

Life & Arts

'The White Road: A Pilgrimage of Sorts', by Edmund de Waal

Edmund de Waal, the ceramicist and author of 'The Hare with Amber Eyes', has written an intensely personal history of porcelain



Porcelain at the Meissen factory in Meissen, Germany © Tobias Schwarz/Reuters

Review by AN Wilson SEPTEMBER 18 2015

[Edmund de Waal](#) is the most accomplished British potter alive today. His deceptively spare white porcelain creations — ranging from huge vessels to tiny jars — partake of the simplicity of ancient Chinese ceramics, while also being challengingly modern. I once had the privilege of visiting his studio and seeing him at work — a sort of homecoming for me, as I am the son of an industrial potter, Norman Wilson, who pioneered some of the most brilliant glazes and shapes of mid-20th-century Wedgwood. My eye and my brain, when I found myself in de Waal's studio, responded to his “signature” whiteness. But the longer I looked at rank upon rank of white pots, on white shelves against white walls, the more my instinct expected the spirit of old Norman to come down and add a bit of colour — some “oomph”.

In 2010, de Waal, already a celebrated ceramicist, shot to wider fame as the bestselling author of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. It was about a collection of Japanese *netsuke* — little figures carved in ivory and wood — that belonged to a great-uncle who lived in Tokyo. De Waal brilliantly interwove the story of the heirlooms with that of the family members who owned them, starting with Charles Ephrussi, a prodigiously rich collector in fin de siècle Paris.

In *The White Road*, de Waal turns his attention to porcelain — from its Chinese origins to Meissen, Wedgwood and the present day — and to humanity's obsession with producing whiter than white ceramics. As with the earlier book, this becomes a scorchingly personal story. Every stage in the material's history becomes a pilgrimage, as de Waal follows in the footsteps of the potters and travellers who discovered the clay and stone that porcelain is made of, and celebrates the beautiful objects that humanity has fashioned from this ingenious conjunction.

Readers who had only heard of, but not read, *The Hare with Amber Eyes* might have wondered what was so interesting about how a collection of little bibelots moved from pillar to post; those who had read the book could reply that what made it a page-turner was de Waal's skill at explaining human passion as it survives in objects. Likewise the new book is no dry history of old pots. It is a story about — well, about skills and artistry, certainly, and about politics too. It is also a disquisition on whiteness, and its different meanings. "I've read *Moby-Dick*," de Waal writes. "So I know the dangers of white. I think I know the dangers of an obsession with white, the pull towards something so pure, so total in its immersive possibility that you are transfigured, changed, feel you can start again."

In the first part of the book, de Waal climbs the hill above the china-producing town of Jingdezhen and reaches the High Ridge or Kao-Ling. Kaolin clay, as we now call it, is one of the two main constituents of porcelain, along with petuntse, a type of stone. The Chinese section is masterly, evoking the appalling working conditions, and the breathtaking skill, not only of the great potters of the Song and Ming dynasties, but also of their successors today.

Then the story takes us to 18th-century Germany, and the young mathematician and philosopher Walther Tschirnhaus, who cracked the secret of porcelain's composition for the court of Saxony and so paved the way for the great Meissen manufactory. For Tschirnhaus, as for de Waal, close philosophical attention to objects and how they come into being is crucial. "Above all he is interested," de Waal writes, quoting Tschirnhaus, "in 'how to obtain what should be observed', in the 'first mode of formation' of things." The pioneering of Meissen porcelain is among the revolutions in thought and taste that would lead, in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, to the Enlightenment.

Time moves on, and, in the mid-to late-18th century, we reach the third leg of the journey: commercial, nonconformist England. William Cookworthy, a Plymouth-based chemist and businessman, all but mastered the secret of how to make porcelain, and one of the book's images shows a mug he produced — pretty primitive stuff compared with the exquisite earthenware being made by Josiah Wedgwood.

Cookworthy sold the patent, which forebode other potters from buying up Cornwall's abundant clay and petuntse stone, to one Richard Champion. But Champion and Cookworthy met their match in Wedgwood, who was not only an entrepreneur of genius, but also a superb craftsman and a great scientist. Through ceaseless politicking, he persuaded parliament, in the name of free trade, to allow anyone to purchase the two key ingredients of porcelain; by 1919, Cornwall was producing half of the world's kaolin.

One charming detail, about which I once wrote a novel, is that when Wedgwood was trying to track down the whitest kaolin, he sent an agent to the Cherokee nation in North Carolina, where there was a great deposit of the clay. De Waal, who goes everywhere, duly heads off to the Appalachians. There is a nice photo in the book, taken as it happens by my father, of Hensleigh Wedgwood, the family firm's man in the US, standing in 1950 beside a roadside marker commemorating Josiah's purchase from the Cherokees.

I loved almost every word of de Waal's book. I wondered, when the three-pronged journey was over — China, Germany, England — whether we needed the excursus in the last 50 or so pages about porcelain in the 20th century. These chapters explore the sinister story of the Allach porcelain factory, which made figurines of SS troopers, work carried on after the outbreak of war by prisoners in Dachau. We also meet old Mr Yang, one of de Waal's acquaintances in Jingdezhen, who had to waste his time during the Cultural Revolution making plaques of Mao.

So — it is all a pretty large sweep. At times, de Waal is twee. I could have done without him declaring, near the start of his chapter on the tiresome Quaker Cookworthy, that "I'm following William. We're on first-name terms." But then again, this is an intimate book. De Waal is intimate with the very stuff that he has transformed so beautifully into pots; intimate with its history; intimate with the characters who make up its story. And yes, by the end, if this sort of elbow-grabbing book works for you — which it did triumphantly for me — he is intimate with his readers too.

AN Wilson is the author of 'The Potter's Hand' (Atlantic)

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