

Anne Hollander on fashion

The Issue of Skirting

For a long time men's concern for clothes was considered physically practical and sensible, and honorably aimed at the public expression of status. Women's interest in clothes was thought to be narcissistic or erotically aggressive—in some way rather neurotic, and concerned with the personal expression of feeling. Female tolerance for physical inconvenience in clothes



Drawing by Salvador Bru

(girdles, high heels, etc.) used to be ridiculed and even hated, because it was seen as shamefully erotic in its essence. The male version (tight collar and tie, confining shoes and jackets in summer heat) was exempt from scorn because it was considered practical in essence—a reasonable sacrifice of comfort to the public image necessary for legitimate masculine worldly success and power. The deliberate use of clothing to assist men's worldly success has long been allowed—but for a couple of centuries it was firmly dissociated from the use of clothing for sexual success—allegedly a female maneuver, and just a bit dishonorable.

Now all this has changed, along with all the other beliefs about sex, success and clothes. A book called *Dress for Success* appeared a few years ago, giving sartorial advice to men who wished to get ahead faster and suggesting that they clothe their uncertain aspirations in the guise of confident assumptions: you don't dress as if you were going to succeed, but as if you were already successful. Recently, *Dress for Success for Women*

has appeared, and the same standards and methods are seen to work for them. But to be correctly dressed for the part of successful worldly achievers, women now must learn *not* to dress as if they were non-sexual beings, and most emphatically *not* to dress in the recognized mode of female *sexual* achievers—the aggressive trappings of erotic ambition: high-heels, see-through blouses and all the rest of it. They must look exactly and only like powerful, successful women—and without the resources and traditions of, say, Queen Elizabeth the First or Catherine the Great, it proves a delicate matter.

And to do it, interestingly enough, women have returned to skirts. The skirt has been the unchallenged badge of the female sex since the early middle ages: during all the recent profound revolutions in American customs and attitudes which have established not only the wearing of pants by women in all situations but also the public recognition of the rights, dignities and preferences of male homosexuals, men have never worn skirts. The sexes have come to share in most kinds of sartorial expression, at least when at leisure, just as they did in the Renaissance. Men have resumed a long-dormant interest in the erotic expressiveness of their own dress: jewelry, cosmetics, false hair, seductive color and texture, suggestive fit, degrees of nudity, captivating varieties of foreign costume, etc. But with all this, no skirts on the man in the street, straight or gay.

The skirt has remained female, if indeed it was worn at all. During its considerable eclipse, while women explored all the possibilities of trouser-wearing, the skirt was shelved, as it were, for the time being until the need for a consistently powerful, successful—and consequently *conventional*—female image arose. As with the collar, tie and jacket for business and professional men of achievement, so with the skirt for the established successful women of the present moment. Serious women may now consider themselves free at last from the need to deliver those emphatic messages about sexual equality that the non-wearing of skirts once conveyed. A skirt is conventional evidence of straightforward femaleness, now devoid of connotations of sexual bondage

or sexual threat. And current skirts, it should be pointed out, have lately stabilized within a fairly small range of fashionable lengths: as the elegant, decent and handsome skirt (variously worn, of course) has become part of the uniform of the female bank-president and corporation lawyer, public terror has conspicuously abated about the possible future level of the hemline.

Elegance and decency, laced with a certain dash, are sought in female successful business dress, just as they have always been in the male version. The answer seems to be some variation of the tailored suit. Successful Americans of both sexes seem to want clothes that can be worn with easy confidence, but that are made discreetly to display their upper-class status by having certain perfect details of the traditional master tailor's art.

Women have worn man-tailored suits (with skirts) for a hundred years; and by now, this style of dress has conveniently lost its early transvestite flavor. In a couple of generations, tailored suits have become as female as chiffon. They have long since ceased to be thought of as appropriate for militant suffragettes or Rosalind Russell playing a ridiculous

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unfeminine female tycoon. They are no longer repressively severe; and they can be worn by the successful women in modern public life with no loss of sexual

ground in any direction. Our first woman president will undoubtedly wear them—but hers, of course, may be made of denim.

gross simplifications of Lloyd's comments on strategy and operations.

The factual snippets and especially the photographs in both books do, somehow, manage to suggest several of the terrible dilemmas of trench warfare. Military theorists before 1914 had spoken confidently of a science of war; trench fighting instead was studded with paradox, inconsistency, irrationality, and outright lies.

Witness the infantryman. Trained to fight, egged on by civilian propagandists, he actually fired his rifle but rarely: during the infrequent battles and perhaps in the ritualistic "morning hate" when British units greeted the dawn with "15 rounds rapid." Instead, his life paralleled that of a cave dweller. Much energy was spent in overcoming supply difficulties and—somehow—getting food, fuel, shelter, dry clothes. Much more was expended in constantly carrying, hauling, repairing, and sheer digging.

This was the pre-bulldozer era. Trenches, emplacements, dugouts, roads, all had to be built and maintained. Barbed wire had to hefted forward and then strung. The vast appetite of modern weapons for ammunition had to be satisfied, and this required human carrying parties, for neither trucks nor pack animals could safely reach the forward units. And all this in a maze of trenches that reeked of excrement and barely-buried corpses, trenches often filled with rainwater, trenches so congested during battle that it sometimes took several *days* simply to remove the wounded, let alone the dead.

Moreover, since most work required the cover of night, the soldier was reduced to cat-napping by day; training, drill, inspections and further labor afflicted him even in rear areas. Constant exhaustion was the result, a dull ache that deadened both nerves and feelings. Perhaps this seemed normal to generals whose careers had been spent in hastily shaping civilians into soldiers, and who preferred lethargy and obedience to vitality and potential disagreement.

Here, then, was *real* war: a fine come-down for the enthusiasts who had entered battle in 1914 and 1915, confident representatives of a Europe whose power and products dominated the entire globe. Now, in a kind of perverted urbanization, men were crammed into a military slum stretching across northern France. Their lives had sunk beneath that of the most primitive pre-industrial peasant, as they burrowed underground to escape the destructive power of the

Books Considered

Eye-deep in Hell:
Trench Warfare in World War I
by John Ellis
(Pantheon; \$10)

The War in the Trenches
by Alan Lloyd
(McKay; \$12.50)

Some sixty years after 1917, that tumultuous year, a modest boom is underway in studies of World War I. There are the books here reviewed; there are more on the perimeter. Some deal with policies and economics, others with ordinary individuals, their behavior, consciousness, states of mind and feeling, a realm usually overlooked in the traditional emphasis on the decisions (blunders?) of generals and politicians.

The Middle Parts of Fortune, Frederic Manning's perceptive novel (1929) of infantrymen in battle and out, has just been republished, superseding *Her Privates We*, its former, expurgated version. E. E. Cummings's *The Enormous Room*, an early portrayal (1922) of the disillusionment of men entangled in the military machine, recently has been reprinted in edited form.

Many younger officers were appalled—and ashamed—by the consistent misjudgments of the high command. The British side of their intellectual counter-attack in the interwar era against their seniors can be followed in Brian Bond's *Liddell Hart: A Study of His Military Thought*, and Anthony Trythall's "Bony" Fuller: *The Intellectual General*.

This conflict between innovation and authority was less pronounced in the American Army, which had arrived late in France and had suffered relatively little. But the European experience, as depicted in Frank Vandiver's recent, massive biography, *Black Jack: The Life and Times of John J. Pershing*, and in the forthcoming survey by Thomas

Another World, 1897-1917
by Anthony Eden
(Doubleday; \$7.95)

The First World War, 1914-1918
by Gerd Hardach
(University of California Press; \$12.95)

Leonard, *Above the Battle: War-Making in America from Appomattox to Versailles*, both reflected and accelerated change, as the old army gave way to one that later became as firmly entrenched in Bavaria and Franconia as it formerly had been in the cavalry posts of John Ford's westerns.

What explains this intellectual flurry? Some of it may be fallout from Paul Fussell's widely-acclaimed *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), a remarkable cultural history of the war's impact on British thinking and expression. Most of these new books are indeed British: perhaps the disappearance of imperial grandeur has stirred a compensatory interest in the days of glory and world power, even those that marked the beginning of the end. Certainly there seems to be a virtually unquenchable appetite in Britain for popularized accounts of both world wars. A minor cottage industry has developed in response, as certain writers scissors-and-paste together new books carved from the defenseless bodies of the old.

So it is with these volumes by John Ellis and Alan Lloyd. Profusely illustrated, with some thin textual tissue as connecting links, they are little more than scanty summaries of material drawn from well-known earlier works. The focus, predictably, is on the British Army on the Western front, though Ellis occasionally does introduce a French or German eyewitness. He also, wisely, sticks to the day-by-day aspects of trench life (and death), avoiding the

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