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Development in Dress

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DEVELOPMENT IN DRESS

THE development of dress presents a strong analogy to that of organisms, as explained by the modern theories of evolution; and in this article I propose to illustrate some of the features which they have in common. We shall see that the truth expressed by the proverb, „Natura non facit saltum”, is applicable in the one case as in the other; the law of progress holds good in dress, and forms blend into one another with almost complete continuity. In both cases a form yields to a succeeding form, which is better adapted to the then surrounding conditions; thus, when it ceased to be requisite that men in active life should be ready to ride at any moment, and when riding had for some time ceased to be the ordinary method of travelling, knee breeches and boots yielded to trousers. The „Ulster Coat”, now so much in vogue, is evidently largely fostered by railway travelling, and could hardly have flourished in the last century, when men either rode or travelled in coaches, where there was no spare room for any very bulky garment.

A new invention bears a kind of analogy to a new variation in animals; there are many such inventions, and many such variations; those that are not really beneficial die away, and those that are really good become incorporated by „natural selection”, as a new item in our system. I may illustrate this by pointing out how macintosh—coats and crush—hats have become somewhat important items in our dress.

Then, again, the degree of advancement in the scale of dress may be pretty accurately estimated by the extent to which various „organs” are specialized. For example, about sixty years ago, our present evening—dress was the ordinary dress for gentlemen ; top—boots, always worn by old—fashioned „John Bull” in *Punch's* cartoons, are now reserved for the hunting—field ; and that the red coat was formerly only a best coat, appears from

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the following observations of „a Lawyer of the Middle Temple”, in No. 129 of the *Spectator*:—“Here (in Cornwall) we fancied ourselves in Charles II.’s reign,—the people having made little variations in their dress since that time. The smartest of the country squires appear still in the Monmouth cock; and when they go awooing (whether they have any post in the militia or not) they put on a red coat”(1).

But besides the general adaptation of dress above referred to, there is another influence which has perhaps a still more important bearing on the development of dress, and that is fashion. The love of novelty, and the extraordinary tendency which men have to exaggerate any peculiarity, for the time being considered a mark of good station in life, or handsome in itself, give rise I suppose to fashion. This influence bears no distant analogy to the „sexual selection”, on which so much stress has recently been laid in the „Descent of Man”. Both in animals and dress, remnants of former stages of development survive to a later age, and thus preserve a tattered record of the history of their evolution.

These remnants may be observed in two different stages or forms. 1st. Some parts of the dress have been fostered and exaggerated by the selection of fashion, and are then retained and crystallized, as it were, as part of our dress, notwithstanding that their use is entirely gone (*e.g.* the embroidered pocket—flaps in a court uniform, now sewn fast to the coat). 2ndly. Parts originally useful have ceased to be of any service, and have been handed down in an atrophied condition.

The first class of cases have their analogue in the peacock’s tail, as explained by sexual selection; and the second in the wing of the apteryx, as explained by the effects of disuse.

(1) See p. 356 of Fairholt’s „Costume in England:” London, 1846.

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Of the second kind of remnant Mr. Tylor gives very good instances when he says (1): „The ridiculous little tails of the German postilion’s coat show of themselves how they came to dwindle to such absurd rudiments; but the English clergyman’s bands no longer convey their history to the eye, and look unaccountable enough till one has seen the intermediate stages through which they came down from the more serviceable wide collars, such as Milton wears in his portraits, and which gave their name to the ‘band-box’ they used to be kept in”. These collars are curiously enough worn to this day by the choristers of Jesus College, Cambridge.

According to such ideas as these it becomes interesting to try to discover the marks of descent in our dresses, and in making this attempt many things apparently meaningless may be shown to be full of meaning.

Women’s dress retains a general similarity from age to age, together with a great instability in details, and therefore does not afford so much subject for remark as does men’s dress. I propose, therefore, to confine myself almost entirely to the latter, and to begin at the top of the body, and to work downwards through the principal articles of clothing.

HATS.—Hats were originally made of some soft material, probably of cloth or leather, and in order to make them fit the head, a cord was fastened round them, so as to form a sort of contraction. This is illustrated on p. 524 of Fairholt’s „Costume in England”, in the figure of the head of an Anglo-Saxon woman, wearing a hood bound on with a head-band; and on p. 530 are figures of several hats worn during the fourteenth century, which were bound to the head by rolls of cloth; and all the early hats seem provided with some sort of band. We may trace the remnants of this cord or band in the present hat-band. A similar survival may be observed in the strings of the

(1) P. 16, vol. i., of „Primitive Culture”, London, 1871.

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Scotch-cap, and even in the mitre of the bishop (1).

It is probable that the hat-band would long ago have disappeared had it not been made use of for the purpose of hiding the seam joining the crown to the brim. If this explanation of the retention of the hat-band is the true one, we have here a part originally of use for one purpose applied to a new one, and so changing its function; a case which has an analogy to that of the development of the swimming-bladders of fishes, used to give them lightness in the water, into the lungs of mammals and birds, used as the furnace for supporting animal heat.

The duties of the hat-band have been taken in modern hats by two running strings fastened to the lining, and these again have in their turn become obsolete, for they are now generally represented by a small piece of string, by means of which it is no longer possible to make the hat fit the head more closely.

The ancestor from which our present chimney-pot hat takes most of its characteristics is the broad-brimmed low-crowned hat, with an immense plume falling down on to the shoulder, which was worn during the reign of Charles II. (2). At the end of the seventeenth, and during the eighteenth century, this hat was varied by the omission of the plume and by giving of the brim various „cocks“. That these „cocks“ were formerly merely temporary is shown by Hogarth's picture of Hudibras beating Sidrophel and his man Whacum, where there is a hat, the brim of which is buttoned up in front to the crown with three buttons. This would be a hat of the seventeenth century. Afterwards, during the eighteenth century, the brim was bent up in two or three places, and notwithstanding that these „cocks“ became permanent, yet the hats still retained the marks of their origin in the button and strap on the right side. The cockade, I imagine, took its name from its being a badge worn on one of the „cocks“.

(1) For the origin of this curious head—dress, see Fairholt, p. 564.

(2) See Fairholt, p. 540

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The modern cocked-hat, apparently of such an anomalous shape, proves, on examination, to be merely a hat of the shape above referred to; it appears further that the right side was bent up at an earlier date than the left, for the hat is not symmetrical, and the „cock” on the right side forms a straight crease in the (quondam) brim, and that on the left is bent rather over the crown, thus making the right side of the hat rather straighter than the left. The hat-band here remains in the shape of two gold tassels, which are just visible within the two points of the cocked-hat.

A bishop’s hat shows the transition from the three-cocked hat to our present chimney-pot; and because sixty years ago beaver-fur was the fashionable material for hats, we must now needs wear a silken imitation, which could deceive no one into thinking it fur, and which is bad to resist the effects of weather. Even in a lady’s bonnet the elements of brim, crown, and hat-band may be traced.

The “busby” of our hussars affords a curious instance of survival. It would now appear to be merely a fancy headdress, but on inspection it proves not to be so. The hussar was originally a Hungarian soldier, and he brought his hat with him to our country. I found the clue to the meaning of the hat in a picture of a Hungarian peasant. He wore a red night-cap, something like that worn by our brewers’ men, or by a Sicilian peasant, but the cap was edged with so broad a band of fur, that it made in fact a low “busby”. And now in our hussars the fur has grown enormously, and the bag has dwindled into a flapping ornament, which may be detached at pleasure. Lastly, in the new “busby” of the Royal Engineers the bag has vanished, although the top of the cap (which is made of cloth and not of fur) is still blue, as was the bag formerly; the top cannot, however, be seen, except from a bird’s-eye point of view.

It appears that all cockades and plumes are worn on the left side of the hat, and this may, I think, be explained by the fact that a large plume, such as that worn in the time of Charles II., or

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that of the modern Italian Bersaglieri, would impede the free use of the sword; and this same explanation would also serve to show how it was that the right side of the hat was the first to receive a “cock”. A London servant would be little inclined to think that he wears his cockade on the left side to give his sword-arm full liberty.

COATS.—Everyone must have noticed the nick in the folded collar of the coat and of the waistcoat; this is of course made to allow for the buttoning round the neck, but it is in the condition of a rudimentary organ, for the nick would probably not come into the right place, and in the waistcoat at least there are usually neither the requisite buttons nor button-holes.

“The modern gentleman’s coat may be said to take its origin from the *vest*, or long outer garment, worn towards the end of the reign of Charles II.” (1). This vest seems to have had no gathering at the waist, and to have been buttoned all down the front, and in shape rather like a loose bag; to facilitate riding it was furnished with a slit behind, which could be buttoned up at pleasure; the button-holes were embroidered, and in order to secure similarity of embroidery on each side of the slit, the buttons were sewn on to a strip of lace matching the corresponding button-hole on the other side. These buttons and button-holes left their marks in the coats of a century later in the form of gold lacing on either side of the slit of the tails.

In about the year 1700, it began to be the fashion to gather in the vest or coat at the waist, and it seems that this was first done by two buttons near the hips being buttoned to loops rather nearer to the edge of the coat, and situated at about the level of the waist. Our soldiers much in the same manner now make a waist in their loose overcoats, by buttoning a short strap to two buttons, placed a considerable distance apart on the back.

This old fashion is illustrated in a figure dressed in the costume of 1696, in an old illustration of the „Tale of the

(1) Fairholt, p. 479

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Tub", and also in the figure of a dandy smelling a nosegay, in Hogarth's picture, entitled „Here Justice triumphs in his Easy Chair", & c., as well as elsewhere. Engravings of this transition period of dress are, however, somewhat rare, and it is naturally not common to be able to get a good view of the part of the coat under the arms. This habit of gathering in the waist will, I think, explain how it was that, although the buttons and button-holes were retained down the front edges, the coat came to be worn somewhat open in front.

The coat naturally fell in a number of plaits or folds below these hip buttons; but in most of Hogarth's pictures, although the buttons and plaits remain, yet the creases above the buttons disappear, and seams appear to run from the buttons up under the arms. It may be worth mentioning that in all such matters of detail Hogarth's accuracy is notorious, and that therefore his engravings are most valuable for the study of the dress of the period. At the end of the seventeenth, and at the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, coats seem very commonly to have been furnished with slits running from the edge of the skirt, up under the arms, and these were made to button up, in a manner similar in all respects to the slit of the tails. The sword was usually worn under the coat, and the sword-hilt came through the slit on the left side. Later on these slits appear to have been sewed up, and the buttons and button-holes died away, with the exception of two or three buttons just at the tops of the slits; thus in coats of about the year 1705, it is not uncommon to see several buttons clustered about the tops of all three slits. The buttons at the top of the centre slit entirely disappeared, but the two buttons now on the backs of our coats trace their pedigree up to those on the hips. Thus it is not improbable that although our present buttons represent those used for making the waist, as above explained, yet that they in part represent the buttons for fastening up these side slits.

The fold which we now wear below

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the buttons on the back are the descendants of the falling plaits, notwithstanding that they appear as though they were made for, and that they are in fact commonly used as, the recesses for the tail-pockets; but that this was not their original object is proved by the fact that during the last century the pockets were either vertical or horizontal, placed a little in front of the two hip buttons (which have since moved round towards the back), and had highly embroidered flaps, buttons, and button-holes. The horizontal pockets may now be traced in the pocket-flaps of court dress before alluded to; and the vertical pocket is represented by some curious braiding and a row of buttons, which may be observed on the tails of the tunics of the foot-guards. The details of the manner in which this last rudiment became reduced to its present shape may be traced in books of uniforms, and one of the stages may now be frequently seen in the livery of servants, in the form of a row of three or four buttons running down near the edge of the tail, sewn on to a scalloped patch of cloth (the pocket-flap), which is itself sewed to the coat.

In the last century, when the coats had large flapping skirts, it became the custom (as may be seen in Hogarth's pictures) to button back the two corners of the coat, and also to button forward the inner corners, so as to separate the tails for convenience in riding (1). This custom left its traces in the uniform of our soldiers down to the introduction of the modern tunic, and such traces may still be seen in some uniforms, for example, those of a Lord Lieutenant and of the French gendarmes. In the uniforms of which I speak, the coats have swallow-tails, and these are broadly edged with a light-coloured border, tapering upwards and getting broader downwards; at the bottom of the tail, below where the borders join (at which joining there is usually a button), there

(1) It seems to have been in actual use in 1760, although not in 1794. See Cannon's „Hist. Rec. of Brit. Army” (London, 1837), the 2nd Dragoon Guards.

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is a small triangle of the same colour as the coat, with its apex at this button. This curious appearance is explained thus:—the two corners, one of which is buttoned forwards and the other backwards, could not be buttoned actually to the edge of the coat, but had to be fastened a little inland as it were; and thus part of the coat was visible at the bottom of the tail: the light-coloured border, although sewn to the coat, evidently now represents the lining, which was shown by the corners being turned back.

It was not until the reign of George III. that coats were cut back at the waist, as are our present evening coats, but since, before that fashion was introduced, the coats had become swallow-tailed in the manner explained, it seems likely that this form of coat was suggested by the previous fashion. And, indeed, stages of development of a somewhat intermediate character may be observed in old engravings. In the uniforms of the last century the coats were double-breasted, but were generally worn open, with the flaps thrown back and buttoned to rows of buttons on the coat. These flaps, of course, showed the lining of the coat, and were of the same colour as the tails; the button-holes were usually embroidered, and thus the whole of the front of the coat became richly laced. Towards the end of the century the coats were made tight, and were fastened together in front by hooks, but the vestiges of the flaps remained in a double line of buttons, and in the front of the coat being of a different colour from that of the rest, and being richly laced. A uniform of this nature is still retained in some foreign armies. This seems also to explain the use of the term “facings” as applied to the collar and cuffs of a uniform, since, as we shall see hereafter, they would be of the same colour as these flaps. It may also explain the habit of braiding the front of a coat, as is done in our Hussar and other regiments.

In a „History of Male Fashions”, published in the *London Chronicle* in 1762, we find that „surtouts have now

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four laps on each side, which are called 'dog's ears'; when these pieces are unbuttoned, they flap backwards and forwards, like so many supernumerary patches just tacked on at one end, and the wearer seems to have been playing at backwords till his coat was cut to pieces. . . . Very spruce *smarts* have no buttons nor holes upon the breast of these their surtouts, save what are upon the ears, and their garments only wrap over their bodies like a morning gown". These dog's ears may now be seen in a very meaningless state on the breasts of the patrol-jackets of our officers, and this is confirmed by the fact that their jackets are not buttoned, but fastened by hooks.

In early times, when coats were of silk or velvet, and enormously expensive, it was no doubt customary to turn up the cuffs, so as not to soil the coat, and thus the custom of having the cuffs turned back came in. During the latter part of the seventeenth and during the eighteenth century, the cuffs were very widely turned back, and the sleeves consequently very short, and this led to dandies wearing large lace cuffs to their shirts.

The pictures of Hogarth and of others show that the coat cuffs were buttoned back to a row of buttons running round the wrist. These buttons still exist in the sleeves of a Queen's Counsel, although the cuffs are sewed back and the button-holes only exist in the form of pieces of braid. This habit explains why our soldiers now have their cuffs of different colours from that of their coats; the colour of the linings was probably determined for each regiment by the colonel for the time being, since he formerly supplied the clothing; and we know that the colour of the facings was by no means fixed until recently. The shape of the cuff has been recently altered in the line regiments, so that all the original meaning is gone.

In order to allow of turning back with ease, the sleeve was generally split on the outer side, and this split could be fastened together with a line of buttons

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and embroidered holes. In Hogarth's pictures some two or three of these buttons may be commonly seen above the reversed cuff; and notwithstanding that at first the buttons were out of sight (as they ought to be) in the reversed part of the cuff, yet after the turning back had become quite a fixed habit, and when sleeves were made tight again, it seems to have been usual to have the button for the cuff sewed on to the proper inside, that is to say, the real outside of the sleeve.

The early stage may be seen in Hogarth's picture of the „Guards marching to Finchley”, and the present rudiment is excellently illustrated in the cuffs of the same regiments now. The curious buttons and gold lace on the cuffs and collars of the tunics of the Life Guards have the like explanation, but this is hardly intelligible without reference to a book of uniforms, as for example Cannon's „History of the 2nd Dragoon Guards”.

The collar of a coat would in ordinary weather be turned down and the lining shown; hence the collar has commonly a different colour from that of the coat, and in uniforms the same colour as have the cuffs, which form, with the collars, the so-called “facings”. A picture of Lucien Bonaparte in Lacroix's work on Costume shows a collar so immense that were it turned up it would be as high as the top of his head. This drawing indicates that even the very broad stand-up collars worn in uniforms in the early part of this century, and of a different colour from that of the coat, were merely survivals of an older form of turn-down collar. In these days, notwithstanding that the same difference in colour indicates that the collar was originally turned down, yet in all uniforms it is made to stand up.

The pieces of braid or seams which run round the wrist in ordinary coats are clearly the last remains of the inversion of the cuffs.

TROUSERS.—I will merely observe that we find an intermediate stage between trousers and breeches in the pantaloon, in which the knee-buttons of the breeches

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have walked down to the ankle. I have seen also a German servant who wore a row of buttons running from the knee to the ankle of his trousers.

BOOTS.—One of the most perfect rudiments is presented by top-boots. These boots were originally meant to come above the knee; and, as may be observed in old pictures, it became customary to turn the upper part down, so that the lining was visible all round the top. The lining being of unblacked leather, formed the brown top which is now worn. The original boot-tag may be observed in the form of a more wisp of leather sewn fast to the top, whilst the real acting tag is sewn to the inside of the boot. The back of the top is also fastened up, so that it could not by any ingenuity be turned up again into its original position.

Again, why do we black and polish our boots? The key is found in the French *cirage*, or blacking. We black our boots because brown leather would, with wet and use, naturally get discoloured with dark patches, and thus boots to look well should be coloured black. Now, shooting boots are usually greased, and that it was formerly customary to treat ordinary boots in the same manner is shown by the following verse in the ballad of "Argentile and Curan": —

"He borrowed on the working daies
His holy russets oft,
And of the bacon's fat to make
His startops black and soft".

Startops were a kind of rustic high shoes. Fairholt in his work states that "the oldest kind of blacking for boots and shoes appears to have been a thick, viscid, oily substance". But for neat boots a cleaner substance than grease would be required, and thus wax would be thought of; and that this was the case is shown by the French word *cirer*, which means indifferently to "wax" or to "polish boots". Boots are of course polished because wax takes so good a polish. Lastly, patent-leather is an imitation of common blacking.

I have now gone through the principal articles of men's clothing, and have

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shown how numerous and curious are the rudiments or “survivals”, as Mr. Tylor calls them; a more thorough search proves the existence of many more. For instance, the various gowns worn at the Universities and elsewhere, afford examples. These gowns were, as late as the reign of Queen Elizabeth, simply upper garments (1), but have survived into this age as mere badges. Their chief peculiarities consist in the sleeves, and it is curious that nearly all of such peculiarities point to various devices by which the wearing of the sleeves has been eluded or rendered less burdensome. Thus the plaits and buttons in a barrister’s gown, and the slit in front of the sleeve of the B.A.’s gown, are for this purpose. In an M.A.’s gown the sleeves extend below the knees, but there is a hole in the side through which the arm is passed; the end of the sleeve is sewed up, but there is a kind of scollop at the lower part, which represents the narrowing for the wrist. A barrister’s gown has a small hood sewed to the left shoulder, which would hardly go on to the head of an infant, even if it could be opened out into a hood shape.

It is not, however, in our dress alone that these survivals exist; they are to be found in all the things of our every-day life. For instance, anyone who has experienced a drive on a road so bad that leaning back in the carriage is impossible, will understand the full benefit to be derived from arm-slings such as are placed in first-class railway carriages, and will agree that in such carriages they are mere survivals. The rounded tracery on the outsides of railway carriages show the remnants of the idea that a coach was the proper pattern on which to build them; and the word “guard” is derived from the man who sat behind the coach and defended the passengers and mails with his blunderbuss.

In the early trains (1838-39) of the Birmingham Railway there were special “mail” carriages, which were made very narrow, and to hold only four in each compartment (two and two), so as to be like the coach they had just superseded.

(1) See figures, pp. 254, 311, Fairholt.

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The words *dele*, *stet*, used in correcting proof-sheets, the words *sed vide* or *s.v.*, *ubi sup.*, *ibid.*, *loc. cit.*, used in footnotes, the sign „&” which is merely a corruption of the word *et*, the word *finis* until recently placed at the ends of books, are all doubtless survivals from the day when all books were in Latin. The mark \wedge used in writing for interpolations appears to be the remains of an arrow pointing to the sentence to be included. The royal “broad-arrow“ mark is a survival of the head of “a barbed javelin, carried by serjeants-at-arms in the king’s presence as early as Richard the First’s time” (1). Then again we probably mount horses from the left side lest our swords should impede us. The small saddle on the surcingle of a horse, the seams in the backs of cloth-bound books, and those at the backs of gloves are rudiments,—but to give a catalogue of such things would be almost endless. I have said enough, however, to show that by remembering that there is *nihil sine causâ*, the observation of even common things of every-day life may be made less trivial than it might at first sight appear.

It seems a general rule that on solemn or ceremonial occasions men retain archaic forms; thus it is that court dress is a survival of the every-day dress of the last century; that uniforms in general are richer in rudiments than common dress; that a carriage with a postilion is *de rigueur* at a wedding; and that (as mentioned by Sir John Lubbock) the priests of a savage nation, acquainted with the use of metals, still use a stone knife for their sacrifices—just as Anglican priests still prefer candles to gas.

The details given in this article, although merely curious, and perhaps insignificant in themselves, show that the study of dress from an evolutionary standpoint serves as yet one further illustration of the almost infinite ramifications to which natural selection and its associated doctrines of development may be applied.

(1) Fairholt, p. 580.

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