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## **Cycling, Well-Being and Dress: late nineteenth century New Zealand**

### Introduction

This paper is taken from an historical investigation of dress worn for sport in New Zealand. Photographs which showed women involved in sports in the period 1880 to 1912 were collected from six museums throughout New Zealand 1. The research adapted elements from established models of artifactual analysis and visual analysis from pictorial evidence (Cosbey, Damhorst & Farrell-Beck, 2002; Damhorst, 1999; Delong & Minshall, 1988; Fleming, 1993; Prown, 1982; Severa & Horswill, 1989) 2. Dress characteristic details were analysed with comparative source material to develop an extended social meaning through cultural analysis and interpretation 3. This additional material included primary sources of New Zealand museum artefacts, nineteenth century newspapers and periodicals, sports journals, pamphlets and articles and secondary sources such as books, articles, unpublished reports and dissertations in the areas of historical dress, social context, women and sport and gender identity 4. The analysis of dress worn for sport extended historical documentation of dress within New Zealand and provided validation and comparative discussion for existing socio-historical writing. This paper focuses on a discussion of

dress worn for cycling and the significance of appearance management to alter perceptions of feminine identity.

Predominant ideology in the late nineteenth century created much prejudice and ambivalence to women's participation in certain forms of physical activity. Sport and a strong associated culture had been developed and established as a male activity in colonial New Zealand (Barclay, 1977). Despite a breakdown of restricted class participation and other sporting practise in a colonial setting, Victorian codes of gender delineation contradicted the acceptance of women within the realms of sport (Hargreaves, 1987). Active participation was seen as the antithesis of the feminine role. During this period the increased public display of physical activity provoked discussion on orthodox views of medical doctrine (Hammer, 1990). Physicians asserted the already established rhetoric from Social Darwinism of women's innate physical and emotional vulnerability. Social judgements were made based on erroneous scientific facts which impacted significantly on societal perceptions of women's active participation in sport (Mangan & Park, 1987). Doctor Truby King, founder of 'scientific motherhood' and the Plunket Society in New Zealand publicly expressed fears of the damaging effects of over exertion (Olssen, 1981). It needs to be noted that eugenic arguments were primary social concerns of this period. These fitted the traditional associations of women's domestic role rather than that of new physical and social freedom (Hammer, 1990).

New Zealand women's lifestyles were changing with increased opportunities for leisure time in the late nineteenth century (Else, 1993). In alignment with other social and political advancements women relished the opportunity of physical exertion to

assert a newfound control of their bodies and consequent mental development. However sport participation contested social conventions of middle class propriety. Conventions retained the woman's primary social role and identity within a restricted sphere. Contemporary critics of women's participation in sport frequently expressed fears of women becoming masculine in their conduct and appearance (Coney, 1998). Women needed to display restraint and respectability to confirm their social identity to legitimise their involvement in sport.

### Cycling and Public Exposure

The advent of cycling characterized all of the issues that surrounded women and sport in their search for independence in this period. Many writers have claimed the immense emancipating factors of cycling for women worldwide (Bradfield, 1972; Grossbard & Mervel, 1990; Hall, 1971; Marks, 1990; P. Russell, 1994; Winkworth, 1989). It was the mass popularity and subsequent public exposure which arose from cycling which contributed to a changing perception of women's identity. Evidence from this research validated the crucial consideration of appearance for the acceptance of women's participation in sport. It was cycling that confronted the individual and public with a dilemma of dress to satisfy functionality, aesthetic, social and moral concerns with greater assault on known conventionalities.

The popularity of cycling surpassed that of other sports in the late nineteenth century. Most of the photographs of women cycling in New Zealand were from the period 1890 to 1900. Cycling fulfilled a range of informal and organised activity from recreational social jaunts in the streets and parks, extending to cycle tours, and competition races, and throughout the period, a functional mode of transport.

Cycling became a fashionable, consumer oriented recreation popularised with the publication of cycling papers and increased exposure in women's journals (New Zealand Cyclist, New Zealand Wheelman, White Ribbon). Information was relayed through this media to inform, promote and expose cycling to a growing market. Cycling was endorsed to the public as an enjoyable and healthy exercise to be encouraged in women.

In the early nineties, public reception to this new form of recreation was mixed. Women were viewed in a radical context not experienced or witnessed before. This new form of physical exercise was seen as a departure from womanly concerns and soon became public property to be exposed to all forms of public (Simpson, 1998). Beyond the inhibiting strictures of women's physical competence, there were social and moral concerns aroused by the conspicuous nature of women cycling. These women cyclists appeared morally and physically vulnerable. Riding without a chaperone or family supervision within urban bounds and surrounding country vicinities allowed possibilities of unrestricted friendships for young women (R. Park, 1987). Cycling saw the advent of greater freedom of social movement which went beyond previous experiences. Middle class Victorian thinking aligned freedom and spontaneity with sexuality (J. Hargreaves, 1994). The strong visual representation of women on the streets with no chaperonage confirmed the fears of a loosening of social standards. Winkworth (1989) discussed how the physical action of women cycling in unrestricted public space, with consequent exposure of the legs and fast physical motion, was considered morally indecent by many. Association was aligned with women of loose morals or prostitution which was a concern of the New Zealand public at the time (MacDonald, 1986). Urbanisation had provoked many challenges

towards the visibility of women in the public context, and consequently strict codes of legitimised behaviour or etiquette had been devised. The conservative public could not comprehend why women would compromise their moral and physical safety with this newfound sport which openly denied rules of acceptable conduct.

The first women cyclists were confronted with intense verbal and physical abuse (Simpson, 1998). With growing numbers of women cycling, strategies of conciliatory conduct were employed to counteract the negative reactions. Contemporary publications for women cyclists made it very clear the essential need of revised attention to conduct and appearances by defining etiquette for safety reasons as well as social acceptability (New Zealand Wheelman, New Zealand Cyclist, New Zealand Metropolitan Cycle Show catalogue, 1897). Etiquette related to conventions associated with ideal feminine traits with repetitive references to maintaining a graceful composure and conservative appearance. The importance of self-presentation was seen as equally important as the cycling protocol itself as evidenced by the number of instructions relating to dress.

Photographs from New Zealand archives indicate that social display and adherence to fashionable taste remained the more important consideration for many women for cycling. A number of women throughout the period 1890-1912 wore dresses that displayed the fashionable elements of everyday wear. The wearing of dresses increased, unlike comparative sports where the wearing of dresses declined. However in accordance with other sports, most women adopted the shirt or tailored jacket and skirt, with some structural characteristics borrowed from menswear as well as feminine references in embellishment and silhouette. The majority of women

participating in sport utilised the aesthetic of the 'new woman', already portrayed in the public arena. Crane (1999) discusses 'alternative dress' for everyday wear by the 'new woman' as a masculine aesthetic, being a men's shirt styling, tie, tailored jacket, waistcoat, and men's style hats. The 'New Woman' was associated with a more active and public identity. Views of increased freedom were displayed in a fashion development exhibiting simpler masculine features of dress at the time (Crane, 1999). The distinct nature of gender roles was being questioned and subsequently shown by changes in everyday dress and dress for sport. Despite the outward expression and promotion of these changing values, traditional Victorian values resulted in critique of the movement by many. 'The New Women tried to obliterate the distinctions of sex, by following the same pursuits, wearing the same kind of clothes, indulging in the same sports as men' quoted the Christchurch Press (Coney, 1993).

Photographic analysis showed that most dress for sports indicated a progression to simpler aesthetics in the latter period. Contrary to this development, more upper body garments in cycling dress showed a greater degree of structural and surface embellishment. There was a wider variation of surface embellishments, for example appliqué, lace, embroidery, braiding, and structural embellishment, such as panelling, pleating, tucking, and bows, evident in dress for cycling. This level of embellishment increased at the turn of the century, corresponding to prevalent style features of fashionable dress. Cycling dress also showed the greatest variation in aesthetic indicators of angularity and roundness. For example there was a varied distribution of straight, shapeless blouses with little waist definition as well as fitted bodices and jackets with sloped shoulders and fitted sleeves.

Despite the tailored construction details and broad shoulder width in jackets denoting a stronger composure than decorative fashionable dress of the period, the exaggerated waist was defined by the highly corseted silhouette. Photographic analysis indicated the wearing of corsetry was more prevalent in cycling dress. 'Porowhita', a writer for a feminist publication, commented on the wearing of corsets: "The act of cycling quickens the respiration, expands the lungs, etc., and how is this possible when the organs of the body are so confined in a tight corset that breathing with comfort, even when not riding, is an impossibility" ('Porowhita' cited in White Ribbon 1898, p.4) 'Porowhita' suggested discarding the corset altogether or finding alternatives. No photographic evidence showed the discarding of corsetry. Corsets have been found in museums in New Zealand with characteristics which align with those advertised for cycling. They are cut lower below the arm and shorter to free restriction in a seated position for legs and upper body movement. Adaptations of the corset for the purpose of cycling were part of the many attempts to rationalise the inconveniences of everyday dress, while maintaining the known aesthetic conventionalities.

Similar attention was given to the suitability of skirts for cycling with detailed descriptions in women's editorials. Of primary concern was the appearance of the cycling skirt to provide a flattering look. Photographic analysis commonly revealed an off-centre fastening and buttoning on skirts for cycling. It is assumed that this was a popular style as it was prescribed commonly in advertised patterns in American, English and consequently New Zealand publications. Many details were given to accommodate for the long skirts which caused problems for movement and

entanglement, as well as the immodesty of revealed legs. These descriptions allow an understanding of the adaptations made to the interior construction of the skirts unseen in photographic analysis.

The lining of the skirt should be carried right down to the bottom... On either side should be placed two eyes to fasten the elastic bands for keeping the skirt down in windy weather; if the skirt is properly cut it will keep down in ordinary riding. The said elastic bands can be obtained ready made at many shops, and are called "The Fixit" dress holders, but any lady can very easily make them. Two pieces of elastic are required, one for the ankle and the other to fasten to the eye in the skirt. The shape is like a T, and when not in use they can be hooked up to the inside of the skirt out of the way. ('Porowhita' cited in White Ribbon, 1898, p.10).

These adjustments of dress which addressed the impracticalities were internal to the construction, maintaining the outward aesthetics known and accepted by the majority. Even in the context where women were cycling in a less public environment, photographs indicated the same dress types and components were worn. A number of women have been recorded as having cycled long trips throughout New Zealand (C. Simpson, 1998). Advice was given for touring including dress in newspapers and cycling publications. The garments and accessories advocated were practical to ensure warmth and protection for changeable weather conditions. Flannel shirts and lightweight wool serge or tweed skirts were suggested with the advantage of being lighter (Otago Witness cited in Simpson, 1998, p. 91). Accessories were



recommended that fulfilled practical considerations while retaining the etiquette of appearance.

... many wear canvas shoes and they look very nice when new, but in the event of rain coming on are anything but safe or comfortable. Thin shoes are also ridiculous for our New Zealand roads; they are all very well for park riding, but we have such a changeable climate that we ought to be prepared for rain whenever we go out. The most comfortable shoes I have ever tried are the Kangarette; they bare made of kangaroo skin, and never lose their shape or become in any way uncomfortable, and it is possible to walk into a shop and purchase a new pair...For cycling it is much better to wear shoes, for then the ankle can have full freedom so necessary not only to make a good but a graceful cyclist ('Porowhita' cited in White Ribbon, 1898h, p.10)

### Cycling and Reform dress

Contemporary commentary addressed the practicalities of dress for other sporting activities but it was cycling which publicly brought to attention the possibility of rational dress. Due to the blatant impracticalities of fashionable dress for cycling, dress became one of the most controversial issues. Early women cyclists who strongly advocated and wore knickerbockers as a more sensible dress for cycling exposed the rationality of dress for physical exercise. The bifurcated lower garment spurred substantial public debate in newspapers and popular cycling magazines. Despite the significant advances of the design of the safety bicycle, it was still considered dangerous with numerous reported accidents. Advocates of reform dress

seized the opportunity to show the impediments of conventional dress for greater physical demands and functional safety of cycling.

The arguments for adoption of the masculine dress arose in the context of women's new position for freedom. Many viewed cycling as a statement of social emancipation. The wearing of bifurcated garments, by some brave enough to combat the antagonism, was an overt expression of this sought freedom accepted only as a male prerogative. In the *New Zealand Graphic and Ladies' Journal* 1893, Alice Burn urged women living "in a land of such promise, and in an age of such rapid development" to acknowledge that their "flowing garments" were really "symbols of enslavement...-the swaddling clothes of a sex that has not yet asserted its right to perfect freedom". Alice Burn strongly advocated the bifurcated knicker suit in serge or tweed as a healthier and more comfortable alternative to conventional attire. The analysis of women photographed in the knicker suit showed jackets, tailored in men's fashion in cut, silhouette, and design detailing. The jackets show little shaping and suppression through the waist. Design detailing is minimal with no surface embellishment. The jackets are neatly buttoned up over a shirtwaist and tie. The knickerbockers are cut with ease for movement and are held below the knee with elastic. The knickerbockers clearly defined the legs along with the black stockings that covered the leg from knee to ankle. Flat riding shoes completed the functionality of the cycling dress.

Cycle racing represented the extreme of women's involvement in cycling, both in appearance and conduct and consequently negative reaction. Racing in serious competition exceeded the public's tolerance for what was considered acceptable as a

respectable female identity. When Alice Burn entered a road race in the early nineties, publications were inundated with fierce debate. Again commentary saw a direct reference of cycling and wearing of knickerbockers as a protest for advancement for women's rights. It was apparent that women's physical aptitude was not a considered attribute in competitive cycling.

A radical change of dress was not possible by the majority of women. The fact that 'Porowhita' is scathing of women cyclists in knickerbockers, indicates the lack of support for reform dress. 'Porowhita' writes:

... Women cannot afford to sacrifice everything to so-called comfort, and I think all right thinking people will allow that the skirt adds much to women's dignity, also that the ladies always look more graceful on their machines than the gentlemen do. Take away the skirt you certainly take away this grace ('Porowhita' cited in White Ribbon 1893a, p. 4).

An article in the New Zealand cyclist commented on the continued lack of support for knickerbockers late in the decade.

The knickerbockers cycliste (sic) is fast disappearing, ladies cycling dresses are made as near perfection as possible, and fully meet the necessities of the majority of women. As far as the scorcher and the female athlete, they may still make themselves conspicuous if they like, but the women of good taste will pursue the even tenor of her way in a becomingly-made coat and skirt for many years yet (New Zealand Cyclist cited in Simpson, 1998, p. 150).

No photographic records of women wearing bifurcated garments for cycling were found in the period 1900-1912, unlike the earlier decade which presented the highest number for the sports analysed. Attempts to change the conventional aesthetics of women's dress by the more radical reformists were unsuccessful. Park (1989) questioned the relationship in England of the dress reform proponents, feminists and women sportswomen, commenting on the incorrect assumptions of direct correlation that many assumed. The beginnings of cycling in New Zealand showed a strong alliance between these components. MacDonald (1993) claimed that Christchurch was the home of the most progressive women's organisations, and many of these members also took up cycling. The Atalanta Club was established in Christchurch in 1892 and was the first all women's cycling club in Australasia (Simpson, 1993). The cycling clubs for women provided cohesion and legitimacy for women who wanted to pursue cycling during a time when general support wasn't given, with organised recreational and social events. Many of the named members were highly involved in other political and social organisations. Women who founded the Atalanta club, including Kate Walker and Alice Burn, were also leading exponents of dress reform. Club minutes from early club meetings highlighted the debate of dress for club uniforms. The group itself had mixed reactions to the strong assertions that reform dress symbolised. Dress reform was one of the most radical components of emancipation movement (MacDonald, 1993) and the Atalanta club became strongly associated with a political agenda. However, not all the women in the club shared the same political affiliations. Due to its controversial nature, it was decided that the subject of club uniform be postponed until 1893. The members of the club were instructed to wear club colours and an emblem to signify membership (Christchurch

Press cited in Simpson, 1998, p.78). Later records show a unanimous decision that none of the members could appear in rational dress due to the extent of negative public reaction (New Zealand Wheelman cited in Simpson, 1998, p.78). The prohibition of rational dress by these earliest clubs experiences set precedent for others in the country to follow. The women in photographs of the Atalanta Cycling Club all wore a combination of tailored jacket, blouse and skirt or shirt waist and skirt. This was considered a conciliatory action of appearance management to allow an acceptance of what was considered a new sport in the early days of cycling. The public was accustomed to seeing this combination of dress for other forms of social and public activity. As long as propriety was maintained with a moderated attention to dress and conduct, cycling as a sport for women could receive greater acceptance.

For most, the donning of a bifurcated garment sacrificed a woman's femininity. However, other arguments of less visible rational dress were promoted. Woollen under-garments for warmth were advocated and knickerbockers, if concealed under the skirt (New Zealand Cyclist, 22 October 1898, p. 10). Other designs were devised, consisting of wide divided skirts and pull-ups (Simpson, 1998). It can be assumed these adaptations were more acceptable with less debate found in published sources. Divided skirts were made to look like skirts when off the bicycle. There were convertible versions, including a design which the skirt could be pulled up with a series of ribbons and hooks. When riding, the skirt could be pulled up to reveal knickerbockers underneath, or when walking dropped to give the appearance of the fashionable skirt (Simpson, 1998). Photographic evidence could not show the extent to which women wore the concealed knickerbockers.

## Conclusion

It was strongly evident that the majority of women chose to wear dress for cycling which signified the desire for changes without overt assertions which undermined acceptability. During this period radical statements of rational dress had been moderated to accommodate for acceptance in a sport which evoked much public debate. An interpretation from a socio-historical perspective of New Zealand validated the significance of appearance management. Photographic analysis indicated that social display and adherence to fashionable taste remained an important consideration for many women in their cycling dress. However, most women's cycling dress signified assertions of change with alternative dress components. This more progressive dress code had symbolic meaning which sought to represent ideals of increased freedom, independence and public participation. Women who participated in sport chose their dress and in doing so, expressed individual and social assertions of extended social and physical well-being.

## Notes

1. The total number of women analysed in sport's photographs was 277, of which 74 were cycling. The sample was determined by the photographs available in New Zealand museum collections and which fell within the criteria of photographs which displayed a full-length frontal or three-quarter view. As with all sampling of archival material which is determined by what remains in collections, the sample cannot be considered to be statistically representative. However it does allow indicative conclusions to be made for analysis.

2. The development of characteristic properties for content analysis was derived from garment types and characteristics visible in fashionable dress during the period. Categorisation included: garment types, aesthetic characteristics of main fabrics used, design aesthetics, feature characteristics, length and widths of components, structural embellishment, surface embellishment, and accessory types. The most

common form of characteristic identification was through nominal identification. The garment characteristics were coded by upper body characteristics and lower body characteristics. The same aesthetic measures were used to code the garments, but feature identification including surface and structural embellishment was determined by the defined features specific to the upper and lower body garments. Body location measures included ordinal measurement of lengths and widths of specified dress components in relation to the body. Semantic differential scales measured aesthetic qualities including fabric qualities of hue and weight, and design qualities of simplicity to complexity and angularity to roundness. These qualities were also ranked on a scale from one to five, with accompanying descriptors and examples. Frequencies of the garment types, features and characteristics were derived from the data and analysis of the dress worn for the specified sports was made through the time periods, 1880 to 1890, 1890 to 1900, and 1900 to 1912.

3. The operations *Evaluation*, *Cultural analysis* and *Interpretation* analysed these characteristics utilising a more holistic framework as outlined by Fleming (1973). The *Evaluation* involved judgement of aesthetic quality and function. These evaluations were often related to the cultural analysis and interpretation. A wide selection of other source material allowed a more valid interpretative process.

4. There is only one publication describing nineteenth century dress in New Zealand by Ebbett (1977) with a small section devoted to dress worn for sports. Malthus (1996) carried out a detailed artifactual study of nineteenth century women's dress from museums throughout New Zealand within an unpublished thesis. In contrast to scant New Zealand sources there are extensive books of Victorian and Edwardian fashion published in Britain, Europe and America. Severa(1995) and Setnik (2000) were the most relevant using photographic images for analysis. International publications on sports dress of this period are limited (Cunnington&Mansfield, 1969; Warner, 2006). To place the study of dress within a changing social context, considerable literature in New Zealand social history was referenced and it is important to note the following; Coney, 1986; Else, 1993;MacDonald, 1993; Malthus, 1989. References discussing the relationship of women and sport and gender identity were highly relevant (Crawford, 1987; Hammer, 1990; Mangan &Park, 1987; Park, 1989; Simpson, 1996; Simpson, 1998). There are a number of articles which identify cycling as playing a key role in women's emancipation

(Bradfield, 1972; Grossbard & Mervel, 1990; Hall, 1971; Marks, 1990; P. Russell, 1994; Winkworth, 1989).

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