

Falling Among Lambs

ROMANTIC FASHION
IN DOONE COUNTRY



Exquisitely British and oozing class, Dean Thomas' new collection has drawn important heads westwards to our land and literature that inspired 'the next Alexander McQueen'.

Naomi Cudmore



Dean Thomas' 2008 graduation collection, *Falling Among Lambs*, is at once both romantic finale and flamboyant first page. Like the chapter of *Lorna Doone* to which it owes its name, the collection sits part way through an unfolding tale. Comprising seven seriously English pieces inspired by the wilderness of the West, Dean's collection closes four years at Central St Martins and ushers in his future amidst the best of British. I went to meet him at the close of his stunning show in Dulverton to find out more.

From pheasant-feather shoes and handmade tweed, to antler buttons and river-softened silk, Dean's creations celebrate local craftsmanship and class detail down to the nth degree.

Lorna Doone and its eponymous heroine lie at the heart of all that inspired Dean in his quest to create something "utterly patriotic", but also something deeply personal. "It was only whilst researching that I began to realise just how relevant the book was to me. I feel at home in the locations of the novel - Doone's rivers, hills and woods were places I played as a child. For the last four years I have been on a fashion course dominated by international students. I was in a minority as a straight, British guy from the 'middle of nowhere' and I wanted to show and acknowledge where I had come from, to explore my heritage and my roots."

In achieving this aim, Dean's work salutes an era of traditional craftsmanship and evokes the luxury of time. Eighteenth-century illustrations inspire cuts, detailing and the fabrics, which, together with the leather and trims, have all been sourced from within 50 miles of his Somerset family home.

Dean has used bespoke tweeds woven using wool from Exmoor sheep: a dense, heavy fabric for the jacket, woven in an old smithy at Bovey Hand Loom Weavers and a finer tweed for the trousers and skirt, crafted by Jack Hudson at

Fox brothers in Wellington. The silks and voiles, from Heathcotes in Tiverton, were left in the River Barle to soften over Christmas last year, whilst Dean was busy preparing some of his other, painstakingly-sourced materials.

"At the same time as my peers were working with chiffons and so on, I was back at home in Dulverton covered with bits of dried birds as I plucked dozens upon dozens of pheasants to gather together the feathers for my shoes and the signature piece, the wing dress. The feathers for this had to be left to dry out to taxidermy standards before I could even think of sewing them into the piece itself."

As well as the silks, Heathcotes also provided the military fabrics for details such as the undercollars. The factory's dye technician, Sarah Marshall, dyed Dean's vintage lace, silks and cotton voiles, printed with a pheasant-feather pattern and inspired by the acid yellow of moorland gorse. "If I am honest I think that I had envisaged a factory where lots of women sat in rows making net, but I had the pleasure of being shown around by the weave director, Peter Hill, and what they do there is far more interesting than I had ever imagined."

As Dean explained to me, whilst the modern Heathcotes, which has just celebrated its 200th birthday, may remain largely unchanged from the outside, inside its workforce are weaving the most highly-advanced materials available and are at the forefront of technological fabric production for the military, the emergency services and the medical industry.

For the accessories and additions, Dean has also kept the focus of *Falling Among Lambs* local. The belts were crafted by Mike Eddisford in Dulverton and the bags were made by Bish Nym Products in Bishops Nympton. The buttons and the shoes are all handcrafted by Dean, the latter decorated with more of those troublesome feathers! "I carved the



buttons from Exmoor stag antlers which I have found over the years, one when I was out walking with my dad back when I was about seven. The 18th-century handles used, for example, as decorative hanging loops on the jackets, along with the paraphernalia for the exhibition, came from Fagin's Antiques and a shed belonging to my granddad, Ronald Thomas, who died last year and to whom the collection is dedicated."

Family has been, and will remain, a real inspiration

for Dean. "My Dad is a retained firefighter and my mum used to work at the first school as a dinner lady but she can't work any more as she has severe epilepsy. I think that her being ill when I was a child gave me a good outlook on life because when you are four and you realise how fragile life is, you need to adopt a very positive attitude.

"I was up at my grandmother's house last week for her birthday and by coincidence – just because she loves them I guess – every single card which she had received had a butterfly on it. All I could see was a mass of butterflies and this gave me an idea for my next collection: I have started to think about doing a series of ladies' tuxedos with negative butterflies and moths incorporated in a dark grey against the black fabric, almost like damask in subtle detailing."

Subtlety is all part of Dean's 'wearable' approach. "If I am going to spend any money on a suit, I want know that it

has a great lining and three pockets on the inside, but I also want to look normal.

"It is very important for me that my clothes make you feel special and are also practical. I am not an artist, I am a fashion designer. It is important for me to be able to see women wearing, and enjoying, my clothes. Apart from the signature piece – the feather-wing dress – the whole collection does fit this bill. St Martins is extremely open in its approach, giving its student a very free rein. In line with this, it can push you to be outrageous or shocking, to create outlandish, abstract, impractical designs and to be very anti-establishment. But when you graduate and try to make a name for yourself in the real world, it is the establishment who you need to embrace you! It is ironic that in being uncontroversial, my show seems to have stood out. If my dream comes true I will one day be working for a well-known brand which is very, very British – a fashion house like Burberry, Jaeger or Aquascutum."

But if Dean has stayed put in terms of his classically British approach, there is no avoiding the pull of London. "I need to be in London to do what I do. When I am here I feel out of the loop somehow. When I am back home I can't design because there are too many other things I want to be doing. Leaving home gives me the bigger picture and makes me appreciate what I have left behind. Time spent on Exmoor is a kind of reward for me and one day I will move back here and have a family, but for now it has to be London."

Dean admits though that the city can, at times, feel like 'the loneliest place in the world', but he devised a trick to make himself feel more comfortable soon after moving there four years ago. "When I first went there at 18 I was scared of walking around the city, being a bit afraid of the unknown. So I thought of the various areas as villages from home. Leicester Square is Brushford and Covent Garden is Dulverton – where I feel safe. And, after I started walking

from one area to another as well as taking the tube, I began to be able to put the jigsaw of villages together better so now things don't feel so far apart and disjointed."

It seems likely, however, given his recent reception by London's fashion gurus, that Dean will soon be looking back on his time of relative isolation in London as a period of calm before the storm, an era like the quiet of evening on Exmoor which is his favourite time of day. Indeed, the



whirlwind has already begun to blow. *Vogue* magazine have been wowed by Dean's work and have likened him to top British designer Alexander McQueen, with whom he worked during his degree. *Vogue* invited Dean in to head office to discuss his work and even recommended him to Burberry as 'a proper country chap'. Stella McCartney has declared her own interest and *The Daily Mail* have proclaimed him as 'the next big thing'.

The world of fashion is a foreign country to me, being more at home in my wellies than anything else and it was my mum (who knows a lot more about clothes than me) who urged me to write about Dean almost four years ago, rather than any inherent instinct about good tailoring. "Just you wait," she said – and she was right. But I have to say ladies that when I had the honour of trying on Dean's silk-lined cashmere trench coat (£1,125), I felt like a million dollars. And that, surely, is the crux of it – as Dean agrees: "When your clothes make the wearer feel special, it's a hell of a feeling. I have to say that I love what I do!"



GET THE LOOK!
Visit La Scarpetta shoe shop in Dulverton High Street to see Dean's window display. The shop has a portfolio to browse through and takes orders for Dean's handmade shoes (£295) and bags. Bags come in a range of colours and leathers, with a great choice of trims, linings and buckles. Prices: £195 for the 'Doone Clutch', £250 for the Lorna Handbag and £395 for the 'Bagworthy' weekend bag. Bags and shoes are all made to order, with a lead time of around six weeks. Tel: 01398 324300.
The feather charms are available at Brimblecombe in Dulverton for £15 each. See page 59 for details.
Contact Dean on 07973 642637/
deanthomasdesigns@hotmail.com



I would seriously recommend getting a piece of the action whilst you still can! Dean's order book has been filling fast in the wake of his packed show in Dulverton this summer. Thronged with visitors from near and far, as well as a keen attendance from the local media, it was a fantastic night which left him spinning.

"ITV turned up and it was so packed that I almost wanted to run away and go home! It is scary putting a little piece of yourself out there for all to see and criticise. But it was brilliant. Jonathan Price at Exmoor Ales supplied the ale and Paddy up at Woods gave the wine. Everyone has been so kind. The most popular pieces were the trench coat, the blouse and the orange jacket, as well as the bags - the 'bagworthy', the 'lorna' and the 'doone'." I had lots of commissions and now the hard work really begins as I have to get on with making."

Dean admits that this will be something of a relief. "Producing the show left me totally impoverished! The mannequins alone cost me £300 each so I have had to save long and hard to buy each one in turn. It has been a long-term challenge." So whilst his contemporaries may have been off celebrating the end of their studies with a well-earned rest, it has been a case of remaining firmly planted in reality for Dean.

"Someone once told me that Billy Connolly has always felt like someone is going to tap him on the shoulder one day and say 'Just kidding, it was all a dream!' - and I suppose to some extent I feel like this. For my own part, I was asked recently whether I was 'always going to stay this grounded?' And what I love about Exmoor - and Dulverton particularly - is that you have no choice *but* to stay grounded. If you start getting too big for your boots people will always bring you back down to earth. I hope that this translates to my work."



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