

Circles of the Wheel

Janet Selby

The back seat of the old 1935 Gray Dodge was slippery going around the corners, especially for us four children in the back. Visiting Nanna and Grandpa at 44 Minter Street, Canterbury was a regular occurrence. This is the house where my mother and her siblings grew up. The 1920's California Bungalow was always cool with the tessellated tiles up the garden path and in the porch. Out the back, high enough to glimpse the Canterbury race track, and down the hill, stood the wood working factory where my grandfather made furniture, looms and spinning wheels, and various pottery kick wheels. I was only allowed in there if accompanied by an adult. I remember the excitement as a little girl encountering the big noisy machines, spitting out soft fluffy wood shavings, piled up in every corner. I think I found the smell rather pleasant as well.

Little did I know then of the subtleties surrounding my experiences there. How do we know what influences we pick up and how they affect our life choices as we grow and mature?

The garage was where the pottery kick wheels were stored. The big heavy concrete fly wheel attached to a moving chain was my playground, like an indoor type of swing. The size of the apparatus, being rather tall, meant I could easily sit underneath the tray where the wet clay would be, without bumping my head, gently swinging to and fro.

Also stored there ready for distribution were delicate little spinning wheels, and gigantic, intricate looms. These were far too fragile and complicated to be of any use in my playground. The kick wheels were much safer - big and heavy, sturdy and sure. They were to be trusted.

My grandfather, J.H. Wilson, began his woodworking business during the Great Depression. Bread boards, butter paddles, match box holders, and ironing boards were items made in the factory. He began making spinning wheels and looms in the 1930's.

He also worked teaching joinery at Sydney Tech for many years to support his wife and 5 children. He kept his business running until his death in 1968, and it continued for a few more years after that. Through his factory, he created a wealth of opportunities for many grateful artisans throughout Australia and New Zealand, where he supplied various items. He specialised in weaving equipment - looms, spindles, spinning wheels. But for me, the most important piece is the Leach Kick Wheel.

Of the many varieties of European treadle wheels available, it was the Wilson/Leach wheel which was recognised as being the most beautifully crafted, with solidly constructed timber frame, ergonomically designed seat, comfortable and serene, and the triangular copper tray, warm and friendly. This craftsmanship sat comfortably in the craft movement of the day. These two craftsmen – Bernard Leach and J.H. Wilson, seem to fit together too. They actually looked alike with white hair and pipe, and were of similar age and character. Perhaps if John Wilson were living in Cornwall, where Bernard Leach ran his workshop, instead of Canterbury, he may have still made them for Leach.

Bernard Leach was a craftsman from Cornwall, who visited Japan in 1906. By the time he returned to England, some years later, he was fired with a passion for traditional Japanese ceramics. He was determined to bring the subtle Eastern way of thinking to Victorian England, and to change the staid mentality about beauty and craft there. Along with William Blake and William Morris, he was instrumental in broadening the attitudes of the

population towards an Eastern viewpoint. His book "A Potters Book" first published in 1936 remains a focus for ardent students today.

The Leach treadle wheel was phased out of students' life in 1985. The smaller electric wheels took over the space - a room for 15 students - with efficiency not encountered by the larger kick wheels.

The differences between learning on a well crafted kick wheel and an electric wheel can be discussed at length, suffice to say, the rhythm and movement of the potter as she connects with the clay builds a vibrancy within the form, almost perceptible upon encountering a finished piece. This vibrancy and sense of connection, subtle and serene, is not available with the hum of electricity.

My grandfather is remembered fondly particularly in the weaving community. He had been supplying their equipment, lovingly crafted, since the 1930s. An excerpt from his obituary in 1968 states:

"We pay tribute to a man whose dignity and sincerity enriched the world in which he lived. As John Ruskin said - 'That man is the richest who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal and by means of his possessions over the lives of others.' " (The Australian Hand Weaver & Spinner, May, 1968)

Bernard Leach visited Sydney briefly in January 1962, and I suspect it was then that the deal was finalised to begin production of the Leach Kick Wheel. The first models were produced in 1962, but were quickly modified to make their width fit through the average doorway. Perhaps door frames were slightly narrower in Sydney, or Leach didn't realise the propensity for Australian potters to work indoors. Anyway, the Leach frame was also the basis for a motorised wheel. From then on until the factory closed down in 1975, up to 120 wheels were manufactured.

My personal interest in Bernard Leach began in the 1990s while I was studying Japanese Ceramics. I had always been interested in Japanese culture - art, pottery and Zen. Leach's historic link between East and West was a starting point for modern arts and crafts, and I link I cherished. I grew up in a suburb of Sydney with my father's influence as an artist, and my mother's as a weaver. My father and I went together to Gymea TAFE during the 1970s for life drawing classes. After High School, I went to Art School and have been working in some art form or other ever since, with pastels, plaster and clay. Today, I find myself back at Gymea TAFE, nearly 30 years later, continuing my studies in Diploma of Ceramics.

The importance of the Leach Kick Wheel became known to me when I was attending a Certificate in Ceramics course at St. George TAFE in the 1990s. It was the enthusiastic response by the teachers that alerted me to the fact that J.H.Wilson's workmanship was highly respected in the pottery community. It is interesting to muse over my role in the circle which began when I was two years old - the time my grandfather made the first Leach Wheel. My inadvertent role in the continuation of my family connection to the ancient art of pottery, continues today, albeit more aware through, no doubt, my meditation practice.

Deep in the dark "Bat Cave" of the TAFE building at Gymea rested two handsome wheels, dusty and old. The dedicated staff pledged to restore them to service and reignite the passion of days gone by. In the first few minutes of their re-emergence students buzzing with excitement to "have a go" surrounded the wheels. Now they are spruced up ready for action but the peeling, yellow label is unmistakable -

“Made in Australia
by J.H. Wilson
44 Minter Street Canterbury
Under agreement with Bernard Leach”.

Researching this story has brought questions to mind. The comparison of the circle of the potters’ wheel, and in centring is not merely an analogy. It can be taken literally. The clay does not respond properly if you are not focussed and centred in your own self. And circles of the wheel continue past the studio, past the dojo and into the vast, wide world. Questions arise about heritage, affinity and using our opportunities to the fullest extent. Acknowledging our affinities with certain aspects of our lives, how can we make the best for ourselves and others around us?

Chanting the Bodhisattva’s Vow, “*The many beings are numberless. I vow to save them.*” I feel our responsibilities to make the most of each moment. I recognise that it is our responsibility to save all beings, and that starts with the one being you know best – your self.

All through my childhood, there must have been subtle impressions shaping my influences and affiliations. It is interesting to muse over these untold whisps of interconnectedness, linked by deep resonances with all mankind, all beings, all things.

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