

An Outbreak of Talent

Edward Bawden (1903-1989) and Eric Ravilious (1903-1942)

Background Notes

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Eric Ravilious, *Edward Bawden working in his studio, 1930*.
Tempera on board, 79 x 92 cm. Royal College of Art.



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Writing in Signature magazine in November 1935 Paul Nash recalled: 'Ten years ago I was teaching at the Royal College of Art. I was fortunate to be there during an **outbreak of talent**, and can remember at least eight men and women who have made names for themselves since then in a variety of different directions...' He continued by defining the group by specialisation - Painting, Applied Design, Textiles, Pottery, Stage Design and Photography, listing Edward Bawden and Eric Ravilious, along with Barnett Freedman, under the category of Applied Design.

Bawden and Ravilious were both born in 1903, that *annus mirabilis* for British art: Bawden in Braintree, Essex, the son of an ironmonger, and Ravilious in Acton, West London, the son of a draper who later, after being declared bankrupt, moved to Eastbourne in Sussex, where he traded as an antique-cum-second-hand-goods dealer. Both families were distinctly, and oppressively, non-conformist. After attending the Quaker School in Saffron Walden and three years at Cambridge School of Art, Bawden won an Exhibition to the Royal College of Art in London. Ravilious, following a similar trajectory from Eastbourne College of Art, also won an Exhibition and they enrolled at the Royal College of Art on the same day in September 1922. Both men were assigned to the Design School under Professor Robert Anning Bell.

The Royal College of Art (RCA) 1920-1925

The Royal College of Art under its recently appointed Principal, Professor William Rothenstein, was undergoing a dramatic transformation and restructuring. Many luminaries of the Arts & Crafts Movement, including Professor Beresford Pite and Edward Johnston, were on the staff, and all first-year students were obliged

to attend Pite's lectures on architecture. Bawden, whose specialisation for his Exhibition had been calligraphy, also attended some of Johnston's classes. Another first-year student whom Bawden and Ravilious met in Pite's architectural classes was Douglas Percy Bliss, a mature student with a degree in English Literature from Edinburgh University, who was in the Painting School. The three men became an inseparable trio: Bliss edited the RCA's student journal, *Gallimaufry* in 1925, to which both Bawden and Ravilious contributed. Many years later he also wrote the first biography of Edward Bawden.

One of Rothenstein's innovations at the RCA was the introduction of part-time teachers, under which umbrella Paul Nash conducted a series of informal tutorials encouraging Ravilious with his wood-engraving and Bawden, Enid Marx and others with the study of design and pattern. Other part-time members of the College staff included Oliver Simon, Rothenstein's nephew and partner of the Curwen Press, who was to play an important role in both Bawden's and Ravilious's professional lives, and Harold Stabler, co-proprietor of Poole Pottery, who commissioned one of Bawden's earliest publications. Ravilious was awarded a travelling scholarship to Italy 1924 and Bawden the following year. In 1928 Rothenstein secured the commission for Bawden and Ravilious, plus another ex RCA student, Charles Mahoney, to paint murals for Morley College in South London, which gained wide-spread publicity and praise.

Landscape and other work

As a relief from work on the Morley College mural, Bawden and Ravilious rented part of Brick House, Great Bardfield in Essex, as a centre from which they could pursue the practice of painting watercolour landscapes, as well as carrying on their other design and illustrative work. When Edward Bawden married the potter Charlotte Epton in 1932, his father bought them Brick House as a wedding present; Ravilious and his wife, Tirzah, later moved to nearby Castle Hedingham.



Edward Bawden, *Back garden at Great Bardfield, 1936*

In addition to landscape painting both men were fully occupied with design work of one sort or another both for publicity purposes for such bodies as the London Underground, the Empire Marketing Board and Fortnum & Mason as well as for book illustration. Many of the incidental motifs employed by both artists in their illustrational and design work are derived from features of the local Essex countryside, though in the mid-'thirties, through his connection with Peggy Angus, Ravilious renewed his affection for Sussex and the South Downs, which he equally exploited for source material. His collaboration with Robert Gibbins and the Golden Cockerell Press in the production of *Twelfth Night* and Francis Meynell's Nonesuch Press with the two volume edition of *The Writings of Gilbert White of Selborne* resulted in two of the finest private press books of the 20th century.

Equally Bawden's many illustrations for Ambrose Heath's cookery books are classics of the inter-war period. Both men produced a quantity of advertising material most particularly for the newly constituted London Passenger Transport Board, much of it initiated through the Curwen Press, which also printed and published their pattern papers and Bawden's wallpaper designs.



Eric Ravilious, *Coronation Mug*, 1937

War and Postwar

In 1940 both Bawden and Ravilious were appointed Official War Artists. Bawden was at first assigned to the British Expeditionary Force in France, while Ravilious was assigned to the Royal Navy. He spent the first months of his service recording British coastal defences before joining a flotilla charged with recapturing and evacuating the Norwegian port of Narvik. His later posting to Iceland in August 1942 was to prove both brief and fatal; on 2nd September

he flew as an observer on an ill-fated air sea rescue mission from which the plane never returned. During these two years he produced an impressive body of work in watercolour, in addition to his well known series of lithographic submarine prints.

Bawden, after the evacuation of Normandy, was sent to North Africa, where he served for two years in Egypt, Sudan, Abyssinia and the Western Desert, before boarding the *SS Laconia* for return to England. On 12 September 1942 the *Laconia* was torpedoed and he spent the next five days in an open boat before being rescued by a Vichy French naval vessel and interned in Morocco. Liberated by the Americans he eventually reached home in January 1943, before being posted once again to Cairo, and later to Italy. Despite the wide acclaim for his wartime watercolours, an iconoclastic post-war generation turned its back on the recent horrors, and Bawden found it hard to re-establish himself in this much changed world, despite election to the Royal Academy and the award of the CBE. In 1949 he was appointed as Guest Instructor to the Banff School of Fine Art in Canada, returning the following year to work on his great mural for the Festival of Britain. Other mural commissions followed, including one for the newly rebuilt Morley College, unveiled in 1958 by HM Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, as well as commissions for book jackets, illustrations and posters. It was during these years that he turned his talent to lino-cutting, creating a series of prints that raised the medium from the schoolroom to a high art form, though watercolour painting, particularly of the Essex and East Anglian landscape, continued to be his priority. His final exhibition at The Fine Art Society in New Bond Street in 1987 was a triumph and was followed two years later by a major retrospective at the Victoria & Albert Museum, by which time he was too frail to travel. He died at Saffron Walden on 21 November 1989.

Posthumous Reputations

Gradually the optimistic wave of international modernism which had dominated art schools, dealers and museum curators for several decades after the end of the war, began to pall, and the seemingly 'old fashioned' work of artists such as Ravilious and Bawden which had temporarily been consigned to the penumbra of art history, began to be reassessed. This reappraisal has gathered momentum over the last forty years as witnessed, among other manifestations, by the amount of books that have been published on artists of the period, and the immense popularity of the Ravilious and Bawden exhibitions at Dulwich Picture Gallery in 2015 and 2018 respectively.



Edward Bawden, *The Pagoda in Kew Gardens*, 1963
Linocut

Some Further Reading

Books by Peyton Skipwith & Brian Webb

Edward Bawden's London

Edward Bawden's Kew Gardens

Edward Bawden's Scrapbooks

Eric Ravilious's Scrapbooks

Design: Edward Bawden

Design: Eric Ravilious

Books by Peyton Skipwith

Dear Edward: Being the Correspondence Between Peyton Skipwith & Edward Bawden

One Lump or Two? - Edward Bawden and Twinings

Entertaining à la Carte: Edward Bawden and Fortnum & Mason

Peyton Skipwith & James Russell

Are You Sitting Comfortably? The Book Jackets of Edward Bawden

Alan Powers

Eric Ravilious: Imagined Realities

Eric Ravilious: Artist & Designer

Malcolm Yorke, *Edward Bawden & His Circle*

Douglas Percy Bliss, *Edward Bawden*

Andy Friend, *Ravilious & Co: The Pattern of Friendship*

Tirzah Garwood, *Long Live Great Bardfield*

Helen Binyon, *Eric Ravilious*

Janet Dyson, *Artists of Great Bardfield*

James Russell, *Dulwich Picture Gallery, Exhibition Catalogue - Ravilious, 2015*

James Russell, *Dulwich Picture Gallery, Exhibition Catalogue - Bawden, 2018*

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