

On the opposite side of the lake stood a splendid brightly light castle fr



1

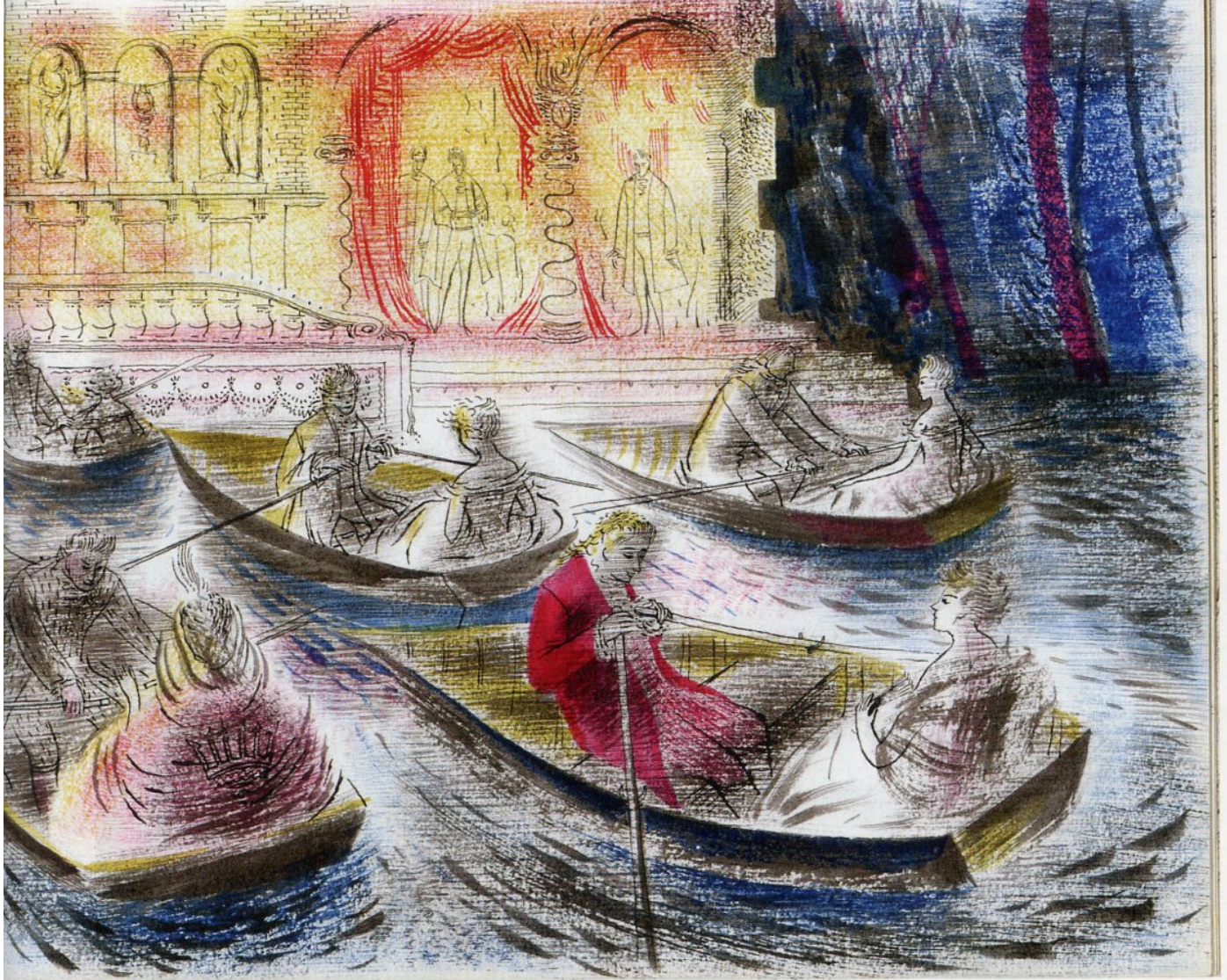
# BARDFIELD BEACON

Some immensely talented artists and illustrators are underappreciated and often seem to slip through the gaps of the canon of illustration.

**SHEILA ROBINSON** is one such illustrator.

*Martin Salisbury* looks at the life and work of a woman whose work includes book illustration, advertising, design, printmaking, mural painting and even the design of pleasure beach amusements

m which came the sound of the joyous music of trumpet and drums.



THERE HAS BEEN A SIGNIFICANT GROWTH OF INTEREST IN recent years in 'mid century modern', with the work of Edward Bawden and Eric Ravilious enjoying particular attention in the form of a plethora of new books and exhibitions. Revivalists such as Angie Lewin and Mark Hearld have gained prominence through their beautifully designed contemporary interpretations of the motifs of this period. These post war years constituted a particularly rich period for British Art & Design and a surprising proportion of the legacy emerged from the small Essex village of Great Bardfield. It was here that Bawden and Ravilious first took lodgings at Brick House in 1925. The story of how the Bardfield or North West Essex Artists gradually accumulated around them in the village as a loose 'colony' has now been well documented, perhaps most fully by Malcolm Yorke in *Edward Bawden and his Circle* (Fleece Press, 2005/ Antique Collectors' Club, 2007). Notwithstanding the Fry Gallery's *The Women of Bardfield* exhibition last year, the Bardfield group was (inevitably at this time) rather male dominated. A number of the Bardfield wives were highly talented artists in their own right but their careers were often at least partially sacrificed to supporting the family. Sheila Robinson's work can be seen to embody a subtler, warmer narrative lyricism than that of many of the better-known male artists of the group. Her close involvement with

the group began as a student of Bawden's at the Royal College of Art just after the Second World War. He remained a major influence throughout her life.

Sheila Robinson was born in Nottingham in 1925. She studied at Nottingham Art School and after a brief, extremely unhappy period in the land army during the war, during which she tried to commit suicide, she was able to take up a place at the RCA. It was here that she met fellow students Walter Hoyle, and Bernard Cheese whom she married. Among her surviving RCA projects, preserved at the Fry Gallery, is a complete, hand-drawn, lettered and bound picturebook version of *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*. This exquisite little book appears to have been designed to the format of the Puffin Picture Books of the time, the spreads alternating between colour and black and white, in the way that allowed the original Puffins to be printed on one single large sheet, in colour on one side, monochrome on the other. The limited colour – scarlet, yellow and blue, rendered in inks with a drying brush, give the impression of printed colour separations. The hand rendered text is riddled with misspelling and eccentric grammar (a feature causing some problems as I embark on a research project to publish the book).

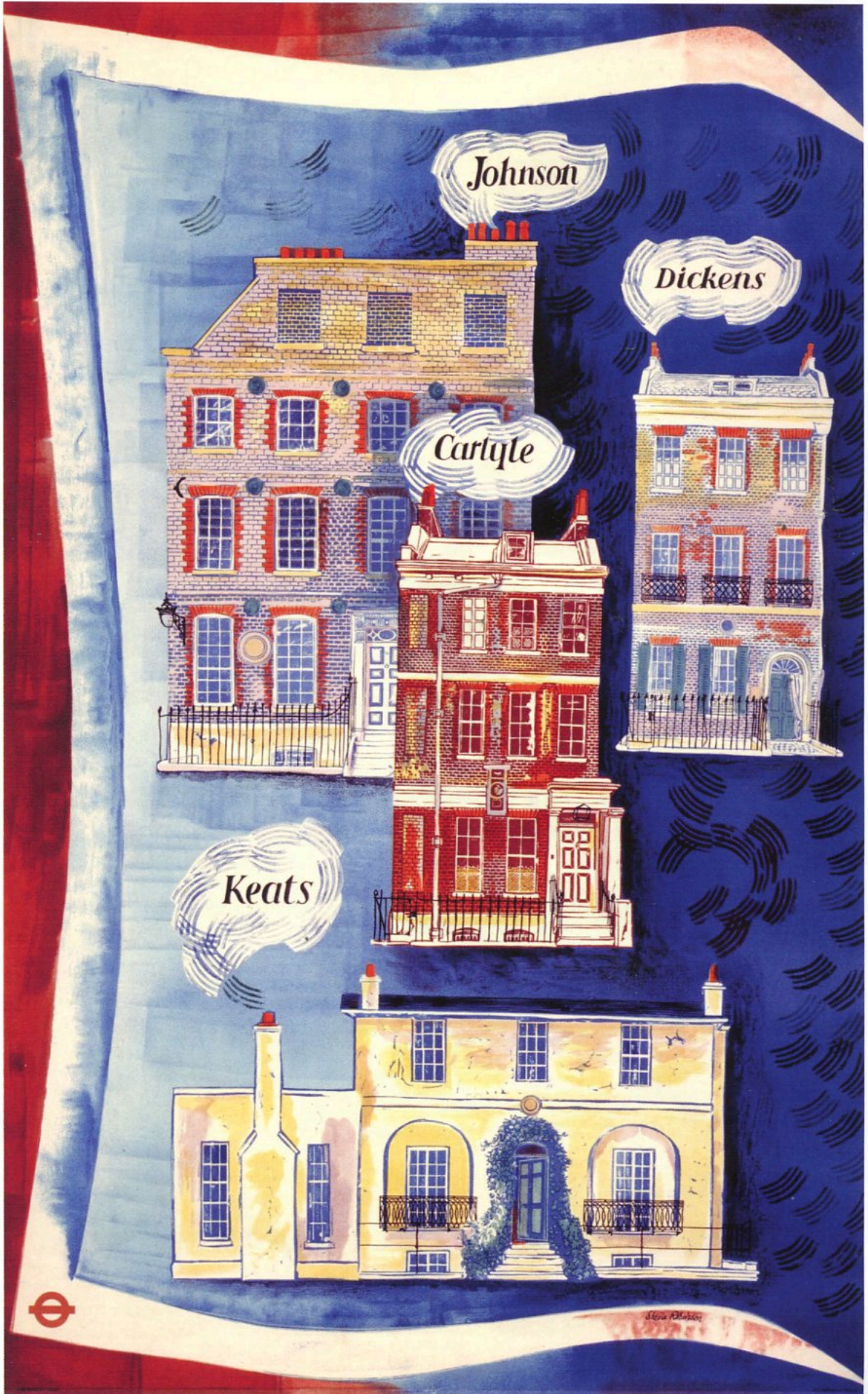
After their wedding, Bernard and Sheila moved to Thaxted in Essex to bring up their two children, Chloë and Ben. But the marriage broke up and Robinson and the children moved

to Cage Cottage in Great Bardfield. Hoyle and Robinson were among the young former students of Bawden recruited to help with his work for that orgy of design and optimism of the times, *The Festival of Britain*. The others were Roy Sharp and William Fenton. Bawden created a free standing, decorative screen featuring a complex design to the theme of 'The British Character and Tradition'. As Yorke points out, Bawden's meticulous planning meant that Robinson and the others performed a sort of laborious painting-by-numbers role. But there was plenty of other, more independent work commissioned for the festival, including line drawings for the various festival guides. Bawden's tuition, his belief in Robinson's work and his wide network of professional contacts were of considerable help, allowing Robinson to make a successful living as an artist whilst bringing up her two children as a single parent, a not inconsiderable achievement in these times (Chloë Cheese recalls a childhood surrounded by drying prints and other artworks in progress). Commissions included book jacket designs, advertising (for companies such as Schweppes), posters for the GPO and London Transport and regular work for that marvelous staple for illustrators of a certain age – the British Broadcasting Corporation. The posters for London Transport are worthy of particular mention. Here Robinson joins an elite 'club' of artists who contributed to a magnificent visual tradition instigated by the legendary Commercial Manager, Frank Pick. The 'pair poster' was a popular innovation at the time, in the form of two freestanding portrait format posters that were designed to be viewed side by side, one of them usually containing textual information. In 1951 Robinson designed *Literary London*. The left hand side of the poster featured a collage of significant London writers' houses with the right hand giving information about each. Here the houses of Johnson, Dickens, Carlyle and Keats are described alongside elegant vignettes of each writer. The whole design is in the form of the open pages of a book. Two years later came another 'pair', this time celebrating the coronation with the title *Royal London*. This is a particularly stunning design in the form of a rich red and blue collage of the fashion accoutrements and architectural detail of all things royal, once again facing its other half of information contained within a decorative pictorial surround.

### Card cutting

The black and white 'bread and butter' work continued to flow through the 1960s, with commissions for BBC publications such as *Time and Tune* and *The BBC Book of the Countryside*. A teaching position at the Royal College of Art and the children growing up perhaps allowed for more focus on Robinson's interest in printmaking. Her particular specialism was in the uncommon art of card printing, a medium through which she displayed exquisite skill and sensitivity. Using simple soft cardboard, glued in layers, shapes are cut out with a knife and sealed with PVA glue. When rolled with printing ink and transferred to paper, subtle textures within crisp, fluid boundaries can be achieved and Robinson exploited this to the full, sometimes combining with linocut to give an even greater range of textures. The domestic cat features prominently as a motif, as it did for many Bardfield artists, Bawden in particular. But there are village street scenes, interiors and landscapes too. As it became possible to be more selective in the kind of commissioned work undertaken, Robinson was able to experiment with card cutting





Johnson

Dickens

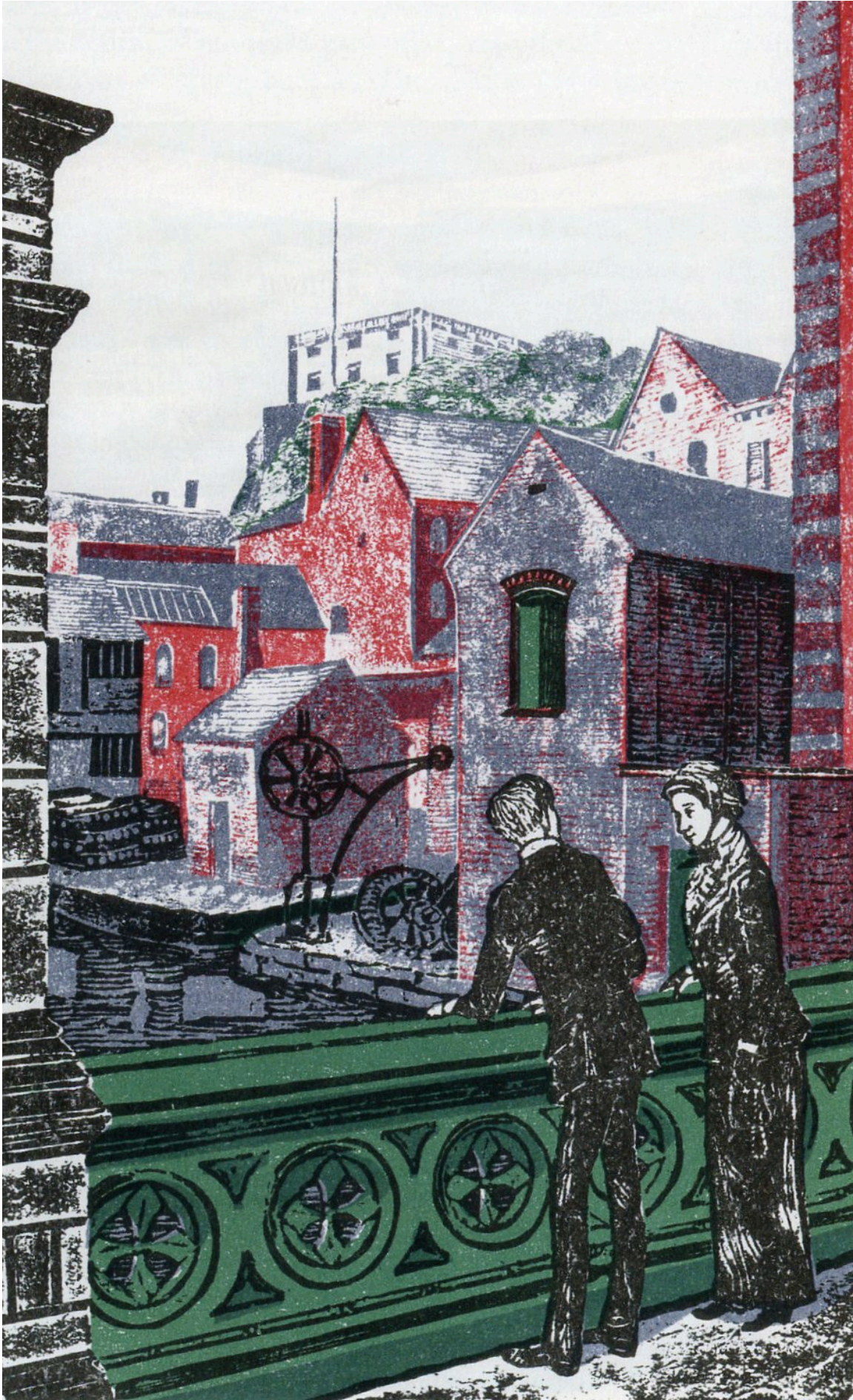
Carlyle

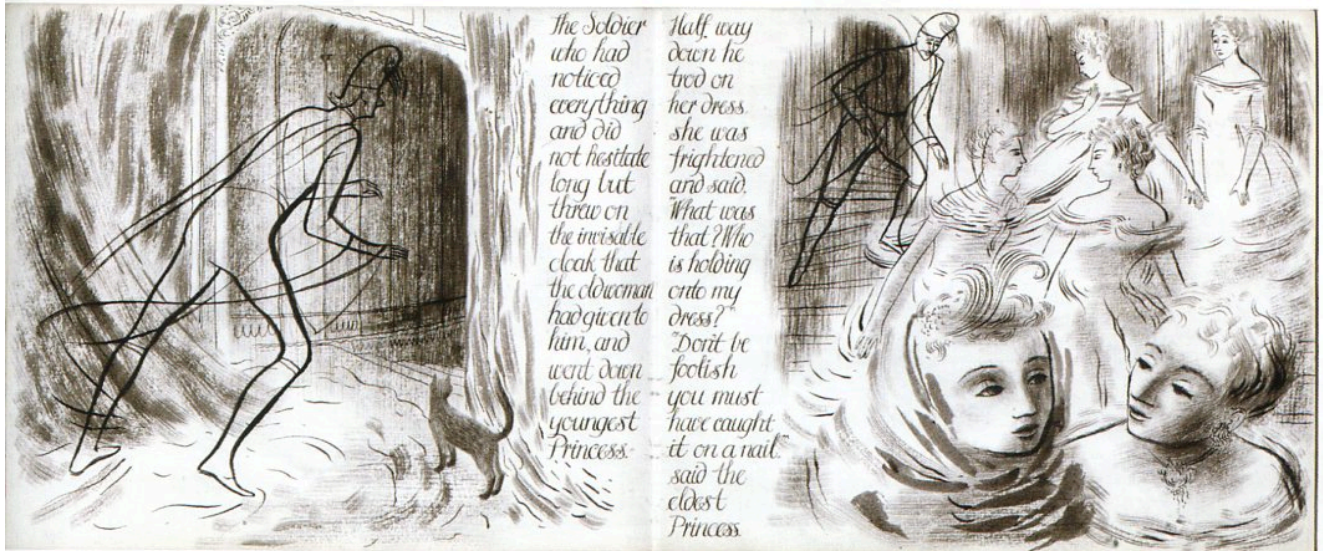
Keats

Keats



Sara Johnson



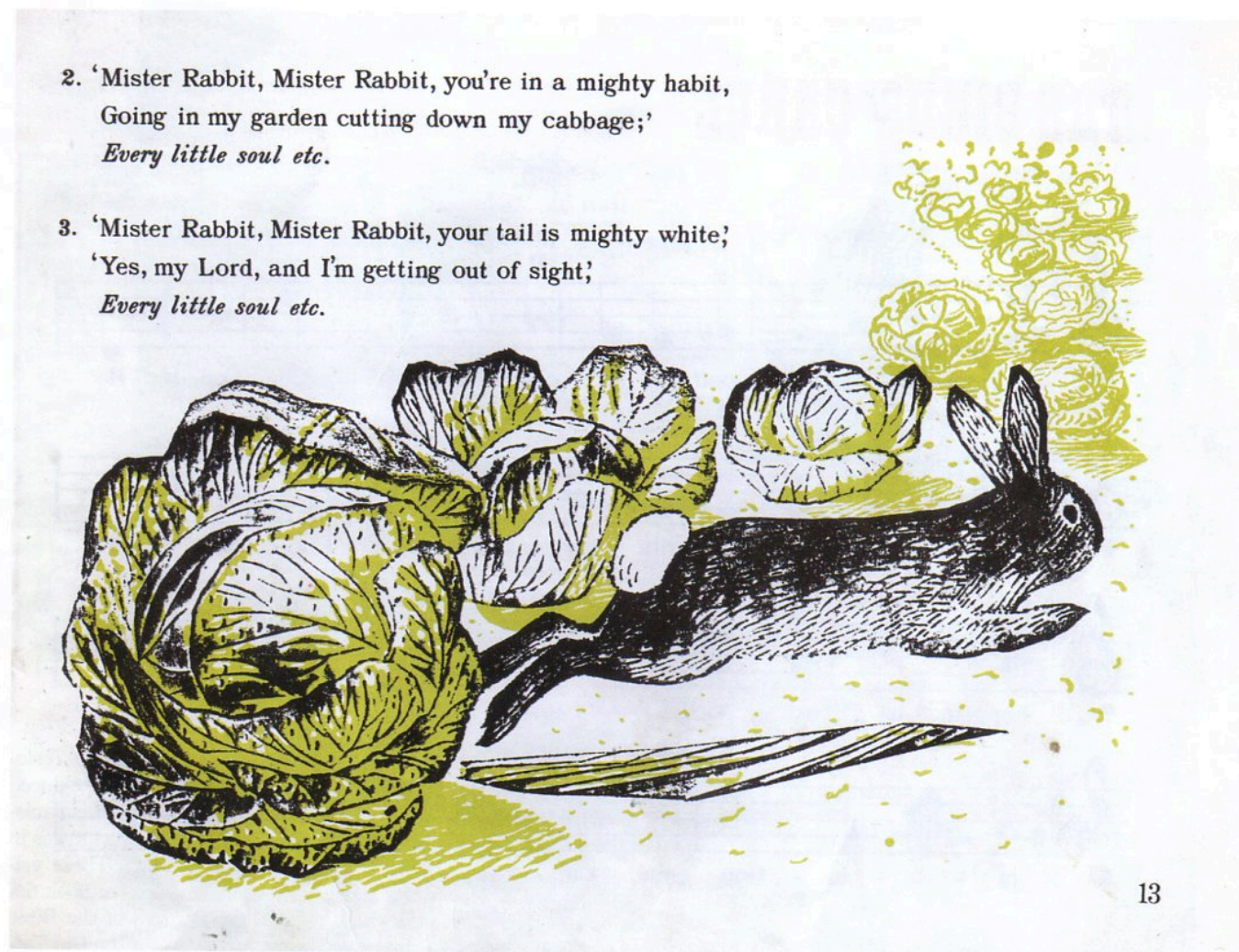


**With her rather large feet, she created prints of extraordinary delicacy and sensitivity**

in her published illustration. *The Oxford Illustrated Old Testament* was a major publishing venture in the late 1960s. Produced in five fat volumes, the series was an ambitious project commissioning leading artists of the time to illustrate the scriptures in black and white. The dust jackets inform us that: "These volumes will appeal to the artist and the connoisseur of book design and illustration, as well as to those readers of the Bible who will welcome a superbly illustrated edition of the Old Testament." The distinguished roll call of artists included Edward Ardizzone, Edward Bawden, Peter Blake, John Bratby, Edward Burra, David Hockney, Carel Weight and Brian Wildsmith. In this exalted company Sheila Robinson contributed card cut illustrations to Jeremiah in *Volume 4: The Prophets*. Writing in her essay, 'Aspects of the Twentieth Century Illustrated Book', Olive Cook says of Robinson's cuts, "Sheila Robinson's masterly cuts for Jeremiah also engage fully with the emotional content of the text which of course is of the greatest urgency. The illustrations are shaped by a deep imaginative insight. The artist said that when she read Jeremiah for the first time it was as though she confronted a landscape shrouded in black fog. The blackest black of printing ink seemed the only medium for the expression of such a reaction and the austere and sombre images Sheila Robinson created are the convincing visual counterparts of Jeremiah's superhuman strength and persistence."

Robinson did not own a printing press. Going on to describe the process of card printing, Cook amusingly continues, "... pressing the paper upon the inked surface of the cardboard with her rather large feet, she created prints of extraordinary delicacy and sensitivity." Perhaps encouraged by the quality of this published outcome, Robinson used the process more in her illustration work. Without question, the most high profile and successful of her published illustration commissions that were executed through this medium was the lavish boxed edition of D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* published by the Limited Editions Club of New York in 1975. Bound in a coarse, beige hesian cloth and contained in a slipcase, the book was produced in

2. 'Mister Rabbit, Mister Rabbit, you're in a mighty habit,  
Going in my garden cutting down my cabbage;'  
*Every little soul etc.*
3. 'Mister Rabbit, Mister Rabbit, your tail is mighty white;  
'Yes, my Lord, and I'm getting out of sight,'  
*Every little soul etc.*



13

6

a signed edition of 2,000 and features 12 single page, four-colour card prints supported by numerous smaller black and white prints. It is probable that the commission would have come about once again through Bawden's recommendation, Bawden having worked on *The Histories of Herodotus* and Flaubert's *Salammbo* for the same publisher.

#### *Vivid expression*

The book was the perfect commission for an artist who shared a strong affinity for her childhood home of Nottinghamshire with Lawrence. The textures and colours of her prints perfectly echo the gritty sensual intensity of Lawrence's writing. The four chosen colours of black, warm grey, scarlet and green are employed in a way that captures both the urban, industrial Nottingham landscape and the gentle countryside. As Olive Cook says in the same essay, "The choice of colour gives vivid graphic expression to Lawrence's use of red throughout the book, whether it be the flaming vermilion of sunset, the crimson cherries and carnations, the scarlet of berries, the brick red of the ubiquitous Nottingham clay or the red of the great stallion at Strelley Mill Farm which looms preternaturally huge. In the unforgettable illustration to one of the most powerful and symbolic scenes in the novel."

Looking at Sheila Robinson's work at the Fry Art Gallery and Museum, as so often with illustrators' work, it is the sketch-books that truly captivate. One in particular, which includes

preparatory designs for *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*, reminds us of just how resourceful and thorough visual research through drawing needed to be to achieve the quality of outcome that we see in her published work. The book teems with life in the form of costume research (at the V&A museum), colour experiment, landscape sketches, lettering, fairground studies and every form of anecdotal and formal drawing imaginable.

Robinson died of a brain tumour in Saffron Walden in 1988. The Sheila Robinson Drawing Prize was set up at the Royal College of Art in commemoration and it is fitting that contemporary drawing-led artists such as Laura Carlin have been among the recipients. Although we are not left with a vast body of work from this perhaps underappreciated artist, what we do have is to be treasured.

*Martin Salisbury leads the Masters program in children's book illustration at Anglia Ruskin University and is a founding member of Varoom Lab*

