

British picture books for grown-ups from the 1940s

The *Britain in Pictures* books published by Collins are a familiar staple of the second-hand book trade in the UK. Most shops will have a selection on their shelves, with-or-without dust wraps. In general, and with very few exceptions, the titles can be purchased for £10 or less. The modest value of the books has tended to belie their status within British publishing and the story of which they are part.

The books were the idea of Hilda Matheson and the series, which eventually ran to 126 titles, began in March 1941 and ran until 1950. The books were conceived as a form of “cultural propaganda” to promote British values and to accurately describe aspects of British life. The series was a modest counter-measure to the stream of anti-British propaganda emerging from Germany as part of their war effort. The impact of the series was especially significant in the USA where German cultural propaganda was considered to have been effective in delaying American entry into the war.

The books deserve to be recognised, within the immediate context of war, as a remarkable achievement and as part of a much larger cultural phenomenon that gave expression to the hopes and ideals of post-war reconstruction. I have already written about the emergence, during the 1940s, of mass-market coloured books for children. Here, I want to offer a complimentary introduction to illustrated books aimed at grown-ups.

WAR

It is worth noting that the circumstances of war had introduced a wide variety of detailed visual material to a much wider public. Plans, maps, diagrams, photographs, charts and even cartoons all became a staple material of military effort and planning. It is difficult to imagine, from our contemporary perspective, how limited an experience of visual print-culture ordinary people had during the 1930s.

Roy Porter has written about the British context of the 18th century enlightenment and print-culture. He has identified the impact of widely available printed texts as contributing to a transformation in reading. At the beginning of the century few people had any books and their reading was generally limited to the intensive study of relatively few texts. By the end of the century, the literary or scientific sensibility was reading widely and extensively. This, in turn, promoted a radically altered world-view as evidenced by the spread of political radicalism in the last decades of the 18th century.

The transition from an intensive reading of visual material to an extensive relationship with visual culture is much more recent. It is worth noting that the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) was the first war in which photographic reporting of military action was possible. It was also the first time that such photographs could find wide circulation through the existence of a mass-circulation popular illustrated press. Robert Capa may claim, within the context of the Spanish Civil War, to have invented the role of independent war photographer.

We should acknowledge the pioneering work of Roger Fenton, photographer in the Crimea (1855) and of the photographers of the American Civil War (1861-65) Mathew Brady and James Gardner. The photographic equipment and processes of these early pioneers made action shots impossible. Their views of the destructive consequences of modern armaments were so shocking that, by 1914-18, the military and political establishments had become mindful of the requirement to control these images, their production and distribution. The advent of small, hand-held cameras and faster film stock effectively took these images beyond the existing controlling mechanisms of state and military.

The Spanish Civil War made a powerful impact on popular political consciousness in Britain. The war was the first ideological war of modern times and ranged the forces of reaction, allied to European Fascists, against the progressive and democratically elected forces of the international left. The written testimony, by George Orwell and others (along with the photographic and newsreel images, the destruction of Guernica, the plight of the Basque orphans, and the political betrayals of the conflict) conspired to increase political awareness amongst ordinary people. The increased level of popular political activity was

disruptive to the political elite, the Establishment cadre and the status quo. The advent of WW2 simply increased the level of these disruptions.

The advent of WW2 destroyed the print economy of the 1930s. The urgent needs of national survival required an increased level of communication and speed. This disrupted the balance of supply, demand, capital, labour and craft that had defined the industry before WW2. A significant factor in the evolution of the industry up to WW2 had been a widespread scepticism in its address to the mass-market. The advent of universal suffrage and the political radicalisation of the popular experiences of WW1, economic decline in Britain and the Spanish Civil War had created a voracious public appetite for information.

Allen Lane, founder of Penguin Books, was amongst the first to capitalise on the political, social and technological disruptions of the late 1930s. His sensitivity to the contemporary zeitgeist convinced him that a mass-market for serious writing existed amongst the newly politicised and upwardly mobile classes in Britain. Victor Gollancz served the same market with his Left Book Club. Neither Gollancz nor Lane were at the forefront of illustrated publishing at this time.

After May 1940, and the retreat from Dunkirk, it was clear that every material, economic and political resource would be required for the defensive efforts of "Total War." It therefore became a matter of military and political necessity that these groups, hitherto overlooked, should be addressed. Furthermore, by the beginning of 1941 consumer capitalism in Britain had, more-or-less, collapsed along with its supporting structures of media endorsement and advertising. Normal channels of communication had, therefore, been suspended for the duration.

The new processes of mechanical reproduction, required by the war effort, increased the capacity of the print economy by an order of magnitude. The extra capacity created an opportunity for new products, within the context of war, that were cultural and political as well as commercial. These products were characterised by the integration of image and text made possible by process block, half-tone and offset lithography.

ART

The rapid response required of propaganda was revealed in the publication of Henry Moore's *Shelter Sketchbook* (1942) by Tambimuttu's Poetry London imprint of Nicholson and Watson. The *Sketchbook* was published as a facsimile of the notebook and produced using photo-mechanical offset lithography by W S Cowell of Ipswich.

The experience of the air raid shelters during the London Blitz of 1940 was a defining moment of the war for Henry Moore. The mass of people, huddled in close proximity deep underground, and without the usual markers of class association provoked a powerful emotional response in the artist. The publication of the *Sketchbook* cemented this collective experience into the popular mythology of the war and provided an enduring record of the experience.

The circumstances of how London Underground platforms became deep shelters is well documented. The architects Tecton (Berthold Lubetkin, Gordon Cullen and colleagues from the Architectural Association School) with the engineer Ove Arup had promoted the provision of deep concrete shelters as a necessary defence of metropolitan populations in modern war. The official response had been to ignore their proposal and build inexpensive cut-and-cover trench shelters. These were quickly identified as lethal (they effectively concentrated any blast along the entire length of the trench). The popular response had been to colonise the deeper underground stations of London Transport. Officials had, at first, attempted to deny access to the platforms for a variety of reasons. In the short term, it became clear that the purchase of a ticket effectively resolved these differences.

It would be an exaggeration to claim that the popular appropriation of London Transport's underground platforms were on a par with the revolutionary seizure of the Bastille. However, the peaceful and generally orderly popular reaction to the blitz helped to redefine class relations in Britain. It was certainly the case that the public were, thereafter, more sceptical of officialdom.

The publication of the *Sketchbook* brought together several strands of British cultural life. Tambimuttu's efforts as an editor and publisher of contemporary poetry combined the literary and artistic circles of the English Surrealists with their political counterparts in the

Mass Observation movement. Tambimuttu had published a volume of David Gascoyne's poetry with illustrations by Graham Sutherland (1943). The following year Tambimuttu published an anthology *Poetry London X* (1944) with colour lithographs by Gerald Wilde and drawings by Mervyn Peake. The emotional response, through poetry or landscape painting, to time, place and history was a peculiarly British recasting of Surrealist and psychological ideas in art. The conjunction of these ideas eventually led to a recognisable *Neo-Romantic* cultural phenomenon in Britain.

The printers of the *Sketchbook* were W S Cowell whose development of photo-mechanical lithography connects them to a wide range of publishing ventures during the 1940s. These range from the *Orlando* books by Kathleen Hale to Brenda Rawnsley's *School Prints* and the *Submarine* prints by Eric Ravilious.

It is important to acknowledge that, notwithstanding Tambimuttu's best efforts, the cultural intervention of the Neo-Romantics remained circumscribed by its self-consciously intellectual and artistic position. Tambimuttu's literary personality and role as the self-styled "prince of Fitzrovia" betray an unwillingness to engage with the mass market. The interactions between politics, class, art and design are by no means straightforward. The legacies of the arts-and-crafts movement and the political radicalisations (*The Artists' International* for example) of the 1930s combined fruitfully to produce objects that were both radical and beautiful.

The *Britain in Pictures* series were a brave attempt at producing mass-market books with colour illustrations. The books were designed as short essay texts with a selection of black and white and colour illustrations. The books were 48 pages maximum, inclusive of illustrations, and were priced at 3 shillings and 6 pence (17.5p). The result was a library of authoritative texts, superbly written and beautifully illustrated, whose propagandising was intelligent, sensible, quiet and ironic. The price-point and availability of the books gave them a widespread cultural and international influence. My father's small collection, for example, had been awarded as school prizes.

These qualities were derived from the founding spirit of the enterprise and its guiding intelligence; Hilda Matheson. Matheson had been a pioneer of radio talks at the BBC and a close colleague of John Reith. She was instrumental in developing an authoritative, yet informal, mode-of-address for the fledgling service. Her support of new ideas, and the

informality of their expression, was eventually seen, within the institution, as subversive and she was forced to resign her post.

A full analysis of the books, its authors and of the artists selected is beyond the scope of our current survey. The artists John Piper, Michael Ayrton, Thomas Hennell, Cecil Beaton and David Low were all published as authors. George Orwell, John Betjeman, Edith Sitwell, Vita Sackville-West and Elizabeth Bowen were amongst the literary contributors to the series. Eric Ravilious was included with conspicuous frequency amongst the selected artists.

The printers of *Britain in Pictures* were Adprint. Wolfgang Foges and Walter Neurath, a émigré printer and publisher combination from Vienna, had established the firm. Adprint were pioneers of inexpensive, but high quality, colour printing. The Viennese origins of the firm were in what, nowadays, would be recognised as marketing publishing. Foges had pioneered a colour illustrated free-of-charge fashion magazine financed by textile manufactures.

Adprint had a material interest in the *Britain in Pictures* series and seem to have been present at negotiations between Matheson and the publisher, Sir William Collins. Matheson's extensive contacts amongst the elite class ranged from members of aristocracy to "Bloomsbury" literary and intellectual types. Hilda Matheson was hugely effective in bringing together members of the émigré community and the British Establishment class and mobilising support for political intervention in a popular cultural form.

The Adprint name also appears on the *King Penguin* series of illustrated books published by Allen Lane. The *King Penguins* were pocket sized hardback books with a brief text followed by full page and coloured illustrations. These small picture books were designed to provide a brief introduction to a subject. Some of the titles have recognisably artistic associations; *Romney Marsh* and John Piper (1950), *The Isle of Wight* and Barbara Jones (1950) or Kenneth Rowntree and *A Prospect of Wales* (1948).

John Piper was an artist who was at the forefront of the rediscovery of English landscape and the development of Neo-Romanticism during the 1940s. He first visited the Romney Marsh flatlands with his friend John Betjeman at the end of the 1930s. There are paper

cut-outs and collages of Dungeness and Littlestone that mark a transition in Piper's work from an ideal form of abstraction to one derived, in part at least, from place. Barbara Jones was an architectural watercolourist who worked, with Betjeman again, at the *Architectural Review* throughout the 1940s.

The problem of context had been one of the major areas of debate between modernist radicals and traditionalists in British architecture and design before the war. John Betjeman had been the driving force behind the *Shell County Guides* where he had worked with John Piper and Paul Nash. The evolution of Neo-Romanticism was, to a certain extent, an artistic attempt to resolve these issues in the light of the arts-and-crafts movement, William Blake, Samuel Palmer and the destructions of WW2. In the circumstances, Neo-Romanticism was just as likely to focus on the bombsites of London as on the mystical landscapes of Britain. Of course, the politics of bombsites and landscapes were very different.

Betjeman and Piper were also contributors to a series of books called *New Excursions into English Poetry* published by Frederick Muller. These combined full-page colour litho, printed by Cowell of Ipswich, with selections of verse. The books, with their illustrations by Michael Ayrton (1945), Edward Bawden (1946), Robert Colquhoun (1947), John Piper (1944), Mona Moore (1944), John Craxton (1944) and William Scott (1945) appear more plausibly populist than the earlier efforts of Poetry London. Significantly, these were William Scott's first lithographs.

The idea of the *Shell Guides* was revisited by Murray's and, later, by Paul Elek in his *Visions of England* series. The latter combine photography and illustration to provide a poetic interpretation of place rather than a simply utilitarian gazetteer of places and services. The illustrations by Kenneth Rowntree, Barbara Jones and Michael Rothenstein are especially appealing in their use of mechanical tints and textures that anticipate the experiments of "Pop" art in the early 1950s.

Peculiarly, Neo-Romanticism also established an international out-post in its discovery of the Mediterranean. Quite apart from the historical significance of the ancient and classical civilizations, this interest was evident in the work of Picasso and of the British artistic communities in France, the Balearics and in Rome. It is worth noting that Elizabeth David and Terrence Conran both founded substantial post-war reputations, and business

empires, on the basis of a rediscovery of authentic Mediterranean lifestyles. John Minton produced the illustrations for Elizabeth David's books and had already found himself associated with this phenomenon with the publication, by John Lehmann, of *Time Was Away* by Alan Ross (1948).

KNOWLEDGE

It is worth saying a few words about the *Architectural Review* during the 1940s at this stage. The *AR* was the principle journal of the architectural profession in Britain. During the 1920s and 30s the journal attempted to introduce a sceptical British profession to the Modernist ideas of Continental Europe. The *AR* gave a platform to those émigré architects and designers who arrived in Britain. At the same time the journal began to articulate a British response to Modernism founded on the rediscovery of Victorian style, early 19th century typography and the pioneering work of the great Victorian engineers. The visual expression of these ideas was assured through the art-direction and architectural draughtsmanship of Gordon Cullen, a key figure in the successful visualisation of the English Modernist project. The *AR* set a standard of sophistication for the visual expression of ideas through photography, plans and typography in integrated form. The use of coloured and textured papers further enriched the journal. The *Review* may be credited with introducing a level of visual sophistication, in page layout and magazine format, to an audience beyond its professional readership.

The visual sophistication of the *AR* was enshrined in the architectural style and design of the Festival of Britain in 1951 and in a host of planning and reconstruction documents published in the aftermath of WW2. By far the most significant of these was the *Greater London Plan* by Patrick Abercrombie (1944) in which the rebuilding and expansion the metropolis, through green-belt and satellite new towns, was proposed. The document contains a wealth of maps, plans and statistical information to support its proposals and deserves to be counted as one of the most significant illustrated books of the 20th century! Amazingly, the book can still be purchased for £20 or less.

Penguin Books published a small landscape format paperback guide to *The County of London Plan* (1945) by E J Carter and Ernö Goldfinger. The guide, embellished with "Isotype" style diagrams, attempts to present the main findings of the *Plan* in layman's terms. The guide belongs to a category of illustrated publishing from WW2 that promotes

the utopian potential of reconstruction. Several titles should be mentioned in this context – the magazines *Contact* and *Future* provide a platform for the discussion of the political, economic and social consequences of WW2, *The New Democracy* series from Nicholson and Watson discusses the impact and potential of welfare reform and the two series from Harrap *America and Britain* and *The Soviets and Ourselves* introduce the great allied powers to each other.

Many of the political and economic illustrated texts use the statistical diagram system called “Isotype.” The system was devised as a series of pictograms that gave visual expression to the very large numbers routinely expressed in political planning. The system was devised by Otto Neurath in Vienna during the 1920s and may be compared, graphically, to the development of Soviet Constructivist information design. The “Isotype” system fell into disrepute, during the cold war period, through its association with centralised governments and planning. A good deal of the theory behind the system survives today in the television reporting of parliamentary elections!

The pioneering visual style of the *Architectural Review* was taken up at *Contact* magazine where art director F H K Henrion combined typography, coloured papers and photography to express the social-democratic political project implicit in the magazine. The early issues of *Contact* make the connection between the magazines explicit by revealing one of the editors as H de C Hastings, owner and publisher of the *AR*.

The social cohesion and class-solidarity required to support the collectivist policies of a planned economy were given moral support through the projection of an emancipated and radicalised, but benign, citizenry. The colour photographic portraits by John Hinde, included in Stephen Spender’s *Citizens at War* (1945) contribute to this project.

POWER

The Labour victory of 1945 gave a popular mandate for the social change and political organisation implicit in so much of the material discussed here.

The Festival of Britain, the Coronation and the advent of television as a mass medium, in both its public service and commercial forms, slowly dismantled the platform that had offered the opportunity for the publications described above. During the 1960s radical politics associated itself, in Britain at least, with hedonistic lifestyle choices. Accordingly, that particular revolution was expressed through the editorial and lifestyle features of television and magazines and colour supplements.

The illustrated books of the 1940s are a significant element in the visual culture of the time. The circumstances of war and reconstruction created an environment where the normal considerations of consumer capitalism and commercial publishing were suspended. The resulting products, produced to serve a wider agenda of politics and social change, offer the chance to collect modestly priced and culturally significant objects. Art, literature, design and politics have rarely been so successfully combined as in the illustrated books of the 1940s.

The economic and political re-ordering of Britain during the 1940's was powerfully expressed in the print-culture of that decade. The technological transformation of the British print economy, required to serve the demands of war, created an opportunity for the visual expression of those ideas. The successful expression of those radical ideas through visual print-culture literally opened a new vista on the world.

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3000 words

Photographs

Abercrombie P (1945) **The Greater London Plan 1944** London, HMSO

Contact Magazine

Henrion/Isotype etc

Page spread

Isotype

cover

Carter EJ and Goldfinger E (1945) **The County of London Plan Explained**

Harmondsworth, Penguin

Dickinson P and Scott W (1945) **Soldier's Verse** London, Frederick Muller

New Excursions into English Poetry

Muller/Adprint/Cowell

Orwell G (1947) **The English People** London, Collins

Britain in Pictures Number 100

Collins/Adprint/Hinde

Piper J (1950) **Romney Marsh** Harmondsworth, Penguin

King Penguin Number 55

Penguin/Adprint

Priestley J B and Hennell PG (1945) **British Women Go To War**

London, Collins

Collins/Hinde/Adprint/Isotype

Ross A and Minton J (1948) **Time Was Away – A Notebook in Corsica**

London, John Lehmann

de Selingcourt A and Rowntree K (1948) **The Isle of Wight** London, Paul Elek
One of the Vision of England series
Designed by Peter Ray

Spender S and Hinde J (1945) **Citizens at War** London, Harrap
Harrap/Hinde/Adprint

Williams G (1945) **Women and Work** London, Nicholson and Watson
The New Democracy
Nicholson and Watson/Adprint/Isotype

plus

Moore H **A Shelter Sketchbook** (1941)

(Fougasse) Bird K (1940) **...and the Gatepost** London, Chatto and Windus

(Fougasse) Bird K (1941) **Running Commentary** London, Methuen

(Fougasse) Bird K (1946) **A School of Purposes** London, Methuen

Tambimuttu (1944) **Poetry London X** London, Nicholson and Watson
Peake, Smith, Wilde