THE ENDURING IMPACT OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

A collection of perspectives

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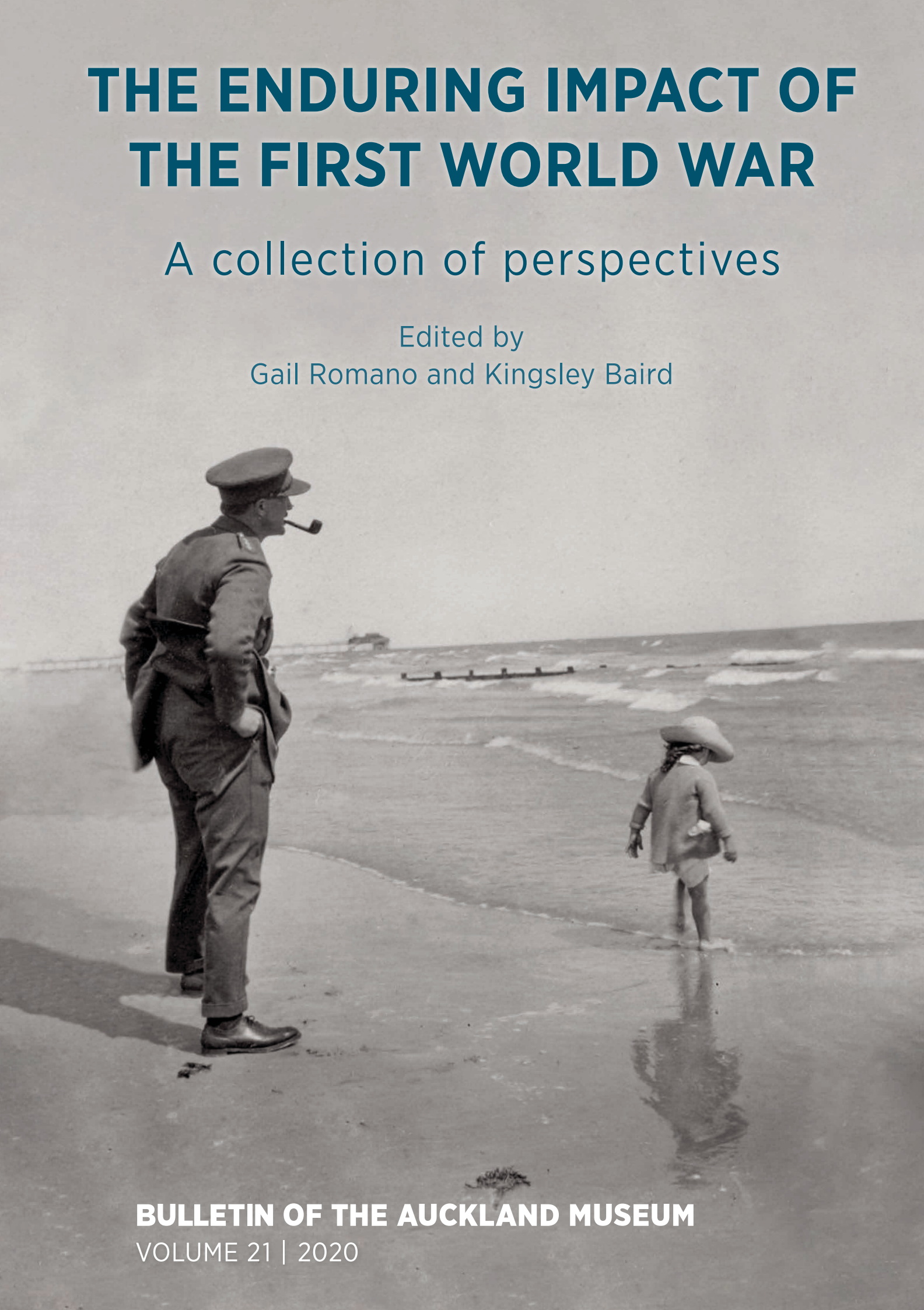

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The Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry Casket in the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

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Abstract

In 1917, English artist and actor Ernest Thesiger wrote to the Ministry of Pensions with what must have seemed a somewhat eccentric proposal that they establish an embroidery workshop to provide training and employment for disabled combatants returning from the war. Thesiger suggested the men could initially 'copy and mend old needlework' but eventually they should make and sell their own designs. The London War Pensions Committee quickly rejected Thesiger's proposal, a decision which he maintained reflected prevailing ideas that embroidery was too 'effeminate [an] occupation for ex-soldiers'. However, Thesiger's proposed workshop soon did become operative, under the auspices of a charity, as the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry. Within a decade it had become one of the most celebrated and successful luxury textile workshops in Britain making a central contribution to the renaissance of embroidery during the first half of the twentieth century. In 1927, almost a decade after Thesiger's initial proposal to the Ministry of Pensions, an exhibition showcasing the work of the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry was held in the London home of a prominent politician, industrialist, art collector and founder of the Imperial War Museum, Sir Alfred Mond. At this exhibition, Queen Mary was presented with a gift made by a man 'who had lost both legs' in combat, 'an exquisite little casket in black and gold Spanish work on a white silk background inspired by the embroideries brought to England by Queen Catherine of Aragon'. In 1946 Queen Mary presented this casket to the people of New Zealand. This article offers an interrogation of this unique object (now in the collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa) as a means to uncover how modern ideas about masculinity, disability, and craft were transformed by the First World War.

Keywords

charity; craft; disability; effeminacy; embroidery; masculinity; philanthropy; textiles

In May 1927 a small wooden casket covered in delicate and intricate embroidery was presented to Queen Mary at a needlework exhibition in London's fashionable Belgravia. The casket had been made by the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry, an enterprise set up in 1918 by the charity Friends of the Poor, to provide work for men disabled in the war. The casket comprises a simple wooden frame and is completely covered, in the style of a lady's workbox, with embroidery made from black silk thread and couched gold-wrapped thread, a technique largely associated with Tudor and Elizabethan times (Fig. 1). Such workboxes, however, generally date from the seventeenth century and were almost exclusively decorated with a form of embroidery known as stumpwork, which was often pictorial and generally brightly coloured. The blackwork featured on this casket, in contrast, is a form of counted thread embroidery that is generally known through its application to dress and rarely to such small domestic objects. All the casket's external surfaces are slightly padded and covered in embroidery, as is its curved lid. It also has brass hinges and four brass ball and claw feet and a working brass lock. There is a small key for the casket's lock through the end of which is attached a blue silk ribbon edged in gold. The quality of materials and the level of craftsmanship employed are extraordinarily high. The workshop's stitched label is attached underneath. The label reads 'SOLDIERS' EMBROIDERY INDUSTRY / MADE BY THE TOTALLY DISABLED / 42 EBURY STREET' (this was the Belgravia address in London from where the workshop operated) (Fig. 2).

The embroidery covering the casket is an all-over stylised pattern of vine leaves with bunches of grapes—typical of Christian liturgical symbolism common in historic religious textiles and popular in Victorian ecclesiastical embroidery. Grapes were often used to symbolise the Eucharist (Christ's blood) and the grapevine his mission, his good works, and it is an image used throughout the New Testament as in 'I am the vine, you are the branches'. There are few historic examples

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Figure 1. Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry casket, silk, thread, wood, brass, 172mm (height) x 265mm (length) x 142mm (width/depth). PC000875 © Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Reproduced with permission of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

from England of grape and vine imagery in textiles aside from a few embroideries surviving from the Tudor court such as the Culpeper tapestries. These were commissioned by a family associated with Catherine Howard, the fifth wife of Henry VIII, and depict various fruits including grapes on the vine.

The embroidered casket was presented to Queen Mary by Sir Alfred Mond, a wealthy British industrialist, politician, and philanthropist, on the 9 May 1927, almost a decade after the idea of the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry had been suggested to the Ministry of Pensions.[1] In 1946, Queen Mary gifted the casket to New Zealand's Dominion Museum in celebration of the end of the Second World War and in recognition of the change in status of former colonies and dominions under the United Trust of Territories in that same year.[2] The only other thing known for certain is that this 'exquisite little casket in black and gold Spanish work on a white

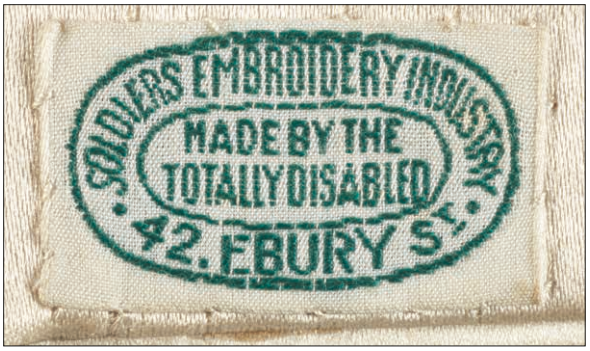

Figure 2. The Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry label. PC000875 © Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Reproduced with permission of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

1 The presentation of the casket by Mond to Queen Mary was widely reported in the press—or a detailed discussion of this, and for a history of the organisation, see my '"The work of masculine fingers": The Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry, 1918–1955', *Journal of Design History*, 31, no. 1 (February 2018): 1–23 [doi:10.1093/jdh/epw043, advance access, October 2016].

2 This was simply accessioned into the museum's collection as a gift from Queen Mary with no other details recorded. I am grateful to Sara Guthrie, of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, for providing access to the museum's accession list for 1946. I am also very grateful to Sara and especially to Claire Regnault for organising the casket to be taken out of storage and put on display during my paper at *The Myriad Faces of War: 1917 and its Legacy* symposium on 27 April 2017.

silk background inspired by the embroideries brought to England by Queen Catherine of Aragon', was made by a man 'who had lost both legs' in the war and had travelled the whole way from Suffolk the day before the presentation in the hope of meeting the King and Queen.[3] The craftsman's name was not recorded.

The Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry was proposed by English actor and artist Ernest Thesiger, who first wrote to the London War Pensions Committee in November 1917 seeking support for a 'Needlework by discharged soldiers' scheme. The programme would retrain and employ wounded men to 'copy and mend old needlework', and subsequently to create original designs, which would then be offered for sale through a London outlet.[4] At thirty-five years of age, Thesiger himself had signed up to fight, joining the 9th London Battalion in September 1914. That New Year's Eve he and his battalion took refuge in a deserted barn which was subsequently shelled. Thesiger sustained serious hand injuries that took almost a year to heal. Needlework played an important part in his rehabilitation. His experience, however, was commonplace during the long years of the First World War, even during its initial few months. It is estimated that of the quarter of a million men from the British armed forces who suffered severe debilitating injuries, 69% lost one leg, 28% lost one arm, and nearly 3% lost both arms and legs. Statistics about psychological injuries, such as neurasthenia or shell-shock, are harder to ascertain.[5] As historian Joanna Bourke has shown, '[t]he decisive impact of the Great War on men's bodies can be seen most clearly by looking at the war-maimed. Irrevocably re-moulded by their experiences, these men struggled to create new lives that challenged their status as physically disabled'.[6] The impact of the war on the ravaged bodies of combatants could be registered in the rapidly transformed fields of psychiatry and orthopaedics but also in the re-invention of craft, with its potential to engage both tacit knowledge and haptic pleasure on an intimate scale, as occupational therapy and later remunerative employment.

The language used to describe wounded and convalescing soldiers who sustained life-changing injuries during the conflict was often triumphant and not passive like that often deployed to describe the congenitally, or accidentally, disabled. For example, one man who had been 'in the Royal Artillery' had '…to wear a collar with a support for his chin which prevents his bending his head to do his work, and does it by hanging it on the door and standing looking up at it. All of them suffer much pain, and often have to put the work on one side for long periods'.[7] 'The first thing a man wants to work', another report stated, 'is his regimental crest. After that he turns out something pretty—a flower piece, or a dainty figure. There is no need to give out Kindergarten work, for the men have … tackled petit point and Jacobean work quite successfully'.[8] Initially, as Thesiger had suggested, the workshop's output would centre on the reproduction of the historic styles and techniques of English embroidery. The men subsequently became so skilled at recreating such styles that they then were often asked to repair historic embroideries. Aside from verifying the quintessential Englishness of the workshop's output, there was some concern about the potential of embroidery to emasculate men, as it was historically so associated with ideals and stereotypes of femininity.

If the wounded men of the workshop were perceived as feminised through their subordination to women (who taught them to embroider and ran all other aspects of the enterprise) this was further reinforced through disability's destabilising of masculine authority and autonomy. The masculinity of the men in the workshop was, therefore, utterly transformed by the war in that their economic subjugation and physical impairment combined to divest them of their inherent masculine privilege. The complex mediation of modern masculine identity in, and through, the workshop was further highlighted by two of the organisation's key male supporters who further embodied aspects of hegemonic and marginalised masculinity. These were symbolised in notions of masculinity as 'paternalism' and masculinity as 'perversion'.

Ernest Thesiger, the workshop's founder, was a well-known society figure. Charismatic, camp, and aristocratic, he was also a leading figure in early 20th century London's homosexual subculture. He maintained that the Government's initial rejection, in November 1917, of his scheme to teach wounded men embroidery reflected prevailing ideas that embroidery was too 'effeminate [an] occupation for ex- soldiers'.[9] By the time of the war, men's interest in embroidery was well established in legal-medico discourses as a sign of a man's 'inversion' (i.e., his inherent femininity) or his 'perversion' (his desire to be a woman). Thesiger's interest in embroidery is often believed to have been an outcome of his rehabilitation for the injuries he

3 'Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery: The King and Queen at Exhibition', *The Times*, 10 May 1927: 13.

4 See correspondence between Ernest Thesiger and the London War Pensions Committee, especially later dated 15 November 1917 about the 'Needlework by discharged soldiers' scheme, in Ministry of Labour Papers, National Archives, Kew, London [hereafter National Archives], LAB 2/626/TDS6705/1919/PartsI&II.

5 Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion, 1996), 31.

6 *Ibid.*, 15.

7 'Disabled Soldiers as Master Embroiderers', *The Queen*, 5 June 1929: 5.

8 'Netley Hospital: Crippled Soldiers as Skilled Embroiderers', *Daily Sketch*, undated press clipping (prob. November 1916), Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry Archive.

9 Ernest Thesiger, *Practically True* (London: William Heinemann, 1927), 122.

sustained on the western front. In fact, he had developed a keen interest in needlework well before the war.[10] Embroidery was a hobby he shared with many of his queer social circle such as the 7th Earl of Beauchamp, a Liberal politician who had served as Governor of New South Wales in Australia, and William Ranken, the Scottish-born painter who Thesiger met at the Slade School of Art and with whom he had a lifelong relationship. Although it seems that it was Ranken, who first started to embroider, after historic models, it was Thesiger who became the leading embroidery expert.

The decision of the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry to use the blackwork technique most certainly came through Thesiger's influence. Blackwork, as applied to dress, is known through 16th century paintings especially those by Hans Holbein the Younger, such as his 1535–40 portrait of Simon George of Cornwall, a country nobleman and minor figure in the Tudor court.[11] Thesiger was the only male teacher in the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry workshop and he regularly took the men to museums and galleries to look at historic examples of embroidery including surviving examples from the Tudor and Elizabethan courts. Blackwork was believed to have been introduced into English needlework from Spain, where it was thought to have originated under the influence of Moorish design. It comprises a running thread stitch worked in a single colour of silk thread, usually black, on a white or cream background, usually of linen, often highlighted with precious metal threads such as gold or silver. It was used exclusively in the decoration of dress textiles such as in shirts, ruffs, collars, caps, and chemises. Popular legend has it that blackwork was first introduced into England when Catherine of Aragon married Henry VIII in 1509, as it was a common feature in the fashions of the late 15th- and early 16th-century Spanish court. However, some of the aristocratic figures that Thesiger hoped to attract to the workshop such as Sir John Carew Pole, a notable collector of English historic embroidery, were interested in establishing an English pedigree for blackwork. In his detailed analysis of the Carew Pole embroidery collection, Alan Wace, the Deputy Keeper of the Department of Textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum and a leading figure in the interwar embroidery revival, claimed that the Spanish origin of blackwork was, in fact, a myth.[12] Since Wace first suggested blackwork had existed in England previous to the arrival of Catherine of Aragon several other historians have argued that it emerged, during 16th-century England, as a result of other internal influences. It was suggested that the rise of pattern books and monochrome woodcut prints was an equal, if not more significant, stimulus for much textile design in the period.[13] By the 1920s blackwork was increasingly seen as an essentially English technique.

The embroidery of the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry casket is known to have been copied after examples in the Victoria and Albert Museum where Thesiger often brought the workshop's men to study historic textiles.[14] Here, the men studied several examples including a woman's coif or nightcap made between 1600 and 1625, of linen with black silk thread in stem, chain and speckling stitches. The pattern of coiling flowers and vines reflect those found in an English garden: foxgloves, carnations, roses, honeysuckle, cornflower and strawberries. Its simple materials and design are made luxurious through the use of silver-gilt thread. However, a small pillow-cover dating from c.1600, featuring coiling vines, in 'back, chain, cord, braid and buttonhole stitches', provided the specific model for the motifs and stiches employed on the casket[15] (Fig. 3). This had been acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1924 during a period when they actively sought to collect important examples of English textiles.

By the 1920s the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry were well known for their work in historic textile conservation and reproduction. They became especially associated with the revival of interest in the so-called Sheldon tapestries, a series of large late 16th-century maps believed to have been made in the 1580s by the first major English weaving workshop, founded by the Sheldon family. Their provenance is now thought to be attributable to other, possibly continental, workshops as well as the Sheldon family's own weavers. However, after the First World War the Sheldon tapestries held an especially important place in discussions of English patrimony, examples being acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Bodleian Library, Oxford.[16]

10 For Thesiger, and his interest in embroidery, see my '"Nothing is more terrifying to me than to see Ernest Thesiger sitting under the lamplight doing this embroidery": Ernest Thesiger (1879–1961), "Expert Embroiderer"', *TEXT: Journal for the Study of Textile Art, Design and History*, 43 (2015/16): 20–26; and my 'Queer Hobbies: Ernest Thesiger and Interwar Embroidery', *Textile: Cloth and Culture*, 15, no. 3 (September 2017): 292–322 [doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2017.129482, advance access, March 2017].

11 Collection of Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main.

12 See A.J.B. Wace, 'English Embroideries Belonging to Sir John Carew Pole, Bart.', *The Volume of the Walpole Society Annual*, 21 (1932–33): 43–65; see 58 [note 2] for discussion of the origins of blackwork.

13 See Lanto Synge, *Antique Needlework* (London: Blandford Press, 1982), 58–60; and Rosemary Muntus, 'Blackwork Revisited', *Embroidery* 53 (September 2002): 23.

14 For this see Ernest Thesiger, 'Work for Totally-Disabled', *The War Pensions Gazette* 37 (May 1920): 497–498.

15 Richard Box, *Drawing and Design for Embroidery: A Course for the Fearful* (London: B.T Batsford, 1988), 24.

16 For these tapestries see A.F. Kendrick, *Catalogue of Tapestries* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1924); Hilary L. Turner, 'Pride and Patriotism Mapped in Wool', in Peter Barber (ed.), *The Map Book* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005), 128–129; and Hilary L. Turner, *No Mean Prospect: Ralph Sheldon's Tapestry Maps* (Derby: Plotwood Press, 2010).

Figure 3. 17th century English pillow cover in blackwork. T.81-1924 Victoria and Albert Museum.
Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The blackwork casket in Te Papa's collection, then, on several levels represents not a simple needlework activity done by a recuperating soldier as occupational therapy but functions within the wider reconstruction of British national identity in the post-war period. Its projection of English embroidery as a form of national patrimony drew a parallel between modern Britain and the historic Tudor dynasty that subliminally bolstered British nationalism in the unstable years after the war's end.

In gifting the casket to the reigning monarch (and thus symbolically to the nation) Sir Alfred Mond, who hosted the garden party in 1927 where the presentation took place, was not making a simple gesture of gratitude to the Queen for her charitable interest. He was deploying the products of the workshop to authenticate his own public identity as 'English' through the linkage of his beneficence to enduring notions of Victorian cultural philanthropy and to a much longer and distinguished history of English textile production.[17] Mond was a Lancashire-born industrialist and Liberal politician who occupied an important role in Lloyd George's pre-war cabinet, but he was also the son of a highly successful German Jewish chemist who had moved to England to escape growing anti-Semitism in Europe. His father Dr. Ludwig Mond had taken British citizenship in 1880 and his main business, Brunner, Mond & Co., became Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI), at one time the largest chemical manufacturer in Europe, and Britain's competitor with DuPont and IG Farben. The Monds were acutely aware of the importance of cultural philanthropy and were especially influenced by the Royal family's example. Of the various philanthropic endeavours associated with their incredible wealth they are best remembered today for their bequests to King's College and the National Gallery, in London.[18] Just as Ernest Thesiger's charitable instruction to the men of the workshop acted as a mask deflecting attention away from his effeminacy and his queer sewing circle so too did Alfred Mond's philanthropic paternalism veil other, personal, motives. Mond's desire to authenticate his 'Englishness' through philanthropic acts in an atmosphere of increasing anti-German hostility was explicit in his patronage of the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry

17 Victorian cultural philanthropy has been broadly defined as the systems of 'vocational training or […] liberal education, applied or high art, [and] recreation' designed for the poor by middle- and upper-class benefactors in the absence of adequate state support during the long nineteenth century, see Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to the Whole, 1859–1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 122.

18 See Jean Goodman, *The Mond Legacy* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982); Charles Saumarez Smith, *Ludwig Mond's Bequest: A Gift to the Nation* (London: National Gallery, 2006); and Thomas Adams, *Transnational Philanthropy: The Mond Family's Support for Public Institutions in Western Europe from 1890 to 1938* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). In 1928, Alfred Mond received a peerage in part for his cultural and charitable activities. He was so well known in the interwar years that he inspired characters in the work of T.S. Eliot and Aldous Huxley.

and further in his suggestion, in February 1917, to Lloyd George to establish a national museum to commemorate the war.[19] Mond also made proposals to the government for schemes to support the war wounded in terms of training and employment. Indeed, in September 1917, he wrote to the Ministry of Pensions in support of a scheme of employment and possible retraining for disabled veterans which was not that dissimilar to that proposed by Thesiger.[20]

Between its foundation in 1918 and its closure in 1955, the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry became arguably the leading embroidery enterprise in the country. It also clearly played some part in the changing conceptualisation of masculine identity as a result of the war. This can be seen not just in how the men of the workshop were perceived as being feminised, through the loss of authority and autonomy, but further in the contrasting models of paternalism and effeminacy embodied by the organisation's key male promoters, Sir Alfred Mond and Ernest Thesiger. The blackwork casket in the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, a unique surviving object from the workshop's history, provides an opportunity to understand the complex mechanisms that deconstructed and reconstructed modern masculinity in the aftermath of war.[21] The fact that it is the work of 'masculine fingers', as Queen Mary's commented upon receiving it as a gift in 1927, continues to stimulate surprise as well as debate almost a century later.[22]

Joseph McBrinn is a cultural historian, critic and curator currently based in Northern Ireland. Born in 1971 he was educated and has worked in the Ireland, Scotland and France. He has held teaching positions at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland, and, currently, at the Belfast School of Art, Ulster University, in Northern Ireland. He has written articles and reviews for *Embroidery*, *Selvedge*, *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*, *Homes Cultures*, *Fashion Theory*, *Art History*, *The Journal of Modern Craft*, *Journal of Design History* and *Oxford Art Journal*. His current research is focused on masculinity and design. His book, *Queering the Subversive Stitch: Men and the Culture of Needlework*, is forthcoming from Bloomsbury. j.mcbrinn@ulster.ac.uk

19 This was formally established by Act of Parliament in 1920 and housed at the Imperial Institute in South Kensington until 1936 when a new designate museum building was opened on Lambeth Road, south London, now known as the Imperial War Museum, see Gaynor Kavanagh, 'Museum as Memorial: The Origins of the Imperial War Museum', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23, no. 1 (January 1988): 77–97.

20 See correspondence from Sir Alfred Mond to the London War Pensions Committee, especially letter dated 28 September 1917, with the 'Memorandum of the possible utilisation of Wounded Soldiers in sedentary occupations', National Archives, LAB 2/626/TDS6705/1919/PartsI&II.

21 There is one single object by the workshop in the collection of the Imperial War Museum and one in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum. All other known surviving examples of the workshop's output are in private collections. A second blackwork casket was bought by Queen Mary at the workshop's annual exhibition and sale in 1931 and is presumably in the Royal Collections.

22 The press often recorded the surprise of Queen Mary, and other notable visitors, that such work was produced by 'masculine fingers', see 'Beautiful Embroideries by Disabled Soldiers', *The Queen*, 29 April 1925; 'Embroideries by Disabled Ex-Soldiers: An Interesting Exhibition', *The Queen*, 18 May 1927; and G.B.H., 'Embroideries by Disabled Soldiers', *The Queen*, 27 May 1931; all Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry Archive.