

This 1000-word commissioned article for *The Conversation* ('Academic Rigour, Journalistic Flair') summarises some key ideas from Pollen's recent research in *Utopian Studies* on early English nudism. The final published article appeared online on 9 April 2018, and can be found here: <https://theconversation.com/naked-utopia-how-englands-first-nudists-imagined-the-future-94454>

## **Naked Utopia: How England's first nudists imagined the future**

**Annebella Pollen**

The Conversation, 9 April 2018

The naked body is as old as humanity. But nudism as a social form, organised into clubs and societies, only [came of age in England in the 1920s](#). Its practitioners were from a range of backgrounds and included those with interests in "physical culture" (today we would refer to this as body building and beauty contests). Many were interested in natural health, including vegetarian and raw food diets, and new exercise regimes from hiking to yoga.

Nudism was particularly embraced by artists and intellectuals as part of a wider set of progressive practices associated with free thought. Many were internationalists inspired by longer standing German nudist traditions, which were far more popular and organised on a larger scale than English efforts. They understood disrobing to be part of a wider ideal of physical, mental and spiritual liberation.

For nudists in this mould, taking one's clothes off in organised groups promised nothing less than heaven on earth. As one 1933 enthusiast claimed in the magazine *Gymnos* ("For Nudists Who Think"):

*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 today.*

Civilisation – here indicating the modern, mechanised and industrialised world – was seen as corrupt. Its manifold problems were made material in everything that was wrong with contemporary clothing.

ii. HEALTH & EFFICIENCY July, 1935

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Advertisement for Spielplatz nudist camp, Health and Efficiency magazine, 1935. © H&E naturist magazine/Hawk Editorial Ltd., Author provided

## The death of fashion

If nudism was Utopian and escapist, dress was necessarily its inverse: dystopian and imprisoning. Garments were described by impassioned early nudists in their publications as "dirty cloth jails" and "the iron chains which civilisation and custom have riveted on suffering humanity". Illness was seen as "largely an inevitable result of the enslavement of the body within the dark walls of its own clothing". Rather than suffer this fate, interwar nudists proposed an alternative way of life, declaring in magazines from Sun Bathing Review to Health and Efficiency: "Clothes are dead."



'Sun worship'. Health and Efficiency magazine, 1935. © H&E naturist magazine/Hawk Editorial Ltd., Author provided

For some of its most ardent supporters, nudity was proposed as a complete cure to modern ills. If its physical and mental benefits were to be felt, nothing at all should be worn at any time. These enthusiasts looked forward to a time when nudism would become the norm on the streets of London, when “all normal-minded civilised people ... live as nudists” and “permanently discard clothes”. Some nudists predicted that bodies would evolve to have no need of garments for warmth or protection; the healthy and vigorous bodies produced by total exposure would be impervious to changes of climate. Some of nudism’s most ardent early practitioners climbed mountains and even skied in the buff.

But others saw these kinds of practices as a bridge too far from the conventional world. More moderate voices argued that “clothing has an important place to fill and no one but a crank would propose its total abolition”.

It is worth remembering that nudity in public was (and is) a prosecutable offence. The establishment of private “sun clubs” and “sunbathing societies” in the interwar years, with strict membership procedures, ensured that nudists avoided arrest, and they also helped maintain respectability. Popular conceptions of nudism ranged from the amused to the frankly appalled; nudist magazines regularly summarised articles from the mainstream press that claimed nudism to be immoral, even “evil”. Even if viewed benignly, nudism was popularly seen as eccentric, so a “sane” or rational approach was promoted by those who wished to avoid accusations of cultishness.



'Sunbathing in Sussex.' Health and Efficiency magazine, 1935. © H&E  
naturist magazine/Hawk Editorial Ltd., Author provided

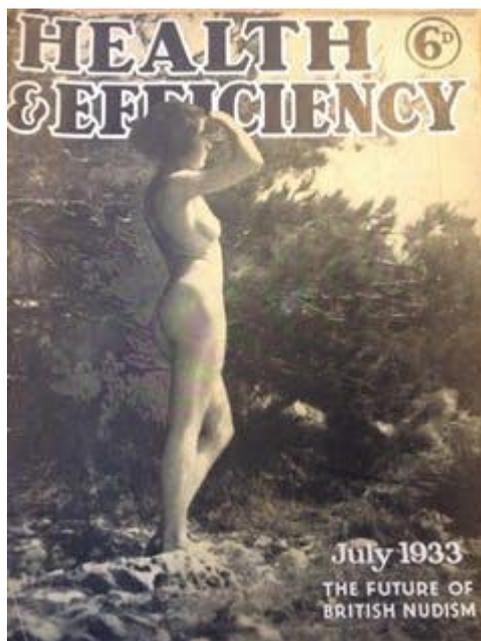
Those who followed a more moderate line of nudism acknowledged that shifting practices of dress and undress as circumstances allowed were needed. This more pragmatic approach promoted occasional sunbathing, under appropriate conditions, in the minimum of attire for the purposes of improved health and well-being. It also led some to invent clothing for nudists as a concession to the country's many sunless days. Design ambitions ranged from the rational to the fantastic.

## The nudist's wardrobe

The most complete scheme was proposed in 1933 by Maurice Parmalee, author of [Nudism in Modern Life](#). He proposed that articles of dress, to be worn when some form of protection was required, should be open, airy and cover no more of the body than was absolutely necessary.

In addition to these practical suggestions, he offered more visionary ideals, including the elimination of sartorial differences between the sexes. He promoted specific garments to resolve issues of warmth, protection for the feet, and the practicalities of menstruation at a time before internal sanitary products were widely used.

Inspiration was freely drawn from across history and geography, with the net result forming 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.



Health and Efficiency magazine, 1933. © H&E naturist magazine/Hawk

Editorial Ltd., Author provided

The individual items were designed to address specific practical shortcomings of nudity, but they also reflected the changed nature of the coming nudist world. Parmalee argued that in his nudist future: “There will be less temptation to dishonesty, so that the lack of pockets will not be a serious drawback.”

## The nude future

For all the claims of nudism’s inevitability, nearly 100 years on it’s no more common to find naked people on the high street than it ever was. The nudist Utopia of the 1920s remains an impossible dream. Even by the mid-1930s the fantasy had begun to tarnish; the dramatic political shifts in Germany showed that undressing alone could not bring a new democratic, pacifist, egalitarian world. Nonetheless, the visions of the English moderates, with their ambition for lightweight clothes and sunbathing in a minimum of attire, gained steady traction during the 1930s as part of a general relaxation of dress and manners. Post-war, it was only English social nudism, organised through clubs and societies, which waned. Nudism for leisure, especially on continental holidays, continued in the pink of health.

These days, contemporary practitioners of what is now more usually called naturism tend not to link their undressing to the socialism, vegetarianism or anti-materialism of nudism’s interwar pioneers; it is merely perceived as a pleasant pastime. As such, the campaigns of the first social nudists in England might seem to be a closed case.

Yet at their most radical, philosophers of nudism recommended the deconstruction of all social propriety in search of a new future. The world they foresaw would unite all in one brotherhood, re-establish a union with nature and make the world a safer, fairer, and more beautiful place. These ambitions remain today, although modern subscribers might differ in their 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.