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Restoring The Wheelwright's Shop

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Restoring The Wheelwright's Shop

Abstract: This article makes the case for a centenary restoration of George Sturt's classic study of British vernacular craft at the end of the nineteenth century, *The Wheelwright's Shop* (1923). It considers how the craft knowledge Sturt describes relates to his other craft – writing. It documents the book's changing relevance to readers a century after publication. Approached by way of contemporary ideas about environmental sustainability, material culture, and ecological psychology, Sturt's book deserves renewed attention from twenty-first century readerships.

Keywords: wood; carpentry; wheelwright; environment; ecology; sustainability; knowledge; expertise; telling; intergenerational; vernacular; folk; book history.

Subject classification codes: n/a

George Sturt's *The Wheelwright's Shop* (1923), now approaching its centenary year, is a battered classic, ready for restoration. It used to be read widely, in part because of the central role that F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson gave it in their primer for "critical awareness," *Culture and Environment* (1933). Sturt's book was, for Leavis and Thompson, the precious document of a kind of English vernacular community that had faded away within living memory. "It is plain", they wrote, "that the waggon seemed to Sturt an organism because it reflected something that is still more fitly described as one […] a relation of men to one another and to the environment".[1] The interest of Leavis and his pupils helped to ensure Sturt's presence on adult education syllabuses and undergraduate reading lists throughout the post-war period.[2] Cambridge University Press issued a second hardback edition of *The Wheelwright's Shop* in 1934, a year after the publication of *Culture and Environment,* and then another five before the first paperback edition of 1963. But fashions change. The socialist critic Raymond Williams had taught Sturt's book to adult classes in the early 1950s.[3] By 1973, however, Williams placed Sturt in a category of British rural writing "that moves, at times, grossly, at times imperceptibly, from record to convention and back again, until these seem inextricable".[4] By "convention" Williams means pastoralized sentimentalism, or more specifically a "foreshortened version" of rural history that cannot recognize persistent inequalities in the social structure. Sturt's reputation has never quite recovered. In his recent 2017 Ford lectures Stefan Collini gives a Williams-derived account of the uses to which Leavis and Thompson put Sturt: they are "preoccupied not with poverty and exploitation but with emptiness and standardization", says Collini; "it is a minatory, hortatory use of the past, and a not very specific past".[5] Whatever your preferred themes in early twentieth-century writing, this begs the question of Sturt's own historical orientations. A re-assessment of *The Wheelwright's Shop* in terms that look to the book's present and future has been long over-due.

That process of re-assessment is now underway. In 2019 Glenn Adamson curated an exhibition called "Shoulder to the Wheel" at the Craft Studies Centre, Farnham (the Surrey town where *The Wheelwright's Shop* is set). At the heart of Adamson's project were four real wheels for an entirely conceptual waggon. The first was an historical artefact, chosen for its contemporaneity with Sturt's own career as a craftsman: it was

handmade in 1894 by a Somerset wheelwright named Bailey, and loaned from the collections at The Museum of English Rural Life in Reading. Adamson commissioned three contemporary makers to respond to this object by creating new works in its image. The workshop of Greg Rowlands, a master wheelwright from Devon, produced a magnificent facsimile wheel in oak, ash and elm that embodies the traditional craftsman's expertise in replacement and repair. Gareth Neal, a contemporary furniture-maker and artist, made a monumental ur-wheel from a solid tree trunk: it is a huge elaboration of the cross-directional strength of traditional elm wheel-stocks, and it responds to Sturt's compulsive speculations about the pre-history of his craft. Finally, Zoe Laughlin, director of the Institute of Making at UCL, created a replica of the MERL wheel in fragile, lurid pink polyurethane. She used scans and a computer numerically controlled (CNC) milling machine, which ruffled her object with digital glitches and distortions. Part of Sturt's manuscript for *The Wheelwright's Shop* presided in a display case to one side of the exhibition space. The four wheels were caught in an unexpected conversation across the decades, and across the south-westerly spine of England, each with its own position in the domain of material intelligence marked out by exhibition's virtual waggon.

What would Sturt, who died in 1927, have made of the exhibition? He might have found it a little abstracted from the small-town artisanal world he knew. But he would surely have recognized in it some of the obliqueness of his own approach. At first sight *The Wheelwright's Shop* looks like a how-to book: a manual of handiwork, perhaps, or a catalogue of the mechanical traditions of provincial waggon-makers, blacksmiths and carpenters. But it contains barely a sentence of direct instruction. What Sturt describes instead is a matrix of relations between traditional craftsmen, draught animals, landscapes and local materials. The crossings between these heterogenous components can perhaps be seen in the four very different wheels of Adamson's exhibition – visitors to the exhibition are invited to imagine them in a sort of conceptual equipoise. Sturt showed how the material actors in his shop were drawn together into a common field of knowledge by human necessity, by human skill, and by human sensation. Instrumentalism never dampens the vividness of Sturt's descriptions, because the trade he records is gone already. He inherited the shop from his father in 1884 and worked there until 1891, at which point he hired a foreman-manager, William Goacher, to run

the business, and half-retired to pursue his literary career. By the time Sturt published *The Wheelwright's Shop* in 1923 factory production and petrol engines had wiped out the old trade, and the woodshop was a garage. In describing the wood-and-iron wheels that he used to make – "four to six feet in diameter, and capable of carrying a load of three-quarters of a ton each" – all Sturt hoped was that "some remembrance may yet be saved of the art of making them".[6] The mode is unavoidably elegiac. Once again, one is struck by the ingenuity with which Strut's elegies have been rotated by the "Shoulder to the Wheel" exhibition so that they now face towards the future.

For the next step in the restoration of *The Wheelwright's Shop* we must go back to the book itself. We need a better sense of how the craft knowledge it describes relates to Sturt's other craft – writing – and to the book's possible future as an object of editorial curation. We also need an account of its changing relevance to readers a century after publication. There is a case to be made for returning to F.R. Leavis's original idea about the book, only partially developed in 1933: that at the heart of *The Wheelwright's Shop* is an analogy between the natural environment, in terms of which Sturt's villagers "expressed their human nature", and the human environment, constituted by the things they made and by their social relations, as glimpsed in a traditional workplace.[7] Approached by way of contemporary ideas about environmental sustainability, material culture, and ecological psychology, Sturt's book has much to say to a twenty-first century readership.

Sturt's Telling

Since the late seventeenth century, writing in English about mechanical engineering has defined itself by the principles of mensuration, distinguishing its own rational and mathematical foundations from the "rule of eye" the suffices for primitive production methods. The trade knowledge that Sturt describes in *The Wheelwright's Shop* has great depth and complexity but, contrary to expectation, almost no rational structure. Sturt insists that knowledge of his craft could involve vast amounts of knowing, without very much knowing why: "and that is how most other men [in the shop] knew", he insists; "the lore was a tangled network of country prejudices, whose reasons were known in some respects here, in others there, and so on" (73). Introducing the topic of the

mysterious convexity or "dish" without which cartwheels soon fell apart, Sturt remembers "it was a detail most carefully attended to by the men in my shop; but I think none of them, any more than myself, could have explained why it had to be so" (20). The basic problem that Sturt faces as a writer is that of communicating the integrity of the knowledge embodied by those men, without imposing upon it an inappropriately reasoned form. This explains the miscellaneous structure of *The Wheelwright's Shop*. It also explains two characteristic features of Sturt's documentary style: his description of material process through narrative, and his focus on the defining quality of "fitness" in the work that he was recording.

The first of these characteristics, Sturt's narrativizing of techniques that are thought of more conventionally as objective processes, is a matter of rhetorical framing as much as anything, but it has wider implications too. Sturt often presents his method as one of "telling" rather than description. "I feel sometimes too ignorant about wheel-making to say anything at all about it," he confesses, before adding with an elaborately passive flourish: "but still […] some things should be told about it that have become known to me" (91). Timber has the story of its working life latent in its fibres. An elm stock is brought out from seasoning: "and now it lay, butter-coloured, smooth, slightly fragrant, soon to begin years of field-work, after much more skill […] had been bestowed on it, though already telling of that skill in every curve" (101). Trying to work out whether the front of a waggon is slightly curved up to accommodate the four-foot wheels below it, or because of some circumstance with the load above it, Sturt admits, "I could not tell. I cannot tell," splitting the difference as he does so between telling as perception and telling as recollection (67). The Wheelwright's materials are in on this business of telling. The grain of wood "told secrets" to the craftsman (55).

> Under the plane (it is little used now) or under the axe (it is all but obsolete) timber disclosed qualities hardly to be found otherwise. My own eyes know because my own hands have felt, but I cannot teach an outsider, the difference between ash that is "tough as whipcord", and ash that is "frow as a carrot", or "doaty", or "biscuity".[8]

Sturt cannot denote what timber discloses under the probing of the axe, but that is not to say that what remains untaught cannot be told. Vernacular crafts were located by the philosopher of science Michael Polanyi within the domain of "passive knowledge",

destined to remain undescribed because their haptic refinements are logically unspecifiable.[9] More recently, the anthropologist Tim Ingold has argued that, on the contrary, we can tell of what we learn through practice precisely because narrative opposes specification. "To tell, in short, is not to explicate the world", Ingold argues; "it is rather to trace the path that others can follow […] The key thing about stories is that they provide practitioners with the means to tell of what they know *without* specifying it".[10] This distinction illuminates something essential about Sturt's method. Where other writers on mechanical arts offer specifics of force or measurement but give insufficient guidance, Sturt confines himself carefully to guidance, and avoids the incumbrance of explication.

A second aspect of the knowledge system that Sturt documents is its "fitness", a word indicating completeness in the attainment of a practical end. Fitness has an aesthetic dimension, a certain easily recognizable elegance, but Sturt knows that evoking the beauty of these processes will not get him to their heart. Two decades before the publication of *The Wheelwright's Shop*, when Sturt had just begun to think about the technical knowledge of working people, he wrote in his journal about how difficult he found it to grasp this quality of fitness:

> Here and there in application (as in steering a boat to the quay, or driving a team of horses round a corner) the working man's knowledge and judgment give results that arrest all eyes, so that all easily find them "beautiful". But for the most part (and wholly, when taken in the aggregate) the fitness of this knowledge eludes me. My present feeling is of being just on the point of perceiving it: there is the "raw material" of it, merely waiting for me to alter my focus a little or shift my point of view, when all will be plain. But I get no further.[11]

In *The Wheelwright's Shop* Sturt got at this elusive quality by describing fitness not in terms of instrumental effects, but rather as a kind of cognitive validity that extended outwards from the individual craftsman, and that could be grasped only in terms of larger relations. This was an evolved validity that Sturt recognized in his employees, but from which he was himself excluded: "as a wild animal species to its habitat, so these workmen had fitted themselves to the local conditions of life and death" (32). The basic idea, obviously enough, is evolutionary. Sturt's prose often takes a Huxleyite turn

towards reflection on the "struggle for existence".[12] But the quality of fitness that he is describing here seems to be less contingent, more complete and more personal than an evolutionary theory would imply. Sturt's artisans are engaged in a struggle that is convivial, rather than competitive. The radical Catholic thinker Ivan Illich, in his 1973 treatise *Tools for Conviviality,* confessed that "paradoxically, a society of simple tools that allows men to achieve purposes with energy fully under their own control is now difficult to imagine […] We have almost lost the ability to frame in fancy a world in which sound and shared reasoning sets limits on everybody's power to interfere with anybody's equal power to shape the world".[13] *The Wheelwright's Shop* allows us not only to imagine such a world, but to follow its flows of energy between persons, the community and the environment.

Crucially, it is Sturt's declared inability to penetrate this close-fitting and yet extensive system of actors and processes – that is, his outsider's perspective on it – that allows him to see it and tell of it as a convivial system. For five years Sturt had been an assistant master at Farnham Grammar School, before taking over his father's shop in 1884 at the age of twenty. Sturt found that those years spent among books had blunted his capacity to acquire the skills practiced unreflectingly by the workmen in his shop: "bookish training was too feeble to enter into these final secrets", he wrote; "evidently there was something more, only revealed to skilled hands and eyes after years of experiment. Precision eluded me; my eyes didn"t see it".[14] *The Wheelwright's Shop* remains powerful today because it tells a story, not of technical triumph, but of how Sturt fell short of becoming a master craftsman. In the process of not quite managing to learn his trade Sturt's attention was educated into a different sort of sensitivity to his materials, his place of work, the town it served, and the particular environment of woodland and farm-scape that surrounded it. His partial exclusion from this convivial system was what allowed him to tell of its comprehensiveness.

Ecologies of Craft Knowledge

Sturt's narrativizing of techniques and his concern with their fitness help him describe a system of knowledge that is graceful and effective, but without rational design. There is a temptation to use the word "organic" here, as Leavis did. It is not a term that Sturt

used often. He does refer at one point to the craft "lore" embodied by the artisanal classes as "an organic thing, very different from the organized effects of commerce", and his evolutionary idea of "fitness" leads to analogies between farm waggons and organisms ("they really looked almost like living organisms. They were so exact").[15] But his language in these passages does not seem to suggest that the general patterns he describes – those of knowledge, community and environment – are like organisms because they are holistic or delimited. The relations that Sturt records are more heterogeneous than that. They have the characteristics of hybrid networks, of ecologies that have natural, human and artificial components. They are localized at the level of landscape, village or workplace, but open to larger forms of group life at a national and international level. In an earlier book, *Change in the Village* (1912), Sturt framed the human experience of these circumstances as one of celebration and observance, rather than instrumentation:

> the pride of skill in handicrafts, the detailed understanding of the soil and its materials, the general effect of the well-known landscape, and the faint sense of something venerable in its associations—out of all this there proceeded an influence which acted upon the village people as an unperceived guide to their conduct, so that they observed the seasons proper for their varied pursuits almost as if they were going through some ritual.[16]

Even in lyrical passages like this Sturt does not call the relations between these components "natural" or "organic". Neither did he use the word "ecology", which was in 1923 still too much the property of biologists to be eligible for a generalist like Sturt.[17] But it is clearly an ecological system that he is describing. *The Wheelwright's Shop* connects with modern ecological thought through the model it provides of sustainable human work within a specific living environment. Two aspects of that model have become especially significant in the century since its publication: first, that it is intergenerational; and, second, that it is at human scale.

When ecologists talk about the sustainability of human communities within environments, intergenerational continuity is essential. Sustainability, writes Bryan Norton, "is a relationship between generations such that the earlier generations fulfil their individual wants and needs so as not to destroy, or close off, important and valued options for future generations".[18] The options available to a community are defined by

local natural resources, and by the cultural resources – such as institutions and practices – that have developed for putting them to use.[19] *The Wheelwright's Shop* gives a rich account of what intergenerational transmission actually involves. It offers an especially clear reminder that truly sustainable craft practices had no component derived from the centralized or top-down dissemination of information. The whole ecology of knowledge came from the ground up. Sturt shows the wheelwright's skills being rehearsed, improved, safeguarded and passed on from one generation to the next by means of an unceasing superfluity of discussion:

> In farm-yard, in tap-room, at market, the details were discussed over and over again; they were gathered together for remembrance in village workshop; carters, smiths, farmers, wheel-makers, in thousands handed on each his own little bit of understanding, passing it to his son or to the wheelwright of the day, linking up the centuries. (74)

The localizing, transgenerational, community-focused logic of sustainability requires a particular sort of culture for the transmission of its knowledge. That culture, as Sturt recalls it, is almost unrecognizable to us today because it is so unrationalized, so hugely inefficient. It is much closer to habit than instruction. Comparing a particularly beautiful detail in the construction of Sussex wagons with his own slightly inferior Surrey practice, Sturt asserts the sufficiency of the local methods with characteristic steadiness: "it was not any understanding of the Why and Wherefore that guided me [as a maker], but the traditional good sense of Surrey waggon-builders for generations" (71). Much of *The Wheelwright's Shop*, including the chapter on "Learning the Trade", focuses on the personal knowledge of individual craftsmen, but Sturt often steps backwards to take in the trans-historical dimension of their work, "and instead of an individual workman, generations of people grow real to me […] labouring in their environment of materials".[20] This intergenerational perspective adds a peculiar grandeur to Sturt's portraits of particular craftsmen.

To have sustainability and intergenerationality at the back of one's mind while reading *The Wheelwrights Shop* is to see how deeply the dimension of environmental time extends into the day-to-day practices Sturt describes. The waggon-maker's materials must be grown and seasoned over decades ("a year for every inch of thickness was none too much"); his skills "had been perfecting, I dare say, in rural smithies for centuries";

the artefacts he makes must stand up to years of hard use in the open fields (41, 164, 24). The wood itself tells of these complications of duration and place, and the wood-shop becomes a sort of library for the records it opens up to the curious craftsman. Sturt is at his most lyrical when describing the researches of the carpenter's beetle "(pronounced bittle)" into a stock of wood:

> With the wedges cleaving down between the clinging fibres—as he let out the wood-scent, listened to the tearing splitting sounds—the workman found his way into a part of our environment—felt the laws of woodland vitality—not otherwise visited or suspected. No professional person ever dreamt of this strange world; no sawyer even got there. Intellect might hear of it; but the senses alone can know, and none may tell, what the world is like down there in the grain of the oak butt, the fir-tree stamm. A man must explore it for himself, with his wedges, watching what happens as he drives them down.[21]

Leaving specification far behind, Sturt brings us to the limits even of narration ("none may tell"). He leaves the wheelwright to follow the lines and flows of his materials in all their absorbing imminence. This is seasoned wood, and Sturt has a Keatsian thought for the cycle of seasons across which that seasoning happened: "well seasoned", he writes of fine piece of elm, "it was the product of winter labour, of summer care in my own loft under my own hands. Long quiet afternoons it had lain there, where I could glance from the stocks across the town to the fields and wooded hills" (100). It is important to rehearse the ancientness of the wheelwright's craft and the slow seasons and years that have brought his materials to use because the sustainability of his work and its environment connects care for the past and for the future. The warehouseman must be as knowledgeable of the wood that he has in stock as of "what was likely to be wanted in years to come".[22] Sustainability is about looking both ways. Sturt recalls that the village workmen he employed were alive at a personal level to the way their skills reached out into the natural environment and across the generations. His confidence about this derives from the immersive quality of the knowledge environment that had the wheelwright's craft at its heart: "without thinking", he insists, "we felt the glamour of the strong associations; and the skilled craftsman must have felt it more than I, because they lived in that glamour like a fish in water" (101). It is the historical depth of those associations that wraps around and encloses the senior craftsmen: it is as much a

dimension of their personal environment as the surrounding landscape or the knowledge-ecology of their craft.

The Wheelwright's Shop always measures out the human scale of its subject, and here we find a second way in which the book is lit up by ecological thinking. We have seen Sturt suggest the idea of the farm waggon as a kind of organism adapted to its environment – to the texture of soil and gradient of slope in a particular landscape, to the sideways sway of horses, to ancient ruts in a country drove. Human bodies help set the dimensions of that environment as well, adding their own delimitations to the scale of the machine-organism: "An image of the waggoner […] shows a man of five to six feet tall, hard at work", Sturt imagines; "and one sees how awkward for his stature a higher waggon-body might have been, whether for pitching hay into it or for lifting sacks from it on to his shoulders" (73). The measurable dimensions of the human body are a constant determinant, but their relations with the artefact are only those of correspondence, and the relations that Sturt is concerned with are closer ones than that, with a stronger element of sensory interfusion. The human scale of the work allows an experience of labour that gives direct sensory satisfaction:

> [it] streamed into their muscles all day long from close contact with iron, timber, clay, wind and wave, horse-strength. It tingled up in the niceties of touch, sight, scent. The very ears unawares received it, as when the plane went singing over the wood, or the exact chisel went tapping in (under the mallet) to the hard ash with gentle sound. But these intimacies are over.[23]

Indeed, a part of Sturt's strategy for recreating those intimacies is his constant reversion to the immediate sounds of the workshop: to the knocks ("like the snap of a toy pistol") made by the spokes going home into their mortices when a wheel is shoed; to the click and clack ("about twice as fast as the footfalls of the horse") made by the waggon in motion, as the wheel slid back and forth on its well-oiled axle-arm; to the "queer scrunching yet ringing chackle" of a loose iron tyre in hot weather (123-8, 137, 182-3). Another is his odd insistence on the different smells of the men in his workshop: the hoppy tang of the wheelwright George Cook; the soapy perfume of blacksmith Will Hammond's hair as Sturt shouts in his ear (Hammond, like Cook, is half deaf, a detail that somehow makes them seem more immersed in the sound-world Sturt works so hard to recreate). The unexpected sensualism of the Sturt's book emphasises the easy

nearness and tangibility of everything in its purview, and the complete comprehensibility of shop and trade to each individual craftsman.

The Wheelwright's Shop is a sensory document of working lives lived at human scale, by means of a technological order that is, as the economist Eric Schumacher put it in *Small is Beautiful*, "conducive to decentralization, compatible with the laws of ecology, gentle in its use of scarce resources, and designed to serve the human person instead of making him the servant of machines".[24] Schumacher called for the development of properly sustainable "intermediate technologies" that draw on the precision and progressiveness of modern science without making their operators the slaves of big tech. He was answered in the world of international development by the "appropriate technology" movement. Writing from the general perspective of an economist, however, Schumacher did not fill out his sketch of what a sophisticated, human-scale technological order would look like, at the level of individual human experience. Following Schumacher, Kirkpatrick Sale has worked through the social and ethical implications of living at human scale, how it presupposes a communitarian setting where "individuals can take in their experience whole and coherently, relate with other people freely and honestly, comprehend all that goes on in their working and civic lives".[25] But Sturt has already given those relations in full vernacular form, as an everyday reality rather than as the design of a master, an economist or a policymaker. Anticipating Sale, he presents his craftsmen's village life as coherent and self-explanatory, guided by practices and processes that were unperceived, although soon to be missed.

Book and Craft

One way of thinking about the coherence of the expertise that Sturt remembers from wheelwrights like Cook and Hammond is to think of it as non-representational. His craftsmen had no need to explicate the processes of their workshop, as Sturt himself felt compelled to do, or to set out the specifics of their craft to ensure its perpetuation. Instead it is the craft itself, in Sturt's account, that creates representations. In their very fitness, says Sturt, the dimensions of the farm waggon were a "photographic negative, showing, to those who know what it means, the normal English farm-land and the

country lanes" (72). The expertise of any given community of sawyers, carpenters or blacksmiths was "the reflection as it were of the peculiarities of the countryside" (32). Sturt often places an implied reader among these material representations: "the provincial wheelwright could hardly help reading, from the waggon-lines, tales and haymaking and upland fields, of hilly roads and lonely woods and noble horses, and so on" (66). By this logic the farm waggon takes its place among an array of convivial tools to which the right kind of book, as much as the right kind of reader, might possibly gain access. The business of telling undertaken in *The Wheelwright's Shop* is one of the kinds of representation being done by the tools, artefacts and processes that Sturt finds all around him. "A scythe is a book", he writes in his journal, "a book composed entirely out of doors by the English peasantry".[26] To the book historian or editor there is an invitation here to reverse-engineer the analogy. What would it mean to look at *The Wheelwright's Shop* as an artefact that belongs as much to the order of representation-making tools as it does to the order of books?

There are passages in Sturt's writings that should give the modern reader pause before pursuing this line of thought. Sturt considered the realm of written knowledge to be distinct categorically from the "tangled network of country prejudices" that was the wheelwrights" craft. Their vernacular expertise "was set out in no book" (73). But it was made a complex representation of the landscape and labour of their community. Sturt's book learning is ill equipped, by contrast, to represent those representations: "In fact Intellect made but a fumbling imitation of real knowledge, yet hardly deigned to recognize how clumsy in fact it was […] How simple is coal-hewing, fiddling, fishing, digging, to the student of books!" (83, 84). One complication here is that Sturt's commitment to such processes is itself self-consumingly literary. On reading Ruskin's *Fors Clavigera* Sturt decides "that man's only decent occupation was in handicraft", and that he must interrupt his teaching career. Later, though, orders at his shop begin to dry up when clients catch on to "my book-learned ignorance, my simplicity, my Ruskinian absurdities" (12, 53). *The Wheelwright's Shop* does not shrink from this paradox.

Another complication is that Sturt made no connection between handicraft and the production of his own books, of the sort that Virginia and Leonard Woolf, for example,

were then exploring with the Hogarth Press. In his journals Sturt deplored the "fantastic reversions to old methods" deployed by William Morris at the Kelmscott Press: "I cannot help thinking that Morris's admiration for ancient work (no doubt very admirable) has in some ways led him astray", Sturt judged; "and his passion for an imitation has introduced into his books mannerisms that would be unendurable, were they again to become the fashion".[27] When Sturt reads (and is slightly disappointed by) his friend and mentor Arnold Bennet's *Clayhanger* in 1910, it is the clever engineering of the book's literary machinery that Sturt suspects: this "does not detract from the fineness of Bennet's work as a craftsman. In fact it is masterly—he is a master craftsman".[28] But craftsmen have a passive relation to their knowledge, Sturt always maintains. It becomes dynamic only at a collective, situated, intergenerational level (or at the particular level of in-the-field repair work). Correspondingly, Bennet the craftsman cannot represent the active principle in his own characters' lives, their will to strive against circumstances. The significant thing is that Sturt describes Bennet's literary shortcomings in terms of a mechanical expertise that he admired deeply. This shows Sturt maintaining a strict separation, at a conceptual level, between literary and mechanical production. The modern editor should not seek artificially to re-entangle those realms by making the materiality of this text obtrude too much.

On the other hand, Sturt was sensitive to the hyper-suggestiveness that material texts may have. In 1922 he published *A Farmer's Life: With a Memoir of the Farmer's Sister*, based on papers left by an agricultural uncle, John Smith. His publisher Jonathan Cape did issue this book in the style of a small-press arts-and-crafts edition, with elegantly rusticated woodcuts by Stephen Bone. In one passage, Sturt describes a different sort of book. This was a souvenir left him by his uncle, an account of the wreck of the Royal George in 1782, "bound in thinnest boards of oak said to have been recovered (truly enough I dare say) from the sunk timbers".[29] Handling it in the present day, Sturt is astonished by the tiny volume's power to evoke memories of the farmhouse window where once it lay, and more as well:

> Now the black-brown oak-grain took my thoughts dreaming away to leafy forests two hundred years ago or so, and to sawyers and timber-carting: now sailor-men and the "wooden walls of old England" seemed to be recalled there.[30]

This suggestive power is both associative and somehow transpersonal, the book "…causing my brain, my feelings, to do the same things that it had caused my uncle's brain, my uncle's feelings, to do long ago". Whether or not we find this account plausible, it tells us something distinct about Sturt's expectations and intentions as a maker of books. Material texts can have the power to be vehicles for trans-historical sympathies. They help us pierce through the veil of history, revivifying and multiplying passive associations to which active minds have only partial access. These sorts of association are at once discursive themes in *The Wheelwright's Shop*, and aspects of Sturt's design on his readers. It is appropriate that any new edition of the book should try to anticipate them. The text is stable, so the first edition of 1923 should be presented as accurately as possible in a printed facsimile, with original illustrations. But this core should be extra-illustrated and redocumented, with an historical account of the book's reception, supplementary extracts from Sturt's journals and other writing, and selected readings from the holograph manuscript, which is deposited at Farnham Museum. Then the job of restoring *The Wheelwright's Shop* will be underway.

[1] F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment: the Training of Critical Awareness* (Chatto and Windus, 1933), 85

[2] See especially Denys Thompson, "A Cure for Amnesia (1933)", in *A Selection from Scrutiny*, ed. F.R. Leavis, 2 vols (Cambridge University Press, 1968), ii. 219-227; W.J. Keith, *The Rural Tradition: William Cobbett, Gilbert White and other Non-Fiction Prose Writers of the English Countryside* (Harvester, 1975), 149-170; John Fraser, 'sturt's Apprenticeship", in *The Name of Action: Critical Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 193-205; and David Gervais, "Late Witness: George Sturt and Village England", in *Literary Englands: Versions of "Englishness" in Modern Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 102-132.

[3] See Stefan Collini, *The Nostalgic Imagination: History in English Criticism* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 201

[4] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973; Vintage, 2016), 375-6.

[5] Collini, *Nostalgic Imagination*, 60-1.

[6] George Sturt, *The Wheelwright's Shop* (Cambridge University Press, 1923), 91. Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses in the main text.

[7] Leavis and Thompson, *Culture*, 91.

[8] *Wheelwright's Shop*, 24; cf Farnham Museum MS 148/B07a/vii fol.3: "~~qualities in timber made~~ {timber disclosed qualities} hardly to be found otherwise" – "disclosure" is a late refinement.

[9] Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), 53-4.

[10] Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archeology, Art and Architecture* (Routledge, 2013), 110.

[11] *Journals of George Sturt 1890-1927*, ed. E.D. Mackerness, 2 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1967), i. 453 (28 December 1904)

[12] *Journals*, ii. 865, using the title (itself borrowed from Darwin) of T.H. Huxley's famous essay of 1888.

[13] Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (Harper and Row, 1973), 15.

[14] *Wheelwright's Shop*, 91; cf. 148: these were "things for eyes and hands to learn, rather than for reason, and my eyes and hands were already too old"; cf. also *Journals*, ii. 869 on starting five years too late.

[15] *Wheelwright's Shop*, 33, 66-7.

[16] George Sturt, *Chance in the Village*, (Duckworth, 1912), 122.

[17] *OED* "ecology" (1a) gives H.G. Wells's popularizations in 1932 ("Economics is […] a branch of ecology; it is the ecology of the human species") and 1933 ("Of human ecology he betrays no knowledge").

[18] Bryan G. Norton, *Sustainability. A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 363.

[19] Bryan G. Norton, "Ecology and Opportunity: Intergenerational Equity and Sustainable Options", in *Fairness and Futurity. Essays in Environmental Sustainability and Social Justice*, ed. Dobson, A., (Oxford University Press, 1999), 118–150, at 146-47.

[20] *Journals*, ii. 865.

[21] *Wheelwright's Shop*, 192; cf. 29.

[22] *Wheelwright's Shop*, 31; see 33, wood kept "for longforseen uses".

[23] *Wheelwright's Shop*, 202; cf. Sturt, *Change*, 123: "And thus the succession of recurring tasks, each one of which seemed to the villager almost characteristic of his own people in their native home, kept constantly alive a feeling that satisfied him and a usage that helped him."

[24] E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (1973; Vintage, 2011), 127.

[25] Kirkpatrick Sale, *Human Scale Revisited: A New Look at the Classic Case for a Decentralist Future* (Chelsea Green, 2017), 17.

[26] *Journals*, i. 131; cf. *Journals*, ii. 865 on "generations […] labouring in their environment of materials".

[27] *Journals*, i. 219 (6 November 1892).

[28] *Journals*, ii. 639.

[29] Sturt, *A Farmer's Life: With a Memoir of the Farmer's Sister* (Jonathan Cape, 1922), 172.

[30] *Farmer's Life*, 173.