Basil Hunnisett. *Engraved on Steel: The History of Picture Production Using Steel Plates*. Aldershot, Eng. and Brookfield, Vt: Ashgate, 1998. 387 pp.; £65. U.K., \$110.95 U.S. (hardcover). ISBN 0-859670-971-3.

Do any readers remember their days as an undergraduate, when a professor would begin to lecture about an initially deeply interesting subject, but would manage, both through the style of presentation and the level of detail, to make your eyes glaze over and gradually close as your brain shut down from information overload and ennui? That's kind of the way I felt as I made my way through this incredibly detailed history of steel engraving upon which Basil Hunnisett has obviously spent many decades of research. The author has created a *magnum opus* in which he traces steel engraving from the dawn of pre-history right down to the 1990s. The book is divided into two parts: the first, consisting of six chapters, focusses on the nature and development of steel engraving and its variants, and the history of its use in the British Isles; while the second and shorter part is concerned with developments elsewhere, with chapters devoted to Germany, France, other countries in Europe, and the United States; concluding with a final chapter on twentieth-century steel engraving. The whole is richly illustrated and supplemented by the inclusion of eight colour plates and 167 black-and-white plates, primarily drawn from the author's own private collection, which is in itself an important demonstration of the author's commitment to the subject at hand. Here I should add a personal complaint as an image archivist: neither the British Library Cataloguing in Publication data nor the Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data, supplied on the reverse of the title page, gives the reader or the library cataloguer any information about the nature, presence, or extent of illustrations in the text, in spite of the fact that they occupy perhaps 40% of the actual space in the book. Why is the presence of imagery so unimportant, especially in a book all about making pictures?

If I sound as if I didn't like what Hunnisett has accomplished in this outstanding book, let me correct the impression. He weaves a rich tapestry of information about the development and making of steel, about the use of steel for armour, weapons, and eventually for printing, and about the experimentation with and diffusion of steel-based printing techniques throughout the Western World, primarily in the 19th century. It was a learning experience for me (and I thought I knew a great deal about printmaking before I began this book) to understand that the technique of mezzotinting, which I once considered the most difficult of all printing processes, was actually looked upon as both a time-saving device, and an easier technique for most printers (63-4), although steel mezzotints did not have the lasting qualities needed to produce extra large print runs. Hunnisett's discursive analysis of the impact of Art Unions on print

production, his inclusion of the lesser-known fields of banknote, map, and stamp engraving as part of his study, and his clear explanations of the techniques of the Baxter print and the enamelled card, to take but two examples, all deserve high praise. He examines the methods, tools, papers, and printing equipment used to produce steel engraved prints in detail. He explains how both plates, and copies of plates, were transported from one country to another, and how printers moved from one country to another, bringing with them the expertise which enabled the printing industry to grow and flourish. Above all, he recounts the often moving stories of individual printers and their struggles both to make a living and to create innovative and ever more durable printing techniques for larger and larger audiences.

What surprised me most about this book was the absence of context. Nowhere in the body of the text does Hunnisett refer to his previous two major studies of steel engraving — *Steel Engraved Book Illustration in England* (1980), and *A Dictionary of British Steel Engravers* (1980) — which in fact should be looked upon as starting-points for this book. In fact, had Hunnisett used his first two books as templates for the third, he may have arrived at a far more successful conclusion. What burdens *Engraved on Steel* is the inclusion of endless lists of engravers' names and dates. To take but one example, Hunnisett, in commenting on Payne's Book of Art with the Celebrated Galleries of Munich, notes that 'Forty-four plates were done by 16 German engravers, i.e. Johann Leonhard Appold (1809-58), Eltzner, C. Eulenstein, Jacob Fleishmann (c. 1816-66), de Garlieb, H. Huber, Joseph von Keller (1881-73), Koch, Alfred Krausse (1829-94), Merkel, Adolf Neumann (1825-84), Gustav Planer (1818-73), Franz Adam Schröder (1809-75), Stein, Friedrich Wagner (1803-76) and Wolff (256-57). Name after name, date after date, pile up relentlessly, and often repetitiously — the Scottish-American engraver James Smillie is mentioned on eight different pages, although not once is his Canadian career, wonderfully explored by Mary Allodi and Rosemarie Tovell in their important study, *An Engraver's Pilgrimage: James Smillie in Quebec, 1821-1830* (1989), mentioned. The effect of these endless recitations and occasional repetitions is to deflect the reader's attention from the major narrative thread that Hunnisett is following. What would have made this study far stronger and more powerful in its impact would have been shorter and more direct narratives or chronologies of major developments, followed by a dictionary of engravers and a list of the major publications (and the engravers who worked on them) which Hunnisett cites in the course of his analysis.

What also seems to be missing is a *sense* of context — how did steel engraving fit into the overall pattern of printmaking developments, particularly from the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, especially in Great Britain? How important was lithography in destroying the market for steel engraving? Did steel engravers turn into lithographers? What was

the impact of wood engraving? How did processes such as rotary printing affect steel engraving? While these questions are touched upon, the answers are not readily apparent. A clearer and more precise chronological narrative, in which world-wide developments in steel engraving, and major publication projects involving the multiple use of the same images were enlarged upon and explained, would have been far more comprehensible to the average reader.

This study is also weaker when it turns to the history of steel engraving in European countries outside of Great Britain, France, and Germany. Austria, Belgium, Spain, Italy, and Sweden are all examined in one page or less, although Holland and Switzerland fare somewhat better. And the former colonies of the British Empire, including Australia, Canada, India, and New Zealand, are virtually invisible, except when the history of stamp engraving is discussed (45-62). One of the other weaknesses of the book is its index. New Zealand is not indexed, although its printing history is discussed and illustrated in some detail on pp. 50-52. Canada is similarly absent from the index, in spite of the fact that printing developments related to Canada are mentioned on pp. 35, 46, 50-51, and 334.

With all its faults, *Engraved on Steel* is nevertheless a must-have book for the print collector and bibliographer. Replete with facts, dates, definitions, and references, it provides an excellent analysis of many aspects of the world of picture production, especially in the nineteenth century. Hunnisett took on an enormous task in attempting to compile a history of picture production on steel plates, and although he does not wholly succeed, his efforts deserve to be applauded, and his book deserves to be bought by every library intent on understanding more about the contents of the books it collects.

The book is a solid physical object as well. Compact and well bound, with an easily readable font, and a wealth of good illustrations, well placed in relation to the text which they are intended to complement, this book has a pleasant 'feel' and look about it which should please any bibliophile.

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