



# Elizabeth Wincott Heckett

## 1934–2025

Textiles were a means of self-expression, an intellectual passion and a source of joy for Elizabeth Wincott Heckett throughout her life.

She was born Elizabeth Loveday Wincott, the second child of the financial journalist Harold Wincott and his wife, Joyce White Wincott, who came from a family of keen dressmakers. To her colleagues, family and friends, she would always be “Libby”. As with most children of her generation, World War II had a profound influence on Libby’s childhood. Whisked out of London for fear of the Blitz, she grew up in the English countryside. When she was not in school, Libby’s mother taught her to sew and to knit, not only out of necessity due to wartime rationing but also as a source of entertainment. When the war ended, Libby and her sister Rosemary, then aged 11 and 13, remade some old clothes into new outfits. On VE Day, they wore their recycled finery, swishing up and down Brighton Pier and “feeling very fine indeed”.

In young adulthood, Libby held a number of administrative jobs in England and the United States, one of which involved the publicity stunt of frying an egg on the bonnet of a car during a heat wave. In 1961, she married Eric Heckett, an American who had come to the US from Germany as a child in 1939. An accomplished seamstress by this time, Libby insisted on making her wedding dress. The couple lived for a while in Greece, where Libby played the roles of muse and helpmate while Eric, a poet, tried to write “the great American novel”. That did not pan out, so he became a businessman. They settled in Ireland and had four children. Libby mothered, gardened and managed their property. She found creative release in the Tick Tock Room (so called because of its noisy clock) where she sewed outfits for herself and her children.

When those children were nearly grown, her marriage ended. Aged 48, Libby enrolled in the Archaeology Department at University College Cork. A pioneer “mature student,” she was older than all of her classmates and most of her professors. Her cut-glass British accent was not an asset in the Ireland of the

1980s. Despite these challenges, Libby thrived. The archaeologist Elizabeth Shee Twohig took Libby under her wing and urged her specialise in textiles.

Seeking a project for her master’s thesis, Libby went to Dublin to meet with Frances Pritchard, who was in charge of more than 2,000 textiles recovered from the excavations of a Hiberno-Norse site at Wood Quay. Pritchard suggested that she analyse a group of mysteriously similar silk and wool textiles.

Libby’s research into the Viking Age head covering that became known as “the Dublin cap” won international acclaim. She presented her findings at the NESAT conference in 1987 (Wincott Heckett 1990a), and later published them in full (Wincott Heckett 2003).

Rising from the ashes of a divorce, she had reinvented herself. For the rest of her life, Libby’s favourite picture would be the one taken in her graduation gown. According to her daughter, Jo Heckett, she would point to it and say: “That is *me*.”

Research became her passion. As well as analysing many textiles for several Irish archaeologists, Libby wrote about ancient Irish textiles held in museum collections. Among these were two held by the National Museum of Ireland: the Bronze Age horsehair ornament from Armoy, County Antrim (Wincott Heckett 1998), and the wool mantle and leather cloak dating from the second to fourth centuries CE, from County Kildare (Wincott Heckett 2001). She also wrote about a shaggy textile, dating from the tenth century CE, discovered in County Meath, in the collection of



Elizabeth Wincott Heckett on her graduation day in 1986 (Image: The Heckett family)

the British Museum (Wincott Heckett 2004).

In time, Libby became the “go to” person for Irish textiles. Her reports appeared in two of the most important books on Irish archaeology published in recent years. She wrote about the linen and wool textile fragments, as well as Ireland’s earliest known leather weaving tablet, discovered at the site of a raised ringfort in County Antrim (Wincott Heckett 2011). Her report on the impressions of cloth on the broken weapons found in an early Viking Age burial in Waterford was published in 2014 (Wincott Heckett 2014).

In Cork, Libby catalogued and analysed the liturgical textiles created in the early 20th century for the Honan Chapel by the Dun Emer Guild and the women who worked for William Egan & Sons, a Cork-based manufacturer of items for churches (Teehan and Wincott Heckett 2004).

An entertaining speaker and storyteller, Libby made presentations at nearly every NESAT conference held between 1987 and 2017. Among these were “The apparel oft proclaims the man: Late 16th and early 17th century textiles from Bridge Street Upper, Dublin” (Wincott Heckett 2005), and “Late Bronze Age textiles, hair and fibre remains, and spindle whorls from Killymoon, Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland” (Wincott Heckett 2007). At the final conference she attended, NESAT recognised her for lifetime achievement (Wincott Heckett 2017). She also addressed the European Association of Archaeologists, the Textile Society of America and The 15th Viking Congress in Cork and spoke at many other meetings. For 14 years, beginning in 1993, she served as a member of the editorial board of the *Archaeological Textiles Newsletter*, the predecessor to this publication, and became a member of its Scientific Committee.

As a part-time faculty member in the Archaeology Department at UCC, Libby was known for her enthusiasm for her topic and her generosity towards students and colleagues.

In 2014, I sent a tentative and fearful letter to the renowned Elizabeth Wincott Heckett. I didn’t want to bother her. I knew she was busy! But I was doing research for an historical novel set in Early Medieval Ireland, and if it were not *too* much trouble, was there any chance she would speak to me about the textiles associated with the seventh century “Lady of Cloonshannagh Bog” (Wincott Heckett 2013)? An invitation to Cobh followed. Libby met me at her door with a hug.

We became friends. Over the next few years, whenever I would drop into Cobh for a visit to her extensive library, Libby would regale me with stories about the textiles she had studied. The 17th century gold

lace from castles sacked by Oliver Cromwell’s forces (Wincott Heckett 2015). The out-of-date clothing depicted on the funeral effigy of the mighty Margaret Fitzgerald, who died in 1542 (Wincott Heckett 2002). The shockingly bright orange textile, which might have been worn beneath armour, excavated from the 13th century Cork city wall (Wincott Heckett 1990b).

Clearly, she had amassed a substantial body of work and there had not been a book on Irish textiles since Mairéad Dunlevy published *Dress in Ireland* (1989). I couldn’t help but ask: had she thought of doing a book? She had, she said, but she did not think she was able to do it now. I said: let me try. A few years earlier, I had edited a large book for the archaeologist Caimin O’Brien. So with Libby’s permission, the encouragement of her family, and the fabulous support of Frances Pritchard (by this time Honorary Research Fellow of the University of Manchester) and Ragnall Ó Floinn, former director of the National Museum of Ireland, I got to work.

On 17 December 2024 in the Aula Maxima of University College Cork the book was finally launched (Wincott Heckett and Williams 2024). By this time, although she was still physically strong, Libby had lost her power of speech. Her daughters Jo and Louisa arranged for her to have a special viewing of the book before the launch began. When she saw the pyramid of blue volumes on the table, Libby’s eyes lit up. Raising her hands to her head, she began to mime a head covering, with a peak at the crown, and ties that could be knotted beneath the chin: the Dublin cap. I opened the book and showed her that chapter, with its wonderful illustration by Kelvin Wilson. She beamed. Then she gave me a hug – for the last time.

Five months later, surrounded by her children, Libby passed away peacefully in the house where she had lived since 1964. Her work on Irish textiles will be a resource and an inspiration for years to come.

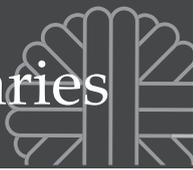
*Beannachtaí Dé ar do hAnam hip dhílis, a Libby.*

(Libby, may the blessings of God be on your gentle soul)

### Select bibliography

Dunlevy, M. (1989) *Dress in Ireland*. London: Batsford.

Wincott Heckett, E. (1990a) Some silk and wool head-coverings from Viking Dublin: uses and origins – an enquiry. In P. Walton and J. P. Wild (eds), *Textiles in Northern Archaeology, NESAT III: Textile Symposium in York, 6–9 May 1987*. Northern European Symposium for Archaeological Textiles Monograph 3. London: IAP Archetype Publications, 85–95.



- Wincott Heckett, E. (1990b) The Textiles in Hurley, M., Excavations at Grand Parade Cork II (Part 2). *Journal of the Cork Historical & Archaeological Society*, vol. 95/254, 1990, 81–86.
- Wincott Heckett, E. (1998) A Late Bronze Age horsehair ornament from Cromaghs, Co Antrim in Ireland. In L. Bender Jørgensen and C. Rinaldo (eds), *Textiles in European Archaeology, NESAT VI, Borås, Sweden, 1996*. Gothenburg: Gothenburg University, Department of Archaeology, 29–37.
- Wincott Heckett, E. (2001) Beyond the Empire: an Irish mantle and cloak. In P. W. Rogers, L. B. Jørgensen and A. Rast-Eicher (eds), *The Roman Textile Industry and Its Influence: A Birthday Tribute to John Peter Wild*. Oxford: Oxbow, 91–97.
- Wincott Heckett, E. (2002) The Margaret Fitzgerald tomb effigy: a Late Medieval headdress and gown in St Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny. In D. G. Koslin and J. E. Snyder (eds), *Encountering Medieval Textiles and Dress: Objects, Texts, Images*. London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 209–221.
- Wincott Heckett, E. (2003) *Viking Age Headcoverings from Dublin*. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy.
- Wincott Heckett, E. (2004) A tenth century cloth from Bogstown, Co. Meath. In J. Maik (ed), *Priceless Invention of Humanity: Textiles, NESAT VIII*. Łódź: Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe, 95–99.
- Wincott Heckett, E. (2005) "The Apparel oft Proclaims the Man": late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century textiles from Bridge Street Upper, Dublin. In F. Pritchard and J. P. Wild (eds), *Northern Archaeological Textiles NESAT VI*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 108–114.
- Wincott Heckett, E. (2007) Late Bronze Age textiles, hair and fibre remains, and spindle whorls from Killymoon, Co Tyrone, Northern Ireland. In A. Rast-Eicher and R. Windler (eds), *Archäologische Textilfunde NESAT IX, Braunwald 18.-21. Mai 2005*. Ennenda: ArcheoTex, 28–34.
- Wincott Heckett, E. (2011) The Textiles. In C. J. Lynn and J. A. McDowell (eds), *Deer Park Farms: The excavation of a raised rath in the Glenarm Vallen, Co. Antrim*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Environment Agency, 353–366.
- Wincott Heckett, E. (2013) The lady of Cloonshannagh Bog: an Irish seven-century AD bog body and the related textiles. In J. Banck-Burgess and C. Nübold (eds), *NESAT XI*. Rahden/Westf: Verlag Marie Leidorf GmbH, 167–172.
- Wincott Heckett, E. (2014) The Textiles. In I. Russell and M. F. Hurley with J. Eogan (eds), *Woodstown: A Viking-Age settlement in Co. Waterford*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 331–338.
- Wincott Heckett, E. (2015) Gold and silver decorative metal laces in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Ireland and Europe. In K. Grömer and F. Pritchard (eds), *Aspects of the Design, Production and Use of Textiles and Clothing from the Bronze Age to the Early Modern Era: NESAT XII: the North European Symposium of Archaeological Textiles 21st–24th May in Hallstatt, Austria*. Budapest: Archaeolingua, 243–249.
- Wincott Heckett, E. (2017) Textiles from the Viking warrior grave in Woodstown, County Waterford. In H. Brezinova and J. Malcolm-Davies (eds), *Archaeological Textiles: Links between past and present, NESAT XIII*. Liberec-Praha: Technical University of Liberec, Faculty of Textile Engineering in cooperation with the Institute of Archaeology of the CAS, Prague, 125–132.
- Wincott Heckett, E. and Williams, M.A. (2024). *Textiles of Ireland: archaeology, craft, art*. Cork: Cork University Press.
- Teehan, V. and Wincott Heckett, E. (2004) *The Honan Chapel: A Golden Vision*. Cork: Cork University Press.

By Mary Ann Williams