“Indignities Imposed by Arbitrary Adult Rule?” Children’s Dress (and Undress) in Progressive Schools in Interwar England

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Abstract: Independent schools describing themselves as “progressive,” “modern,” or “advanced” flourished in interwar England. At the same time, new ideas were emerging among intellectuals about the social and psychological value (or otherwise) of clothing (and its lack). Progressives’ experiments in living and loving, eating and dressing, intersected with the choices they made for educating their children. Radical utopian child-centred establishments integrated health cures and vegetarian diets, for example, alongside new curriculum approaches that included nude practices of “sun and air bathing.” This article examines attitudes to children’s dress and undress by interwar progressive educators alongside arguments of contemporaneous health campaigners, sexologists, fashion writers, and nudists, who were often one and the same. In radical educational and health literatures, children were discussed and photographically depicted as “natural nudists” or, as curator and dress historian James Laver put it, “the best advocates of the modern movement.” Drawing on primary research in pedagogic literature and nudist publications, as well as histories and theories of fashion, nudism, education, sexology, and visual culture, this article argues that utopian interwar English independent education used nudity to demonstrate its most radical agendas and to perform its progressiveness via the bodies of children (un)dressed in an alternative school uniform.

Keywords: children, dress, nudism, photography, progressive education, school uniform, sunbathing, undress

Introduction
“A procession of glum little girls in hard straw hats—walking two-by-two, gloved hands linked, in a straggling crocodile. . . . That was yesterday.” So began a 1937 advisory article “When Your Daughter Goes to School” in the illustrated magazine Britannia and Eve. Its author, Joan Woollacombe, surveyed the “really modern schools” available to parents seeking “a liberal education for the child’s whole nature” (42–43, 108).1 Woollacombe’s opening vision for the outmoded school of yesteryear was sartorially centred. Children’s hard straw hats and gloved hands signalled the prim formality and regimentation, discomfort and conformity, made material in traditional girls’ school garments. As will be discussed, the “modern” schools that flourished in interwar England threw off conventions and constraints in clothes as well as in curricula, sometimes dispensing with them entirely. As Woollacombe summarized, in relation

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to these educational experiments: “Your eight-year-old child will live a life utterly unlike that of the grim youngsters in hard straw hats” (42).

As independent fee-paying schools describing themselves as “progressive,” “modern,” or “advanced” grew in interwar England, offering more liberal, even utopian child-centred educational approaches, so too were new ideas emerging among intellectuals about the social and psychological value (or otherwise) of clothing (and its lack).² Progressives’ experiments in living and loving, eating and dressing, intersected with the choices they made for educating their offspring. Radical schools might integrate natural health cures and vegetarian diets alongside new curricula. Some implemented nude “sun and air bathing” as part of wider physical and psychological endeavours that aimed to provide light therapy, sex education, and liberation from repressive neuroses and unwanted social conventions, such as bodily shame.

This article examines attitudes to children’s dress and undress by interwar progressive educators alongside the arguments of contemporaneous health campaigners, fashion writers, and nudists, who were often one and the same. In radical interwar educational and health literatures in England, children were imagined and depicted as “natural nudists” and as the guarantors of a newly liberated future generation. Drawing on primary research in pedagogic literature and nudist books and periodicals, as well as secondary texts on histories and theories of fashion, nudism, education, sexology, and visual culture, this article argues that modern interwar English independent education used nudity to demonstrate its most radical agendas and to perform its progressiveness via the bodies of children (un)dressed in an alternative school uniform.

Undress as Dress

While nudity can be summarized most simply as an absence of clothing, undress as a form of dress has been established by previous scholars, especially those who have examined its structures in the modern Euro-American social movement that is nudism or naturism.³ Curator Richard Martin (1947–99), for example, of the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, asserted in 1991 that the rejection of dress is instructive for understanding both dress and selves: “Nudism is a gesture that may return us to the matrix of what we are, and . . . why we wear whatever we do wear” (84). More substantially, Australian scholar Ruth Barcan in Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy has explored what philosophical ideas of nudity, as well as practices of nudism, can contribute to fashion theory. Most recently, articles in themed issues of Utopian Studies (“Utopia and Fashion”) and Modes pratiques (“Sans La Mode”) demonstrate how nude anti-fashion offers alternative perspectives for understanding dress and its discontents.⁴

While discussion of the undressed body underpins historic textual discourse about the meaning and value of social nudity as a theory and a practice, the depicted undressed body took on new attention-grabbing dimensions in interwar England, as discussed in recent studies of the visual culture of light therapy and the visual culture of naturism (Woloshyn; Pollen, Nudism in a Cold Climate).
These investigations demonstrate how photographs in magazine and advertising print cultures used the naked body—often in an idealized and youthful manifestation—as a promotional and recruitment tool and as a form of evidence for physical and psychological health claims.

**The Child as Nude Subject**

The photographic depiction of naked children formed a central part of these historic cultures, and its analysis must be approached with care. Visual culture scholars Anne Higonnet and Patricia Holland have sensitively explored how photographs of children have become sites of intense anxiety since the late twentieth century when highly charged child abuse debates—and prosecutions—achieved prominence across the Western world. Higonnet summarized in 1998: “No subject is as publicly dangerous now as the subject of the child’s body” (133).

Photography is implicated in power inequalities of the observer and the observed. This achieves particular intensity in the visual surveillance of childhood, as Holland puts it, “since the relations of power between adults and children are so great” (97). Where the child is naked or partially dressed, this ramps up the interpretive stakes. The academic analyst is implicated in the circulation of these meanings and their attendant dangers; any publication about childhood imagery, Higonnet asserts, “replays the risks of the pictures it is about” (13). These risks include that arguments may be misconstrued or that images may be decontextualized. Some historians of nudism, such as Brian Hoffman, have met these complexities by excluding photographs of children from their publications, even though they form part of the textual discussions. Marguerite Shaffer, in defining a photographic genre she calls “The Environmental Nude,” cropped a naked girl from a 1949 photograph of a family at an American nudist camp in her 2008 article, even as author and journal editors regretted “modifying” a historic document. Mary-Ann Shantz, however, argues that such excisions remove children from the nudist culture of which they are a part, thus minimizing their “actual and symbolic position” (94). In the twenty-first century, at a time when child protection is differently understood and when children’s photographic consent is more considered, historic photographs of nudist children may be uncomfortable to view. Nonetheless, in the historic cultures under discussion, the naked child was a centrally depicted figure, and their images merit analysis.

**Constructing the Child through Clothing (and Its Opposite)**

Just as the photography of children powerfully illuminates unequal adult–child power relations and ideological expectations about childhood, so too do children’s dress and undress demonstrate similar attitudes. As Daniel Thomas Cook puts it in his influential work on the history of children’s clothing, parents impute dressed identities on young children, who are taken as blank slates (16).
As will be discussed, the image of the nude child, in the context of interwar English nudist cultures, operates similarly. Nudism as a performed form of undress equally imputes identities, often coterminous with prevailing claims of childhood innocence and a supposedly pre-sophisticated Edenic state of “naturalness.” These positions reproduce the notion of blank slates to which Cook refers. In nudist cultures, and especially in their photographic representations, the child is both a living being—typically the offspring of the nudist parent—and a symbolic construct of childhood constituted by discourse. Children are consequently real and imagined carriers of claims about what “the child” is and what “the child” wants and needs.

As will be demonstrated, utopian pedagogic literature in the interwar period made radical interventions into the conceptualization of the child in a period when conventional schooling was perceived to be excessively regimented, punitive, and adult-led. School uniforms embodied this: the straw hats and gloves for girls, mentioned at the outset, and the top hats and stiff suits of independent schools’ formal boys’ wear. Utopian child-centred liberal educationalists in the 1920s and 1930s argued hard for children’s freedom and self-determination even as they drove forward their own adult theorizations informed by new theories from psychology, sociology, and sexology. Elizabeth Ewing characterized interwar children’s clothes as marked by “greater freedoms” in her 1977 overview *History of Children’s Costume*. These included changes prompted by anxiety about freedom as an abstract social value. “There was a widespread fear,” she observed, “among thoughtful and progressive parents that children would suffer from repressions, inhibitions, and complexes if thwarted by severe discipline in their early years” (140–41). Ewing rightly notes that this led to a vogue for experimental schools; she characterizes these as being necessarily anti-uniform.

The concept of anti-uniform is based on antithesis. As a relational term, it is always in dialogue with its dialectical opposite. Jane Tynan and Lisa Godson’s 2019 conceptualization of uniform offers a useful model that works equally well when the uniform is undress: it is a ‘device for institutional socialization’ where ‘the individual materially takes on the broader corporate character of the institution’ (65). For children’s interwar institutions whose core premise was freedom, nudism’s oppositional character—the very antithesis of mainstream dressed norms—performed important symbolic work. Social nakedness was the embodiment of flouted sartorial and social restrictions. Its repeat appearance across experimental progressive schools of the period thus reproduces the wider claims made for school uniforms. Kate Stephenson states, in her 2021 history, that the “type of identity projected by an establishment is replicated and reinforced by the design of the uniform worn.” Uniforms may serve practical purposes, but they are also “consistently tied to the existing and idealized identities of a school population.” Historically, “reinforcement of these idealized identities through clothing control and the imitation and emulation of the identity of other institutions were the most important driving factors” (1). As will be shown, these conceptualizations equally apply in non-uniform conditions.
The following section examines nudism’s interwar emergence in England and its manifestations in schools of the period. I pay particular attention to undress in Priory Gate and Beacon Hill as two exemplars within the wider growth of the modern school form. Interrelated features on children’s clothes and educational methods in nudist publications are also evaluated, especially in relation to their photographic visualization. The final section summarizes how children’s undress was operationalized across these various interwar contexts; it appraises its purpose and maps its post–Second World War decline.

The First Nudist School in England

Nudism first emerged in England as a utopian social movement with formal membership clubs in the early 1920s. Its hesitant beginnings can be mapped through the letters’ pages of alternative health magazines and periodicals sympathetic to the wider European youth movement where, typically, English visitors to the longer established and more populous camps in Germany wrote up their experiences. German-language treatises on nudism were translated into English in the mid-1920s, and the first English-language book-length studies appeared at the end of the decade (Pollen, Nudism in a Cold Climate). Among the Nudists (1931), by Frances and Mason Merrill, was an early contribution, authored by two American visitors to German nudist camps who offered an international survey. England merited less than a page; as the authors summarized: “Even England, the European stronghold of Puritanism, is being invaded. There is Mr. Faithful’s [sic] Priory Gate School in Norfolk, a co-educational school where small children and adolescents are all nude” (192).

It is notable that schooling was aligned with nudism in England at its outset. The school to which the Merrills refer was established in 1919 by Major Theodore James Faithfull (1885–1973), a veterinary surgeon who had served in the First World War. In a retrospective account of the school’s origins, he explained that in 1919 he found himself, with his wife and four children, in Sudbury, Suffolk. They first “made use of the educational establishments of the town, but the forced work, the thrashings and other punishments, made us determined to find something better.” He and his wife consequently started their own school, with “the support of the parents of four other children” (Faithfull). An early promotional brochure noted that the school followed the Parents’ National Educational Union system, which provided resources to support home-schoolers (“The Priory Gate”).

While its arrangements followed some of the traditional models for small-scale fee-paying independent English rural boarding schools of the period, Priory Gate was co-educational at a time when this was unconventional. Its brochure mentioned its “modern” qualities, including “new psychological teaching,” which was said to enjoy “special success in the case of backward, nervous or highly strung children.” There was no public mention of nudism. In fact, the brochure’s list of clothing requirements included formalities such as a “Sunday suit” for boys and a “Sunday hat” for girls as well as outfits to keep children
warm in all weathers (overcoats, mackintoshes, and boots) especially given the school’s location in a draughty historic house (dressing gowns and slippers). School hats and badges could be purchased locally ("The Priory Gate").

In 1923, the school expanded to larger premises at Walsham Hall, Walsham-Le-Willows, Suffolk. By 1925, Faithfull was developing a national profile as a lecturer on "analytic psychology" and was publishing articles on his educational theories in health magazines, including in Leben und Sonne (Life and Sun), the German nudist monthly. In these, he elaborated on his school’s developing practices in sex education, noting that “no question has been considered out of place and no piece of information honestly asked has been dishonestly answered.” Candid discussions about bodily matters were combined with the pupils’ communal nudity. Gymnastics and physical culture classes were taught with the minimum of clothing to aid free movement; from this, Faithfull said, the children “naturally found it most satisfactory from the beginning to discard it altogether.” When the school moved to Walsham, it acquired a swimming pool and a walled garden, which was used for joint staff and student sunbathing. Mixed bathing was introduced in the school bathroom, extended to the pool, and was then applied to having children pose for one another as nude models in art classes.

It was this last innovation that was to bring attention to Priory Gate; more than two dozen articles appeared on the subject in the national press between 1925 and 1926, many illustrated with photographs of nude children from what was described as a "School of the Nude," with pupils styled as “Modern ‘Babes in the Wood.’” In these articles, Faithfull’s sister described how the school had attracted “considerable criticism” when neighbours saw children naked in the woods and fields of Sudbury; nonetheless, the school had expanded—to about thirty mixed pupils from ages six to sixteen—and so had its nude practices. When the children’s nude drawings were exhibited in Westminster, London, the Times said they offered “a sensible approach to certain awkward questions” (“Drawings by Children”). Others were sceptical: “If this was the garden of Eden—or even a South Sea island—it might not matter,” said a reporter in the Star. He continued: “But in Suffolk? Well, I have my doubts.” In the articles, outside authorities were enlisted for comment, with actor Sybil Thorndike (1882–1976) saying, “I do not think there is anything very shocking, if people are not self-conscious about it. It is the self-consciousness that matters.” The social worker Wynn Nevinson, positioned in the opposite corner, complained that it was “somewhat un-English” (“The Age of Innocence”). Each of these statements encapsulates how nudism was understood in England in the period: as a practice associated with others, whether in myth, in antiquity, or on distant shores; as a practice associated with indecency and therefore morally suspect; and as a practice associated with new psychological thinking, in Thorndike’s comment about “self-consciousness.”

Faithfull’s ideas were part of an emerging body of sexology in England, most prominently associated with Havelock Ellis (1859–1939). The sixth volume of Ellis’s Studies in the Psychology of Sex (1910) outlined a set of corrective principles about the importance of raising children without self-consciousness about
nudity. Faithfull put these into pedagogic practice at Priory Gate. Ellis wrote, for example, “When familiarity with the naked body of the other sex is gained openly and with no consciousness of indecorum, in the course of work and of play, in exercise or gymnastics, in running or in bathing, from a child’s earliest years, no unwholesome results accompany the knowledge of the essential facts of physical conformation thus naturally acquired. The prurience and prudery which have poisoned sexual life in the past are alike rendered impossible” (111). He also noted the support for this position by “educationalists who are equally alive to sanitary and sexual considerations,” and he observed that teachers “now approve of customs which, a few years ago, would have been hastily dismissed as ‘indecent’” (106).

It was not the case, however, that Faithfull’s methods were warmly approved of by contemporary teachers; they were considered highly controversial. A coldly furious letter of resignation by a member of his staff in the summer of 1926 stated, “To tell the truth about the school is to damn it in the eyes of any right minded person. I really do think the school is such . . . as no sane minded educationist could possibly uphold.”12 Between 1927 and 1928, by the time the school moved to Wereham, Norfolk, formal accusations of indecency had been levied against Faithfull.13 In the same years, however, profoundly positive teaching experiences were had at the school by Cambridge graduate John Bowlby (1909–90), whose time at Priory Gate underpinned his theory of attachment in child relations and his ensuing position at the forefront of twentieth-century British psychology.14

In the mid-1920s, Dorothy Revel (1890–1981) was recruited to Priory Gate. A graduate of Newnham College, Cambridge, and a trained teacher, Revel had already taught at Bedales, Hampshire, England’s most famous co-educational boarding school, and she had implemented child-led organizational approaches when she was the head teacher of a council-run village school.15 There she removed corporal punishment at a time when the disciplinary use of the cane was the norm (Revel, “Village Education”). In her unpublished autobiography, Revel recalled that she was originally sceptical about Priory Gate’s “queer” methods.16 By 1928, however, Revel used the institution as a model for “the School of the Future,” in her book Cheiron’s Cave, with nudity a core part of its new psychology-informed pedagogic program.

Revel’s method applied ideas from the influential theory of recapitulation by G. Stanley Hall (1846–1924), in use in Priory Gate and radical outdoor youth organizations in England (Edgell; Pollen, The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift). Hall argued—in a now discredited theory—that children progress to adulthood aligned with the linear development of culture, which he understood to progress through phases from primitive to sophisticated. This model positioned the white urban Westerner as the pinnacle of cultural achievement, and coeval non-industrialized non-Western others in a state of prehistoric underdevelopment. It was riddled with the racist assumptions of the period, but it informed widely held parallels made between children and the imagined category of international others that Hall called “savages.”
For child-centred educationalists arguing for the merits of children’s wild play in nature, recapitulation offered a set of “evolutionary stages” for a child to work through to become an accomplished adult. The theories also provided justification for children’s nudity. Revel’s book depicted Priory Gate children swimming naked in a river as a form of natural health and undertaking nude outdoor “hardihood” exercises in winter. Amid a wider set of primitivist practices promoting adventurousness and resilience, such as camping, hiking, and handicraft—including weaving the homespun fabric for their own rustic school uniform when temperatures or circumstances required it—Revel’s naked child was both a product of ancient nature and a modern sophisticate, conversant in matters of conception and sex. By the end of the 1920s, Revel had married and moved on from Priory Gate. The school foundered financially by 1930, and Faithfull turned his energies to professional psychotherapy.

Children in Nudist Cultures of the 1930s

English nudist cultures developed a higher public profile in the 1930s, achieving some fashionability and respectability. By 1931, the term “nudism” had entered the Oxford English Dictionary. In 1932, a letter to the Times, titled “Sunbathing,” signed by twenty-two eminent names across the arts, education, science, and medicine, argued that those who wished to expose their bodies to the sun and the air have “found it necessary to secrete themselves in the woods round London in order to avoid the attention of the public, the Press, their friends, and their neighbours. This need for secrecy is an iniquitous state of affairs!” (Badley et al. 10). The signatories observed that children could be treated with sunlight for health reasons—in acknowledgement of the emerging heliotherapy treatments for rickets and tuberculosis—but that adults were denied the same benefits. By 1933, the first book-length national survey, Nudism in England, was authored by Reverend Norwood, an Anglican vicar, alongside two new magazines. Gymnos and Sun Bathing Review both launched in 1933; both considered children centrally in their discussions and depictions. 17

Gymnos underscored nudism’s preoccupation with clothes by mentioning them in the first line of its first issue: “Our clothes lie behind us,” the evangelical editors pronounced, “We are facing the light, naked and unashamed. In the garb of Nature we address you” (“What We Stand For” 3). Aligned with the European nudist movement and using the term “gymnosophy” to describe its activities—a term uniting Greek words for nudity and wisdom—the illustrated magazine was an internationally-minded endeavour that featured ecstatic poetry and scholarly articles on psychology (some authored by Faithfull) alongside book reviews (including one of Revel’s Cheiron’s Cave). The September 1933 issue featured a five-page “Special Children’s Supplement,” including an article, “Gymnosophy and the Child.” This argued that children were nudism’s future guarantors: “If sometimes we have been told that our movement is a transitory one that will die with us, here is a refutation! Not words but FACT. Children growing to manhood and womanhood in such a life will have instinctive in them the ideals, that
are already ours, for a healthier, and more individual and creative life” (“Gymnosophy and the Child” 17).

The issue included monochrome photographs of naked prepubescent children in the rural open air, sometimes with pets or farm animals, and sometimes in groups; this illustrated the fact that “children have been welcome and cherished visitors to our camps,” but the photographs also demonstrated practices in nudist schools (“Gymnosophy and the Child” 13). Some institutions were left unnamed—a marker of their continuing controversy—but others proudly declared themselves, detailing their naked programmes and philosophies. At Pinehurst School in Heathfield, Surrey, for example, nudism was a norm: “During the summer and when the weather is favourable the children, of course, live and work out of doors. Sun-bathing, with its health-giving properties, plays an important part in the daily routine of these happy youngsters. Freedom from clothing appeals to their young minds and they thoroughly enjoy the daily sunbath” (Marin 17). Rocklands School, Hastings, was also featured. “We do not call Rocklands a Sunbathing School in spite of the photograph accompanying this article, taken three years ago,” its head explained. “We take clothes off just as we take all other repressions off and for no other reason.” The photograph showed five nude children playing with sheaves of grass in a field. He qualified this, saying, “We have not taken any photographs for three years because of the tendency it would rouse towards exhibitionism, and we only want our children to be absolutely free and happy in the mind” (Whittaker-Swinton 15).

By contrast with Rocklands’ hesitancy about photography in the promotion of nudism, *Sun Bathing Review*, launched in the spring of 1933, made much of its visual qualities, announcing on its covers that it was “copiously illustrated.” The magazine employed an honorary art editor, photographer Bertram Park (1883–1972), whose nudes had been widely published in book form and whose portrait studio was frequented by aristocrats and royalty. The early magazine covers featured a modernist woodcut by artist Robert Gibbings (1889–1958) showing a family group of man, woman, youth, and child at a stylized water’s edge, and the first issue set the tone for the centrality of the child. Children appeared on almost every page. Opening advertisements included one for Pinehurst School, whose “light and air bathing” was illustrated by ten naked children on a country gate. The opening full-page photograph, “Sun Worshippers at Sun Lodge,” showed a dozen young women, dressed in white cotton “slips” (bras-sieres and knickers), holding aloft a child dressed only in knickers. The opening article “Wake Up England!” (3–4) urged readers to “take action now for the benefit of our children.”

*Sun Bathing Review* took a more moderate line than *Gymnos* in that it welcomed sunbathing in slips as well as fully undressed nudism. Nonetheless, children’s naked bodies illustrated articles, such as “Sun-Bathing in Germany,” where “bleached” English boys were compared negatively to “bronzed” Germans (Barford 12). *Sun Bathing Review*’s first issue also discussed “Clothes and the Growing Girl.” Mary G. Cardwell, MD, represented the conventional view of the
necessities of modesty for female reputations: “An inadequately clad girl, mixing with boys and men in the unrestrained way of modern times, is living in the midst of grave peril” (“Clothes and the Growing Girl,” 14). As Sun Bathing Review advocated lighter clothing for children and adults, it called on Dr. Kathleen Vaughan for a riposte in the next issue, which reached some fifty thousand readers, and also included a feature on “Sun and Air Bathing Schools.”

As a physician interested in active birth and the use of sunlight for bone health, Vaughan (22) argued that, in girls’ clothes, “[t]here must be no over-clothing and wrapping up, no black stockings—but short skirts and no stockings.” She lamented that even “such a wonderful movement as the Girl Guides is entirely spoilt by its dreadful Victorian clothing . . . a cross between the Salvation Army and the policewoman!” Boys, too, must dispense with “collars, ties, plus fours, waistcoats, and flannel shirts” in a juvenile-scaled echo of the contemporaneous campaigns of the Men’s Dress Reform Party (Bourke; Burman; Pollen “Sartorial Rebirth”), which was also a major contributor to nudist literature. These calls were repeatedly illustrated in the magazine, where heavily dressed children, depicted indoors, embodied the repressed and smothered. Children who were naked, or in slips, playing outdoors signified the healthy and the free.

Nudist Children and Progressive Pedagogy

This tenet—that nude children were liberated children—also underscored the principles of several progressive schools, many of whom featured in Sun Bathing Review. Beacon Hill School, established in Sussex in 1927, was one of the highest profile, owing to the status of its founder-leaders: philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and his wife, Dora Russell (née Black; 1894–1986), feminist campaigner and secretary of the World League for Sexual Reform (Gorham). Both developed their ideas about child education in print as well as in practice. Bertrand’s 1929 Marriage and Morals, for example, covered sex education for children, drawing on observations gleaned from his offspring and at his school, including the importance of nakedness. He argued, for example, “It is good for children to see each other and their parents naked whenever it so happens naturally.” He noted that around the age of three, a child may become interested in bodily differences and comparisons, “but this period is soon over, and after this he takes no more interest in nudity than in clothes” (72).

Dora Russell, in her 1932 book In Defence of Children, lambasted the current education system, complaining that “the school of to-day” is “class-ridden, biased by nationalism and ruled by mediaeval standards of virtue and thought. It prepares people for a world that is past” (262). Experimental schools could redress the balance, but she felt only the truly radical of these tackled big issues: “politics, sex teaching, freedom for disorder, destructiveness, rudeness.” She noted that “[s]uch a school must transgress the decorum of the class on which it depends.’ (246) These transgressions included formalities of dress.
The Modern Schools Handbook (Blewitt) of 1934 provided a first “representative selection” of twenty-one British examples of what the editor called “progressive private schools.” The qualities that united them were “firstly, the rejection of some of the ideals of the conventional Public School system, secondly, the insistence on the needs of the individual child, and, lastly, a belief in a changing world” (Blewitt, “Editor’s Foreword” 9). The introduction noted that many schools were influenced by modern ideas, including in dress (Williams-Ellis 23). Children’s clothing figured in several of the essays, written by school heads, but its discussion ranged from claims to practicality—as “healthful and suitable for school requirements” with concessions to “expression of personal taste” (at Bedales, Hampshire)—to more hierarchical uniform systems where colour and insignia were used to demonstrate achievement and seniority (at Abbotsholme, Derbyshire).20

No school in the 1934 survey went as far as Beacon Hill in dress. As Dora Russell later described it in her autobiography, its boys and girls—only about a dozen to start, from ages two to twelve—were given “freedom to run about without clothes,” and teachers “were addressed by their first names not as authority figures.” These two principles “caused most of the hostility and criticism of the school. . . . Stories went about that adults in the school were also nude; this was totally false.” The contemporary press made mock of the enterprise, calling it the “Go as You Please School.” Visitors came every weekend to see what the fuss was about (Tamarisk Tree 17, 27, 47).21 Its unorthodox reputation did the school no harm, however, as well-known intellectuals placed their children in its care, from political campaigners Sylvia Pankhurst (1882–1960) and Clifford Allen (1889–1939) to modernist writers David Garnett (1892–1981) and Waldo Frank (1889–1967). Following the breakdown of her marriage, Dora ran the school singlehandedly from the early 1930s to its closure, on financial grounds, in 1943. Across its existence, it shared premises and staff with other sunbathing schools, including Fortis Green, Hampstead, and Brickwall Northiam, Sussex. Each featured in nudist magazines.22

In its final years, Dora wrote for Sun Bathing Review about Beacon Hill’s nudist principles, arguing that children’s clothes were “indignities imposed by arbitrary adult rule.” She promoted removing clothes for not only physical reasons, citing benefits to children’s muscles “when the body is free of the weight of clothes,” but also psychological benefits of “peace and contentment” for “children who are inclined to be strung up and nervous.” She noted that stripping off was “never enforced” as the school is a “democracy” that gives children a “share in the organization” (“Our Children’s Health” 4–5). For many progressive schools, self-governance by children and “non-assertion by adults,” in the example of Brickwall Northiam, Sussex, was “the cardinal principle.” Children could thus go about “wearing anything or nothing, as they wish” (“Brickwall” 50). Dora also reminded nudists: “Beacon Hill School was not established . . . principally to do propaganda for sun-bathing” (“Our Children’s Health” 4).
Children as Natural Nudists?

The 1920s and 1930s were a period when dress came under intense scrutiny as part of a post–First World War shift in cultural attitudes to formality as well as emerging evidence of the health benefits of exposing the body to sun and air, leading to new fashions for the complete rejection of clothes. These matters were extended to children partly as a corollary of what was seen to benefit adults, but they also overlapped because social nudism as a movement, as opposed to sexual nudity, was intended to be a reputable family affair. Children’s nakedness fit with the broader utopian ambitions of nudism in interwar England, which considered aspects of modern civilization to be corrupting and overly sophisticated, even as the members were ambivalent modernizers (Barcan “Regaining”). There was a sense of paradise lost and a yearning to return to the authentic, embodied in concepts of nature. These ideas mapped well onto enduring Romantic ideas of childhood as a garden and state of innocence. Organizations promoting the cause considered children to be “natural nudists” (“Children and the Sun Bathing Movement” 44). Dressed in their birthday suits, they were imagined to be nearer to the beginnings of life and unsullied by culture. As a Sun Bathing Review editorial put it: “They are possessed of an entirely different conception of the word ‘naked.’ Nakedness to them is a perfectly natural thing, like swimming and running and climbing trees; in fact, something to be loved because of the pleasure and happiness it brings” (“Children, Open Air and Sunlight” 41).

These kinds of “natural” attitudes reinforce, however, that childhood is culturally produced. Attitudes to children are historically specific, and “the child” operates as an ideological repository for the projections of adult others. This was certainly how children figured in the early years of the nudist movement in England; they operated as promotional tools for an experiment that was in its own infancy. Curator and fashion historian James Laver (1899–1975), for example, writing in Sun Bathing Review, described children as “the best advocates of the modern movement” (2–3). Children depicted in nudist publications were not only the offspring of nudist families, demonstrating health and fitness as they danced, played, and posed in gymnastic attitudes and in group games—they also served as authenticators and sanctifiers of nudism’s core non-sexual principles. This explains their abundant appearance on the covers and inside pages of nudist magazines.

In 1946, a Sun Bathing Review reader counted thirty-six images of children in the previous issue, outnumbering adults four to one; the reader complained that this did not represent their distribution in nudist clubs. The editor responded that this was partly because there was a shortage of quality photographs of adults. Club members did not always want to be depicted. Children’s opinions about being pictured, it seemed, were not taken into account. The editor also explained their principal purifying function (“Letter File” 20): “The preponderance of child studies is due mainly to the fact that we are anxious to encourage the family aspect of sun bathing.”
Nudist camps may have been safe, family-based, and therefore non-sexual sites, according to members, but they were, at the same time, spaces for sexual re-education. Norman Haïre (1892–1952), of the World League of Sexual Reform, declared that exhibitionists and “Peeping Toms” should be sentenced to compulsory attendance at nudist camps instead of going to prison, such was their perceived corrective powers (“Sex and Nudism” 124). While this proposition never came to pass—much to the relief of club members—there was little acknowledgement in early nudist literature that sites might also be locations for sexual exploitation. Safeguarding in a twenty-first-century sense was wholly absent, and some practices seem astonishing to twenty-first-century eyes, such as children’s physique competitions, where photographs of nude adolescents were published in magazines and judged for prizes.

The nude’s centrality to art enabled the circulation and promotion of naked photographs of children in nudist and art magazines alike in the 1930s. Nudism’s claims to health were authorized by the doctors and psychiatrists among its number, and new freedoms in fashion were transferred to children by their promoters. Dissenting voices inevitably rarely appeared among those with camps, schools, or magazines to promote. An interesting exception is John Carl Flügel (1884–1955), who wrote enthusiastically for nudist magazines and, like his fellow fashion writer James Laver, was a practising nudist (Carter; Pollen “Utopian Bodies”). In The Psychology of Clothes, Flügel concluded that nakedness would be an inevitable evolutionary fashion outcome but not before considering psychoanalysts’ critical perspectives on the advisability of exposing children to the genitals of exhibitionist adults and of raising children to regard nudism as the norm in a society where it was a marginal adult practice (200).

Where, we might ask, is the child’s perspective in these discussions? Depictions of naked children circulated in the early nudist press without any acknowledgement of children’s vulnerability or of their ability to provide consent. Children are always spoken on behalf of, even by child-centred educationalists at their most radical. Dora Russell argued, “Children, like women and the proletariat, are an oppressed class” (In Defence of Children 275), but still she rarely included their voices in her texts. Methodologically, this is a broader issue with locating the child in history. As the editors of the essay collection Children’s Voices from the Past note, “Children are, inherently, less likely to be empowered to freely create the kinds of sources that historians might later access in their research” (Musgrove et al 11) This was the case in conditions characterized by freedom, as documented in Left Out, Kimberley Reynolds’s historical analysis of radical publishing for children, which located few child-authored accounts.

There are virtually no written or photographic contributions by children in nudist magazines saying or showing how they felt about undress, although there is some visual evidence of children’s engagement with nudist cultures as readers and photographers, browsing pages of the magazine, for example, or looking through a camera’s lens. Their voices are sometimes represented briefly in articles written by parents demonstrating the success of their nudist families.
Former pupils of Beacon Hill were called for positive testimonial in Dora Russell’s autobiography (*Tamarisk Tree* 196–97), although they did not speak of nudism; others recorded positive memories in later oral histories. Fond memories of nude schooling at Priory Gate appear in the autobiographical writing of former pupil and later acclaimed travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor (1915–2011), with more mixed accounts provided by his biographer.

### The Decline and Afterlife of Nudist Schools

Progressive schools did not exist to promote nudist cultures, nor was the opposite the case, but the interwar traffic between the two was productive for their shared legitimation. Nudists and educational iconoclasts were equally invested in the naked child as a symbol to naturalize and purify an unfamiliar practice and ensure the innocence of behaviour that might otherwise be deemed risky and untested. The interwar period saw the joint rise of the nudist movement and the progressive school in England, but each took on new directions after the Second World War. Many independent schools, especially those with minuscule student numbers and precarious finances, did not survive the conflict, but historians of progressive education, such as R. J. W. Selleck, have argued that interwar experiments informed the 1940s’ and 1950s’ reconfigurations of the primary school, even if the “sharpness” (156) of some of their challenges to orthodoxy were blunted by their mainstream incorporation. Others saw the popularity of liberal educators in the 1960s as the true inheritance of interwar innovations (Brooks). Longer-standing larger-scale independent progressive schools, from Bedales to the most famous of the “Go as You Please” schools of the interwar boom—Summerhill, established in Dorset in 1923 by A. S. Neill (1883–1973)—still carry on cultures of informality in dress and discipline in the twenty-first century.

Nudism’s twentieth-century golden age peaked at the end of the 1930s. Camps and membership numbers were severely dented by the new priorities of the Second World War, and while the movement re-established itself in peacetime, those who drove it forward carved out a new identity that attempted to make nudism ordinary. Aspects associated with intellectual avant-gardes and political progressives were too arcane for a movement aiming for mainstream recognition. Nudist periodicals that had been the principal exponents of imagery of nudist children continued, but they adopted new sexual and commercial visual models; *Sun Bathing Review* looked more like a pin-up magazine by the 1950s. Philosopher, psychiatrist, and educationalist contributors consequently fell away.

The nudist curriculum of the English progressive school, then, was an interwar anomaly, curiosity, and controversy. For a brief time, and on a small scale, however, the undressed child functioned as a potent visualization of everything perceived to be enlightened about advanced schooling and modern dressing, psychological experiment, new health, and bodily liberation. In its nude uniform,
the progressive school child symbolized the antithesis of repression, orthodoxy, and convention.

**Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Dr Hannah Field and Professor Kiera Vaclavik for their invitation to develop this research for their “Not Only Dressed but Dressing: Clothing, Childhood, Creativity” workshop at Musée du Textile et de la Mode, Cholet, France in 2022 (Arts and Humanities Research Council Research Networking grant AH/V001787/1) and the Leverhulme Trust for their award of a Philip Leverhulme Prize, which provided the research time to complete the article.

**Notes**

1. The main schools discussed in the article are Brickwall Northiam, Sussex, and Bedales, Hampshire.

2. For the meaning of “modern” schools in the period, see The Modern Schools Handbook (Blewitt). For histories of “progressive” schools, see Selleck. Laura Tisdall examines how the terms progressive and child-centred have been used to describe schools with very different curricula. She distinguishes “utopian” progressives (informed by psychoanalysis, promoting self-governance) from “non-utopian” progressives (child-centred but adult-led; Progressive Education? 1–5). The schools in this article are “utopian” in this schema.

3. Nudism as an organized movement and a formal philosophy emerged at the end of the nineteenth century in Germany where it was called Nacktkultur or Freikörperkultur; see Ross. Nudism became formalized as a movement in England in the 1920s, but late nineteenth-century “sunbathing” pioneers can be found in intellectual and experimental circles, such as those that formed around the vegetarian and socialist poet Edward Carpenter (1844–1929). Early twentieth-century English names for the social movement include nudism and gymnosophy. Naturism emerged as a term in the 1930s to indicate the practice’s difference from sexual cultures. It became British practitioners’ preferred title by the 1960s. For a history of nudism in Britain, see Annebella Pollen (Nudism). For histories elsewhere in the Anglosphere, see Brian Hoffman and Mary-Ann Shantz.

4. See, for example, Pollen (“Utopian Bodies”) and Manuel Charpy.

5. The detail can be found in Neil M. Maher (126).

6. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children offers best-practice guidance on sharing present-day photographs of children. Since 1978, the Protection of Children Act has made it an offence to possess indecent photographs of children. Indecency and nudity are not the same. Naturist photographs of children are legally presumed to be decent, unless proved otherwise, established by a 2002 amendment to the Sexual Offences Act.

7. It was originally my intention to include a small group of photographs with this article to exemplify their historic use and to demonstrate my argument, with the proviso that all were in the public domain, none were explicit, and all were over seventy years old. Due to the sensitivities of reproducing photographs of naked children, however, and given that historical conditions of consent were unclear, Jeunesse did not wish to publish them. I thank Ellie Howard, picture researcher, for securing rights and permissions for the unused images.
I proceed from the position that childhood is a cultural category with its own history, and “the child” is a symbolic device constructed by discourse as well as a human actor. See Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout and Laura Tisdall (“State of the Field” 949–64).

There is no biography of Faithfull, but he was part of the intellectual circle of early twentieth-century British sociology. See John Scott and Ray Bromley.

All quotations in this paragraph from Theodore J. Faithfull (“Sex Education”). The manuscript is annotated in pencil with publication locations and dates: Leben und Sonne (Life and Sun), July 1925; The Torchbearer, September 1925; Creative Thought, October 1925.

Faithfull was connected to the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology. See Lesley A. Hall (“Disinterested Enthusiasm”). For Faithfull’s theories on children, see Annebella Pollen (“The Most Curious”).

Jane Lancaster, handwritten letter to Faithfull, 29 August 1926, Braziers Park School of Integrative Social Research Archive, Ipsden, Oxfordshire. The crumpled state of the letter suggests it was previously screwed in a ball.

“Allegations of Indecency Made by Captain G. E. Rattigan against Major Theodore J. Faithfull, Principal of Priory Gate School, Kings Lynn,” 1927–28, Kew, National Archive, Metropolitan Police Office Records, MEPO3/931. The nature of the allegation is not known as this file is closed to the public until 2034.

John Bowlby is quoted as saying, “[W]hen I was there, I learned everything that I have known; it was the most valuable six months of my life, really,” in Suzan Van Dijken et al.

Bedales was established in Sussex in 1893 by J. H. Badley (1865–1967) as a fee-paying residential “new school” with a philosophy of “learning by doing.” It was fully co-educational by 1898. It relocated to Hampshire in 1900 and is still in operation. Badley described the school as “among the pioneers of sun bathing.” Costumes were worn for mixed bathing, but when bathing was segregated, “costumes are allowed but not encouraged” (“Sun and Air Bathing Schools” 12).


Gymnos launched as a monthly in February 1933. It ran for around a year. Sun Bathing Review launched as a quarterly in the spring of 1933 and lasted until 1959.

In 1909, Bertram Park was a co-founder of the London Salon of Photography. He ran a photographic studio with his wife Yvonne Gregory (1889–1970), and they produced books of nude photographs for art and nudist markets.

Kathleen Vaughan was an obstetrician whose work in India highlighted bone problems caused by lack of sunlight. Sun Bathing Review claimed fifty thousand readers in the summer of 1933 (Sun Bathing Review, Summer 1933, p. 13).

Abbotsholme was established in 1889 by Cecil Reddie (1858–1932) as a liberal fee-paying boarding school for boys from age ten. Reddie rejected the top hat and Eton collars of traditional boys’ school uniforms in favour of soft Norfolk suits. The school continues today.

Russell’s second volume of autobiography includes an undated and uncredited photograph of nude pre-pubescent children in modern dance poses on the lawn at Abbotsholme.
Telegraph House, the school’s first location. An unnamed female teacher, presumed to be Russell, accompanies them, dressed in a brassiere and shorts.

22. Brickwall Northiam was the subject of an illustrated feature in *Sun Bathing Review*, Summer 1937, p. 50. Fortis Green School was a co-educational ‘open-air’ school for children from age two in North London, led by nursery teacher and educationalist Beatrix Tudor-Hart (1903–79). Beatrix was sister-in-law of the Austrian émigré photographer Edith Tudor-Hart (1908–73) who regularly photographed for nudist magazines, including the children at Fortis Green School in *Sun Bathing Review*, Winter 1939, p. 118–19. It is notable that while many schools with nudist ideals were located in rural places, affording the benefits of nature perceived to be essential to a child’s health and development, nudism’s claims to nature were also enacted in urban schools.

23. Emphasis in original. While the longer history of depicting the child as the embodiment of innocence is beyond the scope of this article, interwar nudist photographs continued a sentimental and romantic tradition established centuries earlier; for a detailed account, see Higonnet, 1998.

24. The family aspect of nudism as a protection against prurience was not only demonstrated through pictorial selection in magazines. Interwar nudist club membership was also managed to ensure that single men—always the most enthusiastic of recruits—were offset by equal numbers of women, married couples, and family groups. The underlying assumption, sometimes made explicit in nudist literature, was that men might seek sexual pleasure in nudist clubs. See Pollen, *Nudism in a Cold Climate* (75).

25. Australian-born Norman Haire (1892–1952) was a prominent sexologist in interwar Britain. His words were quoted in an article, “Sex and Nudism” (124), summarizing a meeting of the Sex Education Society on 14 November 1938.

26. Physique photography, demonstrating ideal bodies, especially of men, was a staple of early twentieth-century health magazines. The practice continued into nudist publications in the 1930s. The Sun Bathing Society, the organization behind *Sun Bathing Review*, organized children’s physique competitions and published the results.

27. Art publications offered nude photographs by post, ostensibly for life drawing, including “child studies.” See advertisements, for example, in most issues of *The Artist* in the 1930s.

28. See, for example, a photograph of three young children looking through a lens of a camera on a tripod: uncredited photographer, untitled illustration to an article by the editor (“Children, Open Air and Sunlight” 41).

29. For occasional examples of children’s perspectives, see “How Did Your Family Take to Sun Bathing?” (102). Cash and subscriptions were offered for such essays; prompts included “What did your children say about it?” The experiences of young nudist children Peter, Adrian and Yolanda, and Anthony and Barry, were shared in an article written by their parents (“In Their Hands”).

30. In 2013, oral historian Hari Jonkers recorded an interview with Margaret Jacobson, born in 1929, who attended Beacon Hill from 1936–37, and who noted the very positive impact the school had on her life. She recalled “nakedness” as “one of the freedoms” of Beacon Hill and laughingly told a story that encapsulated the school’s lack of convention. A church minister called at the door: “it was opened by a naked girl, because one of the big things was to not wear clothes when possible, and the, erm, the clergyman who knocked on the door said, ‘Good God!’ and the little naked girl said, ‘There is no God.’” Margaret Jacobson, Planned Environment Therapy Trust Archive, PET 2014.032. With thanks to Jonkers, Craig Fees and Gareth Benyon for bringing this to my attention.
31. Patrick Leigh Fermor wrote: “English schools, once they depart from the conventional track, are oases of strangeness and comedy” (4). He appreciated the bearded and bangle-wearing school staff and fellow students in jerkins and sandals: “The nature worshipping eurythmics in a barn and the country dances in which the Major led both staff and children, were a shade bewildering at first, because everybody was naked” (4). A 2012 biography cites a 1987 letter to Fermor from a former fellow pupil at Priory Gate, Deryck Winbolt-Lewis, who remembered the experience less affectionately. He characterized the school as a “crazy establishment” and Faithfull as a man with “crackpot” interests (Cooper 18). Winbolt-Lewis recalled having to steal food on an unorthodox camping trip where the children were “duly starved” (Cooper 18). The biography also notes that Fermor’s mother had heard a rumour that Faithfull personally bathed and towelled older girls in the school (Cooper 18).


33. For nudism in Britain post–Second World War, see Pollen (Nudism in a Cold Climate chaps. 2 and 3).

Annebella Pollen


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