

John Abell

Becca and her Children

In the 1830s, feelings among the urban and rural poor intensified in response to taxation, working conditions and lack of basic human rights as the effects of industrial capitalism were felt across Britain. It was a period of great civil unrest. Without political representation, rioting and public disorder were the only ways for the working class to confront authority and injustice.

During 1839 the combination of poor harvests and increasing road tolls, gave rise to the enigmatic figure of 'Rebecca' in Carmarthenshire and beyond, who, supported by 'her children' or 'daughters', exacted revenge by smashing and burning the privately-owned Turnpike Trusts. The fact that these scandalous night-time raids were undertaken by men dressed as women, meant that tales of the mischievous 'Rebecca' spread quickly given the sense of mystery that surrounded 'her'. At the height of the troubles, soldiers were dispatched to Llandeilo under the supervision of General George Rice Trevor (1795-1869), the son of Lord Dinefwr. His imposing portrait hangs in the dining room across the hall.

The resulting artworks by Abell are imagined fragments to a complex story. They are not literal interpretations but poetic assemblages, rich in sensation and metaphor. Here Abell plays with boundaries between animal and human, male and female, order and chaos. The collective impact of the vividly coloured paintings, the stark monochrome of the linocut and the more diffuse tonality of the etchings, is of an imaginary world that conveys a powerful sense of the fabric of history.

'Becca and her Children' is a magical evocation of community and social resistance, a distinctive historical encounter with place where Welsh identity is deeply rooted. Part parable, part folklore, Abell's otherworldly scenes possess a clear historical character yet contain elements that suggest contemporary relevance. In terms of a sense of time, they are hybrid forms reminding us of the significance of histories of oppression as a vital concern for the present.

"And they blessed Rebekah, and said unto her, thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them."

Genesis, XXIV:60

In summer 2019, Dinefwr commissioned John Abell as part of the National Trust's 'People's Landscape' programme. As artist in residence, he worked on a series of paintings, engravings and linocuts inspired by the Rebecca Riots that took place predominantly in west and mid-Wales between 1839 and 1843.

Since 1895 the National Trust, in its 125th anniversary year, continues to find ways to preserve and increase public access to the nation's natural and heritage resources.