

Crafts and changing attitudes to their value in schools (1870s-1960s)

– an Accidental Collection

Book collecting is a growing addiction for me. Julian Barnes, author and bibliophile, explains that his own collection began in second hand book shops. As he describes, these have mostly disappeared, and anyway that method of scouring the country's bookshops in a car was 'neither time nor cost effective...' (Barnes 2012). This was certainly not a practice I could adopt.

For me, collecting began aged 16, in local charity shops. I would slip out during free periods at FE College. Book corners in these charity shops provided an affordable repository of old books. I was fortunate that my favourite, the Oswestry British Red Cross shop, was well stocked on a rolling basis. As such, I had exposure to books on a wide range of topics, and was able to gradually hone my interests.

I did not set out consciously to collect; rather, I felt I couldn't let these tangible relics slip through my fingers. As an aspiring archaeology student they were the equivalent to real 'finds' and their abundance made a heady contrast to the lack of finds at the Iron Age hill fort where I had been patiently excavating as a volunteer each weekend.

I bought due to a combination of curiosity, bemusement, and the very cheap charity shop prices. I felt I could justify the purchase of so many obscure texts (and I have no regrets yet!).

In these early days, my interests varied widely. The books offered a close link to the people of the past and I was delving into layers of human thought, each one vividly encapsulating a period. For instance, I found one from that brief period in time when 'Piltdown Man', later discredited as a hoax,

was considered a major scientific discovery. At times the connection is more direct - the instructions on how to create elaborate new hairstyles in my copy of the 1911 Edwardian 'Girl's Own Annual' are absolutely of the period they were written in. To me, this holds a similar excitement to that I felt when handling Viking combs for my dissertation in Archaeology and Anthropology. It had nothing to do with hairdressing, it was the time travelling that excited.

I bought children's encyclopaedias, science books and atlas', language and grammar books and all manner of school texts, especially in crafts. They seemed unwanted but they contained fleeting glimpses of our former skills, attitudes and beliefs, whether negatively in racist, colonial tones or impressively in the sheer complexity of instructions and depth of information.

I enjoyed Opie and Opie's (1959) 'Lore and Language of schoolchildren' and various grammar texts that encouraged teachers to emphasise clipped pronunciation through the use of phonetics. Almost like a sound recording, you can hear the voices of the period through the texts.

Essentially, I was interested in getting a feel of how the world was in 'the past'. A particular time period did not factor in then, but gradually this changed. The crafts pages in various books began to catch my eye, especially the skills required and the high standard of the expected outcome. For instance the exquisite Carrickmacross lace in that I found in the 1911 edition of the Girl's Own Annual. One has to wonder at the mental agility and perseverance in that period, to produce such beautiful items using just mathematical patterns and a simple thread. I thought that it would be unlikely to see such projects suggested as commonly achievable in comparable magazines today.

So, while I would still buy a wide variety of books, crafts as a theme began to dominate my collecting. This is not surprising given how it ties in with my other interests. I have a full sized loom

(rescued from the local agricultural college) which I have learnt to use – the assembly of which would have benefited from a craft manual of the exacting Victorian type that I was beginning to collect.

I have also enjoyed working bone and this became the start point for my dissertation on bone and antler combs. My deep interest in rural and textile crafts initiated my line of collection but the collection itself has now taken over and seems to be leading me along new, more philosophical and theoretical directions.

The important vein of lost or declining rural crafts and their revival in the Victorian era, inevitably lead my collecting to a number of key thinkers from the 19th century. William Morris's ideas on hand production as a healthy antithesis to the Industrial Revolution, the ensuing Arts and Crafts Movement, the prolific and influential writings of Ruskin and other notable Victorians such as Pugin, or Eglantyne Louise Jebb, who founded the Home Arts and Industries Association, are mostly highly collectible. I am pleased to own a 1905 of Ruskin's popular text, 'Sesame and Lilies'. However, early editions of such relevant works are currently beyond my means, although they would make distinguished company for my humble collection.

Instead, I tried to focus on traditional rural crafts (an important theme in the Arts and Crafts movement), seeking to redress their loss, or on training manuals for crafts industries or schools. As such, I initially sought manuals relating to crafts pertinent to where I live, in Shropshire. Some of the crafts lost locally to us are clog-making (poorman's shoes), tanning (medieval Shrewsbury smelt terrible) and paper making (my home is next to a disused watermill that shredded calico to make paper). However I could not find related texts, at any price.

On investigating why, I discovered that prior to the 1870's there was high illiteracy amongst crafts apprentices, the low uptake meant little incentive to write or sell manuals for them. Indeed, the whole purpose of the apprenticeship was to learn the craft through practicing it. The Education Acts of 1870s changed these low literacy rates by making elementary education compulsory for all children. Those who might have gone into apprenticeships were now in schools. Thus my collection veered towards school texts for crafts training.

I sought to capture a moment of remarkable change in attitude towards the value of traditional rural skills. It was the moment at which schools were encouraged to adopt these to help liberate the curriculum from 'the three R's' to one which was more suitable to the needs, not only of the pupils but also of society. This was a radical upheaval which meant much specific literature in order to encourage teachers to rethink and to re-equip. Who were the writers to do this?

The tone had already been set by great scholars, as mentioned earlier, but also less overtly, by fictional classics such as Kenneth Graham's 'The Golden Age'. I was very pleased to find an 1895 edition, in a car boot sale. Who could want to continue the harsh regime of the pauper schools having read this brilliant work, so sympathetic to the view point of children? My copy of 'Knight's Store of Knowledge' 1841 reminds of dire earlier experiences with its timetable from a typical school on p.360 which urges much 'committing to memory', 'marching' here and there and long 'bible studies'.

However, the change was in motion, with H. Holman emerging as my main hero. Editor of the excellent six volume 1913 series, The Book of School Handwork, he contributed materially both to the shift in thought at the time and to my collection. I found my first three at a local antiques fair and recently completed my collection with Volume 3, a gift at Christmas. Beautiful crimson bound

books, embossed with gold drop-spindles and distaff motifs, these texts are a mine of information, with high level crafts knowledge from experts in each field covered. However, equally valuable are the essays by leaders in the field of education at the time, advocating emphasis on crafts across the curriculum, in academic as well as vocational schools. Even Rev. The Hon. E. Lyttleton, Headmaster of Eton College, writes 'handwork can be considered a special form of brain training... it counteracts the one sidedness and fallacious glory of the merely bookish training.' (Holman 1913, p.35)

In essence, my small collection of handwork (now called craft) manuals for schools, colleges and home aims loosely to cover the period from the 1870s until the 1960s. I include up to the 1960's because some of those post World War Two are particularly interesting in showing a developmental continuum. I also include crafts books for the general reader, especially the compilation books such as English Country Crafts (Wymer 1946), as they contain photographs and wisdom of elderly skilled craftspeople, the last generation to acquire these skills from Edwardian elders before they had disappeared. The compilers were perhaps conscious that these people and their knowledge needed recording – an example of post-war nostalgia for a fading era. Many of these crafts were being revived – carving, straw plaiting, book binding, and lace making to name but a few. These typically required precision, patience and dexterity as well as numerical and spatial abilities.

This is of particular relevance now in our digital age, where children are increasingly replacing time doing and making with screen-time. While digital skills are essential nowadays, they are practised in a very different way to craft skills. As neuroscientist Susan Greenfield argues (Greenfield 2014), all these digital mediums engender short-term attention spans, and children are left without the experience of concentrating for long periods of time on a given task. This works, she claims, to the extent that the connections in the brain are forged differently, leaving these children less equipped for tasks in life that do require such concentration. The practice of crafts acts in the opposite way,

requiring attention to be held for the hours or even days needed to knit a pair of socks, construct a wooden stool and so on. As such, a return to greater focus on crafts is desirable, yet seems to be falling behind at the level of schools. Primary schools are selling off kilns in droves, unable to afford the time or materials for crafts. Furthermore, the majority of teachers no longer have the relevant expertise to deliver craft skills.

Nevertheless, there has been a great resurgence of interest amongst adults. Websites like Etsy selling homemade goods are booming, there are numerous blogs of independent makers such as WikstenMade, bookhou and OdetteNY. The recession has played a part in this. The internet has made it much more feasible for people who have been made redundant to turn to the small-scale production of quality crafts as an occupation and then later, if doing well, to turn to a physical shop for sales. Even where it is not a full-time occupation, crafts are becoming crazes, with City bankers in New York joining the knitting trend, bee-keeping emerging on London rooftops and the like. It seems we all want to have a go, with 'authentic' and 'handmade' as the new buzz words. Working adults with stressful jobs seem increasingly to see crafts almost as therapy – as a relief from the stresses of modern living, something that requires a different and slower pace. Sir Christopher Frayling in his book 'On Craftsmanship' (2011) repeatedly refers back to Morris, Ruskin and the Arts and Crafts Movement in his call for a revival of crafts in order to revitalise British industry. To this end, Professor Mark Miodownik from UCL advocates public workshops operating akin to libraries that facilitate a return to handling and understanding materials (Miodownik 2013). This all emphasises the relevance of my collection today.

To summarise, my collection currently follows two closely related strands. The first is the collecting of advice and expertise in lost craft skills. The other, the social history of radical change in attitude towards the crafts, spurred by the Arts and Crafts Movement. With the latter, I have focused on

changes within schools. Ultimately it is the dual approach, the inter-dependent study of the two strands that forms the basis of my collection.

I would love to add the following five books to substantiate both strands –

- Combes, Edward. 1884. On the values of technical training and the teaching of drawing and handwork in public schools. Franklin Institute.
- Holman, H. 1915. Handwork for Infants Schools Vol 2. Caxton Publishing Company Ltd.
- Johnson, George. F. Undated (possibly 1912 or 1922). Pitman's handwork series: Rural handicrafts. London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons
- Morris, William. 1893. Arts and Crafts Essays by Members of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. London: Rivington, Percival and Co.
- Morris, William. 1871. The Decorative Arts, their Relation to Modern Life and Progress. London: Ellis and White

First on the list, the Coombes' volume was often referenced in essays within the Holman 'Handcrafts in Schools' series. Published at the relatively early date of 1884 it marks its position as an important, influential text in the movement. The Holman would complete another set of his that I value highly, while the Johnson text is representative of my wish to accrue more volumes that specifically teach craft. Certainly I look forward to adding this particular book, as it would further represent the rural crafts. However, there are numerous other volumes relating to specific crafts across an array of series' which I am ever on the look-out for. Finally, the two William Morris volumes are expensive and highly collectible in their own right, but for my collection they are emblematic of the whole movement of craft revival. Each of these five books would swell the gathered wisdom on handwork and its increasing place in schools.

I am happy for my books to show evidence of use – as an archaeologist, this adds rather than detracts from their value. Indeed, I intend for my books to continue to be used. I enjoy that the current technological revolution makes pertinent the same ideas about the place of crafts that were so pivotal in the wake of the Industrial Revolution.

My book collection has come a long way from chance charity shop purchases during idle teenage moments. It is now beginning to influence my career choices – quite a transformation!

Word Count: 2,334

Essay Bibliography (not the full collection list):

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