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PEDERSEN, S., PEACH, A.

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Highland Romance or Viking Saga?

The Contradictory Branding of Orkney Tweed in the Twentieth Century

Professor Sarah Pedersen

Dr Andrea Peach

Summary

Few have heard of Orkney tweed today, but in the mid-twentieth century it was as well known as Harris Tweed, and praised for its soft and light characteristics. This article investigates the rise and fall of Orkney tweed and suggests that its decline in the 1960s can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the advent of synthetic, ready-to-wear clothing, but also problems inherent in the mixed marketing messages around the textile. While the main producers of Orkney tweed emphasised the Viking connections of the Orkney islands and their product, the fashion media and overseas customers were more comfortable with positioning Orkney tweed within a stereotypic context of Scottish romanticism, in which Orkney tweed became interchangeable – and replaceable – with all Scottish tweeds. Contemporary attempts to re-establish tweed production on the Orkney Islands have rejected both approaches, focusing instead on the ‘natural’ properties of the fabric and the production of easily portable souvenirs.

Keywords: Textile design and manufacture; branding; Scotland; twentieth century; cultural nationalism; national identity

Introduction

Tweed, a woven woollen cloth closely associated with Scotland, has recently gained critical attention in the spheres of cultural and social history, as well as in the domains of contemporary fashion and

interiors.¹ Harris Tweed is perhaps the best recognised and most preeminent name in tweed manufacture today, and the only fabric boasting its own statutory act.² Capitalising on a rich heritage, the 'on-trend' brand of Harris Tweed makes regular appearances on both the catwalk and in high-street stores, and is used by firms as diverse as Nike, Hugo Boss, Dr Martens and Thomas Pink.³ It may therefore come as a surprise to discover that until the 1960s tweed from Orkney was of equal renown to that of the Western Isles, and shared similar international status.⁴ American style bible *Women's Wear Daily* provides evidence of Orkney tweed's comparative standing, stating in 1950 that:

Hand woven tweeds from such areas as the Orkney islands and Harris Tweeds are said to be favoured ... These are, for the most part, the high-priced mills which have traditionally concentrated on presenting styles domestic mills cannot easily duplicate or ones that are styled to avoid competition with domestic mills.⁵

Indeed, there are even suggestions that Orkney tweed was superior to other Scottish tweeds, being both softer and lighter in weight.⁶

This article investigates the history of Orkney tweed in the twentieth century and asks what happened to this once apparently strong brand. It suggests that a combination of socio-economic factors, including the advent of ready-to-wear apparel in the 1960s and the death of a leading tweed-mill owner in 1976, played a role in the disappearance of Orkney tweed from the world markets in the 1970s. However, more importantly, we argue that the branding of the cloth by Orkney manufacturers was at odds with prevailing perceptions of Scottish tweed, impacting negatively on this once well-known brand. While the Orcadian mill-owners positioned the cloth within the context of the Norse Viking heritage of Orkney, overseas distributors and consumers preferred the more stereotypic depiction of Scotland as a place of Highlanders, heather and tartan. We argue that having two highly contrasting market images for one regional product meant that ultimately one prevailed and one did not. Despite a promising start, Orkney tweed was unable to ride out the challenges of the 1970s economic recession. And whereas Harris Tweed has managed to

overcome numerous financial setbacks,⁷ Orkney tweed has all but vanished from the public consciousness. However, this may be about to change. With tourist trade now recognised as vital to Orkney's economic viability,⁸ there is renewed interest in the manufacture of Orcadian cultural products, meaning that Orkney tweed may once again thrive.

The Origins of Orkney Tweed

The production of woven woollen cloth on Orkney has a long history. Evidence of the manufacture of textiles by Neolithic, Pictish and Viking cultures has been found on the Islands, including weaving implements and an Iron Age woven hood.⁹ Textiles in Viking Age Scotland operated as 'powerful mediators of identity and status',¹⁰ and certainly on Orkney there is evidence that this was the case.¹¹ Firth (1974) and Shearer (1996) write that in most parishes on Orkney there would have been at least one weaver, operating on a domestic scale, using wool from locally reared sheep.¹² By the eighteenth century, facilitated by an expansion of flax growing on Orkney, weaving was a well-established business in Kirkwall, the islands' largest town. One Kirkwall weaver, James Traill, was granted permission in 1755 to build a 'workhouse' with twenty-four looms for the purposes of 'weaving wool and linen',¹³ providing evidence of ambitions to expand weaving as a business enterprise in Kirkwall. Archive accounts also confirm the production and sale of various types of woven cloth to local consumers on Orkney, including linen, calico, lawn, and checks, the latter possibly being an early reference to tweed.¹⁴ More sophisticated textiles were also being woven in Kirkwall at this time, including velvet, silk, corduroy, turk-upon-turk (a wool and canvas fabric which resembled Turkish carpets) and shalloon (a light woollen twill weave originating from *Châlons-sur-Marne*, France).¹⁵ The wide range of woven fabrics in production on Orkney at this time suggest not only cosmopolitan influences and an awareness of fashion, but also an affluent local consumer base. Tweed, which is defined as a 'woven woollen cloth in the twill weave',¹⁶ is assumed to originate as a named product in Scotland from around the 1830s.¹⁷ This type of cloth would already have been produced locally for a number of years, and was noted more for its practical qualities than its fashion

credentials. But the fabric underwent a significant identity transformation in the nineteenth century. This transformation was greatly assisted by its associations with Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), the aristocracy (namely Queen Victoria and Prince Albert), and the invention of estate tweeds.¹⁸ Once perceived as a masculine cloth for rural purposes, tweed became fashionable with urban male consumers, as well as with the sporting elite, and gained a reputation in London and internationally for its 'high aesthetic appeal and quality of manufacture'.¹⁹ By the late nineteenth century, tailored dress styles were increasingly adopted by women, and with this came the introduction of tweed to women's wardrobes.²⁰ The development of Orkney tweed appears to follow a similar, albeit slower paced, trajectory to that of tweed on the Scottish mainland. Eighteenth-century archive evidence cited above makes reference to 'check' and woollen twill weave in the form of 'shalloon', but there is no known evidence of woven fabric being referred to as 'tweed' on Orkney until the early twentieth century.

The promotion and distribution of tweed as a commercial Scottish product began in earnest in the nineteenth century. It is largely attributed to the efforts of several aristocratic women with an interest in improving socio-economic conditions in the Highlands and Islands, and marks the beginning of the shift from tweed as a domestic textile to that of a fashion fabric aimed at women.²¹ Subsequently, from the beginning of the twentieth century, Orkney tweed appears to have been destined primarily for the womenswear market, promoting it as a new product in an already well-established market, and emphasising characteristics that would have 'feminine' appeal. Early promotional material differentiates Orkney tweed as being lighter and lacking the unpleasant rustic odour often associated with existing tweed varieties. The *Aberdeen Evening Express* of September 1910 noted that:

The smartest tweed costumes are all being made of the new Orkney tweed; this is extraordinarily light, and has not the usual tweed smell, to which so many people object.²²

These early attempts to establish an Orcadian tweed market and differentiate the product from existing brands were however short-lived. By the end of the First World War, weaving appears to have died out in many areas of Orkney, and completely in the main centres of Kirkwall and Stromness. The *Aberdeen Press and Journal* commented pessimistically in December 1932 that, while there was some weaving still being undertaken in the islands, 'on the Orkney mainland weaving has been a dead industry for more than forty years'.²³ However, it was not long after this observation that Orkney tweed underwent a new beginning, largely through the efforts of two enterprising Kirkwall businessmen.

Orcadian Tweed in the Twentieth Century: A New Beginning

In 1932, the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* reported that R. Garden's, a successful department store in Kirkwall, was establishing a new weaving mill in the town. Announcing 'Orkney's Bid to Revive Old Industry – Rival for Harris Product?'²⁴ the new tweed was to be branded under the name 'Argarden'. Looms capable of producing 250 yards of Orkney tweed per week were installed in the premises on Laing Street. The looms were supplied by James Macdonald Ltd., makers of Harris Tweed in Stornoway. Two male weavers were imported from Stornoway to train local labour, suggesting that there was no weaving expertise in Kirkwall at this time.²⁵ Garden's were ambitious, and Macdonald informed a press representative that 'he saw no reason why Orkney tweed should not become as popular as Harris Tweed'.²⁶ The *Press and Journal* suggested that the scheme would revitalise the economy of Orkney, both in terms of tweed manufacture and sheep farming.²⁷ This line was supported by Argarden's own marketing materials, which emphasised that:

... for many years weaving was almost a lost art in Orkney ... however, this firm interested some Orcadians in the weaving of tweed in order to assist the employment position in the islands.²⁸

The new Orkney tweed was soon attracting attention on the British mainland, and was promoted for its combination of 'smartness and lightness'.²⁹ This characteristic of 'lightness' was a particular

attraction, and featured largely in the marketing of the product. An advertisement for Rodex coats using handwoven Orkney tweed appeared in a Belfast newspaper in 1936, exclaiming:

Of all the varieties of Handwoven Tweeds the Orkney Tweeds are the most attractive and the pleasantest wear. They are neither hard nor harsh, but have a soft firmness derived from the fine, kindly, Orkney grown wools from which they are made. And although in great demand, these Tweeds are scarce enough to be exclusive.³⁰

Orkney tweed even made an appearance in the unlikely location of Bermuda, featuring in a 1938 article titled 'Vogue Covers the Resort Shops', where it was promoted as a 'good alternative for your outdoor wardrobe.'³¹

In terms of the design of Orkney tweed, there is no evidence that it differed significantly to tweed patterns employed in neighbouring Shetland or the Western Isles. *Aberdeen Press and Journal* recorded that 'plain solid colours, dog-tooth checks and district and windowpane checks are all to be found' with 'herringbone pattern in contrasting shades of light and dark greys' being a main export to the United States.³² Roger Robson, who worked as a hand-warper for both Sclater's and Garden's, as did his father before him, claimed that the patterns for Orkney tweed came from the Western Isles, with herringbone twill and shepherd's check patterns being very popular.³³ Nancy Fergus, owner of the Orkney Tweed Shop in Kirkwall agreed, adding that 'no patterns were unique to Orkney.'³⁴

The Argarden brand was positioned as having genuine Orcadian ancestry. The name, a play on the owner's first initial 'R' and surname 'Garden', differentiated the new brand from the locally established Garden's business.³⁵ Implying historic origins, through the use of ornate Celtic knot pattern lettering, the name and typeface created an air of pseudo-authenticity and romance, evidenced in their promotional material. **[1]**

It was further suggested that by purchasing the tweed, customers would not only be helping to support the local economy, but also to revive a lost local craft. As Graburn (1979) suggests, this notion of revival when linked to a supposedly indigenous craft practice is a value-laden one.³⁶ In this

case, Garden's was attempting to capitalise on the supposed *re-creation* of 'Orkney tweed', by insinuating a much older past, when in fact we now know that tweed was essentially a generic twill product, with its name only recently derived from the Scottish mainland. By drawing a distinction between R. Garden's, the department store, and Argarden, the Orkney tweed brand, Garden's, which by 1933 was a thriving company and major employer in Kirkwall,³⁷ was attempting to attract international consumers for whom authenticity and location would be important. As Hickey (1997) writes: 'the craftsperson, the materials, the activity of making and consequently the object are regarded as characteristic of a place.'³⁸

An illustrated souvenir brochure from 'The House of Garden', dating from 1933 was clearly aimed at the tourist market and encouraged visitors to 'Come in and see our famous Orkney Tweed being made.'³⁹ Allowing visitors to experience the making of the tweed product was to further engage them in the process of making. This, Garden's must have realised, was a powerful marketing tool, as it would authenticate not only the experience of the item's manufacture, but also physically locate the tourist's experience and memory of the place.⁴⁰ Visitors were assured that the loom was open for inspection at all times: 'A visit will satisfy you that we are producing the genuine article',⁴¹ suggesting perhaps that the same could not be said for other tweeds. Interestingly, this claim of authenticity was illustrated by a drawing of 'An Old Orkney Spinning Wheel' in the souvenir brochure, rather than the tweed loom itself. Certainly the industrial aesthetic of a Hattersley loom did not lend itself to the romantic presentation of the brochure. But, as Ponting points out, tweed manufacturers often traded on the idea of their product being 'hand-woven' when by the twentieth century this was something of a misnomer:

The yarn was factory spun and the cloth factory finished, and the weaving was often done on a special kind of hand-loom where the power came from the weaver pushing the lay-sword backwards and forwards, which was not a feature of the earlier hand loom.⁴²

It should also be noted that, by the twentieth century, although the fleeces were produced on Orkney, the spinning itself was undertaken off the islands and then the wool re-imported to be spun

and finished,⁴³ tarnishing the ideal of a completely local product. Garden's literature presented its tweed production as a romantic cottage activity, when in fact it was engaging with technology and operating in a mill environment. This depiction of craft as a traditional, rather than modern, activity is common in representations of craft, as Adamson points out:

Regional 'vernacular' craft traditions are invariably modern inventions, to some degree. They are fashioned according to the needs of the present day, and the objects produced in these circumstances acquire potent totemic value.⁴⁴

In this case, the totemic value of Argarden tweed was given additional currency by linking it to supposed Viking origins. Both were inventions, but served as powerful marketing vehicles for the product.

The Myth of the Vikings

Argarden's presentation of Orkney tweed as an authentic local craft drew on much deeper roots than the establishment of tweed as a fashion textile in the nineteenth century. Working with the history of Orkney itself, Argarden positioned its product within the Norse history of the islands and employed connotations of Viking craftsmanship and international trading in the branding of its tweed. The marketing booklet, *The Argarden Orkney Tweed Saga*, published in 1947, firmly identified Orkney tweed as part of Viking heritage and opened to customers the romantic possibilities of a direct link to one thousand year-old traditions. **[1]** As the use of the word 'Saga' in the title suggests, the booklet presented the roots of Orkney tweed in an almost mythic Viking past, reinforced by the depiction of a Viking longboat. **[2]** It claimed that 'the making of woollen cloths was an important craft in the Old Norse days in Orkney'⁴⁵ and that the early Norwegian colonists had brought their own methods of weaving with them.⁴⁶

Orkney was a part of the kingdoms of Norway and Denmark from the ninth century until 1468, when it was bequeathed to Scotland by the Danish king as part of the marriage dowry of Margaret of Denmark, wife of James III of Scotland. It was therefore part of Scandinavian kingdoms for five

hundred years, and its Scandinavian past is an important factor in the islands' cultural identity.⁴⁷ Popular knowledge of the Viking history of the islands would have been heightened during the late 1930s with the staging of a great 'Pageant of St Magnus' held in Orkney in 1937, a few years after the establishment of the Argarden tweed mill. [3] This pageant celebrated the Viking past of the islands and the 800th anniversary of the foundation of St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall. The pageant was written by two Orcadian authors, J. Storer Clouston (1870-1974) and Eric Linklater (1899-1974), who used sources such as the *Orkneyinga Saga* as the basis for their script.⁴⁸ Storer was the author of several works on Orcadian history while Linklater was a leading light of the Scottish Renaissance and the author of a variety of novels, short stories, travel and children's books.⁴⁹ The aims of the pageant were to celebrate the founding of the St Magnus Cathedral and to encourage tourism to the islands. Plenty of press coverage was provided by the involvement of such important figures in the literary world, including a BBC talk given by Linklater.

Bartie *et al.* note that the history celebrated in the pageant did not include a single Scottish or British monarch, focusing instead on situating the islands within Scandinavian history:

St Magnus pageant is unique in its straightforward celebration of Norse dominion, and provides a clear example of a part of the British Isles where this aspect of the past remained a powerful influence on the contemporary identity of a community.⁵⁰

During the last 200 years, links to a Viking heritage have been used by many different groups to construct national identity. Sometimes this identity is supra-national, allowing people in different European nations to claim an overall 'Viking' connection,⁵¹ but for many others it is a way of establishing national independence.⁵² For Icelanders in the first half of the twentieth century, the Vikings became a symbol of a time of political autonomy, before the country became a vassal state of Denmark.⁵³ Similarly, the Pageant of St Magnus on Orkney allowed Orcadians to construct an identity separate from both Britain and Scotland, looking back to a time when they were part of the Scandinavian world rather than the British Empire. Investigating contemporary Orkney, Lange notes that 'the primary use of Orkney's Scandinavian connection by the people who live there is to construct a separate identity for Orkney.'⁵⁴

Many hundreds of Orcadians were involved in the St Magnus Pageant and therefore the islands' Norse Viking heritage would have been at the forefront of Orcadian minds in the late 1930s. This may well have formed the basis for the particular branding of Orcadian tweed as part of the islands' Viking heritage, which continued into the post-war years.

After the Second World War, a second tweed mill was established in Kirkwall's Mill Street by the Sclater family, owners of a successful drapery business in the town. The mill was managed by John Cumming Sclater, who had recently returned from the war and did not wish to work in the family business. Again, within the company's marketing, connections were made to the Norse Vikings. The tweed brand's name was 'Norsaga', and there was also a 'Jarltext' brand. [4&5] Both logos exploited popular Viking iconography. The Jarltext logo featured a winged Viking helmet, while the Norsaga logo included a shield with a Viking ship on one side and a standing lion bearing an axe on the other - the latter being a known symbol of Norwegian kings since the 1200s.

Despite its historical origins, the myth of the Viking is a comparatively modern phenomenon. The word first appears in the English language in 1807 but did not see common use until the mid-nineteenth century.⁵⁵ It was also not until the nineteenth century that the concept of the 'Viking Age' became common in Scandinavia, associated with the notion of a golden age of heroes. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a Viking as:

One of those Scandinavian adventurers who practiced piracy at sea, and committed depredations on land, in northern and western Europe from the eighth to the eleventh century; sometimes in general use, a warlike pirate or sea-rover.⁵⁶

The image of an outward-looking, dynamic, if violent, Viking is frequently projected through contemporary advertising and branding, conveying connotations of strength, an adventurous spirit and a drive towards expansion.⁵⁷ The Icelander Leif 'The Lucky' Eiriksson was said to have sailed to America 500 years before Christopher Columbus, thus symbolising Viking expansionism and adventurism.⁵⁸ In her investigation of the use of the image of the Viking in Icelandic cultural heritage

and business, Kjartansdottir (2011) argues that the small island-state uses its Viking cultural heritage to both strengthen its national cohesion and to promote Icelandic investments abroad.⁵⁹ A smaller-scale but similar approach to the branding of Orkney tweed can be seen in the marketing of both Argarden and Sclater tweed, with each company highlighting the Norse history of Orkney and connections to the weaving and trading of early Norwegian colonists.

An association with the Viking brand enabled Orcadian tweed to differentiate itself from the more dominant Harris Tweed of the Western Isles and also underpinned its effort to sell the tweed in an international market. Advertisements for Norsaga Orkney Tweeds with the slogan 'Look for the Name' featured regularly in *Women's Wear Daily* between 1950 and 1952, evidencing Sclater's attempts to promote the product in the United States. Kirkwall Library and Archive holds a selection of Sclaters' business correspondence, which demonstrates that the tweed sold both on the islands and abroad, particularly in the US, but also in Japan and the Continent. At one point the firm employed an American salesman and seems to have produced a lighter-weight tweed specifically for this market. Envelopes now in the possession of Eileen Bevan, the daughter of John Cumming Sclater, are evidence of correspondence between Sclaters and shops in New York, Boston and Philadelphia, as well as Luxembourg, Brussels, Liege and Bayreuth [6].

However, it is evident from Sclater's correspondence that the first contact many of his customers had with Orkney tweed was when they were on holiday in Orkney. For example, an undated letter from Mrs Noble of Portobello, Edinburgh, explains: 'some years ago while on holiday in Kirkwall, I bought a cot blanket from you and was so pleased with it that I ordered another from you which you sent by post.'⁶⁰

An unpublished history of Sclater's, written by a Sclater grandchild and held at the Kirkwall Library, includes a number of oral histories from workers at the mill and local shop-owners. One Stromness shop-owner in the 1970s reported that: 'visitors to Orkney were always overjoyed to find this tweed

in our shop as it was obviously something lovely to take home and so very Orcadian, even the name, which was a good one.’⁶¹ A mill-worker also remembered:

The trade name was ‘Norsaga’ and Sclaters did a roaring trade with servicemen [stationed on the islands after the Second World War] who could buy a suit, coat or skirt length to send home to their wives and families. Sclaters even wrapped it up and sent it to the recipients by post.⁶²

The image of the Viking is frequently used in the production and sale of souvenirs to tourists in Scandinavian countries.⁶³ Given Orkney’s strong links to Scandinavia and the focus on its Norse past in its own tourism marketing, it is not surprising that the tweed mills in Orkney also wished to capitalise on the modern myth of the Viking in order to appeal to the tourists who visited the islands.

Tweed and the Scottish Stereotype

However, Orcadian tweed producers, and their claims of a connection to a rugged Viking past, found their product positioned outside the islands within the much larger and more influential image of the romantic Scottish highlands. Whilst both Argarden and Sclaters focused their brands on the concept of the Viking, with associations with expansionism and strength - which worked well within the Orcadian community - it is evident that other national stereotypes were being imposed on their products by markets both overseas and within the rest of the UK.

Tweed as a product, but more importantly as a cultural construction, is inextricably bound with the notion of place, becoming a ‘physical embodiment of the landscape where it is woven’.⁶⁴ From its transformation as a generic rustic cloth to a branded entity, in semiotic terms, it has become a signifier for ‘Scottishness’. Tweed’s tangible connections to the land and place have been capitalised on since the nineteenth century, mythologizing its use of locally sourced wool and native vegetable dyes, such as ‘bark of heather’.⁶⁵ As Gulvin confirms:

... the colour effects of the early tweeds were often obtained by copying leaves, heather or even stones from the countryside and these colours gave the cloth its appeal.⁶⁶

This semiotic reinforcement of tweed as an extension of the remote Scottish Highlands can be seen as early as 1910 when *Women's Wear Daily* reported on a 'unique exhibition of Scotch fabrics' at the Wannamaker department store in New York in which a 'superb collection of attire from the land of tweeds and homespuns' would be displayed 'amid bunches of heather that were gathered on the moors after the opening of the shooting season'.⁶⁷ Here tweed was specifically positioned as both rustic and rural – the heather, the homespuns – and aristocratic, with its mention of the shooting season. In 1913 *Women's Wear Daily* used similar imagery when describing a line of 'real Orkney homespuns, hand woven, made of native wool and in natural colours'.⁶⁸

The imposition of an image of romantic Highland Scotland, rather than Viking strength and expansionism, on both Orkney and its tweed is evidenced throughout media coverage of both the islands and its tweed during the twentieth century. Orkney was portrayed as isolated and far away: a *Vogue* article of 1924 noted how little people knew of the islands because 'Few ... have braved the trouble waters of the Pentland Firth and ventured into the isolation...'.⁶⁹ In 1946, the *Chelmsford Chronicle* ran a travel feature by its columnist 'June Patricia' on her holiday on Orkney. Whilst she did note that 'At Kirkwall the local inhabitants consider themselves—not Scottish, but of direct Norwegian lineage,' the majority of her report placed Orkney in a more romantic setting. She travelled by drifter around the islands, which are 'misty brown' and 'really beautiful in a slight haze' while 'the sea was as blue as cornflower and so smooth' and the air 'so lovely'.⁷⁰ Kirkwall was depicted as a slightly backward place where 'time almost stands still' and 'there are only two rows of shops'.⁷¹ A similar travel story in *Vogue* in 1959 again focused on the remoteness of the islands and described the inhabitants as 'mad' and 'charming eccentrics' while 'their sense of time is peculiar, to say the least of it ...'.⁷²

To other visitors, Orcadians were more than eccentric and less than human. Princess Marthe Bibesco, writing in *Vogue* in 1932, described Coco Chanel's search for 'rough homespun woollies', which she had finally tracked down in Orkney:

... where innumerable old crones spin for her, earning a happy livelihood, unaware that their work is destined not to protect the primitive Highlander from evil weather, but to adorn sophisticated ladies who will impregnate them with all the perfumes of Paris.⁷³

The quest for authenticity had now led to the 'spinning crone' of fairy tales, with no understanding of the world beyond their island fastness, and a clear comparison between the sophisticated ladies of society who wore the tweed and the old women who produced it. A similar almost anthropological tone was found in a *Women's Wear Daily* report of 1935 which described the travels of a sportswear company's stylist around Scotland and how she 'lived among the crofters' in order to learn how they wove and dyed the cloth. The stylist gave a talk at the preview of the collection in which she showed 'bits of lichen' and 'peat soot'.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, 'three window displays of the models are featured, with back drops depicting Scotch lads in kilts accompanying young girls clad in the store's classically styled models', pictures of 'the natives of the Scotch Isles are on the wall' and the store itself was strewn with bunches of heather and roughly woven baskets.⁷⁵

In this discourse, Orkney tweed became a product from a romantic island refuge where time stood still in the manner of *Brigadoon* (1954). Tweed was produced by hand, rather than in a mill, by crones or 'sturdy crofters'⁷⁶ and marketed as traditional, natural, native and 'real'.⁷⁷ There is no mention of any Norse or Viking connection in these depictions. As Beller and Leerssen, whose work analyses the cultural construction of national identity through imagery, would argue: 'most images of national character will boil down to a characteristic or quasi-characterological polarity'.⁷⁸ This polarity can be seen in the consumers of the product: the wearers of tweed were depicted as sophisticated aristocrats: one model of a coat made from Orkney tweed by W.O. Peake of London was called 'Mitford',⁷⁹ no doubt a reference to the fashionable Mitford sisters. As Gulvin (1973) notes, "Scotch Tweed' became the aristocratic cloth of the British textile industry, a byword for genuineness and quality'.⁸⁰

Such mythology continues today, evidenced by a recent publication celebrating Harris Tweed, titled 'From Land to Street', which opens with sixteen text-free pages featuring photographs of snowy

hills, empty beaches, solitary moorland, and clumps of heather.⁸¹ Writing of modern tweed, Harper and McDougall note that tweed is imbued with the emotive notion of the landscape and culture that inspires it and that its appeal is bound up in its association with handmade production and 'authenticity'.⁸² Culler would describe this concept of authenticity as a 'sign relation',⁸³ in that the tweed's attraction is wholly bound up with that which it is purported to represent, namely, 'Scottishness'. This sign relation, which essentially reduced Orkney tweed to a common national denominator, made it difficult for the wider consuming public to accept branding which deviated from the stereotypic script. This we argue, was the case for the Argardgen and Norsaga brands.

Decline and Rebirth of Orkney Tweed

By the mid-1970s both Sclater's and Argarden mills had closed on Orkney. In the later years of production, Sclater's had made attempts to move with the times. Alongside the more traditional shades of moorit brown and lovat green, brighter and more fashionable accent colours such as orange were now included in their Norsaga tweed range. [7] However, despite these attempts to modernise, the market had moved on. The advent of ready-to-wear garments made of cheap synthetic fabrics and the decline of traditional tailoring meant that sales were insufficient to sustain the Orkney tweed industry.⁸⁴ In addition, John Cumming Sclater himself became ill, dying in 1976 at the age of 55, and there was no natural successor willing to take on a failing mill.

Nonetheless, in 1979 a further tweed mill was established on the island of Stronsay by a retired farmer called Tom Shearer. He made his own looms and sold his tweed to tourists, mainly from the yachts that were now arriving in Stronsay from Germany and Scandinavia. Perhaps because of the background of his customers, he does not appear to have utilised the Viking connection in his marketing. Instead, employing the brand name 'Old Hand Weave', Shearer concentrated on producing tourist-related products, such as scarfs and ties, which were easily portable. He also offered a 'heritage experience' for his visitors, allowing them to visit the weaving shed and see the weaver in action.

After Shearer's death, the production of Orkney tweed sank into abeyance until very recently. In 2016, the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* reported on the launch of a new tweed company, founded by Deerness sheep-farmer Nancy Fergus and craft producer Fiona Mitchell.⁸⁵ The two women had won a share of a £50,000 Scottish Enterprise prize aimed at encouraging creative business collaboration and their aim, once again, was to create an internationally recognised tweed brand. Fleeces are sent from Fergus' farm to Shetland for spinning and weaving and then the finished cloth is turned into products such as blankets, hats and lampshades on Orkney. Following Tom Shearer, contemporary producers of tweed on the islands now focus on the tourist trade, in particular tourists from the large cruisers that now arrive in Orkney between April and October every year. In 2017, 140 cruise ships arrived in Orkney, bringing over 130,000 tourists - six times the population of the entire Orkney archipelago.⁸⁶ Tweed producers, and other artisan crafters on the islands, thus focus on producing quality, portable souvenirs aimed at the wealthy cruise-ship clientele. As souvenirs, tweed items can be easily packed into suitcases and transported home. They are what Lury would describe as 'traveller-objects':

... *traveller-objects* [are] those that combine the ability to travel well in the sense that they retain their meaning across contexts and retain an authenticated relation to an original dwelling.⁸⁷

The marketing of contemporary Orkney tweed focuses on the Zwartble sheep used to produce the fleeces, the traditional nature of the products – for example 'traditional' flat caps – and the pure nature of the undyed wool. In this way, the marketing of contemporary Orkney tweed is similar to the branding of much contemporary Scottish craft. No Vikings are involved. However, it is worth noting that the aristocratic connection still exists. Nancy Fergus' website explains that the original three Zwartble sheep in her herd came from 'Longoe farm at the Castle of Mey, Caithness (The Queen Mother's Highland Farm).⁸⁸ Nancy Fergus registered a trademark for Orkney Tweed in September 2015, which will expire in 2025.⁸⁹ A recent research visit to Kirkwall to investigate the history of Orkney tweed and the potential for its reinvigoration indicated much interest on the part

of locals,⁹⁰ but it remains to be seen whether Orkney tweed will ever return to its position of international renown that it enjoyed in the 1930s and 50s. And if it does, it will be interesting to see how it decides to brand itself.

Conclusions

This article set out to discover what had happened to Orkney tweed, a once-sought after textile product which in its heyday was celebrated internationally in fashion magazines and trade journals, and was sold in locations around the globe, including Bermuda and Japan. We have demonstrated that, although having a strong product with qualities that appeared to exceed that of the better-known Harris Tweed, namely softness and lightness, Orkney tweed has all but disappeared from textile history and the received tweed narrative. Tweed in itself is a misleading product name, stemming from a more commonplace woven textile better known as twill. The brand name 'tweed' was adopted in the nineteenth century to stimulate demand for woven textiles and further the interests of tweed manufacturers. In this sense, we have seen that the development of the tweed industry in Scotland was more a consequence of fashion, rather than a response to local needs. Tweed was an invention, and it leaned heavily on national stereotypes to generate interest. The linking of stereotypes to products is common practice, and can be economically advantageous, but it can also be limiting. As Beller and Leerssen argue 'Once formed, stereotypes are resistant to change on the basis of new information.'⁹¹

It is unsurprising that Orkney tweed manufacturers wished to identify their products with Norse rather than Highland culture. As we have shown, Orcadians culture is based on a strong affiliation with a Viking past, one that has become firmly embedded in the national psyche through a continual reinforcement of Viking mythology in everyday iconography, national holidays and festivals. However, the overarching stereotype that was associated with tweed was one that had a foot firmly on the Scottish mainland, more specifically in the Highlands. This was the image that would prevail and endure, and from which ultimately Orkney tweed manufacturers were unable to distance

themselves. It is telling that, until very recently, Orkney tweed, unlike Harris Tweed, never managed to achieve an independent trademark. Perhaps it was unsure what it really wanted to patent.

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Declarations:

There are no declarations.

About the Authors:

Professor Sarah Pedersen, Professor of Communication and Media, Robert Gordon University.

Sarah Pedersen's research interests focus on women's engagement with media, both contemporary and historical. She has written extensively on the Scottish suffragettes and Scottish women's experience of the First World War, recently publishing 'The Scottish Suffragettes and the Press' with Palgrave Macmillan (2017). She is currently leading a Heritage Lottery Fund project investigating the Aberdeen suffragette Caroline Phillips, which includes the publication of an edition of Phillips' letters. She has also written on more contemporary feminist movements online, including a long-running project on the politicisation of the online forum Mumsnet and work on Scottish politics and Twitter.

Dr Andrea Peach, Lecturer in Contextual and Critical Studies, Gray's School of Art, Robert Gordon University.

Andrea Peach completed her MA in Design History at the Royal College of Art in London in 1998 and has been a full-time lecturer in Contextual and Critical Studies at Gray's School of Art since 1998. She completed a part-time PhD focusing on Scottish craft in the late twentieth century, titled: *The Making of Modern Scottish Craft – Invention and Revival in 1970s Scotland*. Her research interests focus on craft as commodity and cultural industry, as well as the construction of national and

cultural identity through the craft object. She has published in the *Journal of Design History*, the *Journal of Craft Research* and the *Journal of Modern Craft*.

ENDNOTES

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² *Harris Tweed Act 1993*. C. xi. See also: J. Hunter, *The Islands and the Orb – The History of Harris Tweed 1835-1995*, Stornoway: Acair Ltd., 2001.

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⁴ Orkney, or the Orkney Islands, is an archipelago situated off the north-eastern coast of Scotland. The Isle of Harris, joined with the Isle of Lewis, is located in the Outer Hebrides, off the west coast of Scotland.

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⁷ C. Harper, and K. McDougall, 'The Very Recent Fall and Rise of Harris Tweed', *Textile*, vol. 10, no. 11, 2012, pp. 78–99; T. Serdari, 'The Carloway Mill Harris Tweed: Tradition-Based Innovation for a Sustainable Future', *Sustainable Luxury, Entrepreneurship, and Innovation*, Springer: Singapore, 2018, pp. 185-207.

⁸ Orkney Islands Development and Infrastructure Committee, *Orkney Volume Tourism Management Study Interim Report*. Executive Director of Development and Infrastructure, 2017.

⁹ The 'Orkney Hood' was found in a peat bog on Orkney in 1867 and taken to the National Museum of Scotland for exhibition. It is a fringed woollen cloak or hood. Radio-carbon dating suggests that the hood dates from AD250-AD615, making it contemporary with the Iron Age site of Minehowe on Orkney. The experimental archaeologist Jacqui Wood was commissioned to make a replica hood in 2002. She suggests that the fringe on the hood has been recycled from a garment made for a wealthy adult and used to make a hood for a child. See: J. Wood, 'The Orkney Hood an ancient recycled textile', <http://www.archaeologyonline.org/Documents/TheOrkneyHood.pdf>, 2003, accessed 18 April 2018.

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¹¹ T. Gabra-Sanders, 'The Orkney Hood, Re-dated and Re-considered', in: P. W., Rogers, L.B., Jorgensen, and A. Rast-Eicher (eds), *The Roman Textiles Industry and its Influence*, 2001, Oxford: Oxbow; Stirling and Milek, op cit.

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- ¹³ *Sheriff Court Records: Civil Court Proceedings*, 1755, Orkney Library and Archive SC11/5/1755/15.
- ¹⁴ *Balfour of Balfour and Trenabie Papers*, 1748-1773, Orkney Library and Archive D2/34/12.
- ¹⁵ *Watt of Breckness and Skail*, 1770-1791, Orkney Library and Archive, D3/120; *Balfour of Balfour and Trenabie Papers*, 1785-1786, Orkney Library and Archive, D2/8/12.
- ¹⁶ Anderson, op cit., p.7.
- ¹⁷ The origins of tweed as a named product are well-documented. According to Ponting, Scottish-born London tailor James Locke received items of twill from a Hawick weaving firm labelled 'tweel' (Scots for twill) and misinterpreted the name as 'tweed', presumably conflating the name with the nearby river Tweed. From that time, the name tweed was generally accepted. K. Ponting, 'The Scottish Contribution to Wool Textile Design in the Nineteenth Century', in: J. Butt, and K. Ponting (eds), *Scottish Textile History*. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, p.83. See also: C. Gulvin, *The Tweedmakers – A History of the Scottish Fancy Woollen Industry 1600-1914*, Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973, p.72, and most recently: Anderson, op cit.
- ¹⁸ F. Anderson, 'Spinning the Ephemeral with the Sublime: Modernity and Landscape in Men's Fashion Textiles 1860-1900', *Fashion Theory*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2005, pp. 283-304; Gulvin, op cit., p.80.
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- ²² *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 2 September 1910.
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- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ *Peace's Orkney Almanac* lists no weavers in Kirkwall in 1933, and only one weaver on the islands of Westray and Rousay respectively.
- ²⁶ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, op cit.
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- ²⁸ J. Mooney, *The Argarden Orkney Tweed Saga*, 1947, Orkney Library and Archive, D1/445/2J.
- ²⁹ *Nottingham Journal*, 27 March 1935, p. 5.
- ³⁰ *Northern Whig*, 21 March 1936, p. 11.
- ³¹ *Vogue*, 'Vogue Covers the Resort Shops', vol. 91, no. 4, 15 February 1938, New York, p. 56.

³² *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 14 September 1971.

³³ R. Robson, 1.2.18. Herringbone twill and shepherd's check are widely used tweed patterns and not unique to Orkney. Shepherd's check is described by Anderson as a 'simple black and white pattern', which became popular in the late 1820s. Anderson, 2017, op cit., p.20. Herringbone twill, described as 'one of the most popular patterns for tweed' has a distinctive 'v' shaped pattern. Young and Martin, op cit. p.212,

³⁴ N. Fergus, 1.2.18.

³⁵ Garden's was established in 1874 by Robert Garden, who had come to Orkney from Aberdeenshire. The business expanded from a grocery to include a bakery, china merchandiser, drapery, millinery, fish and manure seller. G. D. Partner, *Kirkwall - In the Footsteps of Hossack Volume I*, Orkney: The Orcadian, 2017, pp.123-124.

³⁶ N. Graburn, *Ethnic and Tourist Arts – Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World*, London: University of California Press, 1979, p.20.

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³⁸ G. Hickey, 'Craft within a Consuming Society', in: P. Dormer (ed), *The Culture of Craft*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997, p.91.

³⁹ *The House of Garden: An Illustrated Souvenir Brochure*, Argarden Tweeds Ltd., c.1933, Kirkwall, Kirkwall Library and Archive, D1/445/1.

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