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Source: *Folklore*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Jun., 1933), pp. 176-188

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd. on behalf of Folklore Enterprises, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1255817>

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WELSH FOLK INDUSTRIES

BY IORWERTH C. PEATE, M.A.

Read at Meeting, 14th December, 1933

My friend, Mr. Middleton Murry, in his essay on William Morris, in *The Great Victorians*, writes : " Hard practical experience had taught him that a living art could only arise out of a surrounding body of living crafts, and the crafts could not be made to live again while the system remained what it was." In the course of this brief paper I shall have to discuss both the " living art " and the " living crafts " of the Welsh people and must perforce, before I end, make some remarks concerning the present industrial system in so far as it affects Wales. I shall return therefore to the quotation from Mr. Murry.

The Welsh are a peasant people whose main industry even now is agriculture. They are a nation of pastoral farmers living on the moorland and in the valleys, in small rural communities with their literary societies, their eisteddfodau, their evening choral classes and their chapel meetings. In such a nation, in such communities, the craftsman is always a prominent individual. This is so in the life of any nation which has maintained a close contact with the soil : it is a truth which must be fully realized to understand the bases of Welsh culture.

This insistence upon the importance of the craftsman is of high antiquity. The laws of the Welsh princes gave pride of place to three craftsmen, namely, the custodian of the written word, that is, the clerk, the illuminator of manuscripts ; the custodian of the spoken word, the bard, the story-teller, the carpenter of words and phrases ; and finally, the blacksmith, the representative of the material culture of the community. Poetry has always been a craft

in Welsh tradition and the Welsh strict metres lend themselves to a superb craftsmanship the like of which I do not know in any other literature. The Welsh poet, if he writes in the classical metres of his nation, dovetails his consonants as the carpenter dovetails his pieces of wood, and in the hands of a master, this craft becomes an art of the highest order, a mystery which can be enjoyed but never fully comprehended. For euphonious effect which illustrates the wizardry of this craftsman of words and phrases I can do no better than quote a short passage from the works of a distinguished member of this Society, Professor Gwynn Jones, a passage in which the meaning need not be explained to help the listener to realize the art of the poet. It is a love-poem: note the almost magical use of the voiced liquid consonants :

Eiliw haul ar loywa heli,
Eilun nwyd fy nghalon i,
O, f'anwylyd, tynn fy nwylo
I'th eiddilwyn ddwylo di.

F'annwyl, agor d'addfwyn lygaid
Gloywaf fel y gwelwyf i
I oludoedd cêl waelodion
Glân a dwfn dy galon di.

Gwylia dithau, gwel hyd eithaf
Eigion fy ngolygon i,
Yno gweli dân y galon
Lanwyd â'th oleuni di.

Dof yn ôl i dy f'anwylyd,
Heriwn wlad a nofiwn li,
Heb un ing wynebwn angau,
Mal y down i'th ymyl di.

The honour given to the craftsman was a marked feature of medieval Welsh life. It shows itself well in the poetry of the 15th century, for instance. Tudur Aled, nobleman

if ever there was one, writes an elegy to a working blacksmith called Ieuan ap Deicws. "Why" asks Tudur, "did Jesus invite Ieuan to the Kingdom of Heaven?" And the reply is: "Because he was a master craftsman." And this has always been the Welsh emphasis. And in the 19th century, it was the craftsmen who became the spiritual leaders of the nation. "What matters it," asks Caledfryn in his *Autobiography* published in 1877, "that Christmas Evans worked with spade and pick in his youth, or that Williams o'r Wern carried his saw and axe on his shoulder or that John Elias threw the shuttle in his father's factory or that Ieuan Glan Geirionydd drove his team or that Tegid wove stockings or that Gwallter Mechain was a cooper?" And in enumerating his heroes, the writer mentions only a few of the spiritual leaders of his time who were all of the peasant-artisan class. One could add scores of names, such as those of Robert Thomas and Sir Henry Jones, the one a blacksmith who became a college principal and the other a shoemaker who became one of the most distinguished professors of philosophy in the United Kingdom.

It seems to me that to the smith making his complete plough, or the carpenter making his complete cupboard or the shoemaker his complete boot, there was imparted that *joie-de-vivre* of which only the true craftsman knows. The plough, the cupboard and the boot were made entirely in the village workshops: the good name of the craftsman concerned stood or fell by the work of their hands and they strove to make things well and make them beautiful. And wherever we meet the true craftsman, we find too that in his work he combines the beautiful with the useful.

But in the course of time came the catastrophe. Large parts of Wales became affected by the Industrial Revolution, and where the influence was not direct, it was nevertheless felt indirectly. Towards the end of the last century Radicalism in Wales became affected by the philosophy of

getting-on-in-the-world and the Welshman's zeal for learning was rewarded by the institution of the Welsh Colleges and the University of Wales as well as by a system of secondary schools. These institutions were never meant by their founders to foster the native tradition : they were meant to be little Oxfords in Wales and what some people in their blindness call the " romance of Welsh education " almost became a tragedy. The continuity of Welsh culture was almost broken. Book-learning came to be looked upon as almost the only important thing in life. And the craftsman—with the best of intentions—sent their sons into the educational machine to make teachers and preachers of them. The result was disastrous. In my own village, which sixty years ago had a dozen flannel factories producing £8,000 worth of flannel per year and had about forty shoemakers and a score of carpenters, the result is clearly seen. To-day there is no factory, only about five shoemakers, and my own father is the only really first-class carpenter left there. Honour left the house of the craftsman to be placed upon the individual who had two letters to his name, or who could boast of a diploma or a certificate. It is a sad story.

Where industry remained, it became in most cases industry by mass-production methods. The complete table or chair is now never made by the one carpenter. It is produced in a factory, where a number of men make the legs and others the tops. The joy of making the complete article has given place to the mechanical drudgery of making parts. Even manufactured boots have invaded the countryside, and the village bootmakers have deteriorated into cobblers who sole boots but never make the uppers. And with the decay of craftsmanship, I feel sure that the spiritual life of any nation is bound to suffer. What is needed in Wales to-day, as in many another country, is not a return to primitive methods but a control of our system of production to such a degree that the spirit of the old

individual craftsmanship may be born again, a control of our industrial system so that the machine becomes man's servant and not his master, because, as Murry emphasizes, "living art can only arise out of a surrounding body of living crafts" which the present inordinate mechanization of labour makes quite impossible.

But there still remains a large tract of the Welsh countryside reasonably unaffected by modern industrial developments, and in this area the old tradition of craftsmanship still remains. It is to this countryside and a number of crafts still represented there that I wish to draw your particular attention. The National Museum of Wales, sensing the danger of extinction by which these crafts are threatened, now includes within its walls not only the products of the various crafts but also reconstructions of some of the village workshops, and the machinery of the village factories, in its Gallery of Folk Industries.

The Village Smith. Village smithies are still a prominent feature of Welsh rural life though unfortunately the smith is now more concerned with farriery than with the production of fine iron-work. But there still remain instances of fine ironworkers in rural Wales. A notable example is that of Mr. D. J. Williams of Caernarvon who made the iron-work for the Unknown Warrior's coffin as well as a number of fine gateways and railings at Merton College, Oxford, and near the House of Lords, in London. The 18th century saw this type of ironworker at his best in Wales. In the small village of Bersham near Wrexham, there worked between 1702 and 1755, at the Groes Foel smithy two smiths, Robert and John Davies who find to-day an honourable place in any expert treatise on European ironwork. They produced the gates of Chirk Castle, which are a fine piece of work despite the lack of constructive design and sense of proportion shown in them. The caps and bases of the gate piers are almost the earliest ornamental cast iron-work in the country. Other examples of their work may be

PLATE X



EXAMPLES OF GLAZED SLIP WARE OF LATE 18TH AND EARLY 19TH
CENTURY DATE FROM EWENNY POTTERY, GLAMORGAN.

*Reproduced from " Guide to the Collection of Welsh Bygones in the National Museum of Wales " by per-
mission of the National Museum of Wales.*

PLATE XI



TURNING A BOWL ON A POLE-LATHE AT ABERCYCH, PEMBROKESHIRE. (See also the writer's paper
in *Studies in Regional Consciousness and Environment*, Oxford, 1930.)

Reproduced from "Guide to the Collection of Welsh Bygones in the National Museum of Wales" by permission of the
National Museum of Wales.

seen at Wrexham Church, Ruthin, Oswestry and in other districts on the Welsh border.

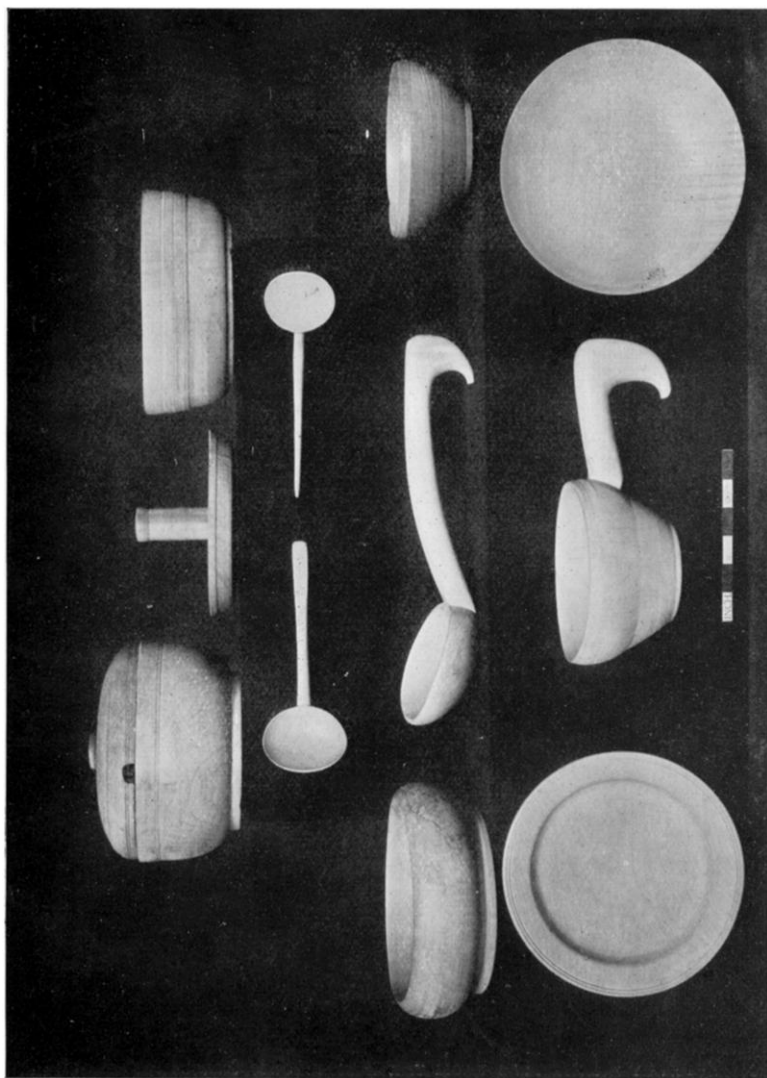
The Rural Potter. Rural potteries in Wales are found in the north and south on the edge of the coalfield in each case. A number was to be found in the Buckley district of Flintshire in the north and in Monmouthshire and the Vale of Glamorgan in the south. In both cases, there was a local supply of coal and of good potting clay. The Flintshire potteries specialized in pots and pans of glazed slip ware, their butter pans being especially well known. The plant of these potteries was quite simple, consisting of a clay-rolling machine, potters' wheels worked by treadle action and pottery kilns which are exactly the same in principle as those worked in Wales in Roman times. The Ewenny potteries in Glamorgan which came into special prominence in the 18th and 19th centuries by reason of their handled wassail bowls and puzzle jugs (Plate X) still produce ornamental pottery, of a deteriorated type, in the old tradition but the bulk of their trade consists in the manufacture of flower-pots which they produce at the rate of many thousands per day.

The Wood-Turner. In any study of surviving Welsh folk industries, the craft of the wood-turner must be given a prominent place. Although the wood-turners are now few in number, barely half-a-dozen, they are, in every case, masters of their craft. Formerly found in every county in Wales, those who make a living from their craft are now found only in Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire and Cardiganshire and with about two exceptions, these craftsmen are found in the lower reaches of the Vale of Teifi, on the Pembrokeshire side at the small village of Abercych and on the Cardiganshire side at Henllan. At Abercych and in the Llandeilo district of Carmarthenshire, the pole-lathe is still used. The pole-lathe (Plate XI) is, of course, one of the most primitive lathes known in Europe. The use of the pole to provide motive power probably originated in the practice of turning objects in the woods where the timber was

being cut down, when a branch *in situ* formed "the pole." But the principle of the forest pole-lathe seems to have been applied to indoor lathes at an early date. The lathe itself is a simple affair. It consists of a bench with a central groove in which are placed two puppets. The wood to be turned is placed between the two puppets upon iron pegs projecting from the puppets, a chuck, that is a cylindrical piece of wood being placed on the one side of the turned wood. The rotating portion consists therefore of the chuck and the piece of wood to be turned. The ash pole is fixed above the bench, its butt end and centre being secured. A leather strap attached to the free end of the pole is twisted around the chuck and descends through the slit bench to the raised end of the treadle where it is secured. The work is put in motion by pressing the treadle which by means of the strap turns the object round. The weight of the foot being released, the elasticity of the pole draws up the treadle, turning the object back again. The motion is therefore reciprocal, not rotatory, each forward turn being followed by a retrograde movement. There are 13th century illustrations of similar lathes.

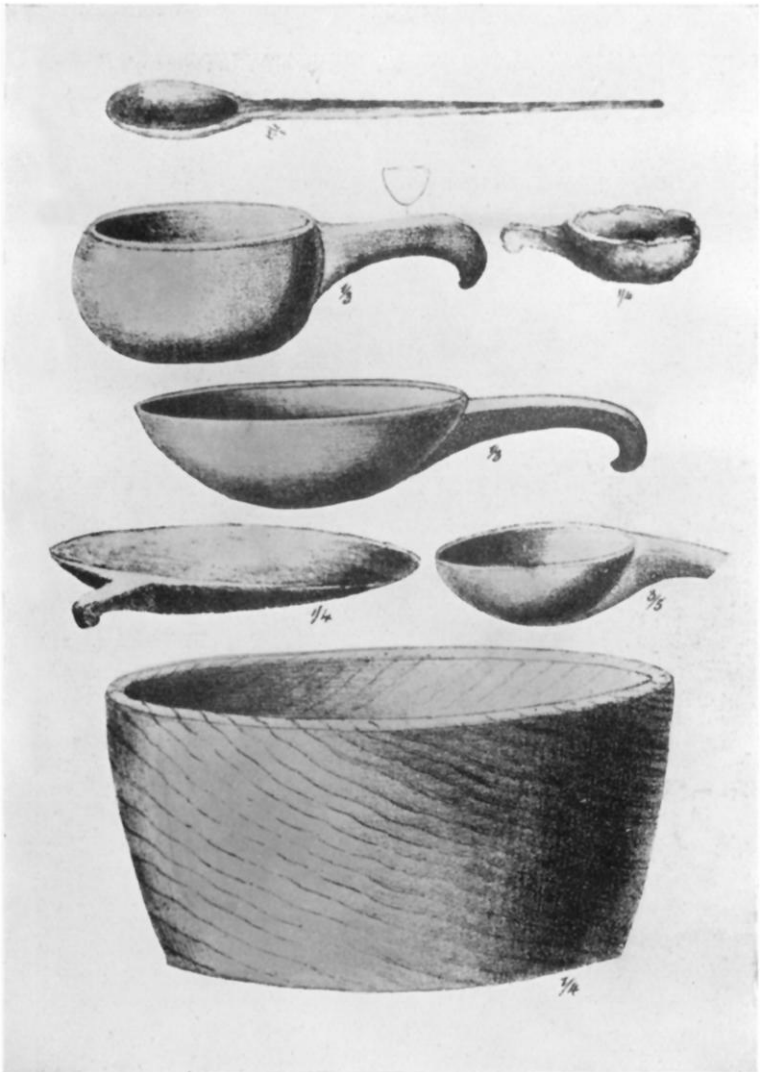
These turners produce objects which may be divided into two classes (*a*) utensils for domestic and dairy purposes (Plate XII) and (*b*) implements for outdoor use. The former class is the more important for our purpose. It includes spoons, ladles, bowls, plates and trenchers, butter-beaters, cream-skimmers and cheese-vats. In no craft is the combination of utility and beauty better exemplified. Where the turners keep to traditional designs they never go wrong and the wooden spoon or ladle will always be found to be shapely and artistic. In this connexion, it is interesting to compare with the modern productions of the Welsh turners the wooden vessels used by people of the lake-shore dwellings of Central Europe in prehistoric times (Plate XIII). These prehistoric peoples pushed their way north into South Britain, as the Early Iron Age evidence from Glastonbury

PLATE XII



WOOD TURNERY : EXAMPLES OF MODERN WARE FROM THE WEST WALES LATHES.
 (See also *Studies in Regional Consciousness and Environment*, *supra*.)
 Reproduced from "Guide to the Collection of Welsh Bygonies in the National Museum of Wales" by permission of the
 National Museum of Wales.

PLATE XIII



WOOD TURNERY : EXAMPLES FROM THE PREHISTORIC SWISS LAKESHORE
SETTLEMENTS.

(See also *Studies in Regional Consciousness and Environment, supra.*)

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testifies, and brought with them a tradition of turnery which has remained to our own day. The tradition of the Central European lake-dwellings has been prolonged in the work of the Welsh turners ;—and the primitive character of their machinery and tools, together with the form of their productions, static from time immemorial and the strong family tradition of craftsmanship, handed down from father to son, all bear witness to the early typology of the modern turners' work. The loss of such a tradition, which is probably older than the Welsh language itself cannot fail to impair the spiritual wellbeing of Wales.

The products of these rural turnery shops were sold at the local fairs, markets and shops. At the small village of Llanarth for instance, as many as twelve turners are remembered at the local fair, and on " good " days, about 360 spoons were sold at some of the markets. But the market for domestic utensils is now steadily decreasing with the advent of cheap earthenware and metal ware and much of the traditional material is now sold only for its art value. But some of the Welsh turners have developed their business in new directions such as the making of axe- and mattock-handles for the industrial districts and the manufacture of agricultural implements for the rural areas.

The Woollen Industry. The country factory is admirably exemplified by the plant of a small woollen yarn factory from Llanrhystyd in Cardiganshire, now housed in the National Museum of Wales. This plant consisted of a devil-machine, a scribbler-carder, a condenser-carder and a spinning billy and jack. The factory was worked by the tenant and his wife, the sole process being the production of woollen yarn. The yarn was then passed on to the local weavers who made it into flannel or cloth which was in turn sent to the fuller whose mill consisted of two heavy wooden mallets working alternately in a wooden trough in which the cloth was placed. The finished article was then returned to the farmer who had supplied the wool to the

factory man. A map of the district illustrates to how high a degree the whole community depended upon this local industry for its flannel and cloth. And it is necessary for us to realize that these craftsmen and factory-men in a very simple manner had solved the unemployment problem. None of the Welsh craftsmen depends entirely upon his craft for a living. In every instance, the craftsman is a tiller of the soil as well. This was true too of the old quarrymen and colliers, indeed even of the nonconformist ministers of religion. The craftsman tended his few sheep and cattle and tilled his land when trade was slow ; he worked at his craft when business was brisk and left his farming to his womenfolk. In this way he was never unemployed. Avoiding alike the "sordid squalor of the poor and the vulgar squalor of the rich," he was always comfortably secure, with sufficient leisure at all times to attend to the needs of the spirit. Here in this Welsh peasant organization of industry lies the secret of the true communal life, an organization described as ideal by Robert Owen and suggested as the solution of our present troubles by men such as Henry Ford, though neither the one nor the other realized in full that their solutions were a return to the peasant tradition and not a departure from it.

The scribbler carding machine in use at the Llanrhystyd factory was made in the first half of the 19th century at a small mill-wright's factory in western Montgomeryshire. Through a happy chance the account books of the old mill-wright still exist and I was fortunate enough to be allowed to work at them. They reveal several interesting and important facts. This country mill-wright supplied machinery to rural factories throughout Wales, from Anglesey and Flintshire in the north to Pembrokeshire and the Vale of Glamorgan in the south. Practically every district is represented in his books and every county appears with the solitary exception of Radnorshire, Montgomeryshire's neighbouring county. I have since learnt that this absence

of customers from Radnorshire was no mere accident of trade. The problem of this county is an interesting one and one which throws much light upon cultural deterioration in national life. Radnorshire is an essentially rural and agricultural county with none of the industrial problems which have entered into the life of some of the South Wales counties. Down to the 18th century it remained Welsh in language and tradition, in direct communication with Cardiganshire its neighbouring county on the west, and one of the most Welsh districts in Wales. During that period it produced its great men and contributed vitally to the first Puritan revival in Wales. But with the disappearance of the old drover system, the connexions with the west ceased and Radnorshire became more intimately connected with its eastern and English neighbouring county Herefordshire, until by the 19th century it had lost to a very great measure its hold upon the language and culture of Wales. It was in the 19th century more non-Welsh than any other county in Wales and in many respects it has remained so because the Welsh tradition is still virile in many of the industrial regions of the extreme south. But in Radnorshire there is no virile Welsh tradition even in the isolated rural regions. But it would be a mistake to suppose that Radnorshire has become English. This is not the case : it has simply ceased to be Welsh. The result would be grotesque were it not tragic. The country folk cannot speak Welsh but neither can they speak English. They speak Welsh in English words, using a limited English vocabulary for the expression of Welsh idioms. "Standing on its own head up there" is a term which I have heard used to imply that a chapel stood isolated on its own—an excellent Welsh idiomatic expression translated word by word into English. These people have lost the key to the past of their own nation through losing the language and at the same time they have not been grafted onto a living English tradition. They are a *deraciné* society, a people fallen between two

stools, a community of half-things. And, here, amongst people in this condition the crafts have been neglected. This is not all. Since Radnorshire became non-Welsh, it has produced no spiritual leaders; morally it is in a far more disquieting condition than any other area known to me and I am informed on good authority that even in matters of public health it lags far behind every other county in Wales. It is an outstanding example of the stern necessity of keeping alive the national language and tradition in Wales and shows very conclusively that no small nation can be assimilated into an alien tradition without disastrous spiritual and economic consequences. It explains too—at least partly—why those of us who are inheritors of the culture and language of Wales will not willingly see them disappear in these days when sane and healthy nationalism is credited with the evils of imperialism and is universally decried.

Cider-making. Cider-making is an industry confined in great part to the southern border counties of Brecknockshire and Monmouthshire. The two important elements in the process were the cider-mill and the press. The mills were large circular stone-troughs of a depth of about nine inches. A heavy stone crusher, weighing about half-a-ton, horse-drawn, was used to crush the apples in the trough into pomace. The pulp was then scooped into bags or mats made of horse-hair and placed in the press, which consisted of a flat shaped stone grooved to permit the juice to run into a receptacle below. This type of plant has now almost entirely disappeared to give place to movable mills and presses which, like the modern threshing-machine, are taken round the farms in turn.

The Wheelwright. Time forbids me to make but a passing reference to the wheelwright's craft. He was of course an indispensable person in every rural community. One of the interesting wheeled vehicles of the central uplands of Wales is the wheelcar, a long narrow vehicle with a body

underslung below the axle for easy passage in difficult lanes and upon overgrown slopes. It may be described as a convergence of the sled and gambo traditions, the front end being heavy and shod with iron to slide along the ground, while the wheels are those of the gambo. This type of vehicle is of course entirely unsuitable for modern metalled roads but is used to good purpose on the mountain slopes of the central Welsh uplands. The horse is attached to the heavy end by means of traces.

Finally attention may be drawn to the bow-waggon of the Vale of Glamorgan, the work of the wheelwright at his best. This waggon, of Teutonic type may be seen too in several of the English counties but the type was evolved to perfection by the craftsmen of the Vale of Glamorgan. The beauty of line, so admirably exemplified in the surboards of the specimen in the National Museum is indeed the result of an age-long experience and emphasizes an aspect of craftsmanship too often absent in modern work.

I must apologise to my listeners for dealing with a subject which is perhaps outside the scope of this society. And yet I feel that the true folklorist must of necessity be also the true anthropologist and account as a special field for his thought and reflection not only the lore of his people but also its culture, its crafts and its industries.

My major problem still remains unsolved. How can we in this generation make secure the well-being of those who in the words of Holy Scripture "maintain the world" and by so doing secure "a surrounding body of living crafts" from which will arise "a living art"? I leave it for your reflection contenting myself by believing very deeply that the system of our society cannot remain what it is. And of all our modern prophets, none has expressed the truth more forcibly in this connexion than D. H. Lawrence :

There's no point in work
unless it absorbs you
like an absorbing game.

If it doesn't absorb you,
if it's never any fun,
don't do it.

When a man goes out into his work
he is alive like a tree in spring,
he is living, not merely working.

When the Hindus weave their wool into long, long
lengths of stuff

with their thin dark hands and their wide dark eyes
and their still souls absorbed,
they are like slender trees putting forth leaves,
a long white web of living leaf,
the tissue they weave,
and they clothe themselves in white as a tree clothes
itself in its own foliage.

As with cloth, so with houses, ships, shoes, wagons or
cups or loaves
men might put them forth as a snail its shell, as a bird
that leans

its breast against its nest to make it round,
as the turnip models his round root, as the bush makes
flowers and gooseberries,
putting them forth, not manufacturing them,
and cities might be as once they were, bowers grown out
from the busy bodies of people.

And so it will be again, men will smash the machines.