

## USING JOSIAH WEDGWOOD TO TEACH THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

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Freshman European history surveys can be deadly. Instructors must cover hundreds of years in one term. This time restriction requires a general treatment of significant periods, events, people, and trends. Continual doses of general information can kill student interest. Therefore, I try various means to put life into the broad treatment of material. I assign readings to give in-depth analysis of selected topics; I supplement my classes with slides, films, and videos providing visual expressions of the material; and I discuss my own research when it is relevant to the class. Sometimes I use the biography of a special person whose life illustrates a general period or theme of history. Such a person is Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795), an innovative potter and an enterprising businessman, whose life touched on the main features of the industrial revolution in England.

My class session on Wedgwood gives specific examples that illustrate the more general material on the industrial revolution. He has served my students well. His experiences bring to life exciting changes in industry and technology in eighteenth-century England, and as a bonus, students learn about Wedgwood pottery. Just as pottery in ancient Greece tells the historian much about the ancient world, Wedgwood's pottery tells us much about things like the improving standard of living and methods of marketing in the eighteenth century.

Student feedback from my Wedgwood class has been positive. And I was convinced anew of the validity of using Wedgwood's life for explaining the industrial revolution when another professor, John H. Sprinkle, Jr., independently came up with a similar class on Wedgwood. A description of our use of Wedgwood in the classroom presents a more interesting and relevant way of teaching the industrial revolution and suggests ways in which other specific material--not always in the textbook--can be used to enhance learning. A discussion of our two class plans follows as plan #1: Hall and plan #2: Sprinkle. We have included information on where to obtain pottery samples and some suggested readings.

### Class Plan #1: Hall

My class session is titled: *Industrialism in England: Josiah Wedgwood*. I begin with a consideration of why the industrial revolution began in England. I outline on the board nine major factors that fostered the development of English industrialization: 1) a tradition of skill; 2) the presence of fuel and raw materials; 3) a consumer market; 4) new technology; 5) mercantilism; 6) transportation; 7) an intellectual community; 8) a social structure supporting innovation and allowing for social mobility; and 9) a government that could be influenced to promote industry. I briefly discuss each of these factors, taking about ten minutes of class time. Then I introduce Josiah Wedgwood.

The balance of my class is a biography of Wedgwood. As I describe various aspects of Wedgwood's life, I refer back to the list of factors that fostered

industrialization in England. For example, in discussing Wedgwood's family background I point out that he was the son, grandson, and great grandson of potters, and I relate this to the tradition of skill that existed in England in the early years of the eighteenth century. I make the point and refer students back to the list on the blackboard. In like manner, I stress that the second factor, fuel and raw materials, was present in Wedgwood's Staffordshire. Coal seams lay side by side with clay needed for pottery manufacture. And again, I refer students to the original list of factors favoring industrialization in England. The next point on the list is market. When Wedgwood was born in 1730, pottery making was a peasant industry. Yet, such things as the increasing prosperity of the middle-class, the improvement of manners, and the new popularity of hot tea and coffee created a market for more stylish and higher quality ceramic ware. And Wedgwood exploited this new consumerism. By the time I am through with my biographical sketch, each factor that was important for the development of industrialism in England has its specific illustration from Wedgwood's life.

In several instances Wedgwood's activities provide more than one illustration of the factors that promoted industrialism in Great Britain. For example, Wedgwood was active in trying to get the government to advance and protect the pottery industry. He led a campaign to break a monopoly on china clay from Cornwall; he lobbied for a commercial treaty between the United States and Great Britain in 1783; he worked for free trade in pottery with France. Certainly, these are wonderful examples of how one entrepreneur influenced government on behalf of his own industry. Such specific examples illustrate how during the industrial revolution the English government could be enlisted in the service of industry.

By the end of class, my specific examples have illustrated the general points I asserted at the beginning. We have progressed from the general to the specific and returned to the general.

Then I go one step further. I suggest Wedgwood was a man of his times who could not have made so extensive a contribution a century earlier. And I point out that each of us, whether we realize it or not, are also influenced by things like population patterns, new technology, and factors important in our time, just as Wedgwood was influenced by the factors creating the industrial revolution.

In a memorable moment last term, a student asked, "Are you trying to say that the times make the man rather than the man makes the times?"

"That is an important question," I replied, "something that the study of history helps us think about." I paused a few seconds. "Class dismissed." Case closed for devoting a class to Wedgwood and the industrial revolution.

#### Class Plan #2: Sprinkle

I chose to discuss Josiah Wedgwood in my survey of Western European history because his story illustrates the central themes of the industrial revolution. My approach to the industrial revolution evolved from my interest in archaeology and material culture. I wanted stimulating and different lectures to explain and enliven my survey course. In textbooks, Wedgwood is not commonly given as an example of individuals who are representative of the industrial revolution such as James Watt or James Hargreaves. At the same time, he is familiar because more people have experience with ceramics than with steam engines or spinning jennys.

And from my archaeological work, I had access to samples of British pottery that I could bring into class for a "hands on" teaching aid.

My class on the industrial revolution begins with a review of the material presented in the textbook. I discuss Britain's unique role and leadership in industrialization, the role of inventions, the changing nature of production, the ideas of consumption as an impetus to industrial growth, the role of private enterprise, and the importance of the individual. I propose to the class that Josiah Wedgwood is a prime example of the importance of individual inventors and entrepreneurs.

Before getting into a detailed discussion of Wedgwood, I describe various types of pottery and their chronology. I have brought in samples of some of these ceramics so students can handle them.

Once students have seen the quality of pottery before Wedgwood's time, I show them a sample of his innovative cream ware. I explain that when Wedgwood perfected the formula for cream ware in 1760, he was attempting to produce a relatively cheap ceramic product that approached the whiteness of fine Chinese porcelains. Such porcelains were highly desired in England, in English colonies, and across Europe.

Students can see the difference between earlier ceramic ware and Wedgwood's cream ware. I have little need to explain why cream ware rapidly became popular; the cream ware is obviously superior. But I do need to explain to the students how I got my pottery samples. They did not come from England. They came from archaeological digs in the area of Williamsburg, Virginia. I then explore with students how Wedgwood's cream ware laid the foundation for English domination of the American ceramics market until the mid-nineteenth century.

Once we have looked at the pottery samples, I return again to the general themes I discussed earlier in class. I point out the technological creativity of Wedgwood and the role of the individual in technological innovation. I stress the importance of the world wide market and special advantages British entrepreneurs enjoyed. The British government favored the growth of industry, banking, and shipping. I explain how the technology of production and decoration transformed potters from skilled craftsmen to semi-skilled task-masters. This trend in the pottery industry exemplifies overall patterns characteristic of the industrial revolution.

Another trend was the growing importance of consumerism. Wedgwood showed special savvy in reading the consumer market at home and abroad. He realized that the growth of population and prosperity created a new market for better ceramic ware. In 1765 Wedgwood received an order for a new tea set from Queen Charlotte. Subsequently, Wedgwood became "Her Majesty's Potter." Thereafter, capitalizing on his royal order, he marketed cream ware as Queen's Ware. Later, when Catherine the Great of Russia ordered a 952-piece set of Queen's Ware, Wedgwood displayed it for two months in his London showrooms before sending it to Catherine. He utilized the techniques of Madison Avenue advertising while most of his competitors were trying just to imitate his new processes.

Wedgwood's advertising methods for his quality product were extremely effective. After its introduction as a fine, stylish ceramic, cream ware quickly became the cheapest type of earthenware. All but the poorest classes could now afford cream ware; and cream ware continues to be produced in great quantities even to

the present day. Again, this new affordability characterized not only ceramics but other goods produced during the industrial revolution.

By the end of class students have gained some appreciation of the complex nature of the industrial revolution; and they have seen how historians can use material culture--in this case ceramics--to better understand the past. Wedgwood and his cream ware have helped my students see more clearly the transformation of society in eighteenth-century England.

#### How to Obtain Pottery Samples:

Seek out archaeologists in your area and inquire about obtaining some cream ware samples. Many archaeologists will be so excited by your interest they will lend you--or help you obtain--artifacts for display in your class.

If eighteenth-century pottery samples are unavailable, modern Wedgwood pottery can be found in many stores. Many modern pieces come complete with an information pamphlet detailing the growth of the pottery industry in the eighteenth century.

Some museums such as the Dewitt-Wallace Decorative Arts Museum, Williamsburg, VA 23185, will produce photographs of pottery samples at a minimal cost. Local and college libraries are also a good source for photographs and illustrations.

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

A useful introduction to the life and accomplishments of Wedgwood is found in an essay "Wedgwood" by Ronald Politt and Herbert F. Curry in *Portraits in British History* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey, 1975), 203-222. For a detailed study of Wedgwood's life see Eliza Meteyard, *The Life of Josiah Wedgwood* (2 vols.: London: Hurst and Blackett, 1865-66). For primary sources see Anne Finer and George Savage, eds., *The Selected Letters of Josiah Wedgwood* (London: Cory, Adams, & McKay, 1965).