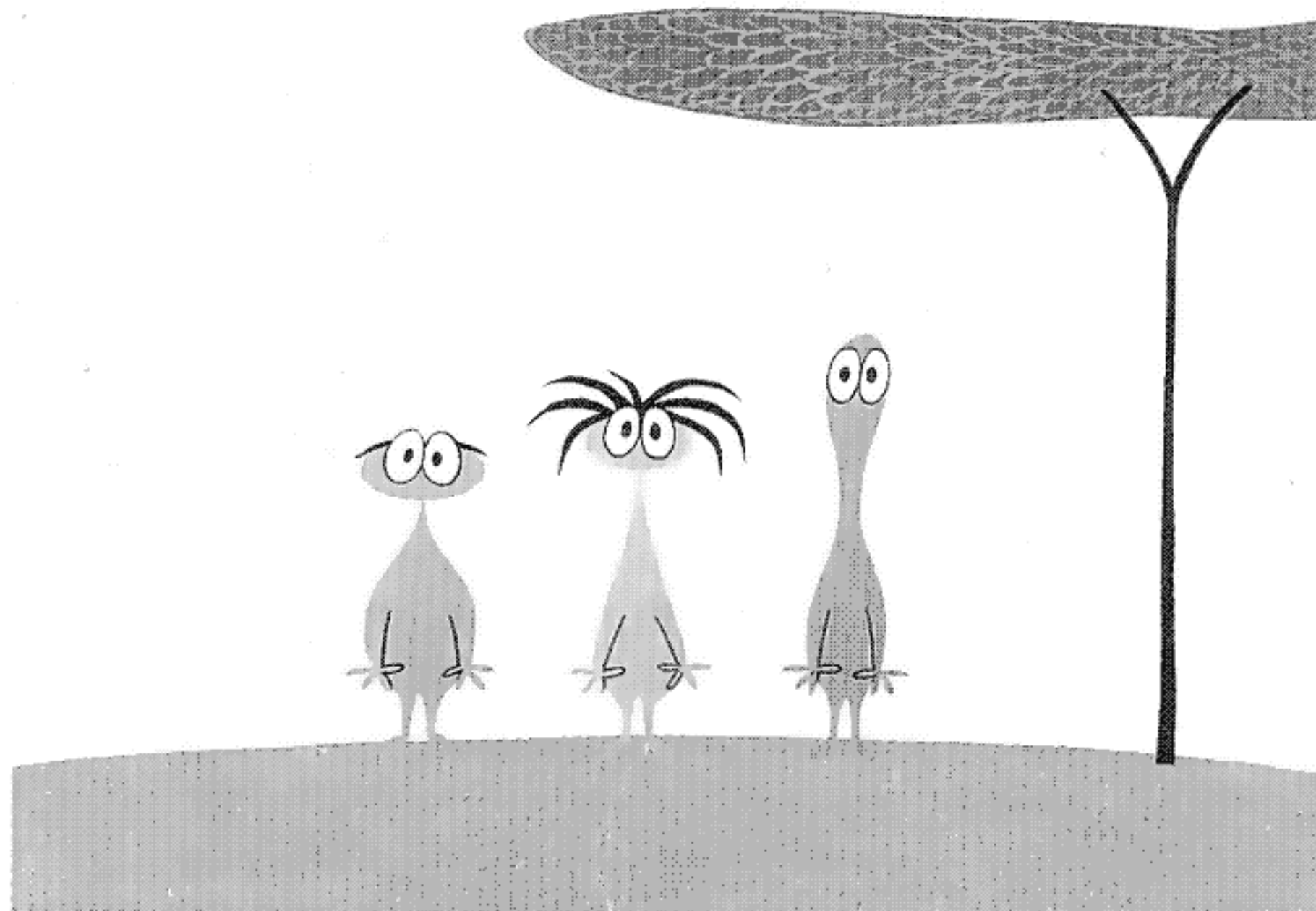


WHY THIS BOOK?

When I was ten years old I bought a paperback book, *How to Make Animated Cartoons*, by Nat Falk, published in 1940. It's now long out of print, but I used it as a handy reference guide for 1940s Hollywood cartoon styles when I designed the characters and directed the animation for *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*.

More importantly for me, however, the book was clear and straightforward; the basic information of how animated films are made registered on my tiny ten-year-old brain and, when I took the medium up seriously at twenty-two, the basic information was still lurking there.

I was living and painting in Spain when the incredible possibilities of what animation could do engulfed my mind. I planned my first film and took the money I had left from portrait painting to London. I starved for a bit, finally found work animating television commercials and managed to self-finance *The Little Island* – a half-hour philosophical argument without words which won several international awards.



The Little Island, 1958

Three years later, when I'd finished the film, the unpleasant realisation slowly crept up on me that I really didn't know very much about animation articulation, that is, how to move the stuff. To train myself I traced off the animation that Ken Harris had done of a witch in a Bugs Bunny cartoon (*Broomstick Bunny* – 1955, directed by Chuck Jones). Doing this only confirmed how little I understood about movement.

While I was making *The Little Island* I had seen a re-release of *Bambi*, but since I'd considered myself a revolutionary in the field of animation, I'd rejected the film as conventional. But when I finished my film, I saw *Bambi* again, and almost crawled out of the theatre on my hands and knees. 'How did they ever *do that*?' I'd learned just enough to realise that I really didn't know anything!



Photo Frank Herrmann

Animation master Ken Harris and wannabe, 1969

So, how and where to get the expert knowledge? I was working in England as an independent and didn't want to go into the Hollywood cartoon mill. I wanted it both ways. I wanted my artistic freedom but I also wanted the knowledge.

Preston Blair's *How to Animate Film Cartoons* was available, but because I was put off by the squashy-stretchy 1940s cartoon style, it was harder for me to grasp the underlying principles I was after – although it's a solid book and Preston was a very good animator from the Golden Age. It's ironic that forty years later I would become best known for my work on *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* – drawing in precisely the same style that had put me off learning from Preston.

Much later, I was able to work with Ken Harris, the first 'real' master animator I met, and whose witch in *Broomstick Bunny* I had traced off. It's generally agreed that Ken Harris was *the* master animator at Warner Bros. Certainly he was director Chuck Jones's lead man.

In 1967, I was able to bring Ken to England and my real education in animation articulation and performance started by working with him. I was pushing forty at the time and, with a large successful studio in London, I had been animating for eighteen years, winning over one hundred international awards.

After seven or eight years of working closely with Ken, he said to me, 'Hey Dick, you're starting to draw those things in the right *place*.'

'Yeah, I'm really learning it from you now, aren't I?' I said.

'Yes,' he said thoughtfully, 'you know . . . you could be an *animator*.'

After the initial shock I realised he was right. Ken was the real McCoy whereas I was just doing a lot of fancy drawings in various styles which were functional but didn't have the invisible 'magic' ingredients to make them really live and perform convincingly.

So I redoubled my efforts (mostly in mastering head and hand 'accents') and the next year Ken pronounced, 'OK, you're an animator.'

A couple of years after that, one day he said, 'Hey, Dick, you could be a *good* animator.'

When he was eighty-two, I would go out to Ken's trailer home in Ohai, California and lay out scenes with him that he would later animate. He'd often take a half-hour nap and I'd keep working.

One day he conked out for three hours and by the time he woke up, I had pretty much animated the scene. 'Sorry, Dick,' he said, 'you know . . . I'm just so god-damned *old*.' (long pause) 'Oh . . . I see you've animated the scene . . .'

'Yeah,' I said, 'I didn't know what else to do'.

'Nice drawings . . .' he said, then pointed. 'Hey, that's wrong! You've made a mistake.' And of course he was right.

'Dammit Ken,' I said. 'I've worked with you for thirteen years and I *still* can't get your "thing". I'm afraid it's going to die with you.'

'Ye-e-aaahhhh . . .' he snickered, then said, 'Well, don't worry, you've your own pretty good thing going.' Then he snickered again.

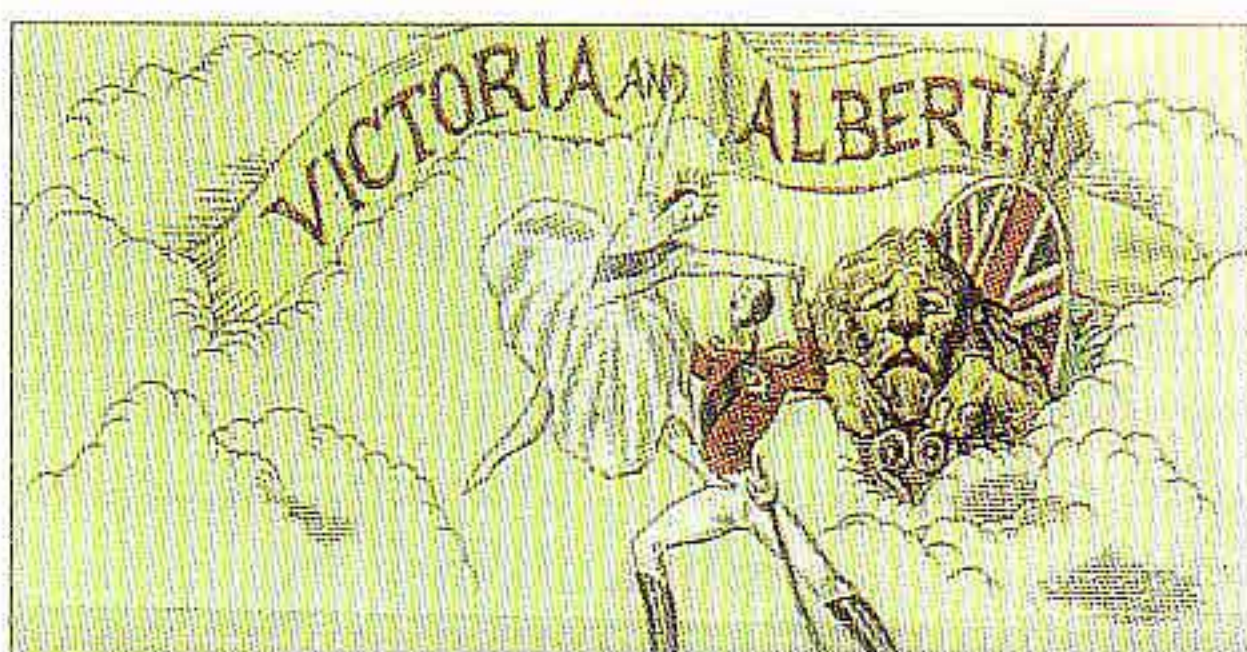
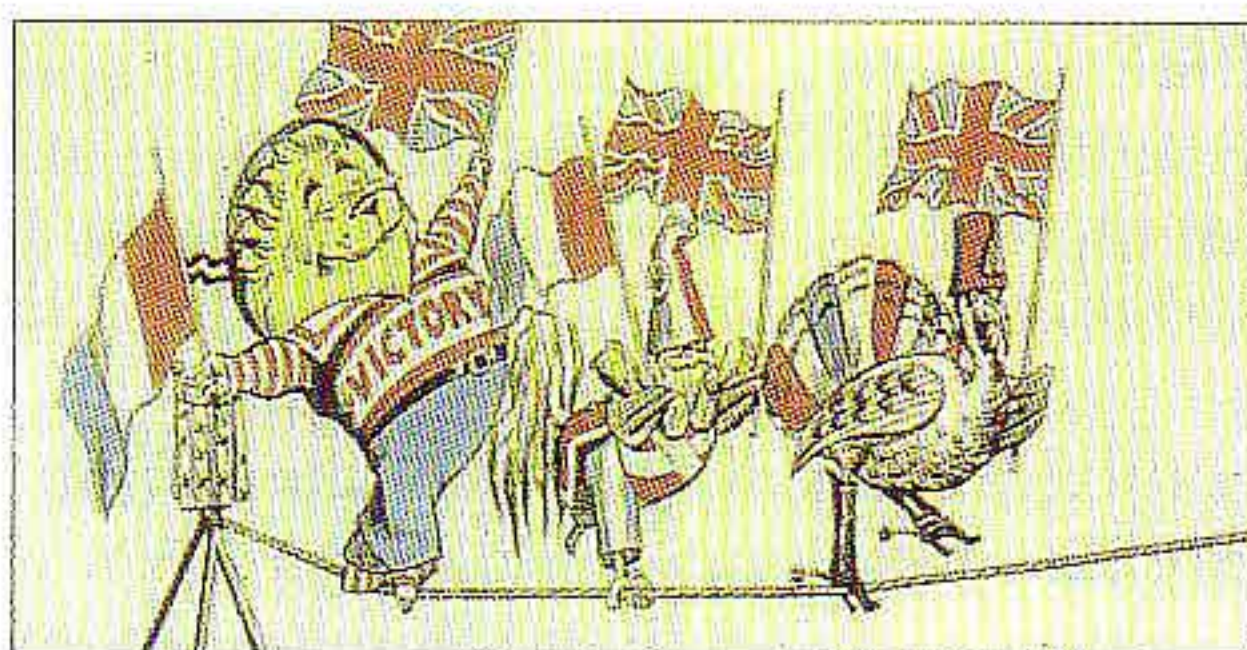
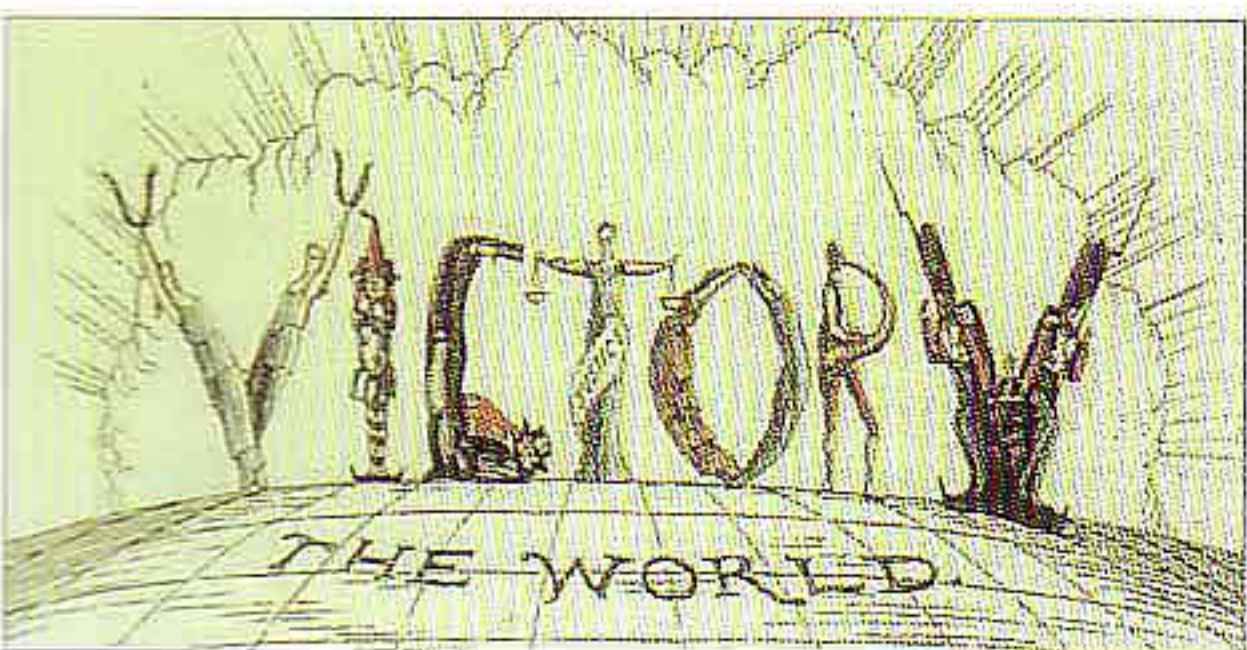
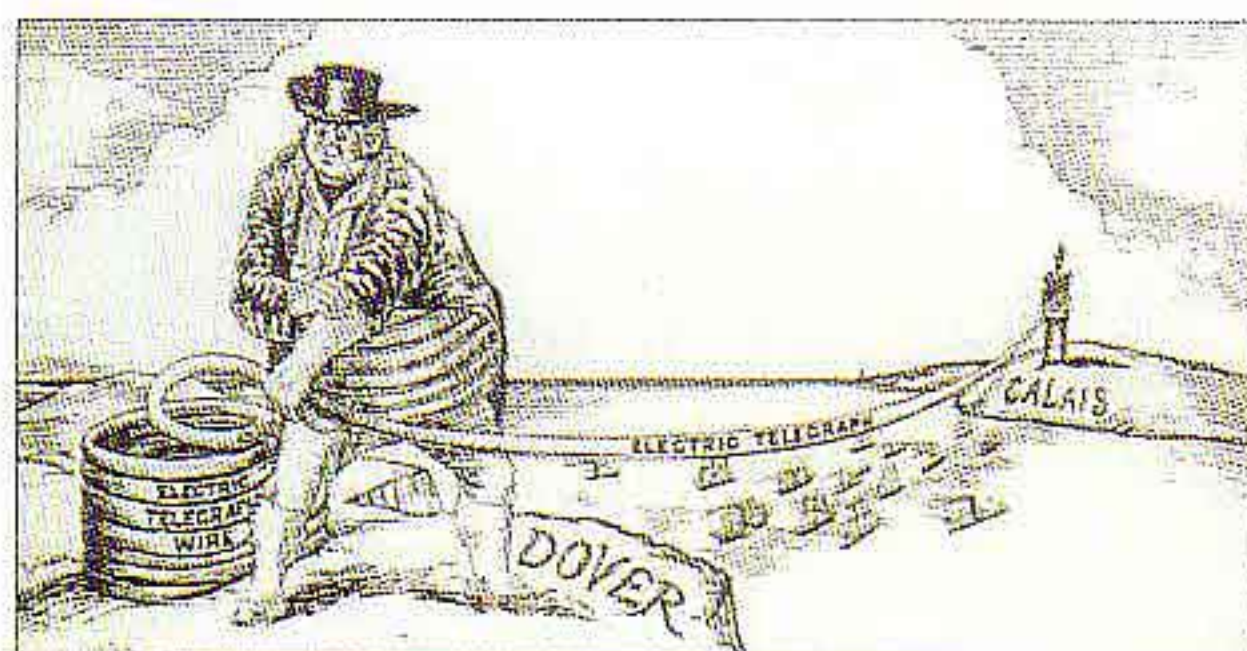
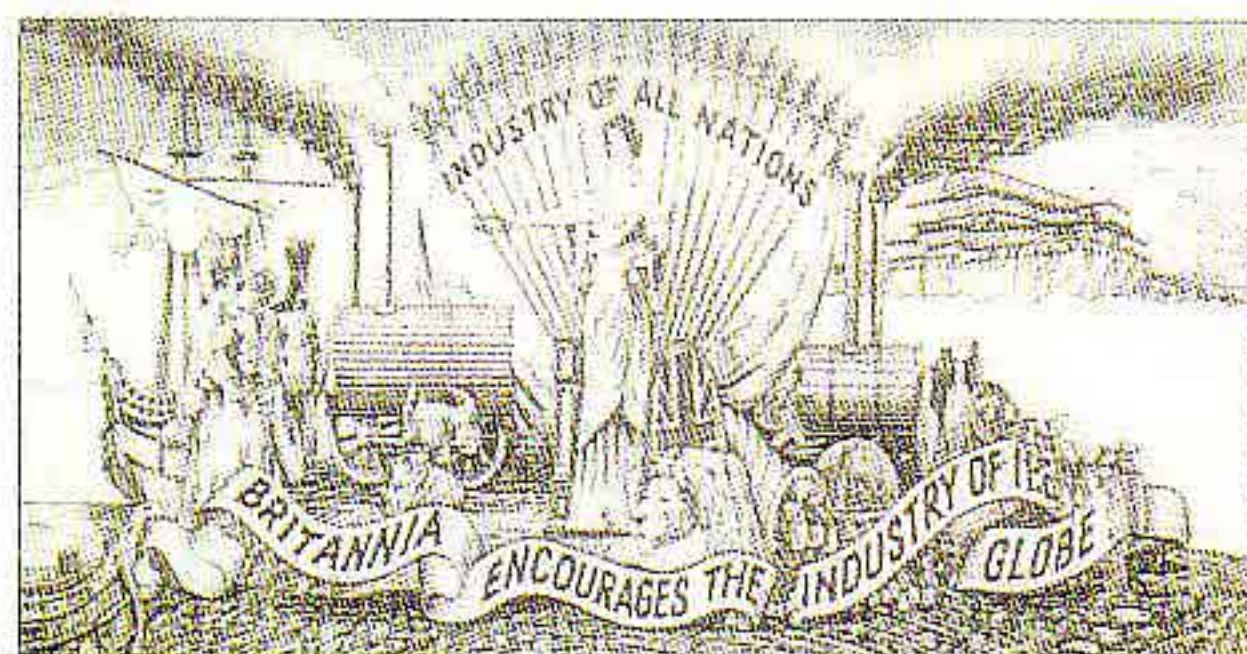
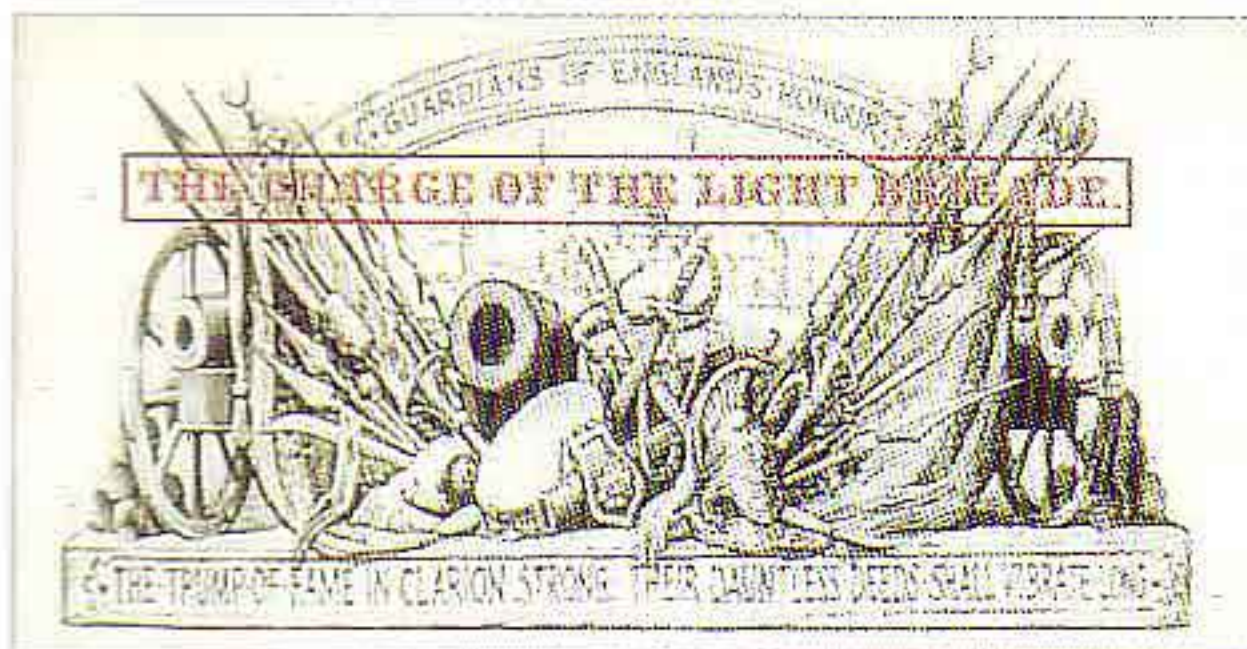
Ken was a very fast worker and I was always squeezing him for more and more footage and getting him to animate even when the taxi was ticking outside waiting for him to catch a plane home to the States.

When he died in 1982 at eighty-three, my real regret was that when I was a pallbearer I didn't have the guts to tuck a blackwing pencil into his hand in his open coffin. He would have loved that.

When I first started working with Ken, we had just completed the animation sequences which occur throughout Tony Richardson's epic film *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and I thought I was getting pretty proficient. When Ken saw it in the theatre he said, 'God, Dick, how did you guys ever do all that work?' (pause) 'Course it doesn't *move* too good . . .'

But I'm still not ashamed of our work on that film.

After that we went to see The Beatles' feature cartoon *The Yellow Submarine*. Though I liked the designer Heinz Edelman's styling, the 'start-stop, stop-start' jerky quality of most of the animation meant that after a half hour much of the audience went to the lobby. No matter how stylish or inventive – jerky or bumpy animation seems only to be able to hold the audience for about twenty-five minutes. While *The Yellow Submarine* had an enthusiastic cult following from the advertising agencies and university crowd, the general public avoided the film. It killed the non-Disney feature market for years.



My animated sequences from Tony Richardson's epic film, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, 1968.

A top United Artists executive who distributed *The Yellow Submarine* told me, 'This is the Beatles at the height of their popularity and *still* people stay away from non-Disney animation.' Film executives at that time always said of animation, 'If it doesn't have the Disney name on it, no one will go see it.' But the real point is, it wasn't just the Disney name – it was the Disney *expertise* that captivated the audience and held them for eighty minutes.

Almost the same week Disney's *The Jungle Book* came out and was an instant hit. I went along to see it reluctantly, thinking (as I still considered myself an innovator) that though there might be something interesting, it was probably predictable stuff.

That's how it started – with standard-issue wolves adopting the 'good housekeeping seal of approval' cutesy baby. I remember the boy Mowgli riding a black panther moving and acting in a clichéd way – until he got off. And suddenly everything changed. The drawing changed. The proportions changed. The actions and acting changed. The panther helped the boy up a tree and everything moved to a superb level of entertainment. The action, the drawing, the performance, even the colours were exquisite. Then the snake appeared and tried to hypnotise the boy and the audience was entranced. I was astonished.

The film continued at this high level, and when the tiger entered weighing eight hundred pounds and was both a tiger *and* the actor who did the voice (George Sanders), I realised I didn't even know *how* it was done – let alone ever be able to do it myself. I went back to my studio in shock and, through the night, I wrote a long fan letter.

In those scenes I thought I had recognised the hand of the great Disney genius Milt Kahl, who Ken Harris had raved about. The first name on the directing animator's credits *was* Milt Kahl, so I assumed the work that stunned me had been Milt's. And it turned out that it was – except for one shot that was by Ollie Johnston. Johnston and Frank Thomas had done lots of other marvellous work in the picture.

So I wrote to Milt saying that I thought *The Jungle Book* was the absolute high point of pure animation performance and that I didn't think it would ever be possible for anyone outside the Disney experience to reach that pinnacle.

It turned out Milt said it was the best letter they ever had – and even better, that he knew my work a bit and wanted to meet me.

Irrepressible ambition made me change my opinion that they *alone* could attain such heights; I figured, I think correctly, that given talent, experience, persistence – plus the knowledge of the experts – why should everything not be possible?

I couldn't stand it any more. I had to know *everything* about the medium and master all aspects of it. Cap in hand, I made yearly visits to Milt and Frank Thomas, Ollie Johnston and Ken Anderson at Disney.

One of the most important things Milt said was: 'Our animation differs from anyone else's because it is believable. Things have weight and the characters have muscles and we're giving the illusion of reality.'



A powerhouse of animation knowledge. From the left – Ken Harris, Grim Natwick and Art Babbitt, with students Richard Purdum and me outside my Soho Square studio in London, 1973.

But how to make it believable? I didn't go there to drink Milt's bathwater or to find out what Frank Thomas had for breakfast. I would fire my carefully prepared list of questions at them and later write down everything they said. These wonderful virtuosos became my friends and were incredibly generous with their help. As Milt said, 'If you ask questions you find out what you want to know. *If you're lucky enough to ask someone who knows.*'

I was also fortunate enough to enlist the marvellous legendary animator Art Babbitt as a collaborator and teacher. Babbitt had developed Goofy and animated the Mushroom Dance in *Fantasia*. He 'dumped his kit' of knowledge by giving several month-long in-house seminars as well as working with me in my London and Hollywood studios for several years.

In 1973, I hired the eighty-three-year-old – but still brilliant – Grim Natwick as a 'live-in' tutor in my London studio. Grim had made his name designing Betty Boop and animating most of Snow White herself in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. I also worked closely with Emery Hawkins who Ken Harris regarded as the most imaginative animator. Emery was wildly creative and rotated in and out of every studio. I was also able to work for a short time with Abe Levitow, Gerry Chiniquy and Cliff Nordberg. Dick Huemer, one of the first New York pioneer animators, and later a key Disney story director (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Dumbo*, *Fantasia* and all the early Disney features) also gave me a very clear picture of the early days of animation.

Most of them are gone now but this book is full of their accumulated knowledge and craft.



I scribbled this of Milt when he was lecturing us at my studio. Milt is saying, 'Don't listen to Dick, he's too technical.'

Milt was always encouraging me to do my own personal, more unconventional work, which he liked – but I wanted the knowledge first.

Two geniuses at once tutor the author – Frank Thomas standing and Milt Kahl at the desk, early 1970s.



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'The Arthurian Legend' was a formidable professor who regarded the professional skills of the animator as being equivalent to those of a concert pianist.



Art in action: his first month long seminar at my London studio was like water in the desert for us.

In the three-day masterclasses I've been giving lately, some experienced professionals initially feel that we're running over material that they're quite familiar with. Then about half way through the seminar things deepen and on the last day it all suddenly knits together. Some even describe it as an epiphany. Well, it sure was for me when I finally 'got it'.

So please read the whole thing.

Animation is just doing a lot of simple things – *one at a time!* A lot of really simple things strung together doing one part at a time in a sensible order.

The movie actor, Scott Wilson sat through my three-day San Francisco masterclass. To my surprise he came up at the end and said, 'Of course you realise, Dick, that *this whole thing* has been about acting.'

I said, 'What?' and Scott said, 'These are the *exact* equivalent methods, exercises and analyses we actors do in our acting workshops.'

So acting is intrinsically part of the whole. And if you can't draw or articulate movement how are you ever going to do the acting?

Someone once asked Milt Kahl: 'How did you plan out the counteraction you used on that character?'

Milt blew up: 'That's the wrong way to look at it! Don't think of it like that! I just concentrate on giving the performance – *that's* what's important! The play's the thing. You'll get all tangled up if you think of it in a technical way!'

Of course he's right. If a musician knows his scales, he can concentrate on giving the performance and bringing out the ideas inherent in the music. But if he constantly has to think of the mechanics of what he's doing – then he can hardly play.

Therefore, if we know and understand all the basics – then we've got the tools to create. Only *then* we can give the performance!

This book is an anatomy course in animation. Just like an anatomy course in life drawing, it shows you how things are put together and how they work. This knowledge frees you to do your own expression.

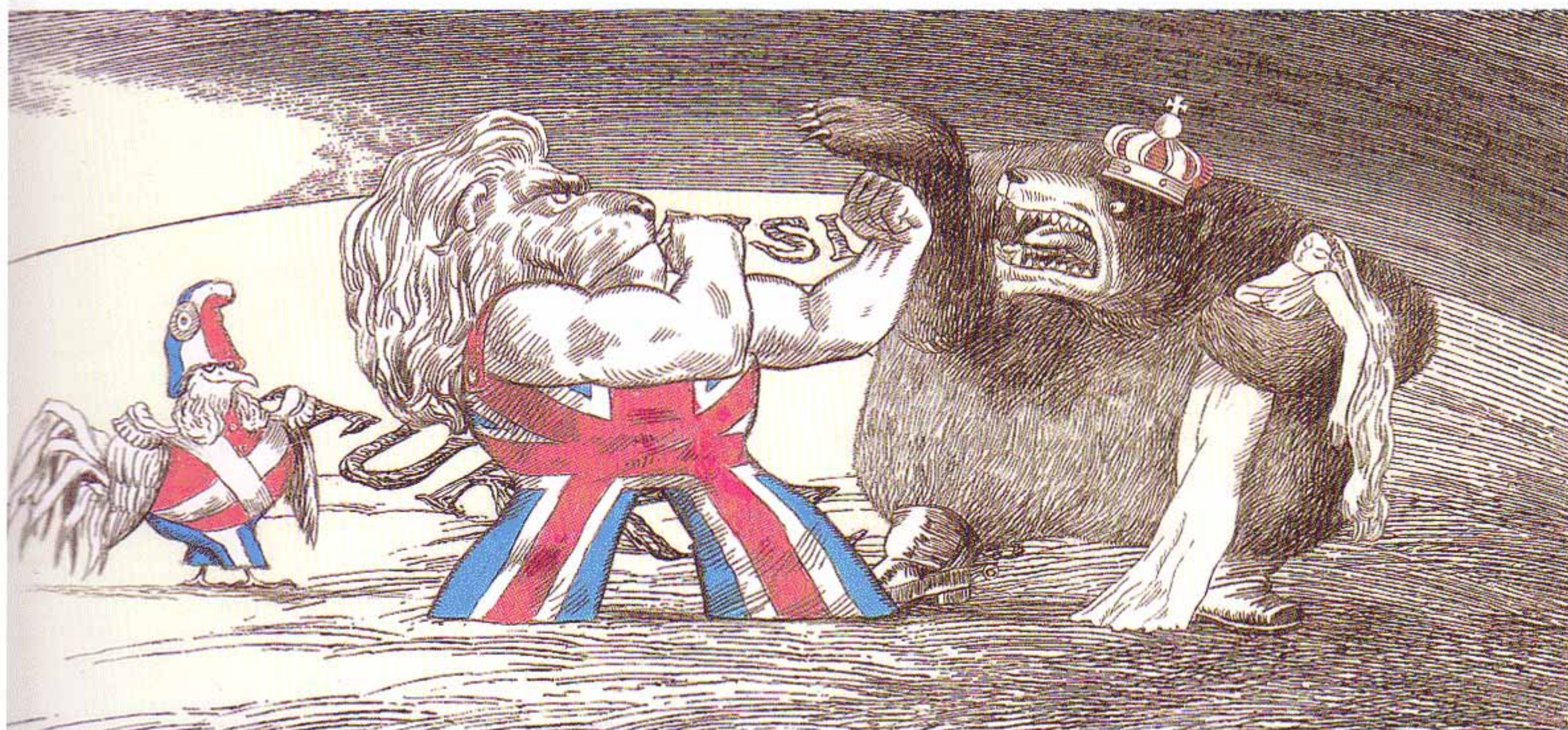
It takes time. I didn't encounter Ken Harris until I was nearly forty and he was sixty-nine. I had to *hire* most of my teachers in order to learn from them.

I hired Ken in order to get below him and be his assistant, so I was both his director and his assistant. I don't know if this is original, but I finally figured out that to learn or to 'understand' I had to 'stand under' the one who knows in order to catch the drippings of his experience.

There's a tale about a decrepit old Zen master wrestler. A very fit and brilliant young wrestler begs the old master to take him on and show him the master's ninety-nine tricks.

The old man says, 'Look at me, I'm old and decrepit and I'm not interested.'

The young man keeps pestering the old man who says, 'Look, son, I'm fragile now and when I show you the ninety-nine tricks, you'll challenge me, they always do – and look at me, you'll make mincemeat of me.'



The Charge of the Light Brigade, 1968

'Please, oh please, master,' pleads the powerful young man. 'I promise I will never challenge you! Oh please teach me the ninety-nine tricks.'

So reluctantly the old man teaches him until the young man has mastered the ninety-nine tricks. The young man becomes a famous wrestler and one day takes his master into a room, locks the door and challenges him.

The old man says, 'I knew you'd do this – that's why I didn't want to teach you in the first place.'

'Come on, old man, there's just me and you in here,' says the young one, 'Let's see what you're made of.'

They start and right away the old man throws the young fellow out of the window. The crumpled-up young man moans up from the street below, 'You didn't show me that one!'

'That was number one hundred,' says the old man.

This book is the ninety-nine tricks. The hundredth trick is called talent.

I became a repository for various strands of animation lore and I've taken all this stuff and given it my own twist. The goal here is to master the mechanics in order to do new things. Get the mechanics into your bloodstream so they just become second nature and you don't have to think about them and can concentrate on giving the performance.

I remember once saying to Emery Hawkins (a wonderful, unsung animator), 'I'm afraid my brains are in my hand.'

Emery said, 'Where else would they be? It's a language of drawing. It's not a language of tongue.'

So everything I know about animation that I can put into words, scribbles and drawings is here in this book.