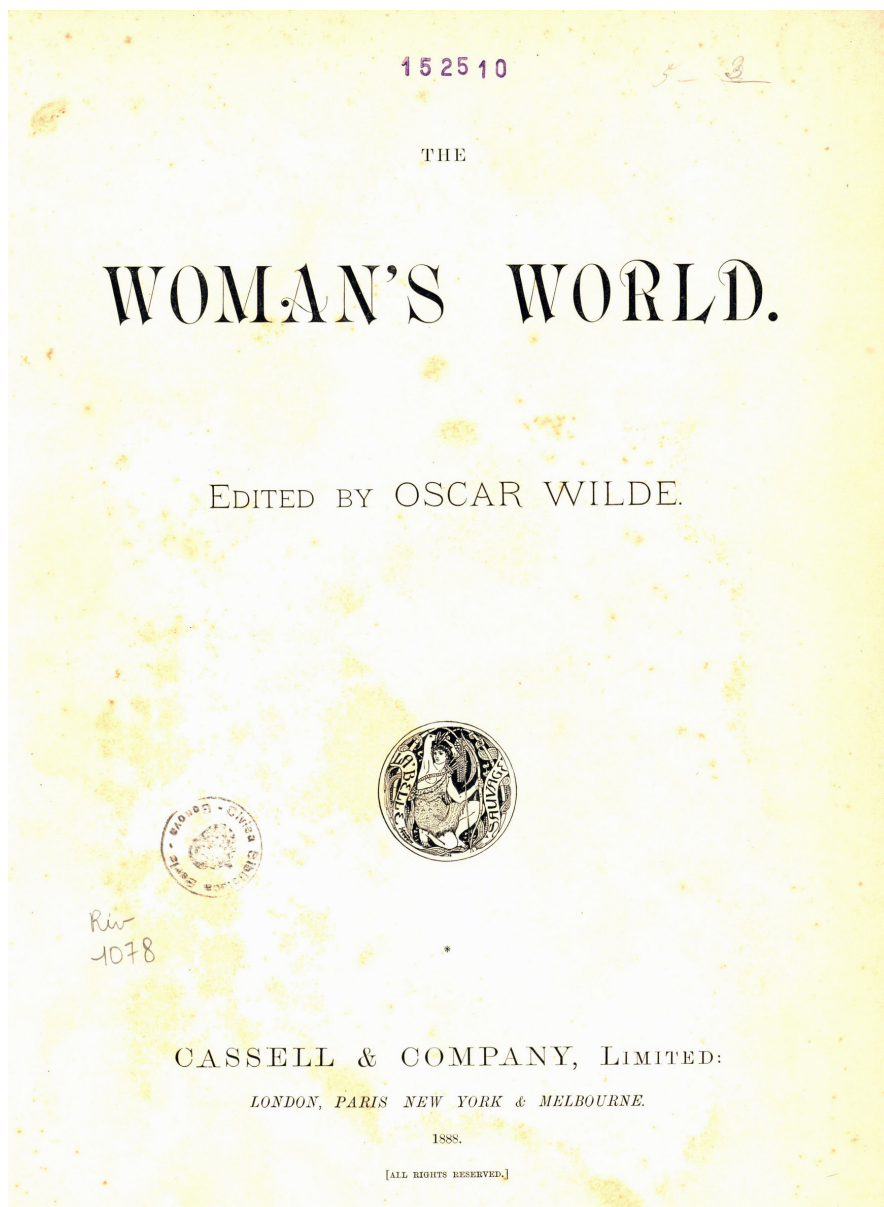


Children's Dress in the Century

Constance Wilde

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Proponiamo la lettura di un articolo integrale di Constance Wilde (1859-1898) scrittrice e giornalista inglese, tratto da un numero della rivista The Woman's World. La rivista, nel biennio in cui uscì l'articolo, era diretta da Oscar Wilde, marito di Constance. Il contributo, qui interamente riportato con il suo corredo iconografico originale, è dedicato all'abbigliamento e alla moda infantile del XIX secolo. Vi si ritroverà, oltre ad una prosa di rara eleganza, uno sguardo acuto e ragionato sui cambiamenti che hanno interessato l'abbigliamento infantile nell'arco di circa un secolo. Chi ha scritto l'articolo passa in rassegna alcuni elementi o accessori specifici, come il fiocco, i pantaloni alla zuava, l'uso di copricapi ma si sofferma anche sulla relazione fra la moda infantile e la vita e la salute dei bambini, nonché sul rapporto fra abbigliamento adulto e infantile. Si noti il riferimento alla grande illustrazione inglese per bambini, che negli stessi anni sta fondando la forma e la grammatica del linguaggio progettuale e iconografico del picture book per bambini. I coniugi Wilde condividevano le campagne della Rational Dress Society contro la costrizione di accessori come corsetti o decorazioni scomode nell'abbigliamento, a favore di un abbigliamento elegante in quanto razionale, semplice e rispettoso della forma del corpo di chi lo indossa. Altro dato moderno è l'attenzione per la necessità di movimento dei bambini e per la loro salute, nonché il riferimento ad abbigliamento che oggi si chiamerebbe unisex e che non distingue dunque nettamente per genere i bambini e le bambine ma sia in primo luogo rispettoso del corpo bambino e delle sue esigenze in termini di libertà di movimento e gioco, temperatura e salute.



Costance Wilde, "Children's Dress in the Century," in *The Woman's World*, ed. Oscar Wilde (London [et al.]: Cassel & C., 1888), 413-7¹

The dress of children has undergone such a thorough change since the beginning of this century, that I think it cannot be otherwise than interesting to glance back through the fashions worn by children in the last eighty years. For this change is not a change of form only, in which women's dress has shared, but a change of feeling, which has had so far but little influence in altering our women's dress, in spite of the efforts of artists and dress reformers.



1800 (ADAPTED TO MODERN REQUIREMENTS).

The greater number of children are undoubtedly dressed more simply, more rationally, more like human sentient beings, less like wooden dolls or dummies to wear the freaks of fancy dictated by dressmakers. I hope that there are now few women who dress their babies in low-necked and short-sleeved frocks in the winter, under the impression that they look pretty, taking no note of the little stone-cold hands and red arms. At the beginning of this century the dress English women possessed at least one merit, that of simplicity — simplicity of material, simplicity of form, simplicity of colouring. All these three things combined to render it a most charming costume, exquisite to look upon, inspiring for an artist to paint. And the children's dress was equally simple, giving us the pretty costumes of which Kate Greenaway has made such a charming study, and which she has so sweetly reproduced in her almanacks and in her books for children. There is no doubt that the costume is at once light and graceful, the only drawback being that it is quite unsuited for our winter, for what rationale mind will not see how very dangerous are our rains, our fogs, and our treacherous winds to the pretty bare necks and arms and lightly clothes limbs? As far back as 1792, Doctor Vaughan, of Rochester, tried to introduce wool for under-clothing, and wrote pamphlets on the subject; but, I am afraid, with little effect, and a child was dressed in linen and fine cambric, with not much regard to warmth or comfort. About 1810, an attempt was made to introduce Turkish trousers for little girls — a very pretty costume, and one that I should like to see carried out now in proper materials. The little girl in the illustration wears worked cambric trousers, a short tunic coat, full-arched collar, and white kid gloves and slippers. Her hair is described as "a tufted crop," and I cannot imagine anything prettier than is the whole costume. It would be a sensible and becoming dress in other light wool or thin silk, with woollen combinations worn underneath it; of course worked cambric was then the fashion, and in the evening nothing but the very thinnest materials were worn. Little boys are never as much tormented as little girls in the way of costume, in those days they wore a very simple dress, either a very short-waisted vest with trousers buttoned up over it, or what is called

1. Genova, Biblioteca Civica Berio, collocazione Riv.1078

a skeleton suit-vest and trousers all in one and quite loose. The next illustration represents a little girl from a fashion plate of 1826.



1810.

The frock is still of cambric, but both skirt and trousers are trimmed with bands of blue satin, and a blue sash is tied round the waist. It needed very little after this to bring about the hideous fashion of 1835. For already the dress has lost its simplicity. The white trousers trimmed with the blue bands of satin ribbon, must have been very ugly; the dress is beginning to be stuck out with full petticoats, and the arrangements of the blue bands at the side, where there is a pretence of looping up, is full of suggestion, and paves the way for the sham bows and buttons of a later date. The cambric skirt is also worn over blue silk now, and the simplicity of the material is dwindling away. The next little girl is taken from a fashion plate of 1835 and we can see how very little change has brought about the present fashion.



1826.

The little girl still wares long trousers and a low-necked dress, but the length of the shoulders and waist is much exaggerated; she has leg-of-mutton sleeves, and her hair is plaited in stiff little talls under her poke bonnet. The boy with her wears a full vest with puffed sleeves, full trousers buttoned over the vest and high frill round the neck. In the same year, 1835, I have another little boy dressed in white satin trousers strapped down under his boots, and a blue vest with rose of buttons down the front and puffed sleeves, evidently the germ of the modern Eton jacket. These children certainly seem very much dressed up. I have no doubt that the little boy looked very handsome and a great dandy in his full shirt-frill and smart vest, though I doubt the beauty, in any circumstances, of white satin trousers. And how thoroughly uncomfortable this poor child must have felt, and how terribly frightened of soiling such wonderful garment! How he must have hated the paraphernalia of fashion!



1835.

In 1851 the sleeves are no longer puffed, and later on still the vest takes its present shape. In a fashion plate of 1851 we have a very simple and homely, if a somewhat ugly, fashion. These were the days when every little girl a silk dress to wear when walking or driving with her mamma, and the silk was very stiff with plenty of gum to make it stick out and rustle and to prevent it from easily crushing.

This little girl is dressed in her best. She has a blue silk frock with short loose sleeves, and under these nice full cambric sleeves buttoned at the wrist. She wears little white trousers and a pink bonnet of drawn silk. Altogether she is a prim and tidy little person. Little girls were doomed then to wear crinolines, and were made altogether as much as possible the miniature of their mothers. I am afraid that even now the same plan is pursued of dressing girls as much as possible like their mothers after they are fourteen or fifteen. They still wear frocks above the ankle, but they are encased in stays, and even wear bustles—those hideous excrescences which, after all, are tolerable only when they are worn to keep the long walking-skirt from dangling against one's heels and catching the mud as one walks. I have said that a more rational system of clothing than formerly is pursued with our children, but I am afraid that this is soon cast off when actual childhood is passed. Boys gave never in their worst days had to suffer so much.

This little boy in the full tunic and belt over long trousers were not, as in this instance, of white satin; and the little lad in brown with his full vest, though he looks very funny here, is really not badly dressed. Then boys have their sensible cricketing and boating and football costumes, excellent for all weathers—warm in winter, cool in summer; their light wool cricketing caps, and their straw boating hats shading from the sun and allowing free ventilation to the head. Boys are doubtless as much the slaves of fashion as girls are, but the masculine costume never assumes such irrational proportions as does the feminine.



Still there is always one particular style that is the fashion, and this is worn by every little well-dressed boy that one meets. At present it is the Navy that is predominant, and this is a very sensible dress. The woollen under-vest, the blue blouse for winter, the white one for summer, and the blue serge trousers form a very good dress for a boy. He is warmly clad, and his limbs are free to every movement. Another dress that is now the fashion for our tiny boys is the jersey suit, elastic and warm, altogether an excellent dress. These jerseys when they are hand-knitted, with knitted breeches and stockings to match, form one of the prettiest costumes that a little boy can wear. A few years since, Highland dress was the fashion—sporrans, philibegs and all. But though the Highland costume is certainly becoming to a tall slight boy, it does not recommend itself to me as a healthy town dress.

A boy who lives in the country and is out of doors all day can easily get inured to the bare knees, but I think that with an indoor life a child feels the cold air when he goes out to walk. However the plids are very pretty when they are worn in the right place as a Highland kilt, but they become rather terrible when the Stuart plaid is woven in velvet and worn by little girls with the bodice seamed across the pattern! I hope we shall never again see the introduction of what in the journals of forty years ago was called "the animated and particoloured article." Then every little girl had a plaid dress, and as aniline dyes were used, these plaids were about as ugly as human ingenuity could make them. Before the Highland suit, we had the knickerbocker suit, a revival of the Dutch sixteen-century costume, the knickerbockers being full and fastened with elastic below the knee. With these were worn a waistcoat and a loose short jacket fastened at the collar only. The knickerbocker suits worn now, no longer have the knickerbockers full. They are simply like trousers cut off below the knee. These are very pretty made in coarse corduroy velveteen, with a belted tunic to match. There is one more boy's costume which I just mention, and this is the dress of the Bluecoat School boy, a survival of the dress worn in the day of Edward VI — breeches buttoned at the knees, long blue tunic reaching to the ankles, yellow stockings, low shoes, and white bands. The cap that belongs to this costume is not worn, the boys seeming to prefer going bare-headed. It is probably owing to artists having turned their attention to matters of dress that see so many picturesquely dressed children around us. Many of these dresses are historical, and the favourite dress for both boys and girls seems to be the Charles I. dress. We have little Cavaliers in plush tunics and knickerbockers, with coloured silk sashes and Vandyke collars; little girls in shot-waisted, long-skirted frocks, with puffed sleeves. These little frocks are sweetly pretty, but it must be remembered that they are not suitable for nursery wear, for a child tumbles down over these long skirts, and is very uncomfortable in them. Out of doors we have our little Claude Melnottes, with their many capes over their shoulders; little Poles and Russians, with braided and fur-trimmed coats and caps. I am glad that plush is rather giving place to rough cloths for children's outdoor dress. Plush is a very beautiful material, but besides

the fact that there are very common imitations of it, it seems scarcely suitable for the free physical life that is so absolutely necessary to a healthy child. Nothing can be more charming than the rough, thick Irish claddagh cloths and coarse flannels, with their beautiful vegetable dyes, for outdoor garments, while for indoor wear we have the most lovely woollen materials in every range of exquisite colour.



I am also glad that the fashion papers are beginning to take up the question of little boys wearing hoods out of doors. It is terrible to see baby-boys going out with their ears exposed to these bitter east winds, their hair even being cut quite short, to prevent any possible protection. It is scarcely to be wondered at the little boys suffer dreadfully from ear-ache. The matter is carried to the other extreme in the case of little girl's head dress. She has a great heavy plush structure, frilled and wired and crinkled, put on the poor little head. I should like to see small close-fitting hoods worn by boys and girls alike, either perfectly plain or trimmed all round with a narrow band of fur. It would also be a very good plan to do away with all idea of emphasising the sex of a child by its dress. Surely, boys and girls of three or four years of age might wear in the winter double-breasts coats and small close-fitting hoods exactly alike, while in the summer both could wear light smock-frocks, and wide hats to protect the eyes from the glare of the sun. How pretty are these old English smock-frocks that have of late years become so fashionable for children of all ages! The smocking is perfectly elastic, and the frocks are such a pretty shape, not emphasising the waist: always a largest part of a child, and consequently the part to be least brought into notice. The little straight French blouses, with full sleeves gathered into a band, make charming overalls for nursery and country wear, but it is the only French fashion that I uphold for English children. I do not like to see a children tricked out in French furbelows like a little stiff doll. Our natural English children are far prettier. The Kindergarten costume introduced by the Rational Dress Society should be adopted by all mothers who wish their girls to grow up healthy and happy. This dress consists of woollen combinations; woollen stays-to button, not to lace-woollen stockings, kept up by suspenders fastened on to the stays; a divided skirt either buttoned on to the stays or made with a Princess bodice; and a smock-frock overall. This seems to be a thoroughly rational dress in every way. There are many little girls who wear this dress now, and I hope to see the number largely increased year by year.