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The Conscription of Fashion - Utility Cloth, Clothing, and Footwear, 1941-1952 - Sladen, C

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sions hardly do justice to Harper's research. It is a shame, too, that, in attending so diligently to primary sources, she neglects other more recent writing in the field. After all, Harper is hardly the first historian or film critic to have looked at the films in question, and authors such as Marcia Landy and Jeffrey Richards, among others, deserve to have their work acknowledged.

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ANDREW HIGSON

Christopher Sladen. *The Conscription of Fashion: Utility Cloth, Clothing and Footwear, 1941–1952*. Aldershot, U.K.: Scolar Press; distributed by Ashgate Publishing Company, Brookfield, Vt. 1995. Pp. x, 134. \$51.95. ISBN 1-85298-007-2.

If Churchill had not been distracted by the hunt for the *Bismarck*, the story goes, Britons would not have got clothes rationing, and hence Utility (a euphemism for “standard”) clothing, in 1941. The prime minister considered this an unwarranted intrusion into people's private lives. The controls proved wise, however, and Churchill's adoption of the siren suit soon made him a walking advertisement for Utility. Modern historians often cite the clothing policy as a typical example of the sharing of wartime deprivations that transformed old class-splintered Britain into the more egalitarian nation it is today. Christopher Sladen, a retired civil servant who experienced the clothing policies first hand, invites us to be more skeptical of such war measures. The rationing of scarce resources was fair and helped stabilize the cost of living, he writes, it *may* even have reduced industrial unrest, but can we be sure that whatever communal spirit this engendered caused a permanent change in social attitudes? Some historians, he points out, think the trend started at the First World War rather than the Second. His book is far from an anti-consensus polemic, however. In the best tradition of the British bureaucracy, Sladen prefers not to state his own position clearly but to present both pros and cons so that readers can make their own decisions.

After discussing the development of the clothing policy in general, the book proceeds to a discussion of Utility products, then concludes with chapters on the postwar controls and the long-term impact on the clothing industry. As with similar programs covering furniture and housewares, the clothing policy had two components. Ration coupons limited the actual number of items bought. Utility reduced the amount of raw materials used in manufacturing these items. The industry having been pared down and made more efficient by the closure and amalgamation of factories (“concentration”), output of textiles and clothing was mostly limited to a smaller number of qualities and styles. Priority was given to price ranges usually bought by the working masses. A “CC 41” label or stamp affixed to the products certified that they met specific standards set by the Board of Trade. Meanwhile, austerity orders banned wasteful embellishments such as frills, waist pleats, decorative ribbons, unnecessary buttons and cuffs on trousers, and even decreed the length of shirt-tails. Although men's clothes looked much the same afterwards, women's fashions altered: skirts became shorter and straighter and a plainer “country look” was adopted as town wear. Single-breasted jackets for both men and women also became the norm. The appeal of the new styles improved in Spring 1942 when the Board of Trade hired leading designers, including Parisians who had fled to London, to create Utility collections. Apart from some shoddy footwear, Sladen notes, most of the Utility clothing proved surprisingly acceptable and durable. There was also generally enough of it, except for children's wear. Compliance by both producers and consumers was impressive, in stark contrast to a similar program

attempted in France. Although women in particular were later eager to abandon the styles in favor of the postwar New Look, the only thing to which Britons really objected during the emergency, writes Sladen (still the proud possessor of some “CC 41” suspenders), was the name Utility itself.

A diverting chapter provides a selection of contemporary comment about Utility clothing taken from Ministry of Information “Home Intelligence Reports,” interviews by Mass Observation officials, and articles in newspapers, magazines, and trade journals. Unfortunately, these examples give little idea how, or if, reception varied by class—an aspect of Utility this reader would like to have learned more about.

Indeed, the great drawback to this book is that at less than 130 pages it is very much a “bare bones” account that leaves one wanting to know more about virtually every aspect touched on. Just the inclusion of more production statistics would have helped. It nevertheless serves as an informative introduction to the subject, and, as the first monograph to focus on this neglected aspect of life on the home front, its publication cannot help but be welcome.

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John Willinsky. *Empire of Words: The Reign of the OED*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. 1994. Pp. ix, 258. \$22.95. ISBN 0-691-03719-1.

“A dictionary is a word-book which collects somebody’s words into somebody’s book” (Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler, *A Feminist Dictionary* [1985], quoted in Willinsky, p. 189). Here is the perfect epigraph to John Willinsky’s *Empire of Words*, a thought-provoking study of that lexical behemoth, the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Whose words? Whose book?, Willinsky asks. The cover blurb to *Empire of Words* claims that the *OED* is the “most Victorian of modern dictionaries.” What are we to make of this temporal oxymoron? Is the *OED* a quaint cultural artifact, or a viable ongoing enterprise?

When Scottish autodidact James Murray began to edit *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* in the 1880s, he was quickly “caught in the web of words.” One hundred and twenty-five serial numbers and forty-four years later, Murray’s work was complete. Or was it? Between 1972 and 1986, editor Robert Burchfield oversaw a full-scale, four-volume *Supplement*. In 1989, the phrase “web of words” took on new shape and meaning with the publication of a computerized second edition. The *OED* entered the free-floating and infinitely-expandable net of cyberspace.

Two principles, however, have remained remarkably consistent throughout the *OED*’s editorial history. First, the words defined in the dictionary come from the medium of print (“Print, the public broadcasting system of Protestantism, capitalism, and the middle class, lent itself to the creation of a standard for governing public discourse,” as Willinsky aptly puts it [p. 5].) Second, each definition is accompanied by dated citations, defining the word in context and demonstrating its historical development. These citations have been drawn from the submissions of hundreds of contributing readers—some professional, some amateur. The sheer magnitude of such a “web of words” boggles the imagination: for the first volume alone (“A–B”), Murray marshalled 1,300 readers, who scoured some 5,000 books; the 1,827,306 citations in the completed first edition were culled from over 5 million citation slips submitted (pp. 42, 50).

Thus, Whose words? Whose book? are particularly apt questions to pose of the *OED*. We owe the raw data of Willinsky’s study to the recent computerization of the great lexicon.