

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in *Corrupted Files* journal, following editorial review.

The published version appeared as:

Annebella Pollen, "Looking Back at Life Reform: Movements and Methods for Turbulent Times," *Corrupted Files* issue 3: Movement, 2017-18. Online version: <http://www.corruptedfiles.org.uk/portfolio/looking-back-at-life-reform/>

Looking back at Life Reform: Movements and Methods for Turbulent Times

Annebella Pollen explores radical interwar experiments in living, from camping campaigns for world peace to ideological battles with clothing.

In the wake of the First World War, mass destruction was felt culturally as well as physically. Victorian ideas of progress had been fundamentally disrupted. Everything that had been held dear seemed devastated; the old ways no longer worked. Across Europe, among intellectual elites, a plethora of modernist movements emerged, experimenting with new forms and structures, resulting in innovative new approaches to music and dance, literature, art and architecture. Many of these movements and their manifestos are now embedded in our canon of twentieth century cultural history.

The need to cultural reform was not just a concern of the elite, however. Although less well-known, many experiments in living had a wider demographic, and a broad yearning for cultural change spawned a wide range of small, sometimes single-issue, campaigns and endeavours. Reform was not just for the fine arts; some interwar groups who campaigned for social change aimed for the transformation of all aspects of daily life, including language and food, bodies and clothes. In England, campaigns based on 'advanced thought' flourished in the 1920s and 1930s; as one contemporary observer put it, 'London is honeycombed with societies for the propagation of this and the abolition of that.'¹ Several recent research projects of mine have examined these groups to understand their utopian ambitions in a period when radical ideas were rife, but also to reclaim the potential of such campaigns for the continuing movement for social and cultural change. This essay continues this work.

¹ C. E. M. Joad (ed.), *Manifesto: Being the Book of Progressive Societies and Individuals* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1934), p. 32.

The first groups I explore are those that coalesced around the concept of 'woodcraft'. This flexible term - broadly related to outdoor living, but with an expanded political philosophy – emerged as part of a rural revival to resist urbanisation in the late nineteenth century. On both sides of the Atlantic, romantic ideas about nature underpinned practices of hiking, cycling and especially camping. As cities became associated with overcrowding, pollution, cheap mass-produced pleasures and a loss of authenticity, efforts to live more simply (even if temporarily) gained popularity. In turn-of-the-century America, artist and naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton incorporated simple living into his new educational scheme for children. Informed by romantic fantasies about Native American ways of life, Seton instilled a love of nature in city boys softened by the comforts of city life. Woodcraft was incorporated into the British Boy Scouts by Sir Robert Baden-Powell by 1908. Here camping and hiking were fundamental to the skills that boys needed to become worthy sons of the Empire. In Baden-Powell's scheme, Seton's nature study and primitivist rituals were combined with elements from the Chief Scout's experiences at war. The motto 'Be Prepared' referred not only survival in nature but preparedness for conflict.

At least, this is how scouting was perceived by members and leaders whose attitudes had been fundamentally changed by the First World War. For pacifists, Seton's woodcraft ideas seemed warped by scouting's militarism, and schisms emerged. The first occurred when conscientious objector Aubrey Westlake and his Quaker father, Ernest, started their own organisation. The Order of Woodcraft Chivalry was formed in Cambridge in 1916, and took Seton's scheme back to basics, and adapting the principles to suit girls, boys, women and men. Among its thousands of members, an emerging philosophy of woodcraft applied ideas from history and myth, as well as new ideas from biology and psychology, to form a crucible for radical thinking as well as a means of organised outdoor leisure. Order camps were marked by ceremony and ritual; members reflected on cultural problems as well as practical issues. The aim was to create temporary societies under canvas in which new ways of life could be rehearsed. Camps continue to this day, although Order membership is now under a hundred.

Another manifestation of the British woodcraft movement was the strangely-named Kindred of the Kibbo Kift. Again originating as a pacifist scouting splinter group, this organisation took a core concept of social movements - trying to change the world - to its

fullest flowering. Kibbo Kift – whose name derived from an old Cheshire term meaning ‘proof of strength’ – was founded in London in 1920 by professional artist and former Boy Scout leader, John Hargrave. It included over a thousand social reformers, spiritual seekers, aspiring artist and author members. Although it was endorsed by high-profile figures in arts, science and politics, most members were of limited means, employed in nine-to-five occupations in civil service or education. When in Kibbo Kift, however, members threw off their city jobs, ordinary clothes and given names, and assumed alter egos of plants, animals and mythological figures. In camps, hikes and ceremonial circles, they cut striking figures, dressed in priestly robes and shorts or carved masks and conical hats. In their woodcraft guises as White Fox and Blue Falcon, as Will Scarlet and Little Otter, Kinsfolk became transformed. The authority of their membership fostered a belief that they were crafting new futures from old ways.

Camping and hiking for Kibbo Kift was more than productive leisure; it was a means of recuperating that which was true and vital. World peace was not something that should be left to governments; by living simple lives in touch with ancient traditions and new ideas, issues from education to economics could be resolved by doing rather than by talking. Although there was no clarity about how world peace could come through camping and ceremony, their manifestos and costumes proclaimed commitment to living out ambitious solutions to the world’s ills. With limited numbers and little in the way of financial resources, issues could perhaps only ever be resolved symbolically.

After ten years as a woodcraft organisation, Kibbo Kift shifted approach fundamentally in the early 1930s, campaigning for social and economic change through more urban and disciplined methods. As a small woodcraft group of little more than ten years’ duration, then, it could be said that they were of little consequence as a movement. Kibbo Kift’s striking self-belief, however, along with the originality of their visual style and agit-prop techniques, retains radical potential. My recent Kibbo Kift book and exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery has inspired a wide range of creative responses and informed new political campaigns.

Acting out change through altered appearance might seem a weak basis for a social movement but for many who had ambitions to reform culture in the interwar years, all

aspects of daily life were ripe for revision. For example, the Men's Dress Reform Party, formed in 1929, and whose membership overlapped with Kibbo Kift, proclaimed that men's social progress was being hampered by outdated, unhygienic and ugly attire. Born of a nexus of intersecting ideas about physical improvement through health and exercise, along with emerging scientific studies about the positive effects of sun and air on the skin, men's dress reformers came from medicine and academia, arts and the theatre, and even included politicians and clergymen. Their call was for more than new breathable, comfortable and washable fabrics. Their aim – always expressed in uncompromising tones – was to 'burn' and 'kill' conventional clothing, and thus to release men from sartorial enslavement.

The evangelical declamatory style of the Men's Dress Reform Party positions them as a social movement of a particular kind in an age of manifestos. Among these interwar protest groups, letters to the press were never enough. Members bypassed the vested interests of the tailoring industry to find their own hands-on solutions, and took them to the streets. They designed and wore flamboyant and sometimes eccentric garments to counteract the moral problems embodied in stiff collars, formal hats and restrictive suits. Silks and satins in oranges and purples, pussycat bows and skirts, togas and all-in-ones were encouraged for those who dared. Men were martyrs to clothes that signalled sobriety, seriousness and duty; women had thrown off their Victorian restraints and men needed to bring the same change to their own wardrobes and lives. Their crusade was thus: 'Men can free themselves; but they must act together. The Men's Dress Reform Party exists to make combined action possible; men must join in their thousands to make combined action EFFECTIVE!' ²

Another radical reform movement born in the interwar years saw clothes as the central site of resistance. Emerging in the early 1920s in England, and informed by the more established nudist cultures of Germany, the English approach had its own flavour. Like German nudist culture, English practitioners were informed by medical and moral debates about health and hygiene, shame and self-realisation. Unlike their German counterparts, English nudism was small in scale and particular in demographic. Although some practitioners came to nudism through interests in 'body culture' (what we might now call body-building and beauty contests), for many in the early years of English social nudism, the project was intellectual as well as physical. English nudists sometimes described themselves as 'gymnosophists' in

² Alfred C. Jordan, 'Men's Dress Reform Party: Dinner Debate at the May Fair Hotel, 24 June 1932', p. 4.

order to ascribe ancient Grecian ideals of bodily wisdom on an activity that was always more than disrobing. Antiquarian language also elevated the practice from something potentially prurient to something sanctified. Nudist publications developed a theory as well as a method for unclothed culture, and it was unashamedly utopian. The practice was a return to a paradise lost and also a solution to deep-seated problems of the modern world, from the cultural construct of sexual shame to the artificial sophistry of social life. To cast off clothing was to cast off conventional thinking. Taking off one's clothes with like-minded individuals (this was, after all, a *social* movement) was invested with enormous expectation, promising gender equality, a reduction in greed, the reorganisation of city life and even world peace.

Unlike Kibbo Kift and the Men's Dress Reform Party, social nudism endures in the present day. More commonly called naturism by its practitioners, it continues through an international network of clubs and communities. Whether it could still be described as a *social movement*, however, depends on one's use of the term. Despite naturism's challenge to convention, it has cast off its former association with other progressive campaigns. In the 1920s and early 1930s nudism in England was strongly aligned with pacifism, natural health, vegetarianism and even feminism. Those who campaigned for a gymnosophic world envisaged a radical socialist utopia; contemporary naturists are more likely to say simply that they enjoy the practice and nothing more.

The interwar social movements described in this essay are more than just historical curiosities. Some could be described as failures – in that they were short-lived and promised more than they could ever deliver – but others have achieved their aim, although not necessarily always with the methods and timeframe anticipated. Twenty-first century men, for example, enjoy almost all of the sartorial freedoms campaigned for by the dress reformers of nearly one hundred years ago. In all cases, the unequivocal belief that life could and should be changed, even down to the smallest detail, and that these reforms would bring far-reaching results that could be achieved by ordinary people through very simple means, remains refreshing. Although groups could be small in size and fringe in appeal, in each case the utopian futures that they envisaged remain latent. The uncompromising language and the public daring with which beliefs were communicated and performed provide an inspirational moral direction about what to do when certainties have crumbled. We might not follow the methods and beliefs that such groups practiced and

espoused, but together the progressive social movements of interwar England reverberate with a powerful desire for an equal, peaceful world that we are still to realise.

Annebella Pollen is Principal Lecturer and Academic Programme Leader in the History of Art and Design at University of Brighton. Pollen's book, *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* was published by Donlon in 2015. Her article, "'The Sartorial Rebirth of Man': Reconsidering the Promise of the Men's Dress Reform Party, 1929-1937", can be found in *Vestoj: The Journal of Sartorial Matters*, issue 7, 'On Masculinities', Winter 2016, pp. 59-68: <http://eprints.brighton.ac.uk/16544/> Her 2017 essay 'Utopian Bodies and Anti-Fashion Futures: The dress theories and practices of English interwar nudists' is available in a special issue of *Utopian Studies* on Fashion and Utopia.