The densely wooded and rounded hills of Vermont, USA’s 49th most populous state, form the backdrop 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...
proceeding painstakingly to carve out circular end-grain blocks of boxwood. From these she made copious partial and corrected proof prints individually by hand with the bowl of an ordinary teaspoon rubbed through a piece of card. The process was long, meticulous and thoroughly exhausting [4]. Using photolithography the final images were printed underglaze in charcoal sepia on 26.8 cm diameter rimless cream-ware plates (Queen Ware) designed by Victor Skellern and Clare Leighton [5] and manufactured at Barlaston, Staffordshire [6]. Clare visited the factory to witness the production process. The back of the plate has the WEDGWOOD imprimatur, a date code for 1952, a facsimile signature of Clare Leighton and an inscription: ‘FARMING. Matching their fortitude to the strength of the earth, the first New England settlers, who arrived in “The Mayflower”, brought forth a bountiful harvest from the new land. The rhythm in the lives of the New England farmers, in its seasonal pattern, will go onward the same.’ A complete set of 12 plates cost US$ 36 [1].

Clare Veronica Hope Leighton was one of the finest engravers of the 20th century. She was born in London (1898) the second of three children, to popular fiction writers Robert Leighton and Marie Conner. She took up painting at an early age encouraged by her artist uncle Jack Leighton and attended art schools at Lowestoft and Brighton before enrolling at the Slade School of Fine Art (1922–3). However, it was at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, London that she discovered and embraced wood engraving. Thereafter, during visits to Europe she developed a political and aesthetic affinity for rural workers, portraying them with dignity and reverence—a theme, which was to run through her career [7] perhaps enhanced later by her personal relationship with the leftwing journalist Henry Noel Brailford [8]. She also began to illustrate books and as early as 1925 made sporadic lecture tours to America famously visiting a lumber camp in Quebec, where she captured the workers’ lives in engravings (1931). She left Brailsford in 1939 and emigrated to the USA continuing her book illustrations and engravings of American rural workplaces [9]. She moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and became a visiting lecturer at Duke University, took up US citizenship in 1945 and finally settled in Woodbury, Connecticut. Exhausted by the Wedgwood series she turned to designing stained glass windows including the transept of Worcester Cathedral, Massachusetts, with its 50’ lancet. Her book illustration commissions continued well into the 1970s. Throughout her long and illustrious career Clare Leighton strove to demonstrate the beauty of wood engraving as an art form and to capture ‘the dignity and poetry of living souls upon a living earth’ [10]. She died in 1989 and her ashes buried in Waterbury, Connecticut.

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?

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