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### **Reforming women's fashion, 1850–1920: politics, health and art**

Patricia A. Cunningham; Kent State University Press, Kent, Ohio, 2003, 250p, ISBN 0-8733-8743-0 £32.00 (Pbk)

The dress reform movements of the mid to late 19th century and the early 20th century have been the subject of only intermittent interest to fashion specialists. It is quite usual, even today, to find references, in histories of fashion, histories of women and general histories, only to Amelia Bloomer, as though she single-handed had promoted the wearing of trousers for women. Yet she was but part of a movement – which was actually various different movements, sometimes apart, sometimes converging – to reform not simply women's dress, but also the conventions and attitudes that dictated what women should wear. As Aileen Ribeiro has demonstrated, dress and morality are always closely connected, so the reform of dress in its heyday in the 19th century, the role of women and the policing of female behaviour always went hand in hand.

Patricia Cunningham has relatively little to say about the period of the French Revolution, when fashionable dress underwent an ideological upheaval as women abandoned corsets, panniers, heavy skirts and wigs in favour of styles that symbolically referenced the republics of ancient Greece and Rome. These styles were later again abandoned, but the stiff and bulky fashions of the mid 19th century continued to meet with opposition, even if this was for many years marginalized.

As Cunningham demonstrates, objections to western fashions came from more than one corner. There were those who objected to tight lacing and heavy ground length skirts and trains on the grounds of hygiene and health. There were the aesthetic movements, originating in the Arts and Crafts Movement, which objected to conventional fashion on the basis that it was ugly, distorted the beauty of the human body and prevented free movement. And there were the communitarian, socialist and feminist movements who emphasized the way in which mainstream fashion both represented the restrictive ideology of women's roles in Victorian times and at the same time actively and materially hindered women, who could not move freely, run, work or, later, ride bicycles safely, in the cumbersome garments they had to wear.

Cunningham divides her material into chapters according to the type of garment to be discussed – trousered dress, aesthetic dress, undergarments. These chapters are plentifully illustrated with many unusual and fascinating

plates, which give a clear idea of the garments under discussion. Her book is original, too, in its emphasis on American dress, for the only previous comparable book on dress reform known to me, Stella Mary Newton's *Health Art and Reason: Dress Reformers of the Nineteenth Century* concentrated largely on Europe, and indeed, primarily on Britain. Neither book fully explores the situation in France, acknowledged capital of fashion in the 19th century, where it appears that cross dressing was forbidden by law, and yet there are accounts of women wearing trousered dress at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, at the same time as the writer Colette, for example, in *Ces Plaisirs*, recounts the difficulties of upper class lesbians in disguising the fact that they were wearing trousers in public.

The main absence in Patricia Cunningham's text, however, is a clear contextual historicization of the reform movements. Her general introductory account of 19th century fashion is largely descriptive and there is little attempt to chart the sources of change in industrialization, urbanization and other major movements that caused women's lives to undergo such tremendous upheavals that it was hardly surprising that forms of dress designed originally for a leisured existence could not sustain the pace of modern life. She does emphasize the advance of women's education, in particular their increasing involvement in sports and physical activities and the impossibility for rural women in the vast spaces of the United States of sticking rigidly to floor length gowns and corsets, but gives the – probably correct – impression of piecemeal adaptations and an uneven process of change, which could have been more systematically discussed.

In other words, despite the accessible style and a valuable empirical base, I missed the clearer philosophical and ideological account that makes Stella Mary Newton's book still the standard by which others are to be judged.

Finally, I found her conclusion surprisingly anodyne, for she seems to have reached the conclusion that the problems addressed by the dress reform movements of a century or more ago have been resolved. She writes: 'The progression toward modernity that provided women new options for dressing ... in many ways paralleled the evolution in women's roles ... these new forms of dress eventually were transformed into the comfortable styles that we wear today' (p. 222).

Yet surely, women's dress (and men's to a lesser extent) is as contested as ever. As trousers and trouser suits have progressed from being a shocking challenge to morals to being a rather drably conservative form of businesswomen's wear, new forms of outrage have arisen, on the one hand eroticized 'celebrity' styles, on the other the movement in Muslim communities for ever stricter forms of Islamic dress. The idea, much promoted in the 1970s and 1980s that today we all 'wear what we like' has never been true – and is never likely to be.

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