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Book Review

Double Harness: an autobiography
ROBIN TANNER, 1988
London: Impact Books
215 pages, with 10 pen drawings, 9 photographs and 7 etchings
£9.95 (paperback), ISBN 0-245-60136-8

To make an etching, take a panel of copper and cover it in a ground of wax or varnish. With your oval-pointed needle scratch off this ground wherever you need a line to appear in the copy you will print, bearing in mind that this will be a mirror image of what you draw in the ground. When the image is as you want it, sink the panel in acid; let the liquid bite the metal you have bared. How long you permit acid to eat metal will matter for the play of tones in the print. You can retrieve a briefly bitten panel, cover an area once more with ground to keep it lighter in tone, and let acid work again to darken the tone of the areas you have kept exposed. When acid has done, remove the remaining ground, ink the whole panel and wipe it. Ink will hunker in the acid-etched lines. Put the panel, now an etched plate, with its freight of ink through the press, to kiss the paper. Pull clear the printed image as you saw it in your mind.

In practice it's a long messy business. Fingers work with acid and metal, wax and turpentine and meths. They gauge ink the right thickness and paper the right weave and weight. They are the cutting edge of a mind which must steep itself in monochrome, giving itself minute after minute to the marking of each tiny line. Across weeks of process the final image must stay charged, energising each moment while the necessary pains are taken and nothing is left to chance or overlooked. Durer and Rembrandt, Goya and Tiepolo worked in these exact and exacting ways, and stand at your shoulder every time you take the plate between your palms.

To work as an etcher is to inhabit a particular way of seeing and making both dogged and delicate. Robin Tanner brought this disposition not only to what he made with ink and metal but to his work in and with schools, firstly as a teacher and later as an inspector, across the middle decades of the twentieth century. He was unwavering in his belief that children are inherently creative, and that encountering art is inherently educative. He learned this at the outset of his teaching career from:

> astonishingly brave pioneers – mainly women on [Goldsmith's] college staff who were convinced that young children had far greater potentialities than so-called education had ever recognised, and that a far broader, richer, freer life for boys and girls would bring undreamed-of advance. (p. 29)

Born the son of a carpenter in rural Wiltshire ten years before the outbreak of World War I, Tanner came to London in the early 1920s. He was a beginner teacher in Greenwich by day and an art student at Goldsmith's by night. His first elementary school class held more than sixty children, three of whom were dead of diphtheria before Christmas. His job, he says, was to teach everything. He ensured this meant art making too, his pupils drawing and painting on whatever materials Tanner could amass, and ultimately making murals in the school. He was encouraged rather than prevented in these radical endeavours. After several years he returned to Wiltshire to marry Heather Spackman whom he had known since his grammar-school days. He tried to live by etching, before returning to teaching in the county, convinced 'it was my work' (p. 48). The double harness of etching and teaching, art and pedagogy, would be his life.

Tanner's artistic sensibility, his commitment to imagining, expressing and showing, compelled his educational practice. He invigorated the environment of his new school, conceiving the classroom as a kind of workshop, and coming to realise that a justifiable curriculum can emerge from art making, and specifically from the production of books. He found himself 'gradually breaking through the boundaries of "subjects" into a wider field' (p. 75). His pupils asked to paint murals, and thrived in the face of the practical and intellectual possibilities and challenges set by painting, drawing, block printing, book making and binding. Some even tried their hand at etching. Tanner as teacher organised and resourced and enabled. He saw the importance of creative tasks undertaken for real purposes and audiences, and the vital role played by the built environment:

> These boys and girls had taught me so much ... They had demonstrated beyond all doubt their innate powers and their love of work. If there were meaning and purpose behind what was asked of them they would always throw themselves and their all into doing it. Mostly I had led them and they had followed, though in some important ventures they had taken the lead and I had followed them ... They had proven to me how potent a force is the quality of the environment in education. (pp. 92-93)

In the early 1930s Tanner became a school inspector, working initially in and around heavily industrialised Leeds. He liked at once the people, if not the place, and found himself part of a growing movement to improve and enliven education. This was '[t]he fight for a saner education for young children' (p. 97), a fight impelled by, among others, Susan Isaacs, Margaret Lowenfeld, Charlotte Buhler, Dorothy Gardner and Marion Richardson. He returned to the South-

West on the eve of World War II, and for the next quarter-century was a key figure in the burgeoning of this pioneering and transformative movement. Supported by Christian Schiller at the Department of Education, Tanner set up conferences, notably at Dartington Hall, and established professional development courses for teachers at which participants made art, shared their ideas and commitment, and strengthened what we would now call informal networks. Artists and craftspeople of the first rank took part in these conferences and worked with teachers.

Tanner retired at the end of 1964, and devoted the rest of his life to etching and drawing. In 1976 he published a condemnation in the *Times Educational Supplement* of the 'reactionary and retrogressive official attitude' in education, epitomised by Margaret Thatcher's appointment as Education Secretary (p. 185). Tanner deplored the widespread closure of colleges of education and the undermining, as he saw it, of the craft of teaching. He opposed the advance of testing and the rise of what would become hyper-accountability. A lifelong Quaker, a pacifist and holder of socialist views, he was unsparing in his verdict on the political course being set for the country. He saw his art making as, among other things, a way to express 'outrage at the destruction of Britain. My etchings are not just pleasant pastorals: they are my protest' (p. 209). Robin Tanner died in 1988.

As a school inspector in the mid century, Tanner was acutely aware of his autonomy, his ethical responsibility, and his potential to be merely an obstacle. He notes:

> I was free to say and write what I wanted: I had nothing to lose. My allegiance was only to the truth as I saw it. If I had power I wasn't aware of it. I now belonged to a traditionally feared or even hated race, and knew that respect or prestige would come to me only as I earned them ... No-one really wanted me: I had to work to make myself wanted. (pp. 96-97)

He did this by looking to establish a living relationship with heads and teachers, in order to enable his views to earn their place and carry conviction and for teachers to feel recognised and cared about. So he made sure that a school could inspect him for the worth and usefulness of the ideas and perspectives he brought:

> I, a stranger, was at once welcomed and used: I was questioned, listened to, and brought right into the centre of whatever activity the school was concentrating upon ... Everywhere there were signs of growth. In nearly every school I was put through a searching examination, and whatever I said was pursued. (pp. 153-155)

It was these signs of growth, good work being done by teachers in particular schools, supported rather than weighed down by the administrative structure, which Tanner encouraged and propagated. In his view, what happened through this process was 'a general quickening of awareness' (p. 162) which brought out

the best in pupils and teachers within his purview. Trust, patience, encouragement, and an adherence to emulating the exacting standard embodied in the work of the artists Tanner put in contact with schools, enabled people to excel.

Like the elms he delighted to draw, Tanner's world has all but vanished. Today's Office for Standards in Education inspection is likely to be experienced as an invasive, perhaps even an abusive, process, far removed from the kind of inspection visit Tanner describes. There will be only the briefest interchange between class teacher and school inspector, and certainly no attempt to foster a sustained relationship based on shared convictions about what good teaching and learning might be, and discussion of how they can best be engendered. Today's inspection will look to illuminate many more elements of schooling than were scrutinised in the 1950s, from financial probity to child protection. Inspectors will delve much more deeply, and into new mines of information. But they cannot escape their coercive function within a system which, over the past quarter-century, has been drastically centralised and geared to the punitive. Nor can there be any going back. The issue for us is how to renew the necessary process of school inspection and the proper holding to account of public servants in such a way as to instil that process with all the benefits identifiable from the practice undertaken by those in Tanner's mould. This requires other aspects of the contemporary educational context be overthrown.

Tanner's work as a teacher and inspector may, by inspiring, help in this cause. But what of his work as an artist? Can drawings of woodland plants, or etchings of stiles and gates and thatch-roofed villages under starlight ever carry progressive and radical political implications? Surely such work is redolent only of a conservative yearning for some ideal order impossibly untouched by capitalist relations of production, or impossibly at ease with them? To salvage the vision of the pedagogue, surely we must unyoke him from the artist?

I think we can escape doing such violence to Tanner's integrity. It is true that his autobiography voices once or twice a general denunciation of the quality and condition of modern life. More characteristic, I think, is the attitude Tanner endorses when he quotes Heather's words from the Foreword to *Wiltshire Village*, a fictionalised document of village life which is also a work of art, published by the Tanners in 1939:

> To call back yesterday would be foolish even were it possible; but in order that what was noble in the yesterday that still lingers might not pass unhonoured and unlamented this book has been made. (p. 103)

Hearing this, I catch more than the elegiac note. In his autobiography Tanner declares himself an optimist, and situates himself in an artistic and political tradition which looks forward, not back: the tradition of Blake and Morris. He quotes from Morris's *A Dream of John Ball*, and counts himself among those 'who must continue to fight, for we are still inspired and tantalised by [that] vision of the world as it might be if we had the will and determination to make it so'

(p. 213). Tanner's etchings and drawings are animated by, and embody, this same project of looking more deeply at and into the material world in order to value and present an enduring vision of a better life to be realised, one in which each of us can live more fully and thoroughly in keeping with the best aspects of our humanity. Tanner took up etching in part because he regarded it as a more democratic art form than painting: against the single authentic original owned by one person, multiple prints. He never cancelled a plate.

Enduringly of value in his example as a teacher and inspector seems to me, firstly, Tanner's commitment to the possibilities of human creative endeavour at, or aspiring to, the highest possible pitch of skill, thought and imagination. Second, his view that any child can match herself or himself to this standard; that a child may be an artist in a precise sense, as was Tanner the boy, and that teachers must retain this way of conceiving of their pupils. Third, faith in collective ways of working. Tanner saw to it that his classes shared in practical endeavours out of which sprang all kinds of educational possibilities and benefits, for in making art together his pupils made new knowledge, honed their sensitivity, informed their discrimination and thought their way into new understandings and new ways to express what mattered. As an inspector he enabled teachers from different schools to meet with artists in a community of purpose. He worked practically to establish relationships which built a shared sense of capability and possibility rather than weakened it, or worse, divided. And he did so in order that through such shared endeavour the individual may be freed to follow her creative bent, to pursue the work that grips and so will develop her. Starved of funding and impeded by a system in thrall to measured targets and the instrumental, teachers and artists continue nonetheless to harness their talent and spirit to these ends. They are Tanner's heirs.

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