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'The shape of his knees bulged in the cheap tweed': clothes and textiles in remembrance

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Date

Tuesday 16 April 2019

Laura King, University of Leeds

Keeping items that have been worn or kept close to the person in question is [a common form of remembrance](#). There have been many examples through this blog of items kept to remember someone – from furniture to jewellery, books to photos. These can be valuable items, financially, but [as often or not are treasured because of their connection to the person](#), and ability to bring back a memory.

Clothing and textiles are an interesting part in this. They can be particularly special. As they sit close to the body, clothes can be particularly powerful in conjuring up the 'spirit' of a loved one. The shape, feel and smell of textiles can bring a person's memory closer and make it more tangible. A favourite jumper might be worn as a way of remembering the deceased, or a blanket kept safe to bring out when a reminder is needed.

The emotional power of clothing and textiles can be found in two stories from the past. The first comes from [Winifred Foley](#), who grew up in the Forest of Dean. Her father was a miner, and one tragic day, Winifred was called back to her family home from London, where she'd moved on marrying. The family was devastated to discover Winifred's father had died.

Both Winifred and her brother were deeply affected. It was their father's clothing that had a huge impact on them both. Seeing his clothes waiting for him was too much – or, in the very least, this is how Winifred chose to tell the story. She says:

‘Mam had put ready by the fire the tin bath for Father’s home-from-pit wash, his change of boots stood on the fender, and his trousers hung from a hook by the mantelpiece to be warm and aired for him. The shape of his knees bulged in the cheap tweed. The poignancy of these reminders was so overwhelming that I felt a scream rising in my throat, but the sound of my brother’s indrawn sobs stopped it.

‘I wish I’d ‘a’ bin a better boy to’n,’ he wept as I put my arms around him.’

[Elin Toona Gottschalk](#), in contrast, tells the story of her grandmother’s remembrance of her grandfather. Elin grew up in Estonia, but had to leave as a refugee with her mother and grandmother because of the Second World War, in 1944. This was particularly difficult for her grandmother; she had lived in Haapsalu, Estonia, for many years and this was where she’d spent her married life. All of the memories of her deceased husband, Erni, were there; and Elin’s grandmother tried to capture them to take Erni with her. Elin writes that:

‘Grandmother was still in the Blue Room ripping more photographs from albums, pulling books from bookshelves, stuffing documents into envelopes, and throwing them into Grandfather’s suurrätt, his meditation shawl strewn over the bed, which was to become our “dear Erni” bundle.’

His prayer shawl became the repository for all of his memories. The prayer shawl became a container in a literal sense; Elin’s grandmother wrapped a whole range of items relating to Erni in the shawl. But at the same time, it became a more symbolic representation of Erni. His shawl became meaningful because it encapsulated Erni himself, and allowed his wife to feel like she was taking him with her to Finland, Germany, across Europe and eventually to Leeds. As Elin wrote, ‘With “dear Erni” clutched to her chest, Grandmother insisted her husband’s spirit was coming with us, or else she, too, would stay behind.’

The shawl kept its significance all of Elin’s grandmother’s life. When Elin’s grandmother was dying, Elin returned to see her, and describes ‘Grandmother was wearing old slippers and “dear Erni’s” prayer shawl under which he used to meditate and keep warm.’ From leaving the shores of their homeland to the moment of her dying, Erni’s prayer shawl remained close to his wife. As an object that he wrapped round him, and significant in terms of its religious meaning too, this piece of fabric was perhaps even more crucial to Elin’s grandmother because of their story as forced migrants. It was portable, as well as being meaningful.

Anything can become important after some dies – a [favourite food](#), the scent of perfume, a favourite countryside spot. But clothes and textiles are so important to many, because they have been close to the body of the person. Interacting with them is also particularly meaningful – the touch and feel of textiles as a loved one may have touched them can feel particularly special. This seems like a widespread and important practice – do you know of other examples of clothing and textiles being important in remembrance?

Thanks to [Hayley Mills-Styles](#) for the idea for this blog post. As [I’ve written before](#), working with artists has been a real inspiration in thinking in different ways about the research I’m doing – thanks Hayley!

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