



Authorgraph No.103: Ian Beck

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Ian Beck interviewed by **Julia Eccleshare**

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The recently refurbished main hall of the Art Workers' Guild in Queen's Square, London seems a natural home for Ian Beck. The newly painted scarlet walls are covered in portraits of the Masters of the Guild such as Arthur Rackham, Sir Edwin Lutyens and William Morris. Above the picture runs a frieze with the names of all the brothers, as they are called - though many are sisters - lettered with their admission dates. Dead members' names are gilded, those who let their membership lapse are left to fade into obscurity. There is a strong feeling both of brotherhood and of a celebration of art and craft skills. It is an atmosphere of culture and civilisation, overlaid with a good deal of manner.

Ian is a brother of the Guild. Brother Archie Beck. Not an alias to fit in with the spirit of the Guild, as it sounds, but genuinely his second name which he adopted at art school in order to distinguish himself from another Ian in the same group. He was elected in 1987 and is currently an honorary secretary. He clearly relishes the feel of the place with its cross fertilisation across the various arts disciplines. Not surprisingly since he is himself such a cultural polymath. His newest project takes him to the 1997 Edinburgh Fringe for two weeks where he and Glynn Boyd Harte, a friend from art school days, will perform in a show that they have created out of their pastiche performances as music hall entertainers.

Ian's attitude to his singing and song writing is much the same as his attitude to his other areas of expertise and extensive knowledge. He is self deprecating about them all, although it is evident that he cares deeply about them. He dismisses his widely gleaned store of information as 'magpie knowledge. I read voraciously and retain it,' as if that made it somehow less worthwhile.

Modesty is one of Ian's overriding characteristics. Self containment is another. He is unfailingly courteous, genial and agreeable. Not for him is the all too familiar catalogue of complaints against publishers, agents or booksellers. He likes to like other writers' and illustrators' work, rather than to criticise. He looks for the best in everything, though he is also quite discerning enough to recognise degrees of quality. His cultivated manner suggests a smooth path of success but, though he would not see himself as someone who had to struggle unduly, he worked a long apprenticeship before he found success as an illustrator of picture books.

Not that he had been courting it and failing but that he had worked for nearly a decade before the chance to do a picture book came his way.

It was a natural step in many ways as his illustrations for the adult magazine world had always 'looked a bit like a children's thing. Lots of dappled light and nice settings. And I always could draw children.' It also fitted in with his long standing collector's interest in children's books by Rackham and his peers; and it had been the underlying inspiration of much of his art school training.

Ian went first to Brighton School of Art while still at school. An eleven plus failure, he went to a small secondary

modern school with a caring headmaster who recognised Ian's ability and directed him towards the Saturday morning classes at the Art School. 'My father died when I was thirteen and my mother was naturally worried about what would happen to me. I was very lucky that my headmaster stepped in to help.'

Later, as a student at Brighton School of Art Ian was taught by, among others, Raymond Briggs, Justin Todd, John Lawrence and Ferelith Eccles Williams.

'Raymond Briggs was a great teacher. He taught me to notice unregarded things. One day he brought in a strip cartoon torn from a newspaper to show us because the detail of the head in one of the pictures was so excellent. But, the idea that you'd go out of college and do a picture book was unthinkable. Someone like John Burningham was the top of Mount Everest. Also, when you are at college you want to be more sophisticated. You are just at the stage when you want to leave everything to do with children far behind.' Ian did just that on leaving art school. He worked two days a week in Harrods to pay the rent and picked up drawing work where he could. Magazine work, record covers, work for the Conran design group - and fulfilling his long standing childhood ambition to draw for **Radio Times** (he even did a cover for it, later on) - all provided him with his basic training. 'Working for magazines, I learnt to draw and redraw to order. It gave me a good technical ability and it also made me realise that I was a tool.'

That ability to work to someone else's idea gave Ian his grounding but he quickly adapted to the possibilities of having his own ideas and fulfilling them.

David Fickling, then newish at the Oxford University Press, invited Ian to do the illustrations for **Round and Round the Garden**, a collection of finger rhymes and games. He had seen Iaris work in **Radio Times** and recognised how well his style would fit the very specific brief of the book.

'What made doing my first book, **Round and Round the Garden**, so enjoyable was that I was escaping from the tyranny of other people's ideas.' Ian's beautiful watercolours and tidy diagrams were a perfect match for text. **Oranges and Lemons** and **Ride a Cock Horse**, books of the same kind, followed in fairly quick succession.

Ian works mostly in watercolours and in his use of both colour and line he has an old fashioned quality, reminiscent of Harold Jones and Albert Rutherston, the English illustrators of the 1930s who drew simple, almost naive figures. 'I try to create a look that is floating, strong, and wistful all at the same time. Sometimes that doesn't work so well in print. It's partly to do with the qualities of white that you get.'

Unlike most illustrators, Ian is nostalgic about the old, four colour overlay method of illustration which he liked for the quality of colour that you could get from it.

But it is not just the use of colour that defines Ian's work. His line images are also very distinctive, though his technique has changed over the years. 'I used to work from photographs. Now I trust myself to make things up so I work from memory. It's quite good really because the invented figures act the way that you want them to. The best illustrators from photographs are the ones who are best at directing. For it to work, you have to get the right angles and the right costumes.'

I follow the other school of thought. I follow Ardizzone who believed in "the rightness of the pose". When you've done lots of lines you know if it's right or not. You have more freedom than if you are working from photographs but it's more work. It may take six or seven goes to get it right. You don't really know exactly what you are doing. Your hand and mind take over. When it works, people respond to the feeling of the picture. The emotion comes off the page.'

Once launched, Ian's picture books developed quickly. David Fickling moved to Transworld and Ian did his first independent picture book, **The Teddy Robber**. He is now published on many lists - Orchard, HarperCollins and Scholastic having been added to the OUP and Transworld - and now has a catalogue of deadlines to meet. 'I do a lot of roughs and am very painstaking so everything tends to get late.' He mostly works from the studio of a friend in which he has a corner but partly, when there is just too much on, at home. 'I don't like to be away from home seven days a week so I have a work place at home, as well. I've always involved the children in my work. When I did **The Teddy Robber**

I planned it at the kitchen table and the boys, Edmund and Laurence, helped by thinking about how they would react to particular situations. Lily has also been an inspiration because she has a quite different outlook on books. She looks for different things and I have sometimes followed her guidance on that.'

Having children and becoming a children's book illustrator happened to coincide for Ian but though he discusses work with his children his real inspiration lies outside the family and mostly in the past. 'I have tried great bleeding chunks of prose now that the boys are older but I don't think it's really my thing.'

Somehow I don't either. Ian's work embodies nostalgia and make believe. It indulges a particular view of a very English idyll which delights the eye and engenders a sense of well being. Exactly the way that Ian himself sees the world and his part in it.

Photographs by Richard Mewton.

A selection of Ian Beck's books

From HarperCollins:

Poppy and Pip's Bedtime , 0 00 198150 1, £6.99 hbk, 0 00 6645410, £3.99 pbk

Poppy and Pip's Walk , 0 00 198149 8, £6.99 hbk, 0 00 664540 2, £3.99 pbk

Poppy and Pip's Picnic (due Autumn 1997)

From Orchard:

Five Little Ducks , 185213 338 4, £7.99 hbk, 185213 497 6, £3.99 pbk

Little Angel , Geraldine McCaughrean, 185213 924 2, £8.99 hbk

The Orchard Book of Fairy Tales, retold by Rose Impey, 185213 382 1, £12.99 hbk, 185213 810 6, £6.99 pbk

From Oxford University Press:

Oranges and Lemons , compiled by Karen King,

0 19 2722816, £3.50 pbk

Ride a Cock Horse , compiled by Sarah Williams, 0 19 272284 0, £3.50 pbk

Round and Round the Garden , compiled by Sarah Williams, 0 19 272282 4, £3.50 pbk

From Scholastic:

Home Before Dark , 0 590 54277 X, £9.99 hbk (due September 1997)

Ian Beck's Picture Book , 0 590 54088 2, £9.99 hbk, 0 590 13715 8, £5.99 pbk

From Transworld:

Hush-a-bye Baby , chosen by Carolyn Fickling, 0 552 52656 8, £3.99 pbk

The Owl and the Pussy-cat , Edward Lear, 0 385 40570 7, £8.99 hbk, 0 552 52819 6, £3.99 pbk

The Teddy Robber , 0 552 52593 6, £3.99 pbk

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