

At Hawkshead

by [Carol Gilbertson](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue

Wee Agnes Sawrey widdow & Dorothy Tyson Spinster do severally make oath yt ye Corps of Margaret Tyson of Gryzedale in the Parish above s'd beeing buryed the first of Aprill 1696 was not put in wrapt wound up or buryed in any shirt sheet shift or shroud mad or mingled with Flax Hemp or any Coffin lined wth cloth or any materiall but what is made of sheep wooll only according to a Late Act of Parliamt made for Burying in Woollen. In witness herof wee the saide Agnes Sawrey & Dorothy Tyson have sett our Hands & Seals. Aprilis, Ano Di 1696.

—Parish document in St. Michael and All Angels Church,
Hawkshead, Cumbria

In Norway when you die,
they clothe you in a gown
of purest white. Egyptians
sucked out organs, layered
presoaked linen strips
around each desiccated limb.
It matters what you wrap a body in.

I am one of the few that walk
the footpaths on the fell today
who put on wool against the sharp October air.
The scattered sheep are unimpressed.
Warming these hills with active tongues,
they are unaware that Parliament,
to buoy the trade, once ruled
that only wool could be the spun
and woven garment of the dead.

Agnes and Dorothy held to the law,
picking softest weave of shift
or sheet or shroud to lay against

the body of their Margaret—
like the Marys in the story,
who laid his body out,
washed and oiled, and put,
wrapt, wound up, and buryèd
each limb in swaddling clothes
to match the ones his little body
wore in Bethlehem—the cloth
he wore to meet with life
and fight with death—
he who newborn slept
among the shepherds
and their silent, woolly sheep.