

‘Bifurcated and Not Ashamed’

LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY DRESS REFORMERS IN NEW ZEALAND

ON 13 JANUARY 1894, Kate Walker married James Wilkinson in Christchurch. Notice of the wedding and descriptions of the dress of the bride and her attendants appeared not only in the local newspaper, but also in other New Zealand papers, and in at least one overseas.¹ The factor that made this particular wedding so newsworthy was that the bride and other women in the wedding party were attired in ‘rational’ dress:

the enterprising bride . . . was divided into two parts, as it were, the upper part of the dress consisting of the conventional bride’s veil, and the lower sinking into a modified pair of breeches. Her costume was of stone blue bengaline, with vest and revers of white silk, embroidered with gold. She wore a beautiful wreath of jessamine instead of the time honoured orange-blossom, and although gloves were discarded, a lovely veil was worn — not, however, over the face, but thrown back, and falling in long graceful folds over the shoulders. The bridesmaid, Miss Nellie Walker, wore a suit of cream silk, with a beautiful lace collar. The lady in whose house the wedding took place [Mrs Alice Burn] wore a brown cashmere suit, trimmed with handsome braid. The suits were nearly all of the same design, neatly-fitting knickers, long coat, with revers, and a long vest, the coat being edged with cord to match the material. Most of the gentlemen were in knicker costume. . . .²

For bride and groom, the wearing of the ‘knicker costume’ was a public affirmation of their strongly-held principles on the necessity of rational dress for women. They had already co-authored a deluxe pamphlet *Notes on Dress Reform and What It Implies* and later were to be instrumental in the formation of the New Zealand Rational Dress Association.³ The political emancipation won by New Zealand women in 1893 had been publicized and applauded by suffragists around the world.⁴ The position of women seemed to be advanced here; for instance, the 1891 census classified more than 45,000 women as wage-earners,

The quotation in the title is from the *London Standard*, in K. Walker and J. R. Wilkinson, *Notes on Dress Reform and What it Implies*, Christchurch, 1893, p.15.

1 e.g. *Christchurch Press* (CP), 19 January 1894; *NZ Mail* (NZM), 9 March 1894; *The Sketch* (Britain), 22 August 1894.

2 *The Sketch*, 22 August 1894.

3 According to a report in the *Christchurch Press*, 15 May 1894, p.6, this Association had been formed the day before, with Alice Burn, President and Mrs Wilkinson, Vice-President.

4 P. Grimshaw, *Women’s Suffrage in New Zealand*, Auckland, 1987, p.95.



A 'Reform Dress Wedding', the marriage of Mr J. R. Wilkinson and Miss Kate Walker. Auckland Public Library Photograph Collection.

married women had been granted property rights, and by 1893 more than half the country's university students were women. But the publicity the Wilkinsons' wedding attire received indicated that in the field of social freedoms the battle was far from over. To change the constricting and restraining nature of women's dress was seen by the reformers as a major objective. Why was this the case?

By the 1880s Victorian ideas of femininity and masculinity were well entrenched in middle-class New Zealand. Women's area of concern was firmly centred on the home and family; anything beyond this world was the realm of men. Women were expected to establish and preserve the sanctity of the home and to 'guard the virtue, morality and gentility of the settlers'.⁵ They were also to be symbols of the family's position in society, dressed in the latest styles for social occasions, following without question the current rules of etiquette and propriety. The Victorian model for feminine behaviour required that women be gentle, submissive, and dignified, setting the standards for familial and societal behaviour, while social and individual concern for respectability provided persuasive and effective control of women's roles. The accepted separation of male and female spheres of interest and activity confined women to the home and to motherhood as the only acceptable profession.⁶ In this context, the Victorian concern with dress and fashion was predominantly a female affair, although, as

5 R. Dalziel, 'The Colonial Helpmeet. Women's Role and the Vote in Nineteenth Century New Zealand', in B. Brookes, C. Macdonald, and M. Tennant, eds, *Women in History. Essays on European Women in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1986, p.57.

6 *ibid.*, p.62; J. Elphick Malone, 'What's Wrong with Emma? The Feminist Debate in Colonial Auckland', in Brookes, Macdonald, and Tennant, p.80.

others have pointed out, male influence in circumscribing limits of appropriateness in women's dress played a vital role in the changes possible to its styles and shapes.⁷ The *Otago Witness* of 20 December 1894 commented that men (and women) were likely to remark on the clumsy figure of a woman who did not wear stays, and the *New Zealand Farmer, Bee and Poultry Journal* in November 1885 quoted a Frenchman: 'a woman who respects herself will not appear with a waist of more than sixteen inches'.

The widely differing types of garments worn by men and women throughout the nineteenth century were an obvious symbol of the gender differences in roles. As Helene Roberts has explained in respect of Victorian dress in Britain, men's dress symbolized seriousness in its dark and sombre colours and shapes; activity in its bifurcated structure; strength in the way it expanded the shoulders and chest; and aggression in its sharp, clean silhouette. By contrast, the dress of women indicated delicacy in its small waist, sloping shoulders, and rounded outlines; inactivity in its heaviness and concealment of the legs; frivolity in the fussiness of trimmings and accessories; and submission in its constriction of the torso. Roberts argues that in women's dress one could clearly read 'the message of willingness to conform to . . . submissive' and self-humiliating patterns of behaviour.⁸

In the 1880s, in spite of the wider range of functions and duties expected of the colonial wife and mother,⁹ a New Zealand woman's dress affirmed her subservient role. The corset, by now widely available and considered indispensable by the fashion writers at least, restricted the torso and inhibited breathing.¹⁰ Bodices were tight-fitting (photographs attest to this in the many strain wrinkles showing across the front and back of garments) and cut long in the 'Princess' style without a waist seam. Skirts were narrow, heavily weighted with drapery, pleats, and ruffles, and worn over bustles, pads, and petticoats. Shoes and boots were uncomfortable and often hard to walk in.

Fashionable dress in New Zealand clearly took its lead from Britain and Europe. Newspaper reports of the many and often minute alterations to garment style or colour being seen overseas were included in almost all papers published here. The Ladies' Column of the *New Zealand Farmer* in 1885 had this to say about the latest fashions: 'Just now the excess runs in the direction of high narrow headgear. In contrast with this and the wasp waist is the immense protuberance that marks the skirt below the waist at the back.'¹¹ And in 1886:

The skirts. . . are still very long, and in spite of the increased fullness of the skirts, there is no bunchiness around the waist. All skirts have a kilting around the lower edge which

7 J. C. Lauer and R. H. Lauer, 'The Battle of the Sexes. Fashion in Nineteenth-Century America', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 13, 4 (Spring 1980), p.581; H. Roberts, 'The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman', *Signs*, 2, 3 (1977), p.554-69.

8 Roberts, p.557.

9 Dalziel, p.59.

10 See Ladies' Columns in e.g. *Otago Witness* (OW), 20 December 1884; NZM, 28 October 1887; *Southern Queen* (SQ), 2, 21 October 1895, p.20.

11 *NZ Farmer, Bee and Poultry Journal* (NZF), November 1885, p.347.



Tight fitting, strained bodices, and narrow, heavily draped skirts characteristic of 1880s dress. Teachers at George Street School, 1883. Album collection, Otago Early Settlers Museum, Dunedin.

serves to take off the too plain effect of the skirt about it. The back draperies are very full and wide, and are generally simply puffed at the top, the edge being left to hang plainly down in the waterfall style. . . . The one steel in the back of the skirt serves the useful purpose of holding that heavy part of the gown off the heels a little, and neither it nor the small horsehair mattress has any ungraceful or ugly effect.¹²

The following year the *Auckland Weekly News* asserted that 'the frocks for the coming season are made with very large tournures [bustles], and steels are placed down the back at intervals of 12 inches. They are to be had in lace and net complete for four and a half guineas upwards. The skirts are draped with rows of ribbon forming panels on one side, and long loops of ribbon from the waist.'¹³ Local entrepreneurial interest in fashion, as well as the developing do-it-yourself mentality fostered by being so far from larger centres of manufacture, can be seen in the local patenting of two forms of steel bustle, one of which combined a fold-up stool with the bustle allowing a woman to sit back 'quite comfortably'.¹⁴

Changes to fashionable dress over this decade and the next did little to ease the discomfort of the wearer. Corsets developed elongated waists in the early 1890s and a long, narrow waist was considered a highly desirable effect. Bodices certainly became less strained, but were heavily decorated, with high, wired, or starched collars and enormous puffed sleeves over the upper arm tapering to very

12 NZF, October 1886, p.316.

13 *Auckland Weekly News* (AWN), 23 April 1887, p.33.

14 NZ Patents 2524, 1887 and 3513, 1889, Patents Office, Wellington,

tight lower sleeves.¹⁵ Skirts fitted more snugly over the hips, but flared below with pleats or fullness at the back. They lost the drapery fashionable in the 1880s, but were not necessarily any lighter in weight. The writer of the Ladies' Column in the *Otago Witness* heralded these changes:

In a very little while we shall see figures parading the streets with no crowns to their hats, and no fullness at the back of their dresses, and nobody will know until a very hard look into a lady's face whether she is an old woman or not. . . . The balloon-like steels that were worn two years ago were hideous, and took away all the grace from a woman's carriage; but the tiny bustle now worn, just the pad and fullness at the back, is becoming — it detracts from a multitude of defects. Everybody has not got a pretty back, and to wear draperies straight at the back of the waist a pretty back is indispensable in order that most people may look well. Round shoulders and ugly hips are too noticeable with the Princess style of dress.¹⁶

Following fashion was not only an urban pursuit. The *New Zealand Farmer* had advice for rural women in changing old styles to new: 'Many a dress of last season's creation, when draped backs, etc, were fashionable, can be transformed into a straight, pleated or gathered tunic back, by which means enough can be cut out of it at least to permit new fronts, or new sleeves.'¹⁷

Depending on available space, newspapers recorded, in more or less detail, local fashions, particularly those seen at events such as balls, parties, wedding receptions, and even picnics. Women at these events were usually defined by what they wore. For instance, at an Orchestral Society concert at the Opera House in Wellington in 1893, 'Mrs Richardson [was] wearing black velvet softened with white lace'.¹⁸ Comments were not restricted just to the latest styles; those who were not keeping up to date often received a mention.¹⁹ It was hardly surprising, therefore, that some women and men reacted against both the emphasis on keeping up with fashion and the fashions themselves.

Calls for the rationalization of women's dress by groups in Britain and the United States were reported by the local press. Those who were active in supporting dress reform in New Zealand were aware of this publicity, and influenced by it and by their personal contacts with overseas reform organizations, through membership, correspondence, and receipt of journals. A Rational Dress Society had been formed in 1880 in London, with Lady Harberton as its President, to 'promote the adoption, according to individual taste and convenience, of a style of dress based on consideration of health, comfort and beauty, and to deprecate the constant changes of fashion that cannot be recommended on these grounds'.²⁰ In particular, the Society was firmly opposed to corsets and tight-lacing, believing it important to leave vital organs unimpeded and to

15 SQ, 26 March 1891, pp.33-34.

16 OW, 18 January 1889, p.33.

17 NZF, April 1891, p.167.

18 NZM, 15 December 1893, p.15.

19 e.g. OW, 5 March 1891, p.33; 28 May 1891, p.37.

20 S.M. Newton, *Health, Art and Reason. Dress Reformers of the Nineteenth Century*, London, 1974, pp.116-17.

support clothes from the shoulders. The Rational Dress Society received endorsement from some prominent members of the medical profession, who attributed a variety of ailments, and even some deaths, to tight-lacing of corsets.²¹ At the International Health Exhibition which opened on 8 May 1884 in London, a section was devoted to hygienic and rational dress, which included digital socks and stockings (with separate toes), roomy shoes and boots, and divided skirts. The Rational Dress Society exhibited sensible and bifurcated garments, and a 'rational' system of underwear consisting of vest, drawers or combinations, bodice, chemise, and divided underskirt. The possible popularity of these items was undermined, however, by the official guide to the exhibition, which pointed to their lack of aesthetic appeal.²²

While the Rational Dress Society argued for alterations to women's dress in order that women could expand their horizons, a number of health professionals were putting forward reasons for modification to dress solely on the basis of health. A German physician, Dr Gustav Jaeger, promoted the use of wool for all garments, but especially for those next to the skin. He argued that vegetable fibres (cotton and linen) were positively dangerous to health — no animals wore these fibres — and that silk was the excretion of a caterpillar: wool alone was healthy. He created 'sanitary' knitted undergarments for women and men in a variety of styles including a corset and combinations ('long johns') which were also on show at the 1884 Exhibition.²³ While Dr Jaeger's emphasis was on hygiene, the maintenance of warmth in dress was a concern of a number of doctors who thought it vital to preserve a uniform body temperature whatever activity was undertaken. Many therefore supported Dr Jaeger's ideas, and wool next to the skin was widely promoted.²⁴

Local newspaper journalists soon began to add their own arguments on tight-lacing and rational dress:

If women cannot even dress themselves in a tolerable manner how can we expect them to shine as philosophers or legislators? . . . Women's want of judgement and of capacity in public affairs is nowhere more lamentably apparent than in her treatment of her own waist. If there is one thing more indispensable than another in a statesman or woman it is a due sense of the proportion of things. Now how can there be any such sense in a woman who deliberately, and with much pain and suffering, turns her waist into a mere connecting link, so to speak, between her upper and lower quarters? . . . Only imagine what the Venus de Medici [sic] would have been like had her sculptor endowed her with such a middle! . . . I would give no woman a vote who abused her waist.²⁵

The damage to the spine and internal organs caused by tight-lacing was continually described in graphic language illustrating the dangers of wearing

21 See *British Medical Journal* (BMJ), 4 March 1882, p.330; 6 May 1882 p.665.

22 As reported in NZM, 8 August 1884, p.3.

23 Newton, p.100.

24 See BMJ, 4 March 1882, p.330; J. H. Rabun and M. F. Drake, 'Warmth in Clothing: A Victorian Perspective', *Dress* (1983), pp.24–31; NZF, April 1886, p.126; June 1886, p.191; NZM, 30 September 1887, p.4; *Daybreak*, 10 August 1895, p.3.

25 Civis, OW, 20 September 1884, p.18.

close-fitting, unyielding stays. Overseas cases of death said to be from tight-lacing were reported.²⁶ Elise, the Ladies' Columnist for the *New Zealand Mail*, while claiming to be the first to write in support of dress reform,²⁷ obviously felt the need to cater to all tastes, writing: 'It is generally admitted that a light and supple corset which is not too tight around the waist nor too flat upon the lower part of the stomach, leaves the bust free while supporting it, is a necessary part of women's attire, sets off and preserves beauty of figure without injuring it.'²⁸ Advertisers of corsets were careful to condemn tight-lacing, pointing out the pliability and elasticity of their product, and even producing 'ventilating' versions for tennis and dancing.²⁹ While the anti-corset aspects of dress reform were hotly debated, with tight-lacing being the focus of much of the criticism,³⁰ the extent to which it was practised in New Zealand remains a mystery. As one doctor put it: 'I have never yet met with a lady who owned to having a tight pair of stays.'³¹

Reformers appealed to women to abandon corsets altogether, believing that they caused serious displacement of abdominal organs such as the liver, stomach, and kidneys, affecting their function, and that severe constriction of the lungs impaired breathing. They equated corset-wearing with alcoholism as a destroyer of the race.³² The more moderate suggested that, since some support was necessary for the waistline and the breasts, 'rational stays . . . made of some yielding material, with narrow strips of elastic webbing let in from above down the sides' and containing as few pieces of whalebone as possible would be a suitable alternative.³³ As Alice explained in the *Otago Witness*, elastic yielded to movement of the body, thereby helping to prevent the injurious effect of tight-lacing without compromising the desired slimness of the figure.³⁴ Scare tactics were used by some reformers. Elise wrote a vivid description of a corset demonstration that took place at the International Health Exhibition: 'a waxen figure, laboriously, and with audible groans, lacing a pair of black satin corsets on its own body, until the waist is compressed to the diameter of a "fashionably," pretty figure; then the lace is loosed and the body enlarges to what should have been its natural size. Dreadfully real is the exhibition, and it must bring many a blush in those conscious of guilt in thus abusing their own persons, and injuring their vital organs.'³⁵ Dr Florence Keller, an American living in Christchurch, used a model skeleton to demonstrate the effects of the corset on the rib cage in breathing at a lecture to local women's groups.³⁶ Many other health problems were attributed to corset-wearing and tight-lacing. The high incidence of

26 e.g. OW, 20 December 1884, p.27; *Daybreak*, 30 March 1895, p.7.

27 NZM, 16 September 1887, p.4.

28 NZM, 28 October 1887, p.4.

29 e.g. NZM, 2 September 1887, p.33; 26 April 1894, p.38.

30 *Daybreak*, 1 June 1895, p.3.

31 OW, 20 December 1884, p.27.

32 *White Ribbon* (WR), May 1896, pp.1-2.

33 OW, 20 December 1884, p.27.

34 OW, 26 March 1891, p.33.

35 NZM, 8 August 1884, p.3.

36 WR, October 1901, p.1.

on look moulded to the figure', or bodices of 'elastic silk', also with three box pleats and a belt, to be worn with a skirt, were obviously the forerunners of the twentieth-century gym dress.⁴¹

In spite of the climate of opinion apparently favourable to dress reform, rational dress in all its various forms was attacked as being hideous, ungainly, and indecent. The most controversial item was the bifurcated garment as outerwear. Its proponents stressed its practicality, appealing to women's convention and commonsense. As Elise pointed out:

The movement in favour of rational dress is one for making all women sensible. Dress is the outward sign of character, and when women become wise they will dress according to common sense and adopt the style best suited to face, figure, age, and position in life . . . dress . . . is not worth setting up as an idol. It is by no means worth running in debt for, or sacrificing health, strength, and comfort for, but it is worth some little trouble, patience and thought. Therefore, I would urge you to adopt a common-sense style that will conduce to sanitation and comfort, and to cast aside prejudice when dealing with the question of reform. Some dresses called 'rational' are not beautiful, but this may be owing to a lack of taste on the part of the maker or wearer.⁴²

Elise offered a pattern for the new divided skirt from 1885 through the *New Zealand Mail*, although it is unclear whether this was outer- or underwear, and nothing is known of its popularity, except for comments by its producer: 'Certainly the divided skirt has many adherents here, I am happy to say; not so many in the town as in the country districts, and occasionally a kindly correspondent writes me a word of acknowledgement. . . .' She advocated setting up an organization along the lines of the Rational Dress Society, offering to co-ordinate such a move if sympathizers sent in their names.⁴³ Nothing seems to have come of it; an idea ahead of its time, perhaps.

The Women's Christian Temperance Union, at this time the only New Zealand-wide women's organization, promoted reform of dress as part of its 'crusade for Social Purity'.⁴⁴ Each branch of the Union had a Department of Hygiene, covering women's health matters, including dress reform. The establishment of the *White Ribbon* in 1895 as the WCTU's official paper allowed its views on dress reform (although not on the latest fashions) to be widely aired.⁴⁵ Reorganization of underwear so that warmth and weight were more evenly distributed; the use of bifurcated under-garments for modesty and health; attachment of skirts to bodices so that weight was supported from the shoulders rather than the waist, with a concurrent reduction in weight and length of the skirt, were all suggested as reforms to be carried out along with the abolition of the

41 NZF, June 1886, p.187; October 1886, p.316.

42 NZM, 16 September 1887, p.4.

43 *ibid.*

44 P. Bunkle, 'The Origins of the Women's Movement in New Zealand: The Women's Christian Temperance Union 1885-1895', in P. Bunkle and B. Hughes, *Women in New Zealand Society*, Australia, 1980, pp.53, 62.

45 WR, July 1895, p.1.

corset. Systematic exercise was also recommended.⁴⁶ The *White Ribbon* continued to publish pro-dress reform articles well into the twentieth century. The 'health' corset, invented in the late 1890s by a French woman doctor, was condemned as roundly as earlier versions had been, as it still interfered with free expansion of the lungs.⁴⁷ The extent to which members of the WCTU put into practice the advocated reforms is unknown, but it seems likely that few would have gone as far as Kate Walker in adopting the 'knicker costume', since one of the pledges of purity agreed to by those joining the WCTU was 'to be modest in language, behaviour and dress'.⁴⁸ Perhaps the discarding of corsets, and the wearing of divided under-things were practised widely, although Frances Willard, the American founder of the WCTU, commented that the corset habit among women was as difficult to break as the alcohol and tobacco habit among men.⁴⁹

The participation of New Zealand women in sporting activities increased in the 1880s and 1890s. Golf, tennis, skating, swimming, mountaineering, riding, gymnastics, and cycling were popular. The girls' high schools fostered these outdoor pursuits, developing bloomer uniforms for sports and gym classes. Outside the schools, however, rational dress, knickerbockers, and divided skirts were not widely worn until well into the twentieth century, although attempts were made to promote their use. In Christchurch, the Atlanta Cycling Club for women was formed in 1892, with Alice Burn, already a vocal and practising advocate of rational dress, as its secretary. She lectured around the country, urging New Zealand women to lead the world in this as in other reforms, and to 'recognise their flowing garments "for symbols of enslavement they are — the swaddling clothes of a sex that has not yet asserted its right to perfect freedom"'.⁵⁰ However, Mrs Burn's ideas proved too radical for most of the club members: on 6 September 1893 a motion was passed that no members should be allowed to appear in dress reform costume because of the bad publicity surrounding rational dress. Instead, a uniform of plain skirt with cream blouse and colours of navy blue and gold was adopted.⁵¹

What to wear for cycling was the subject of much discussion in the press. Divided skirts were favoured for convenience, being recommended for wear 'in the country', if not in town.⁵² An early issue of the *White Ribbon* presented two views: a 'champion lady cyclist' from Britain supported 'the bifurcated garment' while the 'lady record-breaker of Australia' found cycling in a skirt 'easy'.⁵³ 'Porowhita', the author of 'Cycling Notes' in later issues was not an advocate of rational dress, citing the ridiculous back view of knickerbockered legs. 'Women cannot afford to sacrifice everything to so-called comfort', especially if riding

46 WR, May 1896, pp.1-2.

47 WR, July 1904, pp.10-11.

48 Bunkle, p.71.

49 WR, September 1904, p.4.

50 Grimshaw, p.10.

51 CP, 7 September 1893, p.5.

52 *Daybreak*, 14 December 1895, p.5.

53 WR, May 1895, p.2.

in town. Less conventional garb may be possible in the country where one is 'free from restraint'. She preferred a skirt with knitted knickerbockers underneath.⁵⁴ 'Porowhita' seemed to be taking her lead from 'the English lady' rather than the Parisienne. In Paris, so many women cyclists had adopted the bifurcated garment⁵⁵ that the Prefect of Police was forced to warn that rational cycling dress on women infringed the law against women wearing men's clothes.⁵⁶ 'The period when the English lady took, without hesitation, what was adopted by the Parisienne has long since passed, and now the English lady makes her own style.'⁵⁷ Because 'popular taste did not favour the appearance of ladies in knickers', English tailors created skirts which provided for the saddle of the cycle and allowed the skirt to fall equally on either side of the back wheel.⁵⁸

Horse riding also prompted discussion of appropriate apparel, especially for riding astride, a new and controversial method for women.⁵⁹ The Ladies' Column of the *New Zealand Farmer* in May 1886 mentioned that Californian women had adopted 'a kind of Bloomer costume' for 'riding with ordinary saddles' and that they felt more secure and less fatigued than when riding side-saddle.⁶⁰ There was considerable debate on whether women should or even could ride astride, but even for side-saddle riding it had been customary to wear breeches of stockinette, melton cloth, or chamois leather underneath the riding habit.⁶¹ For other sports — for instance, tennis and golf — there seemed to be no question of women in competitions wearing anything but a skirt. Such skirts were usually shorter by a few inches, and wider by a few feet, than the fashion costume, but they undoubtedly hampered movement.

In writing their pamphlet on the subject of dress reform in 1893, Kate Walker and James Wilkinson took account of all these factors. They argued that at least some reform in dress was a necessary adjunct to the many reforms in other aspects of women's lives. As women were enlarging their sphere, entering professions, demanding equal opportunities for development, and equal pay for equal work, so they needed to overcome the greatest obstacle hindering them.⁶² The practice of suppressing the waist they likened to foot binding in China and seclusion of women 'in the East', as methods of inhibiting women from developing to their full potential.⁶³ Corsets, they recommended, should be left off immediately but gradually, an hour a day at first, to allow the trunk muscles to develop and the internal organs to adjust. Outer dress should be primarily utilitarian, only becoming ornamental in 'leisure, bodily quietness and social

54 WR, January 1898, p.8.

55 WR, October 1895, p.7; *Daybreak*, 2 March 1895, p.6.

56 OW, 21 June 1894, p.47.

57 *The Cutter's Practical Guide. Ladies' Garments*, London, n.d. (pre-1910), p.71.

58 *ibid.*, p.71; see also D. Rubenstein, 'Cycling in the 1890s', *Victorian Studies*, 21 (Autumn 1977), p.65.

59 OW, 30 April 1891, p.34.

60 NZF, May 1886, p.155.

61 *Cutter's Practical Guide* p.75; I. Foster, 'The Development of Riding Costume c.1880-1920', *Costume*, 3 (1969), pp.55-60.

62 *Notes on Dress Reform*, p.10.

63 *ibid.*, pp.25-26.

display'. The authors stressed, however, that the knicker costume was not masculine-looking, and could be produced, and daintily ornamented, in a variety of styles.⁶⁴ Artistic dress, the Grecian and Medieval-inspired styles worn and painted by the artists of the Aesthetic and pre-Raphaelite Movements, was offered by Walker and Wilkinson as an alternative to their knicker costume, infinitely preferable to fashionable dress, but only for rest and leisure. While they agreed with the aesthetes that the natural, uncorseted body-shape of sculptures such as the Venus de Milo should be emulated, they could not accept the long, full draping skirts for active wear.

Two classes of reform were described. Minor dress reform was a reform of under-things for 'adult women, street use and moderate activity', and consisted of divided, combination, fitting under-garments, worn with a lighter, shorter skirt suspended from a bodice. No corset was to be worn, and the fitted combinations did away with the need for petticoats.⁶⁵ Higher dress reform involved more radical change. The authors suggested that this could be adopted in successive stages: first, leaving off stays, wearing divided undergarments and shortening the skirt; then wearing baggy knickers (similar to those suggested 40 years previously by Amelia Bloomer) or a divided skirt, followed by a long tunic with knickers showing beneath; and ultimately graduating to the well-fitted knicker suit, advocated as essential for work and exercise, and optional for leisure.⁶⁶

Not only did Walker and Wilkinson use aesthetic, moral, and eugenic arguments to support their suggested reform of dress, but they also used feminist ones. These were based largely on the arguments put forward by John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women*, which they included in a list of suggested readings, together with items more immediately concerned with dress written by Rational Dress Society members, philosophers, and scientists.⁶⁷ They argued that not only would 'the all-round development of women' bring women themselves increased happiness and independence, but also that the nation would 'greatly benefit' economically and morally. That they were also influenced by contemporary theories of eugenics is apparent in their suggestion that this 'development' was necessary for 'realising the ideal of a perfect race'.⁶⁸ Like Mill, they suggested that restricting the development of women would be 'detrimental to a man's development',⁶⁹ producing 'marriage between unequals', debasing 'the quality of love', and tying women to the home after marriage.⁷⁰ In order for women to become 'the real companions of men in the higher walks of skill and

64 *ibid.*, p.11.

65 *ibid.*, p.13.

66 *ibid.*, p.23.

67 *ibid.*, p.12. Other books listed included Mrs Godwin's *Vindication* (1792), Colonel Higginson's *Common Sense about Women*, Mrs Ashton-Dilke's *Women Suffrage*, Bebel's *Works*, Professor Huxley's *Essay*, Havelock Ellis's *Contemporary Science Series*, *Scientific Meliorism* by Miss Clapperton, and articles in *The Arena* and *Review of Reviews*.

68 *Notes on Dress Reform*, p.16.

69 S. Moller Okin, 'John Stuart Mill's Feminism: The Subjection of Women and the Improvement of Mankind', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 7, 2 (October 1973), p.115.

70 *Notes on Dress Reform*, p.19.

knowledge', they must adopt the knicker costume. Fashionable dress was 'wholly indifferent to human physiology', so that adopting higher dress reform garments would immediately provoke a desire for 'active muscular exercise', enabling women to achieve greater physical health and improved personal beauty, 'joining Greek loveliness with modern intellectual culture'. Reform garments would also 'raise women's ability to do domestic or any other work'. Walker and Wilkinson laid the blame for the perceived inequalities between the sexes squarely on the differences in education of girls and boys, as did Mill, but they saw girls' 'unsuitable' dress, 'decidedly inferior to boys', as the greatest obstacle to the acquisition by girls of 'that physical vigour which, in the case of boys, enables them after leaving school to take a strong active part in what goes on around them'. The influence of Dr Jaeger's theories was apparent in the style of underwear recommended and in the promotion of wool. Woollen clothing was extolled as being porous to air and moisture, therefore useful in maintaining a constant body temperature, while allowing 'noxious exhalations' to escape. However, the pamphlet did suggest the alternative of Aertex Cellular clothing, usually made of cotton, which had been developed recently to compete with woollen underwear.⁷¹

On 14 May 1894, a New Zealand Rational Dress Association was formed in Christchurch by the Wilkinsons, Alice Burn, and others, to bring about that change in woman's dress which her wider life and increased activity seemed to demand. The Association encouraged all stages of reform, although some of its founding members were already knicker wearers. Alice Burn was elected President, with Kate Wilkinson as Vice-President.⁷² What the Rational Dress Association was able to achieve, and how many members it attracted, are unknown. To my knowledge, no records of its activities exist. Certainly, its ideas appealed to those who supported the development of the 'new woman'. At a Dunedin debating society meeting in 1895 on the question 'is the development of the New Woman justifiable?', both the motion and the rational system of dress were favoured by the largely female audience.⁷³ Fashionable dress, however, had already begun to cater for this group, by including some features hitherto considered masculine, such as raised or padded sleeve-heads (likened to the epaulettes of military dress), tailor-made suits of a 'masculine' cut and acceptably worn with a stiff collar and a tie, and broader, flatter shoes.⁷⁴ These characteristics, as well as the more radical knicker costume, became symbolic of those new women pressing for emancipation, higher education, and greater employment opportunities.

The association of reform dress with the new woman created difficulties for its general acceptance. Popular hostility to the new woman, who was perceived as being a rational dresser, thus turning her back on femininity, made it impossible for many women to be 'bifurcated and not ashamed'. The assertive hands-on-hips poses of Kate and her attendants in the Walker-Wilkinson

71 *ibid.*, pp.20, 22, 17, 16, 10, 24.

72 OW, 17 May 1894, p.27.

73 *Daybreak*, 22 June 1895, p.3.

74 OW, 22 November 1884, p.27.

wedding photograph would have fuelled this assumption. There was clearly an ambivalent attitude in ladies' columns of the newspapers. Alice, in the *Otago Witness*, quoted overseas sources, suggesting that the knowledge and discussion of rational clothing must strengthen women against fashions that sought to hamper movement or weigh women down; but, apart from getting rid of these, she did not advocate any change.⁷⁵ She thought that the dress question had not created as much heated debate as the question whether women should ride astride.⁷⁶ The *Southern Queen* favoured the use of woollen under-garments, and loose clothing for gym, drill, or physical culture, while condemning those new women who had cast aside their modesty and self-restraint and become 'half-developed' men.⁷⁷ Columnists were prepared to accept and promote the health arguments put forward by the dress reformers, but not the overturning of women's role in society implied by the knicker costume. *Daybreak's* Mary-Jane could support the wearing of shorter skirt and knicker outfits for working and walking outdoors, but considered that long skirts were 'more graceful' for leisure hours in the home, for 'the promenade in fine weather', and unquestionably for balls and other social activities.⁷⁸ Alice summed up popular opinion: 'If only we could do away with the appendages that affect our health, it would . . . be much nicer . . . to remain as we are. . . . Would the world be any better . . . if we were all strong-minded women? I don't think so.'⁷⁹

Like the later feminists of the 1970s, those seeking to reform women's dress in the late nineteenth century clearly saw the symbolism inherent in it. Fashionable dress hindered women from being active, assertive, and strong, and coerced them into being vulnerable, uncomfortable, and unhealthy. They argued forcibly that in persisting with such fashions, women were accepting the continued circumscription of their world. But they were battling overwhelming odds. Fashion's influence was powerful, as was the entrenched stereotypical etiquette separating the spheres of men and women. Certainly the reformers achieved public awareness of their cause, but many women were not willing to expose themselves to popular ridicule by appearing in rational dress. Modifications to underwear, however, may have been more widespread. In time, women's fashion in New Zealand did incorporate many of the characteristics of rational dress. After about 1910, emphasis of the waistline disappeared, and skirts were shorter with less fullness. Dresses hung from the shoulders, so corsets were unnecessary. Clothing for sports and exercise dispensed with hampering features: riding dress lost the skirt and exposed the breeches; swimming costume developed into a one-piece 'combination' garment. Clothing became more utilitarian, and even though women who wore bifurcated garments were often regarded as figures of fun, and the New Zealand Rational Dress Association had

75 OW, 5 February 1891, p.38.

76 OW, 30 April 1891, p.34.

77 SQ, 2, 25, February 1896, p.23.

78 *Daybreak*, 18 July 1895, p.2.

79 OW, 19 March 1891, p.33.

little impact, the ideas and ideals of the dress reformers were vindicated by these developments.

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