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## The world in a wardrobe: expressing notions of care in the economy and everyday life

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The world in a wardrobe: expressing notions of care in the economy and everyday life

**Abstract:**

This chapter presents a brief history, politics and geography of consumption, told through garments. The chapter explores some changing meanings of notions of 'care' (for things; for people; for the environment) through the story of one woman's century-long lifetime of buying, making, wearing and caring for clothes. Her changing wardrobe guides the story, with some light reference to research in the social sciences, history and geography. It concludes with a discussion of what can be learnt from the story about the pursuit of a more environmentally and socially sustainable system of fashion and clothing.

**Introduction**

This chapter tells a brief history, politics and geography of consumption, told through garments. It explores some changing meanings of notions of 'care' (for things; for people; for the environment). It achieves this through the story of one woman's century-long lifetime of buying, making, wearing and caring for clothes. The woman in question happens to be my grandmother, Betty Howard Smith. She was born in 1910 at the tail end of the British Edwardian summer, and died in 2010 a couple of years into the worst economic recession since the 1930s. She really had seen it all before. Her changing wardrobe guides the story, helping to pick out themes of contemporary relevance from some of the key events in her life. It is organised around four sections, the last being a discussion of what can be learnt from the story about the pursuit of a more environmentally and socially sustainable system of fashion and clothing.

### **Paris Match: consumption is identity**

Betty Smith's family had sweated their way into the Edwardian middle classes through making and selling stuff to their fellow strivers (tailoring in one branch of the family; paint and wallpaper in another). Once they had made it into the middle classes they were quick to fill their wardrobes with objects that clearly signalled their progress in society. Fashion magazines and department stores would guide the development of the taste of uncertain new arrivals.

The first years of the twentieth century in Britain saw the embedding of mass consumer culture, particularly amongst the newly affluent and fast growing urban middle class that Betty's family were now firmly embedded in. Increasingly fast-paced cycles of taste were provided for in department stores that were supplied by increasingly global networks of production and consumption. There was nothing new in the principle of international trade over distances – particularly in textiles. But the scale of flows of goods increased dramatically. This increase was made possible by developments in a range of technologies, from agricultural, to freight, to specialised large-scale industrial production through to steel framed building construction that could house vast selections of goods sold with new forms of marketing. Developments in print and communications supported the symbiotic expansion of advertising, publication and consumer goods' industries.

Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929), author of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and the first social theorist of consumption, argued that the practice was valuable to people as a form of display that permitted subtle public rankings of power and wealth. Veblen is a satirist as well as theorist, and, writing more than a century ago, intended to disrupt as well as describe the consumer society that was growing at such a pace. He offered up a stock of

phrases that could make sense of the meaning of material consumption that are still circulating today, including 'the leisure class' and 'conspicuous consumption'. The emergence of this leisure class was built on international networks and flows of resource exploitation, trade, labour and innovation. These networks were welded together by the institutions of imperial, corporate and political power.

The display of power was not restricted to the purchase or wearing of the clothes but also to their maintenance. Betty's family's clothes were cared for by an extravagant infrastructure. Specifically it required a large portion of society to be employed in service, with much of their time dedicated to cleaning, pressing, mending and carefully storing these high value and high status goods. The wardrobe was one significant substructure within the clearly delineated class system. Upward shifts in status were possible but hard. Once achieved, the promotion would be signalled above all by the cut of your coat, the quality of the cloth and the level of care invested in its maintenance by employees.

Betty's education was completed with a trip to Paris. My grandmother lodged with others in a genteel Madame's home in order to receive a robust training in French language, food and fashion. This was the home of the most renowned department stores such as *Le Bon Marché*, *Printemps* and *Samaritaine*. These were innovating in their forms of presentation and marketing in ways that would support the increasing pace of middle class acquisition, including fixed pricing of goods and department managers with high autonomy. This allowed attention to shifting tastes and individual customers needs within a larger corporate machine. This combination could both catalyse and respond to changes in taste at pace and scale.

Her wedding photograph, just a few years on from her Paris trip, is a beautiful thing: two people surrounded by well-wishers on the steps of All Saints Church, Derby. She had gone for the sweet natured but economically modest clockmaker rather than one of the millionaire twins or her other well-heeled suitors that her training, wits and well-considered wardrobe had presented her with. One of the ways of reading the image is to consider the economy of care surrounding her outfit: hours of craft skill; expensive and difficult to maintain fabrics; exclusivity.

However even by the time of her wedding it was clear that the wardrobe was due for a clear out. The Great War had contributed to a transformation of relations of class and labour, and of Britain's relative economic status. The Edwardian middle class wardrobe had required a service class that could support elaborate and varied costumes at the household scale. At the widest scale it also required a global colonial system of human and resource exploitation. Class and colonial relations, and the household economy of service had started to be unpicked by the economic and social changes brought by the war. In the 1930s the newly titled Mrs Betty Smith enjoyed some home help, but the notion of a maid became a quaint childhood memory. Was this felt as a loss? More likely these changes brought a sense of liberation for the served as well as the servant, with greater privacy, more manageable family finances and a loosening of the social codes surrounding dress.

### **Making do and mending: skill and care**

The second global war of her life arrived in Betty's 29th year, and had its own impact on her wardrobe. The consumer economy of global flows of goods was suppressed and the resources diverted into the war effort. The phrase 'making do and mending' has the status of simple virtue in our present period of economic and ecological crisis. But the

connection between global events and the practice of household skills was very direct in her mind, and not simply driven by the necessities of wartime austerity. With freight shipping being torpedoed and goods rationed, this making do and mending was also motivated by a desire to express patriotism, to put on the best show possible and perhaps also the need to keep one's hands busy in the evenings at a time when her industrial home town was a target for bombing. Her wardrobe was augmented with some ingenious re-workings of found materials. Redundant parachute silk (early nylon) was re-fashioned into underwear, with the offcuts being used to stuff a sagging sofa. The demonstration of skills of self-reliance and prudence, but also imagination and self-expression, in presenting herself to the world must have marked a startling contrast with the middle class Edwardian household of her childhood, just a couple of decades earlier.

One of the items that entered the wardrobe at this time was a grey-green stiff tweed suit – the uniform of the Women's Voluntary Service. This saw a cohort of mostly middle class women serving tea, delivering meals, and in myriad other ways aiding bombed out families from other towns and cities and also overseas refugees. The social changes wrought by the war in Britain and elsewhere, and particularly much more direct experience of everyday life of the working class by the middle class, were to have profound effects on politics. 'Democratisation' of experiences of threat, hardship, risk and limitation, the latter enforced by universal state rationing of food and other goods, would form one of the foundations of postwar consensus around the welfare state.

### **One nation – one wardrobe**

While portrayals of 'one nation' pulling together are exaggerated it is clear that during and after the war some significant markers of social differentiation were being rolled back. As rationing lifted Betty would often find herself shopping for the same clothes in

the same department stores as working class women. The shift to more widely shared tastes and consumption patterns was felt in many fields, but was particularly evident in clothing.

The reasons for holding obligations to others, specifically those between the middle and working class, were changing. Where Betty's self-made grandfather felt compelled by his non-conformist religion to give much of his new-found late Victorian wealth to charity, and much of his time to internationalist causes, by the middle of the twentieth century direct personal experience of the suffering and insecurity of others' lives supported a more directly empathetic politics. Experiences of the war also made it even more difficult to justify (or economically and politically sustain) the British Empire.

These political changes at home and abroad brought consequences for the makers as well as the wearers of garments. By the late 1940s onwards organised labour in the UK and other developed countries had won substantial improvements in conditions, and over time the women's movement battled to ensure that women experienced these to the same degree as men. There were varied reasons for the acceptance of this new substantial revision of the western political economy amongst capitalists. Investors and company owners, with an eye on the expansive state socialist system of Eastern Europe viewed this novel social contract as the only viable way of maintaining social cohesion and a political system that would ultimately protect their interests. It also became clear that future economic competitiveness would depend on a well-educated, healthy workforce.

By the late 1960s the number of items of clothing in most people's wardrobes went up as costs came down. Innovations and relative price-drops in domestic technologies –

washing machines; dryers; electric irons, as well as in the fabrics themselves, also prompted changes. The value to the owner of individual items of clothing went down as they became cheap to replace, more easily worn or damaged. Some items were more difficult to mend, but also skills were progressively lost. Perhaps more influential than any of these changes was the increasing pace in fashion cycles. Photography, printing, fabric and dye technologies splashed colour across the high street.

### **The woman in the blue suit – technology for good and ill**

Technology and entrepreneurship had always been central to fashion. In the mid twentieth century, with its context of a low price on fossil fuels and a high social value placed on widespread access to choice, this resulted in a dramatic leap in material production and consumption. Betty would have shared a table as a young woman with the risk takers who, in parallel with the innovations in her father's paintworks, were experimenting with new chemical processes that delivered easy to wear and easy to care for fabrics. She grew up in a region that had good claim to being the birthplace of the industrial revolution – and textiles had lain at the heart of it all.

Certainly she was thrilled at hearing of the invention of American nylons – chemical giant Dupont's most celebrated achievement. This was a topic that would light up her eyes many decades after her first pair came out of the box. At the same time the pollution generated by these new forms of industrial production and material consumption did begin to cause pause for thought. Treasured landscapes that had begun to recover from the coal-fired industrial revolution were now expected to dilute mystery cocktails of effluent. Roads laid out to take shoppers and delivery vans to the department stores started to brutally remodel much-loved street scenes in the centre of towns.

One of my grandmother's most favoured items of clothing was a pale blue trouser suit, probably in Rayon. Produced and purchased at some point in the late 1960s it proved to be very long lasting indeed. I recall picnics as a pre-schooler at which it featured. Indeed I can't easily recall much else she wore throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In echoes of the 1951 Ealing comedy *The Man in The White Suit* it appeared almost luminous, and it carried virtually no blemish or apparent wear across decades. The eponymous hero of the film, played by Alex Guinness, was an English version of Wallace Carothers, the American industrial chemist that discovered nylon. Guinness' character hadn't fully absorbed the consequences of his invention of a material that was durable, stain resistant and easily dyed: it threatened the very industry he appeared to have saved by never needing to be replaced. He need not have worried: the garment industry resolved this threat by coaxing consumers into ever faster cycling of fashion such that the durability or otherwise of clothing had become irrelevant. The low (subsidised) cost of fossil fuels within the economies of the second half of the twentieth century meant that the disposal of clothing carried more value to the economy than its preservation.

It took a self-confident person with a sense of their own style to wear the same trouser suit across several decades. It was usually set off with the same pair of trusty white patent leather shoes with a sensible heel, and perhaps a gold-effect chain. I can only guess that the suit represented several forms of liberation achieved across a lifetime. The wearer was freed from the corsets, layers, and, not least, convention, faced by their immediate forbears. They no longer required a supporting service economy to care for its preservation and maintenance. It is more likely than not that the suit was made during the last days of British mass textile production. The labour that produced it was probably decently paid, and supported by a robust and reliable new collective system of welfare. On account of her very independent sense of style, and perhaps also her thrifty nature,

she put the garment to work long after most of her fellow shoppers had sent it to the fast growing mounds of land filled waste. She might have bought it at the dress shop in a pretty and lively street just next to the church she was married in. It was in all senses a good piece of clothing. One of the last of its kind?

Over the same period that tastes, and patterns of use, care and disposal were becoming more universalised the post-colonial settlement had revised the terms of trade with and production in the developing world. A series of factors fed what became dubbed globalization in the textiles and garment trade. Greater sovereignty over natural resources, lower wage rates, fewer regulatory obligations, gradual liberalization of trade globally, including more fluid capital and the extension and expansion of transnational companies and advances in communications technologies came together to see textile and clothing production in the global south overhaul the first centres of industrial production of clothing in, amongst other places, the mills of Derbyshire's Derwent Valley. Despite vigorous tending and mending of her clothes, Made in China, Made in the Philippines, Made in Bangladesh steadily displaced familiar British trade names in labels on the clothes in the laundry basket.

### **Taking care of things**

What the clothes went through once they got to the laundry basket had changed enormously across her lifetime also. After leaving her well-staffed Edwardian childhood home the rest of Betty's life would see her doing at least a portion of the laundry and the mending herself. She had a perhaps unusual level of enthusiasm for these tasks for a woman of her class, and the kit that they required. She also found it very difficult to throw anything away, hoping that items might be repaired some day and be put to good use.

Hence when she left her large family home in later years she had accumulated what must have been an internationally important collection of white goods, from electrically powered mangles of the 1920s to washing machines bought from the nationalised Electricity Board shops in the 1970s. The pace of redundancy and difficulty of repair accelerated through the latter years of the twentieth century. The pre-war galvanised steel washtub, operated by hand, could be put into service at any time. I imagine it was handy during the 1970s power cuts. She could still plug in and use the 1960s top loader if there was a big backlog of laundry. However a salesman today would frankly admit that you would be lucky to get six years out of a decent brand of washing machine. New machines can gauge the weight of the load, attend to a range of fabrics and levels of dirt and includes programmable 'eco options'. Special programmes allow for freshening of an individual item after a single use, a goal that Betty would have achieved with a short spell on a hanger in the breeze on a clothesline. The new model has more computing power than the Apollo mission that put human beings on the moon. It is precisely this complexity that guarantees its short-term obsolescence.

### **Conclusion: Good value**

In the last years of her life Betty lived mostly in a small room on the top floor of a residential care home with a view across a valley towards the village I grew up in. She took naughty delight in the fact that this vast Edwardian mansion had once belonged to the family of the super-rich twins who had competed for her hand in marriage. She had everything she needed within easy reach in what would originally have been a maid's room. Others laundered her clothing again now, but she kept up the mending habit. It was a good place to go and sit and share thoughts. I wish she were still there to get advice and do some fact checking for this chapter. One phrase used to describe her was that she was always 'good value' – that is - someone who is very enjoyable and useful

company. But she was also intensely interested in good value in the financial sense, and her Christian faith also dictated that values of justice and compassion should always inform the individual's and the community's actions.

What good value would she have contributed to a 'handbook of fashion and sustainability'? The events and experiences of Betty's century have a good deal to tell. They suggest that we may be making a mistake in implying that there is a need to move 'from' unsustainability 'to' a new unimaginably distant and radically different state. The composition of and care for the garments in Betty's wardrobe over a century can be patched together into an account of a more sustainable life with clothing. Many of these elements are covered in far more detail in other contributions to this book, but they can be shoehorned into a paragraph.

Investing in some pieces of long lasting quality rewards the maker and the owner. These are heritage items where the expertise and skill of the designers and makers needs to be well rewarded, but the garments carry and communicate value for many years. Learning and practicing skills of mending, maintaining and refreshing clothes is a satisfying thing to do that increases self-respect and independence that benefit the rest of life. If time and enthusiasm is short, people can spend small amounts of money rewarding someone else's skill in order to keep good clothes going. Consideration for the wellbeing of the makers of textiles and garments is an obligation upon the wearer. Awareness of the realities of their lives is within easy reach (though eyes are easily averted). The business of buying clothes can be done within a fairer economic system that supports the welfare and striving of people near and far, as the British post-war settlement demonstrated. The price paid for 'good' clothes should permit decent and secure lives all the way along the supply chain, whether it stretches across a few miles

or a few continents. Innovation should be treasured just as much as the classic piece. New developments can result in pleasure and surprise but also less environmental and social cost if the right priorities are set in design and manufacturing training and practice. Researching the whole life cycle of a product, and stripping out waste and harm with the rigour that economic globalization has previously only applied to cost will result in dramatic reductions in resource consumption in production, use and disposal of garments. Price signals that reflect or are driven by changing social pressures and values can be a powerful and rapid way of expressing ethical commitments and a shared vision of the future. Assigning adequate prices to the value of labour and of material inputs, including water, crops and fossil fuels provides intuitive ways of delivering change at pace and scale throughout a system.

Can we really imagine all of these things happening? To do so it is necessary to look away from the static political imaginary of the present – one concerned solely with the idea that salvation lies in another burst of impact-blind consumption and GDP figures going up. Rather it helps to look back and reflect upon the scale and pace of technological, economic and political system changes across the last century. Human beings need to remind themselves that the devices and systems we live with aren't mysterious natural forces to be endured, but rather human artefacts that we can drive towards deliberate purposes. The Edwardian household economy of service, the colonial economy of resource exploitation and the stark class divide in life chances of 1930s Britain were all transformed in the course of only the first half of her lifetime. At the time these changes were going on some if not all of them would have been met with some trepidation, if not opposition, by people of Betty's class and background, but it is now difficult to imagine that the world could be otherwise.

Looking into a lifetime of wearing and caring for clothes has demonstrated a whole set of practices and experiences that are present today or within easy reach, from care for clothing to care for others through modifications to the economy. This century long life story confirms that system changes are possible, and can be determined by positive goals. It includes the development of personal and professional skills, the responsible judgments of consumers, rigorous environmental protection and guaranteed reward of workers as well as changes to the regulation and pricing of global commodities. These are ways in which we can, across the space of just one generation, choose to ensure that we wear is, in all senses, 'good value'.

### **Bibliography and suggested reading**

The piece has been written as an unreferenced essay, but the following suggested readings are drawn from human and environmental geography and science and technology studies. They have informed the argument and would support any exploration of notions of geographies of care around fashion:

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