The densely wooded and rounded hills of Vermont, USA's 49th most populous state, form the backcloth to this beautiful yet simple depiction of a solitary farmer harvesting wheat. Feet planted widely and firmly on the fertile ground, he leans into his work confidently sweeping his 'grain-cradle' scythe through the lush ripe cereal. We can feel the rhythm, hear the swish and smell the 'wondrous new-mown grain' [1]. He wears a wide-brimmed straw hat to protect himself from the afternoon sun and some sturdy steel-capped boots to safeguard his toes from the super-sharp slicer. The artist, 'intoxicated with the beauty and universal nobility' [1] of the farmer's sickle, pitchfork and flail, has emblazoned them on the foreground together with a corked stone jug no doubt full of cider. The wheat field stretches out behind the worker; and beyond the silos, barns and other farm buildings, a field of haystacks gives evidence to what he has already achieved. In the far distance past the rolling hills there are imaginary glimpses of ocean—alluding to the first New England settlers, who arrived by sea and 'brought forth a bountiful harvest from the new land'—a theme that the artist captured in her final major publication [2].

Farming was the last of 12 wood engravings for a series called New England Industries commissioned by Wedgwood to depict 'simpler times before the intrusion of modern technology' [3]. For 2 years the artist lived and worked amongst the New England communities learning firsthand about their trades, their tools and their way of life. She made numerous preliminary charcoal and crayon drawings and compositional studies before
The challenge of sustainably feeding, sheltering and clothing 9 billion people by 2050 using fewer resources and less energy will require extensive application of science and technology and will inevitably change the face of agriculture around the world [11]. Such ‘improved’ food production should lead to more employment, enhanced income, better nutrition and greater access to clean water but will farming’s dignity and poetry survive, will there be a Clare Leighton to capture them and will anyone care?

Mike McKiernan
e-mail: art@som.org.uk

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the artist’s nephew David Leighton for his help, support and much additional material, together with Lynn Miller Information Officer at the Wedgwood Museum and Sarah Welcome Senior Curatorial Assistant, Department of Rare Books & Manuscripts at the Yale Center for British Art for their patient response to my many queries.

References

8. Leighton D. E-mail received 26 February 2013.