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Navigating the World through the Eye of a Needle

BY NANCY SCHEEMAKER

Threads of Life: A History of the World through the Eye of a Needle

By Clare Hunter. New York: Abrams Press, October 15, 2019.

320 pages, 5½ x 8¼ in., hardcover, \$26.00.

ISBN:978-1-419739538

In her new book, *Threads of Life: A History of the World through the Eye of a Needle*, Clare Hunter provides an impressive look at the power, influence, and expressive life of stitchery. The book held many discoveries for me and begs readers to view needlework, perhaps, from a new perspective for them: seeing needlework as a vehicle for self-narrative.

The book opens with the magnificent Bayeux Tapestry, a famous 900-year-old embroidery more than 230 feet in length, now on display in Normandy. In this singularly extraordinary and famous story panel, William the Great's conquest of England is told using 4 colors of woolen thread on linen. Hunter aptly describes the piece as a "visual archive of medieval life," and uses this tapestry as an introductory treatise on what she demonstrates over and over again throughout the next 15 chapters of her book. Needlework, she asserts, is an ancient art whose meaning goes far beyond embellishment or mere ornamentation. It has been providing voices throughout history, which resonate with us even today.

Threads of Life shows how stitchery and sewing have not only been ever present, but have served or channeled powerful traditions, preserved family memories, conveyed personal history, upheld community identity, and often expressed political views that could not otherwise be conveyed.

Hunter argues quite effectively that women have used sewing—more readily accessible, despite education or poverty—to effectively express their opinions, their dreams, and the condition of their lives at any given moment in time. When we begin to

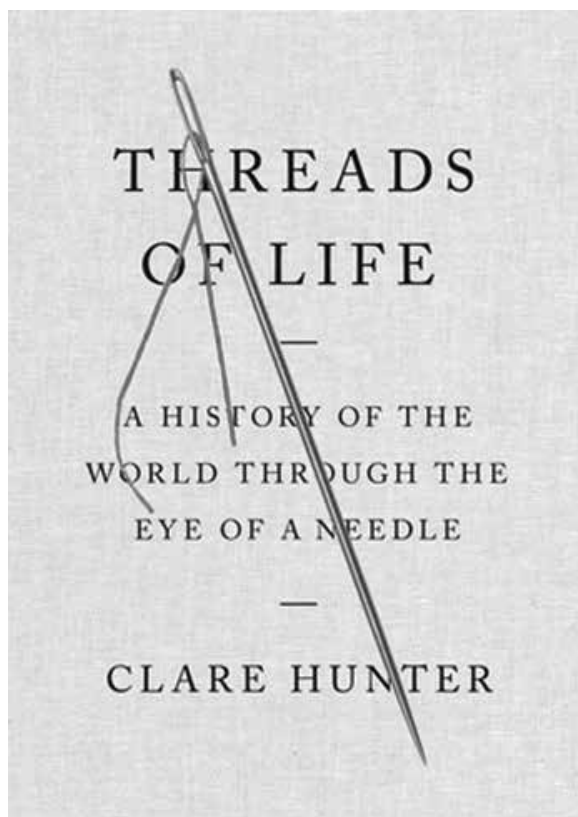
understand the true significance of these contributions, our perception of the art forms that we see and know is expanded, and perhaps, our view of the women who courageously and patiently created them is similarly broadened.

We learn in the chapter entitled "Power" that, in Renaissance times, textiles were the most potent way of messaging political and personal statements, with color and symbols. Palaces and their inhabitants were adorned lavishly in textiles to exhibit power and wealth. The infamous Mary Queen of Scots spent 19 years of imprisonment trying to woo Queen Elizabeth with gifts of embroidery and sewing that might somehow secure her

release. Separated permanently from her child, she sent him gifts of her needlework, as her only means of affection and communication.

Textiles have served as potent expressions of identity and community throughout history. Hunter's narrative shows that, just as the Scottish kilt came to symbolize victory and independence, Ukrainian embroidery and traditional dress were seen as threatening to an emerging Soviet Union. Steeped in symbolic motifs and codes unique to Ukrainian identity, traditional textiles were considered anti-Soviet and replaced with an ornamental pattern that, although pleasing to look at, was bereft of meaning, thereby neutralizing the ominous embroidery.

The author's own endeavors, as community activist and banner maker, serve as strong examples of how stitchery has been employed to influence community and politics in contemporary Scotland. Her work is a reminder of how influential banners,



flags, and sashes have represented a wide array of communities over time—from Masonic lodges to fraternities. In America, the relatively recent and ingenious World Reclamation Arts Project, protesting global oil dependence, with a blanket-wrapped gas station in DeWitt, New York, as a work of art, and the beloved and affecting The Names Project, which led to the creation of the Aids Memorial Quilt, have served to awaken and move the public consciousness on important issues.

Textiles have also been vehicles for protest, outcry, and to safely convey messages around those in power. I loved discovering the existence of the secret language of Nüshu in this book. Developed by women in the ancient Hunan province of China, Nüshu could not be read by men. Women used this script to embroider cloth books and objects with advice and messages of support for one another at a time when they had no control over their lives or fates.

A Reading Life (continued)

Hunter describes Nūshu as the only gender-specific language known to exist in the world. Amazing.

Similarly, Hunter cites the excellent book, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (Random House, 2000), as a perfect example of textile subterfuge. Highly recommended, authors Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard eloquently explore the secret messages embedded in quilts, used to signal and guide slaves fleeing to freedom.

In *Threads of Life*, I learned about the Arpilleras embroidery protest movement. During Pinochet's brutal dictatorship in Chile (1973–90), women witnessed human rights violations internationally through the Arpilleras technique—embroidering scenes on burlap sackings (*arpillera*) in what seemed to be innocently cheery bright motifs—which made their way out of the country, thus breaking an otherwise imposed silence, to expose the atrocities that the military rule was trying to hide through force, fear, and death.

Through messaging with needle and thread, women have more than survived. This is a huge story, and one that defies the modest boundaries of this column. I hope you are encouraged to buy the book from your neighborhood bookstore for further exploration. Clare Hunter has accomplished an exciting history that is meaningful, engaging, and at turns quite astounding, with a knowing nod to the power of textile narrative. ▼

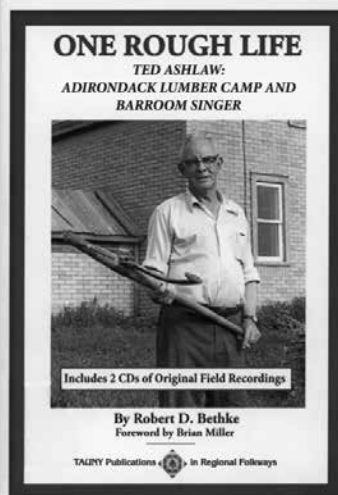
Nancy Scheemaker is the General Manager of Northshire Bookstore in Saratoga Springs, NY. She experiments with textiles, pottery, and collage, and holds an MA in African American Studies. Photo by Todd DeGarmo.



Good Read

One Rough Life. Ted Ashlaw: Adirondack Lumber Camp and Barroom Singer

By Robert D. Bethke. Canton, NY: Traditional Arts in Upstate New York, 2018. 155 pages, illustrations, 2 CDs of original field recordings. 6 x 9 in. paperback, \$21.95. ISBN: 978-1-948815-00-0.



Between 1970 and 1976, folklorist Robert Bethke had the opportunity to interview lumberjack and Adirondack traditional woods singer Ted Ashlaw, and to record him singing a wide variety of songs from the 150-song repertoire he had accumulated during his 27-year logging career (1920–1947). These interviews and recordings ultimately became *One Rough Life*, a wonderful book and CD set that celebrates Ashlaw, examines lumberjack culture in the Northern/Western Adirondacks, and faithfully preserves the songs that served as a soundtrack to a man's life and his era—both of which are now long gone.

The first half of Bethke's book is a short biography of Ted Ashlaw, focusing on his experiences as a lumberjack and singer at a time of great change for the lumber industry. Peppered with Ashlaw's quotes, it provides a fascinating look at a life filled with hardship. His first wife died of

tuberculosis, and Ashlaw was electrocuted in a logging accident in 1947, which nearly killed him (he was partially paralyzed for 2 years, required surgery to remove five discs from his vertebrae, and was plagued with health problems until his death in 1987).

Ashlaw never wallowed in his misfortune, though, and he and Bethke treat readers to a crash course on lumber camp history and culture, with particular attention paid to the rich camp/barroom singing tradition. Ted tended to learn songs by ear—listening to other woods singers like Johnny Pealo and Charlie Cunningham, or “off one of them little old round records”—and he took great pride in being able to accurately sing pieces just as they had been originally performed.

The second half of *One Rough Life* is comprised of lyrics, tunes, and annotations for the 35 songs included on the set's two CDs. The tunes were transcribed by noted musicologist and composer Dr. Norman Cazden (PhD in Musicology, Harvard) and are a treasure trove for anyone interested in Adirondack lumber songs or traditional ballads. Bethke includes the Roud Folk Song Index, Traditional Ballad Index, and (when applicable) Child Ballad identifiers for each song, making it easy to compare Ashlaw's renditions to other versions and to examine the ways in which songs change as they are passed around.

As splendid as Bethke's book is, it is his recordings of Ashlaw that stand as the project's *pièce de résistance*. Ted sings in a sweet, steady voice, full of character and humanity, unadorned by musical accompaniment. His delivery is confident and assured, that of a seasoned balladeer for whom singing is as natural as breathing. Ashlaw may have occasionally decried the state of his post-accident voice, but its power is undeniable; one can imagine it silencing the chatter of a modern barroom and captivating listeners' attention, just as easily as Ashlaw had in his prime among the lumber camps and bars of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s.

One Rough Life is a remarkable achievement and should be required reading/listening for anyone with an interest in traditional music or the Adirondack logging culture. It brings to life the bygone world of lumber camps, bears witness to the power of song to sustain the spirit, and honors the resilience of Ted Ashlaw as a person. Fate may have treated him more roughly than most, but the voice we hear belting out ballads on *One Rough Life* belongs to a man who was anything but broken.

—Kevin Rogan

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