

WEAR THE LANDSCAPE

SIMON FAIRLIE reviews *Fibershed* by Rebecca Burgess

Imagine living in a community where no one had a kitchen, and the closest refrigerator, stove, oven, and cooking pots and pans were all located overseas . . . food would arrive from overseas in boxes with no ingredients list."

We would never allow our food system to become so dysfunctional, continues Californian textile specialist Rebecca Burgess — but that is what has happened to the clothing industry in industrial countries. In the USA, 98 percent of all garments are now imported, compared with just five percent in 1965. *Fibershed* is a welcome plea for a movement to relocalize textile production, similar to that which has revived demand for local foods over the last 20 years.

A fibreshed (as in watershed, not potting shed) is a bioregion that prioritises "place-based textile sovereignty", focussing on local sources of raw materials, their conversion into clothing, and the connections between all parts of the system "from soil to skin and back to soil again".

Burgess developed the concept in 2009, after a moment of revelation in an airport, when she was returning from a Navajo reservation where she had been studying natural dyes:

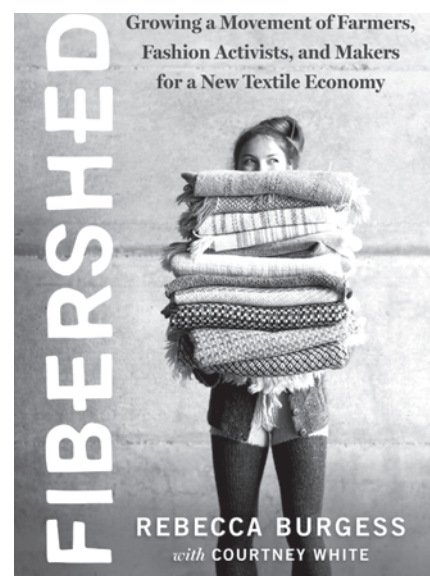
"I looked down at the the plastic chair I occupied and saw my grey stretchy corduroy pants and I realized both

were made from the same raw material. I looked at the carpet beneath my feet — it was also made of oil. The jet fuel that would power my ride home — oil. In fact nearly everything surrounding me involved products that originated from fossil fuels extracted from war-torn lands . . . I had a sudden image of a wardrobe that would be made from natural fibres grown within a strategic area centred on where I lived."

As she explored the matter, she kept uncovering more uncomfortable facts about modern clothing. Production of polyester, which is used in 60 per cent of garments today, consumes 350 million barrels of oil a year and is responsible for three times as many CO₂ emissions as cotton production. Rayon, made from wood pulp, is imported into the USA, even though its manufacture is so toxic that has been banned by the US Environmental Protection Agency. Artificial aniline dyes release effluents which can be absorbed by humans and cause endocrine problems in fetuses. Microfibres are shed when plastic clothes are laundered and find their way into rivers, oceans and marine wildlife.

Meanwhile consumers are buying increasing numbers of clothes — 60 percent more than they did 15 years ago, and throwing them away sooner. The average US citizen jettisons almost 80lb of clothing every year, bought from fast fashion outlets such as Zara and H&M, which supply thousands of different designs every year almost on a "print on demand" basis. By contrast, the Rana Plaza fire in Dhaka, in which 1,100 factory workers died, highlighted the exploitation of the people employed on miserable wages to churn out these throwaway garments.

Burgess decided to embark on a "wardrobe challenge", namely a year of sourcing all her own clothing only from her California fibreshed. It was indeed a challenge. She did a lot of darning before discovering that wool from Corriedale sheep was much



the best for socks. The region produced a wealth of usable fibres: wool, organic cotton, and the hair of alpacas, llamas and guanaco. The problem was lack of spinning and weaving facilities: California processes just one percent of the wool produced in the state and has only one remaining woollen mill (see photo p.33)

Burgess's wardrobe year enabled her to contact a wide number of growers and textile workers, who, at the end of her year organized a "Wear the Landscape" fashion show in a feed barn which drew an audience of 200 and generated \$6000. The Northern California Fibershed group was formed, going on to organize projects such as a Wool and Fine Fiber Symposium, an on-line market place for producers, and a feasibility study for a Californian wool mill.

The second half of the book examines in more detail the various fibres available within the North California fibreshed, and goes on to describe how the movement has spread across North America and to places such as Australia, Norway, and Bristol, England.

The fibreshed movement has one potential weakness: it may do no more than create niche markets for luxury items that only the well-to-do can afford. Rebecca Burgess is well aware of this, and a main objective of the movement is to create regional infrastructure with economies of scale that enable goods to be sold affordably and competitively. That however is an undertaking of a different order of magnitude from the "wardrobe challenge".

Fibershed by Rebecca Burgess with Courtney White, Chelsea Green, paperback, 270 pp. 2019.



Members of Pacific Northwest Fibershed stooking flax.

Photo: John Morgan

FIBRESHED COMES TO BRITAIN

EMMA HAGUE considers the prospects for a UK homegrown textile revival.

The UK fibre industry faces some key challenges. Thanks to industrialisation and globalisation our once thriving wool and flax textile industries have declined to the point where we now have no commercial processing facilities for plant fibres and very limited facilities for processing wool. Garments made in the UK from homegrown wool are available only to a niche luxury market.

Farmers looking to have their fleeces spun are restricted in options by the volume of fleece they shear from their herd each year. Mini-mills offer a traceable service for processing a single fleece into a ball of yarn, but at premium prices. At the other end of the scale our largest commercial facilities process eight ton lots as standard, and blend fibres aggregated from British Wool depots across the country to create homogenised, quality-consistent bales fit for mass production.



Plaw Hatch

The South East England Fibreshed

The SE Fibreshed, established this year, works out of Plaw Hatch, a community owned biodynamic farm in West Sussex. Covering Surrey, Hampshire, Sussex and Kent, it is uniquely placed to connect sheep farmers and fibre growers with the fashion industry in London. The long-term goal is to disrupt the traditional hierarchical supply chain with designers at the top and the producers and makers at the bottom. We host visits of fashion designers to Plaw Hatch to learn about regenerative agriculture and local fibres. We are in the early stages of creating a fibre and maker/designer directory and are seeking funding to create a series of garments with regenerative fibre producers.

Deborah Barker www.southeastenglandfibreshed.org.uk

The South West England Fibreshed

Our Fibreshed began in 2015 with the launch of the Bristol Cloth, a collaboration between several producers that explored the possibility of building a bioregional production system for woven cloth in the South West.. The Bristol Cloth project has since crowdfunded its first run of cloth. The recently launched SW England Fibreshed visual directory profiles a growing community of fibre farmers, processors, makers, brands and others who are aligned with the Fibreshed ethos of working locally and collaboratively with the native resources that we have available. This is a conversation that will unfold at key fashion and farming related events in 2020.

Emma Hague www.southwestenglandfibreshed.co.uk

There are a few facilities that process volumes between these two extremes, and can tailor their service to deal with different kinds of wool, but they are in high demand. A one year lead time at these mills is not unusual and they have limited space for storing fleece, so farmers have to work out a system for shearing, storing and transporting their fleece to tie in with the mills' availability and their own agricultural calendar. Meanwhile sheep go on producing wool year after year and must be shorn regardless. An annually renewable natural resource becomes a frustrating burden without the systems in place to process it.

These problems are compounded by the low price of wool which is viewed only as a by-product of the sheep-meat industry. The second half of the 20th century saw a shift away from diverse breeds of dual-purpose sheep suited to regional landscapes, and fit for both meat and wool, to larger, heavier breeds focussed solely on meat production. Fibre quality tends to decline as meat productivity increases, so modern sheep breeds in most cases supply a coarse, white fibre that is excellent for carpet manufacture but no longer suited to the level of cloth and garment production for which UK fleece was once famed. Since this shift was happening in parallel with the boom in synthetic, petroleum-derived fibres, it's not hard to see how we've arrived at today's state of play.

Nevertheless, there are increasing examples of "flock-to-shop," or "farm-to-yarn" products developed by farmers and smallholders who are determined to do things differently, and supply viable woollen products as well as meat through regenerative farming systems. Successful products depend on clever marketing strategies, authentic story-telling and access to markets. Many of the highest profile homegrown products are supplied by first-generation farmers who arrived at fibre farming with design or marketing acumen developed elsewhere. Perhaps they also come with a naïve, positive outlook that values wool as more than a by-product. These farmers add value to their raw fleece by selecting for interesting characteristics — natural shades other than white, or interesting textures or lustre — and by making decisions during breeding, lambing and shearing that are focussed on continual improvement of these fibres.

Enabling homegrown garments to reach a wider market requires large-scale systems change. Fibreshed supporters have been testing the waters in the UK over the last five years, through regional projects and case studies such as Bristol Cloth. A community is gathering, now formalised in the South West and South East of Britain, that includes fibre farmers, mills, textile and fashion designers and manufacturers, as well as retail stores and education providers, to assess how the Fibreshed concept is relevant here.

What is reassuring is that this conversation is already happening with regard to food production. For years the discussion around fibres has been a few steps behind. The strength of Fibreshed lies in its focus on regenerative farming, which provides a framework for considering food and fibre systems as one and the same.