

*The Cut of His Coat: Men, Dress, and Consumer Culture in Britain, 1860–1914.* By Brent Shannon. Athens: Ohio University Press, xii + 252 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$49.95; paper, \$24.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-821-41702-9; paper, 0-821-41703-7.

Reviewed by Elisabetta Merlo

Studies of the changes in costume that occurred during the nineteenth century have overlooked the importance of fashion to male identity and neglected the part played by men in the rise of a consumer society. At the beginning of the 1930s, when the German psychologist J. C. Flügel described Englishmen as subscribing to a “great masculine renunciation” of fashion and style, he was alluding to the emerging industrial bourgeoisie’s rejection of the opulence flaunted by the traditional landed aristocracy in favor of a sober, undecorated, almost standardized style. Flügel’s view influenced most fashion historians, at least until recently, as it reflected the reality that, in their striving to gain sociopolitical legitimacy, the newly affluent English industrial entrepreneurs embraced the three-piece business suit as a uniform. This afforded little room for personal expression or embellishment and left to women the task of displaying their families’ wealth and social status through their costume and style.

Brent Shannon’s ambition in writing *The Cut of His Coat* is “to recover the role of middle-class men as active participants in the birth of modern consumer culture from 1860 to the turn of the twentieth century” (p. 11). His book is a welcome addition to the study of male involvement in the “new consumerism,” earlier described convincingly by Christopher Beward, in *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life, 1860–1914* (1999). Although Beward focused on working-class clothing and style, like Shannon he did not confine himself to the metropolitan social and sartorial elites, and he refused to subscribe to the commonplace view—based on the rhetoric of masculine disdain for shopping—that consumption was a feminine enterprise while production remained the prerogative of men.

In his broad survey of historical sources, enriched by numerous illustrations, Shannon examines men’s relation to fashion trends and marketing from several

perspectives. In addressing a range of subjects, he analyzes men's "hidden" consumption and sartorial habits in the Victorian age, seeking out their reasons for secrecy. He looks at the roles played by advertising and by the monthly journal *Fashion*, which was published in London between 1898 and 1905 for a male audience, in attracting men to the world of consumption and appearance, just as England was becoming the undisputed international leader in men's fashion. Shannon concludes with a consideration of gender and class, detailing how these factors intersected with male fashion, which, although it evolved more slowly and with less ostentation than the feminine counterpart, was equally influential in defining and regulating social differences.

The author introduces a variety of issues seldom covered in one book, such as the construction of masculinity, the search for class identity, innovation in male fashion, and men's response to modern fashion retailing. However, Shannon's most noteworthy achievement is his examination of the sometime contradictory, usually tangled, process of constructing gender as it evolved during the late Victorian age, a crucial period in the history of the consumer society. In surveying the impact of sexual difference on class formation, Shannon analyzes two popular stereotypes—the "dandy," who epitomized narcissistic self-display, and the "masher," who was a parody of the middle-class man aping the lifestyle of the elites—in order to demonstrate that the "trickle-down" theory did not apply to all middle-class Englishmen. Rather than emulate the lifestyle and dress of the upper class, many members of the emerging urban bourgeoisie developed their own style.

Although Shannon deals with an interesting and unexplored topic, the sources he has analyzed are inadequate. Indeed, they do not enable him to present a complete picture of the male response to the retailing innovations that occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century. Nor does he fully explain how fashion became a marketable commodity. He relies on fashion journals, fashion plates, advertisements, and popular novels, which track the evolution of costume and taste, rather than revealing the history of fashion production, distribution, and consumption.

However, *The Cut of His Coat* will certainly inspire further investigation into the subject of masculine consumption. Its publication is evidence that the field of consumer history is ready for more research.

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