

STELLA MARY NEWTON:

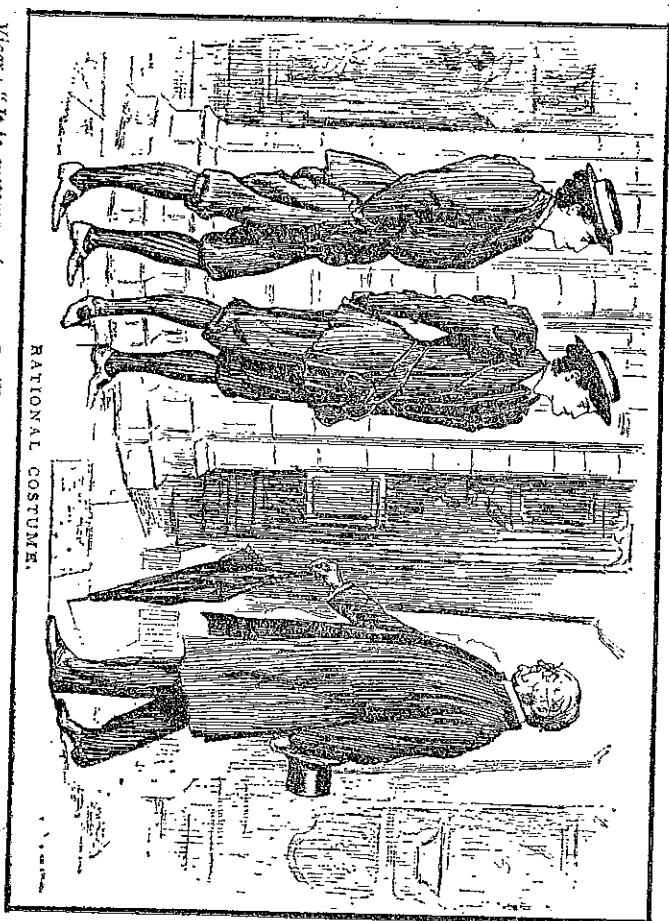
Health, Art and Reason

Dress Reformers of the 19th Century
192pp plus 66 illustrations. John
Murray. £3.95.

The subject of dress, like that of sex, is simultaneously profound and frivolous, always personal, and somehow inappropriate for serious study with too straight a face. Portentous solemnity about sex or about clothes seems ultimately ridiculous. Nevertheless the temptation to advocate programmes of sexual conduct or habits of clothing as deliberate expressions of serious ideas is apparently perpetual among civilized peoples. The depth of human feeling about these two related matters will usually guarantee an instant, strong public response one way or another, either to a crusader's appeal or a critic's blast. But although strong feeling is constant, specific fashions in sexual behaviour or in dress are ephemeral, and it soon seems just as quaint and idiotic that anyone should have cared so much about the wearing of manish tailored jackets by women, to say nothing of trousers, as about the question of whether women might travel unaccompanied.

Epochs take themselves seriously at the expense of history, and the fashion turmoil of the past decade might incline people to think it was unprecedented; but in *Health, Art and Reason*, Stella Mary Newton demonstrates that deep concern about what people were wearing or should wear was as touchy a question in 1880 as it was in the first year of the nineteenth century: was an age of reform; but it is interesting to see how the constantly provocative subject of clothing could be used to serve the cause of reform in various modes not directly sartorial.

Mrs Newton begins her book with a discussion of the costume devised by Amelia Bloomer of Seneca Falls, New York, in 1851. The first Women's Rights Convention in America had been held there only three years before, but the dedicated and serious spirit of that resolute undertaking was not actually apparent behind Mrs Bloomer's invention, although she herself was a founder and supporter of the cause. Her own view of dress was evidently family light-hearted and quite separate from her strong opposition to existing sexual inequality, or from



Vicar: "It is customary for men, I will not say Gendarmen, to remove their hats on entering a church"; George du Maurier's comment in *Punch*, 1896, on upper-class girls' masculine cycling wear.

Beyond the fashion principle

By Anne Hollander

toped, a cumbersome and irrational complexity unprecedented in the West. Of course clothing is in its essence troublesome, like all art. It represents the need man apparently has to suffer and struggle to create a change in nature for visual satisfaction. Moreover when the artistic medium is his own body, man will evidently undergo amazing physical discomfort to serve his aesthetic ends, to say nothing of his corollary social aims. The nineteenth century offered new sources of wealth, new technical capacities, and newly complex social patterns to nourish the

lust for self-expression through clothing, but along with these not unfamiliar kinds of encouragement for display came a new one: historical awareness.

The study of the past gradually developed into a responsible discipline during the nineteenth century, and one minor result of this was the appearance of a number of serious histories of costume. It was now possible to survey the whole course of fashion at one glance, and to discern certain periods were, objectively more beautiful than those of others.

but that the perpetual and extreme changes in fashion were essentially irrational. While it is in process, of course, the steady change from one fashion of dress to another does feel obsciously desirable: it works by exerting a constant, undeniable influence of a reactionary counter-pull. Thus, when in mid-nineteenth century full skirts were in fashion, they continued to push to the limit the century full skirts were in fashion, to satisfy and push to the limit the general visual pleasure in that bell-shaped female image. Only then did the ridiculousness of the fashion in its completely developed form sub-

ments of the prevailing mode before the spirit of reform awakened.

More interesting than the specific suggestions for dress-reform concentrated at any single moment in the century (such as Dr Jaeger's Woolen System of Dress in the 1880s) was the rather general and wholly new idea that fashion should be abolished altogether. Moral slavery seemed to be the condition required for wishing to follow the mode, since the phenomena of fashion could now be seen to have no morally acceptable genesis, and pleasure in fashion for its own sake had as yet acquired no serious aesthetic justifications. It is interesting that fashionable dress was thus officially the enemy of art; Reason was perhaps a bit more obvious in France, Baudelaire was indeed taking the opposite view—that the distortions of fashion were ennobled by being yet another assertion of man's need to idealize nature and aspire to the divine. Modern sensibility since then has continued enlarging its conception of style to include the workings of fashion in effort, as in other arenas of aesthetic the peculiarities of historical dress but those of modern clothes as reasonably honourable expressions of general taste, even though specific examples may occasionally disgust and appal.

Mrs Newton's study includes a further look at the connection between the spirit of female emancipation and the idea of abolishing fashion. In the early days of the movement, Mrs Bloomer felt that reformed clothing might still quite properly transmit feminine sexual attraction. Later some ambivalence emerged among crusading ladies as to the propriety of dressing attractively in order to enlist masculine influence for the cause of women's escape from sexual bondage. Some advocated pretty bonnets and neat gloves to enhance serious ideas, and for the express purpose of being taken seriously as women: others insisted on wearing harsh, masculine clothing as a sign of their good faith, but they often succeeded in alienating by their repellent appearance the men whose support they hoped to engage. If fashion could really be done away with, it was felt, the question of dressing with or against it need not arise for serious women. Important issues could be dealt with on a more lofty plane, where the whole equivocal matter of dress could attain an equal seriousness, if it were not perhaps to be totally ignored. Clothes could at least be

seemant undertaking was not actually apparent behind Mrs Bloomer's invention, although she herself was a founder and supporter of the cause. Her own view of dress was evidently fairly light-hearted and quite separate from her strong opposition to existing sexual inequality, or from any feelings of outrage at the larger significance of female bondage to skirts. She herself abandoned the costume when people continued to see only the Bloomers and not the issues. The Bloomer costume was advocated as something not so much practical as attractive, calculated to evoke muted visions of Moroccan harem beauties superimposed on the neat and coquetized feminine shape of the Western mid-century.

Not the least loss of feminine allure was supposed to be incurred by the adoption of this full, divided garment, which was demonstrably modest as well as manageable; but its critics immediately took up the issue of sexual identification, and many cartoons appeared showing Bloomer-clad girls proposing marriage or taking on other masculine prerogatives to match their bifurcated clothes. The Bloomer had a short and rather frivolous life, appearing on the music-hall stage and in popular art and fiction much more memorably than it ever did in society. It was nevertheless a signal for a wave of attempts to improve on both luxurious and popular habits of dress, a reform movement which seems generally to have affected the whole self-conscious culture of the later nineteenth century, at least in England and America. After discussing Bloomers, Mrs Newton's book concentrates on England, describing the distinct flavour of dress-reform characteristic of each decade and ending with the attitudes towards dress expressed by the Socialist movement at the beginning of this century.

The reflection of riches in personal adornment is a very ancient human pleasure; and so naturally with the increase of industrial expansion, wealth, and all forms of conspicuous consumption, the clothes of the mighty were expanded and enriched in the nineteenth century like the Empire itself. In order to require reform, dress must furthermore have come to seem a monstrous and ridiculous mockery, like the medieval church; and indeed by the 1860s the clothes of wealthy and civilized folk, besides being ostentatiously costly, had de-

medium is his own body, man will evidently undergo amazing physical discomfort to serve his aesthetic ends, to say nothing of his corollary social aims. The nineteenth century offered new sources of wealth, new technical capacities, and newly complex social patterns to nourish the

and one minor result of this was the appearance of a number of serious histories of costume. It was now possible to survey the whole course of fashion at one glance, and to discover not only that the clothes of certain periods were objectively more beautiful than those of others.

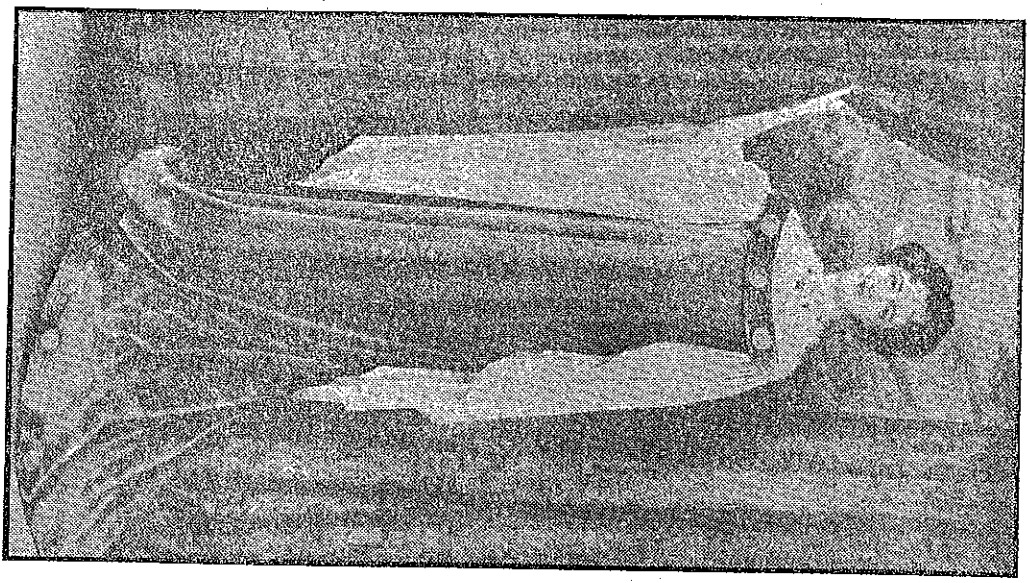
influence of a reactionary counter-pull. Thus, when in mid-nineteenth century full skirts were in fashion, they continued to get ever larger, to satisfy and push to the limit the general sexual pleasure in that bell-shaped female image. Only then did the ridiculousness of the fashion in its completely developed form suddenly become manifest. The visual longings of the general public then shifted towards a modification of the enormous bell; and narrower clothes with back-fullness began to come increasingly into vogue until they, too, reached a limit. At any historical remove, the silliness of either fashion in its extreme form is instantly obvious. But at the moment and at close range, they each seemed to be appropriate and pleasing, at least in the eyes of the fashion-minded. It was a new-born historical objectivity, combined with a zeal for self-improvement and good works, which enabled the English people to turn a critical eye on their own clothes for the first time, to see fashion as a form of bondage, and deliberately to try resisting or even abolishing it.

Mrs Newton points out that attempts on the part of ideologues to abolish fashion only resulted in the promulgation of new modes among the fashion-minded. This is a phenomenon recently apparent in the adoption of the counter-culture costume by bourgeois intellectuals; and it shows that exclusive distinctions are always difficult to maintain for long between any revolutionary style and the established mode it intends to flout. Radical chic is evidently nothing new. In the same vein, Mrs Newton also shows how ideological reforming zeal about dress tends to involve against fashions which are already at the limit of their development and on their way out, or already abandoned by the young, attractive and traditionally rebellious members of conventional society. On the other hand, the various types of "reformed" dress invented during the nineteenth century—the Pre-Raphaelite costume, "aesthetic" dress, classical or "Grecian" dress, and the mannish tailored clothing affected by "strong-minded" or "platform" women—became instantly prey to the novelty-seeking encroachment of fashion itself. They might not even have been the pure inventions of a reforming spirit at work, but were likely to have made a few preparatory appearances as ele-

trarily we would have with, it was felt, the question of dressing with or against it need not arise for serious women. Important issues could be dealt with on a more lofty plane, where the whole equivocal matter of dress could attain an equal seriousness, if it were not perhaps to be totally ignored. Clothes could at least be recognized as important even if fashion were not.

But apparently fashion is important, and in this century there has been no choice among even earnest social and feminist reformers but to acknowledge the fact. One Charles E. Dawson wrote famously in the *Woman Worker* in 1908:

Fashion will not always rule despotically. As the great upward movement of womanhood broadens and the dawn of women's consciousness of mighty power grows clear, it will be pleasing to watch its influence upon the "ladies' papers", and see how long their snobbish twaddle and rag-trade announcements endure. They show no sign of abating, although many believe the dawn is here.



"Iselt", an evening gown of supposedly medieval inspiration, from the Liberty catalogue of 1905.

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