



BOOK REVIEW

A Cultural History of School Uniform

Kate Stephenson

Exeter: University of Exeter Press (2021) 232pp., hardback £75.00

ISBN: 9781905816538

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A history of British education through its school uniform traditions

A Cultural History of School Uniform is not only a book about school uniforms but is also a history of schooling in Britain over the last five hundred years and a useful text on class, gender, religion and national identity within schooling. Kate Stephenson does a great job of bringing the topic of school uniforms to life while tracing their 500-year history. There is no book to compare this with, which shows how original and useful it is.

The first chapter 'The Charity Schools 1552-1900' sets out how school uniform developed in Britain from its origins in clothing charity school pupils. The colour and fabric of the clothing, along with what it was meant to convey is covered. In chapter 2 'The Public Schools 1800-1939' the history of school uniform is traced alongside the establishment and growth of schools in England (and to a lesser extent Scotland). Stephenson shows how uniforms reflected notions of masculinity and the British Empire. In the third chapter 'Public Schools for Girls 1850-1939' we discover that girls' school uniforms began with gymslips and clothes that girls normally wore but then moved into a more masculine and male form of school uniform. Chapter 4 'Education for All 1860-1939' covers the opening up of education and with compulsory education there is a need for clothing for many more children. The final chapter 'Fashion and Fancy Dress 1939-Present' covers the second world war to the present day and so comprehensive education and school uniform as favoured fancy dress mode. It investigates how school uniform is portrayed in books and film with a focus on St Trinian's in the 1940s to 1960s rather than more recent works such as Harry Potter. The conclusion deals with some of the key issues from the book such as gender, class, religion, and national identity. After summarising each of the chapters there is a final bringing together of the strands of the book.

This book is a really useful addition to scholarship on school uniform and adds to works such as Tynan and Godson (2019) *Uniform. Clothing and Discipline in the Modern World*, Gereluk (2008) *Symbolic clothing in schools. What should be worn and why*, and McVeigh (2000) *Wearing Ideology. State, Schooling and Self-Presentation in Japan*. Stephenson's work furthers our understanding of the history

of different types of uniform for boys and girls and for school and physical education. She shows how uniforms were influenced by prevailing or previous fashions and how the uniforms have influenced fashion and fancy dress.

There is a useful glossary and a bibliography by sector and comprehensive notes for each chapter with full references. It would have been interesting to draw out some more of the underlying political threads such as colonialism which the book began with. After so much rich historical detail I would have enjoyed reading more of the author's insights in this final chapter. Nevertheless, I wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone curious about school uniform and/or studying education in Britain today as it gives an impressive overview and insight into the different prevailing currents that have swept across education in the 500 years that formal schooling has existed here.