
Opening Extract from...

The Potter's Hand

Written by A. N. Wilson

Published by Atlantic Books

A. N. Wilson

THE POTTER'S HAND

ATLANTIC BOOKS
LONDON

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Atlantic Books,
an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-84887-951-5
Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-84887-952-2
E-book ISBN: 978-0-85789-916-3

Printed in Great Britain

Atlantic Books
An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London WC1N 3JZ

www.atlantic-books.co.uk

The Men that invent new Trades, Arts or Manufactures, or new Improvements in Husbandry, may be properly called Fathers of their Nation

~Benjamin Franklin

Part One

The Frog Service

I

THE UNOILED HINGE JOINED ITS MELANCHOLY WHINE TO the opium-dosed whimper of the patient who sat gagged in his chair, and to the swift rasping of the saw. The door creaked ajar in the very moment that the doctor sawed off the leg of Sukey's Pa.

—B-b-best done fast, Dr Darwin was saying, and whether Mr Bent, who performed the operation, was following advice, or moving fast by instinct, to get the whole cruel necessity over as quickly as possible, who was to say? Certainly not a child aged two, who saw it through the crack in the door: the saw going through flesh and bone, the blood splashing.

No one had intended the child to be within earshot, or sight, of the gruesome event. But the Brick House was not especially large. When the child was born, her mother's screams could be heard not only in every corner of the house, but in every house for yards around in Burslem, that undulating little village. Indeed, all the thirty hands in the adjoining works had heard her hollering. But today, when the Master was to undergo his 'execution', as it had been termed by Heffie Bowers, the hands were quiet, going about their business in a subdued mood, speaking in hushed voices, as if a death had occurred. As well it might. Most died from the pain and the shock of amputation, which is why, both doctors said, it could not be done fast enough. Heffie said that when one of her uncles, who went

for a soldier, had his arm off, he'd passed out just at the sight of the saw. Rusty. *It wunna clane, lahk*, and looked as if the blood of other executions still clung to it.

You'd hope better from Mr Bent, of course. He was the best surgeon in the district, and rode over from Newcastle-under-Lyme to administer potions to the hands. Bent had delivered all three of Mrs Wedgwood's children.

Richard, the baby, was scarcely a year old on the day of the execution, and himself sickly that day. John, almost always known as Jack, was a puling twenty months. It was the knowing little Sukey who was at large, in the next room. Sally, her mother, had assumed that Heffie was minding her. Baby Richard was screaming, it was only colic, Heffie was sure, and he had woken Jack, who was letting out his usual roars, and Annie the nursery maid was unable to quiet either of them. Such a commotion was the last thing that either Mr Bent or Mr Jos would want at that moment, and Heffie had gone upstairs to loll and lah and rock the little ones.

So Sukey was alone in the little panelled eating-room. In the adjoining parlour, with its pretty apple-green panels, the patient sat, without his breeches, in a chair covered with Turkish towels. His wife, Sally, held one of his hands, and Dr Darwin stood with a hand on one of his shoulders. Mr Bentley was there too, Josiah's friend and business partner.

—Oh, Jos, said his wife.

—Do you feel the effects of the laudanum, sir? Mr Bent had enquired. There was a quaver in his voice as he had produced the fret-saw from its case.

—What must be done, must be done, said Josiah Wedgwood.

The evenness with which he spoke, the absence of slurring, demonstrated to his horrified hearers that he was still conscious.

—Perhaps w-w-we should wait a few more minutes, s-s-sir, for

the narcotics to take effect, stammered Dr Darwin, whose large fleshy hand stopped kneading the patient's shoulder and reached out for Sal's hand.

It was then, with the whine of the unoiled hinge, that the door had swung open a few inches. It was easily wide enough for Sukey to view the spectacle. Afterwards, it became part of the family legend that she had spied on the execution. She 'remembered' the story, but whether she remembered the event was a matter about which she would change her mind in the course of the next forty-nine years. Was memory something which was carried about in one's brain, or did the brain, so to say, retain the capacity to repeat stories to itself, supplying images and incidents which fluctuated and altered with the perspective of time? Their friend Coleridge would write about images on the surface of a stream passing away when a stone was scattered, and then re-forming – though not in his mind.

Mr Bent had lifted the linen sheet in which he had wrapped his patient. When Dr Darwin, partly with an involuntary pleasantry, partly in deadly earnest, spoke, he did so for both the Wedgwoods.

—Remember to c-c-cut off the right leg, I entreat, he said.

Darwin wedged the gag into his patient's mouth. There reaches a point where the surgeon's task is inseparable from the torturer's, which is why the faint-hearted should never enter the medical profession. Her husband squeezed Sally's hand so tightly that she thought he would crunch her bones. The saw began its work. The first thing to happen was a fountain of blood, spattering all the towelling which had been laid in circles round the chair as well as the clothes of those who stood by. With each motion of the saw, with its dreadful butcher's-shop scrapings, Wedgwood flinched and shook his upper body.

—If you were able, sir, to remain stiller, said Mr Bent.

The scrunching changed to a slithering, as when the chump chops

have been placed on the butcher's board, and he has turned to slice steaks. All the colour from Josiah Wedgwood's normally rosy face had vanished. He inhaled deeply through his nose, and then out through his mouth, several times, but no further whimper, no cry came from him.

—It is done, sir. And now I must dress the wound.

—It were clumsier than the way our Caleb ud darn a sock, not that ah'd let 'im loose wi' me needles!

So Heffie had declared, when she had helped to dress the wounds in after days. And, however clumsy the needlework, during all this, the stitching and the swabbing, Wedgwood was unable to remain silent. The first stabbing of the darning needle made him yelp. Darwin held out a small phial of laudanum to the patient's lips. When he had swallowed some more of the narcotic drops, Wedgwood let out the little yowl which a dog might emit while he thrashed, and then he slumped. This was the moment, as Mr Bent would later confess, when a patient often dies, either through loss of blood or through sheer pain.

Sukey, a thin little fairy with wavy mouse-blonde hair and a long face un-childlike in its attentive stare, its pallor, its obliquity, looked at the participants in the drama: Mr Bent, swabbing and dabbing; her mother being comforted by the gargantuan, stammering figure of Dr Darwin; and the remarkable person who sat in the chair minus his right leg, her father, Josiah Wedgwood, Master Potter.

One day, far in the future, when her father was dead, Sukey would marry the son of Dr Darwin. Her child, the grandchild of Josiah Wedgwood and Erasmus Darwin, would be Charles Darwin, whose theories about the Origin of Species by Natural Selection would revolutionize the world. From the loins of Josiah Wedgwood and Erasmus Darwin would spring a great intellectual dynasty. From thence came Tom Wedgwood, Josiah's son, who was the pioneer of

photography; Ralph Vaughan Williams, whose music captured the English soul; Veronica Wedgwood, whose histories of the Civil Wars evoked the English past; Gwen Raverat the engraver; and dozens of others. But at present, as the little girl Sukey watched them patch up the stump of her father's leg, it was 1768. Across the seas, the Massachusetts Assembly was dissolved for refusing to assist in the collection of taxes. Louis XV had just completed the building of Le Petit Trianon at Versailles for his mistress Madame de Pompadour. The author of *Tristram Shandy* had just died in London. His body would be snatched from its grave and appear a few days later on a slab in the Cambridge dissecting room of Charles Collignon. One of the students standing by was a parishioner of Sterne's and passed out at viewing the corpse of 'Parson Yorick'. Such are the strange quirks which occur in real life, but which we dare not introduce into fiction. It was not Josiah Wedgwood who would die at this date. He had other works to do. It was Richard Wedgwood, the baby whose cries could be heard while his father's leg was removed, who died five days after the amputation.

2

AND NOW, SEVEN YEARS HAVE PASSED. AND WHAT SWISS goose supplied the feather which is now being clutched by a secretary in a wig, as he sits at a small table in the Château de Ferney hard by Lake Geneva?

Beyond the long window, overlooking the back of the château, is framed a view of formal gardens and, beyond the low box hedges, there are the Alps. And in obedience to his master's voice, the secretary scratches the words across the page. The wet ink shines on the quill's tip, as, hopping from one leg, at the other end of the bedchamber, a very old, very thin man gets dressed. He smells, the old man. He smells partly of urine, and partly of that decayed old-man smell which almost all ancient people have when they emerge from a night's sleep.

François-Marie Arouet skips gently, thrusting the withered hams into his breeks. François-Marie has been left behind in sleep. It is once again Voltaire who arises, Voltaire whose words echo across the world, threatening thrones and altars, but above all altars. From this Swiss château the famous playwright has become the voice of dissent everywhere. From this new-built famous spot, he has vowed to wipe out the Infamy – the Infamous Superstitions of the Roman Church, the Infamous Privilege of the Old Order – and to replace it with Reason, with Reasonableness, with Light.

His playful spaniel larks about as the great man balances on one leg and inserts one skinny calf into his breeches, his nightshirt rides up his scrawny shank, and his nightcap, a forlorn mitre, droops on his head. He is now over eighty. His cheeks are quite hollow. His nose and chin are sharp as a corpse's. His eyes luminesce, coruscate, with irrepressible glee, for he senses the world going his way.

As the philosopher-playwright paused, stocking in hand, his little dog grabbed the sock and nearly pulled him over. Voltaire shook the garment.

—Let go! Yeki, let go!

He named the spaniel bitch Yeki after Yekaterina, the great Empress of Russia, for they lived in times when the hierarchies of things were reversed. Though he could be a courtier with the best of them, and lard the enlightened despots – Frederick of Prussia and Catherine of Russia – with compliments to their learning, their foresight, their musicality, and in the case of the substantial German ruler of Russia, their sexual allure, both sides in these courtly friendship-games knew who was the master. Frederick and Catherine, perhaps alone among the European potentates, were intelligent enough to understand the inexorable march of change.

—Yeki, I say, let go!

The dog pulled vigorously on the well-made stockings, but the old man's grip was tighter than a spaniel's jaw, and he pulled the sock, moist with dribble, out of the animal's mouth. He sat down again on his bed to pull on the stockings.

—Should we write to Mr Franklin? he mused aloud to the secretary. He is in Paris, and wrote to us yesterday. It would be good to hear at first hand.

Voltaire shrugged, smiling to himself. Franklin was a coarse fellow, but a brilliant one. Not only was he tapping, with his experiments in Natural Philosophy, the very forces of Nature itself – tapping

the electrical power of lightning, even – but he also, this Boston tallow-chandler, was alive to the no less explosive convulsions which prepared themselves to ignite the world. His 'Edict of the King of Prussia' a few years back had been enjoyed by Frederick himself as well as by Voltaire. In the Edict, Frederick had imposed taxes on the inhabitants of England because they were a colony, so to say, settled long ago by Angles, Saxons and Jutes from old Germany. All the arguments deployed by the King in Franklin's satirical pamphlet were the ones used by Lord North's ludicrous Ministry in London to impose taxes upon their colonists in America. And now Franklin had himself been in London, and in Paris, arguing the colonists' case. It would have been good to discuss these matters with him. Voltaire was an Anglophile and the dispute between the thirteen colonies and the old country was a distress to him. But there could be no doubts about where justice lay. The English would win the battles in the short term. It was said that the Virginians had sent a ship to France to buy ammunition, but what could untrained farmers from America do against the thousands of German mercenaries at King George's disposal? The English would send their redcoats to put down any insurrection which the Americans might offer. The colonists would, Voltaire had little doubt, submit. But it was ideas, the idea of Liberty, the idea of an independent republic without kings, that would ultimately prevail.

So, to whom should the next letter of the morning be written? Letters had been flooding in to express sympathy upon the illness of his beloved niece Madame Denis. The ancient cynical face creased with contempt as he read them. These bloodhounds wanted him, by one hint or phrase, to admit in writing what everyone knew, that this woman, his niece, was also his lover. Since 'everyone' knew it, why should he bother either to confess to it, or to deny? God knew the truth.

With his breeks, breeches and stockings on, Voltaire now padded to the window. It was a beautiful March day in this year of 1775. He could see the new church which he had recently had built – with its Latin inscription in its porch: DEO EREXIT VOLTAIRE. 'Voltaire built this for God'. Was it an act of piety, or was it like his letters to King Frederick and the Empress Catherine – a polite reminder to an old potentate that they both knew now who truly was the Master? His correspondence, and all his sycophantically expressed courtship of Frederick and Catherine, were elegantly disguised instructions: that if monarchy was to survive, it could do so only on Voltaire's enlightened terms. God too had been served notice. If He were a mere hypothesis, and explanation for how things be – well and good. If He were the First Cause of Mr Franklin's electricity, then the First Cause could rest secure, with Voltaire's blessing, untroubled by His creation. He could sit back, having set in motion the intricate machine of the universe, and allow the more intelligent men and women of Europe and America to set it into some kind of reasonable order. But if God thought He could come back with all the mummery of the Middle Ages and all the power over human minds of the Inquisition, then He must think again!

Unable to think, for the moment, of anything further he had to say to his Creator, Voltaire said to the secretary,

—Let us write to the Empress of Russia.

Madame, vous avez posé une question à l'ancien malade de Ferney au sujet des Anglais, toujours un sujet—

Madam, you have put a question about the English to the old sick man of Ferney—

—Let me see her last letter, said Voltaire to the secretary. Fumbling in the bureau, the secretary found the last effusion of the Empress, written in French, in her large-bottomed German hand.

The Empress kept up a regular correspondence with the old

gentleman and each of her letters made clear her fervent admiration. His *Lettres Philosophiques*, of which she was especially fond, described his visit to England in 1726 and his belief that, with all its faults and foibles, England was freer and more enlightened than his own benighted France. He was always too ironically subtle and yet too sycophantic to spell out the fact that England was, and always would be, a good deal more enlightened than Catherine's benighted Russia!

The old sage, who had visited London nearly fifty years before, had in fact, as a young man, been dazzled by the extent of toleration, political enlightenment, freedom of expression and thought. It puzzled him all the more, this quarrel with America. Was George III trying to behave like a Russian tyrant? He could hardly ask the question in a letter to Catherine. For a while, having cleared his throat, he dictated generalities. By the time a prolific and opinionated man has reached Voltaire's age, he can scarcely hold back the flow of self-parodying generalization.

—and taken all in all, Madame, the English are a reasonable Nation. But it would be a mistake ever to take this Reasonableness for granted. In the matter of Shakespeare, for example, there is an incomprehensible national madness. I told their most celebrated actor, M. Garrick, that I could see no merit whatsoever in Romeo and Juliet. *A young man meets a thirteen-year-old girl and decides that his whole happiness depends upon marrying her sur le coup. With no canonical precedent or justification, a member of the Franciscan order not only consents to this, but administers narcotics to the young woman which will render her totally insensible – giving her the appearance of death itself. And this is the stuff of realism! This is their great love drama! Garrick is a reasonable man, and by his acting he tries to make natural, and reasonable, passions which Shakespeare has only disfigured and exaggerated in the most ridiculous manner! Garrick merely chided me for being 'an amiable barbarian'!*

But, Madame, you ask of M. Wedgwood. Naturally, I have heard of his prodigious invention of an English pottery to rival even the finest productions of Sèvres. Indeed, he has flattered me by producing a portrait bust of this ancient invalid of Ferney, which the old man is vain enough to have in his library alongside Houdon's portrait-bust and another of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. I also possess a portrait medallion of myself in M. Wedgwood's exquisite white biscuit ware. (Where does he find such white clay outside China?)

He has arisen to prominence in England long since my own departure from that mysterious land. As well as being a distinguished ceramicist he is also a Natural Philosopher, who has made many experiments into geology. He belongs to a philosophical circle who discuss such developments of human knowledge as Electricity, and the properties of Matter. His friends are M. Priestley, Dr Darwin, M. Watt, a pioneer of industrial engineering and whose invention of a steam-powered engine I should love to import into my small manufactory at Ferney. So, all in all, a group of philosophes likeminded with Your Imperial Majesty and myself. It was a happy chance that Lord Cathcart had been the British Minister at St Petersburg. Lady C., as Your Imperial Highness knows, is the sister of Sir William Hamilton, whose discoveries of Italian and Etruscan antiquities have done so much to inspire M. Wedgwood, and it was a happy fortune that M. Baxter in London was able to facilitate your order and to put you in touch with M. Wedgwood.

The dinner service which M. Wedgwood has already made for Your Imperial Highness sounds exquisite. Twenty-four pieces of the most formidable ceramic work – not china, I note, but M. Wedgwood's own invention of 'Creamware' – a new word to add to my English vocabulary! I myself possess a tea set and a dinner service made by M. Wedgwood and I can only echo Your Majesty's delight, not only in their beauty, but in their practicality: the jugs truly pour, the lids of the bowls

and tureens actually fit. When piled up, the plates fit together as neatly as if they are made of paper.

And now, Your Imperial Majesty has decided on a truly Imperial commission for M. Wedgwood – nearly a thousand pieces for your palace of the Finnish Frogs, the Kekerekeksinen. Our English friends would find a drollerie, perhaps, in Your Majesty asking the advice of a famous 'Frog' Philosopher for your 'Frog' Palace.

But, I pray you, do not listen to Sir William when he requests a dinner service of a design which he deems to be 'classical'. True, M. Wedgwood makes exquisite copies of Etruscan and Roman originals. And if Your Imperial Majesty wanted to eat soup from a dish of gambolling Dryads, and sturgeon from a plate depicting Poseidon or Aphrodite, M. Wedgwood would be the best man in Europe to gratify your Imperial desire. But would it not be in every way more original, more amusing and more comme il faut to ask that honest son of English clay to celebrate his own country – to decorate Your Imperial Highness's service with Topographick and Architectural Scenes of the Island of Britain? Here you could view a great Duke's house, as it were Chatsworth or Blenheim. Here you could see the poor huts of Hebridean fisher-folk. Here a park, and there a mountain. And so through the hundreds of views which M. Wedgwood could supply Your Majesty you would begin to build up a picture of this strange kingdom. We watch – we enlightened ones of the world! – with wonder as the Ministry in London quarrels with the coarse but honest colonists of America! Come what may, England, that land of paradox, will always hold a special place in the heart of the sickening, and ageing, Methuselah of Lake Geneva.