

BOBBINS AND PENS

Reflections from Portumna Pen Pushers on the Archive of
The Headford Lace Project, Shorelines Arts Festival 2021



HEADFORD
LACE Project



I was first introduced to the Headford Lace Project through a series of collaborative online workshops facilitated by the Arts Officer, Sharon O’Grady of Galway Co.Council. After meeting Ester Kiely online, I visited the streets of Headford where I was blown away by the variety of pieces and the superb *Space Between* exhibition.

As I expected, the passion of the team involved in Headford Lace and their openness to the idea that pinged in my brain on that walk resharpened the nibs and pens of our own Portumna Pen Pushers. We had spent most of 2020 apart and sitting in front of blank pages, but accessing the archive pieces, painstakingly collected and recorded by Ester, Ger, Anne and the rest of the Headford team, proved to be the prompts the Pen Pushers needed to get ink on the page again.

So for Shorelines 2021, we present *Bobbins & Pens* with prose and poetry from Portumna’s writing group. To celebrate our reunion, albeit online, we decided to print this limited edition of a selection of our writings.

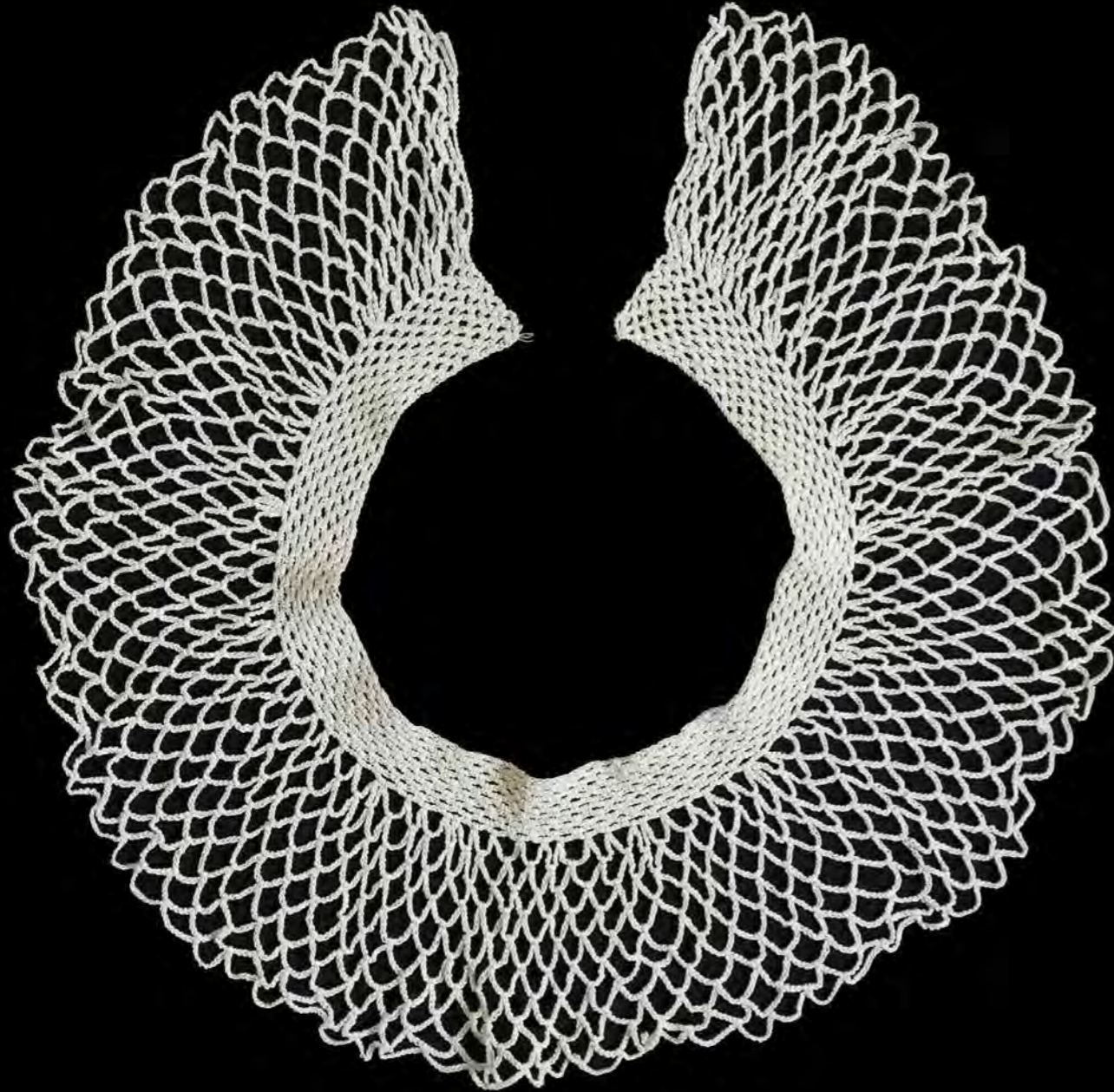
The resilience of the lace makers in their world became a strong support for us as we coped with lockdown and isolation. We writers wove our words between us, becoming a cohesive, focused group, with pens in our hands, writing about the women of the past who had bobbins in theirs.

We hope the work of all those hands will be enjoyed by you, now that you have a copy of our *Bobbins & Pens* in your hand.

Noelle Lynskey
Shorelines Director and Facilitator, Portumna Pen Pushers
September 2021

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Crochet Collar

Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Wiltrud Duell

Two double crochet in each third chain space.
I count while listening to the TV news.
Two treble crochet into every second V shape.

For centuries women handcrafted delicate lace,
earning a pitiful wage, they could not refuse.
Two double crochet in each third chain space.

Ladies of the ascendancy with a stern gaze
devalued whatever womankind produced.
Two treble crochet into every second V shape.

For mindfulness handcraft highly rates.
My practice is crochet – calm in pursuit.
Two double crochet in each third chain space.

On screen shines RBG's iconic face,
the deceased judge with liberal views.
Two treble crochet into every second V shape.

This lady achieved equal rights in many ways.
Over her black robe she wore a collar in white lace.
Two double crochet in each third chain space.
Two treble crochet into every second V shape.



Crochet Wedding Glove

The Wedding Glove

Noelle Lynskey

Cast on by
patient hands. My mother
shaped the gloves of picot lace,
a perfect pair for mine.

Passed on by
generations. Her
thread outlined and traced,
to chain a perfect fit for me.

Slipped off my
left hand, to tether
his gold band in its right place
a perfect ring that's mine.

Cast aside
in time. One lost its other,
its lattice and lace
once the match for me

Unravelling, imperfect,
 my cries spill,
 grief for my lover
 slips in me
 between spaces
those once interlaced
 with mine.



Lace Jabot

Thread and Air

Margaret Hickey

Thread and air, weave and weft,
white upon white and gap linked to stitch.
Our fingers twinkle, our wrists are a blur
as we twist and cross these webs for the rich.

Who'll wear this froth of a lace fichu?
A lady of high station, someone grand.
And all of us here would see in a flash
whose work it was, if it fell from her hand.

In my 'prenticeship, I learned such words!
From far-off lands: Brabant, Guipure,
Shetland lace, Honiton, Chantilly, Bruges.
And the snowflakes reminding us to stay pure.

Point de neige, the snow, reminds us of whiteness,
White upon white all the time. So clean!
We sit in a circle, all maidens, all innocent,
stitching and braiding in a chaste young dream.

Convent sisters sit with their bobbins
And pray and work and know their ground,
their couching, their filling, festooning, too,
Princesses who will never be found.



Handmade Bobbin Lace Strip

The Space Between

Betty Gough

She sits by the window winding bobbins
making lace she will never wear
while wondering if her well-worn boots
will last another winter
and the thatch stand up to
the snow and gales that blow.

By candlelight she stitches –
a fine and flimsy trousseau
that has taken several seasons to complete
for a woman she will never know.

A woman wrapped in silk and fur
who has never known the pang of poverty
or the cold from leaking shoes.
A woman who has never had to handle anything
heavier than a china cup or crystal glass
or trouble her fingers
with more than a visiting card
delivered on a silver tray.



Handkerchief Trimmed with Headford Lace

The Long Spin

Joe Conmy

The road cut through the mountains
Sixty miles of meandering bends
From Castlebar to the Corrick bridge.
A signpost: Glenamoy, twenty-five miles.

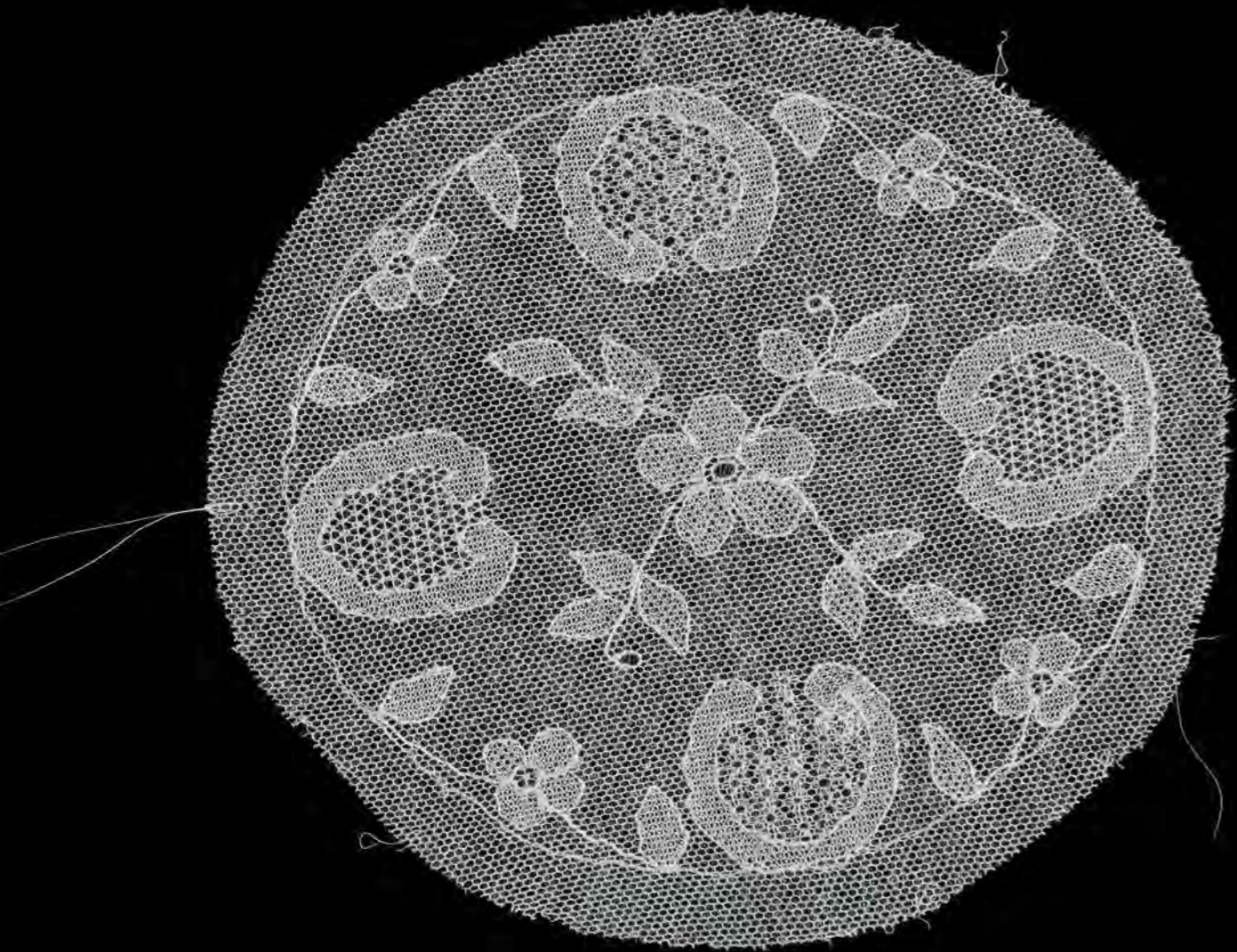
The destination, his mother's birthplace,
Peter arrives now in Barnatrá
At the empty school in Muings
Barren and empty of human life.

From his mother's tattered photo
He knows this landscape – majestic,
Stretching from the calm bay
Across the bog mountain slope.

If Nancy had stayed,
Instead of crossing the sea
Alone with Peter in the womb,
Would he have known a mother?

Standing where she had worked
Until the age of nineteen
The shudders run down his spine

In his hand he holds a handkerchief
White, with intricate lace,
His mother's gift
To her only child.



Limerick Lace

Lace Maker

(in memory of my mother)

Mary Rourke

Knotted knuckles, stiff movements, twisted fingers, yet fingers that made such delicate stitches, created such exquisite designs: knots, twists and clusters, roses, shamrocks, cables, shells, swift, elegant, perfect movement. Hands that were never idle, at rest now.

Irish crochet was always her first love, though she tried Limerick lace, Carrickmacross. Embroidery! Those dancing costumes, a joy to behold. Patterns were taken in at a glance; She got the idea, checked measurements, and her own eye provided the rest.

Long strands of cotton slipped through her nimble fingers, her steel hook catching, pushing through, pulling out, over and back, over and back, the hook almost invisible as it slipped in and out, twisting thread, forming intricate patterns.

Making Limerick lace really tested her eyesight, the small thin needle with the hair-like thread pushed in and out through holes in net. She worked in her bedroom, to protect delicate fabric from little helping hands.

Her knitting she picked up every spare moment, could leave it down partway through a row, pick it up later and carry on. We, her children, wore designer clothes, except in her day, they were just considered home-made.



Glengarriff Lace Collar

The Gift of Lace

Eileen Smith

A work of art
An ancient craft
Evokes memories
Muted with time
My mother's mother
A woman of strength
Careworn face
A warm smile
Her hair firmly
Knotted on her head

Most evenings she
Merged her artistic
Flair into quilting
Or lace making
I watched her work
On the wooden table
Her gifted hands
Going back and forth
Looping and twisting
The cotton threads
Tautly wound on
Hand turned bobbins
Slowly creating
Delicate shapes
Her small frame
Bent over
Intent on her pattern
Patience sustained

Perfection achieved
Her pride concealed
Lovingly wrapped
In scented tissue
A special gift for
My confirmation dress



Collar

Lace

Monique Mielke-McGuinness

While I was looking at this beautiful lace,
ghosts of my childhood were tormenting me.
Peeping through every hole, every loop,
here was my grumpy old grand-aunt
with scallop-shaped lace around her neck,
on her head, on her dress, looking like
an embellished witch, giving out for no reason,
frightening me for ever.

To annihilate this distressing vision,
I tried to follow the threads in their complicated
looping, interlacing, twisting patterns!
I started to squint, as my eyes were looping and twisting, too.
The expected cure, the revelation of beauty,
was dashed away as my stern grandmother,
all dressed in black with an immaculately white lace collar,
resurrected from in between the circumvolutions of my brain,
giving draconian orders, transforming me
into a bunch of chattering bobbins!

Oh dear! Where could I find solace!
I invoked St Catherine, patron saint of lacemakers.
She miraculously came to my rescue,
calling to the hero of my childhood,
d'Artagnan, the handsome Musketeer.
He jumped gracefully onto the screen of my fantasy,
wearing his lace collar with straight edges,
the long pleated lace cuffs, the wide-brimmed hat
with ostrich feathers and brandishing, of course,
his invincible sword!
He bowed to the ladies of the Headford Lace Project,
wishing them success and joy in their enterprise.



Heart

Headford Heart
Patricia Donnellan

From the soul star
that resides above the crown
light lines emanate
to enfold humanity.

A woman sits. Thread
entwined on bobbins
she criss-crosses
the space between.

Like the soul star,
each thread is separate
yet interconnected
at the heart.



Strip of Guipure Carrickmacross Lace

Benediction

Jackie Blake

Now, the unknowing of her is a comfort to me.
The secrets are glorious.
They fan out like starlings.
I am thankful for them: the lies.

They scaffold my sadness and cement my rage.
The stories are like famine stone walls.
A meta narrative, from nowhere, going nowhere.
One probe from me and the whole thing would have come undone.

No questions for an easy life.
And now, no life at all.

Her hair felt false at the end, like a piece of starched lace or dry turf.
Her eyebrows were perfect.
Her mouth held her tongue like a vice grips
Her face was determined to darkness and beyond.

Her lived experience was a merry go round,
That went round and round and round and round and round and round
And round.
Until she let go and dove backward into the darkness.

There has been a letting down.
Of that I am sure.
In the end I was glad to let you down,
As gently as I could.



Tatted Cross

The Chosen One

Ellen Davis

We were in the attic sorting through mother's keepsakes; I opened a shirt box. Folded back the pale blue tissue paper and found my christening gown. It was pure, snow white lawn, deeply hemmed in fine handmade lace.

You said, 'That lace reminds me of the vestments Fr. Murphy wore at Mass.'

My heart grew cold, my hands clammy.

'Remember him? You were always his favourite. He kept you back to tidy the missalettes and—'

I swivelled round and shouted, 'Stop it! Shut up!'

Your voice broke off mid-sentence, as if I had punched the words back down your throat.

He always kept me back to make sure the kneelers were put up, empty the donation boxes, replenish the penny candles and tidy the missalettes on the vestry shelf. Then he would ask me to help him with his chasuble. I hung it with the others. They were beautifully embroidered, heavy silk brocade, in green, white, red and purple. He'd slowly untie the cincture and fold it neatly on the chair.

He stooped low and I would take the deep lacy daggers of the hem of his alb and draw it over his head. As he stood up he would place his hand on my shoulder, to steady himself. He never had any problem opening the thirty-three tiny buttons of his soutane with his right hand, as his left snaked across my shoulders and pulled me closer.

'You are my favourite!'

All the while I wished I wasn't the chosen one.



Headford Lace photo from Headford Castle

The Threads of Time

Marie Barrett

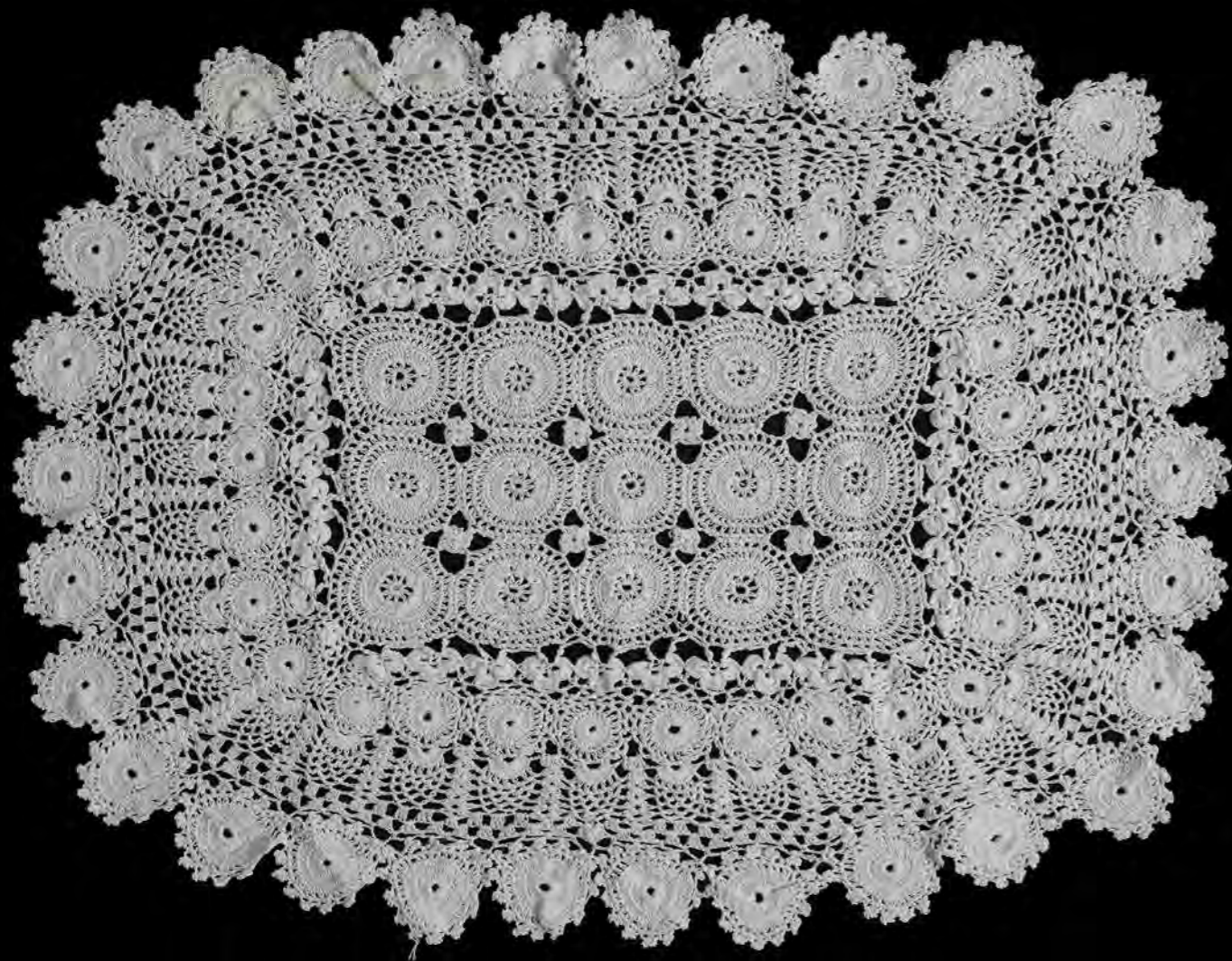
'The only known example of Headford lace is believed to date from 1904.'

Maybe it is because we ourselves are now living in a time of pandemic – where so much of our own certainties are disappearing – that those words ring deep for me.

After three hundred years and more of lacemaking, one solitary piece remains. Those three hundred years covered the span of so many lives and events and generations, including the dark years of the Famine – years in which lacemaking provided some protection from total devastation.

Life was lived, skills were passed on and the lace makers maintained some semblance of normality through it all. As we are now attempting to maintain our normality in these Covid days, believing foolishly in our permanence.

Remembering that single piece of Headford lace might whisper to us, tell us to treasure more the living and the weaving of each of our days. Thinking of what we leave to those we love.



Tray Cloth

Refuge in the Convent

Noelle Lynskey

Flicking image after image online—
nowhere else to flick these days,

you swipe right and there on the screen
a reminder of the room where you sat half crazed,

your hands tucked under each side of your thighs;
their shaking would only give your terror away.

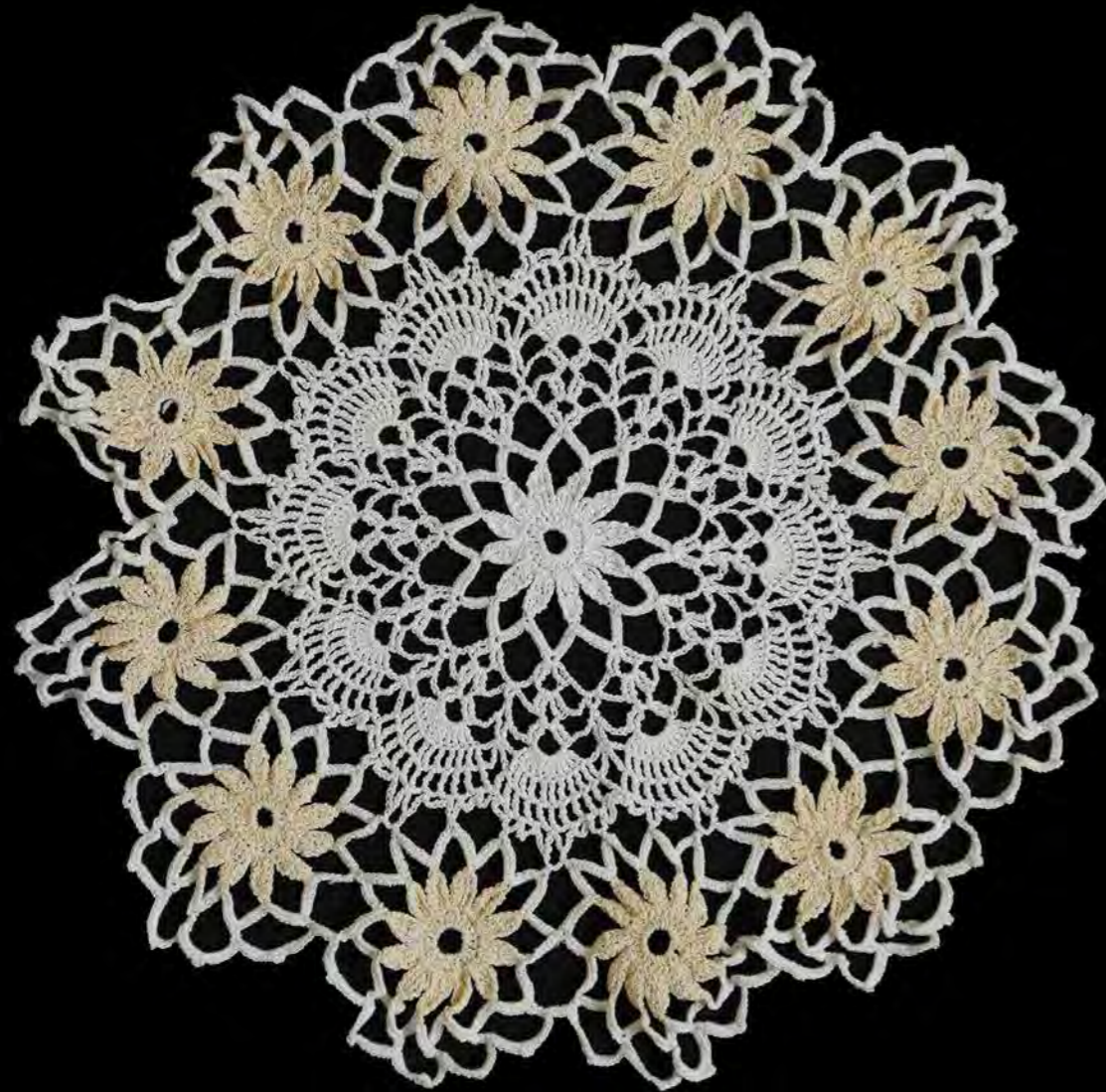
The parlour was no place for whos and whys,
no space for sympathy or pity the unchaste.

While the hard wood sharpens with the setting sun
the nun spits out her scathing, 'What a waste.'

Her anger fires the teacup she slams down,
tea drops stain the tray cloth edged with lace.

The training in you has you stretch out to say
'I'll rinse it out, it may not leave a trace.'

Your teardrops fall, dilute the spreading stain,
She screams at you: 'Mind! That's Headford Lace.'



Two-tone Doily

Headford Lace

Mary Rourke

For centuries genteel ladies filled their days with bobbins, pins, needles, and thread, creating delicate lace. In the 1760s one of those ladies, Mary St George, set up a school to teach this craft to the women of her locality, hoping to lift them from the poverty and destitution in which they lived.

With a plentiful supply of linen thread from the local flax industry, the smart, intelligent women of Headford were soon producing lace for sale. In their own homes on long winter evenings, or outside their doors in summer sunshine, they made lace. Young women learned from their mothers, and grandmothers taught their granddaughters, the two of them sitting together with pillow on lap, patterned paper on pillow, pins in paper, thread on bobbins, bobbins in pairs.

The very skilful and intricate work of lacemaking was paid for in pennies by the rich and titled. But for a lacemaker who spent hours and hours bent over her bobbins, how much, exactly, did she get?

The typical rates were:

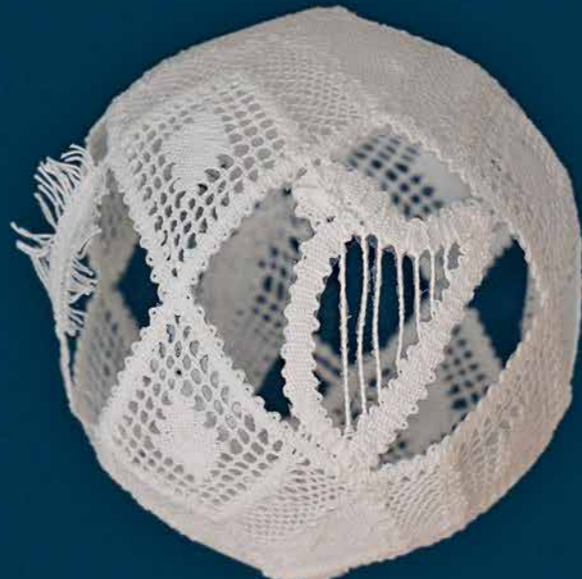
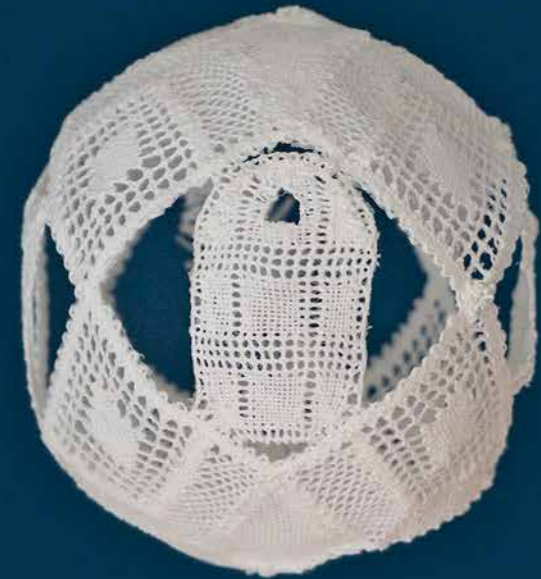
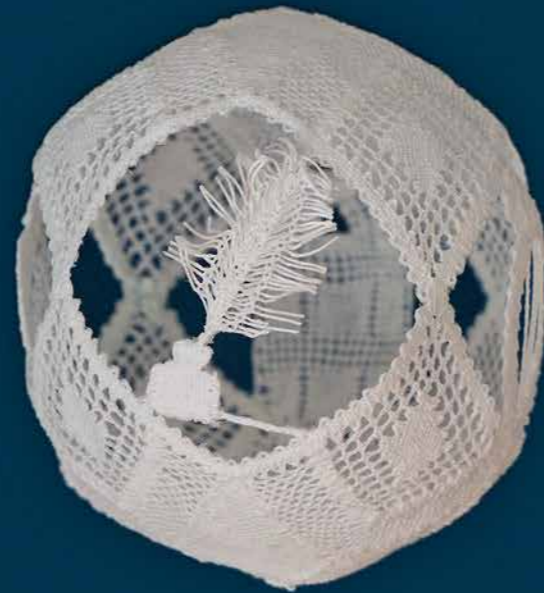
2 shillings or 24 pennies for 8 yards

3 pennies for 1 yard

1 penny for a foot

It took the women approximately 30 minutes to make a single inch of lace, so it took at least 6 hours to make 12 inches. And even at those rates, the workers did not get paid the full penny. The middle man took his share first. And was there only one middle man?

Still, whether it was a penny or a halfpenny, it was money the women of Headford had that others had not. They also had mastered a very useful and satisfying craft.



Memento Mary Bobbin Lace

The Kinswoman's Lament

Margaret Hickey

The woman is high born! She should not demean herself, but must command respect, for the sake of the family, if not her own.

Needlework, as much as dexterity at the keyboard is a womanly skill, agreed. There's no real harm in lace. But to start a school!

Mary St George will get a reputation. Too independent, too full of ideas. She's comely, elegant. Educated—perhaps too well!

This lace. Torchon, she tells me. Something foreign there! Yes, it's dainty enough. But in Headford we look for solidity. None of your notions.

What will she do with it? Give it to the poor? As dish rags? Far better if the maidservants occupy their free time with thread and bobbins.

I've counselled her. Persist in this stubbornness, Mary, I said, and you'll die an old maid. Use your art in netting a suitor, not a kerchief.



Three Bonnets at the Irish Workhouse Centre,
presented and produced by Headford Lace Project
in memory of Maria Maher, Catherine and Mary Naughton.

Sonnet I Mary Byrne's Bonnet

Eileen Smith

The lowly Irish workhouse was her only childhood home,
A dreaded place of misery devoid of a mother's love,
Ashen orphan of fifteen years and wasted to the bone,
Praying for relief and succour from the Lord above.

Earl Grey devised a project, and a contract was applied,
To transport teenage girls across the great divide.
With the promise of paid labour and all they needed of supplies
The orphans set sail for Sydney - in this new land they would reside.

A stranger among strangers, Mary loved their kindly ways.
Attired in her cotton bonnet stitched with shamrock and her name,
In no time she secured a post in the busy marketplace,
Proved to be an honest servant, so quickly rose to fame.

Mary was one of thousands who sailed from Ireland's shore,
Buried their past with little trace and never returned no more.

Mary sailed on the Thomas Arbuthnot ship that docked in Sydney (1850) as part of the short-lived Earl Grey scheme. From near Loughrea, her parents Patrick and Mary were deceased. Records show that she was entirely alone on arrival and that she could not read or write.

Sonnet II
Go for it, Girleen
Wiltrud Duell

For weeks I languished on a ship sailing Down Under.
All I knew was my parish in Galway and the workhouse.
I was an orphan, illiterate and my hair crawled with lice.
The promise of a better life? No time to ponder.

Be glad Earl Grey gave you a chance, I was told.
When the stench in the ship's bowel grew evil, I cried.
When the sailors came to have their pick, I prayed,
And thought of my travel box. It gave me hold.

This chest contained new clothes - a clever scheme.
I had to look presentable on arrival.
The colonies cried out for the suitable female:
Young, English speaking, able to work and breed.

I'd seen my mother smiling in the door's frame,
While I stitched two cotton bonnets with my name.

Sonnet III
Passage
Patricia Donnellan

Today I must leave the dead and dying,
in fields and on roads, the hunger a plight.
The agonised groans of people crying,
their crops are rotting with potato blight.
To the workhouse, for shelter, I will go.
Evicted from home, my parents have died.
I cannot beg from the people I know,
the master in Portumna might provide.

In my tartan skirt and snow-white bonnet,
I swallow the tears as I join the queue.
I board the ship, the Thomas Arbuthnot,
Bombaderry bound, to begin anew.
Lord, protect us from man's mentality,
that fails to own our shared humanity.

Sonnet IV
Steal. Heart.

Kevin Chesser

When the Blazers cantered on the master's
lawn, his flaming fire left me stone cold forever.
He slapped his riding crop on boots I'd shone—
'til I saw my face black in the leather.
I whispered my song to the chimney wind:
its creaking stair winds under my shawl.
On my knees I gathered dust from his hearth,
the scuttle locked my eyes; his tap-tapping—my ears.
His lady under her bonnet of lace
will never trace that hand (not mine)
pinch her locket; lay it under my cotton cap.
My transport handed down for theft of a heart.
His whelps heel and take their beating,
I'll nail my heart-song to a Southern Cross.

A big thanks to Ester, Anne, Ger and all the members of the Headford Lace group for their time, trust and involvement.

Thank you to:

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Thank you to all in Portumna Castle for facilitating the exhibition at Shorelines 2021.

And for the imagination of my fellow Pen Pushers, a really huge thanks.

Dedicated to all the hands who produced the lace pieces.

Noelle Lynskey 2021

