

# **CRAEFT: AN INQUIRY INTO THE ORIGINS AND TRUE MEANING OF TRADITIONAL CRAFTS**

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Man's search for meaning is, in these days of alienation and anomie, always a topic that can generate interest. Meaning at its most concrete is tied to the things of Earth, to the nature of man and the world of nature. Thus, if man becomes wholly dissociated from Earth, bad things result. This, in a nutshell, is the message of not a few modern prophets, and among them is Alexander Langlands, offering a specifically British variation on the theme.

The author is an archaeologist and historian of medieval times, resident in Wales, and frequent participant in British television re-creations of earlier times (a popular genre there), like *Victorian Farm*. By avocation he is interested in traditional things and ways of doing things, and of the types of work he discusses in this book, he has actively participated in most. This gives his book an experiential feel that is superior to many books that offer only second-hand description. It also makes his comments on meaning seem organic, rather than didactic or forced.

Langlands begins by defining his title word, *craeft*, an Anglo-Saxon word. It is not, or not precisely, what we mean by the modern word "craft." That modern word has been abused, pushed and pulled like so much taffy, especially to sell consumer goods that nobody really thinks have anything to do with craft, that it has lost much of its meaning. Langlands more or less defines "craeft" as a synonym for "true craft." He works backward, observing that true craft must have to do with physical work involving natural materials. Its opposite is computer work, a "pixelated abridgment of reality" that lacks any physicality. Craeft necessarily involves actual, direct engagement with the material.

To extend the definition further, Langlands examines the use of "craeft" by Alfred the Great (a prolific writer) and by other Anglo-Saxons, where it (usually) means "power or skill in the context of knowledge, ability, and a kind of learning," that includes physical skill, but also mental and spiritual virtue or excellence. After reviewing other uses of the word, Langlands offers a modern definition of *craeft*: "a wisdom that furnishes the practitioner with a certain power," that retrieves "an

awareness and an understanding of how materials worked” and how the human form relates to them, a “co-ordination that furnishes us with a meaningful understanding of the materiality of our world.” Through craft, we take pleasure in using our skill, not substituting machines to do the work, to create things that are specifically useful to us, rather than buying mass produced, disposable, or unnecessary things (such as Langlands’s *bête noire*, the battery-powered pepper mill). (Nor does true craft include what is colloquially termed “crafting,” the manufacture of decorative or superfluous items as a hobby, such as scrapbooking.) It is not just the creation that is true craft, though. “We’ve conflated craft with skill and design with art when . . . it should be about more than just making. It is the power, the force, the knowledge and the wisdom behind making—the craft behind it.”

Craeft depends in large part on tacit knowledge, of the type discussed by Matthew Crawford in *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (of which book more below). Thus, craft is difficult or impossible to reduce to mere instruction. Craeft can, however, use machines in its execution; it is the involvement of the master, not necessarily his specific tools, that matters, although the use of too much machine destroys craft. After all, craft such as hedging uses simple machines such as sprung shears, but when the hedger uses electric finger-bar shears, it is no longer craft.

Having defined his terms, while offering interesting asides, the remainder of the book is an exploration of specific modern examples of craft, most of them actually executed by the author, interspersed with ruminations on each craft, on the landscape that created and directs the craft, and on Britain itself. First up is a craft that is, in a small way, still somewhat practiced—haymaking. To be precise, the making by hand and subsequent storage of hay, dried grass (as opposed to silage) for animal feed is not widely practiced by farmers. But the scything of grass by average homeowners is not that rare, though not necessarily competently done. (I own a scythe, which I use occasionally, but not well.) Langlands, who took to haying in a common way, by first scything weeds in his garden as an alternative to using a “strimmer” (a weed-whacker), discusses all the many variables that dictate methods of producing hay, from grasses to weather in different areas of Britain to the techniques developed to deal with weather. His point, made here first but applicable to all the crafts he discusses, is that craft is the very

opposite of “one size fits all”—man fits himself to craft, to the materials and technique, not the other way around. Fail to do that, and your hay rots, or it lacks nutrition, or you never even get it out of the field. The craft is not merely scythe work, “it is the correct use of these implements in the field that represents the craft—the longer trajectory of production and use within a wider socio-economic context.”

And the form of implements for every craft is often dictated by local conditions and by specific demands. Whether it is methods of “whipping” (attaching something to a stick with cord), shepherds’ crooks, the stone used in building drystone walls, or the poles used to pick apples, everything has an design dictated by nature. Plastic items, purporting to be universal tools and imported from Malaysia, are not the same thing; they cannot accomplish craft, since they are not fitted to the specifics of the work at the level that achieves excellence.

After a detour to Iceland, to see farms that have been operating for more than a thousand years, Langlands returns to English craft, with one that particularly fascinates me, beekeeping. Actually, not so much beekeeping, but beehives, in the form of skeps, basket-type enclosures woven of soaked cane and straw, used before modern frame hives were invented. This is of particular interest to me since I am about to install several beehives myself, and while I doubt I’ll go for skeps, Langlands is not wrong that examining what makes a skep different from frames has much to say about bees and their keeping. Yes, you can’t harvest honey from a skep without destroying it, but by timing swarms you can avoid destroying a colony, and while honey production falls using skeps, Langlands suggests that the bees are healthier. That may well be the case, and given the current problems facing honeybees, maybe skeps should make a comeback.

Next come hedges and stone walls, both ancient means of delineating the landscape and confining fields and livestock. Hedging, like all craft, is a lot more complex than it looks. If you don’t weave branches that rise out of a hedge back into the hedge, first notching them with a billhook (which as with all such tools has infinite regional variations tied to local conditions in hedgerow species, soil, and rock), the hedge develops holes at its base, quickly expanded by animals, rapidly destroying the hedge. Like anything with a direct connection to nature, hedging is not fire-and-forget. But if properly tended, a hedge will last

essentially forever, even if, like the Ship of Theseus, it is not really the same hedge. Similarly, the construction of stone walls depends on local materials and conditions. Walls that seem insubstantial and wobbly in the Hebrides are designed that way, in order to not be damaged by wind and to convince the sheep to stay away; if the local stone were more malleable, perhaps they could be made more substantial, but builders work with granite, and build walls to fit their raw material, not one-size-fits-all walls.

Turning to other crafts, Langlands addresses textiles, namely wool and linen. Among other items, he focuses on Harris Tweed, woven in the Outer Hebrides and rigorously defined and protected by law. A libertarian sensibility would be offended that the government has helped and protected Harris Tweed and would be happy had Chinese wool dyed with chemical dyes replaced it under the same name. Langlands does not have a libertarian sensibility.

He also spends a great deal of time on a craft that is little known today, roof thatching. Existing old thatched roofs, dating back into the nineteenth century, can be cut through in a form of archaeology, showing once again the tremendous variations over time and space dictated by local materials and techniques. And as with all crafts, thatching is both a lot harder than it looks, and a lot more special than it looks. Langlands does not mention the oft-heard claim that achieving mastery of a skill takes approximately ten thousand hours, and no doubt that's more than some of these crafts take, but as his own learning curve shows, it's certainly a significant amount of time that's required.

Finally, Langlands covers some other crafts, notably ploughing, moving from leather to harnesses to horses. He claims that horses are not much less efficient than diesel tractors, and better in many ways, among them resilience and sustainability. And that brings up the key question in all this—how much of craeft is workable on a large scale today, in light of both natural limitations and the demands of modern people?

Langlands has three objections to the modern world for which he thinks craeft offers a solution. (I actually think he could have said quite a bit more, especially on more abstract levels, such as a discussion of how craeft relates to beauty, and how the diminution of craeft ties to the modern blindness to the very existence of beauty. But Langlands is, most of all, tied to the concrete, so this omission is not surprising.)

First, he gently criticizes the mindset of “perpetual growth,” because it “contradicts the accepted reality that the Earth’s resources are finite.” Second, he believes that the decline of *craeft* is spiritually bad, diminishing contemplation and meaning in human life. “We have become detached from making, and it isn’t a good state for us to be in.” Third, and closely tied to the second, he draws a line between the dying of *craeft* and more general societal degradation, in the creation of a world drained of ties to reality, abandoning the search for excellence and ignoring the link between competency and actual achievement.

As to limited resources, *craeft* at first does appear to be a solution, at least a partial one, since it views the making of things as limited by materials available locally, and creation and use as a sustainable cycle, not one of consumption followed by disposal. I suppose that’s true when you are wandering the Wessex countryside, largely empty of people, meditating on features like the Oxna Mere, a self-filling stock pond of mysterious construction built more than a thousand years ago. But what does this say to, and of, the millions in council housing, glued to the BBC or the Internet, often drunk or high, waiting for their next dole check? And what does it say to the further millions resident in Cool Britannia, housed in their glass towers and jetting off to vacations in Iceland and Ibiza? They’re not going to live like a Wessex farmer, and they are not real interested in even thinking about *craeft*, since they are mass men, in José Ortega y Gasset’s famous term.

Nor, in fact, do they need to live like Wessex farmers, at least with respect to resource disappearance. Solar and nuclear energy are, at least in theory, functionally infinite, and energy, not raw materials, is the primary limiting factor in delivery of goods to the masses. (It is not true, either, that we are running out of traditional sources of energy.) Leaving aside that growth is going to stop for totally different reasons, because it is inevitable that global population will, soon enough, fall and keep falling, it is not really growth itself that is the gravamen of Langlands’s complaint, but a throwaway culture. This culture is evident everywhere, from farms having “become little more than processing plants where cheap imported animal feed is converted into meat” to plastic and cardboard being used instead of pottery or woven baskets. And the main problem with our throwaway culture is not running out

of things to throw away, or places to throw them away in. Rather, it is a spiritual problem, and that is the real focus of Langlands's book.

No doubt we would all be better off spiritually if we lived our lives through a frame of *craeft*, though for the vast majority of us, it would be nearly an unfathomable change. It's not going to happen, however, so no need to worry about how wrenching it might be. The slum dwellers and their overlords in their steel fortresses of power, and the rest of us in between, are not going to step away from their, and our, throw-away habits. The overlords may pay lip service to "sustainability," but for the vast majority of them, it is nothing more. Obtaining meaning through objects, evinced in earlier ages by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, or in a different manifestation by Thoreau and the Transcendentalists, has always and ever only been the concerns of a small segment of the ruling class. Langlands seems to realize this when he observes, "Craft has, and always will, enjoy buoyancy among the luxury markets. . . . But for the everyday the cost is prohibitive." He thinks this may be changing, as fuel costs increase, but as I say, they're not in fact increasing, and they're not going to. Even if they did, almost everyone is spiritually wedded to consumption, because that is what they think gives meaning to their lives. Wrenching them out of this mindset would require a massive societal reset.

That leaves two groups who will, in practice, of their own accord concern themselves with *craeft* (other than specialists and hobbyists). Both are small. The first is those for whom *craeft* is a practical concern, mostly rural dwellers who are close to the physical components of craft and have some need. Even here, though, most will choose wire fencing rather than rebuilding the ancient hedge or drystone wall. The second is the spiritually focused, some of a traditional bent and some of the type who might otherwise focus on yoga or Buddhism. Neither of these is going to rebuild our world around *craeft*.

Perhaps, though, too much focus on thatching obscures that *craeft* has applications whenever, in Matthew Crawford's words, we can make something "that is meaningful because it is genuinely useful." We achieve agency through self-reliance and the search for excellence. If we simply cultivate pushback on the throwaway culture, we will all be better off, even if we aren't running out to build new drystone walls in our backyards and even if the throwaway culture maintains its grip. Such

a pushback could be a key building block of societal renewal, of the recreation of strong families and strong communities. Maybe—although the road from here to there is pretty blurry. I'd be perfectly happy if, as a small first step, governments clamped down on the flood of cheap imports that feed the throwaway culture. So what if limitations on trade shaved a few points from GDP? As I have said before, human flourishing doesn't consist of the ability to buy five percent more cheap Chinese crap every year.

That's not to say I disagree with Langlands in his analysis of the problems of modernity. I wholeheartedly agree that our societies are spiritually degraded (though Britain considerably more than the United States). Turning to Langlands's related, third objection, craft pays homage to reality and to an understanding of the world as it is, and rejects artificiality and ideological distortions of the world. It is perhaps an unknowing grasp of this truth that drives rejection of craft (and its higher manifestations, such as beautiful architecture) by many who are ideologically wedded to modernity. And this, perhaps, is the solution. If, as I hold, the modern world embodies numerous fundamental denials of reality, it is inevitable that reality will reassert itself, and at that point, through the smoke and the corpses, perhaps craft, embodying the resilience of human nature and of Earth, will once again find its purpose within the fabric of human society.