

## JOHN WEBBER : ETCHINGS AND AQUATINTS

Mr A. A. St. C. M. Murray-Oliver's excellent research on John Webber's prints, the fruits of which appeared several years ago in *The Turnbull Library Record*,<sup>1</sup> deserves the commendation of amplification and emendation.

The details of Webber's life contained in the *Dictionary of National Biography* can usefully be supplemented by the *Schweizerisches Künstler-Lexikon*,<sup>2</sup> although his birthdate should be corrected to read 6 October 1751.<sup>3</sup> He died of diseased kidneys on 29 April 1793 in his Oxford Street lodgings. It might also be noted that the Swiss surname was Wäber, not the usually reported 'Weber'.

Mr Murray-Oliver's comments upon the prints are excellent, although a later researcher, profiting from that work, is able to make both caveats and additions. The common statement, for example, that Webber published a series of sixteen aquatints of Pacific views between 1788 and 1792 is, in fact, quite wrong. None of the sixteen prints between those dates are aquatints; all are soft-ground etchings with hand-coloured washes added.

Although Webber must have learned etching from his mentors in Bern and Paris, respectively Johann Ludwig Aberli and Johann Georg Wille, he employed the relatively new soft-ground method, one which required little skill but was particularly suited to a draughtsman like Webber. In the soft-ground process a needle is unnecessary; one need only draw the impression on paper laid over a softly-waxed plate.<sup>4</sup> These prints are, it seems, entirely Webber's production: drawn, etched, published and coloured by him.<sup>5</sup>

The Boydell folio of letterpress and prints is a more difficult matter. The prints are Webber's sixteen soft-ground etchings, aquatinted and then coloured by unknown hands. Mr Murray-Oliver believed them to be redrawn plates; I think they are Webber's plates, perhaps touched up where worn, overlaid with a crude aquatint tone and coarsely coloured by anonymous brushes.

It was Mr Murray-Oliver who first raised the puzzle of when these views were actually put before the public. The title-page bears an 1808 date but, as he noted, all the plates are dated 1 April 1809. Much more puzzling, some of the paper is watermarked 1819 or 1820. In his article, Mr Murray-Oliver posited two editions, one in 1809 and another ca. 1820-21. In a recent conversation, he seems persuaded that none were published until the later date, since he has located no set without some 1819/1820 watermarks.

The Boydell firm of print publishers was founded by the etcher John