



Book Review

Kate Stephenson

*A Cultural History of School
Uniform*

Exeter: University of Exeter Press
2021, 220 pp.

Kate Stephenson's book is an example of how some of the more exciting and innovative work in the history of education is currently taking place at the edges of the discipline, crossing over into other fields of study. Stephenson, working at the intersection of so-called 'dress history' and social history, has with this volume provided a fresh take on issues of class and gender in education through the lens of that most iconic feature of English education: the school uniform.

A more accurate description of the project would perhaps be that it is a cultural history of school uniform *in Britain*. Drawing on a range of sources such as school archives, autobiographies, diaries and school magazines, commercial advertisements and photographs, Stephenson focuses mainly on English and some Scottish institutions. As such, the book could be read as a work of modern British history, contributing to debates over national identity, gender, class, and imperialism. It can also be read as an entertaining account of exotic British peculiarities such as gymslips, boaters, Eton Jackets, and top hats. However, Stephenson's work is not exclusively of interest for scholars of British history. For the historian of education, this book is also an important invitation to consider how clothing can tell us something broader about pupils' place in society and shifting educational trends.

In five chapters covering the period 1552 to the present, Stephenson traces the origins, development and spread of the school uniform in Britain. Chapter 1 deals with the so-called 'charity schools', emerging from the 1550s. In these schools, uniforms functioned as a practical way of ensuring that children were sufficiently clothed, but also conveyed a visual proof of pupils' working-class status. In chapter 2, the opposite symbolic function is discussed, focusing on nineteenth-century elite boarding schools. Here, uniforms originated as attempts to distinguish between teams on the sports fields. They quickly became a vital part of the public-school ethos, signifiers of class status, and an aspirational symbol for the middle classes. Public school uniforms were also infused with a specific ideal of masculinity, connected with British imperialism abroad.

Chapter 3 shows how the development of school uniforms for girls reflected changing views on women's education. In the 1850s, public school uniforms were carefully aligned with contemporary feminine ideals. As girls' education became less controversial, designs shifted towards more androgynous and practical uniforms. In chapter 4, the spread of school uniforms from elite institutions to a universal symbol of British education is documented. As mass education expanded between 1860 and 1939, the function of the school uniform slowly shifted from a marker of class boundaries to a method of disguising social background. Finally, chapter 5 deals with the period from the Second World War to the present. It discusses the determination of schools to maintain

uniforms under rationing and difficult circumstances, and the emerging trend of personalising uniforms in the context of post-war youth cultures and subcultures. The last half of the chapter discusses the school uniform as a phenomenon in popular culture, in Britain and globally.

Stephenson is at her best when delving into the details of uniforms and institutions in the three middle chapters. Thoroughly researched and enriched by images and source material quotes, these chapters are valuable reading for anyone trying to understand how institutional contexts and social contexts interacted and influenced uniform design. Particularly enjoyable is Stephenson's thoughtful gender analysis of the development of girls' uniforms. She shows how school uniforms could be used both to reinforce gender norms, but also to give room to transgress gender-based expectations, allowing girls to engage in behaviours and activities that sometimes could be more progressive than those in society outside of school.

Though a 500-year account, the weight of the book is on the years 1800–1939, and the institutional contexts in which uniforms developed. One question I am left with is what specifically makes this book a *cultural* history of school uniform rather than simply a history of school uniform. Perhaps this confusion stems from the final chapter, which differs from the preceding ones. Here, school uniforms are detached from their educational and institutional contexts and analysed as a cultural phenomenon (from the St. Trinian's cartoon to Britney Spears). This interesting cultural encounter feels slightly underdeveloped, as it follows a row of very thoroughly researched chapters, and the perspective on culture could per-

haps have been explored in more depth throughout the book. Finally, it would also have been interesting to include examples from the British empire.

However, these are perhaps unfair demands on a researcher who has had to work from scratch to fill a large gap in the research, and as a result has provided a significant contribution. Instead, historians of education should grasp the opportunity offered by this work. Even for those working on contexts where school uniforms were not in use, the approaches and ideas of this book are useful. They could for instance be applied to the study of uniformed youth organisations existing in many European countries in the twentieth century. Stephenson briefly discusses how there, despite ideological differences, were similarities in how public schools and state-sponsored fascist youth movements used uniforms to instil uniformity and display hierarchy (p. 118). Uniforms as an educational phenomenon offer a new entry to study how formal and informal educational institutions dressed young people, and what they wanted to achieve by this. This excellent book will therefore be of interest to most historians of education.

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