

# P.S.

Ideas,  
interviews  
& features ...

## About the author

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- 2 An Enlightened Historian:  
Travis Elborough talks to Brian Dolan
- 4 Life at a Glance
- 13 Top Ten Favourite Books
- 14 A Writing Life

## About the book

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- 16 Wedgwood and the Mysteries of the  
Eighteenth-Century Industrial  
Landscape by Brian Dolan

## Read on

---

- 21 Have You Read?
- 22 If You Loved This, You Might Like ...
- 24 Find Out More

## An Enlightened Historian

*Travis Elborough talks to Brian Dolan*

**What drew you to Wedgwood as a subject to begin with, the man, the pottery or his interesting times?**

Wedgwood's life and career were somewhat familiar to me through my previous research in eighteenth-century British history – for instance, his work was mentioned in my last book, *Ladies of the Grand Tour*, where I talk about the collections that were formed by travellers to Italy and how they inspired the market for replicas of the antique. It was fun to write about that again from a different viewpoint. But my main interest in Wedgwood stems from my background in the history of science, where I knew that were it not for Josiah's commitment to chemical experimentation and his connections with Enlightenment thinkers like Joseph Priestley and Erasmus Darwin there would be no Wedgwood pottery today.

**What do you especially admire about Wedgwood?**

I most admire his unfailing belief in the possibilities of creating a utopian society if the wealth that is created through industry was turned into support for those who were politically disenfranchised. That and his hope that through scientific investigations the health of the population would be improved and diseases eliminated. Both represent what we commonly think of as typical Enlightenment ideologies, but Josiah's life is an illustration of how one

turns such dreams into practical pursuits of those goals.

**Did you find yourself disliking him at any point? I couldn't help feeling that his decision to take the ailing Sally to Bath rather than Buxton so he could keep an eye on his business interests revealed a rather unrelenting, even slightly calculating side to his character.**

We have to remember that so much of what we know about Josiah's actions comes from what he reports to Bentley, so sometimes it seems to me as if he is overstating his attention to business matters to the apparent neglect of his family. I had to read between the lines when going through his manuscripts to determine how much he was self-fashioning as opposed to reporting his true feelings. At one point he tells Bentley about how he frightened his workers by smashing an imperfect production, which at first made me think he must have had a rather stern presence, but the more I went over that I began to think he was actually surprised that he could be seen as such an authority figure. The transformation of his life – from no hope at all to managing relations with the world's most powerful and wealthiest people – was so substantial that he was bound to have a calculating side to his character, but that proves he is human. All in all I think I would want him as a leader in my company. As a side note, I had to ►



Author photograph by Shelley Adler

**LIFE**  
*at a Glance*

**BORN**

Chicago, Illinois, 1970  
(Scorpio)

**EDUCATED**

University of Florida,  
USA, and Cambridge  
University, England

**CAREER**

The grand tour of  
universities as professor:  
Umeå Universitet,  
Sweden, University  
College London,  
University of East Anglia,  
Birkbeck College, and  
finally University of  
California San Francisco

**FAMILY**

Married to medical  
historian Dorothy Porter

**LIVES**

Downtown San Francisco

**An Enlightened Historian** *(continued)*

◀ laugh when I read the proposal for the daily schedule for his children’s education which I quote. Even he would have known that was unrealistic.

**Over the course of your research what were you most surprised to discover about Wedgwood?**

I did not know when I started my research the extent to which his extended family – his uncles and cousins – were involved with the pottery business and how successful they were. I never anticipated spending the first five or six chapters of the book getting into his family background, but discovered it was essential not only to establishing the context in which Josiah grew up, but to appreciating how he understood the potential benefits of the business and where he looked for inspiration as well as early financial help.

The other thing to surprise me was how much he relied on the sale of the ‘stock in trade’ items and the imperfect seconds that he sold in considerable quantity to America as the bedrock to his business. The innovations that made Wedgwood pottery so notable – the jasper, the encaustic ware and other ‘ornamental’ items – were developed at considerable expense, and the more famous the customer the less profit he was prepared to take. Relying on the sales of rather simple, ‘useful’ wares that were shipped across the world at considerable risk, given how many wars interfered with trade, was to me a surprisingly stressful feature of Wedgwood’s life and career.

**Isn't it ironic that, although Wedgwood exemplifies the great shift in the arts from the courtly to the commercial, this dissenting Whig-ish political radical owed so much of his success to royal patronage?**

Josiah himself recognized the irony. Throughout his life he disliked and objected to aristocratic hereditary privileges. He believed that devotion to caring for the improvement of society and humanity should not be ordered along sectarian or political lines, and that access to government should certainly not be conditional on religious beliefs and social status. But he knew that for things to change he needed to raise capital and become known, and getting the aristocracy interested in one's wares was the most effective way to accomplish his goals. But it was Wedgwood who created the demands – he got his patrons interested and sold them on the uniqueness of his wares – so he was comfortable with the notion that he was calling the shots. One of my favourite quotations of his, which he stated when refusing to put a family crest on a special order, was that crests were as useless as crest wearers. What is really ironic is that his wealthiest patrons were the worst at paying bills on time. Another irony, by the way, is that a frequent error made in referring to Wedgwood (besides his name being commonly misspelled 'Wedgewood') as 'Sir Josiah Wedgwood', which he would not like, let alone accept. His descendant Tony Benn has kept that spirit alive. ►

## **An Enlightened Historian** *(continued)*

◀ **A vaguely similar point but one of the things that fascinated me in your book is that Wedgwood is a provincial industrialist who seems to have been an astute judge of metropolitan fashions, exploiting the taste of the gentry for antique styles.**

I think that when one is born into a family with no money, especially a family managing a cottage industry producing simple wares to a large market, metropolitan conspicuous consumption is glaringly ‘conspicuous’. When it is one’s job to put goods in front of a class of customers who spend all their time travelling and shopping, success is measured by how aggressive and energetic one is to push the boundaries of what is available to purchase. So it is less the case that Wedgwood judged metropolitan fashions than that he recognized the desire to spend, and created trends and tastes by, in his words, ‘surprising the world with wonders’.

**It’s also rather curious, isn’t it, that we have scientific experimentation and mechanized methods producing ersatz ancient artefacts?**

I think that reproducing the antique and creating a craze for it was his biggest coup. Whereas dilettanti like Sir William Hamilton were interested in ancient vases because they informed a historical consciousness that sought to recover the genius of the ancients, Josiah was interested in replicating the artefacts to prove that the real key to understanding the past and building on ancient principles of design was to employ modern methods of scientific investigation. The reason the aristocracy came to include

his factory as a stop on their worldwide travels was to get a glimpse of the ingenuity involved in the production of these wares. The fact that he employed machines that were not available to the ancients was a visible mark of 'Enlightenment progress'. To Josiah, it marked his superiority over his rivals as a manufacturer; to the aristocracy, it marked England's superiority over their continental neighbours.

**Wedgwood seems a figure who fulfils Nietzsche's adage, 'That which does not destroy you makes you stronger.' His physical disabilities forced him to seek other ways to prosper. Would you agree?**

Entirely. If Josiah had had the physical strength of his brother, for example, I think it would have been much more likely that he would have specialized in a particular aspect of the craft, such as throwing or firing – both of which took physical strength. I think his brother might have been more inclined to enter into partnership with him, and he would have overseen his particular share of the business, much like 'Useful Tom' did at Etruria. To wildly speculate, it is possible that he would have excelled at his particular station, but would not have had the time or ability to delegate tasks in order to pursue the chemical experiments that proved so essential to his success. Of course, he also would not have been laid up in Liverpool, might not have met Turner, Bentley and his other 'Lunatic' friends who guided him into the world of natural philosophy. But history is full of contingencies, so 'what ifs' are fun ►

## An Enlightened Historian *(continued)*

◀ but not as interesting as piecing together the complicated past we have. What is certain is that despite his medical history he wore himself to the ground, both physically and mentally, as did Sally.

**You vividly conjure up the intellectual fervour of the period, in particular the flourishing provincial scientific societies, like the Lunar Club. You make it very apparent how vital Bentley was to Wedgwood as a friend, intellectual mentor and business partner. Useless to speculate, perhaps, and sorry, another ‘what if’ . . . but could Wedgwood have been as successful without him?**

Stories of a ‘lone genius’ in history are very rarely accurate, and I believe that Wedgwood’s success owed as much to those surrounding him as to his creativity and dedication to improving the quality of his wares. Bentley has previously been characterized as the ‘brains’ behind Wedgwood’s success, with Josiah the skilled craftsman. I don’t think that is accurate. I think they both had good ideas and both had business acumen. It is certain that Bentley offered Josiah intellectual guidance, and he provided an inroad to Josiah to think about raising the profile of the business to be representative of the interests of ‘polite society’ – fashioning the marketing of the wares around the glamour of travel, history and literature which Bentley learned in his more genteel upbringing. But rather than Bentley pioneering that side of the business, I think we need to understand the relationship

as one where Bentley gave Josiah a perspective on entrepreneurship to aspire to, as much as Sally, his uncles and his early employers like Whieldon gave him ideas about how best to be an effective leader and conscientious employer. Again, who knows what would have happened had Josiah met other people or fashioned his business according to other models, but what is worth recovering historically is the mutual exchange of energy and ideas that make the real difference between a start-up company and an enduring legacy.

**For a man who had such faith in industrial progress, what do you think Wedgwood would have made of the urban squalor that resulted from the factories of the industrial revolution? Weren't his workers ultimately right to be worried about deskilled production-line labour?**

What drove Josiah's commitment to developing his business more than anything else was the belief that wealth could in turn generate health among all those that helped industry turn the raw materials of the earth into products that supplied a market. Rather than continuing the tradition where labourers migrated from one village to another in search of work, where in the event they fell ill they were neglected since the laws dictated that only the parish where they were born would receive money from the state to take care of them, Josiah wanted to build a community where workers had an interest in the success of the business they were helping to build. Josiah's idea that this would work ►

## **An Enlightened Historian** *(continued)*

◀ goes back to your previous question about his disability breeding versatility. It is a fascinating historical conjunction that his own inability to perform all the tasks that his labourers performed occurred at the moment when the concept of the division of labour was developed. Things happened so rapidly that I am sure Josiah understood the concern his workers had about being denied insight into all the other areas of production at work. But he needed to protect trade secrets while at the same time asking them to embrace an entirely new experience of working alongside machines.

While I am confident that Josiah was convinced that the housing he built, the education he provided and the nascent system of health care he provided to his workers and their families were being accepted as benefits to the system he built, he was devastated that the most problematic features of industrial life – especially the persistence of disease and the impurity of the air – were not being eliminated through the same avenues of rational enquiry that created steam engines and English porcelain. Wedgwood's life is framed by three revolutions: the American, the chemical, and the French. The fourth revolution – the 'therapeutic revolution' – never happened, despite the experiments in purifying air by his friend Joseph Priestley. The fact that sparkling water was invented as an attempt to cure scurvy by feeding oxygen to sailors through drinking bottled water added hope to their cause, but fell well short of their dreams.

**What do you regard as Wedgwood's greatest achievement?**

To me his greatest achievement is not about his pottery or his money. It is about his ability to muster the courage and energy to cultivate the respect and admiration of so many people, of all classes of society. His life fascinated me because it involved such a dramatic transformation, but it was not a sudden success. Besides numerous financial risks, he managed to build the courage to speak frankly with powerful Members of Parliament and to spearhead campaigns to condemn slavery and social injustice. He was a pioneer in the industrial revolution, and as a human had his strengths and weaknesses, but his greatest achievement was pursuing and largely realizing the fundamental belief that defines the Age of Enlightenment, which was that one could create something useful from nothing.

**What are you working on next?**

One of the interesting reactions to the Wedgwood biography is how it has provided a background to a name most people primarily know through their own collections of Wedgwood pottery. Many people have their own personal history of Wedgwood to tell, and have written to me to say that this historical background has given the material objects they possess an added dimension to the Wedgwood legacy. This prompted me to think about the multiple ways that historical consciousness is formed, and the different ways that traces of the past are preserved and understood. These are ►

## **An Enlightened Historian** *(continued)*

◀ themes I'm presently writing about, which explore what I refer to as the 'sounds of history' – about the creation and reproduction of music, instruments and 'records' of the past. It has taken me outside of eighteenth-century archives, and opened my eyes and ears to the richness of history ■

# Top Ten Favourite Books

- 1. Lonesome Dove**  
*Larry McMurtry*
- 2. The Education of Little Tree**  
*Forrest Carter*
- 3. To Kill a Mockingbird**  
*Harper Lee*
- 4. The Complete Adventures and Memoirs  
of Sherlock Holmes**  
*Arthur Conan Doyle*
- 5. Possession**  
*A. S. Byatt*
- 6. The Magic Mountain**  
*Thomas Mann*
- 7. Making History**  
*Stephen Fry*
- 8. The Normal and the Pathological**  
*Georges Canguilhem*
- 9. The Elements of Style**  
*William Strunk and E. B. White*
- 10. Smashing People**  
*Michael Fishwick*

## A Writing Life

### When do you write?

Any time I can. When I am in 'writing up' mode, rather than conducting research, I write for long stretches of time with very little sleep since that's the only way I can remember everything I want to say. Forced breaks during such writing spells are a real nuisance.

### Where do you write?

My first book, *Exploring European Frontiers*, was written in the second bedroom of a two-bedroom London flat that was a shared study with my wife. She wrote her book at the desk next to me. The cramped quarters and hum of the computers had the effect that we were working on a Boeing 727. *Ladies of the Grand Tour* was written in a study in the slightly larger terraced home we moved to in Cambridge when I worked at the University of East Anglia. *Wedgwood* was written half in Cambridge and half in my office at the University of California at San Francisco. The break in between, when we moved to California, really disrupted things, but I eventually found all my notes in a moving box.

### Why do you write?

I love the stories that emerge in the course of research and I write to develop my skills of relaying them to others.

### Pen or computer?

Computer. I'm left handed and hate the ink stains on the side of my hand.

### Silence or music?

Silence.

**What started you writing?**

A clichéd desire to be a lawyer in my first year of college, and my father (who was a lawyer) saying I needed to learn to write well, so take English courses.

**How do you start a book?**

By imagining a meeting with the subject of the book and writing down everything I know about the historical context.

**And finish?**

It is hard to know when the book ends. Each one has somehow sown the seeds of the next.

**Any writing rituals or superstitions?**

Nope, anything goes as long as it flows.

**Which living writer do you most admire?**

I admire the historian Professor Jeremy Black. He calls himself a maverick historian for writing what might be considered an academic stream of consciousness, but I see an unpretentiousness and desire to offer the public alternative views of history in his work which is refreshing.

**Who or what inspires you?**

It is hard for me to finish beautifully written books because about half way through I feel compelled to get back to my own writing with the hope of one day being as good.

**If you were not a writer, what job would you do?**

I also teach, but if I had a complete change I would advance from being a private pilot to a commercial pilot and open my own charter company in the tropics.

**What's your guilty reading pleasure?**

Dennis Lehane. ■

## About the book

## Wedgwood and the Mysteries of the Eighteenth-Century Industrial Landscape

*By Brian Dolan*

IN 1789 A SMARMY Danish professor from the College of Commerce in Copenhagen known as Mr Ljungberg was in England, hoping to curry favour with the Midlands' industrial innovators. Apparently he was a man of some ingenuity, noted for his 'modesty and Gentleman-like behaviour', according to Matthew Boulton, who perspicaciously saw beyond such appearances and concluded that he was probably 'employed by the Court of Denmark, to collect such knowledge in this country as might be useful in that'. After a cautious meeting with his guest, Boulton sent the Dane to see Josiah Wedgwood, armed with a letter of introduction which, of course, revealed nothing of Boulton's suspicions.

Boulton and his friendly rivals, including Wedgwood, had reason to be wary of foreign visitors. (Ljungberg was later arrested and his notes and drawings seized as he attempted to leave England, finally fleeing the country after the Danish Embassy paid £300 bail.) Throughout the eighteenth century industrial espionage was a growing problem for manufacturers, a phenomenon which reminds us that Wedgwood's Etruria, or Boulton's Soho factory, while pioneering and therefore worthy of covert surveillance, were not the only factories to emerge at that time.

The portrait of Wedgwood's life and career offered here reveals a very human transformation that occurred in the making of a great industrialist – the risks, challenges, achievements and disappointments that came with manufacturing wealth – but it is equally important to step back and recognize that Wedgwood was not a lone entrepreneur. Throughout the century, factories were emerging around Europe, and information about the workers they trained, the machines they used, the ideas they hatched and the products they mass produced circulated in a world of competition that paralleled the world of consumption.

The origins of the Industrial Revolution are often traced to 'cottage industries', not dissimilar to the family craft of pottery production that Wedgwood was born into. Yet what became known as 'The Thing' by later critics of industrialization (like William Cobbett, who could only bring himself to refer to it in that way), was also a product of innovative thought and manual techniques more evocative of magic than artisan skill. The silk works established by the Frenchman Jacques de Vaucanson in Lyon are illustrative. In the 1730s, while living in Paris, Vaucanson devised ingenious automata, such as a mechanical flute-player: a life-size statue of a person which, through the operation of ►

## Wedgwood and the ... *(continued)*

◀ hidden bellows, was designed to play the instrument. Such technical ingenuity attracted the attention of the French government, who commissioned Vaucanson to design a mill works driven entirely by automated machines to spin and weave silk. Wedgwood's own chemical experiments were similarly rooted in apparently occult practices to reveal the secrets of nature, which to the eighteenth-century mind had lingering associations with the alchemist's search for the philosopher's stone.

In this way the Industrial Revolution was built around the institutionalization of secrecy, prompting the emergence of espionage and simultaneously turning factories, including Etruria, into tourist stops for visitors hoping to get a glimpse of the magic behind the scenes. Nineteenth-century accounts of industry tended to focus on the relationship between energy and economics, namely how machinery led to new levels of efficiency and productivity, but also to the destruction of the landscape and the dehumanization of labour. But to the contemporary, eighteenth-century perspective the occultation and secrecy of skilled practices made the industrial landscape mysterious and powerful, as remarked upon, for instance, by visitors to coalfields in places like Shropshire or Warwickshire where enormous Newcomen steam engines cleared the mines as they 'draw water by the impellant force of Fire'.

Since Wedgwood's experiments were conducted secretly, with only Sally or his children allowed in the laboratory, potential

spies could only attempt to reanalyse the composition of a finished piece for imitation. It is owing to the uniqueness of the final product that Wedgwood has gone down in history as one of the first 'brand names', where consumers identify the manufacturer with the production, such as 'Wedgwood jasper'. Other manufacturers are better known for the machines they invented to carry out the chores of production, such as Kay's flying shuttle, Hargreaves's jenny, Arkwright's water frame and Crompton's mule. And while Wedgwood was also an innovator in the organization of his labour force – dividing it among specialized skills before anyone else in the potteries – other manufacturers were progressive in their own ways, such as the use of machine tools and hydraulic presses invented by Henry Maudslay and Joseph Bramah or the prototype assembly-line production developed by Samuel Bentham for the manufacture of ship's biscuits for the navy.

As we know from the construction of Etruria, which Wedgwood strategically placed alongside the planned Trent and Mersey Canal, location was critical to the future of his manufactory. Similarly, recruiting political patronage and the favours of local genteel landowners was necessary not only to control waterways, but for permission to mine local resources, such as tin and copper in Cornwall, lead ore in Derbyshire or clay in the Midland potteries. The ability to pull this range of factors together – particular mechanical ingenuity, the availability of natural ►

**Wedgwood and the ...** *(continued)*

◀ resources and the ability to network with potential partners or patrons in settings such as coffee houses (unlike in France where clubs were banned, hindering commercial communications) – was common to all the successful manufactories in England. This not only illustrates the complex social and regional framework in which every manufacturer developed his business, but how inefficient espionage would prove to be. Replicating industrial settings outside of Britain would mean recreating all the elements that combined in the unique way they did for the endeavour to work successfully. That this could not be easily accomplished – owing to different political, social and natural infrastructures in Europe or the Americas – kept Britain ahead of the industrializing current, and further makes Wedgwood and his contemporaries unique in history. ■

## Have You Read?

Other books by Brian Dolan

### ***Ladies of the Grand Tour*** (2001)

The freedom to travel and explore Europe by embarking on the Grand Tour became almost an essential rite of passage for wealthy young gentlemen in the eighteenth century. Hearing of the delights on offer, swathes of women also set off to sample foreign lands for themselves. Drawing on journals and letters from the likes of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Montagu and Marianna Starke, Brian Dolan's wonderful book brings the stories of these pioneering female travellers to life.

'A captivating book written with passion and energy.' *The Times*

'Brian Dolan offers many fascinating glimpses into a previously overlooked slice of 18th-century life.' *Daily Mail*

### ***Exploring European Frontiers: British Travellers in the Age of Enlightenment*** (2000)

In a period when political revolutions shocked nations into reassessing what separated the civilised from the barbaric, how did literary travellers contemplate the characteristics of their continental neighbours? Focusing on the writings of British travellers, Dolan's debut examines how a whole new idea of Europe was created during the Enlightenment.

'The polymath traveller of the eighteenth century had interests ranging from botany to political economy. To make all of these comprehensible to the reader, as Dolan has, is no small achievement.' *Times Literary Supplement*

Read on

## If You Loved This, You Might Like ...

### ***The Lunar Men***

Jenny Uglow

Erasmus Darwin, James Watt, Matthew Boulton, Josiah Wedgwood and Joseph Priestley were the small band of allies, industrialists, scientists and businessmen who formed the Lunar Society. Uglow's group portrait offers an exhilarating picture of this extraordinarily fecund intellectual fraternity.

### ***Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World***

Roy Porter

In this thought-provoking book, Porter claims that Britain should be regarded as the true crucible of the Enlightenment.

### ***The Arcanum: The Extraordinary True Story of the Invention of European Porcelain***

Janet Gleeson

An entertaining and informative account of the invention of porcelain and the founding of the famous Meissen Porcelain Manufacturers in Dresden.

### ***Tea: Addiction, Exploitation and Empire***

Roy Moxham

A fascinating look at the role of tea in Britain's colonial adventures.

### ***The Hanoverians: The History of a Dynasty***

Jeremy Black

A lucid and engaging study of the ruling dynasty of Wedgwood's age from one of Dolan's favourite historians.

***The Rise of Design: Design and the Domestic  
Interior in Eighteenth-Century England***

Charles Saumarez Smith

An immensely readable survey of interior  
decoration of the period. ■

Read on

## Find Out More

<http://www.thepotteries.org/index.html>

Local Stoke-on-Trent history portal

<http://www.wedgwood.co.uk/>

The official Wedgwood site

<http://www.wedgwoodmuseum.org.uk/>

The Wedgwood museum site

<http://www.thewedgwoodstory.com/>

Website of the Wedgwood Visitor Centre

<http://www.erasmusdarwin.org/>

The Erasmus Darwin House site