

Preface

Ways of knowing

Mike Cooley

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The prose poem, A GRAND TOUR, is based entirely on Mike's knowledge and recollection of the craft skills encountered in "A Grand Tour" of this small town of Tuam in County Galway. All the places described and the craftspeople mentioned are real. Many of their families continue to practice the skills described.

Mike embarked on a career in engineering design, primarily in the aerospace industry. He was increasingly concerned about the misuses of science and technology and sought with others to propose constructive alternatives which would celebrate human skills and be environmentally desirable. In particular, he was concerned that human beings were gradually being reduced to machine appendages and deeply regretted the fact that this was occurring at a time when there were constructive alternatives worthy of attention such as human-centred systems.

The prose poem, INSULTING MACHINES, reflects these concerns and urges us to re-examine our social responsibility, whilst options are still open to us.

Mike Cooley, author of the seminal book, *Architect or Bee?*, has a wide range of interests. From an early age, he was fascinated by the skills displayed by craftspeople and used to spend hours after school and during school holidays visiting the various workshops in the town and chatting with the craftspeople about different materials and techniques. He was convinced that these skills and talents were an important inheritance for future generations, and this motivated much of his subsequent research.

M. Cooley (✉)
Chairman, AI & Society Board, 95 Sussex Place,
Slough SL1 1NN, UK
e-mail: m.cooley@btconnect.com

1 A GRAND TOUR

1.1 Images of Craft Skills in 1940s Tuam, by Mike Cooley

It was a place of unselfconscious artists/craftspeople whose embodied knowledge is that marvel, human skill

which causes inert tools to spring into life as biddable extensions of the knowing hand, producing art concealed as work which always revealed the hand of the maker.

Where tools and materials supported those, skilled with talents fine-tuned over centuries

and whose tacit knowledge and sense of quality lurked in unpretentious work spaces.

Artefacts hidden in the guise of the ordinary so familiar as to be unnoticed

For we see but little of what is there and find instead, merely what we seek.

This then was the setting for a grand tour in a small place,

guided only by the tutor of his intrusive curiosity in this, his Florence on the Nanny,

a treasure trove of much used but little appreciated artefacts.

Now on a drizzly October day he would embark upon his initial Wanderjahre

by going nowhere special -for the greatest journeys are always in the mind.

Perched halfway down the Tullinadaly hill,
stood the workshop of Henry Creighton & Son -coach builders.

The huge sliding front doors, like the curtains in a theatre,
 slid back to reveal the cavernous workshop behind.
 A hand-made side car nearing completion, where
 father coached son as his father had done. Then
 armed only with a spokeshave, blocks of wood were
 transformed
 into delicate, graceful wheel spokes like the limbs of
 a ballet dancer.

At the back, their very own ring of fire where the heat
 expanded the wheel rim
 so that it fitted snugly and tightened the wheel as it
 contracted.

Fitted to a well greased axle, soon to take the Lys-
 key family into town on Sundays
 If Jarlath's chariot had a Creighton wheel, where
 might Tuam be today?

A stone's roll downhill, almost unnoticed-
 hid the tiny snug leather-scented workshop of shoe-
 maker Doris Hosty.

The shoe-last in the window, a symbol and a tool with
 paraffin lamp of eye damaging inadequacy
 where handmade shoes seemed to grow from the
 materials spread on a small work surface
 while throughout the town there was no shortage of
 those to testify
 that the shoes she made would fit like a glove, put a
 spring in your step and last for years.
 One proud owner known for hyperbola, asserted that
 any self respecting corpse
 would be proud to be laid out in them.

Now, meandering along the Old gardens pathway to
 the Old Road where the Rooney brothers
 sculpted beneath the galvanised roof of their wind-
 swept workspace.

There they 'liberated' Angels or Celtic Crosses as if
 by magic
 from the pregnant stone in which they could already
 see the figure
 and would remove 'all that was not David' until he
 emerged resplendent.

Then the hand eye and brain combined to direct the
 spectacular chisel movements
 And beneath its cutting edge, beauty was manifest.
 Yet these artist craftspeople were kept 'below the
 salt' by the inadequate name: stonecutter.

Then a further ten minutes to The Mall, just past the
 cinema where the anvil bells
 of the glowing forge rang out and Joe Connolly
 coaxed crude metal

into intricate shapes as if it were the plasticine of his
 hand and brain co-ordination.

This was design by doing, as customers imagined
 aloud what they desired in practice
 by discussing the number of twirls and leaves they
 would like to grace their gates. There the intricate
 balance between imagination and reality was forged.
 Joe's work adorned and secured many an entrance
 and exit
 even the convent had its boundaries set by him.

Then on to the Ballygaddy Road, a place of many
 talents

and where the dressmaker Mrs Flaherty toiled in her
 house-cum-workshop.

Armed to the teeth with pins in her lips in readiness
 for fixing

she employed skills that defined the bespoke and
 were evident in each measurement and scissor cut.

A huge iron, retrieved from the open fire, hissed
 trainlike as it folded

and flattened the willing material on a room-dwarfing
 table.

Her level playing field in an unfair world.

There, flat materials would be formed to caress that
 extraordinary variety

of three dimensional contours that is the human body.
 Whether for a two piece suit, a wedding dress or a
 ballgown, her fine feathers made fine birds.

What home in MacHale Terrace did not boast at least
 one garment fashioned by Mrs Flaherty?

She could metamorphise a mother's wedding dress
 into a confirmation gown for her daughter
 then a first communion dress for her youngest.

But a few paces away, stood the workshop of the
 O'Rourke carpenters

where doors were custom made of well discussed,
 highly figured and seasoned wood.

Each would fit snugly into an existing frame however
 skewed-

a one-off fitted to perfection in an irregular world, not
 some tolerated item imposing itself.

This respected artefact would be visited three months
 later to ensure that it had settled in
 with careful final adjustment to make it gently clonk
 close on the inner and outer worlds

-a threshold of tension between the public and private
 domains.

And just visible tall upright threatening, lurking in the
 workshop corner, two coffins

Handcrafted reminders of our mortality.

Where to stop in this Hermitage of treasures? Perhaps
at Paddy Donoghue's,
whose hand stitched, brass embellished harnesses set
off many a fine horse,
or famed footballer Frank son of Jim Stockwell
whose shop signs with letters
defiantly stood proud of their flat surface;
Why not the bakers Clorans and Lydons where ovens
were fired up at around 4.am
or Bob Holmes barber and provider of apprenticeships?

Not forgetting the Walsh brothers -a quartet of tai-
loring talents
three in Tuam and Richard in Kilcreevanty
or the Holian family of plasterers, bricklayers and
builders.
Or Tommy Acton the bonesetter 'with the gift' in
Desmesne cottages.

And precious to me are the cherished youthful
memories of dad's workshop
where I learned to anneal copper and temper steel
and that mecca of skills orchestrated by Franz Kaplan
in the workshop of the sugar factory
or..... an ever growing repertoire limited only by our
own lack of insight.

2 INSULTING MACHINES

2.1 By Mike Cooley

It is a graceful degradation, bristling with paths not
taken
Supercharged by Taylor's one best way
with all the zeal of the monotheist
Where Schumpeter shoves, Kondratiev waves and
Gladwell points
All in hot pursuit of singularity.
Behold the strange phyla as they stalk their makers
They too can walk, feed, talk and -some say- think.

We create devices and then they create us.
Narcissus-like, we gaze into a pool of technology and
see ourselves.
We acquiesce in our own demise, setting out as
participants
and metamorphosing into victims.

The diagnosis is serious: a rapidly spreading species'
loss of nerve
Tacit knowledge is demeaned whilst propositional
knowledge is revered.
Who needs imagination when there are facts ?

A human enhancing symbiosis ignored
whilst a dangerous convergence proceeds apace
as human beings confer life on machines and in so
doing diminish themselves.
Your calculus may be greater than his calculus
but will it pass the Sullenberger Hudson river test ?
Meantime, the virtual is confused with the real
-as parents lavish attention on the virtual child
whilst their real child dies of neglect and starvation.

Potential and reality are torn apart as change is con-
fused with progress
with slender knowledge of deep subjects
-you proceed with present tense technology,
obliterating the past and with the future already
mortgaged.
The court of history may find you intoxicated with
species arrogance
recklessly proceeding without a Hippocratic Oath.

Meantime, the deskiller is deskilled, as a tsunami of
technology rocks our
foundations. The multinational apologist solemnly
declares

"We should have the courage to accept our true place
in the evolutionary hierarchy
-namely animals, humans and post singularity
systems".

Now the sky darkens with pigeons coming home to
roost
and the mine canaries topple from their perches
unnoticed.

That distant sound grows louder.
Is it the life affirming energy of Riverdance
or the clacking hooves of the Four Horsemen ?
That music, is it 'Ode to Joy' or is it 'Twilight of the
Gods?'
As the embrace tightens into genteel strangulation
-will the seducer in final deception whisper "Shall I
compare thee to a Summer's day ?"