

Needless to say, the present author is in no position to discuss the experience which the Los Angeles or Seattle local has had in this connection. However, with respect to the San Francisco local, it may and should be noted that the employers have waged a very successful rearguard action against the implementation of the modification in question. They have raised a host of issues through the grievance machinery, i.e., through the local Labor Relations Committee, through arbitrations, and through referrals to the coastwide representatives of the industry. As a result, even those who voted for the contract and the modification do not yet know what it may come to mean. What they do know is that, despite the local's more recent success in implementing the modification, relatively few men have thus far been rotated into and/or out of the 9.43 status. At the same time, there is a growing consensus on two points: (1) the enormous impact which a new technology has had on their social relations—and hence on the unity, strength, and militancy of their union and community with one another—and (2) new technology cannot be successfully dealt with on an ad hoc, piecemeal basis and, since any local can be similarly victimized by a new technology and the way it is contractually utilized, such matters must be dealt with on a coastwide basis.

California Living

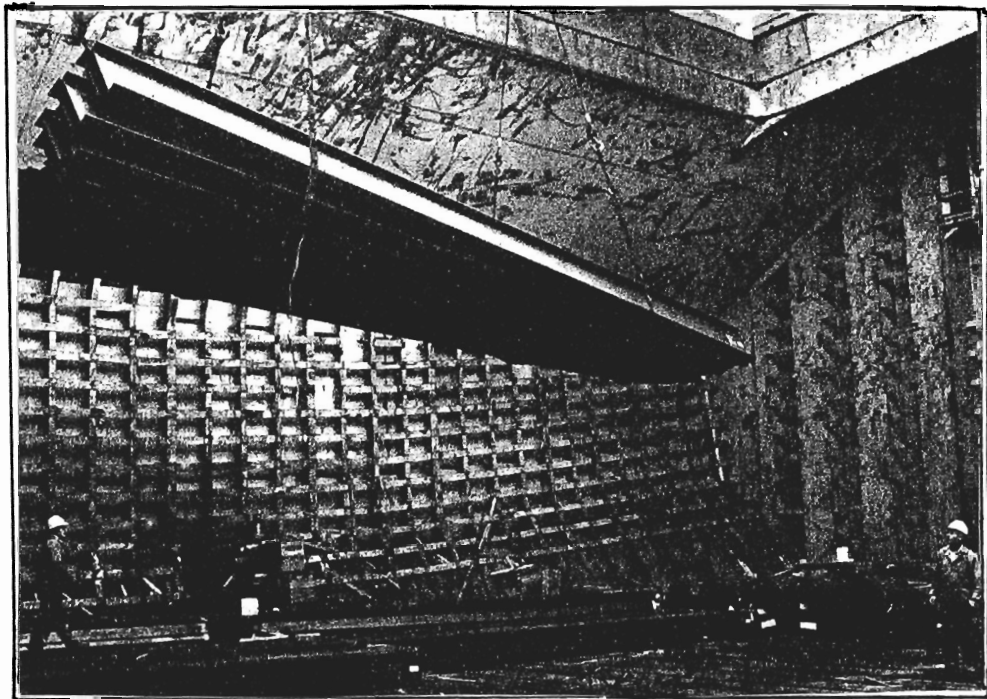
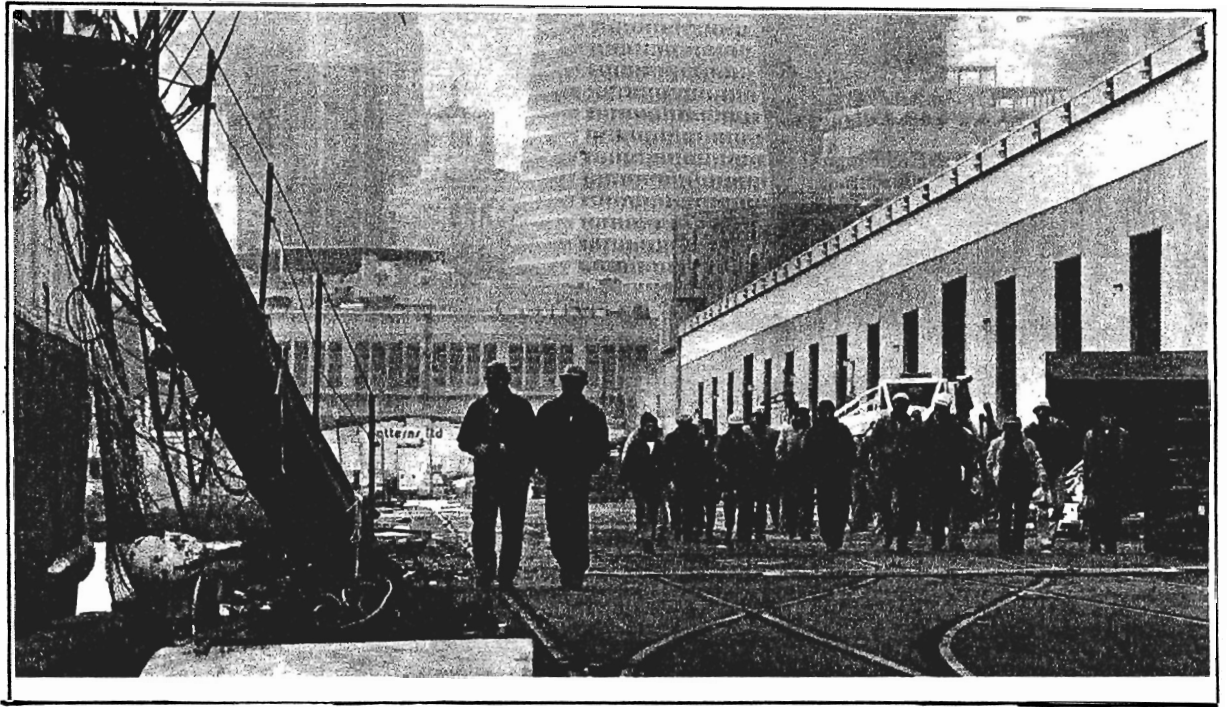
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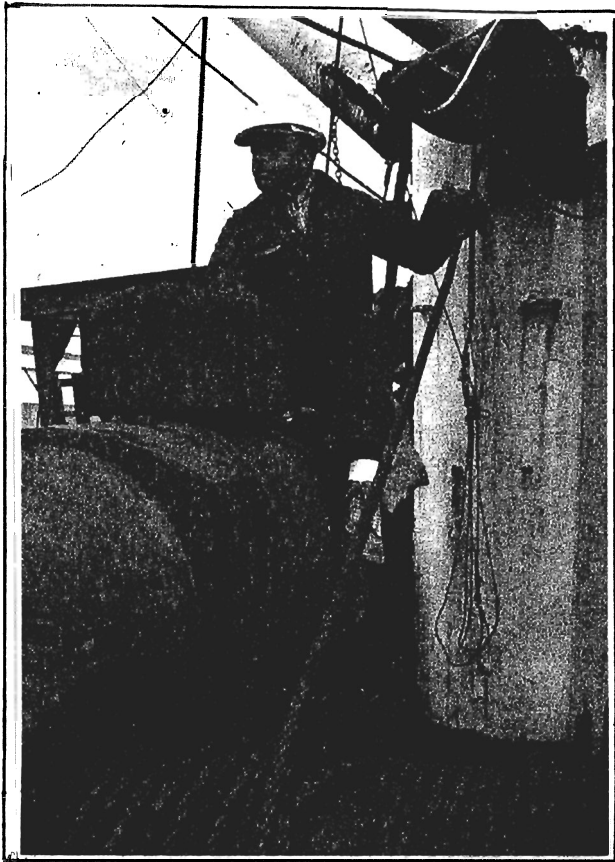
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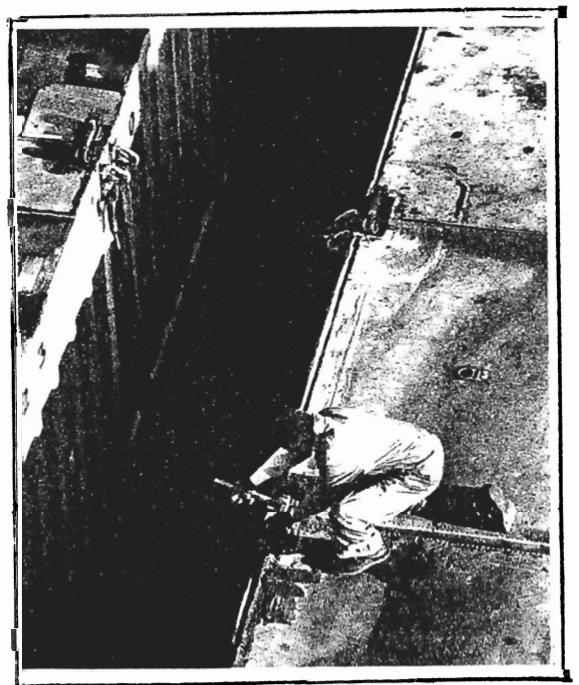
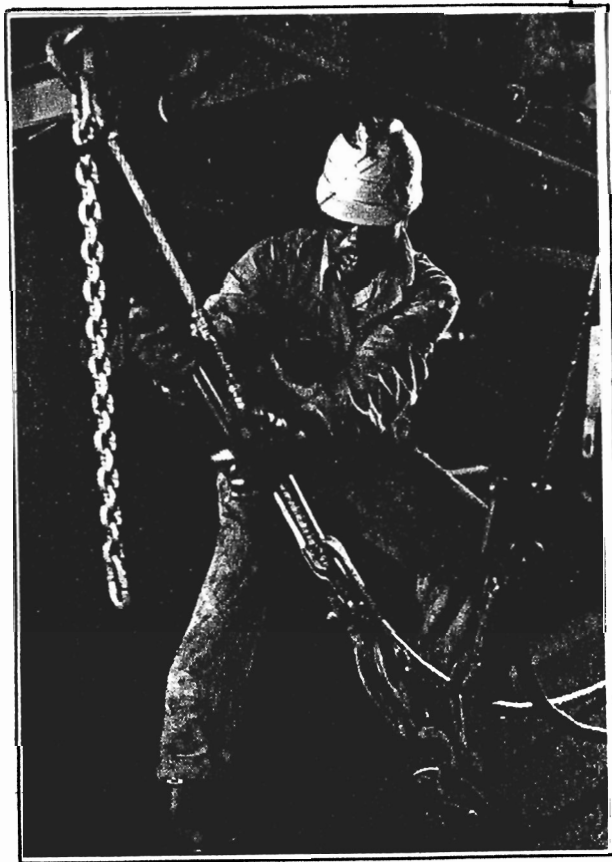
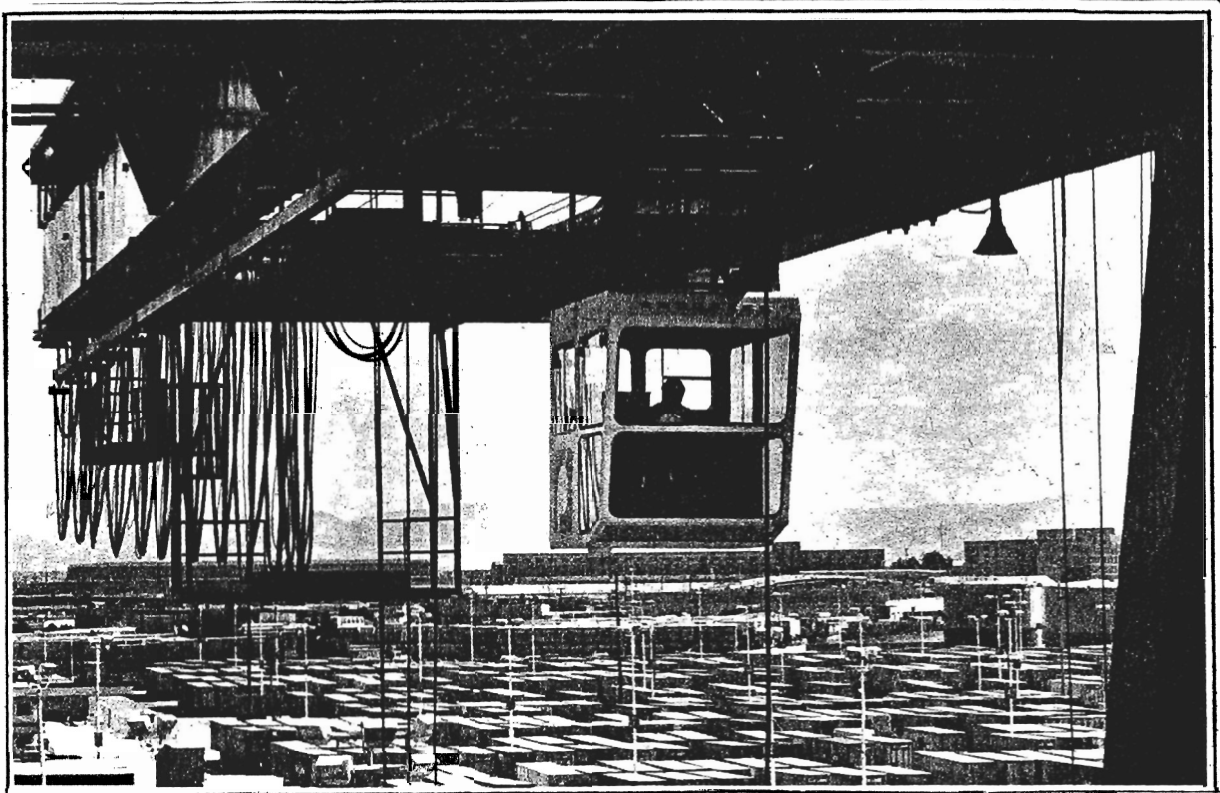
The Men Along The Shore

By Herb Mills

Photography: Pat Goudvis







■ When I first went longshoring in 1963, the warehouse district that lay adjacent to the city's waterfront was a richly colorful and exceptionally vibrant commercial area and neighborhood.

There were umpteen cafes and bars on the pierheads and in the first few blocks towards "uptown" and beaucoup stores — stores with "ARMY - NAVY" surplus, "CLOTHING FOR THE WORKING MAN," and specialty items for seamen, fishermen, and longshoremen. Store-front churches, "missions," and reading rooms, especially for seamen "on the beach," were scattered about. There were pawn shops, gun shops, and bait shops; hotels, each with a weathered posting of their daily, weekly, and monthly rates; boarding houses, rooming houses, and flophouses. "REC AND LOCKER ROOMS" dotted the area. There were movie houses, maybe not first run, but they only cost half a buck and never closed. Liquor stores and corner groceries, newsstands and book stalls, smoke shops and pool halls abounded. The aroma of roasting coffee was always there, as was the pungency of spices from every exotic corner of the earth. You could always find a card or dice game or a bookie. You could even pitch pennies. You could always find a pal or two you had worked a ship with a week or so before. You could always find a new political tract or leaflet and someone ready to discuss it. You could always find a place to drop a crab pot or wet a line — or a place to simply watch the passing parade and the waters of the Bay in solitude.

A little bit up from "the front" was Farmers' Market. It began to stir at 2 a.m. as workers arrived to open up. Trucks appeared. Their parking and running lights added pin-pricks of eerie, lonely, mist-bound color as we headed back to the ships and docks after a 1 a.m., mid-shift supper up in Chinatown.

Towards 3 a.m. seamen who had closed the bars on lower Market Street or lower Mission, up in North Beach, or in that remnant of the Barbary Coast, the International Settlement, started to drift good-naturedly through the muffled streets to presently board their dimly lit and gently surging vessels. We were always full of advice for seamen headed for

town. That's just being friendly. But if, like many of us, you've sailed, you know it's really appreciated, too. So when we spotted a small knot of seamen headed back to the front, we'd also hail them to ask about their night on the town. "Hey, mate! Good time?" "Ja! Ja! Gooood time! Gooood town!"

About 4:30 ILWU warehousemen began to drift into the cafes near their hiring hall on the lower end of Commercial Street. It opened at 5. It had some real fine wall paintings of men and women working. Children, too. Dispatching began an hour later. You need an early start for a job in South City or some such place.

Fishermen berthed at the Wharf, at Mission Rock, or in China Basin were by that time well outside the gate. They pulled away from cafes that opened at 3 a.m. to serve them breakfast and steaming coffee. They'd be back with their catch by mid-afternoon, so we'd watch them depart or return when working Pier 45 (which today is hardly used), Pier 50, or the now abandoned banana dock in China Basin. We always enjoyed that scene.

We'd begin to drift into the bustling, already crowded waterfront cafes around 7 a.m. As was true at break time, lunch, and supper, we "took on stores" with teamsters, warehousemen, sailors with shoreside duty, ship chandlers and repairmen, tugboat workers, railroaders, ship clerks and scalers, and longshore walking bosses. You'd always see someone you hadn't seen for awhile and do some catching up. On a sunny day or pleasant evening, we'd finish up with coffee while sitting outside watching the Bay. When it was cold and rainy, there was the compensation of an especially contagious verve and heartiness. Maybe a shot or two of brandy, too.

The hiring hall and offices of Local 10 were moved from Pier 18 beneath the Bay Bridge to their present site on Fisherman's Wharf in 1959. As compared to its former, run-of-the-mill and over-crowded digs, the local now had two really spacious buildings of unique design. Its new home, together with a fair-sized parking lot, was set on a full city block. It would later be further distinguished by an extraordinary Benny Bufano statue — a serene St. Francis. Given the Pier 18 situation,

this new complex could be advertised as "a monument to the city's labor movement." However, its elected, rank-and-file board of trustees rebelled when asked about wearing tuxedos at the opening ceremony.

When it opened and for some years thereafter, our new home was ringed by a neighborhood of fishermen and fishing families. As is the fashion, you could say their lives were really centered. They had their boats, their slips, and homes. They had their cats, dogs, and parrots. They had the Bay and what lies beyond and hence they had their livelihood. They even had an annual blessing of their boats that somehow seemed to work. There were shops with bait, tackle and marine supplies, repair facilities and dry docks. There were processing plants for fish and other seafoods. There were dockside cafes for a very early breakfast and a beer in the late afternoon. There were even restaurants where neighbors met in the evening to eat, sing, dance, and hoist a couple. It really was, as the signs still say, "a fisherman's wharf." And because we respected and enjoyed their community, we were always made welcome by our neighbors.

It was within such highly textured settings, then, that the relationships we had by reason of our work and union were rounded out and deepened. Indeed, a true community — spawned by work, strengthened by unionism, rooted in a turf, and enriched by a spontaneous and diverse social contact — was thereby fashioned and very much enjoyed by those of every calling on the city's waterfront.

During the past twenty years, several radically new technologies have been introduced into the transport industry. The key component in the most widely known and utilized of those technologies is the container. A container is a rigidly framed, reusable "box" into which a wide variety of cargoes can be (as we say) "stuffed," secured against shifting, sealed, and then transported by rail, truck, plane, or ship. Maritime containers are about eight feet by eight feet in width and height. They run from twenty to forty feet in length and accommodate up to twenty-five tons of cargo.

As the use of containers spread in the longshore industry of San Francisco Bay, the social and economic dislocations were increasingly severe and encompassing, both for us and others. Thus, to begin with, when they first

began to appear in some number (around 1961), there were about 4,800 longshoremen working over 7.5 million hours a year in the ports of the Bay and Northern California (Stockton, Sacramento, and Eureka). At the present time, this area has about 2,300 men working just over 2.5 million hours annually. On the other hand, the cargoes handled by these ports rose from just under 10 million tons to just over 20 million between 1961 and 1979. For us in Local 10, work fell from over 7 million hours a year to just over 2 million as conventional operations became less common in the Bay Area. As that happened, and as pier after pier was abandoned, the opportunities we had long enjoyed to structure our working and personal lives were increasingly and finally quite drastically curtailed. Our options with respect to the nature of our daily work were also increasingly reduced in favor of a very substantial pay guarantee plan. Our numbers, too, were adjusted — by normal attrition and by our gaining an earlier retirement age. We went from about 4,200 in 1961 to about 1,850 in 1979. Meanwhile, Bay Area cargoes rose from about 7.5 million tons a year to well over 15 million.

The Port of San Francisco was, of course, especially hard hit. It simply could not accommodate the new operations anywhere north of where it belatedly hoped to, namely, Pier 80 at the foot of Army Street. While the city's terrain and prior development made this so, there was also its geography. With all else being equal, there's just no reason to route container ships and their cargo to the San Francisco peninsula when fully 95 percent of that cargo is going to or coming from points east. The dismal story can be briefly told. In 1961 the port handled 5,311,334 tons of cargo. The figure in 1979 was 2,652,375.

Meanwhile, the Port of Oakland boomed, if only because of its terrain, both seaward and landward, its geography, and its relative lack of prior development. Its cargoes went from 2,554,035 tons in 1962 (and just prior to the opening of Sea-Land's facility) to 10.7 million last year. During this

period, its container tonnage also climbed from less than 55,000 to 8.8 million. As for San Francisco, it had a container tonnage of 828,030 in 1978, the most recently available figure.

Within the framework of these massive dislocations of the Bay Area economy, successive portions of our world were also buried beneath concrete and glass, steel and potted redwoods, three-piece business suits and a studied informality of very high fashion. As our turf was demolished in favor of fancy restaurants, bars, boutiques, and hotels, our community was literally consumed in a swirling vortex of financial and commercial swingers. The paintings of the warehousemen could not be saved. They disappeared beneath the rubble of the lived-in museum that housed them. Indeed, the entire lower end of Commercial Street lies buried beneath the imposing majesty of the Embarcadero Center. Farmers' Market and its restlessly dynamic setting also fell to that majesty, to the regal, if placid splendor of the Hyatt Regency, and to the high-rise, high-cost apartments and townhouses of the Golden Gateway. North Beach was progressively inundated by neon and gawking tourists, by the boisterous juvenility of conventioners, and by a silicon-based, pink plastic sexuality.

Our neighborhood has fared no better. It has simply been plowed under by the commercialization of everything in sight. Take the Eagle Cafe, just down from our place. For years we went there for an early breakfast. Lunch, too, when we worked a nearby pier. Well, the Eagle's still there, but now it's perched atop Pier 39 — that startling embodiment of the knack some people have of tearing things apart and then living off their fabrication.

Since the technological sprawl of modern longshore facilities dictated a decentralization of the industry to land-fill sites throughout the Bay Area, our longshore community was likewise destined for something of a "diaspora." It follows, too, that the operational circumstance is virtually unchanging. We simply do not see each other as often. By the same token, these immense and widely scattered facilities are in no way surrounded by the richly

zestful and varied neighborhoods of the old Embarcadero. Indeed, unless you pack something from home or buy from a vending machine or coffee truck, a drive "into town" is necessary at lunch and supper time.

Having thus been stripped of our daily, matter-of-course opportunity to kick around together, we've also been dispersed and isolated by the new technology in other ways. For example, a conventional vessel is to this day routinely worked by up to 150 longshoremen, but less than thirty work the largest container ships in the world, the SL-7's of Sea-Land. As in any modern operation, those men are also much further distanced from one another. Indeed, much of the work on any such operation is performed by individuals who can only communicate by radio from their machines. As for the dock and shipboard groups that may then be employed, they, too, are much smaller and much more distantly placed than in conventional operations. They, again, have no occasion and little opportunity to communicate with one another or anyone else. As a work force, then, we've been "atomized" on these operations by a division of labor that requires no on-going communication and cooperation among us. It's even hard to know who's on the job with you:

The tasks of modern longshoring are also utterly routine as compared to those of conventional longshoring. The range of necessary skills and experience is drastically narrowed. By the same token, there is little, if any, need for initiative, ingenuity, or innovation. The container, or what we call the sling-load, is always the same. Its movement to and from the vessel is always the same. So, also, its hoist and shipboard handling. Our labor, then, has been radically "de-skilled" and endlessly sequenced thereafter into a veritable sea of containers — and increasingly so by a computer printout.

The personal and social loss in all of this, at least for us — and, I guess, for a lot of other workers, too — has been painfully high. Our everyday working and trade union relationships can no longer be spontaneously rounded out and broadened, deepened and enlivened, in an encompassing social

setting. We are also denied the measured self-esteem we earned by taking pride in our work and being helpful to our fellow workers in interesting, challenging, and ever-changing circumstances. In a word, modern longshore work cannot underwrite the production of a sense of personhood or the fashioning of an on-the-job community.

Given the cynicism so current among us as a nation and a people, one might hesitate to use the word, but under the conditions won by the ILWU over many years of struggle, conventional longshoring is a moral experi-

ence. It might even be said that such employment has continually renewed our humanity and sense of fraternity — and hence our union and community — by a fashioning of character. For this reason, it is hard to overstate how profoundly we've been influenced by our work, estate, and heritage. It follows, too, however, that our ongoing effort to cope with a uniquely rapid and engulfing technological change will continue to be very importantly informed and strengthened by our remembrance of men and things now past or passing. □