestrel Books, the hardback children's book imprint of Penguin Books. John worked with Hardy and Trelld Bicknell, the book designer, on Andrew Lang's *Blue Fairy Book*, *The Road to Canterbury* and the illustrated edition of *Watership Down*. In the sixties, Lawrence worked for nine publishers, illustrating thirty-five books, fifteen of which were historical tales for the publisher Macdonald and Co. These books were based upon real people and events, the artist providing four black and white illustrations from pen drawings, together with a bookjacket illustration in colour. In the nineteen-seventies, Lawrence continued to demonstrate his versatility with more illustration for children's books, cookery texts and charming conceits showing his fascination with language. *Rabbit and Pork* and *Tongue Twisters*, were published by Hamish Hamilton in 1975 and 1976 respectively. The opportunity to take on the first illustrated edition of Richard Adams's *Watership Down* was a difficult challenge but one not to be missed. For a period of two months, Lawrence was out in the Berkshire countryside with his sketchbook, making notes for a splendid book which was issued with black and white drawings, two-colour and full-colour illustrations. A limited edition, bound in green leather, was issued by Paradine.



For the Folio Society, Lawrence's wood engravings successfully captured the essence of Laurence Sterne's curious book, *Tristram Shandy*. A reissue of this work in 2005 benefited from an outrageously funny design cut on vinyl for the cloth binding. Lawrence admits to reading Defoe's text carefully before reaching for his tools, a practice which he has meticulously followed in all his assignments. Unlike most linocutters, Lawrence likes to use his wood engraving tools, as well as the gouges and v-tools normally used for this work. It was at this time that he realised that he was happiest when working with graver, while freely admitting that his readiness to work in different media has been of inestimable value to him in the publishing industry. In 1973, Lawrence received a request from the Imprint Society of Boston, an American publisher of well got-up, 'limited editions', to illustrate a period piece, *Rogues, Vagabonds and Sturdy Beggars*. This was much to the artist's delight and he produced seven carefully constructed linocut designs, prints from each of which were broken down to provide several, smaller illustrations. Lawrence had first experimented with the idea in a wood engraved print made for Dartington Hall, but this was the first example of the composite technique which the artist was successfully to employ in forthcoming books, although he claimed no credit for this apparent innovation. However, a review of his books of the seventies appeared in the German periodical, *Illustration, Zeitschrift für die Buchillustration*, referring to this technique as 'eine brillante Idee'.

In 1979, he produced two large wood engravings for use as frontispiece and final illustration in Ian Serrailier's retelling of *The Canterbury Tales*, published as *The Road to Canterbury*. Prints from these pictures were cut up to produce fifty-four smaller illustrations. Further examples in this genre can be seen in the artist's *Everyman's Book of English Folk Tales*, by Sybil Marshall, published by Dent in 1981, and John Clare's *Autobiographical Writings*, Oxford University Press, 1983. *Nothingmas Day*, a book of verse published by Allison and Busby in 1984, has illustrations from vinyl cuts. By the nineteen-seventies, Lawrence was receiving requests to create wood engraved devices for both commercial organisations and individual book collectors. John's strong wood engraving, allied to a light-hearted approach to design, can be seen in the cuts for Professor Bill Butler, Peter Guy, the Basilisk Press and Hamish Hamilton. In the eighties, he produced further fine examples of devices and book plates for the Camberwell Press and the publishers Patrick Hardy, the Roundwood Press, and Julia MacRae.

During the eighties, he was busily occupied, dealing with forty-seven books in all. While this would seem to be factory production, with completed projects appearing at weekly intervals, the projects were sufficiently diverse to keep his illustration fresh and invigorating. Some of the smaller projects, illustrated with pen drawing and, where appropriate, watercolour and gouache washes, could be executed rapidly without loss of quality. Four children's books by Penelope Lively and published by Heinemann, *Fanny's Sister*, *Uninvited Ghosts and Other Stories*, *Fanny and the Monsters* and *Fanny and the Battle of Potter's Piece*, were illustrated in black





and white from pen drawings with colour restricted to boards and bookjacket. For the publisher Patrick Hardy, Lawrence used pen and colour wash for *George: His Elephant and Castle*, written by himself, and *Mabel's Story*, by Jenny Koralek. The artist illustrated in similar vein for a number of titles issued by Julia MacRae. *Awful Annie and the Squeaking Chop*, *Awful Annie and Perfect Percy*, and *Awful Annie and Nippy Numbers*, by Jean B Simpson, appeared in the Redwing Books series. *Emily's Own Elephant*, by Philippa Pearce, was illustrated in colour throughout. Perhaps his finest book for MacRae was the large picture book, *Christmas in Exeter Street*, by Diana Hendry, illustrated in pen and watercolour, a superb interpretation of a sensitive story. Lawrence was able to employ his composite technique for the illustration of *Oenene in January*, by Kevin Crossley-Holland, printed and published by Nicholas and Frances McDowell at the Old Stile Press in 1988. Two years later, he illustrated Robin Myers' scholarly edition of *The Autobiography of Luke Hansard*, printed and published by Simon Lawrence at the Fleece Press in 1990. In both cases, the illustrations were printed directly from the block.

Lawrence continued to receive commissions from the Folio Society. The new decade opened with Evelyn Waugh's fictional trilogy, *Sword of Honour*. John's pen and wash drawings, together with the black and white headpieces, capture perfectly Waugh's combination of irony and sweet melancholy. Here also, the artist was allowed to continue his interpretations on the decorative bindings of the volumes. This was followed in 1992 with Browning's *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, for which Lawrence produced seven small wood engravings. This was issued as a miniature book and bound in brown moiré silk blocked in black and gold. William Hickey's *Memoirs of a Georgian Rake*, published in a standard series format by the Folio Society in 1995, allowed the artist to give full rein to his engravings on vinyl. Lawrence also contributed ten wood engravings to a massive anthology, the *Folio Golden Treasury*.

In 2006, John's experimentation with a new formula reached a triumphant conclusion with the publication of *The Seahorse, the Shyest Fish in the Sea*. This curious text by Chris Butterworth, is a disarmingly written factual account which has enabled John to provide an exciting and beautiful series of images, enhanced by his own specially created letterforms. The book is a riot of enchanting colour, created from a combination of vinyl engravings, watercolour washes set against background textures printed from the plank. Walker Books, a publishing phenomenon of the nineties, has been responsible for some of the most exciting children's books of the last decade, and Lawrence has illustrated titles by Susan Hill, Martin Waddell and Allan Ahlberg, as well as *This Little Chick* from his own pen.

Through the Looking Glass was the title given by John Lawrence when he gave the 1986 Stanley Morison Memorial Lecture to students of Manchester Polytechnic. He expressed his admiration for Tenniel's illustrations for 'Alice' which display the 'most wonderful combination of draughtsmanship and engraving skills', and made further reference to his choice of title by explaining that most engravers work through a magnifying glass although, in his own case, he wore 'binomags which I fit on my glasses'. During his long and productive career, Lawrence's genial personality coupled with a natural politeness of manner has played no small part in his relationship with the publishing industry. Nevertheless, he has had to grit his teeth on occasions when his engravings have suffered ill treatment at the hands of insensitive printers. A further indignity, which he and fellow illustrators have had to endure, is to see titles reprinted in paperback, with a cover commissioned from a different artist, thus destroying the integrity between text and image. Of the battles to be fought, 'these are the ones you don't win'.

PROFESSOR IAN ROGERSON 2006



Quotations from private conversations between the artist and the author.

IMAGES IN TEXT

Detail from illustration for *Food by Appointment: Royal Recipes since 1066*, by Michele Brown. Elm Tree, 1977 • detail from illustration for *The History of a Pair of Sinners*, by Allan Ahlberg and John Lawrence. Granada, 1980 • detail from 'Linking the Nation', a design for a millennium postage stamp, 1999 • device for Annual Reports of Flemings Investment Trust



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