

# The Men's Dress Reform Party 1929-37

By BARBARA BURMAN and MELISSA LEVENTON

'Well, why not beauty for men?'<sup>1</sup>

'A wail has gone up throughout the land; man is clutching at his throat and crying 'release me from the strangle-band'<sup>2</sup>

THANKS TO the publication of Stella Newton's *Health Art and Reason* (John Murray, London 1974) we gained the first full survey of the aims and work of nineteenth-century dress reformers. Since then it has seemed fair to assume that organized attempts at dress reform in the United Kingdom must have faded and dwindled to nothing during this century.

Several factors might support this assumption: not least the simplifying effect of the First World War on dress; the impact of lighter weight man-made yarns and faster dyes to facilitate washing; increasing public access to sport and associated leisure activities. By these formerly unpredicted means, it has seemed that the reformers' earlier demands were met on a wide scale. Thus, in this century, the calls for dress reform seemed to have been overtaken by events.

A clue to suggest this was not entirely true exists in *The Psychology of Clothes* (Hogarth Press, London 1930). The author Dr John Carl Flugel (1884-1955) was a leading British Freudian, based at University College, London. In his book he made several sympathetic mentions of dress reform groups, and noted they were active at the time of his writing. Our research into one of these groups points to much greater activity, interest, and success in dress reform between the wars than we had previously imagined. Here we describe the work and aims of the Men's Dress Reform Party from 1929 to 1937, and discuss some of the likely reasons for its eventual closure.

The idea that men's dress needed reform was not new. In 1888, for example, the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* bewailed the lack of artistic qualities in coat and trousers and recommended that men return to wearing breeches. An American magazine in 1890 felt that '... the one supreme comfort left the student of art in man's dress is, that the very extreme of ugliness has been reached, and whatever modifications come in the future must, necessarily, be for the better'.<sup>3</sup> It was another forty years before the Men's Dress Reform Party emerged and its founders seemed unaware of the nineteenth century discontent they might have shared. The efforts of the Healthy and Artistic Dress Union in the 1890s in London and their proposals for modified men's clothing might have encouraged them in the realization that there were precedents for their case. Obviously there were differences in the social climate. There were differences in approach too; perhaps the most telling was the Men's Dress Reform Party's lack of the somewhat heavy-handed relationship with past art which had characterized so much of the reform efforts of the nineteenth century.

The MDRP came into being in 1929. On 12 June that year it issued its first call to membership. This was addressed to 'men and women, old and young, rich and poor' and all 'interested in healthier and better clothes for men', and sought to develop a campaign to 'reform their clothes with as much profit to health and appearance as women have

recently achieved'.<sup>4</sup> From 39 Bedford Square, London WC1, seven distinguished signatories extended this invitation to would-be members; they were a steering committee formed by Dean Inge, the 'gloomy Dean' of St Paul's; Guy Kendall, headmaster of University College School; W. R. Sickert the painter; Ernest Thesiger the actor; Dr Leonard Williams; Dr Caleb W. Saleeby the chairman of the Sunlight League; Dr Alfred C. Jordan, the Acting Hon. Secretary.

According to Dr Jordan, the MDRP was the culmination of several years of growing dissatisfaction with men's clothes.<sup>5</sup> The catalyst was an article advocating dress reform which he had himself written for the *Evening Standard* in April 1929. Then a Mr Humphrey Moore wrote to the paper endorsing Dr Jordan's views, urging all like-minded young men to join him in creating a men's dress reform party. Contact between the two men led to Dr Jordan taking organizational responsibility. He took the idea to Dr Saleeby of the Sunlight League, and together they prepared the Manifesto and gathered together the original signatories.

The precise nature and function of the original committee is unclear; Sickert and Thesiger seem to have been included because of their artistic connections and public reputation and had little, if anything, to do with the actual running of the Party.<sup>6</sup> The committee was not united in its stand on reform; each of the doctors had his own pet theory.<sup>7</sup> By August 1929 there was a public rift between Dr Williams and other Party members, magnified, according to Dr Williams, beyond its merits by the press. Dr Williams felt the Party suffered from an excess of zeal: he advocated evolutionary reform and maintained that conventional attire would be perfectly acceptable as long as it was not constricting to the wearer. The 'zealots', led by Dr Jordan accused Williams of trying to wreck the MDRP — an accusation he indignantly refuted.<sup>8</sup> After this early clash, Williams ceased to be prominent in the Party's activities.

Despite these initial tensions, the MDRP was claiming by early October of 1929 that enthusiastic contact had been made with them by organizers of hopeful reform groups in India, China, Australia, South Africa, USA, and Canada. They also claimed that provincial branches of the Party were forming with some rapidity. They also reported on the existence of a fellow League for reform already well-established in New Zealand.<sup>9</sup>

By early November of their first year, the Party also reported 'complete success' to be assured, provided members would rally. By that time they had already formed their Design Committee, and prepared a report for publication called 'Practical Dress Reform'; by then they had also organized an annual subscription of 2s 6d. and arranged to demonstrate actual reform garments at the New Health Exhibition in the New Horticultural Hall at Westminster in London, from 15–22 November.<sup>10</sup>

The 1929 report of the Design Committee set out ideals which were to inform the Party's efforts throughout its existence. *The Times* noted the report as soon as it was published and put immediate emphasis on the fact that the committee 'do not put forward fixed and final views'; it noted the Party preferred 'the encouragement of a greater range of individual style than is possible with men's present stereotyped costumes'.

The collar and tie were seen as the most objectionable features of men's dress, which should be replaced by a 'Byron' collar which, as *The Times* went on, 'meets all needs of aesthetics, convenience and hygiene'. A hanging tie, with a lower knot, could still be

worn if necessary, and the shirt itself should be replaced by a blouse, 'for many purposes'. If shirts or blouses could be made 'sufficiently decorative' they would be respectable as outer-garments in their own right, with the coat or jacket then serving as an extra rather than an integral part of the costume. This change was declared an aim of the Party. So too was the abolition of trousers which were 'unsparingly condemned'. Shorts or breeches were promoted as better alternatives. Hats were thought unnecessary, and sandals were liked more than shoes. These proposed reforms applied to evening wear as well as sports and work wear.<sup>11</sup> Through this report the Party established effective press relations straightaway; several national and local journals discussed the report in some detail. The tone of these reviews was serious and considered.

The remarkable initial impetus and energy behind the Party came from its founding 'Hon. Secretary', and guiding light until 1937, Alfred Charles Jordan MD, MRCP, CBE. He was born in 1872 and died in 1956. By the time he founded the MDRP he had established an international eminence in radiology, both early and influential in that field of medicine. He was also president of the Hunterian Society. Jordan practised in Bloomsbury, and had already achieved some notoriety with the popular press who liked to photograph him as he cycled long distances across London wearing shorts, when shorts were a rare sight indeed on city streets.

Significantly, Jordan's interest in related issues of general health had led him to form the New Health Society, partly as a result of his work with the casualties of the First World War. He formed this society in conjunction with the surgeon William Arbuthnot Lane. Formed in the mid-1920s, this society was also based at 39 Bedford Square; it campaigned for better awareness of the role of exercise, fresh air, and good diet in improving the health of adults and children, and for better conditions in housing and places of work. It published a fairly substantial monthly journal known as *New Health*, which was to run until the society closed in 1937. The annual subscription was one guinea or 2s. 6d. for associate membership. In several ways the New Health Society was a venture which allowed Jordan and his companions in reform to rehearse and test some guiding ideas which were to lead later to the formation of the more specialized MDRP. In a practical sense, the address (and presumably the typewriter and telephone) of the New Health Society provided an established base and network for the Party.

Two examples from the pages of *New Health* show how ideas which were first aired there went on to achieve significant success within the MDRP a few years later. Firstly in 1927 Jordan suggested improved garb for men when they were at the seaside. He argued in a *New Health* article that year for the abolition of 'unsightly and unnecessary garments, which cling to us in hideous and chilling discomfort when we come out of the sea'. In order to benefit from the 'healing powers of sunlight when it has access to the surface of the body' men were advised to adopt a bathing slip; 'if it fits accurately (as it must) it cannot possibly offend modesty'.<sup>12</sup> Such a slip was eventually designed and sold by the MDRP from 1932 onwards. It was cut in panels, with Cambridge blue at the sides and Oxford blue at the centre and it had an optional MDRP 'logo' to be sewn on. It was available by post from the MDRP Supplies Department, based at Jordan's then home address 38 Moss Hall Grove, London N12.<sup>13</sup>

A second example of this transfer of interests occurred in 1928 when Dr Saleeby, chairman of the Sunlight League and also chairman of the Clothing Sub-Committee of

the New Health Society, drew attention to the need for reform of men's outdoor clothing. In *New Health* he lobbied for the wearing of shorts for tennis and argued that shirts for most outdoor sports should be made of artificial silk. In his view this material would allow perspiration to evaporate easily, and let through the maximum of ultra-violet light.<sup>14</sup> This went against a common preference at the time for wool next to the skin in male sportswear, a habit supported by several leading observers.<sup>15</sup> Saleeby noted that the men's situation was 'really pitiful' in these matters, and that the 'task of the would-be reformer is hard when he approaches that conservative and timorous sex'.<sup>16</sup> He felt, however, that the Duke of York had set a good example at Wimbledon in 1926 by wearing 'sleeves cut short above the elbow' so 'no other man need be afraid to do so'.<sup>17</sup>

Once again appropriate garments for this reform were later designed and sold through the MDRP. In 1933 tennis shorts were advertised by the Party as 'approved' by Bunny Austin and Brame Hillyard and as being 'stylish and cool' and 'supremely comfortable'. They were held up without a belt by 'two short bands of elastic let in invisibly at the sides. A waist-band extension with hook obviates any pull on the front button and gives a neat finish'. These shorts were sold at 15s. a pair, or three pairs for £2 2s. *od.*, by post from the MDRP Supplies Department.<sup>18</sup> 'Meanwhile, what have the Wimbledon authorities done to help on this healthy and desirable reform? They have put the ball-bows into trousers!'<sup>19</sup> Oddly enough, at this date shorts were *de rigueur* for football.

The examples of this promotion of bathing slips and tennis shorts demonstrate the shift of projects from within the New Health Society to within the MDRP. Closely linked with both of these organizations was the Sunlight League. Its chairman served in both the others. The League was formed in 1924 when its first patron was Her Majesty Queen Alexandra. It was located near to the MDRP at 29 Gordon Square, London WC1. At the formation of the MDRP in 1929 the Sunlight League had called its attention to the need for mutual support. 'Members of the MDRP we look to you to help us carry on our work of saving the children of the future from the diseases of darkness, dirt and ignorance, and give us the power to secure for you greater facilities for the enjoyment of pure air and sunlight.'<sup>20</sup> Saleeby retained connections with the MDRP until its closure, and the League's quarterly journal *Sunlight* frequently printed articles and information about dress reform.

Early optimism within the MDRP was fuelled by such links and support and also by rapid, highly public successes during their first years. By 1931, for instance, they had attracted the support of Sir Henry Wood and the then Dr Adrian Boult in what they reported as 'the achievement of the year'. They referred to the 'reform of the evening dress of the men of the BBC Promenade Orchestra. Throughout the Season at Queen's Hall (August to October) the men wore soft white shirts with attached soft collars and black Palm-Beach jackets. The men were well pleased with the relief from the starched collar, shirt-front and heavy coat'. This reform, suggested by the MDRP had been adopted 'very readily' by Wood and Boult, respectively the conductor and music director.<sup>21</sup> Wood had also served on the committee of the MDRP Mid-summer Revel in 1931.

Optimism was also justified by the achievements of their campaign to get the bathing slip accepted. Prior to designing and selling the slips, they had published painstaking annual lists of all those UK seaside resorts where slips were permitted, and also those

where 'regulation' garments were still required. By 1932 the Party could claim a decisive hand in this affair, and had succeeded in convincing a number of seaside councils that a bathing slip is enough covering for a man to wear for mixed bathing and sunbathing'. From Aberystwyth to Worthing thirty-eight resorts permitted the slip. There remained twenty-seven against, from Barmouth to Weston-super-Mare. 'Margate still hesitates but has almost come round to the side of health and sense.'<sup>22</sup>

Another reason for confidence was the Party's remarkable growth of local branches. This decentralization occurred quickly, each of the provincial and London branches having their own Honorary Secretary who were probably responsible for organizing local social gatherings and who were urged to sponsor debates and other publicity-attracting events. Jordan seems to have been the central committee member most involved in branch activities. The pace of the formation of new branches began to slow by 1932.



FIG. 1. The power of humour is often used coercively to maintain social conformity. From the nineteenth century on, *Punch's* cartoonists always sought to ridicule dress reformers of any hue; the MDRP was no exception. A man's bare knees and lack of conventional neckwear were typical targets of derision

*'Punch' 10 July 1929*

Almost two hundred branches were formed altogether, including a good number overseas. The Party functioned abroad from Costa Rica to Cairo to Madras, but probably had its closest ties with its Viennese and Canadian branches, both of which had active and enthusiastic honorary secretaries. Not much was reported about the other foreign branches; however, it must have been both useful and comforting to be able to point to Party achievements abroad during slow times at home.

The Cambridge branch was one of the liveliest and most independent. By May 1930 it had thirty undergraduate members and several well-known dons joined. Its local secretary was an undergraduate from Selwyn College called H. Donington Smith, and he pressed for the adoption of lighter, brighter clothes. 'Collar studs and suspenders must go; whither is immaterial'.<sup>23</sup> The branch pioneered the new tennis dress. This could be seen in the window of a Cambridge department store, Joshua Taylor and Co. Ltd, which claimed that 'many complete suits have already been sold'. The tennis wear was sold with stockings or socks which had fancy tops in college colours. Jordan personally urged the '1930 Cambridge man' to consider what he should wear during Ball Week. 'Surely something cool and decent? A silk blouse; satin shorts and silk stockings — and a nice clean arm for his fair (and cool) partner's back! If not, why not? Lack of courage? Then join the MDRP.' 'The boiled shirt, the mill-stone collar and the mute's suit have had a long enough run; KILL THEM! Burn them in the Market Place! They will have few mourners! —'<sup>24</sup>

The central steering committee itself organized events for members and the general public. Members enjoyed social activities such as long weekends away and dinner-dances. The wearing of reform dress on these occasions was encouraged: members were urged to design their own and prizes were awarded at the annual midsummer fête. In July 1929 the first of many public rallies was held in London, at which several committee members and Percy Dearmer spoke. Such events provided '... an excellent opportunity for the interchange of opinions and suggestions...'.<sup>25</sup> *The Daily Sketch* published a series of letters to the editor from members of public following the first rally; some writers revealed their own dress reform experience, others reported sightings of men in less-than-conventional attire, and one disgruntled man snapped 'In my experience of life — nearly eighty years — unconventional dress leads to unconventional manners and a lower standard of society'.<sup>26</sup>

As well as press coverage generated by their activities, the Party also used radio and film. A debate, broadcast by the BBC between Dr J. C. Flugel (for reform) and Mr Anthony Martin (for convention), was held in the autumn of 1929. A film of an exhibition tennis match played by Brame Hillyard and Bunny Austin, both wearing shorts, was obtained and shown; some of the Party's own activities were filmed and shown in weekly newsreels.<sup>27</sup>

The mid-summer dress reform Revels were perhaps the most glittering and felicitous of all the Party's events. They took place each summer for most of the Party's existence, and the organizing committees boasted many famous names from Society and the arts. In 1931, for instance, apart from Sir Henry Wood, Ethel Mannin the novelist served on the organizing committee, as did Mrs A. C. McCorquodale, later to be known as Barbara Cartland. That year the Revel took place at the Suffolk Street Galleries London SW1. This 'night of Revelry and Dance will give every man a chance to show how he can

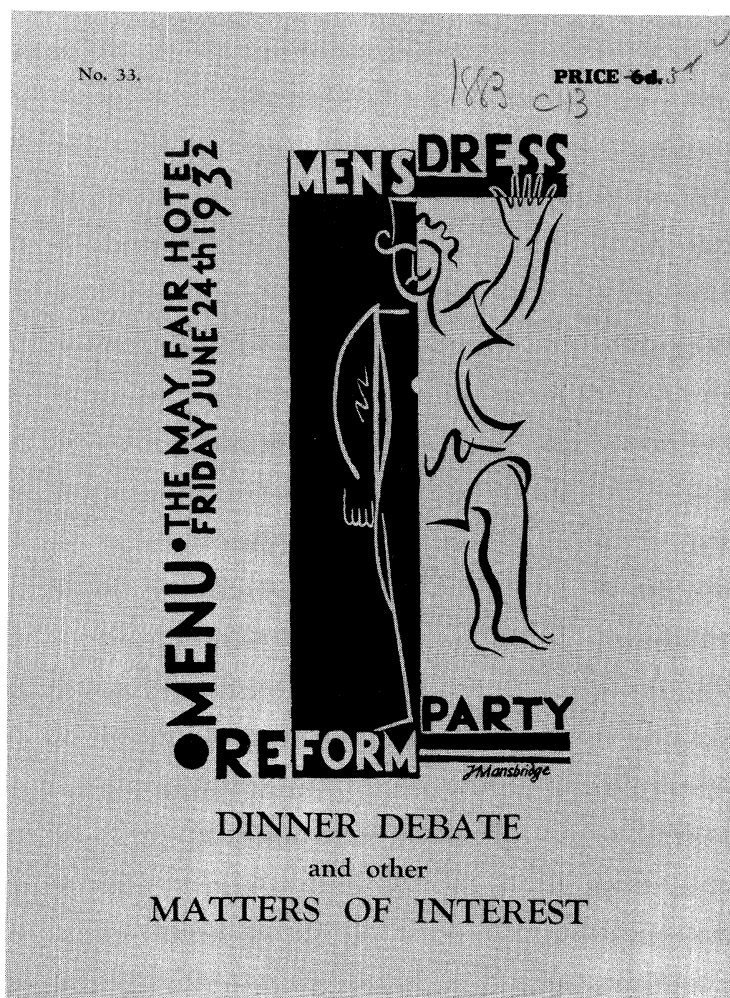


FIG. 2. Social events provided an important support network for the MDRP. Menu cover from a mid-summer dinner debate in 1932

*By permission of the British Library*

LOOK AND FEEL HIS BEST by the costume he will evolve for the UNIQUE OCCASION'.<sup>28</sup> At a similar event in 1933 the unconverted were invited to wear 'Regulation Evening Dress with Starched Collar and Shirt Specially Boiled for the Occasion, in the hope and belief that discomfort will achieve conversion'.<sup>29</sup> The 1935 Jubilee midsummer Rally was a weekend visit to Stratford-on-Avon, with the MDRP Festival Dinner held in the foyer of the Memorial Theatre, overlooking the river.

Another major thrust in the Party's effort to reach the public was participation in trade and health-orientated exhibitions, just as nineteenth-century dress reformers had done. Just before this formation of the Party, 'healthy' suits of artificial silk, looking remarkably like the Party's idea of reform dress had been shown at the British Artificial Silk Industries Exhibition in April 1929. The Party's first demonstration of reform garments at the New Health Exhibition in November 1929 was followed by their stand and mannequin shows at the Lancashire Cotton Fair held in Manchester from 11 February to

1 March 1930. The Fair was part of the industry's drive to improve exports and was opened as a major event by the Home Secretary. The MDRP held their demonstrations four times daily, concentrating on washable clothes, and on the new open-necked shirt, in designs suitable for town wear rather than just sports wear. It was reported that the Party found many new members there, including 'one of the leading magnates of the industrial North'.<sup>30</sup> Tantalizingly, he remains unidentified. The Party also exhibited at a Chamber of Trade show at Dewsbury in the same year. New members were enrolled at the Ideal Holidays Exhibition in London, again in 1930, and that busy year also saw a Party stand at the clothing section of the International Hygiene Exhibition in Dresden.

The impact of all this activity seems to have persuaded several tailors, drapers, and outfitters that they might be onto a good thing if they catered for the reformers' needs. The *Tailor and Cutter* weekly journal itself hedged its bets most of the time about dress reform; it was, on balance, more concerned with the damage done to small tailors by the developing ready-to-wear menswear trade than the potential damage reformers might inflict with their taste for looser and simplified, lightweight garments. Nevertheless some small businesses even started to design reformed menswear of their own, instead of just



FIG. 3. Holiday attire at the time of the formation of the MDRP. It emphasized the general drift towards informality in dress, eventually to overtake some of the main aims of the MDRP

'Punch' 24 July 1929



offering to meet an individual customer's reform requirements. For instance in 1932 a London firm offered dual-purpose coloured dress reform shirts, with 'an artistic silk cord in place of the usual buttons' at the collar; this 'unique attachment' was hidden beneath the collar to allow it to be drawn together for wear with a tie if necessary. Although the collar was not detachable, it didn't appear 'unduly soiled in comparison with the rest of the shirt' because of the dark colours in which it was available. It was easily laundered, the makers claimed, as well as made-to-measure, available with long or short sleeves and delivered within seven to ten days. This particular reform garment cost 21s. in 'Delysia' or 12s. 6d. in finest Irish linen. Postage was 6d. extra.<sup>31</sup>

Austin and Smith of 64 Great Portland Street in London were an outfitters sympathetic to reformers' needs. So too were Dowie and Marshall of 455 West Strand, London who were 'shoemakers since 1824' and Ley and Miller of Edgeware Road, London,



FIG. 4. MDRP members photographed in London, probably on the day of the Coronation competition prizegiving in 1937. Left: Dr Saleeby of the Sunlight League wearing conventional dress; second left, Roy Heckscher, a Jordan family friend; third left, an unknown man probably wearing the dark blue chiffon velvet outfit, with light blue silk shirt and cummerbund, which was given second prize in the Coronation competition; fourth left, unknown man wearing a suit also shown as a prize winning design in *The Listener* (14 July 1937); fifth left, unknown man, thought to be model used for the competition; far right, Dr Jordan, aged 65, founding member of the MDRP; he carries the conventional jacket he commonly wore in town with his shorts

*First published in the 'Daily Sketch' 8 July 1937*

considered themselves specialists in so-called hygienic clothing. The MDRP was very active in drawing its members' attention to such firms; it regarded encouragement and support for inventive retailers as one of its important roles. Dr Jordan was himself scrupulous in acknowledging and supporting appropriate reform whenever it stemmed from outside the Party. Retailing success including the opening of a dress reform shop in Menton by the Party's Riviera branch in 1933 and the increased volume of trade by the Party's own Supplies Department necessitated a transfer of distribution in London to A. P. Bolland of Warwick Street.

Despite successes and optimism, the end of the Party was sudden and apparently complete by 1937. No clear sequence of events can be established leading directly to the dismantling of the organization, but in the Party's last known event are contained several of the problems which had dogged it from its beginning: chiefly these stemmed from an apparent dearth of acceptable design ideas and the stubborn conventions of ordinary menswear. The last event, in Coronation year, was a competition for new designs which was staged in London and also televised. What was probably meant as a last-ditch attempt to infuse fresh design ideas was to turn into the Party's swansong.

The Coronation competition was as well-organized as anything Dr Jordan did; entries were invited for two classes: 'office, professional or other vocational wear' and 'ceremonial or evening wear'. On 7 July the prizegiving took place in central London, with addresses given by the judges. The judging panel consisted of A. S. Bridgland (journalist and fashion expert), Lewis Casson, Dr J. C. Flugel, James Laver, Herbert Norris, and H. A. Rogers (president of the Association of London Masters Tailors). Admission was by programme at 6d.<sup>32</sup>

The previous day television viewers had seen a slightly different panel, missing Lewis Casson and Herbert Norris. The programme, visible to about 50,000 set-owners in the limited radius of Alexandra Palace, was titled simply 'Men's Dress Reform' and lasted for ten minutes in an evening's viewing which only lasted from 9 to 10 p.m. in total. Dr Jordan himself was on the programme, accompanied by his son Peter, who modelled a suit. The loss of Casson may have contributed to the apparent flatness of the programme, but the biggest disappointment seems to have been the clothes themselves about which the judges were critical. The first prize of fifty guineas was measure of the hope pinned to the competition.

The clothes 'were not beautiful nor were they practical'. No first prize was awarded due to the poor standard. Second prize went to an evening 'costume made of dark blue chiffon velvet; it had a coat with sleeves, the whole lined with white silk, and long trousers of conventional pattern. Under the coat was worn a light blue silk shirt and blue cummerbund'. Third prize went to an evening garment with a cape. Consolation prizes went to two day suits with shorts and one with breeches 'on eighteenth-century lines'. Dr Jordan contributed several designs including a uniform with shorts for telegraph boys.<sup>33</sup>

Coupled with the lack of design skills, the well-known conservatism of male dress was emphasized by the BBC itself. It published in the *Radio Times* two untypical and unflattering photographs of Dr Jordan wearing strange, short-skirted tunics of medieval character, probably only worn for a midsummer Revel or some such more fanciful event. In practice he mostly wore smartly cut shorts with a conventional jacket. These two

photographs, used to advertise the programme, cannot have aided the cause. In addition *The Listener* published a review of the programme which was particularly critical and unhelpful. It attacked the reformer's emphasis on shorts: 'Whether man's lower limbs look their best encased in slightly flattened parallel tubes may be open to doubt, but at least there seems no great aesthetic advantage in cutting the tubes short at the knee.' The anonymous reviewer conceded that some of the interest of the clothes 'no doubt lay in their novel colours', unfortunately not visible on the black and white screens. This limitation, the writer felt, was 'fully made up for by the convenience of being able to express our feelings regarding the costumes shown without risk of offending their designers who were safely at Alexandra Palace several miles away'. The designs were not likely to influence taste, but they 'nonetheless provided viewers with an entertaining ten minutes and plenty of laughter'.<sup>34</sup>

The BBC seems to have displayed a curious approach in televising something they clearly intended to deride. Dr Jordan and his friends cannot have been impervious to the laughter. They must have been very disappointed by the whole affair. By this stage Dr Jordan had carried onerous duties in the Party for nearly ten years, at some considerable financial cost to himself, and the Party was ready for new impetus. Had the Coronation competition succeeded in generating fresh momentum and new friends, its closure might have been averted. However, it had a thoroughly negative effect just at the point when Dr Jordan's efforts were to be swallowed up anyway by the greater events leading to the outbreak of war in 1939.

Despite its sound, health orientated reasoning, its energy and its periodic optimism in its significant sartorial advances, the MDRP lasted less than a decade. One major stumbling block must have been its inability to persuade men to adopt reform dress for much else besides sports and leisure.<sup>35</sup> Reform dress had the disadvantage of being similar to clothes commonly worn by young boys. Even convinced reformers could only be sure of meeting like-minded and like-dressed men at the MDRP functions. There is too, a long-established disinclination on the part of Englishmen to take advice on changing their appearance. Additionally, male dress was, and is, frequently used to lend a would-be authority to the wearer, and in part this authority depends on borrowings from, or references to, the dress of the past. In this sense, tradition can be a key factor in male appearance, in male identity itself. The particular notion of change promoted by the MDRP could never seriously challenge this. This authority of appearance in menswear was well-served by bespoke tailoring, and later also by the increasingly sophisticated ready-to-wear tailoring, which was able carefully to disguise and bolster the figure by means of subtle cutting and the use of opaque, firm cloth. Bespoke tailoring also offered a ritual and evidence of expenditure which further enhanced the visible authority of the wearer. The loose, soft cloths, shortened arms and legs, and unstructured necklines of reform clothes failed to achieve this. There were also fears that dress reformers might be thought effeminate; aware of this, several *New Health* articles referred to the clothes masculine qualities and unimpeachable masculinity of some of its proponents.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately the need for conventional dignity in menswear was greater than the appeal of the MDRP's aims and examples.

To make matters worse, the New Health Society was declared bankrupt late in 1937. It swiftly reappeared under an altered name, but when, shortly thereafter *New Health*

ceased publication, the Party lost its major publishing opportunity. For these practical and social reasons the Party was over. We do well to recall it in its most vigorous heyday, when its members believed anything was possible. Perhaps at some future date they may be proved right: 'The dull, unimaginative, conventional, stuffy, non-creative, unproductive nincompoops, whose palsied minds would destroy health, efficiency and freedom, by their sneers and jeers have utterly failed to crush the movement for men's dress reform.'<sup>37</sup>

### Postscript

The authors recognize the need for further research into organized dress reform this century. At least two other organizations are known of by name only; these are the *Sensible Dress Society* and the *Hygienic Dress League*. In order to achieve a more complete picture, further information would be much welcomed.

### Acknowledgements

Our thanks to June Averill of the BBC, June Swann, and to Peter Jordan for his most courteous and patient help.

### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Byngnam, Dion, *New Health* (January 1932), pp. 21-22.
- <sup>2</sup> Jordan, A. C., Letter to *The Times*, 17 June 1929.
- <sup>3</sup> Jenness-Miller, A., *Jenness-Miller Monthly* (February 1890), p. 67.
- <sup>4</sup> Jordan, A. C., Letter to *The Times*, 12 June 1929.
- <sup>5</sup> By his own account, Dr Jordan began wearing reform dress in 1926.
- <sup>6</sup> Sickert was said, in 1929, to favour the wearing of the kilt. Other than this, his name is conspicuously absent from most MDRP literature.
- <sup>7</sup> Dr Williams, editor of the *Journal of Balneology and Climatology*, felt that clothing should not be at all constricting, because that interfered with the proper function of the body. Dr Saleeby approached reform dress from the question of the circulation of air, maintaining that maximum exposure to sunlight and air was crucial to health and to the future of the race. Dr Jordan attacked conventional dress for men because it was dirty and unattractive. These were their basic orientations, although they borrowed ideas from one another on some issues.
- <sup>8</sup> Letter from Dr Williams to the editor of *New Health*, August 1929.
- <sup>9</sup> *New Health* (October 1929), p. 30.
- <sup>10</sup> MDRP Newsletter to members, 8 November 1929.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Times*, 18 November 1929, p. 9. *Sunlight* bore the cost of the original publication; it also reprinted it in full in its issue of December 1929. The report was illustrated with eight line drawings and two photographs.
- <sup>12</sup> Jordan A. C., *New Health* (May 1927), pp. 71-72.
- <sup>13</sup> A photograph in the possession of Peter Jordan shows Arnold Fuchs wearing a MDRP bathing slip on the banks of the River Avon during the Party's midsummer Revel 1935.
- <sup>14</sup> An influential book had been published in 1924 which contained evidence of the benefits of light and air. *Sunshine and Open Air* by Leonard Hill, Director of the Department of Applied Physiology at the National Institute of Medical Research, contained dramatic photographs of First World War wounds healed in fresh air and convalescent soldiers ski-ing at high altitudes dressed only in loin-clothes and boots.
- <sup>15</sup> The theories of Dr Gustave Jaeger, well established by the end of the last century, encouraged the move from flannel to untreated wool next the skin, and were still being promoted by the early 1930s. For instance, Alexander Byce sponsored wool in his book *Ideal Health*, 3rd edn (London, 1935); he suggested the top eight inches of a man's trousers should be lined 'with Jaeger' to protect the loins, and he subjected all his views on clothing to the broad commitment to eugenics, 'the influences which improve the inborn qualities of the race'. This book was first published in 1901.
- <sup>16</sup> Saleeby C. W., *New Health* (June 1928), pp. 51-53.
- <sup>17</sup> Saleeby drew attention to the exemplary appearance of the Duke of York in *New Health* again in September 1929 by publishing a picture of the Duke camping in well-cut shorts and an open-necked shirt. Shorts were worn at Wimbledon for the first time in 1933 on the centre court.
- <sup>18</sup> Advertisement in MDRP leaflet June 1933.
- <sup>19</sup> Jordan A. C., *New Health* (November 1932), pp. 22-23.

- <sup>20</sup> Saleeby C. W., *Practical Dress Reform*, report of the Committee on Designs of the MDRP 1929.
- <sup>21</sup> MDRP Newsletter to members January 1932.
- <sup>22</sup> Jordan A. C., *New Health* (November 1932), pp. 22-23.
- <sup>23</sup> MDRP reprint from the *Cambridge Gownsmen* 24 and 31 May 1930.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> *New Health* (August 1929), p. 24. Dearmer was Professor of Ecclesiastical Art at King's College, London.
- <sup>26</sup> Letter to the *Daily Sketch* 19 July 1929.
- <sup>27</sup> Mr Martin from the men's clothing trade wrote frequently for *Men's Wear* magazine. Both sides claimed to have won this debate. A speech by Sir Nigel Playfair, wearing reform dress, at the Party's 1933 midsummer Revel was filmed and shown throughout the week following.
- <sup>28</sup> MDRP broadsheet for the Revel on 24 June 1931.
- <sup>29</sup> MDRP broadsheet for the Dinner Debate on 21 June 1933.
- <sup>30</sup> *Cambridge Independent News*, 4 April 1930.
- <sup>31</sup> Advertisement in MDRP pamphlet on their Dinner Debate on 24 June 1932.
- <sup>32</sup> Announcement in *New Health* (July 1937), p. 27.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Listener*, 14 July 1937, p. 69. Dr Jordan had illustrated his ideas for uniform reform, including that of telegraph boys, well before in *New Health* (November 1932), pp. 22-23.
- <sup>34</sup> *The Listener*, 14 July 1937, p. 69.
- <sup>35</sup> H. Donington Smith allowed in a letter to Barbara Burman in September 1985 that, as secretary of the Cambridge branch of the Party in 1930, he had only wanted to promote shorts for tennis.
- <sup>36</sup> Baden-Powell, founder of the Boy Scout movement and wearer of shorts and open-necked shirts, was frequently cited by the MDRP as the example of masculine virtues, although he was not affiliated formally to the Party.
- <sup>37</sup> Seton, G. (Lt-Colonel G. S. Hutchison), *New Health* (July 1932), pp. 26-27.