



Knitwear

Dropped stitches

Imitation and demography threaten a traditional Scottish brand

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MARY WILLIAMSON, an 85-year-old resident of Whalsay in the remote Shetland Islands, knows all about globalisation. She makes hand-knitted Fair Isle woollen jumpers, and has orders from “a gentleman in Sweden”, “a gentleman in China”, and Hollywood producers.

Fair Isle knitwear is in vogue. Fashionistas say the recession created a taste for garments that look chunkily lasting and homemade. Customers “are looking for things which will last for a couple of years, rather than get thrown away after a season,” says Nick Fiddes of Scotweb, an internet retailer. Alas, Fair Isle jerseys are the subject of bitter wrangling—and imperilled by demography.

The knitwear and its horizontal bands of dense non-repeating patterns evolved on Fair Isle, a tiny rocky island between the Orkneys and Shetlands (see map). The style is said to have been devised by stranded survivors of a ship wrecked in the Spanish Armada of 1588. But only 70 people live on Fair Isle itself and only four of them knit. Each sweater takes about 100 hours; the island’s annual production is about 30 sweaters, 200 hats and 30 scarves. These are sold only in the island shop, which is cleared out when the summer’s first cruise ship calls, says Mati Ventrillon, a French-Venezuelan who runs the craft co-operative.

So clothes sold elsewhere but branded as “Fair Isle” are actually not from there—not even, in the strictest nit-picking sense, Mrs Williamson’s. Ms Ventrillon is indignant that knitters in the Shetland archipelago, 25 miles (40 km) away, pass off their jumpers as Fair Isle jerseys. “They are Shetland garments, not Fair Isle,” she says. Others disagree: Fair Isle is part of the Shetland chain, they argue, so Shetlanders have a claim to the name.



This inter-island spat, however, is a sideshow to the real threats to the brand. Teresa Fritschi, an American who runs Thistle & Broom, a Scottish luxury-goods website, reckons her island knitters could earn much more if Fair Isle products enjoyed the same legal protection against imitation as Harris Tweed (a thick cloth that is actually mostly woven on the outer Hebridean island of Lewis). But no Scottish politician has taken up the case—so big retail chains can advertise “gorgeous heritage-inspired Fair Isle knitwear” that is machine-made elsewhere. Mass production of such jerseys, often only faintly resembling anything made on the island, depresses the price of the genuine articles.

That, laments Ms Fritschi, means youngsters are spurning the craft. “My ladies are in their 70s and 80s,” she says. “They learned it from their grandmothers, but no one is learning from them.”

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