What I would have liked to have time to say during my interview with Simon Mayo on Scala Radio. 11:45am 18th March 2019

Crochet: from the French word *croc* or *croche* (hook) which originated from the old Norse word *krokr* which also meant 'hook'. Variously know as *haken* (Holland), *haekling* (Denmark), *hekling (Norway)* and *virkning* (Sweden).(1)

Question I was asked: Why are crochet terms different in the UK and US?

Well, this was a biggie, and of course those of you who have done any reading around this will know that there is not definitive answer!

I quite quickly developed a theory that the terms probably diverged around the end of the 19th century. My guess is that this was a hugely significant period - when skilled crochet practitioners took their skills with them when they emigrated from Europe to the US; four million people emigrated there from Ireland alone between 1850-1990.

I decided to start my explanation with the history of the craft itself, to try to decipher how these might have come about. I started with a bit or reading and found that Lis Paludan, although she addressed this subject from a largely European perspective, theorised that crochet originated in either China, the Middle East or South America. Both Ann Stearns and Clinton MacKenzie discussed the connections between modern day crochet and historical textiles, but MacKenzie cited Mary Thomas as his source. Now this gives us is a pretty wide geographical ballpark, but let's explore these theories a bit.

There were most likely some crochet and knit-like practises in China and Japan prior to the importation of Western crafts when trade began with the West in the 1800s. Paludan suggests that crochet's roots may have stemmed from tambour work (chain stitching with a hook through tightly stretched mesh), which came via the Middle East, and Stearns shows her contemporary experiments with this technique.(p72-74) Paludan speculates that latterly the mesh was discarded, so that the chain stitches became a self-supporting fabric. Regarding the Middle Eastern theory, Stearns dedicates a chapter to the 19th century textiles of Turkey, discussing lace, purses and 'tiğ oyasi' (headscarf decorations) made with crochet, and from the way in which she describes these as embedded in the culture, it is clear that these practises had a long history in this arguably Middle Eastern country. (p144-153)

MacKenzie writes that Mary Thomas did not give much credence to the suggestions that crochet-type textiles, possibly descended from Pre-Columbian textile practises and used in puberty rites, existed in South America before the Spanish introduced European methods. However, we know that crochet is popular in South America today, with highly skilled practitioners producing varied types from fine white lace to chunkier colourful work.

Many claims are made that crochet was first practised in Italy and France during the 16th century, and cite 'nun's lace', created in religious houses for ecclesiastical textiles, as evidence for this. Ruthie Marks, writing for the Crochet Guild of America, reports that Anne Potter agrees with this, but I sadly don't have access to this text, so can't verify this. What I can tell you is that Potter was as mystified as others, and had her own theories, like we all do. However according to Paludan the surviving evidence does not resemble crochet so fails to support this theory.

Like knitting, and other crafts considered 'domestic', crochet skills would have been taught informally by being demonstrated and explained verbally in domestic situations. This is opposed to

the largely male orientated formal craftsmen apprenticeships of this period in which mastering craft skills led to recognition, authority and inclusion in record keeping of the craft guild system.

Knitting and crochet patterns were not written down until the mid-1800s, and even then, this may have been in a form that would be largely unrecognisable today. Many authors assumed the actual skill of making the stitches was already understood (for the reasons discussed above), so many did not include the explicit instructions we are accustomed to in modern patterns. An exception to this was Mlle Eleonore Riego de la Branchardiere, who wrote many books of crochet patterns, (the first one when she was only 18), and so brought crochet to a wide audience. According to Marks, Mlle Branchardiere, who had a French father and an Irish mother, claimed to have invented the form of lace-like crochet later known as 'Irish crochet'. You can read some of her books on the University of Southampton Knitting library web resource and via the VADS website, or as eBooks via Project Gutenberg.

In Knitting, Crochet and Netting, published in 1946, Branchardiere describes working what Europeans today call a slip stitch as making a 'Shepherd or Single Crochet'. She writes, 'Put the needle in the 1st chain, draw the wool through; there will now be 2 loops on the needle; draw the last loop through the 1st'. Although she describes drawing the new loop through the old loops one after the other, rather than both together as we would do today, this is clearly a slip stitch. (p57) She then describes making a modern UK double crochet stitch and designates it as, 'Plain, Double or French Crochet'. (p57-58) So at this point in history, there is already some confusion; single crochet is being used to describe a slip stitch.

It seems that Branchardiere was not the first crochet author. I happened upon https://blog.lovecrochet.com/the-history-of-crochet-is-it-as-old-as-the-hills/ which featured an article by Kathryn Senior 'The History of Crochet: is it as old as the hills?'. In this she writes of an early crochet bag pattern published in 1824 in Amsterdam by Penelope magazine. Sadly there is only an image and no instruction shown which might shine some more light on the terminology in use then.

Irish crochet

Crochet was particularly significant in Ireland in the mid-to late 1800s, because it could provide vital economic support for families that were starving in the terrible famine. This lasted from 1846-1852 and devastated the Irish population leading to mass immigration, and of course those who could crochet went as well, taking their skills to a new land.

Irish crochet comprises very finely worked motifs, sometimes with a relief effect, joined together by a crochet mesh. The thread used is fine cotton, and it is worked with a very small hook. Originally the hooks would have been home-made from steel wire and set into a wooden handle. To learn more about the technique and history of Irish Crochet, I recommend visiting Ann Reillet's 'Crochet Thread'.(2)

Nuns were partly responsible for bringing crochet to Ireland. As reported in the Kenmare Times of 2011, in the 1860s Carmelite nuns established a lace school in which they taught Irish crochet amongst other lace-making skills. Other crochet schools were established, but the Kenmare school became famous for its excellent design quality. Through collaboration with two design schools in London and Cork and the establishment of an art programme the quality of design was developed further until their clientele included royalty, which in turn influenced additional fashion interest in lace. Irish lace of various types was highly prized for both wedding dresses, veils, lingerie and ecclesiastical pieces.

Crochet lace and beyond…

The Victorian and Edwardian obsession with lace ensured the continuing popularity of fine crochet, and although this abated by the 1920s, it was replaced by using crochet to make complete garments. The new synthetic rayon yarns draped exceedingly well, and crochet worked in these made elegant, elongated shapes perfect for the 'flapper' look.

Through the two World Wars knitting tended to take precedence, possible because it seemed more utilitarian and practical compared to the lacey crochet look.

Come the 1950s crochet grew in popularity and re-entered the fashion scene. Magazines such as Stitchcraft featured patterns for hats and accessories made in the new synthetic yarns coming onto the market, and certainly by the 1960s, crochet was really back. In the 60s all sorts of clothing was made from crochet and in the early 70s fashion embraced the granny-square in bold colours. The power dressing 1980s saw a slump in popularity, hand crafts were not part of the new look, being relegated to the 'hippy' and 'homely'.

It wasn't until the turn of the century that there was a resurgence of interest in both knitting and crochet, ignited partly by Debbie Stoller's Stitch'n Bitch movement, but also inspired by a reaction to the fast pace of life. Although part of the technology that might be seen to be encouraging the fast pace, social media is still playing a significant part in maintaining and widening the impact of hand making. The latest in this is of course the popularity of the Japanese Amigurumi style of crochet, making small items from tightly packed stitches.

Now I know I have not answered the question, but the history is important in considering how the terms diverged. I still think it was to do with the influx of immigrants, taking their skills with them to a new land, and the terms drifting apart after that. We have already seen some ambivalence in Branchardiere's terminology, so why would this not perpetuate and terms come to mean different movements/stitches during a century of geographical separation? After all the size designations of the hooks have evolved differently; US are alpha-numeric and old Imperial became larger the smaller the number (and where is the sense in that?), whilst modern European metric hooks work on a direct millimetre diameter measurement.

Some theories suggest that the UK terms are based on the number of loops left on the hook after the pulling the first loop through the stitch below, whilst US terms refer to the number of movements needed to complete the stitch after the pulling the first loop through the stitch below. This comes a bit unstuck when you get to the half-treble stitches, but it seems reasonable otherwise. There are probably others, but I think we just have to accept, and translate, rather like we do with other linguistic difference such as pavement being called a 'sidewalk' in the US, and a car boot being a 'trunk'.

Most modern books now make it clear which terms they are using (Us or UK), but older books and patterns can be a minefield. If you want to check if a pattern or book is US or UK, the best way is to see if there is any reference to single crochet (sc) in the instructions. If there is, it is definitely a US pattern – as there is no single crochet in UK terms. If there is no reference to single crochet, this doesn't mean it is a UK pattern, because it may just not include single crochet! So, beware and look for other signs; the hook sizes may give you a clue, and so may the yarns listed in the pattern.

I sometimes write the pattern out again, (if its short), or use a highlighter to mark where I need to be careful. Otherwise, a drop of Tippex works well, (but not on a library book)!

UK to US terms - and back again

UK		US		US		UK
Slip stitch	→	Slip stitch		Slip stitch	→	Slip stitch
Double crochet	→	Single crochet		Single crochet	→	Double crochet
Half treble	→	Half double		Half double	→	Half treble
Treble	→	Double crochet		Double crochet	→	Treble crochet
Double treble	→	Treble		Treble	→	Double treble
Triple treble	→	Double treble		Double treble	→	Triple treble

I apologise in advance for any mistakes, and hope that this has been of interest.

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(2) Ann Reillet, https://crochetthread.wordpress.com/irish-crochet/

Further reading:

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