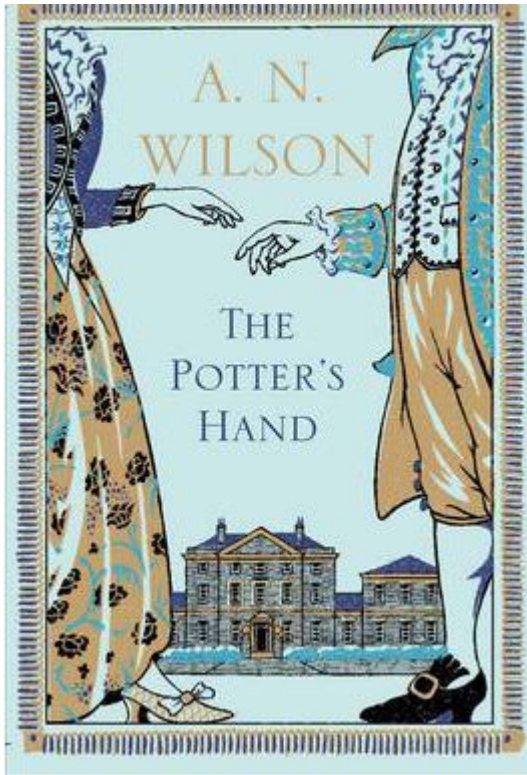


# Wedgwood Recast



In the afterword to *The Potter's Hand*, its author, A. N. Wilson, identifies the novel as a work of historical fiction, embellishing the life of Josiah Wedgwood, whom Wilson quite rightly asserts has largely been forgotten. The novel seeks to commemorate the work and life of Wedgwood by presenting a thoughtfully composed portrait of the man and his milieu. Wilson's family connection to Wedgwood emerges at strategic points in the novel, making the resulting work an impressive homage to an ancestor whom Wilson clearly respects and wishes to bring to wider renown among readers.

The novel consists of three substantial sections, each dedicated to a work of art. The first section, which concerns Wedgwood's production of the massive dinnerware service termed "[The Frog Service](#)" for Catherine the Great, constitutes the bulk of the novel. Subsequent sections document George Stubbs' production of the 1780 [Wedgwood family portrait](#) and Wedgwood's reproduction of the [Portland Vase](#) in 1790. Despite this organizational strategy, the works of art themselves play little role in the novel, with the tepid exception of the Portland Vase, which invokes Keatsian ruminations on the nature of life and death. The novel is more overtly interested in the lives of its artists and their coterie, specifically Wedgwood and his extensive network of British intellectual luminaries, including Sir Joshua Reynolds, James Watt, and Erasmus Darwin.

At its most compelling, *The Potter's Hand* explores the tenuous network of Atlantic commerce that enabled the production of Wedgwood's pottery. Wedgwood's Creamware, for instance, achieved its characteristic color through a mixture of domestic clay, which fired to a grey hue, and imported clay, obtained from the Cherokee people of North America, which fired to a whitish hue. The conceit of the first section of the novel is Wedgwood's desire to obtain enough clay from the Cherokee to complete his Frog Service. Wilson accounts for the ways in which the complications of empire—most notably the American Revolution—kept Wedgwood from achieving his goal.



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The second section, framed by the Wedgwood family portrait, configures a lineage for the novel's vision of empire and its relationship to artistic production. The fictional Josiah Wedgwood commissions the portrait in an attempt to reject the rapidly changing social milieu of early nineteenth-century England. He requests that Stubbs paint his family in a classical manner, but soon finds that Stubbs' capricious artistic tendencies render any attempts to shape the style of the portrait ineffectual. The power struggle that ensues between Wedgwood and Stubbs dramatizes the relationship between industrial and artistic production during the era. As Wedgwood is quick to point out, Stubbs uses Wedgwood enamel tiles as canvases for smaller works, but Wedgwood is unable to profit from this economic arrangement when shaping the formal elements of the portrait itself. The portrait's production forces Wedgwood to reexamine the relationship between art and commerce, which comes to bear in the novel's final section.

Wilson's section dedicated to the Portland Vase expands the novel's interest in empire to the British removal of Greek and Roman antiquities and sharpens the novel's interest in trade dynamics as well. While Wedgwood's reproduction of the vase was initially commissioned for aesthetic value, Wedgwood saw the project as an opportunity to market his virtuosity as a potter and the versatility of his medium. As the novel recounts, reproductions of the vase served as salesman's samples for the Wedgwood line, which Wedgwood sought to expand into additional European markets. But Wedgwood's capitalist ambitions are undermined in the novel, and, at its conclusion, Wedgwood pottery is still coded as a thoroughly British production.

While the novel engages with the rapidly shifting dynamics of empire and its social and political vicissitudes, it is a book that is interested in human emotion first, and politics only subsequently. Its primary character, despite overtones otherwise, is not Josiah Wedgwood; while scenes focused on Wedgwood begin and end the novel, the bulk of the novel follows Tom Byerley, Wedgwood's young nephew and, early in life, the heir apparent to Wedgwood's pottery works, and Sukey Wedgwood, Josiah Wedgwood's daughter, who would ultimately be the mother of Charles Darwin. While Josiah Wedgwood is central to the novel, his

character is never developed to the extent that the novel's younger protagonists are. Tom follows the path of any number of *bildungsromane*, first departing from his uncle's patronage to pursue an acting career in New York, then setting out into the wilds of colonial America to help his uncle obtain the desired Cherokee-owned clay, finding himself entangled by chance in the American revolutionary cause, and ultimately returning to England and settling into marriage and career, now a chastened former artist. Tom's story enables changes of scene in the novel much more readily than other characters, chiefly because he is unhindered by the social and physical limitations of much of its cast of characters (for instance, Josiah Wedgwood himself has a wooden leg, a characteristic that the novel exploits). Sukey, only two years old at her first appearance in the novel, faces the challenges of being young, well-connected, and female in late eighteenth-century Britain, and her development is charted in terms of insights on the family's internal dynamics rather than adventures abroad. Wilson counts on Tom and Sukey to provoke in readers an emotional investment in Wedgwood's story and clearly prizes this connection above attachments to Wedgwood's art itself.

Aspects of Wilson's interest in Tom and Sukey do help to create momentum through the intricacies of Wedgwood's career, but other aspects, frankly, detract. Tom provides the basis for the novel's central love plot, which begins when he first encounters a young Cherokee woman when attempting to secure his uncle's clay. The woman, named Blue Squirrel, is beautiful, impetuous, and sexually adept: an assemblage of damning colonial stereotypes of Native women. Blue Squirrel does develop as a character, and by the end of the novel seems to be a representation of colonial hybridity, having achieved an identity independent from violent male control and a revered status in Wedgwood's pottery works. But Blue Squirrel, later renamed Merry, is always an object of sexual desire first and an artist second. The last scene in which readers encounter Blue Squirrel consists of her stripping naked to swim, and then having sex with a male companion who, like Tom, is "saved" through a sexual experience with her. Blue Squirrel is a character imported from colonial romances featuring Native peoples, as are Wilson's references to the Cherokee tribe more generally. While this novel certainly does not claim to be revolutionizing historical romance as a genre, and does feature better-developed portrayals of women, such as Sukey, the inclusion of a stereotypical Native maiden is disappointing.

The ideal reader for Wilson's novel has a general interest in the eighteenth-century British colonial moment and the economic workings of the Atlantic world, but should not approach the text seeking a meticulous account of the networks of cultural power during the era. As Wilson clearly articulates in his afterword, and as any observant reader will conclude in the early pages of this nearly 500-page work, it does not presume to be a historical account of the era. What it does accomplish is piquing the interest of readers in a neglected historical figure who provided an important connection between the economic and intellectual life of England. Wilson does so in a style that echoes authors such as Sir Walter Scott, a figure that Wilson has lauded in previous critical

work. *The Potter's Hand* offers readers a chance to engage with Josiah Wedgwood in a familiar and well-developed literary form.