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The published version appeared as:

Annebella Pollen, "'The Sartorial Rebirth of Man": Reconsidering the Promise of the Men's Dress Reform Party, 1929-1937', *Vestoj: On Masculinities*, issue 7, pp. 59-68, Winter 2016

'The Sartorial Rebirth of Man?'

Reconsidering the Promise of the Men's Dress Reform Party, 1929-1937

Annebella Pollen

Looking back at the campaigns of the Men's Dress Reform Party – a short-lived endeavour to improve the cut, colour and function of interwar menswear – is a curious experience. To those who have considered the party before, the enterprise seems, with the wisdom of hindsight, to have been doomed from the outset.¹ Standing largely outside of the collective power of the fashion industry, the idiosyncratic dress dissenters appear as isolated, amateur voices. In a period when comfortable sportswear and breathable fabrics were steadily gaining ground, the crusading demands of the group's sartorial campaigns to 'kill' and 'burn' conventional clothing seem comically at odds with progressions in mainstream taste. From this distance, the organisation might be dismissed as a mere cul-de-sac of history, as one of many minority pressure groups of the period. Despite the singularity of their stance, however, it is perhaps the radical energy of the group's ambitions that is worth salvaging. Men's dress reformers sought to overturn dominant styles and stand outside of fashion. Their call for 'a united blow for liberty from the tyranny of inertia and stupidity and vested

¹ Valuable previous studies include Barbara Burman, 'Better and Brighter Clothes: The Men's Dress Reform Party, 1929-1940', *Journal of Design History* 8:4, 1995, pp. 275-290, and Joanna Bourke, 'The Great Male Renunciation: Men's Dress Reform in Inter-War Britain', *Journal of Design History* 9:1, 1996, 23-33. More recent investigations of the party in the context of health include sections of chapters in Simon Carter, *Rise and Shine: Sunlight, Technology and Health*, Oxford, Berg, 2007 and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body: Beauty, Health and Fitness in Britain, 1880-1939*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

interests which, in sum, we call “convention” was uncompromising.² Indeed, some of their plans for reforming everyday clothing for men were so far ahead of their time that they still seem outlandish nearly a century on. This article revisits the party’s publications in order to extract lessons for our own times.

Members

The Men’s Dress Reform Party emerged from a nexus of several intersecting campaigns. Its origins can be found in the late 1920s, in the clothing subcommittee of the New Health Society, which was led by a pioneering campaigner of radical health causes, Sir William Arbuthnot Lane. The party, formally established in 1929, had as its Honorary Secretary Alfred D. Jordan, a London radiologist of international reputation, and its chairman was Caleb Williams Saleeby, a tireless promoter of innovations in public health in the interwar period and the founder of the Sunlight League, which promoted open-air cures. The interests of these three men extended far beyond dress and provide a useful context for understanding the impetus for the party and its roots, which were fundamentally based in the practices and morals of so-called physical culture and life reform rather than in the study and production of fashion.

From the start, the campaigners for dress reform seemed caught in a double-bind. Dreaming of a lighter, cleaner, more colourful and comfortable future for men, they wished to transform masculine clothing fundamentally. At the same time, however, they wished to be taken seriously as men of good standing with a substantial message to impart. Their campaigns cultivated respectability by emphasising the professional background of their membership and castigating ‘cranks’ and ‘faddists.’³ Several members argued for a moderate approach to sartorial change, suggesting a plan of action that would ‘move along the lines of

² *Report of Men’s Dress Reform Rally*, 3 July 1929, p. 4.

³ Alfred. C. Jordan, ‘New Fashions for Men: The “Reform Party”’, *The Times*, 17 June 1929.

least resistance.⁴ In practice, this meant capitalising on the growing popularity of short trousers for holidaying and sports. Shorts-wearing public figures such as Lord Baden-Powell, Chief Scout, and the Duke of York (later George VI), were heralded as models for reforming men to follow. Other moderates argued that there was no reason why a reformed dress for men might not be conventional; the charge, after all, was to get rid of dirt-gathering, heavy and dark 'funereal' textiles, to banish hard materials such as the bowler hat and to reduce stiffness generally by eradicating starch. A core of party members, however, yearned for something more radical, favouring new designs for men's skirts, kilts, kimonos and togas. These members seized upon the opportunity for revolution rather than reform, seeing a chance to raze respectability and promote flamboyance.

The mixed interpretation of the group's message was no doubt due to the mixed make-up of membership. Party members were drawn from the arts and the stage, academia, medicine and the clergy. The headlining of these disciplinary areas in the group's publicity shows that the campaign aimed to be at once aesthetic, dramatic, rational, scientific and evangelical. Yet for all of the Party's statements in support of respectability, members could also be, in fact, nudists, pagans and sexual experimenters. Certainly, close scrutiny of the individual biographies of party signatories and supporters is instructive. Several prominent members were aligned with radical outdoor and utopian organisations, such as the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift and the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry, whose theatrical garb for camping, ceremony and performance borrowed from avant-garde theatre and ecclesiastical garments as well as the hiking wear of the scouts.⁵ For others, their bohemian lifestyles as artists and actors gave them professional opportunities for dressing outside the norm, as well as cover

⁴ *Report of Men's Dress Reform Rally*, 3 July 1929, p. 8.

⁵ Roland 'Deathwatch' Berrill, a barrister turned tarot reader, and Saxon 'Phoenix' Snell, a shorts-wearing engineer and skier, were members of the Kibbo Kift. Harry 'Dion' Byngham was a member of the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry. For further information on these figures and on woodcraft groups see Anabella Pollen, *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians*, Donlon Books, London, 2015.

for what would have been seen at the time as scandalous same-sex activity or promiscuity.⁶ Finally, in arguing ‘dress reform and food reform *must* go together’,⁷ the party put wearers of shorts and open-neck shirts into the same category as the vegetarians and raw (or ‘unfired’) food enthusiasts of the natural health scenes of the 1920s, who zealously embraced new and experimental forms of living, including practicing yoga and meditation and rejecting vaccination. The reform of dress was thus embedded in the wider reform of a ‘civilisation’ perceived to be in crisis.

Support for the organisation was always in the minority, nonetheless, within three weeks of the party’s establishment, letters of approval had been received from France, Spain, Switzerland, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Norway and Egypt.⁸ It was claimed that the idea appealed across the classes, but with its ‘distinguished’ panel of signatories and its proposition for a wide range of outfits for a range of social and leisure situations, all requiring regular laundering for maximum hygiene, the party was primarily concerned with the sartorial plight of the well-to-do middle and upper class man. Nonetheless, even within this narrow purview, there was significant uptake. By 1930 there were thirteen party districts in London and thirty-nine more nationwide; further groups were established in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Canada, Egypt and India.⁹

Concerns

To fashion historians, the most notable name among party members was John Carl Flügel, whose 1930 book, *The Psychology of Clothes*, introduced psychoanalytic attempts at decoding

⁶ Actor Ernest Thesiger, for example, was openly homosexual, and artist Eric Gill was widely known for his bohemian lifestyle as well as his rejection of trousers. The extent and range of his sexual activity, including incest and bestiality, was only uncovered by his biographer, Fiona MacCarthy, after his death.

⁷ *Report of Men’s Dress Reform Rally*, 3 July 1929, p. 12.

⁸ *Report of Men’s Dress Reform Rally*, 3 July 1929, p. 10.

⁹ Men’s Dress Reform Party, ‘List of Hon. District Secretaries’, 1930, British Library manuscript collections reference 1883c13.

dress as well as the contested concept of ‘the great masculine renunciation’ (the nineteenth century rejection of colour and ornament), which is still discussed in scholarship on menswear.¹⁰ Flügel’s understanding of the parlous status of men’s clothing in the 1920s was shared by many party members. Throughout party publications, there was incredulity that women could be leading the way in colourful and comfortable clothing. Many party pamphlets offered a potted history of men’s fashion that outlined a fall from grace from earlier periods of spectacular sartorial superiority into the ‘painful sameness’ of present-day wear.¹¹ This was compared, unfavourably, to the ‘infinite diversity and beauty’ of womenswear in the 1920s.¹² It was also understood that this inequality in dress would manifest a material risk to men’s advancement in the long term: ‘Unless we give our boys a fair chance, the women of the next generation will surpass the men in a measure that will be of real profit to neither sex or to the nation at large.’¹³

There was also seen to be a difference in men’s and women’s happiness as a direct result of clothes. Flügel conducted a questionnaire in 1928, with the results published in 1929 under the title, *On the Mental Attitude to Present-Day Clothes*.¹⁴ Flügel’s female respondents were largely satisfied with their own sartorial condition, and expressed sympathy with the clothed discomfort of men, which was described by one respondent as a kind of ‘martyrdom.’ Men, reflecting on their own situation, were much less content. They sometimes ‘violently’ opposed the fussy and uncomfortable restrictions of a well-dressed man’s wardrobe. The increasing informality of women’s clothing in the 1920s, which had grown scantier in weight

¹⁰ J. C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes*, Hogarth Press, London, 1930. For the presence of Flügel in recent fashion histories, see, for example, Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, Routledge, London, 2007 and Michael Carter, *Fashion Classics from Carlyle to Barthes*, Berg, Oxford, 2003.

¹¹ Dean Inge, ‘Dress Reform for Men’, *Evening Standard*, 19 June 1929.

¹² Alfred C. Jordan, *Medical World*, 6 December 1929.

¹³ *Report of Men’s Dress Reform Rally*, 3 July 1929, p. 4.

¹⁴ J. C. Flügel, *On the Mental Attitude to Present-Day Clothes: Report on a Questionnaire*, *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, IX: 2, 1929. With thanks to Flügel’s grandson, Clive Harper, for the supply of this publication, and for further information about his grandfather.

and consequently exposed more skin to sunlight, had been noted enviously by male health and dress reformers. The same progression was not apparent in menswear. Men, it was argued, were still expected to dress as formally as the early Victorians even though women had succeeded in throwing off their nineteenth-century 'swaddling' garb.

The symbolic nature of clothing was also understood to be contributing to the problem. Men's clothes, Flügel noted, were associated with strength and support, seriousness and sobriety, devotion to routine and duty. He argued that these values are made material in the fabric of men's clothing, which presented an overall signal of resignation. Why could they not, he asked, represent an alternative set of symbols, of 'hope, courage, enterprise and inspiration'?¹⁵ Flügel noted that modern industry had been successfully rationalised, but not men's dress. The building programme, post-war, also promised 'Homes Fit for Heroes.' The party asked: where were heroes' clothes?¹⁶

A subtext of many of the party's materials was fear of emasculation. Clothing posed threats to men's virility: hats, for example, 'help make them bald.'¹⁷ Clothes were often styled as perilous weapons: neckwear 'strangled' and 'muffled' its wearers. Women were said to be free to change the style and colour of their own garments whenever they pleased (although it was noted, bitterly, that it was usually men who had to foot the bill).¹⁸ Men, interestingly, were also seen to individually lack courage to make the changes needed; they were described as 'meek' and 'enfeebled.'¹⁹ The party's 'crusade' thus offered strength in numbers: 'Men can free themselves; but they must act together. The Men's Dress Reform Party exists

¹⁵ Men's Dress Reform Rally, *Dinner Debate and Other Matters of Interest*, 24 June 1932, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Report of Men's Dress Reform Rally*, 3 July 1929, p. 7.

¹⁷ C. W. Saleeby, 'Change Men's Clothes', reprinted leaflet from article in *New Health*, n.d., c.1929. British Library manuscript collections reference 1883c13.

¹⁸ Alfred C. Jordan, 'Healthy Dress for Men', reprinted article from *Franco-British Medical Review*, November 1929. British Library 1883c13.

¹⁹ H. J. Dion Byngnam, 'Better Clothes for Men', reprinted article from *New Health*, May 1930, n.p. British Library 1883c13.

to make combined action possible; men must join in their thousands to make combined action EFFECTIVE!’²⁰

Appearances

Men’s dress, in the party’s appraisal, was tight, dirty, heavy, expensive and ugly. Among some members, there was little love shown for clothes in any form. Although some were sartorial exhibitionists, Jordan, for example, referred to garments as a ‘necessary evil.’²¹ In some of their missives the authors could be interpreted as nudists defeated by climate; clothes sometimes seem merely a reluctant concession to polite society.

What reform dress should look like was never directly specified by the party, and suggestions were welcomed. Broadly they coalesced around an unrestricted neckline as opposed to the despised triumvirate of collar, collar stud and tie, but the variations of shirt openings at the throat included romantic ‘Byron’ collars, loose bow ties, cowboy-style lacing, a ‘Russian blouse’ with a single-button fastening, and rather risqué deep V-necks. In all cases, high quality in fabric and cut was required so as not to encourage a slovenly or inappropriately sporty look in professional and formal contexts.

This distinction could also be achieved through colour and ornamentation; decorative embroidered elements and even the inclusion of brooches in place of ties were recommended. In part these embellishments were encouraged to enable a feeling of being fully dressed in shirt or blouse alone. The problem that a man could not remove his coat or jacket, even when hot, without appearing somewhat ‘undone,’ could be resolved by establishing the shirt as a complete piece of respectable clothing in its own right. Established tailors who advertised in party publications welcomed suggestions for adaptations to

²⁰ Alfred C. Jordan, ‘Men’s Dress Reform Party: Dinner Debate at the May Fair Hotel, 24 June 1932’, p. 4.

²¹ Alfred C. Jordan, ‘Dress in Relation to Health: A Lecture’, Royal Institution of Public Health, 4 December 1929, p. 9.

conventional dress and some party members designed their own, from a rather monkish 'tunic suit' with collarless, pull-on top, paired with matching shorts, to a more raffish silky draped blouse, open waistcoat and shorts ensemble.

Shorts were a core staple of reform wear. Trousers were 'condemned' unsparingly by almost all members. They were described as 'unaesthetic in their gaunt tubularity;' 'horrible contraptions' and 'the stupidest, dirtiest garments ever devised.'²² Kilts were also promoted but shorts were more widely adopted, owing to their familiarity. The issue of how to make garments already acceptable for sport and outdoor activities into formal evening wear, however, presented an enduring challenge. For all of the party's claimed modernity, the silken knee breeches that were suggested as a solution, especially when paired with a velvet wrap or cloak, inevitably recall the reform dress ideals of the late nineteenth century, in whose footsteps the dress reformers of the 1920s clearly walked, although largely without acknowledgement.²³

The informality and functionality of holiday wear and sportswear offered progressive models to expand upon but for those who wished to retain status in respectable society, it was a step too far to wear such outfits for all situations. For formal work wear, new innovations were suggested: cool, silky shirts in washable rayon or 'Celanese' fabric, always with soft collars or open necks; shorts in light suiting fabrics that sat on the hips and removed the need for belt and braces. Jumpers, with or without sleeves (in place of waistcoats and jackets) and knee socks were recommended for when the weather grew cold. The skimpy, airy attire of reform dress was argued to be suitable for all weathers as long as the wearer

²² Alfred C. Jordan, 'Dress in Relation to Health: A Lecture', *Royal Institution of Public Health*, 4 December 1929, p. 11.

²³ Further details about this period of dress reform can be found in Stella Mary Newton, *Health, Art and Reason*, John Murray, London, 1974 and Anabella Pollen, 'Radical Shoemaking and Dress Reform from Fabians to Feminists', in Charlotte Nicklas and Anabella Pollen (eds.), *Dress History: New Directions in Theory and Practice*, Bloomsbury, London, 2015.

also ate and exercised correctly, underscoring the connection of the campaign to health agendas. Colours for reform garments were to be light in deliberate contrast to traditional, heavy and dark dirt-gathering suit fabrics; impeccable cleanliness and regular laundering was a core part of hygienic dress.

Men's neckwear in particular was singled out for critique; the party campaigned to end 'the tyranny of the tie'²⁴ and the collar-stud was framed as 'the villain of the piece.'²⁵ The symbolic similarity of the collar to a yoke, and to the harness and chain of slavery was also highlighted. The deep groove that it regularly left at the neck was even likened to a suicide attempt. Swimwear was also subject to the party's scrutiny. The 'mock modesty' of the Victorian period had imposed a cover-up bathing suit on men that clung coldly to the skin after swimming and denied the body the healing effects of sunlight, which so many health campaigners considered essential. According to party pamphlets, 'nearly all Continental Resorts' permitted bathing in more scanty 'slips or trunks' in the 1920s, but many English resorts insisted on 'regulation' bathing suits for men, that is, those that covered both chest and back with fabric. The party conducted a national survey on the topic and found puzzling results. While some locations, such as Brighton, accepted trunks as suitable seaside wear, further along the Sussex coast, for example, Eastbourne swimmers could not enjoy the relaxed rules of their near neighbours. The Kent coast, in addition, 'with its unsurpassed sunshine and clean air' was, according to Jordan, 'almost solidly on the side of Mrs. Grundy' (a popular personification of prudish morality).²⁶

Practices

²⁴ *Report of Men's Dress Reform Rally*, 3 July 1929, p. 11.

²⁵ Alfred. C. Jordan, 'New Fashions for Men: The "Reform Party"', *The Times*, 17 June 1929.

²⁶ Men's Dress Reform Party, *Seaside Sun Bathing*, leaflet no. 23, June 1930; revised 1932.

The party did not produce a regular journal but instead issued a series of pamphlets, including reprints of strident articles written for the press, which could be ordered in bulk for propaganda purposes. They also published lists of beaches where trunks were permitted (and those where they were not) as well as a 1936 guide to hotels where reform dress would be welcome. At such venues, 'evening dress was discouraged.'²⁷ That this campaign met with fairly limited success is suggested by the small numbers of hotels listed, with less than a handful in each county and a dozen or fewer for both Scotland and Wales. Not coincidentally, the locations were often places that encouraged nudity and rambling. The adverts in party pamphlets are also telling, promoting sandals and foot-shaped footwear, vegetarian patent foods and sunbathing societies. In this, and through their stand at the New Health Exhibition in November 1929, the party showed their allegiance to healthy living more than aesthetics; indeed the term 'hygienic dress' was used synonymously with 'reform dress.'

The party also organised events, rallies and 'revels,' and attempted to institute special dates for the wearing of reform dress. At first a single day was identified as an annual national calendar event, but Saturdays and each morning and evening to and from work were suggested as alternative times where reform dress could be tried. Revels were very well attended in the early the early 1930s, with up to a thousand guests and big names in attendance, including H. G. Wells, and the unlikely combination of romantic novelist Barbara Cartland and eminent anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. The party seems to have had the resources to throw spectacular parties; the 1932 invite claimed the Midsummer Dress Reform Dinner Debate at the Mayfair Hotel to be 'the Sartorial Event of the London Season.' Reform dress was, of course, encouraged, and prizes were awarded for best and worst outfits, judged on 'healthiness and comfort,' 'originality and ingenuity,' 'artistry,' and

²⁷ Men's Dress Reform Party, *Hotels in Gt. Britain*, leaflet no. 40, 1936.

‘probability of general adoption.’ The booby prize was presumably given to the most conventional attire.

The party’s public events were not as homosocial as many of their discussions; women were welcomed and, indeed, flattered in their invitations as ‘pioneer dress reformers.’ Women also entertained, judged and presented prizes. Although it has been erroneously argued that the politics of men’s dress reform – such as they were visible – tended towards the radical right, scrutiny of the names at revels shows a largely left-leaning and socially reformist crowd, with particularly strong representation from actors, artists and writers.²⁸ Another core constituency was health professionals, including many early psychoanalysts. The atmosphere was bohemian: intellectual yet playful. Notably, few were present from the garment industry; these were broadly understood to be perpetrators of the problem.

Response to the dress reform movement from the tailoring trade tended to be conservative and defensive. An article from *Tailor and Cutter*, for example, argued that the tendency of campaigners to admire men’s clothes from other nations threatened to undermine the world-leading position of the British textile industry. The spectre of crankiness was also regularly raised: ‘It is hard to understand the mentality of those who attend a dinner in beach pyjamas, hiking kit, tennis gear or ordinary lounge suits. This is not reform but merely a disregard of the appropriate. He who wears a plus-four at the theatre or in town is not a

²⁸ Burman makes this observation in her otherwise meticulous article, ‘Better and Brighter Clothes: The Men’s Dress Reform Party, 1929-1940, p. 287-288, based on a misunderstanding of the politics of eugenics-informed ideals in the 1920s. Eugenics aimed to improve ‘racial health’ – a term which was used synonymously with national health or the health of the human race - through better breeding, and was based on a concern that the general physical fitness of the British population was diminishing the reproductive quality of the ‘stock’. Both Jordan and Saleeby promoted eugenics, but this should be understood in the context of the times, where the ideals appealed across the political spectrum. For more, see Lucy Bland and Lesley A. Hall, ‘Eugenics in Britain: The View from the Metropole’, in Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010. As an example of the party’s sympathies with socialism, core Men’s Dress Reform Party sympathisers, H. G. Wells and C. E. M. Joad were jointly responsible for establishing the Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals in 1932 as an attempt to unite the variety of reform organisations on the political left. A notable and fascinating exception is dress reformer Graham Seton Hutchinson who was also a high profile British fascist.

dress reformer but a social anarchist.²⁹ Although some more sympathetic manufacturers advertised in the pages of party publications, and there were even outlets (in London and on the French Riviera) selling reform ready-to-wear, the garment trade was largely dismissive that a small gathering of reformers should think they could change an established industry by concocting a few eccentric, amateurish designs.

Legacies

The closure of the New Health Society in 1937 – from which the party had sprung – seems to have taken the Men's Dress Reform organisation with it. Certainly little was heard of the party's rallying cries after this time, although the wider movement for dress reform and the urge to analyse dress did not, of course, die with them. Innovators in the study and practice of dress and its meanings have carried the baton ever since. Interestingly, the party's last hurrah capitalised on the new media of television with a final dress reform competition timed to coincide with the Coronation, which was accompanied by a filmed debate. This panel included the fashion historian, James Laver, and it appeared in the same year as the first televised dress history programme (again by Laver, alongside Pearl Binder).³⁰ Both presenters were, in their own ways, eccentric figures who developed discussion about what dress could be and mean through many years of collecting, curating and publishing that laid the groundwork for the healthy state of the discipline of dress history in the twenty-first century. Fashion theorist Jonathan Faiers has argued that the pioneering investigations of Laver and others in the mid-twentieth century offers much inspiration for current dress historians, particularly in the way that those who were interested in dress at the beginning of the discipline's formation took an eclectic approach to the subject as part of a wider intersection of cultural interests (in Laver's case, musical theatre, poetry, the occult and

²⁹ 'This Dress Reform', *Tailor and Cutter*, 6 July 1932.

³⁰ Pearl Binder was the mother of dress historian Lou Taylor. For more on her and Laver's work, see Lou Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2004.

mountaineering).³¹ Certainly, the Men's Dress Reform Party was always about far more than clothes. Concerns with health and hygiene, masculinity and nationality, civilisation and modernity, and the psychology of happiness and self-expression were woven into its uncompromising campaigns and designs, and members were not afraid to enact their idealism. They were a small part of broader social reform agendas in the interwar period, which collectively sought to challenge all aspects of culture through lived experimentation. It is in this revolutionary ideal, I argue, that we might still find inspiration. The Men's Dress Reform Party had idiosyncrasies that were easily mocked but in its attempts to speed up the pace of change for the improvement of dressed bodies in everyday life, they raised their newly-uncovered heads above the parapet. We might be amused, from the perspective of the increasingly informal dress codes of the twenty-first century, by the thought that men who would dispense with tight collars and wear cool clothes could be perceived as social anarchists. Yet, in a period when male politicians and heads of state have only recently cast off their neckties, and when tokenistic 'Dress-Down Fridays' are still considered liberal forms of workplace benevolence, twenty-first century observers should not feel so satisfied that all the sartorial battles have been won. Men should try wearing skirts or short trousers as part of conventional business attire in 2016 to see how far dress reform has yet to go.

³¹ Jonathan Faiers, 'Dress Thinking: Disciplines and Indisciplinary' in Charlotte Nicklas and Annebella Pollen (eds.), *Dress History: New Directions in Theory and Practice*, Bloomsbury, London, 2015.