
FEATURED ENGRAVER

Miriam Macgregor

JOHN RANDLE



Coleridge: *Xanadu* 10cm × 7cm

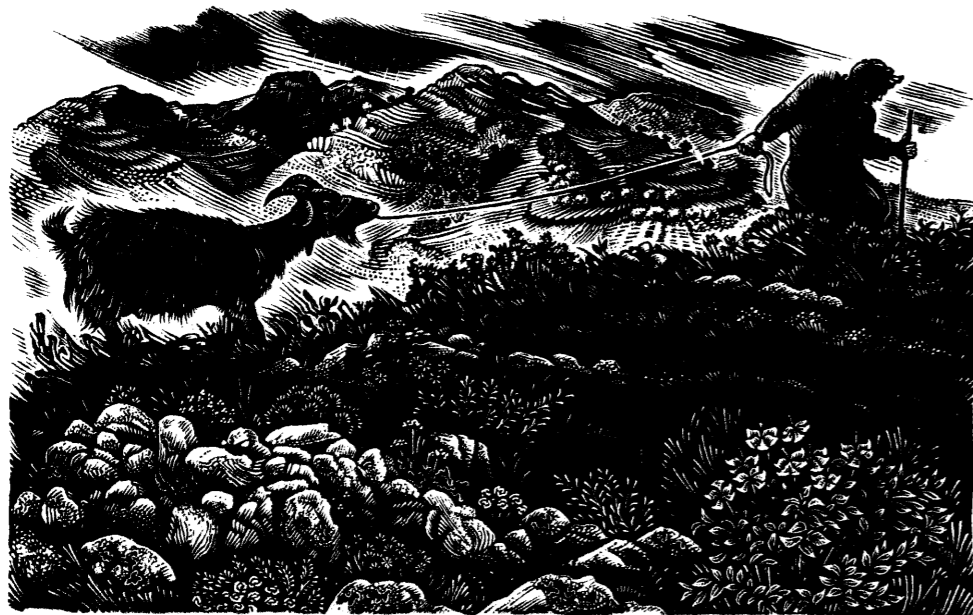
Miriam Macgregor was born in India and came to England when she was ten. She still remembers the view from the train window from Glasgow where they had docked, grey skies and little hedged-in fields, so different to the foothills of the Himalayas. Her view of the gentle English landscape still retains that freshness and sense of surprise that she first saw as a child.

At Hastings Art School she met John Lawrence, and later, after he had moved on to the Central School of Art, she had marvelled at the speed and fluency with which he spun and engraved the boxwood block on the sandbag, and discovered that these apparently unexciting little black squares could be transformed into marvels of intricate light and shade. Later, she found wood-engraving a convenient medium to explore when living in London and working as typographer for B. T. Batsford, and in her early work can be found the busy skies, characterful figures and love of the vernacular that characterise her work even today.

In 1976 she came to a Whittington Press open day and later, urged on by a friend, rang to see if we needed a compositor (she had an Adana and some Garamond type with which she had printed some booklets and ephemera). We didn't really, but the sight of a few of her engravings convinced us that we did. Working at the Press twice a week helped to concentrate her energies on her engraving, and the first three small books of poems by Jim Turner that she illustrated (*Cotswold Days*, 1977; *Other Days*, 1979; *Lost Days*, 1981), set in the Cotswold countryside, proved ideal for her natural style – the people, stone buildings, animals, trees and landscapes, all came vividly and often humorously to life. Furthermore, her presence at the Press meant the setting, printing and layout were all in part her personal input. With some trepidation, she sent John Lawrence proofs of the engravings of her first book.

Her vision and technique expanded, and *Whittington, Aspects of a Cotswold Village* (1991) is an engaging record of a timeless Cotswold village just before mains water arrived, and all the little stone privies and pigstys and other outbuildings began to emerge from the jungle behind the chocolate-box cottages. Her text is as engaging as the images, and the jacket is an unusual forty-eight-inch two-colour lino reduction block of a panorama of the village that wraps right around the book and into the front and back endpapers. The engravings for *Diary of an Apple Tree* (1997) are even more of a challenge, a single ancient apple tree drawn each month from the same viewpoint for a year. The tree finally collapsed in a storm not long after the last engraving was printed.

Allotments (1985) she claims to be her favourite. The little plots which are the refuge and delight of so many townfolk are lovingly described – their vegetables, sheds, beanpoles and inhabitants are a constant source of delight to her, and so also to us. The many figures in this book demonstrate her natural affinity for drawing people at work. The three miniature books



Hard Going 12.5cm x 8cm

published in collaboration with Lorson's Books in California are little gems, seldom seen over here, and record the making of her garden when she first came to live in Whittington in 1985: *Weeds in my Garden* (1986), *Predators in my Garden* (1993) and *Wine from my Garden* (2000). They are each hand-coloured with delightfully apposite and often witty texts, set in 6-point Garamond.

In complete contrast are the three books she has done for the Folio Society, a colossal challenge for any engraver: *Diary of a Village Shopkeeper* (1998), *Silas Marner* (1999) and *Coleridge* (2003). In spite of the historical research, number of blocks, and the tight schedule, she still managed to produce a series of memorable images. The paradox of the Folio Society is that although the

editions run into thousands, the engraver's work is probably seen by not many more lovers of engraving than the small editions which private presses, printing directly from the wood on sympathetic mould-made papers such as Zerkall, issued in runs of only a few hundred.

Miriam has also engraved many one-off blocks for prints, images which she has stored away in her mind's eye sometimes for years before they finally break out into wood. These set-piece engravings are often tours de force, and the quality and imaginative power of her work has been recently recognised by her membership of the RE. Her work cannot be recorded without mention of her two major pochoir books, *New Castle* (1998) and *A House by the Sea* (2005). Originally intended as a light relief from the rigours of engraving, in due course engraving has become a form of relief from the intense labour of stencilling even a hundred copies of these brilliantly colourful books, which can truly be said to have taken the art of pochoir to new heights.

There is a life and vigour in Miriam's engravings that was evident even in those engravings she brought to the Press in 1976, and a warmth in the figures, usually drawn from life to the occasional embarrassment of her children, friends, and even pets, that perhaps reflects the warmth of her own personality. Her technique has inevitably refined over the years, but her particular vision of all around her is just as fresh as it was when Mr Lawrence gave her her first and only lesson from behind his counter in how to hold and use the spitsticker.

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The World At Your Feet 12cm x 14cm