



PROJECT MUSE®

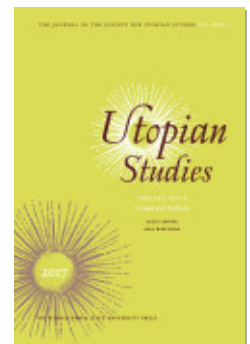
---

Utopian Bodies and Anti-fashion Futures: The Dress Theories  
and Practices of English Interwar Nudists

Annebella Pollen

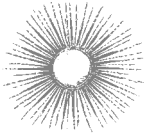
Utopian Studies, Volume 28, Number 3, 2017, pp. 451-481 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/686648>



## Utopian Bodies and Anti-fashion Futures: The Dress Theories and Practices of English Interwar Nudists

*Annebella Pollen*

### ABSTRACT

*Nudism has been largely overlooked as a means for exploring utopian ideas about bodies and dress, yet the first decade of organized nudism in England demonstrates idealistic beliefs in the powers of disrobing. Those who reject clothes think deeply about dress, and nudist practitioners in the 1920s and 1930s produced distinctive and sometimes sophisticated theories of fashion and its discontents. At this time “social nudism” was a new and minority pursuit that was garnering significant public interest, not least among intellectuals who promoted the practice as a solution to postwar cultural crisis. In the clamor for public respectability, however, visionaries were offset by moderates; disputes thus provide insight into the meanings and uses of dress and undress. As a forward-looking theory and a lived experience, English interwar nudism was simultaneously a product of its particular place and time and a fashioning of a future that has yet to arrive.*

KEYWORDS: *dress, interwar, utopia, England, nudism*

To explore utopian fashion using a case study of those who have cast off clothes might seem like a deliberately perverse enterprise. The practice of nudism may

first appear to be an immaterial culture, a dress study without an object. And yet, as John Berger has so pithily put it in *Ways of Seeing*, “Nudity is a form of dress.”<sup>1</sup> Being naked is never without cultural signification, deeply rooted in social and material specificities. In *Seeing Through Clothes*, dress historian Anne Hollander has emphasized that “the state of undress” has “a constant share” in “the profound and complicated motives governing all types of dress.” She asserts, “The more significant clothing is, the more meaning attaches to its absence, and the more awareness is generated about any relation between the two states.”<sup>2</sup>

It is nonetheless something of an irony that those who vehemently reject clothes tend to think more deeply about dress than most, at least in relation to its shortcomings. In so doing—especially in the earliest days of the organized movement—nudist practitioners have produced detailed, distinctive, and sometimes sophisticated understandings of fashion and its discontents, which have been largely overlooked as a site of dress theory. Discussion of dress is particularly prevalent in the nudist literature that emerged in England in the 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>3</sup> At this time organized or “social” nudism was a new and minority pursuit but one that was garnering significant growth in public interest, not least among intellectuals, who prided themselves on their advanced thinking and often promoted the practice among a range of reformist, if not utopian, endeavors in pursuit of radical solutions to what was perceived to be a postwar crisis in civilization.<sup>4</sup>

In practice, as will be discussed, English nudists in the early years of the movement varied in their commitment to the cause and inhabited a range of positions on a spectrum of belief. These ranged from utopian dedication to the creation of a wholly naked world that promised a panacea for all social problems to a more moderate adoption of occasional sunbathing, under appropriate conditions, in the minimum of attire, for the purposes of improved health and well-being. As such, nudism at its broadest was and is a practice that is not entirely without clothes at all times. In addition, nudism has a distinctive character in a cold climate; interwar English nudists of a practical bent pioneered systems of “gymnosophic dress” as concessions to the country’s many sunless days. As social reformers more broadly, early nudists tended to also support contemporary campaigns for dress reform for improved health, comfort, and aesthetics in a range of settings; these design ambitions for modernized clothing, for times when nudism was not possible, ranged from the rational to the fantastic. At their most imaginative, nudists dared to dream of futurist worlds in which clothes would be entirely abandoned or conceptually completely redrawn.

This article, then, assesses the dress theories and practices of English nudists in roughly the first decade of social nudism, in the period that encompasses the establishment of the first nudist club in England in 1924, the inclusion of the word *nudism* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1931, and the dismantling by the Nazi regime, from 1933, of the widespread German *Nacktkultur* that had been the founding inspiration for the more modestly scaled English endeavors. These pioneering years offer a heady moment of utopian promise; nudism in England was a highly experimental practice in its beginnings and tended to attract educated figures with unorthodox approaches to living whose claims for nudism as a radical alternative to conventional culture were all-encompassing. Through the emergence of homegrown nudist magazines and the establishment of the first generation of nudist literature in English, a comprehensive philosophy of life—where concerns about dressing and undressing were absolutely central—was developed through word and image.

The participants in these debates were variously artists, writers, psychoanalysts, and medical practitioners. The support for and justification of nudism by well-known figures in the arts and sciences—from George Bernard Shaw and Havelock Ellis to Dora Russell and Naomi Mitchison—helped legitimate and popularize the practice and additionally established a rich body of published ideas and a distinctive visual culture. In these years the organizers and promoters of social nudism sought to achieve respectability for “complete sunbathing” as a popular leisure activity. In the clamor for public acceptability, nudists’ utopian visions and social solutions were at times offset by more pragmatic moderates among their number; such debates about what not to wear and why thus provide insight into the uses and meanings of dress and undress, both as practices of everyday life and as fantasies of the new world nudists wished to bring into being. For, as a forward-looking theory as well as a lived experience, English interwar nudism was simultaneously a product of the material conditions of its particular time and place and a fashioning of an imaginary future that has yet to arrive.

### “The Nudist’s Library”: Sources and Contexts

The discussions that follow are informed by the wave of book-length publications that emerged in the decade under scrutiny; these include publications that promote nudism as a part of wider health concerns of the period (for example,

C. W. Saleeby's 1924 *Sunlight and Health*), popular German works on nudism translated into English (Hans Suren's 1927 *Man and Sunlight*), and the first generation of English-language books on the subject (John Langdon-Davies's 1929 *The Future of Nakedness*, Eric Gill's 1931 *Clothing Without Cloth*, Frances and Mason Merrill's 1932 *Among the Nudists*, Maurice Parmalee's 1933 *Nudism in Modern Life*, Jan Gay's 1933 *On Going Naked*, C. E. Norwood's 1933 *Nudism in England*, George Ryley Scott's 1934 *The Common Sense of Nudism*, William Welby's 1934 *Naked and Unashamed*, and I. O. Evans's 1935 *Sensible Sun-Bathing*). In addition, the discussion draws upon further works by sympathetic English dress reformers whose theories culminate in nudist futures, principally Gerald Heard's 1924 *Narcissus: An Anatomy of Clothes* and J. C. Flugel's 1930 *The Psychology of Clothes*. Alongside these, detailed debates are drawn from the pages of periodicals in the archives of British Naturism; materials consulted include surviving copies of a ten-year stretch of *Health and Efficiency*, a physical culture magazine established in 1900 that became wholly devoted to nudism from 1931–32; the smaller-circulation journal *Gymnos* ("For Nudists Who Think"), which ran from 1933 to 1934 and was then incorporated into *The Illustrated Sun Bathing News*; and monthly issues of *Sun Bathing Review: Journal of the Sun Societies* from 1933.

There is an abundant secondary literature in English on the more widespread and politically complex nudist practices in Germany; these include Chad Ross's *Naked Germany*, Michael Hau's *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany*, and John Alexander Williams's *Turning to Nature in Germany*.<sup>5</sup> Detailed studies of English nudism in a parallel period are much scarcer, although the subject, admittedly smaller in scale than its continental European counterparts, is still rich with opportunity. This study therefore builds upon the outline work of Philip Carr-Gomm's *A Brief History of Nakedness* and the more detailed and theoretical studies of Ruth Barcan.<sup>6</sup> Outside studies of nudism per se, works by dress historians have also provided useful points of departure for this inquiry; Michael Carter's preliminary research on English sun-worshipping "Heliophiles" and his scrutiny of the dress philosophies of Flugel inform these discussions, as do overviews of historical dress reform and utopian dress by Elizabeth Wilson and Aileen Ribeiro.<sup>7</sup>

More specifically, this study adds to a body of publications I have been developing over several years that reconsider, and in some cases seek to recuperate, the uncompromising philosophies and often unrealized visions of historic idealists and life reformers. These studies have examined the legacies of nineteenth-century dress reform in interwar campaign groups, the Kindred of the Kibbo

Kift and the Men's Dress Reform Party, second-wave feminism, and twenty-first-century socialist style.<sup>8</sup> Studying the cultures of English social nudism at its inception offers another, interconnected case study of social reform through cultures of dress, offering perhaps the most extreme example of dress as a materialization of political ideology.<sup>9</sup> Here dress is considered to be both the fundamental social problem and the site of redemption; the resolution of social ills is attempted through its reimagining and ultimately its annihilation. Without clothing, utopia was sought in the transfiguration of the body. A central plank of nudism, according to the editors of *Gymnos* magazine, was that "the body is more than raiment," yet it was the conscious release from raiment that made the body visible.<sup>10</sup> As Michel Foucault has argued in his philosophical meditation on the sites of elsewhere, "The human body is the principal actor in all utopias." He asserts, "Everything that touches the body—drawings, colors, diadems, tiaras, clothes, uniforms, all that—lets the utopia sealed in the body blossom into sensible and colourful form."<sup>11</sup> In the spirit of this claim, then, this article thus considers, in turn, interwar social nudism's utopian vision, its relationship to clothing as a site of worldly complaint and reformist compromise, and, finally, its futuristic fantasies of the body's release from sartorial enslavement.

### "Men like Gods": Dream Worlds and Real Worlds

Fashion commentator Richard Martin has claimed, "Never has there been a Utopian wish or realisation without serious consideration of clothing."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in Ribeiro's assessment of five hundred years of utopian writings in English fiction, defined as the "serious discussion of an ideal political and social system," she notes that almost all of its practitioners tackle the treatment of dress to a greater or lesser extent. She is careful to note, however, that there are distinctions between the categories of dress reform and dress in utopia; in her conceptualization, "the former is usually more practical, related to and deriving from real clothing, and sometimes actually made up and worn." She continues, "Projects for dress reform, if they are to be successful (and not all were), must—partly at least—conform to contemporary fashion, and be subject to considerations of practicality, if they are to be worn by real people. Dress reform cannot indulge in the wild flights of fancy and theatricality seen in much utopian clothing—clothing, moreover which will *never* have to pass the test of reality."<sup>13</sup> Carter has also characterized utopian dress as

a place apart. He notes its ultimate impossibility: "There is a place where clothing always appears in a condition that it can only allude to in the world of the living. That realm is the world of the imagination; the places found in narratives, reveries, and visual images."<sup>14</sup>

These definitions offer useful models by which to measure English social nudism as a utopian form, for it is an area that is both a way of life and a theoretical philosophy, which bridges reformist agendas as well as idealistic fantasy. As will be shown, the nature and tone of discussions of early nudism varied enormously, encompassing deeply pragmatic concerns, near-religious beliefs, and futurist fantasies that border on science fiction. The ideology of nudism and its methods for practical implementation were not always agreed upon by its adherents and practitioners; the internal contradictions thus form a dynamic ground for analysis. A brief survey of the titles of more than one hundred years of international publications held in the archives of British Naturism confirms at a glance the undeniably utopian nature of the wider project; books and magazines with names such as *Eden*, *Arcadia*, *Elysium Fields*, *Paradise*, and even *Utopia* abound. Yet whether early nudism in England should be understood as utopian was less than fixed in its own time; its contested status was tackled head-on in the first generation of literature.

For those early English practitioners who styled themselves as "gymnosophists"—from the combined Greek words for nakedness and wisdom—nudism was understood as one part of a more comprehensive philosophy and a wider project of social reform. Parmalee, a sociologist and author of an early book on "the new gymnosophy," argued that this particular approach to nudism was characterized by simplification, not only in dress but also in other aspects of life. He felt that it should seek to end "unnecessary and unhealthy clothing, useless structures built largely for show, ugly and uncomfortable furniture, much trumpery bric-a-brac intended for decoration, and many superfluous and injurious kinds of food and drink."<sup>15</sup> In this context, the practice of removing one's clothes was thus more than mere disrobing; it formed an integral part of an earnest attempt at solving contemporary social problems, whose nature was sometimes too broad to be defined. As the editor of the first issue of *Gymnos* observed, some people suffered "in their sub-conscious minds the vague sense of something lacking, of complete happiness never quite achieved." It was asserted, "Our experience leads us to suggest that nudity will supply the need."<sup>16</sup>

*Gymnos* contributor Albert Ebor also detailed gymnosophy's far-reaching physical, moral, and intellectual effects; he asserted that it "stands for all-round

regeneration, in that it changes the false for the true; bondage for freedom; hypocrisy and cant for truth of purpose and resolve, and, above all, elevates the mind, and prompts the soul to strive for heights far above the petty and mean things which are attached to civilisation, as we know it to-day.” He continued, “Let us then dispense with clothes and with all attributes that are mean, vain-glorious and untruthful, and by so doing usher in the Golden Age.”<sup>17</sup> Many early nudist authors strike this evangelical tenor and reveal a near-religious pursuit of a placeless promised land. For these authors, nudism is not only a social cause that offers a tangible resolution to all that is wrong in the modern world but also a way of delivering heaven on earth. Perhaps the first to establish this zealous approach was Suren in *Man and Sunlight*, a comprehensive “manual of life reform”<sup>18</sup> to be achieved through a rigorous regime of outdoor nudism and exercise. Suren asserted, “There is a purity—a sacredness in our natural nakedness. We find a marvellous revelation in the beauty and strength of the naked body, transfigured by godlike purity shining from the free and open eye which mirrors the whole depth of a noble and questing soul. Placed in the bright frame of exalted Nature, the human body finds its most ideal manifestation.”<sup>19</sup>

Many nudists pursued a similar declamatory tone of moral faith in the transcendental power of the unclothed body. Noel Poynter, in a passage entitled “I Believe,” stated, “I believe in the power of the Nudist Movement to permeate through the strata of man’s life today, transmuting, revitalizing, and rebuilding a civilization based on a perfect balance of moral, economic and social freedom on the one, and of woman as woman, for the building up of character, strength and courage.” For Poynter and others of his ilk, what was being sloughed off with clothes was the worst of mechanized modernity, with its manifold complexities and artificialities. Nudism offered not only a means of simplification but also the potential for holistic unity with what was natural and enduring. Poynter instructed, “Dig down to the hard rock of the essential, cast off the tawdry accumulation of convention, and all the petty personal trash that the world has grafted on the individual spirit. Cast it off, I say! Seek in return the vitality, the energy, the unswerving faith in human dignity and purpose that can only be found in the crystal rock—the golden, sun-filled ore that has so been lost to man, and now, found again, must and will be cherished as the life-giver, the god-given.” This exultant, near-pagan call to arms, simultaneously forward- and backward-looking, was unashamedly in pursuit of an ideal, to be achieved through



nudist regeneration. Poynter's aim was for nothing less than "a new spirit, a new man, a new citizen of a new world."<sup>20</sup>

Nudism promised a return to that which had been lost and a transfiguration of the commonplace. In the words of another practitioner, as a result of nudism, ordinary men and women "become as the gods and goddesses of the ancients, and take rank with the aristocracy of the human race."<sup>21</sup> The claims that were made of nudity were clearly extraordinary, and the investments made in the project were deep; in consequence, expectations ran high. Herman Soshinski, founder of the American Gymnosophical Association, declared that, through "nude culture," "the body shall become beautiful again, reappear as the 'Image of God.'" He asserted that nudity would enable "body, mind and soul" to join in harmony with "all vital forces of nature." As a result, "man shall also become good again."<sup>22</sup> The cumulative message of these proclamations—which are echoed again and again in the hopes and dreams of early nudist writings—was that the utopian world was closer than had previously been thought. Such spiritual riches could be unlocked by undressing.

### **"Top Hat Minds": Casting Off Clothing and Its Metaphors**

The cause of complaint and the root of repression was broadly agreed by first-generation nudists to be "civilization." Various understood as atomized, mechanized, inauthentic, and enervated, this corrupted culture was made material in everything that was wrong with contemporary clothing. If nudism was utopian and escapist, dress was necessarily its inverse, dystopian and enslaved. Specific articles of dress were singled out for critique in nudist accusations, but more broadly clothing as an abstract concept was made to carry the weight of a variety of moral charges, using a range of metaphors. Garments were described as "dirty cloth jails," a "tyranny," and "the iron chains which civilisation and custom have riveted on suffering humanity."<sup>23</sup> Disease, danger, and deathliness were common characterizations: For example, it was noted that illness "is largely an inevitable result of the enslavement of the body within the dark walls of its own clothing"; an excess of dress, as part of the excess of comfortable living, was claimed to be fatal. Those who clung to their "astrakhan collars and have no use for the Sun and Air and freedom of the body" offered "one consolation" to nudists; it was believed that "they will

die off quicker than those who follow the sun.”<sup>24</sup> In typically uncompromising language, it was declared, “Clothes are dead.”<sup>25</sup>

In particular the fashionable garments of the period’s immediate forebears, from tight corsets and trailing skirts to heavy, complex bathing costumes, were slighted as “ludicrous, insanitary, uncomfortable, imbecile.”<sup>26</sup> Modern clothing fared little better, being described as “crude, unimaginative and unattractive.”<sup>27</sup> The problem particularly concerned the apparently irrational clothes worn by men: “They fray their necks with the rings of collars and bore into them with protruding studs, they encase their bodies irrespective of the state of the weather in thick black or grey cloth and wear on their heads little black boxes which they call bowlers or taller ones called silk hats.”<sup>28</sup> The argument that menswear was not progressing at the same speed as women’s wear featured prominently in nudist literature of the 1920s and 1930s and overlapped directly with organized contemporaneous campaigns for men’s dress reform. Many dress reformers were also nudists, and vice versa.

As I have discussed elsewhere, these dress reform endeavors varied in their forcefulness, and solutions proposed ranged from moderate revisions to existing garments to make them more “rational,” lightweight, and washable to the complete eradication of the offending items.<sup>29</sup> Those who published in nudist papers shared the same variety of approaches, although in the radical space of the magazines, totalitarian desires were perhaps more prominently communicated. Artist Eric Gill, for example, well known for his dress diatribes and for wearing only an artist’s smock in public, proclaimed: “I should like to see collars, ties and trousers abolished.”<sup>30</sup> Other everyday items were also castigated in no uncertain terms. Waistcoats were dismissed as ugly and lacking in function: “In the name of common sense can anybody tell me what useful purpose is served by this mongrel born of a tailor’s nightmare? With no arms, half a front and an apology for a back, it is good for nothing beyond collecting junk in the pockets.”<sup>31</sup> Parmalee argued that “all the implements of torture with which mankind voluntarily adorns itself, or rather in which it encases itself, as if in straitjackets in prisons and asylums, should be discarded.” These “abominations” included boots and shoes: “In no other way has mankind deliberately caused itself more misery than by the use of these monstrous agencies of deformation.”<sup>32</sup>

The release from such items would produce a state of being that was, again, couched in utopian terms. Supporters of nudism’s redemption

characterized the clothed as “poor prisoners, whose souls and minds are as clogged and shrouded, as darkened and choked, by creeds and conventions, as our bodies are by wool and felt and starch.” They looked forward to “liberation from these heavy draperies that shut out from our mind the fresh draught of independent thought, and that screen our souls and bodies from the divine light which Heaven pours out day by day to save us from our padded dinginess.”<sup>33</sup> Emancipation from clothing was emancipation from all that clothing represented; this included industrialization. Gill, as part of his wider arguments about the loss of craftsmanship and contemporary culture, argued that the world of mass production was producing uniformity. By extension, in casting off mass-produced dress, nudism would return individuality.<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, other authors who evoked industrialization as a problem claimed that nudity could provide a way to mark out distinction from “the mob” in a world where securities of status were being put at risk by “the increased prosperity and higher standard of living among the working classes, the remarkable rise in democracy, the emancipation of women, the enormous spread of popular education.” Together these factors had created “a herd” from whom elites found it hard to stand apart.<sup>35</sup> This use of nudity as an act of class definition contrasted with the more common egalitarian claim that hierarchies of caste and class could be broken down by removing clothes. Nudism was said to produce “more democracy and individual freedom through the disappearance of many oppressive conventional, moral and legal restrictions.”<sup>36</sup> Relations between the sexes would be improved, and a whole host of sexual neuroses—understood to include adultery, prostitution, and masturbation—were expected to “vanish” along with clothing and its production of false modesty and shame.<sup>37</sup> Other nudists went still further and predicted a reduction in greed, the spatial reorganization of city life, population control, and pacifism among its potential effects.<sup>38</sup>

### **“Sensible Sun-Bathing” or “The Cult of Nudism”? Moderates Versus Completists**

While many and various claims were made for clothing as the central problem to be cured and for nudism as the cure-all, some counterbalanced their assertions even as they made them. Pragmatic practitioners maintained

their enthusiasm for the cause while denying that it could ever deliver all it promised. Parmalee, for example, despite all his statements to the contrary, noted that “gymnosophy is no panacea . . . , and will not render mankind ideal and perfect.” He conceded, nonetheless, that “it can ameliorate certain of these ills.”<sup>39</sup> Parmalee was one of many who compared contemporary culture unfavorably with a paradise lost; both the Garden of Eden and the cultural pinnacle achieved by ancient Greece were repeatedly and longingly evoked. He also assessed literary ambitions for ideal states that included nudism from Plato to H. G. Wells but concluded, “The discussion and description of nudity in literature have so far had no value whatsoever for gymnosophy. Utopian discussions and schemes are wholly ineffective, even when supported by a great name. Many persons accept the ideas theoretically, but will not act upon them.”<sup>40</sup> For nudists of this line of thinking, utopia was synonymous with fantasia. In order to bring forth the gymnosophic society that they so desired, practicality and compromise were key.

Among early enthusiasts of sunbathing, the question of whether exposure of the whole body to the sun was necessary was a key sticking point. Must nudity be complete and universal? All agreed on the general positive values of sunshine for well-being; Saleeby’s *Sunlight and Health* and the increasing popularity of outdoor swimming, hiking, and camping as summer leisure activities had established the pleasurable and medicinal benefits of light and air on exposed skin. To what extent these and additional benefits could be enhanced by *total* nudity, however, was a common cause for dispute between what might be described as “moderates” and “completists.” A range of voices promoted complete disrobing, from psychologists who vouched for its capacity to “dispel fear” to physicians who advocated “the whole light on the whole skin.”<sup>41</sup> Norwood reinforced this point of view in his “scientific” study *Nudism in England*. As an Anglican clergyman, and thus in many ways moderate in his approach to living, he nonetheless argued that, for medical reasons, “it is important that the sexual organs are exposed.”<sup>42</sup> Because a core aspect of the promotion of nudity was to release the naked body from cultural ideas of shame and from its dominant association with sex, sunbathing in swimming costumes, “slips,” and brassieres was condemned in some quarters, while strongly endorsed in others (some “sun clubs” formally insisted upon it for members). In an article debating “partial nudity,” for example, H. Robini argued that “false ideas of modesty should not be engendered by covering the sexual organs or the breasts.”<sup>43</sup> Cedric Belfrage argued elsewhere that

complete nudism was a necessity: “The whole thing about Nudism is that the idea is completely defeated if you have a thread of clothing on you. It is a thing which you cannot possibly appreciate unless you are completely naked. . . . You don’t get anywhere near as much physical and mental benefit without complete nudity. A sense of absolute freedom is a *sine qua non*.”<sup>44</sup>

For some who followed this completist line of argument, nudism was envisaged as a total practice that should not be confined only to sunbathing and gymnastics in the summer months or to the designated, authorized social spaces of nudist societies. Nudity in public, however, was a prosecutable offense. To remain on the right side of the law, indoor nudist clubs with ultraviolet sunlamps were devised in London for inclement weather and maintaining social relationships over long winters. Those in favor of “universal nudism” looked forward to a time when nudism on Regent Street would become the norm—indeed, when “all normal-minded civilised people . . . live as nudists” and “permanently discard clothes.”<sup>45</sup> Others, however, saw these kinds of visionary ideals as a bridge too far from the conventional world; Norwood argued that “clothing has an important place to fill and no one but a crank would propose its total abolition.”<sup>46</sup> George Ryley Scott, in *The Common Sense of Nudism*, concurred: “Nudity, like strong drink and most things in this world which are worth having, can be abused and overdone.”<sup>47</sup> Even the idealists of *Gymnos* stated that they did not practice “nudity for nudity’s sake”; it needed to be exercised under controlled conditions, among men and women of the highest repute.<sup>48</sup>

In part the compromises with convention were of concern because of the precarious nature of nudism in the public eye. In order to protect from accusations of prurience and exhibitionism, stringent bureaucratic rules of membership were practiced in nudist clubs, and elaborate codes of conduct, once membership was secured, aimed to reinforce nudism’s legality and respectability. Popular conceptions of nudism by nonpractitioners ranged from the amused to the frankly appalled; nudist magazines featured regular responses to accusations made in the mainstream press that nudism was immoral, even “evil.”<sup>49</sup> Even if viewed benignly, nudism was still popularly seen as eccentric, so a “sane” or rational line was thus maintained by those who wished to counteract this critique of cultishness. Long-established affinities between nudism and vegetarianism, socialism, and teetotalism—nudism’s natural bedfellows—were deeply objected to by some members. Novelist George C. Foster, for example, the author of numerous moderate articles

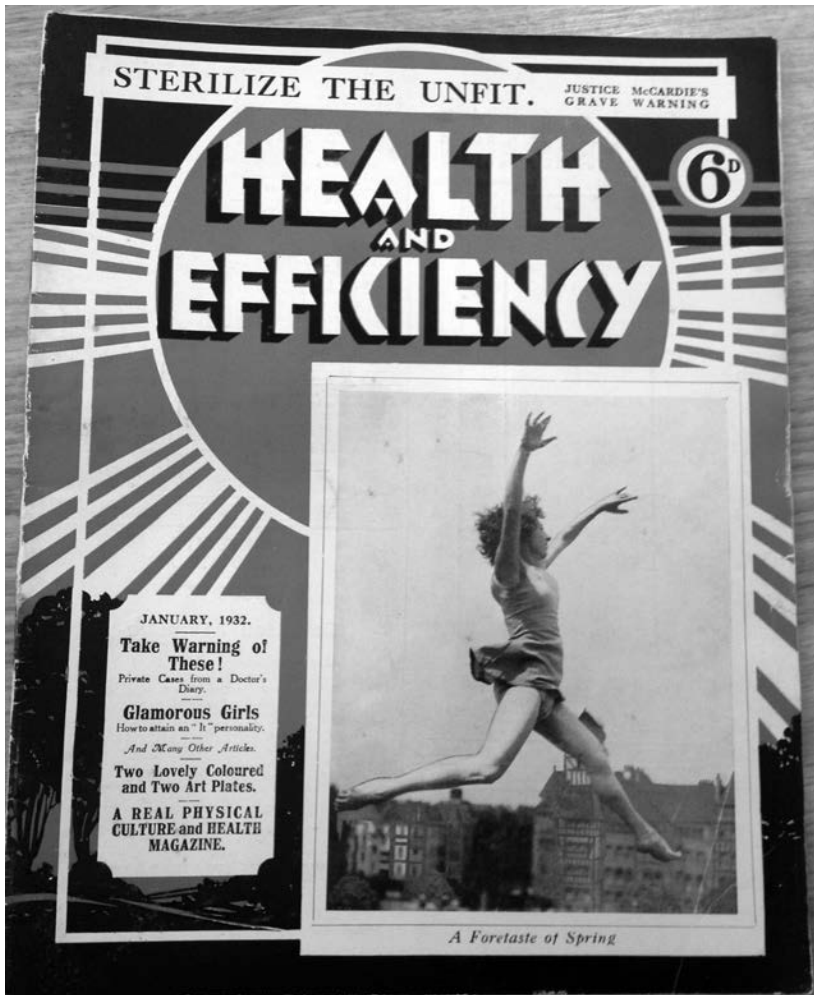
with titles such as “Nudism Is Not a Cult” and “Nudism and the Common Man,” was particularly vocal in this area, arguing, “The movement does not want the fanatics and the cranks. It needs Mr. Everyman and his wife. It needs people with jobs in the City and a proper pride in ‘keeping up appearances.’ . . . It needs such people and their wives more than it needs cranky artists and authors, self-expressionists and parlour-bolsheviks.”<sup>50</sup> Others, however, such as Alec Craig, for example, highlighted nudism’s “ideological affinity” with the political Left and argued that “nudism is progressive.” Craig emphasized that “free speech, the free circulation of ideas, individual liberty, and democratic government” were all at risk in the reactionary political environment of the early 1930s. To him, the “critical mind, free from the shackles of superstition, tradition, ignorance and convention,” that nudists had applied to “the problem of clothing” could and should be equally applied to other problems of social and political life. In his evaluation, if this happened, “miracles would be worked.”<sup>51</sup> In these hopes for an improved social and cultural existence, nudism was understood as one part of a political ideology that was utopian, not in the sense of a perfect unattainable domain of dreams but as a social vision of a better world within close reach.

### “Permissible Dress”: Clothing for Nudists

*New Health* magazine perhaps best articulated a middle way between clashing camps: “Somewhere between superabundance of dress and complete nakedness lies the happy mean, a mean which will permit of dress or undress as circumstances change.”<sup>52</sup> This more flexible approach to dressing allowed nudists to cover themselves as suited the situation and helps explain advertisements for garments, as well as the clothing worn in photographs, in nudist publications. *Health and Efficiency*, for example, as one of the more commercially minded magazines, is rich with illustrated promotions for a range of products from patent medicines to articles of dress. As a magazine with its roots in “physical culture” at its broadest—encompassing what we would now describe as bodybuilding and beauty contests—the publication discussed nudism from at least 1925 but only became fully devoted to the practice from 1931–32. As such, in the period, its covers and pages tended to feature an eclectic mix of dressed and undressed bodies, including men in jockstraps and fig leaves assuming postures reminiscent of Greek statuary and

women in diaphanous drapes contorted into expressionist attitudes inspired by modern dance (Figure 1). Fashionable swimming costumes and caps were pictured alongside hiking outfits, while so-called natural corsetry for women was promoted alongside Aertex sports shirts for men.

Although there is not space here to discuss the distinctive visual culture of interwar English nudism at great length, all illustrated nudist publications shared a similar style of photography (Figure 2). Naked bodies were invariably white (although sometimes warmly tanned), young and slim, and—for reasons



*Figure 1.* *Health and Efficiency* cover, January 1932. Courtesy H&E naturist/Hawk Editorial Ltd.

of legality—arranged in stylized positions where their pubic hair and genitals were concealed. They were often pictured in exalted attitudes, stretching in gymnastic, athletic, or dance postures, singly or in coordinated groups. Less choreographed photographs were included from camps, with members often involved in organized exercise or games, from leapfrogging to tug-of-war. Nudist women, men, and also children were most commonly depicted in “natural” outdoor settings, with few intervening signs of the industrialized world. Props were also sparse; occasionally an archery bow or a shot put, a kettle bell or a medicine ball, or a staff or spear was visible. The naked body dominated as the principal subject. Photographs were universally taken in good weather, although Suren notably appeared, in his own publication, naked on skis in the snow. To enable front and side views of their glistening and muscular bodies, Suren and his male colleagues were pictured in a discreet black “posing pouch”; a pattern for its construction is given at the rear of *Man and Sunlight*. Other forms of briefs or slips were pictured on bodies at English sunbathing events; some of these resembled Native American breechclouts, and others were more akin to adult nappies made of loose, white fabric. Advertisements for reform clothing, particularly items designed and supplied by the Men’s Dress Reform Party, included fitted, waist-high bathing “slips” and, strikingly, a very loudly patterned, complex golfing ensemble (Figure 3).

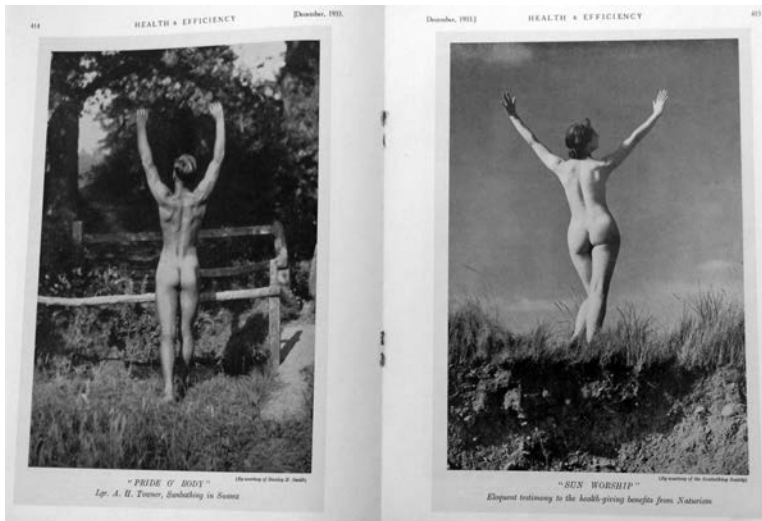


Figure 2. *Health and Efficiency* spread, December 1933. Courtesy *H&E naturist*/Hawk Editorial Ltd.



**MEN'S DRESS REFORM PARTY**  
*Hon. Secretary: Dr. A. C. JORDAN, C.B.E., 82z Portland Place, London, W.1.*

**The New M.D.R.P. Golf Ensemble**




In Winter, with cold wind blowing, wear  
**GRENFELL JUMPER**, open at the neck.

IN COOL WEATHER wear  
**PULL-OVER** and HOSE.

GOLF JUMPER of Grenfell cloth, zip fastening	1	9	9
SHORTS " " to match	1	19	9
OVER-TROUSERS " " " " " "	1	11	6
CAP (round, peaked) " " " " " "	1	7	6
PULL-OVER (long-sleeved) to match	1	18	9
SLIP-OVER (short-sleeved) " " " " " "	1	11	3
GOLF-HOSE with garters and tabs, to match	1	9	9
SHIRT, art-silk, with zipp, short-sleeved, to match	1	10	6
	<b>£6</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>9</b>

SPECIAL PRICE for complete outfit ... **£6 15 0**

**ORDERS to MANAGER, M.D.R.P. SUPPLIES, 38, Moss Hall Grove,  
 London, N.12.**

*Measurements required:* Height; chest; waist; size for hose and for cap.  
 Cash with order or C.O.D.

Cheques to be made payable to "**MEN'S DRESS REFORM PARTY**"

Printed by W. H. HOULDERSHAW, LTD., 49 London Road, Southend-on-Sea, Essex, and Published by  
 THE GYMNIC ASSOCIATION OF GREAT BRITAIN, 79 St. Martin's Lane, London, W.C.2. Obtainable  
 through any branch of W. H. Smith & Son, Ltd., and Messrs. Wyman & Sons, Ltd.

Figure 3. Men's Dress Reform Party golf clothes advertised in *Gymnos*, December 1933.

The fact that magazines included discussions on what to wear for nudism might seem oxymoronic. Nonetheless all periodicals and books debated the issue, and many also debated what nudists might wear when not in the sun. Laurence Housman, for example, wrote an extended letter to

*Sun Bathing Review* to suggest what could be worn whenever minimal decency was required, as an improvement on the makeshift arrangements he saw in magazine photographs. His model drew inspiration from what he vaguely described as “pictures of natives” and consisted of a short apron hanging loose over a belt to cover the genitals of both sexes. As he put it, “What they wear is decorative and easy; it is something to be seen and admired; it has not that wretched appearance of exposed underwear which characterises most of your present sun-bathing costumes.” In Housman’s view, “The bunched loin clothes your devotees are at present wearing are to my mind both silly and ugly, and in the case of some of your males a little bit ‘exhibitionistic’ in tendency.” For times when women’s breasts must be concealed, he suggested following “the fashions of ancient and eastern civilisations” with the aim of making the cups “decorative and beautiful” with “rich, strange colour and pattern.” Finally, he added, for occasional shelter, “a loose Indian wrap” to add “real social beauty combined with the freedom you so much desire—and need.”<sup>53</sup>

For other nudists, however, bodily decoration was vetoed. Clifford Coudray described a female member of a nudist organization in Germany who “got hauled over the coals,” as he put it, “for wearing a gold and ruby pendant, as we are supposed to cultivate bodily beauty, but unadorned. Women were not made by God to stick jewels on their necks or bosoms.”<sup>54</sup> Parmalee’s accounts of women’s adornments worn in English nudist camps differ. He observed, warmly, “The women often wear bands or garlands of flowers around their heads, usually retain such jewelry as they are in the habit of wearing, such as rings, bracelets, earrings, and necklaces, and sometimes don slippers with brightly coloured ribbons. More rarely they drape a transparent veil about the shoulders.”<sup>55</sup> Notably, no similar practices of decoration were recorded among nudist men, and it is interesting that these practices border the culture of feminine embellishment and glamour that nudism was determined to destroy. Much is written in nudist publications on dress as a form of deception and trickery, and in passages now deeply distasteful to the twenty-first-century ear, the removal of clothes is sometimes promoted to shame participants into bodily improvement and to draw attention to men and women’s eugenic potential as breeding partners. Although eugenics appears a deeply unsavory project to us now, nudists in the 1920s and 1930s considered many aspects of eugenic theory to be an intrinsic part of their project of social improvement.<sup>56</sup> Nudism was said to enable a method of sexual selection that was without artifice. W. Hope-Jones of the Eugenics

Society Council despaired of the current “debased” state of affairs, with “its painted and powdered women angling for masculine favour with the bait of expensive clothes and cosmetics.” He lamented, “We may well hope that our descendants will be privileged to live in a freer and saner world, where they may meet each other as God made them and not as their tailors have disguised them.”<sup>57</sup>

The three central purposes of dress were widely agreed by nudist authors to be adornment, modesty, and protection.<sup>58</sup> The first was curtailed, and the second was understood to be a false cultural construction, but the latter remained a challenge. Several authors claimed that nudism created more resilient bodies: “Vagaries of climate, cold winds, even snow need be no obstacle to a fit hardened, unabashed and sensible people.”<sup>59</sup> Parmalee also stated that nudity at work was “entirely feasible”; he argued that “in most occupations no protection is necessary” and that nudity even improved efficiency. Manual work especially should be undertaken naked.<sup>60</sup> Other articles in nudist publications keenly emphasized that sunbathing did not merely mean “lying about” but, rather, the pursuit of pigmentation through effort, exercise, and “rational activity.” Tennis, badminton, swimming, and the physical management of the nudist camp (from felling trees to digging latrines) should be conducted naked. As one author put it, “Notice how supple and harmonious are the movements involved in the wielding of the axe or mattock!”<sup>61</sup> Beyond the sports and games listed above, vigorous naked outdoor exercise was not encouraged. As was noted in an article on mountaineering, “Anyone who intended real climbing . . . would, of course, wear full clothing and breeches, unless he wished to lose his life in the cause of naturism.”<sup>62</sup>

The most comprehensive attempt at devising a clothing scheme for nudists was made by Parmalee in the form of his “gymnosophic dress.” The suggestions he offered were made in recognition that clothing would always be needed for protection at times. While this sounds pragmatic, Parmalee also aimed at apparel that would be “more expressive, and more colourful and varied than heretofore.” As in the men’s reform recommendations, articles of dress were to be open, airy, and easily removable and to cover no more of the body than was absolutely necessary. Parmalee, however, aimed at experimental designs that did not suggest “ordinary dress,” and one highly radical aim was to eliminate sartorial differences between the sexes. Specific garments aimed to resolve issues of warmth, protection for the feet, and

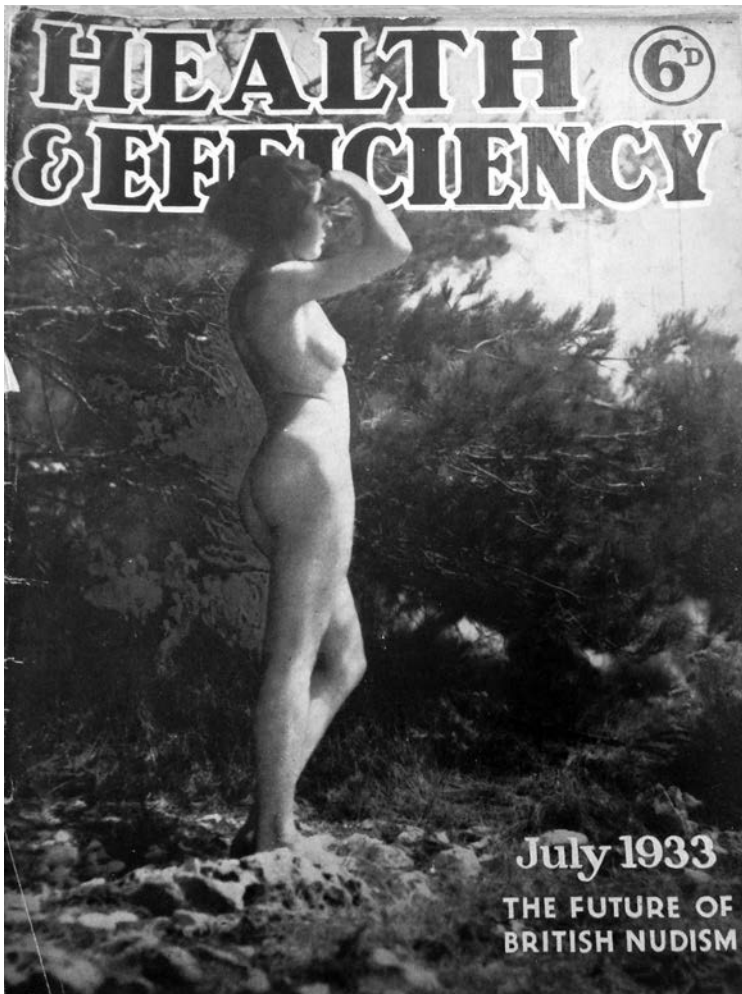
the practicalities of menstruation at a time before disposable and internal sanitary products were widely used. Inspiration was freely drawn from across history and geography, with the net result constituting an outlandish ensemble of doublet, cummerbund, Bavarian braces, Scottish kilt, socks and Japanese sandals, a hooded South American poncho, and a clutch bag for daily necessities. The individual items were designed to address specific practical shortcomings of nudity, but they each also reflected the changed nature of the coming nudist world. For example, Parmalee admitted that “human nature will not necessarily change inherently under gymnosophy” but “in a democratic society there will be less temptation to dishonesty, so that the lack of pockets will not be a serious drawback.” Making little concession to fashion—described as a “tinpot goddess”—or to conventional taste, gymnosophic dress in all its peculiarity was perfectly suited to the uncompromising utopian society Parmalee foresaw.<sup>63</sup>

### “Forecast of an Unclad Society”: Nude Expectations

In almost all cases, books on nudism published in the period included a section reflecting on the future direction of the movement (Figure 4).<sup>64</sup> Freed from the compromises and conventions of contemporary culture, here authors imaginatively projected new possibilities. As all authors were nudist practitioners, many texts used this space to confirm their dearest hope: that nudism would expand beyond an eccentric fad into widespread adoption. Langdon-Davies believed the future of nakedness—the title of his book—to be inevitable. He claimed in 1929, “It will indeed be a short time only before a person who wears more than a loin cloth in Regent Street will be stigmatised as indecent and degenerate.”<sup>65</sup> Others looked forward to a time when nudist clubs would become redundant, as the practice became a regular part of outdoor leisure and educational activities in public parks, baths, schools, and gymnasiums, and to a day “when all forms of sport will be taken without clothes.”<sup>66</sup> The more radically minded imagined “palaces of universal self-culture, in which mixed nakedness on occasion is taken for granted and psycho-physical aesthetics play a prominent part.”<sup>67</sup> Evans hoped that “the sight of nude sun-browned bodies almost anywhere in the countryside will attract neither distaste or surprise.”<sup>68</sup> For some this prediction was expected to arrive in a few short years; for others it was a benefit that their children

would reap. Parmalee's complete scheme was expected to take generations or even centuries to realize.

Regardless of when the change was anticipated, for those who imagined a nude future, its consequent effects on the meaning of clothing were expected to be transformative. Some interesting inverted thinking resulted, where clothing would be bootlegged as if it were alcohol under prohibition: "One can imagine the clandestine dens of vice that would spring up, places where the patron could see dressed people, and in the worst ones, even dress



*Figure 4.* *Health and Efficiency* cover, July 1933. Courtesy *H&E naturist*/Hawk Editorial Ltd.

himself!"<sup>69</sup> Arnold Lane expected, "Where everybody habitually walked about entirely naked, the sight of an individual wearing clothes would excite just the same comments as a nude man or woman. . . . Under such conditions indeed a pair of trousers or a dress would be as stimulating sexually as nudism is to the ignobler mentalities now."<sup>70</sup> Some mused about the possible function clothing could serve in their unclad world: "Will it become a joke, like back-scratchers, or survive in a modified form, like wigs, for some special purpose, like warmth or embellishment?"<sup>71</sup> Uncomfortable formal clothes, Evans predicted, "will have been relegated to museums for the amusement of the curious or the investigation of serious students of the human mind."<sup>72</sup>

Two authors who outlined nude futures in great detail were Gerald Heard and J. C. Flugel; both were experimental thinkers, life reformers, and nudist sympathizers if not practitioners. Heard's debut book, *Narcissus* of 1924, marked the first flowering of his lifelong experiment in living that would include pioneering personal involvement in radical pacifism, the human potential movement, communal living, Eastern mysticism, psychedelic drugs, and the theory and practice of homosexuality. Combining Heard's personal taste in flamboyant clothing and modernist design with his developing career as a popularizer of science, and prefiguring his side career as a sci-fi author, *Narcissus* expounded a curious thesis about the reciprocal relationship between architecture and fashion styles that took in a broad sweep of history and ended up far ahead in an unfamiliar future.<sup>73</sup>

Heard adopted ideas from psychology and biology to explore his core concept that evolution was now taking place apace in the material world rather than on the human body. He acknowledged that, customarily, little was expected of clothing. To Heard, however—both in his private life and in his published thesis—it was intensely significant, and all the more so for being apparently of no consequence. "If," he argued, "we may assume the psychological commonplace that the unperceived is *ipso facto* the vital, there can be no more striking example of it than the state of our clothes." For Heard, the dramatic evolutionary shift taking place—which could be seen most clearly in the rapid developments in fashion and design in the 1920s, including architecture and motor vehicles—was nothing less than "a Revolution, one of these cataclysmic jerks which mark the passing of a process from the control of the subconscious to the conscious."<sup>74</sup>

Heard presented his theory through an outline of changes in fashion and architecture, mapped from antiquity to the present, in a dramatic sweep

that made up for gross historic generalization and a lack of evidence with an authoritarian tone of voice. Arriving in the present day, he noted, "It will not be denied that our architecture is in flux. We must take it, then, as proved that our clothing will soon begin to flutter—indeed that it will be twisted out of all recognition." How this might happen was suggested by two directions—on the one hand, he envisaged "lighter, stronger architecture imposing cleaner, closer, more convenient clothing. Colour will come back onto building surfaces, and men's dress will begin to flush in reflection. On the other, if there is complete projection, architecture may take the place of clothing, and some outer art, more austere, less intimate, may take the place of architecture." Fashion, he suggested, should look to architecture and engineering for inspiration; clothing would reference modernist forms seen in skyscrapers and dirigibles.<sup>75</sup>

How do these assertions relate to nudism? Heard addressed the limits of clothing head-on in his outline. He asked, "If then architecture takes the place of clothing, what of clothes themselves? On this hypothesis they must ultimately disappear. The radiation of life will have become so strong that the veil nearest to it will be consumed." Making reference to the celebrated physician of sunshine and light Dr. Rollier and his "heliotherapy" clinic at Leysin in Switzerland, he asserted, "We do not need half our wardrobe. Much indeed may be positively harmful, preventing the pigmentation of the skin which seems the best protection that man can present to the elements. Any covered portion becomes bleached, relaxed, and tender. Hygiene, if it could have things all its own way, would no doubt strip us naked." In a preemption of the later claims of the gymnosophists, he claimed of protection, modesty, and display: "The three purposes of clothes seem outworn, and our last garment in danger of falling to the ground." For Heard, however, this radiant future would not stop at the naked body; he asked, "What then is to prevent us fulfilling Mr. Wells' stupendous prophecy and becoming like the Martians only tentacled brains?"<sup>76</sup>

Heard's hypothesis might seem to be a fanciful novelty of little consequence, if it was not for the fact that his claims were discussed in the press on both sides of the Atlantic; that they prefigure, in both example and style, the many claims made of clothing's inevitable redundancy among nudist publications over the following decade; and that they are called up in Flugel's influential *Psychology of Clothes*. Flugel's exploration of dress, which again attempts to understand the function of clothes through core concepts

of decoration, modesty, and protection, draws on his psychoanalytic surveys on the experience of dress in the late 1920s and was also informed by his membership of the Men's Dress Reform Party. His personal investment in his study is revealed by the frontispiece, which shows six images from a sequence of photographs taken by Flugel of his wife, Ingeborg, dancing in shawls and a bathing suit on a family holiday to Capri (Figure 5).<sup>77</sup> Additionally, the forward-looking nature of his project is outlined by the opening epigraph by Anatole France, who claimed that the one publication that he would like to access, a century after his death, would be a fashion magazine of the future. These garments, he suggested, "would tell me more about future humanity than the work of philosophers, novelists, priests and scientists."<sup>78</sup>

Flugel discusses contemporary European "nude culture" throughout his book, including in his discussion of individual "types," whom he sees as differentiated by their experience of clothing. The "rebellious type," in Flugel's conception, is mapped onto gymnosophists but can also be applied to dress reformers and thus to Flugel himself. He refers to gymnosophy by name but says that he has no personal experience of the practice (later he would become an active member). Nonetheless, he speaks warmly of its experiments and achievements throughout his book and most particularly in the final chapter, "The Future of Dress." Here he takes his exploration of the evolution of clothing as part of a process of reconciliation with the body



Figure 5. J. C. Flugel's family album (late 1920s–early 1930s). Courtesy Clive Harper.



to its logical conclusion. Finally “the sartorial crutches” are tossed aside. He looks forward to a time when “the aesthetic variations, emendations, and aggrandisements of the body that are produced by clothes would no longer be felt as necessary or desirable.” In this future, “there would be no need for clothes, except in so far as they might still be required for purposes of pure protection.” In a parting gesture that tears up several chapters of his foregoing study, Flugel concludes that “dress is, after all, destined to be but an episode in the history of humanity.”<sup>79</sup> Nudism’s time had come.

### Conclusion: “A Metaphysic of Mode”

For all the claims of nudism’s inevitability, nearly one hundred years on, it is no more common to find naked people on Regent Street than it ever was. The nudist utopia of gymnosophic society remains an impossible dream. Even at the end of the ten-year period examined, some aspects were beginning to tarnish. From 1933, following the first ban on nudist groups under the Nazi regime, regular reports on the demolition of German *Nacktkultur* appeared in English nudist periodicals—especially in *Gymnos*, which explicitly aligned itself as internationalist and was modeled on German *Freikörperkultur* (Free Body Culture) ideals. These restrictions included nudists’ use of public spaces, the need for organizations to declare allegiance to the Nazi party, and the requirement for reinforced bathing suits. Together these showed that undressing alone could not bring a new democratic, pacifist, egalitarian world. Free Body Culture organizations in Germany were variously outlawed or co-opted, and the ideologies of nudism proved themselves partly adaptable to aspects of National Socialist thinking, from their sense of a cultural crisis and their commitment to eugenics to their celebration of bodily ideals from ancient Greece.<sup>80</sup> As Williams has observed of the situation in Germany, “By the time the Third Reich entered its genocidal war, the nudist utopia had become a Darwinist meat market.” A text from the period states, “We celebrate the women with the best racial background and the most beautiful bodies for breeding. . . . No one will be able to conceal his or her flaws and weaknesses behind clothes.”<sup>81</sup> The similarity of these statements with those of English nudist culture suggests another possible direction of travel that none of the celebratory futurists imagined.

In practice, in fact, the visions of the English moderates, with their ambition for lighter-weight washable clothes and sunbathing in a minimum

of attire, gained steady traction during the 1930s as part of a general relaxation of dress and manners. By 1936, N. J. Barford, the editor of *Sun Bathing Review* and the founder of the umbrella organization, the Sun Bathing Society, disbanded it, believing that its aims had been achieved.<sup>82</sup> A postwar edition of William Welby's 1935 text, *The Naked Truth About Nudism*, indicated that the subsequent conflict had "killed" the movement, yet many of Welby's predictions in his chapter "Has Nudism a Future?" have since been achieved in Britain, including that "the Government may well issue Nudist bathing beaches at seaside resorts." In part, these came as a result of Welby's recommended tack: that nudists should live by example and be reasonable, open, restrained, and nonantagonistic to nonnudists.<sup>83</sup> In 1958, artist Robert Gibbings, one of the most regular and vociferous of contributors to *Sun Bathing Review* in the interwar period, stated, "Nudism is now an accepted fact, and needs no further apology or justification."<sup>84</sup> Nudists, perhaps, were no longer in search of a theory.

Postwar, Carr-Gomm notes that it was only English *social* nudism, organized through clubs and societies, that waned. The 1930s might have been the pinnacle of popularity, but the practice of nudism for leisure, especially on European continental holidays, continued in the pink of health.<sup>85</sup> A key difference between interwar nudism and nudists in the present day, however, is attitude. Barcan's studies of contemporary practitioners show that today, "almost without exception, nudists are more inclined to describe their practice as a source of personal relaxation, freedom or esteem." Those whom Barcan interviewed firmly denied that there is any social reform agenda, preferring the concept of nudism as a "lifestyle." She says, "Few contemporary nudists are happy with the idea that it might be a 'philosophy.'" They deny any relation to socialism, vegetarianism, or antimaterialism. As one interviewee stated, "It's something I like doing, and that's it."<sup>86</sup>

Nudist utopian philosophies of the 1920s and early 1930s are undoubtedly a product of their time, when bold new experiments were launched among artists and intellectuals across all aspects of culture. At their most radical, philosophers of nudism recommended a deconstruction of all social propriety in search of a new future. The world they foresaw would unite all in one brotherhood, reestablish a union with nature, and make the world a safer, fairer, and more beautiful place. The moderate voices in the movement who sought to popularize the practice distanced themselves from the dreamers and aimed to attract "the average man—and his wife—and his family."<sup>87</sup> Responsible for titles

such as *The Common Sense of Nudism* and *Sensible Sun-Bathing*, these authors aimed to temper reform dress and undress to popular taste. As Evans advised, “Not needlessly to hurt the feelings of others by flaunting unsuitable clothes in the face of convention, but to disregard the prejudices of busybodies. Not to risk the loss of friendship or prestige (it is not a matter in which martyrs are needed) by unthinking tactlessness, but none the less to go to the utmost limit to which tact and consideration for others will allow.”<sup>88</sup>

In relation to Ribeiro’s distinction between dress reform and utopian dress, it may seem that in the long term, the moderate reformers won out over the utopians. We do not dress in skyscraper style or inhabit nudist palaces of universal self-culture; our bodies are not transfigured in pagan worship, nor have we cast off flesh entirely, as some had hoped. Those who made such claims were well aware that they were operating at the margins. Heard concluded his extraordinary prophecies with some resignation: “What actually will happen who can say—we who cannot even tell if next year well-dressed men will have two or three or even four buttons on their sleeves?”<sup>89</sup> Flugel asserted that “in recommending this or that as a contribution to sartorial reform, we are guilty of striking a compromise, since ultimately our reforms must end by improvising clothes out of our existence altogether.” This, he suggested, was not so terrible a result: “Art itself (and with it sartorial art) is a compromise between imagination and reality; it deals with real media but implies an inability to find complete satisfaction with reality, and creates a new world ‘nearer to the heart’s desire,’ away from the limitations and disappointments of reality.”<sup>90</sup> As Ribeiro noted, utopian dress is necessarily distant from the lived experience of clothing (and its opposite) in everyday life. As “wish-fulfilment, fantasy, imagery,”<sup>91</sup> however, it is as much a part of the history of fashion as the clothes worn, or not, on the streets.

The philosophies of interwar English nudists retain their promise. Their fearless language, pioneering spirit, and brave rejection of convention and repression still reverberate through the yellowing pages of their publications. We do not need to embrace all aspects of their cause to acknowledge the power of their campaign. Parmalee defended his visionary proclamations by stating, “It is only human to dream of a saner world in which mankind will not be largely deprived of contact with nature, and where under its beneficent influence children will grow up into healthy and happy adults; a world in which equality between the sexes will encourage harmonious relations between men and women, and where races and nations will dwell

together in peace and mutual respect.”<sup>92</sup> These ambitions remain with us all, although we might differ in our approach to how they should be delivered. It may take centuries to come, as Parmalee expected, but the hope of a new world springs eternal.

The nudists’ tactic to reduce culture to its barest flesh was perhaps one of the most extreme visions for fashioning a new age, but it is one that has resonated with philosophers of utopia before and since. In another time and place Foucault asserted, “My body is like the City of the Sun. It has no place, but it is from it that all possible places, real or utopian, emerge and radiate.”<sup>93</sup> Without clothing, our bodies are all that remain, but they remain as cultural constructions, porous to a range of projections. Undressing can be a practical activity, but when developed as a conscious endeavor, it can communicate our deepest expectations of our dress and ourselves. In the nudist movement in England in its founding years, the meaning of the nude body was clearly complex even as it stood as a symbol of simplification.

ANNEBELLA POLLEN is a principal lecturer in history of art and design at the University of Brighton, U.K. She researches dress, design, and photography across a range of periods and case studies. Her books include *Mass Photography: Collective Histories of Everyday Life* (I. B. Tauris, 2015), *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* (Donlon Books, 2015), and the co-edited collections *Dress History: New Perspectives in Theory and Practice* (Bloomsbury, 2015) and *Photography Reframed: New Visions in Contemporary Photographic Culture* (I. B. Tauris, 2018). She is working on a new manuscript entitled *The Image at Large: 200 Years of Mass Visual Culture*.

### Notes

This research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, United Kingdom. Grant reference: AH/M004570/1.

1. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 54.
2. Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: Avon Books, 1980), 82.
3. It is most common in current cultures of nudism to prefer the word *naturism* to describe the practice. While *naturism* was occasionally discussed in the publications of the period, its meaning was not agreed upon, and the term *nudism* was widely used and preferred.
4. For a wider discussion about the understandings of civilization in the period, see Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilisation, 1919–1939* (London:

Penguin, 2009). For excellent context on the ambivalent attitudes of interwar nudists toward civilization and modernity, see Ruth Barcan, "Regaining What Mankind Has Lost Through Civilisation: Early Nudism and Ambivalent Moderns," *Fashion Theory* 8, no. 1 (2004): 63–82.

5. Chad Ross, *Naked Germany: Health, Race, and the Nation* (New York: Berg, 2005); Michael Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History, 1890–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); John Alexander Williams, *Turning to Nature in Germany: Hiking, Nudism, and Conservation, 1900–1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

6. Philip Carr-Gomm, *A Brief History of Nakedness* (London: Reaktion, 2010); Ruth Barcan, *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy* (London: Berg, 2004); Barcan, "Regaining What Mankind Has Lost Through Civilisation."

7. Michael Carter, *Putting a Face on Things: Studies in Imaginary Materials* (Sydney: Power, 1997); Michael Carter, "J. C. Flugel and the Nude Future," *Fashion Theory* 7, no. 1 (2003): 79–101; Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003); Aileen Ribeiro, "Zippypyjamas and Buskins of Green Diamonds: Dressing Utopia Throughout the Ages," *Vestoj: The Journal of Sartorial Matters* 6 (2015): 70–81.

8. Publications that underpin this study include Annebella Pollen, *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* (London: Donlon Books, 2015); Annebella Pollen, "'The Sartorial Rebirth of Man'? Reconsidering the Promise of the Men's Dress Reform Party, 1929–1937," *Vestoj: The Journal of Sartorial Matters* 7 (2016): 59–68; Annebella Pollen, "Radical Shoemaking and Dress Reform from Fabians to Feminists," in *Dress History: New Directions in Theory and Practice*, ed. Charlotte Nicklas and Annebella Pollen (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 179–94; Annebella Pollen, "Dressed to the Left," *Photoworks Annual* 24 (2016): 12–13.

9. The interconnection between English nudism, the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, and the Men's Dress Reform Party was more than ideological. There was considerable overlap in membership.

10. "Planks of Nudism," *Gymnos* 1, no. 1 (1933): 1.

11. Michel Foucault, "The Utopian Body," in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline Jones (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 232.

12. Richard Martin, "Dress and Dream: The Utopian Idealism of Clothing," *Arts Magazine*, October 1987, quoted in Michael Carter, "Dressed for Paradise," in *Putting a Face on Things*, 80.

13. Ribeiro, "Zippypyjamas and Buskins of Green Diamonds," 76–77.

14. Carter, "Dressed for Paradise," 75.

15. Maurice Parmelee, *Nudism in Modern Life* (London: Bodley Head, 1933), 213.

16. President of the Gymnic Association of Great Britain, "What We Stand For," *Gymnos* 1, no. 1 (1933): 3.

17. Albert Ebor, "The Future of Gymnosophy," *Gymnos* 1, no. 2 (1933): 13–14.

18. Hans Suren, *Man and Sunlight* (Slough: Sollux, 1927), x.

19. *Ibid.*, 7.

20. Noel Poynter, "I Believe," *Gymnos* 1, no. 12 (1934): 16.

21. "A Summer School Described," *Sun Bathing Review: Journal of the Sun Societies* 1, no. 2 (1933): 7–8.
22. Herman Soshinski, "Kalokgathia or The Harmonious Development of Body, Mind and Soul," *Gymnos* 1, no. 11 (1933): 14–15.
23. Arnold Pickin, "Commonsense Dress," *Health and Efficiency*, June 1935, 192; W. S. Sparkes, "Without Clothes: A Fantasy," *Gymnos* 1, no. 12 (1934): 17; "Summer School Described," 8.
24. C. E. Norwood, *Nudism in England* (London: Noel Douglas, 1933), 33; George Bernard Shaw, "On Excessive Clothing," *Sun Bathing Review* 1, no. 2 (1933): 5; "Thirty Years On," *Illustrated Sun Bathing News* 1, no. 1 (1935): 32.
25. W. S. Sparks, "Behold the Skin! It Must Be of Some Use," *Gymnos* 1, no. 11 (1933): 8.
26. Parmalee, *Nudism in Modern Life*, 187.
27. Laurence Housman, "Our Letter File," *Sun Bathing Review* 1, no. 2 (1933): 34.
28. "Some Views of Mr. C. E. M. Joad," *Sun Bathing Review* 1, no. 2 (1933): 5–6.
29. Pollen, "Sartorial Rebirth of Man."
30. Eric Gill, "Nudism—A Natural Reaction from Industrialism," *Health and Efficiency*, April 1935, 111–12.
31. Pickin, "Commonsense Dress," 192.
32. Parmalee, *Nudism in Modern Life*, 124.
33. W. Hope-Jones, "Eugenics and Sun Bathing," *Sun Bathing Review* 1, no. 1 (1933): 11.
34. Gill, "Nudism."
35. George Ryley Scott, *The Common Sense of Nudism* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1934), 48.
36. Parmalee, *Nudism in Modern Life*, 13.
37. "Thank God for Nudism! By 'A Clergyman,'" *Gymnos* 1, no. 10 (1933): 4.
38. Parmalee, *Nudism in Modern Life*.
39. *Ibid.*, 177.
40. *Ibid.*, 209.
41. Haydn Brown, "The Psychology of Nudism," *Sun Bathing Review* 1, no. 7 (1933): 77–78; C. W. Saleeby, *Sunshine and Health* (London: Nisbet, 1924), xix.
42. Norwood, *Nudism in England*, 32.
43. H. Robini, "Total or Partial Nudity," *Gymnos* 1, no. 8 (1933): 21–22.
44. Cedric Belfrage, "Naturism Transforms a Nation," *Health and Efficiency*, February 1934, 42.
45. Ebor, "Future of Gymnosophy," 14.
46. Norwood, *Nudism in England*, 32.
47. Scott, *Common Sense of Nudism*, 151.
48. President of the Gymnic Association of Great Britain, "What We Stand For," 3.
49. "Bunkum! By the Editor," *Gymnos* 1, no. 11 (1933): 3.
50. George C. Foster, "Nudism Is Not a Cult," *Sun Bathing Review* 1, no. 6 (1933): 44–45.
51. Alec Craig, "Nudism Is Progressive," *Sun Bathing Review* 1, no. 7 (1933): 86–87.
52. J. C. Hale, "Undress and Redress: An Appreciation of the President's Article in *New Health*," *Gymnos* 1, no. 8 (1933): 20.
53. Housman, "Our Letter File," 34.

54. Clifford Coudray, "Hiking a la Nature," *Health and Efficiency*, October 1931, 86.
55. Parmalee, *Nudism in Modern Life*, 90.
56. For a broader understanding of the political positioning of eugenics in the period, see Lucy Bland and Lesley A. Hall, "Eugenics in Britain: The View from the Metropole," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, ed. Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 213–27.
57. Hope-Jones, "Eugenics and Sun Bathing," 11.
58. See, for example, Scott, *Common Sense of Nudism*; Gerald Heard, *Narcissus: An Anatomy of Clothes* (New York: Kegan Paul, 1924); J. C. Flugel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930; London: Hogarth Press, 1950).
59. Arnold Lane, "Prudery's Veil on the Sun," *Health and Efficiency*, October 1931, 81.
60. Parmalee, *Nudism in Modern Life*, 120–21.
61. "Nudism Is Not Just Sunbathing: It Means Exercise and Effort," *Health and Efficiency*, September 1933, 310.
62. "The Wealth of Mountain Health—in Britain," *Health and Efficiency*, July 1934, 252.
63. Parmalee, *Nudism in Modern Life*, 178, 139, 214, 141.
64. For example, there are sections with future projections in I. O. Evans, *Sensible Sun-Bathing* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1935); Scott, *Common Sense of Nudism*; and William Welby, *The Naked Truth About Nudism* (1935; London: Thorsons, n.d.), among others.
65. John Langdon-Davies, *The Future of Nakedness* (London: Noel Douglas, 1929), 35.
66. W. S. M. Knight, "Naturism's New Year," *Health and Efficiency*, January 1934, 3.
67. Dion Byngnam, "In Sane Naturism the Way to the Body Beautiful," *Health and Efficiency*, December 1933, 400–401.
68. Evans, *Sensible Sun-Bathing*, 45.
69. Frances Merrill and Mason Merrill, *Among the Nudists* (London: Noel Douglas, 1932), 228–29.
70. Lane, "Prudery's Veil on the Sun," 81.
71. Shaw, "On Excessive Clothing," 5.
72. Evans, *Sensible Sun-Bathing*, 21.
73. Alison Falby, *Between the Pigeonholes: Gerald Heard 1889–1971* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008).
74. Heard, *Narcissus*, 13.
75. *Ibid.*, 140, 142.
76. *Ibid.*, 145–46, 155.
77. My warm thanks go to Clive Harper, Flugel's grandson, for generous access to private family collections.
78. Anatole France, epigraph, in Flugel, *Psychology of Clothes*; my translation.
79. Flugel, *Psychology of Clothes*, 234–35, 238.
80. Williams, *Turning to Nature in Germany*, 58.
81. *Ibid.*, 64.
82. "A History of Naturism—Timeline," *British Naturism*, 2011, <http://www.bn.org.uk/news/information/about-naturism/history-of-naturism/a-history-of-naturism-timeline-r28/>.

83. Welby, *Naked Truth About Nudism*, 122.
84. Alan R. Warwick, "An Appreciation of Robert Gibbings," *Sun Bathing Review*, Spring 1958.
85. Carr-Gomm, *Brief History of Nakedness*, 164.
86. Barcan, *Nudity*, 169–70.
87. "We Begin Again," *Illustrated Sun Bathing News* 1, no. 1 (1935): 3.
88. Evans, *Sensible Sun-Bathing*, 21.
89. Heard, *Narcissus*, 156.
90. Flugel, *Psychology of Clothes*, 101.
91. Ribeiro, "Zippypyjamas and Buskins of Green Diamonds," 80.
92. Parmalee, *Nudism in Modern Life*, 258–59.
93. Foucault, "Utopian Body," 233.