

Book Review – Richard Higginson

The Radical Potter: Josiah Wedgwood and the Transformation of Britain

By Tristram Hunt

Allen Lane, 2021, 322 pp, hardback £25.00, ISBN 976-0-241-28789-7

In the view of W.E. Gladstone, a shrewd judge, Josiah Wedgwood (1730–95) was the greatest man ever to apply himself to ‘the important work of uniting art with industry’. Tristram Hunt, the author of this magisterial study, supports this by saying that ‘Wedgwood’s marriage of technology and design, retail precision and manufacturing efficiency, transformed for ever the production of pottery, and ushered in a mass consumer society’ (p.xviii). Perceptively, he compares Wedgwood to Apple’s Steve Jobs in his ‘interdisciplinary thinking, aesthetic control, production oversight and relentlessly experimental frame of mind’ (ibid.).

Hunt, who is a distinguished historian, has strong motivation for writing this book. He served as Labour MP for Stoke-on-Trent Central from 2010 to 2017, led the local campaign to save the Wedgwood Museum and is Director of the Victoria & Albert Museum which contains some of Wedgwood’s most brilliant creations, including the Portland Vase. He brings to the task erudition, detailed knowledge and a fluent, seemingly effortless writing style.

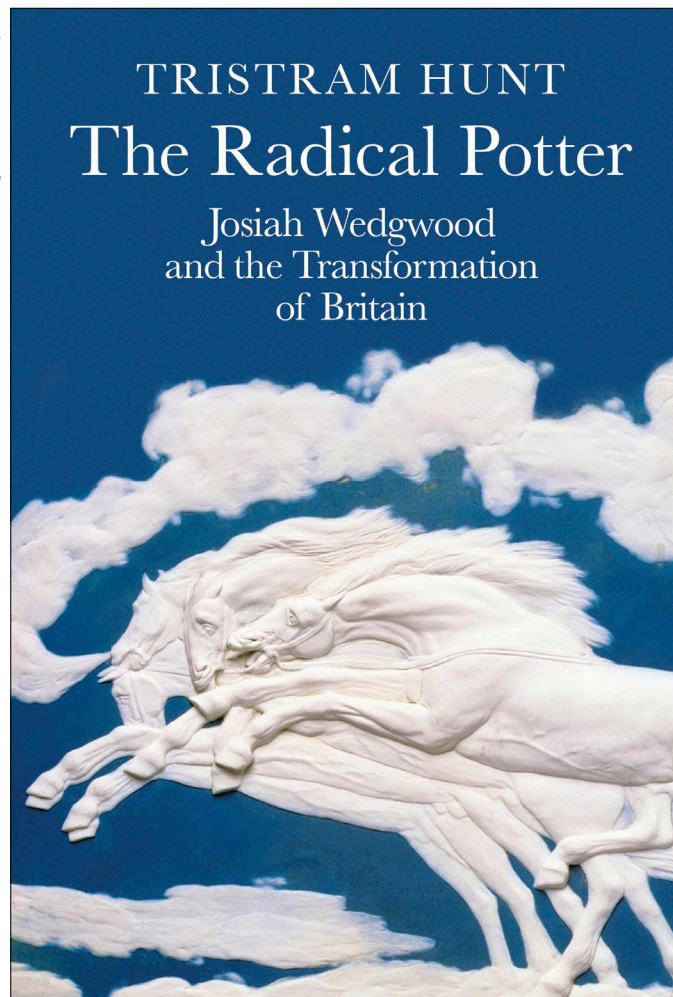
Josiah’s start to life was unpropitious. He was the 12th child of a family that ran a pottery business, but it was only one of many in the rich clay and coal seam of North Staffordshire, a “rugged pott-making spot of earth”. Josiah’s

apprenticeship was severely affected at the tender age of 12 by a bout of smallpox, which affected his right leg and left him unable to operate the foot-pedal on the potter’s wheel. (A later deterioration in his leg meant it was eventually amputated – a traumatic event which Wedgwood endured with

with his close friend Thomas Bentley, who was based in Lancashire.

Wedgwood was a Unitarian, the branch of Dissenting Christianity which deviates from belief in God as Trinity. In discussing Wedgwood’s ‘relentless tendency to experiment’, Hunt says that ‘like so many eighteenth-century

Unitarians, he was brought up to question established authority and credal dogma and seek his own understanding of nature and revelation...the wonder of the divine presence came not just through the Word of Scripture, but also through the patterns and processes of the natural world. Raised in this tradition of rational dissent, Wedgwood learned from an early age that science and Christian revelation were mutually supportive of one another’ (p.35). Without wishing to dispute that this is an accurate portrayal of Wedgwood’s attitude, and despite the fact that Hunt draws frequently on his correspondence, direct quotations which support it are curiously lacking. Hunt appears less interested in the details of Wedgwood’s faith than many other aspects of his life; he doesn’t mention, for instance, that the potter



great fortitude.) But this early setback actually proved providential because it caused him to focus on the wider aspects of business and in particular design and innovation. He set up on his own at the age of 29, in 1759, but the business really took off after he entered into partnership

was a regular attender at his local Unitarian chapel. But he does mention John Wesley meeting Wedgwood and saying of him that “he is small and lame but his soul is close to God” (p.42) – so his faith clearly made a positive impression on the great evangelist.

Hunt is excellent at placing the developments Wedgwood pioneered in his business in a wider social and economic context. He notes how before the Industrial Revolution there was an 'Industrious Revolution', a notable acceleration in the tempo of labour, business and trade across Britain. Mass markets were opening up, with the rich and upper class setting trends, and other sectors of society who were gradually becoming more affluent following in their train. Wedgwood and Bentley were sensitive to fashion and changing tastes. They broke new ground in printing beautiful catalogues but behind the clever salesmanship were genuinely excellent products. These included Creamware (white earthenware with coloured glazes) and Jasperware (a stoneware body most commonly stained pale blue with white neo-classical reliefs).

Wedgwood established his business afresh on a site near Stoke to which he gave the classical name Etruria. This was situated close to the Trent and Mersey Canal (a key transport artery which he persuaded local landowners to build) and included the family house, his factory and a village of 76 workers' houses of a high standard, with communal bakehouses and pump rooms and, in time, even a bowling green, 'a Town for the men to live in', as he put it.

He therefore anticipated benevolent nineteenth-century Nonconformist employers who housed their employees in good conditions. However, we may have a glimpse of his faith in his frequent complaining about 'St. Monday' – the practice of his workers taking Monday off after the weekend – and their preference for holidays in

'Wakes Week' in the summer, rather than a long holiday at Christmas (p.171).

In the face of a severe economic downturn, Wedgwood found that careful division of labour, a trend that Adam Smith concurrently wrote about in *The Wealth of Nations*, resulted in better quality and lower costs. Hunt writes 'And here we have the uncomfortable irony that Wedgwood, a potter of supreme personal creativity' instituted 'a conveyor belt of ceramic production that consciously sought to strip away the human touch' (pp.177-8). Hunt then goes on to quote Marx and Engels, and the evils of the conveyor belt. There was however no actual conveyor belt at Etruria, and the division of labour and the production line are acceptable, and probably essential, in modern manufacturing. The more inhuman aspects of the conveyor belt system came later.

Hunt calls Wedgwood 'the Radical Potter' but the overall evidence of this biography is more mixed. For much of his career he courted the favour of the rich and powerful; these included Queens Charlotte of England and Catherine of Russia. Hunt recognises that Wedgwood's radical sensibilities 'could sometimes be overlooked in the face of commercial opportunities' (p.180) and that he often expressed an instinctive belief in the morality of British imperial actions abroad. Wedgwood manufactured medallions of military heroes. Yet he was critical of government policy in relation to the breakaway United States and was enthusiastic about the promised democracy and social equality of the French Revolution. (We are not told what he thought about the revolutionaries'

falling out with each other and resulting carnage.) He became persuaded of the wrongness of slavery and commissioned the famous sculpture showing a male slave on bended knee, "Am I not a Man and a Brother?" which became an emblem of the abolitionist movement.

In an outspoken Epilogue, Hunt is critical of Wedgwood's family successors, who allowed the business to decline until Josiah Wedgwood V, in the 1930s, who instituted a revival that lasted 50 years. The 1987 merger with Waterford Crystal, however, proved disastrous, and Hunt's strongest ire is reserved for the management that destroyed the business over the next 20 years. 'The lessons of Wedgwood's commercial life – the passion for beauty, unending focus on production processes, relentless innovation, feel for fashion, management of suppliers – were dismissed by an incompetent elite with no understanding of what they owned or of the people of North Staffordshire' (pp.267-8). If Hunt is right this was indeed a culpable tragedy.

Christian businesspeople wishing to find heroes of the past to emulate have understandably focused on a later generation of Victorian entrepreneurs. Hunt's biography makes clear that the latter stood in the footsteps of an eighteenth century giant – albeit a physically small one – in Josiah Wedgwood. The pity is, however, that Hunt doesn't have more to say about Wedgwood's faith or give us direct quotations illustrating it. This leaves the reader uncertain whether that faith was a source of genuine personal inspiration to Wedgwood or simply part of the intellectual background that influenced his thinking. 



Richard Higginson was Director of Faith in Business at Ridley Hall from 1989 until his retirement in 2018. He is now Chair of Faith in Business. He is a founder-editor of FiBQ and the author of several books, including *Faith, Hope & the Global Economy* and (with Kina Robertshaw) *A Voice to be Heard*. He is grateful to John Lovatt for his assistance in writing this review.