



Out of the closet

By Jane Milburn



Jane Milburn in the Textile Beat studio (photo by Darcy Milburn)

Textiles are woven into Jane's life story, and she now creates and champions sustainable and responsible fashion, also known as the 'slow clothing' movement

My career in fibre began after graduation with my first job as a research assistant on a University of Queensland cotton project. This led to work as a rural reporter with the ABC and opportunities to do stories at Sheepvention in the Western District and visit the big merino studs in the Riverina; I even studied wool-classing in my own time. After

moving to Townsville with the ABC, I met my husband Darcy and had three children. We eventually set up home in Brisbane where my career evolved included roles as a media advisor to a Minister for Primary Industries and later as a communications consultant. It was being selected for the prestigious Australian Rural Leadership Program and completing postgraduate leadership study in 2013 that brought



Jane Milburn in History skirt (photo by Fiona Lake)

me back full circle to textiles and a campaign of my own making around the issue of textile waste.

The start of slow clothing

I began exploring creativity after discovering it while playing with my children and fabric paints. I love that we can all be creative, we just have to be prepared to invest time and energy in imperfection, to experiment, to play and learn. I found a lot of mindful satisfaction and relaxation through playing with fibres from nature.

I had op-shopped for natural-fibre clothing on and off since university days but it was after attending a Fashion for Floods fundraiser in 2011 – when at night's end everything was reduced to \$2 a piece – that I came to realise how much beautiful pre-loved bounty was all around us. It was Albert Einstein who said no problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it. My consciousness was raised by personal and postgraduate study that enabled the bringing together of wide-ranging career and life experiences in a creative and meaningful way.

Reflecting on why so much perfectly good clothing was being discarded, I

joined a series of dots, took a leap of faith, set up Textile Beat and created a fresh narrative about slow clothing and opportunities for creative reuse of existing textiles. I segued skills and insights from a Food Farming Australia blog initiated in 2010 as Queensland runner-up in the RIRDC Rural Women's Award where I wrote about sustainable food production and its connection to health and wellbeing.

Sew it Again

I wear second-hand clothing with intent, not because new is unaffordable. My bona fides as a textile artist are grounded in making the decision to

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spend every day of 2014 upcycling clothing for the Sew it Again project to demonstrate the endless opportunities that reside in discarded natural-fibre clothing. This was a journey into creativity, empowerment, thrift, sustainability, ecological health and wellbeing – woven with threads of childhood, education, professional expertise, networks and nature. Everything old was new again as I set about refashioning, repairing, reshaping, restyling, repurposing old clothing then publishing 'how-to' photos on www.sewitagain.com along with facts, figures and commentary about contemporary clothing culture. I turn garments upside down, inside out, around and about, to spark fresh looks. I sew things together or chop off collars, sleeves and hemlines and replace them with something else. I fillet them completely and restitch them back together in different imaginative ways.

The goal is to inspire behaviour change in the way we engage with clothing, for the good of ourselves, society and the planet. It is a call to conserve water/natural resources by reducing excess consumption, validate upcycling as a thrifty option and foster rural/urban connection through natural



Close-up of lace offcuts in Jane's History skirt

fibres. Sew it Again won the Social Media category of the Rural Press Club's 2015 Excellence in Rural Journalism Awards with judges saying the project "made a difference in the world because it engaged with the community, had a call to action and was transformative".

Conscious dressing

My 365-day commitment to dressing with a conscience is now a platform from which I can inspire and empower others to reflect on their clothing habits and make small changes to become more sustainable. There has been a transformational shift in the way we source clothing, the fabrics these garments are made from and potential for exploitation, burgeoning consumption and waste. I could see conscious dressers like myself seeking to know more about the provenance and ethics of their clothing.

Dressing is an everyday action that defines us. Clothes envelop our bodies to provide protection and privacy. They do for us on the outside what food does on the inside—nourish, warm and engage body and soul. While clothing meets our material needs, fashion emerged to satisfy non-material needs for participation,

identity, freedom and to signal wealth and social status.

Most clothing is now made in factories in developing nations where supply chain transparency is limited and workers can be exploited. There is no financial incentive to repair or refashion, it occurs for ethical, environmental and lifestyle reasons. Fast, cheap food influenced dining in the same way that fast, cheap fashion has changed dressing. At a time when the Food and Agriculture Organisation has identified that one-third of food produced is never eaten, there is growing evidence that a similar portion of clothing is wasted. My purposeful work is bringing awareness to this and other material issues.

Through the Sew it Again year, I learned that average annual clothing consumption has doubled in the past two decades and the total amount is expanding at three times the rate of population growth. Synthetic fibres derived from petroleum now dominate the clothing market, so if you are not wearing natural fibres you are likely to be dressing in plastic. Although natural fibres such as cotton do consume a lot of water (it can take 2,700 litres of water to grow cotton for a T-shirt). Australian cotton growers have reduced water consumption by 40 per cent and chemical use by 85 per cent in the past decade. Reclaiming these fibres by refashioning simply helps make them more sustainable.

Ethical issues

There are five ethical issues with contemporary clothing culture which provide motivation for a movement towards slow clothing:

1. Increasing consumption

In the past two decades, world apparel fibre consumption doubled while the global population increased by about

25 per cent; individual annual average consumption was 6kg in 1992, but 12kg in 2013. There aren't any more days in the year, so why do we need so much new stuff?

2. Microplastic pollution

Two-thirds of new clothing is made of synthetic fibres, which are derived from petroleum, compared to only one half a decade ago. Research in 2011 by ecologist Dr Mark Browne found that thousands of microplastic particles are being shed from synthetic clothing with every wash and entering the food chain.

3. Modern-day slavery

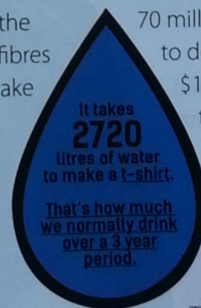
Most clothing is now made in Asian factories and the dark underbelly of fast fashion and cheap clothing was exposed when Bangladesh's Rana Plaza factory collapsed in April 2013, injuring thousands and killing 1,133 people. Fashion Revolution Day on April 24th honours those workers and its call to action is: 'Be Curious. Find Out. Do Something.'

4. Waste

In the UK, nearly one-third of unwanted clothing goes prematurely to landfill and the proportion is likely to be similar in Australia. Australia annually ships 70 million kilos of cast-off clothing to developing nations sold for \$1/kg before being sold on to locals, which impacts on indigenous clothing economies.

5. Loss of skills and knowledge

There is a lack of respect for the time and resources involved in the making process. The loss of simple sewing skills means an inability to repair or replace buttons. This lack of knowledge and skills creates dependency and a lack of autonomy.



See more...

Jane is keen to hear from anyone who has ideas and opportunities they would like to share. She can be contacted on **0408 787 964** or via email, at jane@textilebeat.com