

Eric Ravilious and Helen Binyon

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Deputy Keeper, Modern Collection, The Tate Gallery

The work of Eric Ravilious has always been appreciated and enjoyed, but as time passes it becomes increasingly clear that his stature was greater than has often been admitted. After a period in which considerations of style and genre have loomed disproportionately large, there is now widespread appreciation again of the central importance of content in art. This is propitious for an understanding of Ravilious's work and of the close unity between all its parts – a main theme of this book, which considers Ravilious equally as a fine and as an applied artist.

Most of Ravilious's work was small in scale and its medium was either delicate or supportive of a text or a manufactured object. In all these fields his approach was broadly traditional, and his work addressed neither political and social issues nor (in any direct way) the avant-garde contest of his period between Surrealism and abstraction. None of these facts, however, necessarily connotes a marginal position within the British art of his day, or a lesser contribution to it. Every idea has its own just form and Ravilious found his. Those who open themselves to what Ravilious expresses through his various disciplines will find a sensibility linked in complex ways to the principal currents in the art of his day. And although they will find appearances translated onto a flat surface with extraordinary vividness, they will discover too that Ravilious penetrates beneath the surface of things in a meditation on the mystery of their nature and existence, and on their location in space and time. Like all significant art, that of Ravilious has an outer and an inner reality.

His work is orderly, precise and full of specific detail. From the early 1930s this characteristic is paradoxically united in his watercolours with distinct breadth of design (as it frequently is, in all his media, with breadth of the scene evoked). In his landscapes the curve and bulk of the earth are conveyed with an almost physical feel and where there are paths, bridges or causeways one is led in imagination along them into the deep space of the picture, step by step, with a verifiable, seemingly tangible sense of actuality. These qualities coexist with a beautiful assertion of the medium itself of watercolour, as a deposit on the paper. Carefully composed, Ravilious's watercolours nevertheless convey a strong sense of the spontaneity of an actual moment of observation. This combination of breadth with immediacy recalls Cotman whom he is known to have admired and more generally places him centrally in the English watercolour tradition, as do his powerful sense of the land and its occupation and, no less, of the sky, the weather and their frequent moistness. But Ravilious often seems still more English because unlike most well-known English artists of this generation he hardly ever went abroad, and virtually his only significant non-English subjects concern the defence of Britain by air and sea.

The mix in Ravilious's art of peculiarly English scenes with



Abstract decoration for J. M. Dent's Everyman series, 1936-7. Engraved on wood.

nineteenth- and twentieth-century machinery places it also within a widespread tendency of interwar Western art as a whole, namely the examination of an artist's own national or local scene; the best-known example is American Regionalism. Characteristic of such art was the use of traditional and comprehensible pictorial styles. Looking back as he did to pre-modern sources, Ravilious shows no trace of the sensuousness and solidity in paint handling so important to many English artists in the work of the masters of Post-Impressionism, but his interest in concise and accessible imagery links him both with the Camden Town artists (he met Ginner), with his friend Percy Horton, with his near-contemporaries in the Euston Road School, and with the work of a poet close to them, W. H. Auden. Ravilious's observation of the everyday scene and of the odd details of English life also overlapped in the late 1930s with Mass Observation, while his subject matter and his concern with precision connect his work with that of Tristram Hillier and especially of Edward Wadsworth (a letter from whom is printed on p. 107).

An important difference between Ravilious and the abstract, Surrealist and Euston Road artists of the 1930s was that he did not have a crusading attitude regarding the direction that art should take. Nevertheless, and despite his fundamental difference of aim from abstraction and Surrealism, it is not only with the Euston Road artists that his work shows links. In abstract art, for example, the role of feeling or mood is vital. In his engraved abstract devices Ravilious contrived simultaneously to accentuate bold and distinctive forms and to convey particular emotions difficult to define in words, while in all media his work shows a delight in strong, elementary shape, cleanly articulated and interacting with elegant, living line. This preoccupation reminds one repeatedly of the aesthetic of Ben Nicholson. Both artists responded enthusiastically to the crisp forms of nautical design (on which John Piper, a friend of Ravilious, wrote an article in 1938¹), to imagery of kings, queens and fireworks, and to sports such as tennis and billiards in which precision was essential. In British art of the 1930s a continuum of sensibility links Nicholson's most abstract works with Ravilious's most figurative.

Although Ravilious's connection with Surrealism is less explicit, his work of the 1930s is peculiarly of its period and it is difficult to believe that the sense of latent drama in many of his scenes, devoid of inhabitants or with a single strange object or structure presiding over a landscape, would be quite as they are were it not for the Surrealists' discovery of a super reality in everyday life. Already before the establishment of Surrealism in England such an awareness was evident in the work of Ravilious's teacher, Paul Nash. The fact that it was joined in Nash with an obsession with design, with an interest in constructions seen in a landscape setting and with mastery of the English watercolour tradition shows how powerful an influence on Ravilious he must have had. The work of both conveys a sense of sudden revelation. This quality is apparent in a different guise in the work of another brilliant watercolourist whom Ravilious admired, David Jones. But Ravilious derives it more directly from Nash, with whom he shares a central preoccupation with the mystery of place, time and space – the spot and the moment seen in relation to a wider perspective. Despite Ravilious's greater 'straightforwardness' pictorially, he as well as Nash was an important contributor to the development of English Neo-Romantic landscape art. Wartime isolation from the continent intensified collective awareness of the English atmosphere and past.

These had long been central subjects of Ravilious's art, though the element of distortion which began to be prominent in Neo-Romanticism from around the time of his death is alien to his work. His affinities with Samuel Palmer and with Henry Moore are discussed below.

Comparison with the new art of the early and mid 1940s only accentuates the contrasting qualities in Ravilious of order, subtlety and a certain understatement. Though he contributed to the revival of interest in Victoriana his work shows more fundamental inspiration from the art of the eighteenth century, the century of Devis, Sandby and Stubbs and of kinds of art which combined keen observation with a certain detachment. Both qualities are strong in Ravilious, the latter perhaps to an unusual degree. All his work has an attractive warmth because it records or immediately anticipates human activity within the scene depicted. But this makes all the more remarkable the substantial absence of human beings from his pictures, particularly in his last ten years. Appearing largely through traces of their presence, they seem to be interpreted in terms of functions rather than of personality. When people do appear they tend to be either types (masked revellers, practitioners of specific trades), slightly doll-like (e.g. tennis players), actors, repeated units seen from afar, or (as in the zodiacal figures in the 1929 Almanack) concepts. Both in the delightfully-peopled Morley College murals and in *High Street* (two works containing many figures in settings), the objects seem to have more personality and presence than the human beings, who in *High Street* have minimal (or in many cases no) facial features. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that, though filled with fun and with curiosity about life, Ravilious was also found by those who knew him to have a slightly elusive quality. J. M. Richards recalls that 'he never lost a kind of wariness against all allegiances and personal involvements'². In his work, on the other hand, one senses a deep and intense involvement, but one with something more changeless than human relationships.

It is perhaps significant of this central quality in Ravilious's art that the same combination of absence of people with extra-worldly preoccupation is found in the art of Paul Nash³. Like that of Nash, Ravilious's art shows unusual awareness of time and space, yet at the same time suggests an inherent concern with matters of the imagination and of the spirit which lie beyond measurement. One of the most personal aspects of his work is its combination of such inward vision with the keen observation of matter-of-fact reality, which he makes us see with new delight. He finds poetry on both levels, and also in their inter-relation. We have already noted the satisfying and inviting way in which Ravilious plots out the precise position of elements in the near, middle and far distance of his watercolours; in doing this he leads us not only into a particular space but also into a special mental world. Whether the scene is indoors or out, one has an enhanced sense of time passing, from second to second. But Ravilious locates contemporary existence in a broader perspective. In many works, signs of modern life are juxtaposed with traces of prehistoric man. In others Ravilious reiterates the timeless cycle of the seasons and the activities which result from it, especially the fertility of harvest symbolized by ears and sheaves of corn. This is a central theme of Samuel Palmer, whom Ravilious further echoes in associating man's yearly round with an exceptional prominence of celestial bodies. The sphere of the sun is beautifully noticeable in many of his watercolours, and his wood engravings feature sun, moon, stars and comets set in looming proximity to



implements and plants, recalling their closeness to man as they balance on the rim of Palmer's intimate valley⁴. Ravilious's zodiacal figures come right down into earthly situations – even into rooms – where they establish a magic presence. Vital though the verifiable world is in his art Ravilious often seems therefore to use symbols and selected natural phenomena to draw our awareness beyond material reality. Although this aspect of his work is not as obvious as in Nash or Jones its importance is underlined by noting at how many points his pictorial vocabulary overlaps with that of a third explicitly visionary artist of the time. In the work of Cecil Collins key Ravilious motifs such as lighthouses, prehistoric sites and fireworks are all important, while his *The Cells of Night* 1934 (Tate Gallery) visualises the inner spirit of man awakening beneath a sky whirling with meteors that seem strangely close to earth.

As Helen Binyon had special reason to know, it was in Sussex, with its austere and curving Downs, that these aspects of Ravilious's art found their greatest inspiration from the English landscape. It seems oddly appropriate, therefore, that it should have been for a site in that county, and when Ravilious's powers were at their height, that Henry Moore's carved stone *Recumbent Figure* 1938 was commissioned, a work much concerned with the spirit in landscape and with landscape as spirit. As Moore later recalled, 'It was then that I became aware of the necessity of giving outdoor sculpture a far-seeing gaze. My figure looked out across a great sweep of the Downs, and her gaze gathered in the horizon. The sculpture . . . became a mediator between modern home and ageless land'.⁵ Ravilious was one with all these contemporary English artists in seeing man in a wider context than that of his immediate circumstances. It is not surprising that for all its acute observation of the actual scene his work, like that of Barnett Freedman, often gives the sensation of a dream, a state in which reality is often not so much denied as heightened.

Ravilious's success as both realist and poetic artist results from his basing each work on a clear and precise conception. There are no incidentals in his art; everything is excluded which does not support the

*Celebratory decoration
for The Hansom Cab and
The Pigeons by L. A. G.
Strong (The Golden
Cockerel Press, 1935).
Engraved on wood.*



chosen theme. Though already remarkable his work of the 1920s is in general more detailed and elaborated than it became in his great last ten years. A change from relative density to a sparer yet stronger design, filled with a sense of air and light, seems to come first in the wood engravings (however compressed) and to be established in all his media by 1932. His use of colour was exceptionally effective partly because it was restricted to so few elements per work. Of key importance was his gift for selection, his eye for that which, amid millions of ordinary sights available to all, is somehow singular. Each such element – a cloud, a dustpan, the spiral in a Swiss roll – is picked out and remains distinctive even if its vehicle is an engraving into which many elements have to be packed. In the watercolours the beauty and the strangeness of things which might otherwise have been thought inconsequential are conveyed to us by their relative individual isolation. This is one reason why Ravilious's grasp of texture and tactility is so telling (as well as being so remarkable in so fluid a medium). Thrust into prominence, the texture of wood, grass or rust, the weave of net, racquet or corn sheaf, come alive on the sheet, and one can almost feel the chalk of the Down being cut into to form the image of a horse.

It was Ravilious's skill as a designer which, in each work afresh, enabled him to merge such specific perceptions into an effective whole. His design skill is that of a master, for leaping beyond mere admirable or striking composition he conjures from his component elements the instant evocation of a special mood. The tiniest tailpiece can evoke the passage of time, swift movement or the processes of growth. A design to celebrate a special occasion suggests at a glance the experience of past centuries, contemporary activity nationwide, and the prospect of marvellous spectacle. His much-loved fireworks link an earthly mood of this kind to an awareness of cosmic forces.

Ravilious's war work was of necessity done in conditions less conducive to the kind of compression, at once engaging and revelatory, which thus characterizes his work through the 1930s. Nevertheless his war pictures are among his finest achievements precisely because their important element of record and reportage is married with a grasp of atmosphere and environmental scale, and of man's relation to forces more enormous and permanent than those of an enemy in war. Without his more meditative researches of the interwar years, this would not have been possible. In all Ravilious's work observation and idea were united to remarkable effect. His early loss to British art was the more tragic because of his special ability to focus and celebrate the reality of the here and now while at the same time giving his art the wider imaginative and spiritual range which ensures increasing recognition of its stature.

The work of an outstanding artist enables later generations to come close to his personality in important respects, but there is a special value in the recollections of those who were close to him in life. Helen Binyon's vivid memoir is such a primary source. Not only does it contain a wealth of

factual information but it captures, as this necessarily detached introduction cannot, the liveliness and fun of Ravilious and his circle – qualities which go hand in hand in his art with those outlined above. It also indicates the continuing importance to him personally and professionally of several gifted contemporaries from his days at the Royal College of Art who are therefore hardly mentioned here. An exception, however, must be made of Helen Binyon herself. In her memoir Helen makes clear that she and Ravilious were students together at the Royal College and that they were friendly in the 1930s and till his death. Without being told, however, the reader would have no idea that in these later years their relationship was of great importance to them both. In a book with so strong a biographical emphasis it seems desirable to make this clear, and also to indicate how remarkable the author was in her own right.

Helen Binyon was born on 9 December 1904, the twin daughter of the poet and art historian Laurence Binyon (1869–1943) and his wife Cicely, née Powell. Since 1895 Binyon had worked in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, of which he was ultimately the Keeper. He was also for many years Keeper of the Department of Oriental Prints and Drawings, and developed a pioneering interest in oriental paintings. No less fruitful was his influence on the appreciation of Blake, Girtin and Cotman, and of Francis Towne, whom he virtually ‘discovered’. His own poetry was pervaded by a brooding love of the English earth and legends.⁶ Educated at St Paul’s Girls School, Helen Binyon entered the Design School of the Royal College of Art in the same year as Ravilious, 1922. The Principal, William Rothenstein, was a friend of Laurence Binyon’s and it might be thought, as indeed was borne out by her career, that the practice of art was a natural and straightforward extension of Helen’s background. Her years at the Royal College were however not without problems. From her mother’s side of the family the influence was towards a conventional role in society. While at the Royal College she was presented at Court as well as leading, part of the time, the kind of social life consistent with this. The backgrounds of many of her fellow students were very different, not least those of the men, some of whom, moreover, were older because they had served in the war while others, such as Ravilious, Edward Bawden and Barnett Freedman, seemed to have unusual personalities. It seems, therefore, that while acquainted in general with Ravilious and his immediate circle, Helen Binyon did not get to know them well in these years and indeed felt a certain tension between the contrasting possibilities suggested by her own family background. Like Ravilious she was, however, taught by Paul Nash and his influence on her remained decisive.

In the years after the Royal College Helen Binyon spent one year in Paris and another in the United States, where she worked on the hand-colouring of reproductions of works by William Blake. Like all aspects of her work this depended on her gift for meticulous precision; in the same period she obtained a job as draughtsman at the College of Arms. Her own work as a graphic artist was in engraving and watercolour. As a wood engraver she exhibited at the Redfern Gallery as part of the same group as Nash and Ravilious. Her prints are remarkably close in feeling to those of Ravilious and her line engravings of the period bring out at least as strongly a very similar response to the singularity of individual *things*. As in Ravilious, objects or people do not overlap; the isolation of each permits its structure and its feel to be appreciated. An almost physical

Helen Binyon in the 1930s.



delight is conveyed in the coil of a rope, the lean and touch of a ladder, the slicing of a haystack and, precisely as in Ravilious, the sensation of crossing a bridge. Her watercolours of the 1930s show a steely line, exceptionally narrow and accurate, and much greater detail than her prints, allied to a fresh simplicity in the touch of the medium. The principal subjects are land – and townscape, with a special enjoyment of interrelated roofs, fences (a key Nash and Ravilious motif) and unpretentious village homes, some of them in Essex.

Her work as a book illustrator was first published in the 1920s. She contributed extremely Ravilious-like wood engravings to Maria Edgeworth's *Angelina, or L'Amie Inconnue* (The Swan Press, 1933), to her father's tiny *Brief Candles* (Golden Cockerel Press, 1938) and to the Penguin Illustrated Classics edition of *Pride and Prejudice*, also in 1938. Between 1940 and 1949 Oxford University Press published a series of at least ten books for children about two girls named Polly and Jane. These were written by Margaret Binyon and extensively illustrated by Helen. The illustrations make most effective use of their restriction to one or two colours each, and make maximum play with pattern and with varied and often minute texture. The overall effect of each illustration is of a bold and telling directness, within which the structure of any object depicted is examined with a degree of interest surprising in children's books, enhanced by the often striking angles of view adopted. The man picnicking on the beach in *A Day at the Sea* (1940) is a portrait of Ravilious. Helen's final book was *The Children Next Door* (Aladdin Books, New York, 1949), which she both illustrated and wrote. Here striking simplicity is taken still further, the material ranging from line drawings of shells to objects such as an open watercolour box viewed from directly above.

It was in about 1930 that Helen and Margaret Binyon, in creating a puppet show with which to welcome their father home from a visit to

Frontispiece for Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice* (Penguin Illustrated Classics, 1938). Engraved on wood by Helen Binyon.



Ravilious as depicted in *A Day At The Sea* (Oxford University Press, 1940). The 'Binyon Books' were written by Margaret Binyon and illustrated by Helen.



Japan, initiated the involvement with puppetry which will probably be seen as Helen's most lasting professional legacy. Their interest in puppets had been fired by seeing, as children, one of the legendary puppet performances given by William Simmonds (1876–1968). Oddly enough, Helen seems never to have met Simmonds, but her description of the special qualities of his puppetry pinpoints the values which always governed her own work in this medium, notwithstanding its increasing concern with innovation as the years went by. Simmonds's work, she wrote, achieved a 'rare and exquisite balance of the relationships between all the elements – the puppets were extraordinarily sensitively carved, jointed and moved; the content of the scene exactly the right weight for its puppet actors . . . the music of exactly the right delicacy for the size of the puppets. . . . The limitations the artist set himself . . . were a source of artistic unity and intensity. . . . The show, delicate and allusive, was pure enchantment'.⁷

Like Simmond's puppets, the Binyons' were marionettes. In the years after the Royal College Helen had learned wood carving as well as engraving at the Central School of Art. She designed the sets and made the puppets, while the words were written and spoken by Margaret (who had won a prize at one of the Oxford verse speaking competitions organized by John Masefield – Laurence Binyon, had for many years been much concerned with the revival of verse speaking). Throughout the 1930s the sisters gave performances of their portable puppet theatre all over England, under the name Jiminy Puppets, from 'gemini', the Latin word for twins. They were hired for private or charity shows, but also gave short public seasons. One of these was at the Poetry Bookshop, and in June 1938 they gave a six-night season at the Mercury Theatre with words by Montagu Slater and music by Benjamin Britten and Lennox Berkeley performed by the composers and others.⁸ Jiminy Puppets aimed at beauty, fun and dramatic effect. They made much use of traditional British ballads and songs and (also in 1938) appeared on television with their performance of 'Twas on the Broad Atlantic'. Individual pieces lasted about four minutes, and an evening's performance about an hour. The sisters' last public performances (no longer under the name Jiminy) were seasons in Bristol in the early 1950s, but in July 1969 they gave a final private performance at a party in their own former home, the Keeper's House at the British Museum. This was to celebrate the centenary of their father's birth and included a play he had written for them about the Museum, in which an Egyptian mummy and other exhibits come alive and argue about their relative popularity with visitors. The setting of this performance was doubly appropriate as the house was then occupied by the specialist in eastern art, Basil Gray (Keeper of Oriental Antiquities) and his wife Nicolette, younger sister of Helen and Margaret and an important figure in the establishment of international modern art in Britain in the 1930s as well as a distinguished historian, teacher and designer of lettering.

The period around 1933 was one of great change in Helen Binyon's life. In that year both her sisters married and her parents left the British Museum. Helen moved into a flat in Belsize Park shared with a fellow student from the Royal College, Peggy Angus, an art teacher who was to become a very original designer of tiles, fabrics and wallpaper. Helen and her family and friends all considered her renewed friendship with Peggy at this time to have had a liberating effect on her. The antithesis of the more restricted and conventional side of Helen's family, Peggy was an

A wood engraving by Helen Binyon, printed in red on pale blue paper, announcing 'a new Puppet Show' to be presented by Margaret and Helen Binyon in Bristol.



extraordinary person. Their flat was decorated with large grey fronds cut from sheets of *The Times* and pasted onto a pink ground. They gave large and lively parties here and at Furlongs, Peggy's cottage on the South Downs (described in Helen's memoir) which she acquired in 1933. It was through Peggy that Helen (who was unusual in the circle in having a car) met Ravilious again and got to know him well. As recounted in the memoir the Raviliouses would come to stay at Furlongs, but in 1934 Ravilious and Helen fell very much in love. Ravilious used then to come alone to stay at Furlongs with Peggy and Helen. In 1938 Helen decided that distressing though this would be their intimate relationship should not continue. For the Raviliouses' sake as well as her own she could not agree that both relationships should coexist. She and Ravilious remained close friends, and his death reinforced her friendship with Tirzah Ravilious. She took an affectionate interest in the three Ravilious children and it was they who asked her to write the memoir which is published now.

Lennox Berkeley (left) and Benjamin Britten at the piano, with Margaret and Helen Binyon operating their puppets, 1938.



Helen Binyon and Eric Ravilious, drawn at Furlongs c1934 by Peggy Angus.



Ravilious's letters to Helen Binyon make clear the importance he attached to her views on his work, which he was always bringing for her to see. It is evident how much they had in common beyond many shared friendships. Both influenced formatively by Paul Nash, they drew inspiration together from the English watercolour tradition and from the sense of the *genius loci*. This is apparent in the watercolours in which, at this period, they were both particularly prolific and particularly interested in technical precision. They had both taken part in the 1920s revival of wood engraving and both were accustomed to solving problems of design for a large audience. Above all, though Ravilious's work is the more wide-ranging and profound, their work is very close in feeling. It seems inevitable and right that the work of both will be associated permanently.

In the first half of the war Helen worked for the Admiralty in Bath, drawing hydrographic charts; she was living in Bath when Ravilious died. Her later war work was in London preparing photographic exhibitions for the Ministry of Information and doing ambulance service in the evenings. Soon after the war there came another turning point in her life, when she began teaching at Bath Academy of Art, Corsham. Bath Academy included both a School of Visual Arts and a course for training teachers of art, drama and music in general education. Although Helen taught in both, her principal and increasing role was in the training of teachers. But her work was unusually rewarding because of the emphasis laid by Bath Academy's remarkable Principal, Clifford Ellis, on the importance of interaction between the two parts of the Academy and on the value of innovation. Helen was thus able to contribute not only as a teacher of drawing and watercolour and as a pioneer in her special field of puppetry but also, as a senior member of the staff, in the weekly criticisms of the work which students of all disciplines within the School

of Visual Arts had produced in response to set projects. Her sense of the importance of observation and of the need for a work to convey a feeling of life rather than of mere formal experiment combined with her undoc-trinaire attitude towards materials and style to make her a widely respected member of the team. As Clifford Ellis writes, 'Helen enjoyed being in this lively community and her contribution was one of the reasons why its work could not deteriorate into illiberal 'Basic Design' '.

After the personal loss and communal tribulation of the war, Helen's work at Corsham seems to have given her a new lease of life. At first she worked there part-time, sharing houses first in Hampstead with Peggy Angus and then with her sister Margaret and children in Bristol. When Helen became a full-time teacher at Corsham she bought an old weavers' cottage in the village. Her love of children and her vocation for teaching found their ideal fusion in the introduction of local primary school children to her own students, as part of teaching projects embracing both art, music and drama (of which puppetry is itself a synthesis). The ending of Helen's public appearances with marionettes coincided roughly with the development of her special interest in shadow puppets. This lay at the heart of her teaching at Corsham and culminated annually in public performances of shadow plays created by her students. Shadow puppets were also the perfect vehicle for Helen's teaching method, which in watercolour and puppetry alike centred on the setting up of situations within which students were encouraged simultaneously to explore their own sense of the materials employed and of the content to be expressed, so as to discover a personal solution rather than one dictated by narrow rules. In her Corsham productions there was thus a strong element of openness and surprise. She drew both on centuries-old traditions of East and West and on more recent cultures such as that of the Bauhaus, employing abstract imagery and exploring pure sound. Anything was admissible so long as the result was satisfying, thorough and complete. However brief, her puppet shows were always works of art.

Helen retired from Corsham in 1965 and with her twin sister bought a house in Chichester overlooking a garden which she created, bisected by a deeply-cut stream and with the city's tall and ancient flint wall as a backdrop. The insights of her Jiminy and Corsham years were summed up in her *Puppetry Today* (Studio Vista, 1966), described by Clifford Ellis as 'her testament as a teacher'. This book was trenchant in its criticism of poor standards and of slovenliness, but above all was positive and infectious enthusiasm. It drew on Helen's wide experience of puppetry in other countries to give a clear account of the four main branches of the art – string, glove, rod and shadow puppets, with special emphasis on the last – but unlike many puppet books it was artistic as well as technical. Thus a central theme was the need to realize fully, and to integrate, all the different aspects of a puppet show – the construction of the puppets, of course, but also their precise design, so as to compress into each single form as complete as possible a sense of representation or identity; and above all their movement. The aim, she explained, should be not merely to illustrate a pre-existing story or score, but to allow the particular characters and capabilities of the puppets to bring it to life, so that theme and material should be one. Helen Binyon stressed that puppetry was not doll-making but drama, the work of art being not the puppets but the performance as a totality. Any material, however improbable, was acceptable, and sources of inspiration for movement which she cited included

weather, kinetic art and the dance of Merce Cunningham.

Following the appearance of *Puppetry Today* Helen was commissioned by the Arts Council of Great Britain to undertake a survey of professional puppetry in England, and she presented this in 1971. Here the points made in her book gained added force by contrast with the generally low level of accomplishment she had found in viewing thirty-seven very varied puppet performances, but also found confirmation in the work of a very few young puppeteers, particularly Christopher Leith, as well as in such diverse directions as the American Bread and Puppet Theatre and Basil Brush at the London Palladium. Identifying puppetry's intermediate position between art, drama and dance, she stressed the need to combine the qualities of all three traditions. She wrote that 'what we *feel* must come from what we *see*' (rather than simply from what story we hear), and urged the establishment of a permanent formal link between puppetry and living dramatic art. Running through both this report and *Puppetry Today* is an exhilarating stress on the excitement of discovery and the rich potential of puppetry. Helen Binyon was fascinated by the scope for transformation offered not only by the individual puppet (where she delighted in ingenuities of every kind) but by the ability of a performance to conjure, for a brief, concentrated span, a complete and convincing world. Her writings have a lasting value deriving from a consistent clarity combined with a feeling for the magic of her art which seems to extend beyond puppetry (or watercolour) itself to an infectious response to the curiosity and beauty of the world around us.

Although not funded by the Arts Council, the Experimental Puppet Workshop which Helen led at the Central School of Speech and Drama in July–August 1973 realized one of the principal recommendations in her 1971 survey. As described in the resulting report it was 'a leap in the dark' made collectively by puppeteers, artists, theatre designers, poets, actors and musicians. It was attended by the Director of the National Theatre and ended on a note of optimism created by the sense of expanded possibility realized through a concentrated interdisciplinary approach, and by the appointment of Christopher Leith and Jennifer Carey, members of the Workshop, to the staff of the National Theatre.

The Experimental Workshop was Helen Binyon's last formal undertaking in puppetry, though she remained closely involved in the field. However, she continued till near the end of her life to paint in watercolour, especially when on holiday, for example in Provence, Sicily, Yugoslavia, Greece, Morocco and Tunisia. Her postwar work in this medium was much more free than during the years of her friendship with Ravi-lious. Its essence is a lyrical simplicity in which the subject is accurately summarized but the colour and touch of the medium are allowed a stronger role. There is the same feeling as before the war for grouped architecture, but a new breadth in the treatment of its setting and a delight in the long brushstroke with which plants and branches are represented. To a degree the influence of Paul Nash, though never lost, seems to be replaced by that of his brother John, a close friend. Looking through the large number of accomplished and poetic watercolours she made, it comes as a surprise to learn that she never regarded herself as a professional painter and that she had only one solo exhibition (at the New Grafton Gallery, Bond Street). Less than three months after this exhibition closed she died on 22 November 1979.

The principal work of Helen Binyon's last years was this memoir of

Eric Ravilious. It is marked by the same qualities of clarity, perceptive and often amusing observation and admiration in any art for the highest standards, which characterized her own fastidious work as artist and teacher. A perfectionist, she held back more from making her own achievements known than one feels her work justifies. It is therefore a source of satisfaction that she lived to complete this memoir. Its concern with wood engraving and watercolour from inside each art complements her writings on puppetry. It enables those who did not know her to gain a more rounded impression of a gifted individual who was not only important in the life of Eric Ravilious but made a valuable contribution in her own right to the art of her time.

In the preparation of this introduction I have been greatly helped by many of the family and friends of both Eric Ravilious and Helen Binyon, and I should like to add my thanks to those which were expressed earlier in the book.

- 1 'The Nautical Style', *Architectural Review*, January 1938.
- 2 J. M. Richards, *Memoirs of an Unjust Fella*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980, page 95; J. M. Richards was also the author of the text of *High Street*.
- 3 Though in the present book John Lake is quoted writing that even before he went to the Royal College Ravilious 'always seemed to be slightly somewhere else, as if he lived a private life which did not completely coincide with material existence. This made me feel a very earthy person when in his company'.
- 4 It should be noted that at approximately the same time as Palmer's etchings were making a strong impact on the young Graham Sutherland, Ravilious and Bawden, also students, made a 'pilgrimage' to Palmer's Shoreham.
- 5 'Sculpture in the Open Air', a talk by Moore recorded for the British Council, 1955, and published in Philip James, ed., *Henry Moore on Sculpture*, Macdonald, 1966, pages 97-109.
- 6 Information from *Dictionary of National Biography*.
- 7 Helen Binyon, *Puppetry Today*, Studio Vista, 1966, pages 13-14.
- 8 Two of the works given were 'The Seven Ages of Man' and 'Old Spain'; the words of both are published in Montagu Slater, *Peter Grimes and other poems*, The Bodley Head, 1946, pages 58-75 (in performance a simplified version of 'The Seven Ages of Man' was used). In 'Britten in the Theatre', in *Tempo* No. 107, December 1973, Eric Walter White states that the music was for singer, clarinet, violin, piano and celesta but that the manuscript scores disappeared in the war. Mrs Higgins (Margaret Binyon) and Sir Lennox Berkeley both recall that each composer wrote the music for a separate work. Mrs Higgins believes that Britten's was for 'Old Spain', including wailing music for the black-clad women.