

Hand in Glove:  
Respectability and Dress



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## Introduction

This is an exploration of two closely related social phenomena, respectable and respectability. In particular, I want to trace how dress was so often an accomplice to achieving, and then displaying, respectability. The use of the past tense here is intentional, as the sort of respectability that I want to discuss almost certainly no longer exists having begun to disappear in England sometime in the late nineteen sixties. It had staggered through the immediate post-war years almost certainly held together by the austerity clamped on the daily lives of a population devastated by the war. Restraint and denial were the watchwords of this pinched existence. (1) Some thing I will touch on towards the end of this investigation is the slow death of that English attachment to respectability and how and why it changed into different sorts of collective beliefs, values and behaviour.

To understand the sort of respectability I have in mind requires a journey back to the Midlands region of England in the late nineteen forties and early nineteen fifties. This was the time and the place where I spent much of my early childhood. I'm going to draw on the memories I have of my grandparents who looked after me for considerable periods of time, along with their friends and neighbours. For a few years my parents paid me only intermittent visits and which meant that I lived wholly within the respectable worlds of both my maternal and paternal grandparents. It is from their lives that I have built this picture of respectable dress and respectability in general.

This exploration of respectability could not help being a complex mixture of recollection, personal revelation and critical judgement. Inevitably it was marked by the historical and social coordinates of this writer. More particularly, it meant that it is shaped by the critical rejection that I, along with many of my generation, dismissed the whole apparatus of respectability. Our effort to distance ourselves from respectable judgements was to dress in ways that were a deliberate affront to its styles of dressing. What emerged was a sort of anti-respectable dress often put together with the intention of frightening what a friend described as the 'grey suit and short back and sides brigade'. (2)

Being of a generation who refused to obey the assumptions that anchored respectability, especially the aesthetics of respectable dress, some recognition must be made of those slumbering antagonisms that were a such part of it's judgemental inclination. To more fully understand

respectable dress means holding a critical attitude towards the liberation theology that surrounded much of the provocative dress that emerged in the nineteen sixties. At the time the dismantling of respectable dress was often done in the name of being liberated from its repressive tourniquet. Once this was discarded the wearers would be able 'to be themselves'. (3) Remember, it is 'our' version of the attack on respectability that has ruled the waves ever since. But to write a corrective that overlooked the misery and the stunted imaginations that were so often a requirement of respectability would be an endorsement of some very unpleasant things that happened in households at that time.

A closer look at how people such as my grandparents lived their lives might act as a sort of corrective to the harsh judgements the *refusniks* levelled at all things respectable. There was an almost complete consensus as to how respectability was represented in the arts. Progressive ideas in film, television, drama, literature, even philosophy all depicted respectability as a poverty stricken and repressed way of living. In John Schlesinger's 1962 film *A Kind of Loving*, Thora Hird portrays a woman unhinged by her desperate defence of respectability whilst in Schlesinger's 1963 film *Billy Liar* Tom Courtenay is unable to leave the safety of the 'respectable' family home despite non-stop abuse from his father. The overthrow of respectability was a common trope in British arts and Jimmy Porter was perhaps the most notorious of its enemies. (4) In all this turmoil about how one should live, dress remained a sensitive indicator of what being respectable looked like as well a what sort of person you were.

This is not a voyage of self-discovery, or an amble down memory lane. I want to *understand* something about the people with whom I spent so much of my childhood. What was motivating them to live their lives in the way they did? They neither were people seemingly indifferent to dress in the sense of personal display nor were they participants in the changing dress styles of fashion. But they could be extraordinarily sensitive, even cruel, to breaches of what was judged not to be respectable. Dress could be a sensitive region, which for the most part lay buried beneath the habitual tasks of daily life, but it was the place where arguments and condemnations could most commonly break out. Suddenly, dress would cease being insignificant and become a matter of singular importance. (5)

## Notes

- (1) A hilarious depiction of this unrelenting hunger can be seen in the 1984 film *A Private Function*. Mother, played by Liz Smith, wanders aimlessly through the house looking for food, bleating sheep-like ‘I’m hungry, I’m hungry’.
- (2) One way of dressing in an anti-respectable manner was to wear items taken from the occupational clothing of working class men. (Fisherman’s jumpers were a particular favourite.) Female anti-respectable dress was much more diverse than that of the male. One favourite of anti-respectable female dress was to display areas of the body that had previously been hidden. This gave rise to the popular phrase ‘You’re not going out dressed like that!’
- (3) This neo-bohemian assault on respectable dress was a minor event compared to the triumph of male and female casual wear that began at some point in the early nineteen seventies and which was a combination of sports wear and ‘holiday’ clothing. ‘Today there are no Gentlemen’ as Nik Cohn remarks about the disappearance of formality in dress. It was the advent of these casual clothes that undermined much of the formality of dressing that was such an important part of respectability.  
Cohn, Nik, *Today There Are No Gentlemen: the changes in Englishman’s Clothes since the War*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1971.
- (4) Jimmy Porter was the chief character in John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger* first staged in 1956. He became a leading fictional figure in the assault on English respectability.
- (5) At certain points in the text the reader will find a number ‘optional extras’ that are placed to one-side of the main narrative. These are:

*Dictionary: Respectable*

*Aesthetic: Respectable*

*Fashion Respectable?*

These ‘extras’ may be read whenever the reader is prepared.

### *Dictionary: Respectable*

Often words can slip through us, or we slip through them, with little notice being paid to their many variations of meaning. This is a slow passage through three associated words, respect,

respectable and respectability. The word that threads together respectable and respectability is, of course, respect, a word that can appear either as a noun, or as a verb.

As a noun, respect can move from an everyday expression of admiration through to more weighty forms of deference such as esteem, veneration and honour. As will become clear, these latter expressions have a strong sense of authority. In short there is often a political dimension to the exercise of respect.

As a verb, respect is more complicated than its life as a noun. It is a transitive verb, that is a verb that requires an object-here almost certainly a person-to complete it's meaning. Hence the importance of the positions of donor and receiver that is integral to its operation.

Respect can mean something close to congratulation and admiration, or the acknowledgement of a particularly admirable quality found in an individual, or group. ('I really respect her honesty' or 'I have nothing but respect for the way they played.)

For those permanently deprived of respect may mean having to regularly confirm one's status with those who possess authority, who collectively may be known as the 'authorities'. (Do I still please you? 'Is my job still safe?) The giving of respect can be a purely isolated act of admiration on the part of an individual ('I've always respected what he is doing.') through to a collective requirement that respect should be given to a person or institution. ('We must all show respect to the headmistress'.)

Respectable.

We may all take away some kind of picture of respectable, something that will often be accompanied with feelings of fondness or derision. Many of the meanings of respectable consist of a tabulation of the rules that are meant to guide the creation of a respectable material presence.

To be respectable is to be in a condition where one is worthy of respect. It is a condition aspired to by those wanting to become respectable and a comfort to those living within its borders, those living a respectable life. Being respectable may only last for a very short time – for instance being 'properly' dressed for a particular occasion- or it may last for years such as those persons who occupy (hold) positions of familial authority. Of all the markers of being respectable it is dress that forms the most tangible sign of its presence. The qualities of a respectable individual include being a good, proper and worthy person. There is a moral dimension where the respectable person

is someone who is good, decent and honest. It is here that we find the beginnings of an aesthetic of the respectable. Standards are laid down not only for dress but the material world of made objects. This is the point where presentable appearance and conventional behaviour draw from the same well. Final mention must be made of the way that the meaning of respectable has, in recent years, acquired a critical dimension so that to name something as 'respectable' is to dismiss it as beneath contempt, or derisory.

### Respectability

Many of the elements of respectable are present in respectability. It is a condition of being respectable but now writ large to apply to a group. Respectability is something that is inclined towards the public sphere rather than the private. It is a group form of respectable on display. It is a way of gauging, and judging, the levels that the respectable has reached within a group as a whole. Respectability is a condition that needs to be constantly attended to for fear it may offer a less than presentable face to the world. Such anxiety can set off periodic restorative campaigns that aim to restore falling standards. Whether it is something of concern to those living within the group or whether it is a form of scrutiny by those outside, looking in, respectability is always an abstraction of some kind. It is a word that denotes the sum total of the respectable elements found in a group.

How can this exploration of the three words, respect, respectable, and respectability help us understand the lives of the people we are about to encounter? Four things need to be taken into consideration.

- First, respect and respectable are forms of praise that can be both given and received. They provide ways that those within the group are able to align themselves with qualities considered admirable.
- Second, the giving and receiving of respect and being judged as respectable - or not - has a political dimension that is an integral part of who 'owns' the authority in these exchanges. Judgement is at the heart of the politics of respectability.
- Third, respectability and respectable are social qualities and so exist in the form of shared ways of living.
- Finally, respectable suggests a dress aesthetic that favours plain, unassuming sorts of clothing.

## Setting the Scene

### Hannah and Herbert

From the ages of 6 to 10-that is from the late 1940's until the mid 1950's- I lived permanently with my grandparents, alternating spells first with my maternal and then with my paternal grandparents. This meant that I soon became familiar with the pattern of their daily lives and their responses to the world around them. Living with them stretched from a time when there were strict rationing rules for almost everything in sight and came to an end in 1954 when finally there were things to buy. Adequate supplies of food were available as well as the slow emergence of consumer durables. One of the most popular of these newly available consumer products were televisions which were bought, or rented, in thousands so the country could watch the coronation in 1953. It was through this period of national recovery that I learnt the contours of my grandparent's lives and their notions of respectability.

My maternal grandparents lived on the northern edge of Nottingham- a city with a population of just under a million- my paternal grandparents lived further out from the city in a village, chosen I'm sure, as part of the middle class flight from the perceived uncertainties of urban living. Nottingham, like so many provincial cities, had a lively and independent social and cultural life. It had morning and evening newspapers, three theatres, a university and a strong Workers Education Association and what today would be called an art house cinema. Underpinning this was a healthy industrial base that ensured a degree of prosperity when things got going after the war. Boots the Chemists, Raleigh bicycles and Players cigarettes. All companies that were still reliant on the trade routes of Empire. Nottingham had not suffered heavy bombing and after the war recovery was rapid compared to many less fortunate provincial cities.

It's time to introduce my grandparents and the different ways each of them maintained their respectability. Herbert and Hannah (my maternal grandparents) were working class people through and through and had lived in the same house since the 1920's. Herbert had worked on the railways all his adult life gradually rising to become a signalman in the nearby Daybrook station. Outside work he had two loves, his allotment and his religion. The allotment was situated on the far side of the train tracks from his signal box. It produced huge amounts of vegetables, much more than my grandmother could ever use. Luckily the neighbours would always welcome the arrival of this vegetable surplus. Methodism absorbed the rest of his life. He was a lay preacher



and every Sunday he would set off on his bike to deliver sermons to several local Methodist chapels. It was Methodism that had given him an education and so had enabled him to read widely and to think and feel beyond the standard interpretations of the world held by his peers. In a corner of the living room he had a large bookcase filled with the standard works of Methodism. Below was a small desk that he would sit at for an hour or so after work preparing his sermons until Hannah ordered him to the table for his evening meal. I never heard him preach but my mother once told me that he could terrify his congregations as he laid out the consequences of sin. As a grandfather he was kindness itself. He never mentioned religion and in many ways his outlook on life was more suited to the turn of the century (20<sup>th</sup>). I still have the temperance medal he was awarded at a huge rally held in the Albert Hall. His respectability was held within the strong ethical frame of mind that was part of his unwavering religious beliefs.

Grandma Hannah had the ability to make me feel secure by doing little more than being present. She was not the sort of person who would shower me with non-stop displays of affection. This emotional restraint lay at the heart of both Herbert and Hannah's notions of being respectable.



Herbert and Hannah: His sixtieth birthday.

Early nineteen fifties

In an earlier life - before WW2 and before the arrival of the National Health Service - she had been an amateur (and therefore cheap) midwife who had perhaps practiced other sorts of birth control although we never knew for certain that this was just rumour. I will discuss her dress in greater detail later but for the moment it's enough to say that she evaded self-conscious displays of respectability whilst at the same time appearing respectable. Looking back on how she

conducted herself, I have the feeling that she hid within an appearance of respectability- where else could she go? In this she was like Herbert. She too was on the very edge of respectable but could never be described as 'not respectable' or of running a 'disreputable' household. This principle of presenting an adequate degree of respectability in behaviour was carried over to the interior of their home.

Apart from the corner in the living room where Herbert wrote, read and pondered (Always to the accompaniment of the BBC radio news) it was Hannah who ruled over the rest of the house. It was furnished with pieces whose style suggested a date well before WW2. Each piece was an isolated item bereft of any aesthetic connections with the items placed alongside it. I can't remember any additions being made to the amount of furniture placed around the house. It seemed that when one went past the living room the house was organised for doing a job, and doing it with a minimum of 'equipment'. It was a kind of dress that was made to be both not looked at and at the same time be scrutinised for any signs of excess in the wearer's dress. There was everything that respectability demanded but only just.

There was one great mystery to the house and that was the front room. It was a room only sparingly maintained by Hannah because it was a room that was never used. (It was a room that seemed forever poised, waiting for something that never happened.) It had a three-piece suite whose colours were so faded as to be barely visible. In the window was a large aspidistra that seemed to thrive on the freezing temperatures that were the result of the room never being heated. On either side of the chimneypiece were glass cabinets holding china ornaments, mementos of visits to the seaside when they were young lying alongside china WW1 tanks. There was a complete absence of ornaments and pictures apart from a stained mezzotint of John Martin's *Belshazzar's Feast*. The irony is that the deserted front room was really the one part of the house primed and ready for visitors that, as far as Hannah and Herbert were concerned, never came. Visitors never penetrated further than the living room. The deserted room that Hannah dusted occasionally was part of a principle of 'saving for best'. Certain sets of crockery, items of dress and in this case whole rooms, should only be used on 'special occasions'. This was an opportunity to display 'the best' and so ensure that the respectability of the hosts was safe. The only time I saw the front room used was for the gathering after Herbert's funeral.

## Setting the Scene:

### Cyril and Elsie

My paternal grandparents, Cyril and Elsie, lived about ten miles away from Herbert and Hannah but apart from all assembling on the steps of the chapel for my parents wedding photographs (1943) after that they probably met on only a handful of occasions. Cyril was a working class scholarship boy born within walking distance from where Hannah and Herbert lived. He became a schoolteacher, a career he pursued after graduating in a science degree at the recently established Nottingham University and he retired as an assistant head in the early nineteen sixties. He was old enough to have fought at the front in WW1 and like so many survivors never spoke about his war experiences. But as I learned after his death the war had been a lasting influence for much of his life.

He and Elsie were married in the early nineteen twenties and before WW2 they had built a comfortable way of life for themselves, a life that the war disrupted not least because my father (their only son) was routinely in considerable danger whilst serving in the navy. When the war was over many families who could afford it, and this included my grandparents, moved out of Nottingham and set up homes in the surrounding villages. As well as joining this 'flight' from city there was an added reason for Cyril and Elsie to move to a rural setting. By the end of the war they had come to believe that the war had destroyed both the urban fabric and the moral health of the country, a condition that could only be 'repaired' by the general adoption of 'rural values'. The countryside would, in some vague way, return the nation to how it had been. But this rural flowering never happened and Cyril and Elsie became suspicious of everything that was 'new'. Their home, *Green Gates*, became a refuge against the unsettling decline of the world beyond the garden walls.

A teacher's salary meant my grandparents could quickly adopt a middle class style of living. As soon as circumstances allowed they moved to a village eight to ten miles outside of Nottingham and it was here that they set up their first home in a house designed by Cyril. Both the layout and the contents of *Green Gates* were quite different to Hannah and Herbert's home. The clearest difference between the two homes lay in the relative importance that was given to comfort. (1)

Their home *Green Gates* was typical of post-war middle class respectability. The open coal fire had migrated into an Aga cooker set within a large kitchen. As a class, servants had disappeared and shovelling coal was not something the respectable middle class were any longer fond of. (The house was equipped with primitive radiators and log fires for special occasions.) There was a large sitting room where leisure activities such as reading, playing the piano and dozing in the afternoon took place. As yet television had not arrived but there was a rather large radio that was listened to in the evenings. The floor was covered in a thick carpet and as you sat down the chairs and the sofa they would open their arms to receive you. Each piece of furniture was covered in a William Morris influenced fabric. Unlike Hannah and Herbert's house there was no lonely front room and what remained of the practice of 'saving for best' was restricted to crockery and clothing. It was a home that embodied that most distinctive creation of the English middle class, a way of combining respectability with comfort.

My grandmother Elsie deserves consideration for the way she lived, and survived amid the formidable talents of her husband, talents that were not always tolerant towards those who didn't agree with him. Like Hannah, Elsie ran the domestic side of the household - washing, cooking, and cleaning. She had something that Hannah had - a vacuum cleaner. At a certain time each year the house was given over to bottling the fruit and vegetables from the garden and turning every other kind of fruit into jams. The garden was her great love and the fruit, vegetables and flowers that she grew in her greenhouse were both huge and beautiful. Her work in the garden was vital to keeping it in a respectable condition. On either side of *Green Gates* were similarly disposed middle class households and their gardens needed constant attention in order to remain respectable.

It has to be said that Elsie lived in the shadow of Cyril, or rather was absorbed into his idea of respectability. She shared some of the qualities of Hannah; she was respectable in every aspect of her life without it dominating her personality. She was, in the best sense of the word, a thoroughly quiet and warm person who, it has to be said, never broke ranks with Cyril's religious eccentricity and his extreme political views. Nor did she challenge his frequent excommunications, at least not in public.

There is no doubt that Cyril was a very gifted man. He was the only person amongst his family and friends who had a tertiary education - a not inconsiderable achievement for a working class man. He was a superb gardener with a large library of gardening books, gardening equipment and

places scattered around the house where did mysterious things to ensure success with his seeds. He was an expert pianist who played the organ of the Baptist chapel where he and Elsie worshiped. His notion of what was theologically unacceptable extended to chapel politics. After disposing of three ministers he retreated to *Green Gates* where he, at last, formed a congregation that was acceptable to himself and Elsie. In addition to this he was a competent photographer and built a darkroom in the attic where he experimented with very dangerous chemicals trying to make his photographs look like etchings. He specialised in romantic landscapes and views of 'quaint' Peak District villages. Looking back on these photographs its clear that they are of a rural England that was rapidly vanishing. By the time he took these photographs any hope of what he longed for, namely a regeneration of England inspired by rural ways of life, had vanished. Finally, he was a capable carpenter who made the furniture for *Green Gates*. When all of these gifts were combined with the force of his beliefs as to what was right and wrong the effect was to disrupt three generations of his side of the family.

It was difficult to tell whether his teaching had become anything more than a way to earn a living. He taught science, something he paid no attention to for the rest of his life. He never brought any work home and was completely silent about things that had happened at school. At some point his beliefs started to fuse into a rigid enforcement of what he considered to be respectable (right), or rather what he judged not to be respectable (wrong). (2) Cyril and Elsie's religion became utterly eccentric as bookshelves filled with volumes proving that national regeneration could be predicted in the dimensions of the Great Pyramid. Their Christianity, if that was what it still was, became something that was bereft of any form of religious inspired compassion. A love of the English countryside turned into a racist rant against anything other than 'pure' white individuals. He was the defender armed against what was immoral (a strong form of non- respectability) someone whose task it was to restore moral and respectability order within the family. (3) This latter activity brought the family to the brink disintegration on two occasions. A strict and intrusive disciplinary regime and an unbending religion, lead one son to leave home to join the navy at the age of sixteen. The other son, sexually active by the age of eighteen and was sprung in bed with his girlfriend by an early return of Cyril and Elsie. He was given a couple of weeks to leave home and it was years before any sort of reconciliation was achieved. A couple of years before he died I asked him why he was so angry with the Jews. He snapped back 'Because they robbed the working man of his religion!'

## Notes

- (1) One of the achievements of middle class interior design was to emphasise the need for comfort-or at least the look of comfort- in their houses. So furniture would be provided with ample cushions. It would have 'cushion covers' to transform the harshness of wood into being seated in a bower of William Morris flowers. Floors would have carpets rather than the naked feel given to the feet by linoleum. Most important was to have central heating in as many rooms as possible.
- (2) I was the object of his displeasure on two occasions. First occurred when I paid a visit whilst at university. (About 1965) My hair, which had always been straight and long, had escaped the hairdressers for years. I stayed for two days and had to suffer a non-stop stream of insulting comments. 'Hedgehog' was his favourite. If I remember it was about my obvious (To him) departure from a respectable appearance and so on the way to an immoral way of life. The second time was much, much later. After I had gone to live in Australia I wore tinted glasses to help with the bright light. I wore them when I visited Cyril and Elsie in the late 1990's. This time he interrogated me as to why I was wearing dark glasses indoors. It was then that I realised what he was concerned with was whether I had joined Bohemia. For him long hair and dark glasses were surely indications that I had made that journey.
- (3) This rather severe picture could occasionally be broken by unexpected bursts of humour. Once the television arrived he became a passionate viewer of all forms of sport, especially when there were English teams taking part. He found it difficult to tolerate any excitement and would retreat to the garden and wait for one of us to signal the all clear.

### Male Dress: Herbert and Cyril

Being part of a group was always integral to being respectable. As a social phenomenon it is only through one's judgement of others, as well as being judged oneself, that a person is able to both feel and know they are respectable. But being respectable is more than a *feeling* of confidence although there's no doubt that this was an important part of its resilience. Dress had always been a sensitive gauge of the ebb and flow of respectability. All the family members we are about to look at, male and female, had their sense of being respectable guided by habits of dressing that shaped what needed to be worn in public. The respectability of one's dress was felt most urgently

when choosing what was to be worn when out and about. Of course, there were also those clothes that were more appropriate to the informal times and places that made up much of their lives. As we shall see, it was the relationship between these two kinds of dress and not just a specific set of garments that made up a respectable wardrobe. It was not just what was worn but the when and the where of their wearing,

## Herbert

Herbert's clothes and the way that he wore them, were shaped by his religious beliefs and by the styles of dress associated with working class men in the period immediately after the Second World War. (1) His wardrobe was limited as were the variations he made to his dress in response to his different weekly activities. My guess is that he gave little or no thought when it came choosing what to wear and what he eventually did wear was the result of habit rather than a selection made from a range of alternative garments. Herbert's respectability lay buried in those habitual actions.

When he retired and no longer wore his railwayman's uniform his most common style of dress were the clothes he wore whilst working, either on his allotment, or in the large shed at the bottom of their garden. This dress consisted of a well-worn, dark three-piece suit that only rarely consisted of a matching set. The waistcoat might be of a different material to the jacket but each piece always seemed to be about the same age as its neighbour. No matter what kind of gardening task he might be involved with he would always wear a collar and tie as well as a watch and chain hanging from his waistcoat. To top it a cap would be perched on the back of his head. On returning home- usually in the late afternoon- he would hang his jacket on a peg in the kitchen and this was the sole change he made to what he wore until he got ready for bed. Change consisted of taking off but not putting on until the next morning. Herbert wore black boots for every occasion. He never wore anything brown, no shoes and no slippers. The absence of any specialised footwear between boots and bed might be just another instance of the lack of insulating layers of comfort so characteristic of middle class households. This was Herbert's sole way of dressing for all the 'secular' situations that filled his week.

The most dramatic change in his dress came on Sundays. As a Methodist lay preacher who led the services in several local chapels his Sunday dressing routine hardly ever altered. He would wear a clean, dark three-piece suit together with polished black boots and a clean shirt for his collar and

tie. His cap would be set aside for a black bowler hat. Hannah would carefully brush the bowler before he set off on his bicycle to deliver the first sermon.

There was an expectation on the part of both Hannah and the congregation that Herbert would arrive dressed in the respectable manner described above. Perhaps it was a belief that Herbert's way of dressing completed the spiritual readiness of both the preacher and the congregation he was about to address? His appearance was an expectation fulfilled? His Sunday best was 'smart' and Hannah was careful to keep his suit, collar and tie 'fresh' ready for his Sunday duties. His Sunday dress both made him fit to conduct the service and at the same time his clothes exhibited the respect he had for the congregation, their singing, the chapel and the service he was about to initiate. It would have been impossible for him to deliver his sermon dressed in his working clothes. Perhaps, despite it being a non-conformist congregation, there was something of the sacred about his 'Sunday Best'.

There was one event involving Herbert's wardrobe that can throw a broader light on male working class dress immediately after the World War Two. Soon after I was united with my parents we all lived by the sea on the English south coast. Mum invited Herbert and Hannah to visit us for a holiday. I have no memories of their stay but there is one battered photograph of Herbert and Hannah and I sitting on a beach.



Herbert and Hannah on a beach. Early nineteen fifties

Both of them are dressed as if it were a Sunday. Judging by what I am wearing it must have been warm day. Looking back on my previous description of Herbert's wardrobe this strange holiday dressing, Sunday best on a beach, suggests that he didn't have any clothes that lay between his



informal working clothes and his Sunday best. There were simply no collective dress forms available for the rare departures Herbert might make from his and Hannah's routine. I'm almost certain that this was the first, of very few, holidays they had after the end of the war. Herbert had no idea what clothes would be appropriate for a holiday. Perhaps he even had no idea what a holiday was. His answer was to decommission his Sunday best for the time they would be away and wear his familiar cap as his sole concession to the situation he found himself in. His universe was one where casual wear did not yet exist.

## Cyril

I'm not sure when Cyril began his studies at Nottingham University, I suspect it was in his early twenties. This was a time when he was involved in radical leftwing politics as a consequence of what he had witnessed whilst working as a stretcher-bearer in the front-line trenches of the war.



A Young Cyril. Just After the War

By the time he took up his first position as a schoolteacher his way of dressing was different to the other men in his family. I have a photograph in which Cyril and his father are relaxing on a summer's day in the years just before the outbreak of the Second World War. Great grandfather Carter was a working class man and is dressed in a fashion not dissimilar to Herbert. His response to the hot weather is to take off his jacket-it is hanging on his deck chair-and roll up his sleeves. His waistcoat remains in place. On his feet are the regulation boots. What he's wearing is a modification of his regular outfit. Cyril, on the other hand, is wearing lightweight trousers and a

cream coloured linen jacket that was his regular response to the ‘official’ arrival of summer even if the sun failed to make an appearance. He has no waistcoat and on his feet are shoes rather than boots. His clothes are meant as a response to those increases in temperature that were supposed to happen during summer. He rarely adjusted his summer dress by discarding items of clothing as his father had done. (2)

Being a schoolteacher all his working life Cyril, for the most part, left behind his working class origins and for the rest of his life he (and Elsie) lived a thoroughly middle class existence. Cyril wore a variety of hand made tweed three- piece suits except for the few weeks designated as summer. The suits were generally made from a plain, rust coloured material that must have been the work of a local tailor. He wore his suits slightly baggy, perhaps to increase the appearance of his small frame. [The ‘bagginess’ may be an echo of the fashion for exaggerated trouser legs worn by young men in the twenties.] I never saw Cyril wear black, or garments that had any patterned designs. As far as I can remember he never ventured far from his tweed-based wardrobe. (Even his ties were plain and always in muted colours.) Where he differed from Herbert was that he was able to *vary* what he wore by having a number of suits he could choose from. Being able to choose what to wear from a number of alternative garments was yet another indicator of how the practice of ‘saving for best’ was disappearing from amongst the middle class.

The template for male dress such as Cyril’s was not ‘inherited’ as was the case with Herbert. Herbert, and working class men in general, had a way of dressing that grew out of the combined pressures of tradition, habit, compliance and, of course, income. Cyril even dressed differently to his working class father who was just one generation away and whilst some of this disparity can be explained by the different class positions occupied by father and son other changes, particularly the availability of a greater range of clothing that could be purchased, came into play. For a working class man (and woman) who was entering the middle class meant that to achieve respectability meant wearing acceptable clothes and because these acceptable clothes were not ‘inherited’ as were Herbert’s, Cyril was able to develop a personal style that he put together from catalogues and department stores in Nottingham. The personal style he put together was not, I think, an anti-respectable way of dressing, nor was it an instance of fashion. He was a deeply conservative man and it was more likely that the ‘innovations’ he made to his dress were attempts to establish such ‘innovations’ as respectable. Cyril never spoke about his clothes but there’s no doubt that he was something of the peacock, dressing upwards and outwards towards the

permitted boundaries that being a Baptist and a teacher allowed. ('Respectable peacock' might be a better description.)



Cyril in the mid- nineteen seventies

The heart of his wardrobe were his tweed suits and they were important because they were 'fit' for both his work as a teacher and for his life at home. In addition to this amalgam of work and home were the adjustments that he and Elsie made to their dress as members of their local Baptist chapel. It was Elsie who always carefully prepared Cyril's Sunday clothes. As the organ player he was sure to be scrutinised by the rest of the congregation. His Sunday best consisted of one of his tweed suits that had been 'refreshed'. No dark clothes and no boots!

By the late nineteen fifties those rules of dress inspired by religious belief had begun to change. There was a loosening of what was considered appropriate form of dress to wear to a religious service. There had been a radical change in the relation between dress and respectability, and in particular the strong moral content that was such a major part of respectability. The congregation was now an assembly of multi- coloured women and the men's dress was no longer of a kind suitable for a funeral. The rule to dress in a certain way, to enforce a certain degree of uniformity, was no longer in place. I have a feeling that Cyril and Elsie –and the rest of their congregation– dressed to be acceptable rather than as someone doing the Lord's work, which was certainly the case with Herbert. Dress rules for Cyril and Elsie were not as intense as they had once been. This was born out by the elderly man who always sat in the front pew directly opposite the minister. His voice was deafening when the hymns were sung and during the sermon he would

repeatedly shout ‘Alleluia’ and ‘Praise the Lord’. He was dressed in an immaculate black suit and looked very similar to Herbert in his Sunday best. He belonged to an earlier form of service. His sort of respectable was gone and the congregation that he had been a part of no longer existed. His respectable had become a lonely eccentricity and an embarrassment to the other members of the congregation.

### Notes

- (1) Representations of working man’s dress were a common feature in English publications up until the sixties. Cartoonists could easily indicate the presence of working class men by way of a few key sartorial indicators. Cloth cap. White muffler. No tie and collar. Battered suit and boots. The most famous example of this was the Andy Capp cartoon that started in 1957 and appeared in the Daily Mirror was the most well known of these caricatures. Nor was it just working class men that were depicted. Andy’s wife was also recognisable from a few items of her dress.

She wore a headscarf unsuccessfully covering her hair rollers. Knee length coat and what could be slippers. She was a character who had a minimal awareness of the difference between public and informal dress. This display of exceedingly private elements of her dress would straight away mark her off as someone who is disreputable.

(see below)



Andy Capp with his wife Flo.

- (2) This change into summer dress was as much a symbolic transformation as it was a functional one. The move into his linen jackets was one more instance of his expanding on what was acceptable dress. He and Elsie also visited us and the photographs show a person even more ‘modified’ to accommodate the heat— no tie and a shirt with a soft collar. Cyril’s dress was also symbolic of the fact that he was on holiday and that comfort was something he now expected from his dress.

### *The Aesthetic of Respectability*

Running through this discussion of the dress styles worn by my grandparents was the feeling that there was a set of principles guiding how they looked. (Nothing remarkable about that.) Together, these dress principles added up to an *aesthetic of respectability*, which valued a kind of female dress that was quite different to the styles of fashion-influenced dressing. Respectable dress for men meant conforming to the already established respectability of the conventional suit, white shirt, collar and tie. In both instances it was an aesthetic possessed of a sense of what was not respectable as well as what was. This meant that it was an aesthetic equipped to pass judgement on the suitability of every aspect of men and women’s appearance from the smallest item of clothing to their overall impact.

The aesthetic of respectability, like all dress styles, allowed for a modicum of variation just so long as these variations remained within its broader guidelines. Herbert and Cyril were quite different in how they looked but neither of them would dream of deserting what each regarded as their acceptable ways of dressing. Hannah and Elsie varied their dress according to what activities they were engaged in. They wore their weekdays clothes when at work with household activities but both reached for their versions of Sunday best when setting off for chapel. Elsie’s chapel dress was a deal smarter and more ‘expensive’ than her domestic clothing. Hannah, on the other hand, seemed to do little preparation other than throw her best coat over her ‘working’ clothes, put on a much-abbreviated hat and with her gloves set off for the Ebenezer chapel where Herbert would be preaching. For Elsie, it would be unthinkable for her to attend chapel in anything resembling her weekday clothes. (Even if a coat hid them.) Sunday best saw an intensification of the general aesthetic principles of respectability.

The aesthetic of respectability stood on three principles- Clean, Plain and Smart. The foundation for all three was cleanliness and it is difficult to imagine Plain and Smart being able to exist

without the prior presence of Clean. Ever since Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* we have come to know that cleanliness involves a great deal more than what results from the application of mechanical actions with soap and water. (1) Both Hannah and Elsie set aside Mondays as their washday. Keeping clothes clean in a period prior to the arrival of washing machines was a daylong physical slog. Respectable dress was never really private. It was a public form of dress and so was required to be clean wherever, and whenever, a woman, and to a lesser extent a man, ventured out. Repairs to any small holes, visible patches and tears, supplemented the cleansing actions of washing and the sense of renewal that was given to the clothes. Hannah was adept at keeping Herbert's clothes in good repair and my memories of Elsie were that her afternoons could be taken up with darning, mainly socks. It was important for both men and women that clothes worn on special occasions should be devoid of any marks originating from work and the workplace. These were secular marks and so inappropriate to any elevated social situations they may be part of. It should be remembered that clothes were rationed and so the maintenance of respectable garments was an important task undertaken by the women of the house. The rationing of clothes meant that there was a degree of democratic tolerance for garments that displayed any signs of repair.

Perhaps the most immediate way to be judged respectable was for one's dress to be regarded as *smart*. Smart referred to the condition of one's dress as a whole rather than to a specific garment. (This was an aspect of respectable dress that applied just as much to men as to women.) It was a public quality and not something to be strived for in one's private life. The production of smartness would begin even before cleaning was completed. Starch and bleach could be used to produce the sorts of textures and surfaces required by smart clothing. Eliminating a garment's meandering creases by ironing helped to produce an approximation to the original form of the garments such as the 'proper' creases of a men's suit and the correct fall of a dress. Before he set off for his Sunday duties Hannah would make sure that Herbert's suit was clean and his boots polished. The creases at his elbows and his knees could be eliminated with a damp cloth and an iron but they would have always reappeared by the time he arrived home in the evening. Being respectable, and the smartness associated with it, was not something undertaken to give one's clothes a look of 'newness'. Wearing clothes that are 'brand new', that is clothes that are possessed of a 'look' of having never been worn, is not smart. Smart is about conspicuous renewal rather than purchasing the new. As such it implies a degree of effort has been expended so as to bring the quality of smart into being. No effort was visible when one was wearing new

clothes other than a display of pecuniary power. What was desired was a visible effort that had been made to overcome the gentle dilapidation of one's dress and so bring it into line with the respectability of others. As a valued quality for dress smart was always tied to how one wished to appear in public. Being smart was a declaration of fellowship.

The last part of the aesthetic of respectability is the quality of plain. Plain answers perhaps the most immediate question, namely what did respectable dress look like? Plain is not something that is simply a list of negative qualities such as boring, uninteresting, without decoration, and generally unattractive. Plain was certainly applicable to the clothes worn by Hannah and Elsie but it would be wrong to interpret their dress as evidence of a lack of imagination or an avoidance of the non-respectable. I'm sure Hannah and Elsie wanted to look their best when out and about. (Well Elsie certainly did, Hannah I'm not so sure about.) But 'best' here meant their appearance drew on an aesthetic that contained little, or nothing, of the impulse to dress according to fashion, particularly its insistence on seasonal changes of style. Plain was not just an absence of fashion nor was it a repressive apparatus to deal with those who might stray too close to *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*. Like clean and smart, plain had a moral value that guided the choice of clothing. For those who wore it, plain was thought to be simple in the sense of honest and authentic. Honest could mean 'without guile' and plain dress would be without ostentation and unadorned. Practically this meant that Hannah and Elsie favoured pastel, colours, no arresting patterns and certainly no 'experimental' shapes. Within those 'guidelines'- which were probably only half glimpsed by those who dressed inside them- some amount of variation was permissible. Hannah and Elsie not only differed in the sorts of clothes they wore, but differed to the degree they felt the presence of the respectable aesthetic. The typical style of respectable men's dress, a style worn by most men at the time -a three-piece suit with white shirt, collar and tie- required little or no adjustments to ensure its respectability. Plain clothing was respectable because it was thought to be honest and its wearer was likewise seen as an honest person. Within the aesthetic of respectability there is a feeling that the territory beyond plain dress was dangerous. It was a place where someone's 'truth' could get lost in the folds of complicated, 'dishonest' dress. Respectable dress, what it is, how it is worn and when it must be worn is a moral concern and a very important one at that. (2)

## Notes

(1) Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*, Routledge, New York, 1980.

(2) Why was plain clothing their preferred form of dress?

There had been a lengthy tradition of restrained and unadorned dress within non-conformist congregations from the moment they were first established. Plain dress- male and female- meant that, properly dressed, one's conscience was clear before 'the Lord'. Elaborate forms of dress would hide one's soul from the aforesaid being. So, unadorned forms of dress were honest because they hid nothing whilst non-respectable dress was filled with deception. The former didn't fear the judgement of the Almighty whilst the latter were wearing clothes that cheated on his final judgement. My feeling is that by the time of Cyril and Elsie (but probably not Herbert) this religious sentiment had begun to fade and dissolve into the many secular activities initiated by the chapel's congregation.

### Dress: Hannah and Elsie

Grandma Hannah and grandmother Elsie were separated by age (About 10 years), by class and by membership of different religious congregations. Their clothes were quite different and yet they still dressed according to the general principles that elderly women desiring to be respectable would keep to. Most importantly Hannah and Elsie were respectable but not fashionable.

#### Hannah

Hannah's clothing, like Herbert's, was limited. Her wardrobe must have been small because whatever the time of day, whatever the day of the week, she always seemed to be dressed in the same way. This uniformity might have been because her clothes were all of a similar style and she simply rotated them. It could have been that the amount of money she had to spend on her clothing was very limited and so any opportunities for variation were few in number. All her dresses hung straight down to mid calf and there was never any indication of the body beneath. Her legs were always covered even when she was sitting on the beach but her arms were almost always on show due to the many watery tasks she had to complete in her daily round. The dresses were mostly beige but could have floral designs for special occasions. She never wore jewellery



apart from a small brooch attached just below the collar of her dress. This was the kind of respectable dress that she wore from day to day, throughout the week.

When working indoors she would always wear an apron, something I can't ever remember her being without. The apron(s) varied according to the sort of task she was engaged in. There was one sort of apron-blue with white stripes- that was a part of the 'dark side' of the household, something that would be thoroughly unacceptable to the recently emerging middle class who were living just ten miles to the northwest. As you climbed the stairs hanging above your head were the hindquarters of pigs being cured. Herbert had a sideline as someone who was able to slaughter pigs, a service for which he would be paid in kind. [One] Herbert would take his payment, raw pieces of pig, down into the cellar and put them in vats of brine. When they had been cured for the right amount of time Hannah would take over. She would dismember the legs into more manageable chunks, something that was sure to cover her apron in grease. From then on she became the keeper of the pork, slicing into it at the table irrespective of where on the pig-now ham- your helping had come from.

When she did have to leave the house only slight additions to her outfit were thought necessary. Just a hat, gloves [occasionally], bag and a coat, worn irrespective of the weather. Her style of dressing was quite different to that of the 'outside world'. As we have already seen she would wear a style of dress that hardly altered from one week to the next. This lack of variety in her wardrobe and what it might mean to the 'outside world' never seemed to bother her. Hannah lived quietly within the principles of respectable dress.

On Sundays, Hannah would make a few small changes to her costume before setting out for chapel. She normally wore her 'best' coat, which was about the same length as her dress and was of a heavy material that would hang evenly and so approximate to looking smart. She wore gloves intermittently but I'm sure there would have been a deal of silent disapproval on those occasions she had arrived at chapel without her gloves. Everything was topped off with a small hat that carried a residual floral decoration. Neither the hat, nor its decoration, ever seemed to change.



Hannah on a rare outing.  
Mid-nineteen fifties.

One of the problems presented by Hannah's dress is one to which I have no satisfactory answer. Given that her style of dress persisted, unchanged for so long where had it come from? An immediate answer, of course, was that it had been purchased from some kind of clothing store, or were Hannah's all hand made? Hannah certainly had sewing skills but these were used to repair household linen and repair certain items of the household's clothing such as socks. If she had a sewing machine I cannot recall one being used. I often helped her wind the wool as she unravelled an old jumper, or scarf. The wool would then be knitted into a new garment. But if there were shops that specialised in Hannah's sort of dress how did they cater for someone whose dress style had remained the same for so long and remain viable? Surely this ran against the mainstream situation where dress styles changed so frequently? How did Hannah's version of respectable dress survive for so long given the changes that had taken place all around her in the changes that had taken place in mainstream female respectability?

### Elsie

Elsie was born into the middle class and lived in the middle class all of her life. Like Cyril, the way she dressed was not 'inherited' but was rather something put together by personal choice. Elsie, I'm almost certain, bought a great deal of her clothes using catalogues, which were often left lying around the house so that I could leaf through them when I had nothing else to do. Crucially, Elsie's dress style was different to that of Hannah's; in particular it differed in how it embodied a new form of female respectability. Elsie's dress was a 'respectable' version of the changes that had happened to every aspect of women's clothing in the inter-war period. The

presence of an aesthetic of respectability may persist, as it did, but the boundaries it may circumscribe, the shapes it may favour will redraw what is thought to be an acceptable and respectable form of women's dress.



A Young Elsie.

Early nineteen twenties

In some ways the changes that had happened to Elsie's dress were equivalent to the changes that had shaped Cyril's way of dressing. The contrast between Cyril and his father in the photograph of them relaxing in the garden is matched by a similar contrast between Elsie and her mother. Elsie's mother- Mamma Stan- came to live with Elsie and Cyril when things got too difficult for her to manage on her own. From what I can remember she dressed quite differently to Elsie. Her dresses were calf length, often in dark colours with lots of lace. Not tight but certainly not a shape that was trying to disguise the presence of a body underneath. I'd like to think that Mamma Stan was dressed as she would have been before WW1 or that her previous ways of dressing were still influencing what she wore. There are many small differences between the female generations but it is the change in skirt length that signals the most significant shift to female respectability. Elsie's dress was more varied than Hannah's, but like Hannah it was dominated by what she wore when cooking, at work in her green house, or the many other household tasks that filled her day. Whenever I think of her she is in a kitchen full of steam from the many ways she would transform

fruit and vegetables into food that would last through the winter. In the mornings she would be wearing a white lab coat that was discarded as the rhythms of the house changed in the afternoon. For all these domestic tasks she always wore a skirt that reached down to her knees. Despite being a respectable skirt there were differences between the skirt lengths of Elsie and Hannah. She was similar to Cyril in the way she would adjust her clothes to the seasons. There was a seasonal variation to the weight of the skirt material. The colour of the skirt could also vary but it was never a dark colour and always plain. Unlike Hannah, there was evidence of a body residing beneath her skirt. Her arms and her legs below the knees were visible without violating the current rules of female respectability. She always wore blouses of which there seemed to be an inexhaustible number and these too would vary according to the seasons. Some had short sleeves for summer and long in the winter. It was on the blouses that a degree of decoration was allowed. They were trimmed with thin bands of lace placed either side of the buttons. The same sort of lace would be attached to the collar. The respectable aesthetic meant that only a restricted use of this kind of decoration was permissible. Likewise their range of colours was restricted to pale pastel shades. The boundaries of plain were flexible but not that flexible. When the weather turned cold she might wear a cardigan of varying heaviness but once again they would be without any patterns or designs. It has to be said that she seemed impervious to any cold weather and would only put on 'outdoors' garments such as scarves, raincoat and rubber boots when gardening.



Elsie in her garden. Early nineteen seventies.

Likewise the arrival of the warmer weather would see her dressed in her 'normal' clothes whilst spending a whole afternoon bringing to perfection whatever it was that she was growing. Both she and Cyril would change their clothes midway in the afternoon and change into slightly more 'elevated' garments to be ready for visitors or as a way of marking that the day's 'secular' tasks were complete. (This was not quite accurate since Elsie, after a short period of rest, would have to start preparing the evening meal.) The only event that disturbed this routine, in the same way it did for Herbert and Hannah, was getting ready for chapel. Her 'Sunday best' invariably meant wearing a suit made up of a brown, tweed jacket and matching skirt. There would be a hat but this would be the one of the few occasions when she wore one. Like Hannah, Elsie seems to have alighted on a style of dress that balanced her interest in clothes, their cost and considerations of respectability that were appropriate to her time in the chapel. Having found this she saw no reason to change. Elsie's wearing of her Sunday best was indicative of the ebbing away of the religious component of women's dress. She honoured religious precepts by wearing thoroughly respectable dress but it could also be worn in secular events. It had become a form of dress that honoured the religious through the respectable.

#### Notes

- (1) Two explanations present themselves as to the origin of Herbert's slaughtering skills. When they got married he and Hannah had left an agricultural existence when they were in their early twenties time enough for both of them to learn how to transform a live pig into slices of meat on a plate. It might have been something brought about by the war. Pigs were easy to feed and house and there must have been many pigs in the area for Herbert to kill and for Hannah to turn into a variety of pork products. For the sake of the pigs one hopes that Herbert didn't have to practice before he got things right. The pork economy was coming to an end when I lived with them at Sherbrooke Road.

#### *Fashion and Respectability?*

Whilst Hannah and Elsie had many differences in the ways they dressed the principles guiding their appearance shared a number of surprising similarities.

Both the styles and rhythms of respectable dress- as worn by Hannah and Elsie- are different to the styles and rhythms of fashionable dress and its alibi self-expression. So pervasive are the

assumptions of fashion into all forms of dress, particularly women's dress, means that it is difficult to understand those sorts of dress, such as Hannah and Elsie's, in ways other than notions deriving from fashion. So their dress may be thought of as being the way they are because they have failed to keep up with the historical waves of fashion. They no longer have a fashionable impulse. In earlier times they might have been fashionable but after a certain point this fashionable quality evaporates, never to move again.

There is a sense in which if one were to strip out all the fashionable traces from dress what would remain would be just clothes. In other words nothing remains other than dress as a collection of functional objects. This is clearly not the case with the sorts of dress worn by Hannah and Elsie. Their appearance is guided by the aesthetics of respectability and is as rich in meaning as their fashionable counterparts.

The important question to ask is why do certain dress styles desert the rhythms of fashion and opt for a stability of form? Even here the idea of fashion is still the most important organising principle of those stable forms of dress worn by Hannah and Elsie. At some point respectable dress had fallen away from being fashionable, or rejected it wholesale. Whatever the reason it was the absence of the ferment so characteristic of fashion that was responsible for the stability of my grandparents dress. Once again it was thought to be a prior fashionable state that had somehow evaporated leaving behind...what? Thus, there is the belief that respectable dress is conservative but conservative because it lacks fashion's impetus rather having independent and legitimate reasons of its own.

As I mentioned earlier, to wear respectable dress did not mean everybody wore the exact same dress. Respectable dress was not a uniform. Hannah and Elsie and Herbert and Cyril all wore clothes that were different to one another. There is change but the impetus to alter one's dress does not come from obeying the laws of fashion. What they are wearing is not fashion slowed down nor is it part of the movement of modern women's dress as a gradual triumph of comfort, nor is it part of the liberation of the female body, of which changes in women's dress had played such an important part. Finally, what they are wearing is not the sort of dress that results from some sort of repression of a fundamental pressure to be fashionable. It is not a form of dress that is crippled in some way, longing to break free.

If the sorts of dress worn by Hannah and Elsie are outside the discourse of fashion then we must ask what sort of objects are they? Neither of them is dressed according to the rhythms fashion,

even in their most diluted form. They dressed to be clean, smart and unostentatious and these desirable states have none of the open-ended impetus so typical of fashion. (1) This means that the rhythms of respectable female dress were always a great deal slower than those found in female fashions and as a consequence difficult to detect. This gave an appearance of stability that suggested it was a form of dress that honoured something other than fashion.

If they were largely outside the realm of fashion then we return to the opening question- what is the nature of these examples of respectable female dress styles? We are so used to the idea that our clothing is accompanied by stream of images nudging us towards the desired goal of a purchase that it is difficult to comprehend a world where such an all-encompassing spectacle around clothing is absent or severely restricted. The image suggests the 'look' that will be achieved if one purchases the represented garments. Such a pervasive imaged world certainly did not exist for either Hannah or Elsie. What they wore and how it was worn came from a place other than fashion. Where they went to replenish their wardrobes I cannot say? In photographs, Hannah appeared to be wearing outfits of the same style in the 1960's that she had worn in the 1930's. Elsie, I'm almost certain, bought most of her clothes using catalogues that came from a London store called Gamages. Inside were primitive illustrations of the clothes that were for sale. This array of possible purchases was as close as Elsie came to putting together a 'personal' style of dress. Hannah, I'm sure never used catalogues. Not only was the origin of her style of dressing a mystery but also where she went to purchase both her own and Herbert's clothes. I can't recall any fundamental changes in the way either of them dressed so the clothes they bought must have been to refresh an already established style of dress. There is improvement in their dress but not advancement.

Groups wearing respectable dress did not necessarily exhibit a greater uniformity in their appearance other than what normally results from communal exchanges. There is change but the impetus to alter one's dress is not something driven by the laws of fashion. What they are wearing is not fashion slowed down nor is it part of the modern 'liberation' of women's dress in the name of comfort. Nor is what they are wearing something that results from the repression of a universal urge to participate in fashion. It is not a form of dress that is in some way crippled where, if only the repression could be lifted, fashion would suddenly blossom.

## Notes

- (1) In its historical manifestations a tendency towards a similarity of dress- both male and female-has been a feature of the way the adherents of early Puritan sects have been depicted. Both my grandparents were members of non-conformist congregations and in theory the sensitivity towards dress still hung around but the ferocity with which earlier dress codes were enforced was no more.

### The Politics of Respectability

At this point I have to leave behind the dress of Hannah and Herbert and Cyril and Elsie. I can't recall there being any 'incidents' over dress [Apart from Cyril's half-hearted swipes at me when I was in full bohemian scruff mode.] They were so much a part of their respectable way of life that very few contacts were ever made with what lay at the edge of their respectability. There was one spectacular (and cruel) expulsion from the family home but that was a dispute about 'respectable' sexual behaviour, not dress. Instead, I'm drawing on the experience of my wife, Jenni, when she was a young teenager in the north of England growing up in a respectable working class family.

The political dimension of respectability, the thing that accompanies all its manifestations, is judgement. Judgement organises the stuff of the world-clothes, objects, drama, films, literature and behaviour- into a moral universe where the respectable (acceptable) and the disreputable (unacceptable) are easily identified. Judgements can be something as commonplace as half whispered observations on the appearance of those nearby to the severing of all links with the individual being judged. Dress always occupied an important position in the determination of respectability. The constant visibility of what one was wearing meant that the wearer was always liable to be the object of critical scrutiny. Judgements were easily formed about the aesthetic qualities of a particular style of dress, or about the appropriateness of the social context in which a garment is either present or absent, as was the case of Jenni and her gloves.

The gloves in question were made of white cotton with a feminine lace trim and were always kept scrupulously clean. They were worn solely by women and girls during the summer months and were considered compulsory wear in certain situations. To wear these gloves was a way for women to show respect towards any person, or institution, which had authority over the wearer.



Jenni was in her early teens- in the mid 1950's- when glove wearing suddenly became a problem for her. She normally accompanied her mother to church and would always wear her summer gloves without any fuss. (In winter glove etiquette receded and wearing them was mainly to do with keeping warm.) As well as church attendance compulsory glove wearing was expected in a number of other situations such as turning up for piano lessons. But the one that caused so much trouble was her mother's insistence that she should wear her gloves when visiting the doctor. It was at this point that she dug in her heels. At first she tried to leave the house gloveless, hoping it wouldn't be noticed. It was her older sister, and then her mother, who berated her for this breach of respectable female appearance. She persisted with her dislike for wearing 'ceremonial' gloves and stopped wearing them altogether when she left home to start her higher education. [The irony in all of this was that her mother stopped wearing gloves herself during the evaporation of dress formality that began in the mid sixties.]



Jenni's mother [left]  
Early nineteen sixties.

This episode of the gloves contains, in miniature, most of the elements at work in the political dimension of respectability. There will be someone, Jenni, who has lapsed either wilfully or unintentionally from the minutiae of respectable appearance. In the romance of disobedience the individual being judged, who may often be a junior, and so weaker member of the group may heroically resist the power of a judgement or they may collapse in the face of such authority and

resume dressing according to the rules of respectable appearance. To be judged in the court of respectability meant gathering not just punishment but being shamed back into the expected form of dress. There is a desire on the part of the judge to retrieve the person being judged and place them back into the life of the group but now reformed and so acceptable once more. Jenni was the youngest member of her family and her small glove rebellion was noted by both her elder sister and her mother both of whom were concerned not to let her 'escape' from her life amongst the similarly dressed. The display of dress similarity was a visible sign that one was an acceptable person, a person of respectability. But it was also an important sign that a potential breach in the defences of respectability had been plugged and so could act as a discouragement to any others who might be thinking of experimenting with their dress. Judgement is a making secure.

To shame a person's dress in the name of respectability can be as mild as drawing attention to a minor lapse or something that would require an act of total contrition to achieve a degree of forgiveness. The maintenance of dress respectability was always a conservative force whose task was to rectify the lapses of an individual's dress by way of judgement and shame. With Jenni's gloves it was their absence that needed to be put right via parental shaming and so bring about the restoration of acquiescent glove wearing. Judgements can sometimes carry an apprehensive element that the person being judged may be forever lost to the respectable group. This is why a judgement that results in a loss of personnel may be accompanied by sadness. (1) A successful judgement is one where the individual becomes respectable again. Jenni's refusal to wear gloves was an early sign to the other members of the family that she had begun to leave behind the rules on how to be respectable.

Judgements of dress carry accusations about what sort of a person the judged person is. Not surprisingly these judgements/accusations are different for men and women. Judgements directed at male appearance were concerned with a visible inability of the man to keep to the requirements of the respectable dress aesthetic. The prized qualities clean, smart and plain were matched by their antonyms grubby, scruffy and feminine. For working class men such as Jenni's father, the chief requirement for their public appearances was to be smart. One's suit [always a suit] must be clean and pressed; a tie was compulsory, shoes polished and haircut to an acceptable length. If one's dress failed to reach these standards it would start to attract adjectives such as scruffy, shabby and dirty. Derogatory judgements passed on a man's appearance were also statements about the worth of that person. Lapses in a man's dress were translated into moral shortcomings.

An individual who wore scruffy clothes had a scruffy persona. For men, these judgements were largely about an individual's competence in his transactions with the world their inability to lead an ordered life. Judgement might go no further than comparative gossip about a certain man's slovenly incompetence. There was, however, one judgement made on the sort of male appearance that broke with the aesthetic principle of wearing clothes that were plain. If what man was wearing what was ostentatious and so judged to be 'feminine' then their membership of the heterosexual male congregation was in doubt. This sort of judgement could be made upon a man whose appearance was too carefully composed. Respectable dress but not too respectable. Dress lapses by women were dealt with far more severely than men. Often it would be the sexuality of the young woman that was being judged. Compared to the leniency of male judgements the severity of those laid on women were far more hurtful. The condemnation of any infringements of the respectable dress aesthetic could attract accusations that could bite deeply into the woman. Insults such as slut, tart, etc were frequently used to shame a young woman into remorseful conformity. 'You are not going out dressed like that'.

It would be wrong to see the apparatus of respectability as simply a repressive enforcer of a set of arbitrary dress rules. As we have seen with Jenni's gloves the insistence that they be worn was far from meaningless. To call the glove wearing of Jenni's family compulsory, that is an action obeyed unknowingly, is to miss the element of voluntary participation and the pleasurable feelings that can result from 'keeping to the rules'. Amongst those breaking with the rules of respectable dress there may have been sadness at 'leaving home', of no longer being part of respectability. Being respectable is an activity that is shared, where the sense of what it is to be 'respectable' moves freely between the members of the group. Pleasure comes from obeying the rules of dress instead of breaking them. Conformity is a display, even an assertion, that one is a certain sort of being amongst similar sorts of beings. Jenni's mother and sister's response to her refusal to wear the white cotton gloves was a mixture of both puzzlement and irritation. To them she was 'undone', she had become an anomaly. Matters were only put to rights when she agreed to wear the gloves. She was no longer someone who had refused to be part of 'respectable' society, heading off to who knows where. The safe and familiar place that was respectability was restored when the gloves were returned to their proper place, on Jenni's hands.

## The End

My life with my grandparents came to an end when I was able, finally, to live full time with Mum and Dad in the mid-nineteen fifties. Apart from occasional visits I never stayed with them other than for a few days at a time. When I left Nottingham the ways in which respectability and dress were intertwined in their lives seemed secure and unchanging. Hannah and Herbert lived at ease inside their respectable lives and probably never ever considered themselves as respectable. It is unlikely that they ever 'defended' what they wore in the name of respectability. As far as Cyril and Elsie were concerned their clothes and the notion of respectability that went with them were typical of a couple at ease in their middle class lives. What they wore was what they had purchased which meant that clothing had started to be mediated through a rapidly expanding range of visual imagery. Respectability and buying clothes were now dependent upon one another.

By the time I began to make the inevitable journeys north to attend their funerals it was clear that the small worlds in which they had lived were gone taking notions of respectability and dress with them. By then its disintegration was clear to see. No representatives of the chapels that had been such an important part of all their lives were present at their funerals (To this day the location of Herbert's grave, the most committed Christian of them all, is unknown.) At the heart of this decline was a weakening of the subjective desire to pass effective judgements on dress. Judgements of respectability would give way to judgements of style.

My grandparents lived their lives within a place and a time whose geographical, social and emotional boundaries mapped out a physical, as well as a shared, landscape whose most important feature was that its contours were familiar. For a few years after the war their lives remained unchanging. Life was still organised into the shapes and expectations that resulted from the pressures of wartime. Just as their daily lives moved through relatively small localities, so also did their social lives happen within a narrow set of exchanges? In this small world social life happened within close-knit groups such as neighbourhoods, workplace groupings, chapel congregations and kin relations and it was within these groups that notions of dress and respectability circulated. For the most part daily activities involved personal transactions with individuals that were already familiar. News concerning friends, neighbours and relatives would circulate rapidly from group to group. It was this closeness that ensured judgements of respectability, and the inevitable commentary that would ensue, would be shared. There was little,

or no, experience of an 'outside world' and anything that might originate beyond the boundaries of the small world. [This was in contrast to their children who had been thrown far and wide by their war service.] As an ex-railway employee, Herbert must have had a travel pass which I'm sure he never used until they visited us on the south coast. Even when Cyril and Elsie acquired a car their journeys were limited to those familiar local places Cyril wanted to photograph. It remained a world where familiarity was prized and any intervention on the part the 'outside world' disturbed the familiar order and was difficult to deal with. One evening there was a knock on Herbert and Hannah's door. When Hannah answered it two Sikh gentlemen had opened a large suitcase filled with silk scarves, perfumes, etc. Poor Hannah was utterly astonished by they're appearance-their full beards and their turbans- and couldn't speak. Mum rescued everyone from embarrassment by buying something.

As the availability of goods for sale expanded there were things that could be bought that tested the integrity of the boundaries defining the familiar. The arrival of television introduced worlds quite alien to what could be imagined by my grandparents. The extraordinary volume and variety of images of events, locations and personalities that had originated beyond their world proved unbeatable. Television opened up a gradually widening breach that let an outside to take up permanent residence in the home. Herbert and Hannah held out against television preferring to stay with their radio.

After the arrival of television the most important purchase, certainly for the middle class, was a car. The car dissolved the boundaries of the familiar, as its owners were given a geographical freedom unknown before. Cyril and Elsie bought a car and at first went on journeys to places that were familiar. Later they would travel to places they wanted to become familiar with. In many ways they had only seen these places as photographs. Cyril was a keen follower of the 'motoring' style of dress that consisted of 'gloves, cap, short coat. The car expanded the physical they could move over and in so doing rendered the 'old' boundaries out of date. Cars rendered the space in which they lived fluid.

This geographical fluidity increased with the arrival of holidays and in particular foreign travel/holidays. Like cars, it was the ability to cross and recross the geographical edges of their 'small world' that had perhaps the most profound effect on how they saw their home. Even the name 'foreign' in foreign travel suggested encounters with worlds other than the home

environment. What had previously been the 'other' no longer existed in its previous form. The other had changed into an imaginative space that was a constant presence, in all likelihood an imaginary made up of foreign scenes. Now it was much more than a knock on the door. This triumph of the foreign holiday was to have a huge influence on what both men and women were to wear as they discarded the earlier formalities of dress that notions of respectability had relied on.

One thing that acted as compression on social life and kept the world of respectability in place for a few years after the war was rationing. What one could buy was heavily restricted so what individuals purchased was similar, or not that different, from each other. Clothing was also rationed which led to a surge in home dressmaking as a way of maintaining respectable appearances. This 'democratic' consumption continued for a few years until rationing was abolished in 1954.

Once rationing was lifted there was more stuff to buy and more money to buy it with, albeit that this growth was slow at first. The gradual growth of goods that could be purchased would put the congregation of respectability under great strain. When more and more goods are available there is an increase in the individuality of appearing respectable. This widening of the distance between these newly blossoming consumers makes a unified judgement upon respectability a great deal harder to achieve than it had been in the days of rationing. Respectability thrives in a world it can control. Judgement must have a clear boundary between the acceptable and the unacceptable, something that is shared by all those who participate in its daily routines. Once there are differential increases in the spending powers of each household the grounds upon which respectability rests starts to evaporate, or transform into a purely private matter. Many class differences that were submerged during rationing re-emerged as differences in incomes re-asserted themselves. As far as female dress was concerned increases in wealth quickly pushed appearances past any traces that might remain of the aesthetic of respectability. Greater variety appeared in the dress worn by the female members of the congregation of Cyril and Elsie's chapel. For the men it was probably the quantity and quality of what was hanging in their wardrobe rather than innovations in style.

Respectability, and its relation to dress as I had experienced it as a child, had ceased to exist by the mid to late 1960's. As a way of life, that held on to a belief that it was important to look and behave in a respectable manner it proved unable to survive the disruptive forces let loose in the

1960's. One of the most poignant of these social forces eating away at the world of respectability was a weakening in the power of the family to order the lives of its younger members, what might be called its children. It may be recalled that an important task of respectability, and its judgements, was to recruit the younger generation into its respectable way of life. However, when Tertiary Education began to expand in the early 1960's it had as a consequence that these students-to-be would leave the familiar worlds they had grown up in. But more was at stake than simply leaving the family home. When these fully-fledged students returned it was clear to both parents and offspring that the 'children' could no longer be comfortably accommodated within the respectable order of their parent's home. The children had refused their parents gift of respectability.

Something that was affecting daily life as a whole and not just the Baptist and Methodist congregations attended by my grandparents was an increase in the secularisation of daily life. There was a gradual erosion of a single source of authority binding together chapel and congregation and with this went the capacity to judge in a morally forceful manner. There was still authority but it had changed. It was now dispersed across the social order. In television, advertising, music and the huge increase in visual imagery, especially how it became an essential accompaniment to clothing. Respectability no longer had the power of an authority to enforce its judgements. Long after the time we have discussed Cyril and Elsie ceased to attend Sunday Service. It-chapel- had become far too liberal to their taste. Their 'service' was conducted at home.

Hannah and Herbert. Cyril and Elsie. All gone.

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