Knitting the Past Together

BY ANNEMAREE DALZIEL

In 2006 I was invited to Bathurst to design the stage set and costumes for ***Needfire***, a dance performance about an old Celtic ritual, practised in Gaelic Scotland. In my research for the project, I encountered a story from history that would shape the next few years of my life.

During the Scottish Clearances of my family's history, people were driven off their ancestral lands because sheep farming was more profitable than traditional ways of life. For centuries, powerful people displaced ordinary people from common lands in England and southern Scotland, to establish large sheep runs. But in Gaelic speaking Highland and Island Scotland in the nineteenth century, the brutality and speed of dispossession, and the contempt for the common people was breathtaking. A unique culture fragmented.

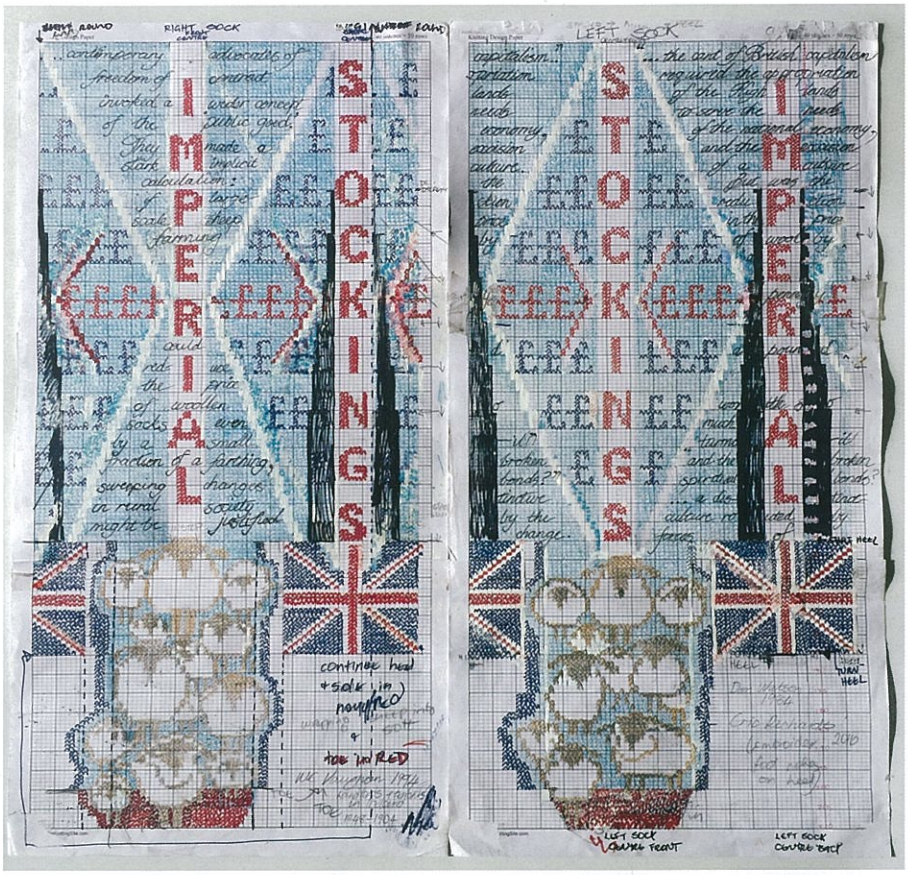
With no local industry to provide work, many people were obliged to leave or starve. The grief of these people was recorded in letters, Gaelic poetry and song, and these grievances persisted in Scotland for generations. The people carried the grief with them to British colonies around the world.

In the struggle to survive in a new culture, their stories were often obscured by time, and by having to speak English rather than the

Gaelic of their memories. As settlers, they displaced the Indigenous people, repeating the racial slurs used against them in Britain. First wronged, then wronging others, they formed a part of colonial Australia's frontier history, a history of multi-layered grief.

Choreographer Cheryl Roach and her OzScot dancers showed me that Highland dance could respond to a story like this with great emotional power, that joy in life could survive shattering grief.

Much later, I read a story justifying their dispossession—because more sheep meant cheaper socks for displaced people working for tiny wages in factories—and I was enraged. Are people's lives, traditions and belonging to land so easy to set aside? I vowed to knit the history of Gaelic betrayal and loss into a series of socks, that I called ***Imperial Stockings.***



Like Madame Defarge, the vengeful tricoteuse (knitter) at the guillotine in Charles Dickens' novel ***A Tale of Two Cities***, I wanted my knitting to record the crimes powerful people enact on the poor. But rather than seeking revenge, I wanted my knitting to create an imaginative journey into memory.

To begin a search for healing and harmony, I would knit soft and detailed socks and invite people into ordinary everyday activities with me. By wearing socks, they would be literally stepping into their history, and coming for a walk. I wanted them to take me to a place they love, where the softness of handknitted woollen socks and walking in nature might reconnect us with stories of their forebears, their emigration and settlement in Australia.

Why did I think I could use knitting and nature to connect and heal? I have been knitting since I was very little. There is a photo in our family album of a three-year-old me, sucking my bottom lip as I knit face washers for my teddy. We had moved from a bat infested schoolmaster's house in the bush to the edge of town, a place of mineshafts and wildflowers. We loved being outside there, in the fascinating world of Grandad's farm. We knew the smell of sheep, their wool—wet or dry, the lanolin-soaked timbers of shearing sheds. We knew the feel of poddy lambs sucking our little fingers as they balanced on their wobbly-stilt legs and grabbed at the teat of a milk bottle. We knew where wool came from and learned to knit before we started kindergarten. Everyone knitted. The woollen jumpers my aunt Patty knitted for me kept me warm on winter rides with my mother to watch the sun rise over the mountains.

My mother's relationship with knitting, animals and the bush gave us a bridge through her tumultuous world, gifting us a sense of calm, delight and connection unmarred by moods or words, battles of will or the spectres of old hurts that she fought, over and over. The socks she knitted for my father showed her love and care for him. She was

Accident jumper

My Mother's homespun and dyed Fair Isle pieces

a horse whisperer and painter longing to be a hermit, and for her, social contact was fraught. But her creativity was astounding and fun! I remember using scraps of yellow and red wool to knit the ears of Hush Puppy, a papier-mâché glove puppet I made for the grade four school play my mother directed.

When I was fourteen or fifteen, my mother took up spinning. She would come home and spin for an hour to unwind from her day teaching. She collected plants from her walks in the bush, from our garden, vegetable peelings to make dyes, and experimented with different mordants. She knitted exquisite Fair Isle jumpers, hats and socks for herself. While she only dyed wool for a short time, she continued to knit socks and beanies for decades, gorgeously soft and durable homespun comfort. She always washed them in home-made wool mix and kept them in a carved camphor chest. Nearly half a century later she gave some of her earliest knitting to me.

My own creative knitting is not always so durable or carefully looked after. In 1981, as I convalesced from a horrendous motor bike accident that was to end my medical career, I knitted a colourful tunic. It told the story of my accident. In it, dreamy spirit figures speak with trees and point to my broken body and sorrow.

By wearing it, I was asking the world

Hush Puppy glove puppet

to notice—but I think people saw a colourful jumper, not my secret sorrow.

When I needed a bone graft to heal my mangled leg, I knitted my gorgeous housemate Cat a sleeveless dress, a feminist portrait of North Sydney. In it, the head and arms of a woman lean over a skyscraper turning the MAN building into WOMAN. On the other side is the wave made famous by the Japanese printmaker Hokusai. A cat on a surfboard replaces his view of Mount Fuji. This dress expressed something of the joys that art, music, and the action of Sydney life brought to our early twenties—all things that healed me and shaped my life as an artist and theatrical designer.

Today when I think about knitting, I see yarn looping around holes, trapping warmth and elasticity into a smooth fabric. Each row supports the one beneath it and is supported by the one above.

If it is not to unravel, it needs a base (casting on) and a lock to finish (casting off, grafting etc). Unlike the warp and weft of loom weaving, it relies on a continuous thread, each loop interconnected and dependent on those around it. If the yarn breaks, a hole forms and, with the slightest pressure, grows. If a stitch is dropped, the fabric remains but where there once was a stitch supported above, supporting below, there is now a ladder. A ladder is a quick way up, and a speedy way down. Sometimes life feels like a series of accidents, where random threads survive somehow to make a story.

The humble craft of knitting makes a model for the connections in life between gaps in memory, story and loss. It creates warmth, comfort, and things of beauty. I marvel at how two sticks can transform spun scraps of fleece into a yielding fabric that comforts jangled bodies. Some garments are short-lived and disappear, knitted scraps like my puppets' ears, which get chewed by real puppies or by moths. Others, like the fishermen's jumpers from the coasts and islands of northern Scotland (and Europe) identified the bodies of the drowned by their unique cabled patterns. And some—like my mother's carefully washed and stored Fair Isle homespuns—survive across generations.

If all goes well, my Imperial Stockings will return stories of grief to memory, for the mourning and healing that lays old wounds to rest.