SCEPTRE

THREADS OF LIFE

A History of the World Through the Eye of a Needle

CLARE HUNTER

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The Hare with Amber Eyes meets *The History of the World in 100 Objects*: an eloquent history of the language of sewing over centuries and across continents

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'Sewing is a way to mark our existence on cloth: patterning our place in the world, voicing our identity, sharing something of ourselves with others and leaving the indelible evidence of our presence in stitches held fast by our touch.'

Threads of Life is a chronicle of identity, protest, memory, power and politics told through the stories of the men and women, over centuries and across continents, who have used the language of sewing to make their voices heard, often in the most desperate of circumstances.

In *Threads of Life* Clare Hunter takes us from Mary, Queen of Scots in captivity to the mentally and physically damaged soldiers returning home after World War One, from the grieving mothers of the disappeared in 1970s Argentina to nineteenth century tailors whose pictorial quilts campaigned for reform and feminists in 1980s America, in an evocative and moving book about the need we all have to tell our story.

For millennia, women and marginalised communities either unable or forbidden to write or speak out for themselves, have used sewing to document their thoughts and experiences and even to transmit subversive messages.

The popularity of sewing, embroidery and 'making things' is surging. The Royal School of Needlework reports that their classes are oversubscribed; sewing workshops and blogs, online needlework tutorials and social media networks of sewing enthusiasts are all on the rise.

The link between sewing and improving mental health has been well documented. Clare has worked over many years with people who are the most vulnerable in society – the mentally ill, immigrants, prisoners, the elderly – using sewing as a way to help them tell of their lives and connect with the wider world.

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The Bayeux Tapestry tells the story of the Battle of Hastings in 1066. It is generally agreed that the tapestry was designed by a man, but conquered Saxon women sequestered in English nunneries who are thought to have sewn it. It is a drama of war with a male cast – within its depictions of 632 men, over 200 horses, 55 dogs and more than 500 other animals and birds, there are only six women. However, there is a suggestion that female stitchers covertly inserted images of their own making, the sewers slipping in their own personal testimonies of life after invasion, or even documenting abuse.

Born in 1844, **Agnes Richter** was a seamstress. At 49, she was admitted to Dresden's City Lunatic Asylum. Despite the asylum doctors' assessment of her as clear minded and credible, Agnes remained in the asylum, during which time her mental state worsened. In 1895 she was transferred to another facility, where her behaviour degenerated until she was no longer intelligible or capable of normal conversation. It was there that she began to embroider text on the inside and outside of her regulation asylum jacket. She furiously stitched outrage in overlapping words, jagged letters, repeated assertions of self, *Ich* (I) sewn over and over again. While many have attempted to read the rest of Agnes' writing, it remains largely indecipherable. The text does not seem to have been written as messages to others, but as a protective second skin

for Agnes herself. The jacket itself became even more moulded to her shape through her wear of it and has preserved it, ghost-like, through the centuries following her death, still carrying the multiple perforations of her jabbing, stabbing, furious needle.

In the Second World War men and women in German and Japanese Prisoner of War camps scavenged cloth and Thread to sew evidence of their survival and keep a sense of self alive. At the fall of the island of Singapore to the Japanese in 1942, 130,000 allied troops were forced to surrender. Of the POWs, 500 were women, most of whom had led luxurious lives as colonial wives. Now they had lost their palatial homes, their place in society and their husbands. The women were marched on a nine-mile trek to **Changi prison** on the city's outskirts. Changi had been built to house 600 prisoners in peace time: by 1944 there were 4,000 POWs. The conditions were dire. Malnutrition, brutality, disease and death became everyday nightmares.

One of the women, Ethel Mulvaney, proposed using sewing as a subterfuge to stay in contact with their menfolk incarcerated in a separate prison. The women decided to make quilts, telling the Japanese that these quilts were humanitarian gifts to comfort patients in the prison hospital. Ethel exhorted the women to 'sew something of themselves' into their allotted six-inch square: a personal image, a signature. On each quilt of sixty-six small squares, each square bore a sewn autograph and a personal image. The women in Changi prison stitched alone and privately - their embroidery was not done during a jolly, spirit-reviving sewing bee. Sewing allowed a moment of respite, of retreat, some moments in which to revisit individuality.

PRESS RELEASE

The **Miao** are said to be the first settlers of present-day China. Centuries of ethnic division, warfare and enforced migration pushed them into the remote and barren uplands of South West China. There is no written Miao language. Oral history relates that they lost their original writing system when it was proscribed by an early Chinese dynasty. Any infringement was punishable by death. So Miao women began to conserve the Miao alphabet by embroidering mnemonics on their clothes, although no one can now read its code. It is believed that Miao embroidery is lingual and that their sewn story cloths are libraries that house myths, histories, tales of community experiences and sacred tracts of beliefs. Miao embroiderers replicate complex images and patterns from memory, retaining sewn rhythms and choruses of patterns in their heads.

Nowhere has the re-animation of the dead through the clothes they wore been used to more dramatic and emotive effect than in the **NAMES memorial quilt project**, a response to the AIDS epidemic that swept through America in the 1980s. Quilts were chosen as a deliberate ploy to evoke a wholesome association with home, family and comfort. Conceived in 1987, the NAMES Project Foundation invited people to make a sewn panel. Its purpose was ambitious: to create a fabric requiem that lamented the waste of so many lives through negligence and fear, on a scale and impact that would make its message inescapable. On 11 October 1987, nearly 2,000 panels were laid out on the Mall of Washington D.C., transforming it into an encrusted carpet. The project was not merely a creative and public way to voice grief. It was a way to challenge the anonymity of the dead, their reduction to statistics.

'It seemed to me that we had lost sight of the potency of needlework, the tactile residue of its makers' touch; the meaning of its symbolic patterns and motifs, its ability to conserve community traditions. I wanted to restore that knowledge, to remind readers of needlework's emotional, social and textural qualities and by doing so, to revive an appreciation of its value.'

CLARE HUNTER has been a banner-maker, community textile artist and textile curator for over twenty years and established the community enterprise NeedleWorks in Glasgow. She was a finalist for the Aesthetica Creative Writing Award with a story published in its 2017 Annual. She was also a recipient of a Creative Scotland Award in 2016. She lives near Stirling, and *Threads of Life* is her first book. www.sewingmatters.co.uk @sewingmatters

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