

UNCIVILISING

[SOMETHING ONLY ARTISTS CAN DO?]

WILL DURANT made an interesting comment: this 19th.-to-20th. century American philosopher was in a position to know, being author to the 11-volume *Story of civilization*. "Civilization", he said, "exists by geological consent, subject to change without notice". Numerous civilisations have come and gone, some thanks to environmental changes. Some, because *Homo sapiens* can be a very dumb critter. Human histories are full of stories about our achievements, and our vicissitudes; they tend to play down the dumb bits.

We are in a period of history [some say the last, but hopefully they're pessimists – or do I mean optimists?...] that the earlier Chinese would probably have thought unfortunately interesting. One of the many problems facing us as we try to find a path towards what we call sustainability – a surprisingly woolly idea that has quickly become a weasel-word in everyday conversation – is that we need to 'reskill' ourselves. During humans' long process of cultural evolution going on alongside genetic evolution we appear to have misplaced some of the abilities inherited from our ancestors [or, if you prefer, that were assigned to us].

Cultural progress appears to have distanced us from a [supposed] earlier integration with the rest of the world. Recently, the spread of specialisation, professionalism, and [oh paradox!] education, has denied most members the chance to practice old skills or learn new ones. This is why such earnest titles as *The handbook of sustainability literacy. Skills for a changing world* appear on the bookshelves, and why it is important to use them. This particular volume is a wide-ranging collection of articles on the 'literations' we need to be able – literally and metaphorically – to 'read' our culture.

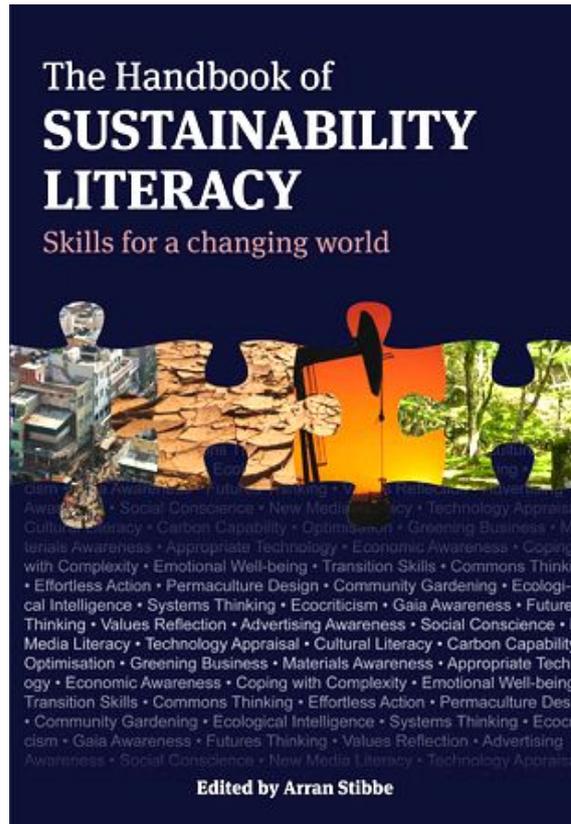


Will Durant 1963

Library of Congress,
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Intended primarily for people in education, its contributors include Stephen Quilley on 'Transition' skills, Justin Kenrick on 'commons' thinking, Patrick Whitefield on permaculture, Stephen Sterling on ecological intelligence, John Blewitt on new media, Zoe Robinson on the greening of business, Paul Maiteny 'finding meaning without consuming', and Ling Feng looking at the Zen attitude to 'effortless action'. [1] Sustainability indeed has many facets.

Some seem to be missing – at least, if we think of 'art' as having some importance in communicating, establishing, and sustaining, the attitudes, values, and procedures of the sort of culture such people are advocating [just as it has now in sustaining the Status quo]. Barry Bignell's essay 'Beauty as a way of knowing' takes us into aesthetics, but *art* does not seem to register as a contributor of skills in the *Handbook's* terms.



With or without art, sustainability is simultaneously a multifaceted and an amorphous thing. We all mean different things by it. The pedant in me wants every discussion about sustainability to begin with each contributor stating: "What I mean by 'sustainability' is ... &c.", instead of rushing in to tell each-other what they are doing to save the planet. The problem here really is that a fundamental question is too seldom asked: "What do we/you/I want to sustain?". I have a canny suspicion that in very many cases the answer would be: "Why! the *Status quo* of course...". That could turn out to be a bit dumb.

Are we not most intent on seeking a more ecofriendly way of getting from A to B faster than ever before; of finding more carbon-efficient means of bringing the world's foods to our plates [without necessarily taking them out of other people's mouths – though most are never likely to be put in]; of recharging our animal beings in places nearer and nearer pristine, leaving ever-fainter footprints, and without the upset of another person's presence, or the faintest sign of their being there before us...? [Surely: Yes.]

If we are to be serious about trying to help our changing world change towards 'sustainability' [and it will be obvious I don't think we are, yet], we must change more than our light bulbs. Changing our clothes might help – but that doesn't change *Us*. A glance into history gives a hint to what else must change. It does not, of course, show any guarantee that we *can* do it.

The old quip that, though slower, soap and education dislocate new-met societies more thoroughly than guns is much more than a joke; but the greatest danger for other cultures *and* our own is well-described as a *story*. It is one we tell each-other and everyone else we meet.

“If we are indeed teetering on the edge of a massive change in how we live, how society itself is constructed, and how we relate to the rest of the world, then”, the writers of the *Dark Mountain Manifesto* [2] state emphatically, “we were led to this point by the stories we have told ourselves – above all by the story of civilisation. ” This story, a myth in the formal sense, is that age by age things get better and better, despite apparent setbacks, and it echoes from so deep in our history, and is repeated so often, that we accept it as – or as if – god-given. In this story, humankind – and humankind alone – is worthy. Its title is ‘Progress’, and its punchline is “One day all will be perfect”.

In our capitalist age, this myth in the everyday sense is elaborated very enticingly: “The Next Life may be perfect [if &c....], but you can all be rich in this one if you try.” A few are not convinced. They say this story is a problem. Perhaps it used to be helpful, but it’s time we stopped telling it. The *Manifesto* is an attempt to turn down the influence of the story of [our] civilisation’s march ever-upward, by developing – or remembering – stories that tell about a world that is not swamped by a human-centred world-view, in which consumerism isn’t a moral good, where [modern] scientific rationalism isn’t pre-eminent, and where human culture is ecofriendly.

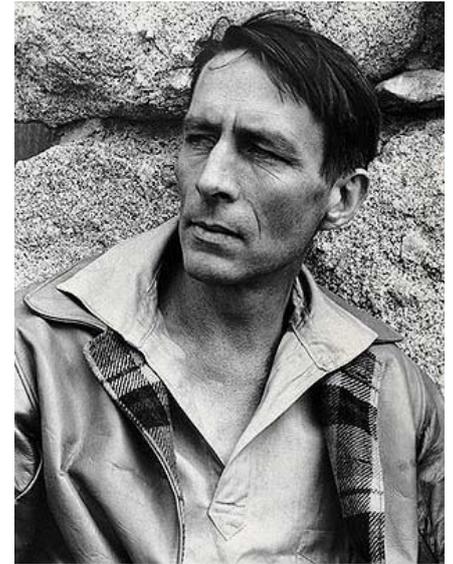
Just as much of a person’s individual life is presented to others in story form, so is the collective and cumulative life of a culture presented to new-born members, incomers, and newly-met strangers. This point of view is far from universal, but is gaining ground. It seems valid at several scales. First, most of the conversations one [over] hears are narratives. Then, “every day we tell ourselves stories about how the world works. These embedded narratives are really theories, even if we don’t acknowledge them as such. Thus we need to be careful of the stories we tell”; and “numerous authors have commented on the crucial role of story in political struggle.” I am quoting from the interesting write-up by a Canadian student of her project to use ‘the arts, including First Nation stories, to investigate an environmental issue. [3]

Discarding one’s culture-story is, of course tricky, and on a par with pulling the rug from under your own feet. It is not helpful that you have probably forgotten it is a story – and perhaps a dumb one. The whole business is taboo. The mission is, after all, to *uncivilise* ourselves....





The *Manifesto's* title and subtitle come from lines by the American poet Robinson Jeffers. [4] Its writers' hope is that it is the first stage of an adventure to dislodge the Western civilisation myth and see established stories that tell of humankind as but one kind of being in a web of beings, and that tales of our separateness, the inexhaustibility of 'resources', and an end-of-the-rainbow perfection, are fibs. For "the myth of progress is founded on the myth of nature. [...] The very fact that we have a word for 'nature' is evidence that we do not regard ourselves as part of it [*sic*]", but believe that civilisation will distance us from it. [*Sic*?... See how easy it is to fall into forms of words that say the opposite of what we mean! If there is no 'nature' separate from us, we cannot feel apart from 'it'.]



Robinson Jeffers

Encouraged by slight signs of the old story losing ground, the *Manifesto* writers aim to provide a forum for what Jeffers calls 'uncivilised writing' – writing that, unlike 'nature-writing', tries to express the world as seen from outside humanity. At the moment [late 2009], there is a website blog, but a magazine is proposed, and contributions are being sought. [5] Names suggested on the website as torchbearers include Cormac McCarthy, David Abrams, Jay Griffiths, and [sometimes] D.H. Lawrence and E.M. Forster. Lew Welch, quoted by John Danvers in *Sustainability literacy*, looks like another:

*Step out onto the planet
Draw a circle a hundred feet round.*

*Inside the circle are
300 things nobody understands, and maybe
nobody's ever really seen.*

How many can you find?

The *Manifesto* ends with 'The Eight Principles of Uncivilisation'. Number 5 states: "Humans are not the point and purpose of the planet. Our art will begin with an attempt to step outside the human bubble. By careful attention, we will reengage with the non-human world." A note from the website is helpful: "Uncivilisation is not a place or a time or a campaign goal; it is a process, of unpicking the myths by which we live, even those of us who think we are challenging them".

The authors explain 'uncivilised writing' as something they will recognise when they see it. It will be fiction, or non-fiction, poetry, or



prose.... It will try to show the world as seen from outside the human self. I think they may be looking for the degree of unseparation [though not the sentiment] caught in a Japanese poem whose writer's name I've forgotten:

*Angry,
I go into the street
and become a motor-bike.*

The *Dark Mountain Manifesto* comes from writers and addresses writers, but these are seen as a subset of artists in general. Indeed, for the *Journal* they also want "photographs, illustrated stories, montages". The artist is seen as special: "In the age of ecocide the last taboo must be broken – and only artists can do it." The attempt, they say, is too important to be left to politicians, conceptual thinkers, number-crunchers..., or to environmental activists and campaigners. It will require word-weavers who do not bury themselves in theories and ideologies, but who have "dirt under their fingernails".

Only artists can do it?.. This is no easy enterprise, and, as the *Manifesto* makes clear, will not everywhere be welcomed. It will need more than a handbook. Have we the skills for a narrative form of permaculture?

Or... do I miss the point? I read the *Manifesto* with enthusiasm – but for what? Is it a distinctive flavour that has attracted so much attention [6]; or is it that it is clearer, or newer, or briefer, than earlier invitations to Deep Ecology, Councils of All Beings, At-one-ness, Interbeing, Rewilding, Intersubjectivity, and other projects? Does the cloudiness [which I seem to see] lie in the message being carried by *words*? Would the story be clearer told in paint, or in carved stone; or by the movements of dancers, or by the sounds from musicians?... But then – even in a culture looking towards uncivilisation, could any art speak as lucidly as the lilies of the field, or the song-bird that tells the day's story? [6]



1 *The handbook of sustainability literacy. Skills for a changing world*, edited by Arran Stibbe, Green Books, Totnes, 2009. [A multimedia version of the *Handbook*, ed. by Poppy Villiers-Stuart & Arran Stibbe, is available at www.sustainability-literacy.org.]

2 *Uncivilisation. The Dark Mountain manifesto* Paul Kingsnorth & Douglas Hine, 2009, available at www.dark-mountain.net

3 Don't be put off by the title – 'Salmon tales: An arts-informed and literary inquiry into salmon farming in B.C.' [British Columbia] by Aileen E. Penner, 2005, available at http://www.yorku.ca/fes/research/docs/2004/Penner_2004_OGSPS.pdf. This is, of course, some way from the level the *Manifesto* is concerned with.

4 Jeffers [1887-1962] studied forestry, medicine and literature. He was influenced by Yeats. He rejected the view that humans are 'above' other beings – or, as *Encyclopaedia Britannica* put it, in 1974: "viewed civilisation [...] and found it contemptible".

5 A posting on the website states: "We are seeking submissions now, and have already had a good number by email. If you are interested in submitting some work, or have an idea, drop us a line on info@dark-mountain.net. The deadline for the first issue of the journal is midnight on 31st December 2009."

6 Details and discussion are accumulating at www.dark-mountain.net. At November 10, googling brought out over 18.000 references to the project. There are interesting comments [for example] on the R.S.A's Arts & Ecology pages at www.artsandecology.rsablogs.org.uk/tag/dark-mountain-project.

7 There is an old Zen story: "Once, a Master was about to speak to his students when a bird started to sing. Everyone listened to the bird in silence. When it too fell silent, the Master said: 'We have finished the lesson for today'." In some Australian Aboriginal societies, children are "taught to listen to the first note that any bird sings throughout the day, and respond accordingly" [Munya Andrews *The seven sisters of the Pleiades*, Melbourne: Spinifex, 2004.]

Martin Spray