Dress, moral reform and masculinity in Australia
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Uniforms are an extremely effective indicator of the codification of appropriate rules of conduct. This essay argues that the influence of uniforms continues to be pervasive in Australian male dress, extending to everyday life and culture, and is formative in the development of taste in Australian male dress. To argue this case I use the non-normative dress practices of the convict ‘magpie suit’ and the dress promoted by Men’s Dress Reform Party (MDRP), 1929–1940, as a counterpoint to military uniforms, to gain a deeper understanding of male fashions worn in Australia. As there does not appear to be a full and substantial account of Percy Grainger’s dress practices, what is available, nonetheless, provides an inspiration for inclusion as non-normative dress practices.

One of the mandates of military dress is to re-form the body. In early colonial Australia the magpie suit was designed to bring about moral reform, while later, in the early 20th century, the MDRP sought to bring about health reform through diversification of male fashions. Like Grainger’s towelling clothes, these were exceptions within the wardrobe of hegemonic masculine dress, rather than the norm. In discussing this reforming of bodies, this essay draws on the approach of the work of the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss. His theory is highly applicable to bodies wearing military uniforms, using his ‘triple viewpoint’ whereby the sociological, biological and psychological attributes combine to produce the social body.

Introduction

 Whereas most commentators of Percy Grainger write on his musical arrangements, conducting, compositions, ‘free music’ and inventions, the starting point for this article was a memory of clothing made from towelling (or the Graingerism, ‘toweldress’) seen in the Grainger Museum at the University of Melbourne in the 1970s. As a result of the visit, I became intrigued with Grainger, both as a musician and the way he used his body as a vehicle for expression. What became really interesting was the split between the public and private personae, and how those parts were expressed through his modes of dress. Whereas Edwardian starched shirt fronts and tailored black frock-coats reigned supreme on the stage, in his teaching and leisure life Grainger became known for his idiosyncratic dress. This is partly known because he
was an ‘autoarchivist’, collecting dress of his own, as well as of others, some of which has made its way to the Grainger Museum.

In the play between these personae, this essay argues that the pervasive influence of military uniforms has been formative in the development of taste in hegemonic Australian male clothing. I examine forms of dress outside the norm and draw on Australian prison dress (the magpie suit) and the clothing promoted by the Men’s Dress Reform Party (MDRP), 1929–1940, in Britain. While these might seem a long way from Grainger’s colourful ‘towel trousers’, what this essay highlights are the interconnections between the social, moral and political rationales of dress, as well as the explanations and symbolism that modes of dress signify. Grainger’s wardrobe was very calculated. He was exposed to a wide vision of cosmopolitan cultures in Europe, South Africa and the South Pacific, which triggered or enabled him to express his inner self, helped him to gain some sense of ‘normality’, and released inhibitions that gave licence to his sensibilities and his sexual activities.

Although there is no evidence of Grainger becoming a member of MDRP, he similarly espoused a healthy athletic lifestyle, nude sun-baking, vegetarianism and the wearing of what might be called rational clothes. This paper contends that Grainger took a serious interest in designing clothes, and was actively interested in dress reform, particularly in regard to exercise and sporting activities for both men and women. In a 1909 letter to his mother, he writes: ‘Women … should have free untramelling clothes to leave her limbs free to jump around and voice the joy of nature …’. His ‘dressplans’ included a sports bra he designed for his lover, Karen Holten. In a subsequent letter, he follows up by asking: ‘All these sports costumes, how many of them will you have made before we meet, do you think? Will you be able to ride bare-back?’ This was in a period when corsets were worn by the overwhelming majority of women, restricting activities to comply with hegemonic femininity.

Grainger viewed himself as Australian, constructing an identity in the form of a legacy through building a museum in his ‘birth-town’, Melbourne. Constructing identity is one of the key functions of dress, be it the nation-state identity, as in uniforms, or, as in Grainger’s case, a creative interpretation of hegemonic masculinity. It might be considered that Grainger’s views on democracy were expressed through dress, not only through his designs’ enabling of both male and female bodies’ physical mobility, but also in the potential for social mobility through greater equality of the sexes. The democratisation of dress was an issue in the dress reform movement. However, it is doubtful that Grainger’s towelling outfits, however democratic they might be, could have been worn at the time in Australia. To suggest why this is so, I examine the magpie suit, a remnant from the convict sartorial genealogy of Australian male fashion. Although Percy Grainger was neither a
convict nor a member of the MDRP, he joined the military as a musician while living in America during World War I. These are useful lenses through which to explore the anxieties and ambivalence that are experienced with fashion.

Fig. 1: Percy Grainger at his home at White Plains, New York, 1936, wearing waistcoat, shirt, shorts and leggings made from bath towels and bath mat by Percy Grainger and his wife Ella Grainger, c.1934. Photographer unknown; silver gelatin print; 34.8 x 24.5 cm. Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.
Reforming dress

The imposition of reform through dress has a long and contentious history. Sumptuary laws imposed in Europe since the 13th century, as ineffective as they were, aimed to curb the spending on dress by the middle and lower classes, in particular the merchant classes who aspired to the lifestyle and extravagant appearance of the elite. The upper classes were free to wear what they liked. Those who had worn magpie suits in colonial Australia also aspired to take on the appearance of the colonial elite or ‘pure Merinos’. Those who formed the MDRP were from the upper middle class. They could afford to eschew socially restrictive dress practices, until World War II hindered food and clothing supplies in Britain. However, the dress of both groups has disappeared and is rarely discussed; ridicule appears to be a connecting thread.

Also woven through this essay is the pervasive influence of military uniforms, arguably a democratic form of dress, despite the hierarchical nature of military organisation.

It is rare that dress is simply practical. Protection from the weather is generally overridden by the demands of social interaction, as well as cultural and political interplays with the body. The mandate of convict dress was hierarchy and moral reform; the MDRP’s was health reform and appearance; and the military’s is to ‘re-form’ bodies to national and political ideals. Utilitarian dress rarely equates with fashion. One imagines that military uniforms set utility at the forefront, but seldom has this actually been the case; uniforms have a close symbiotic relationship to fashion, with hierarchy as a priority. Grainger designed a utilitarian jacket with short lengths of string to suspend manuscripts, pencils, pens and other personal belongings that were within easy reach as he walked vast distances between engagements. His first ‘towel trousers’ or shorts, for running in were ‘cool in summer, warm in winter and washable at all times’. This was not recognisable ‘fashion’, with all its attentive markers. Along with dogs barking at his ankles, Grainger caused curious and incredulous stares from onlookers, often causing him to jog around the outskirts of towns to avoid being made fun of. Sensitive to ridicule, he found ways to circumvent it.

Dress reform movements were responding to mass-produced fashion as exemplified in displays of the Great Exhibitions and international expositions held around the globe from the mid-19th century. Reformists articulated the political and social connection between the body’s interactions with dress. Feminists, physicians, artists, architects, academics, and members of communal and religious groups advocated making dress rational, calling for clothing that assisted mobility, or at the least facilitated unencumbered movement of the body. Reformists such as Amelia Bloomer, Harriet Beecher,
Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the Grimké sisters and Lucy Stone were the first to wear such dress in public to illustrate its potential, but were laughed at.16

However, much of the discourse on dress reform movements was in terms of women’s dress, centering on America, Europe and Britain.17 From the 1850s, campaigners fought on health, physical mobility and political emancipation issues. Each of these three areas of reform was associated with specific interest groups, but often the public saw the three as inextricably linked. Women involved in political reform found that they were spending more time justifying the reform garments they wore, rather than fighting for equal rights or the vote. They were ridiculed at every turn: satirical cartoons and comments were published in newspapers and journals, abusive jingles were sung at them in public and, at times, women dressed in their new-styled garments were surrounded by hecklers.18 The actions by reformers were discordant with the hegemonic ladylike delicacy and weakness. On the one hand, *Punch* magazine was attacking women for being slaves to fashion, and on the other, lampooning their reform dress, presenting them in mannish dress and smoking cigars. The political campaign for emancipation collapsed and did not gain momentum again until the turn of the 20th century.

Grainger was a supporter of women’s equality and was familiar with the writings of the ardent socialists Edward Carpenter,19 John Ruskin20 and William Morris.21 Ruskin and Morris encouraged a resurgence of the handmade in the decorative arts. Morris, in particular, argued that dress should be designed on the basis of an intimate relationship with the body. Grainger’s sports bra and the towelling clothing were a response to clothing the moving body during public vigorous exercise while maintaining respectability.

Of the three strands of issues being contested by dress reformers, it was the health and hygiene agenda that was taken up by the MDRP in Britain, which also had membership around the world, including Australia.22 Concerns about men’s dress had arisen much earlier than 1929. The available leisure and sporting clothing, such as the Norfolk jacket or hunting ‘pinks’, were related to aristocratic pursuits such as shooting, fishing and hunting. A more democratic form of dress had been sought—as it was also sought by Grainger. The MDRP articulated and formalised concerns about men’s clothing. This party was established as part of the search for sartorial alternatives aligning with health reform rather than, unsurprisingly, the political reform that women were pursuing. MDRP members had links to the Sunlight League and the New Health Society. The men who founded the MDRP were also involved with the British eugenics movement, aligning to some extent with Grainger’s ideas on race and his anti-Semitism. But it also had members who were interested in aesthetic reform of dress, away from the standard military-derived male dress.23
The mass production of men’s clothing significantly preceded that of women’s garments. From the 18th century, the military required large numbers of uniforms. Despite the low-technology production methods available in England, the military demanded standardised sizing and patterning in uniforms. The clothing contractors who supplied the government brought together the system of many individual manufacturers making multiples of a single item. As well, it was the government’s financing of the large quantities required by the military that enabled mass production. These conditions were catalytic to the industrial revolution once mechanisation and standard measuring systems became a reality. Male dress based on a military cut dominated the production system and required only slight variation of existing patterns. Dress reform clothing, on the other hand, had a very small manufacturing base. Although it is perceived that male clothing changes little, it is nonetheless subject to fashion’s changing whims. Subtle changes, such as the size of the pinstripe, the placement of buttons or the width of the leg of trousers fuel the motor of male fashion. Hence the MDRP appears to have been outside the fashion system and was not large enough to keep pace systematically with fashion’s unrelenting demand for the new.

‘The weight of tailordom’
British tailoring techniques were based on the use of woollen fabric. Wool was the backbone of the English economy and the landed gentry producing it. In the 18th century, the wool industry was threatened by the vast importation of cheaper cotton by the new entrepreneurial middle class. A pamphlet, which sought to ban the importation of cotton into England, stated that ‘wool will guide all other habits of the body’. It became a national duty to use wool in the dress of military, legal, educational and governing institutions. In this context wool was politicised and considered a ‘moral fibre’. The magpie suits made for convicts were made from this very decent fibre; the very fabric of the uniforms was infused with moral intent and a performative regime was inscribed by its imposition on the convict body. During the convict era, the wool industry was established in Australia and many men retired from the military formed the ‘squattocracy’, who controlled vast tracts of land and aspired to the tastes of landed gentry back home. However, ‘techniques of the body’ are hard to eradicate from the body, particularly the military body with its rigid physical demands and long hours of training. Uniform-like dress continued to appeal to the new class of men in Australia, probably because it maintained a sense of hierarchy. Later in this paper I argue that convicts, in turn, aspired to the tastes of the ‘pure Merinos’ (colonial slang for member of the pastoral elite).
Art historian Anne Hollander waxes lyrically about the modern suit: the skills of tailoring wool with a lustrous finish, the ability to fit the garment so closely to the body, as well as enhancing the shape of the male body. The subtle padding could build up the chest, and broaden and sharpen the shoulders. The Fabian socialist, Simple Life proponent and MDRP supporter, Edward Carpenter, called for ‘the weight of tailordom’ to be lifted. Of course, lower-class men generally had muscular bodies that the upper class sought to imitate through the calibrations of tailoring. This fictional shaping of the masculine body is particularly prevalent in the military, where details such as decorative epaulettes were used to broaden the officers’ shoulders even more. The officers did not participate in the hard physical work doled out to the lower ranks, so a tapered look from the shoulders to the hips was achieved by shoulder pads and corsets worn underneath the officers’ jackets to pull in the waist. In corporealising the state, military uniforms re-formed the heroic military body or ‘heroes in wool’, and uniforms became the hegemonic shape of the masculine body in the modern era.

In stark contrast, the types of dress promoted by the MDRP were knitted jumpers instead of tailored jackets; soft blouses with a ‘Byron’ collar and a hanging tie or lower knot rather than shirts with stiff detachable collars with studs; and shorts, breeches and kilts were all viewed as better alternatives to trousers. The MDRP also advocated doing away with hats and wearing sandals instead of shoes. (Grainger made drawings of sandals, sending them to his lover Karen Holten.) These fashions suggest that the clothing could be made domestically, not requiring the bespoke tailoring skills needed for suits. However, it was these innovations, as well as the amateur cut and fussy appearance of the MDRP wardrobe, that caught the eye of those ready to ridicule the MDRP. Members were considered to be part of the ‘loony fringe’. I contend that the idiosyncratic MDRP dress was equated somewhat with femininity, rather than with progressive masculinity.

The subtle and not-so-subtle signifiers in clothing indicate economic, political and social status. They also highlight the existence of hierarchies, class position and differentiation, age, gender and ethnicity. Military dress clearly indicates signifiers of status. The casualisation and, perhaps, the democratisation of dress meant that the subtle markers of status were not apparent in the clothing proposed by the MDRP. The new wardrobe of the MDRP had not developed such markers; for example, the associated status of the Savile Row suit or the Jermyn Street shirt was missing. The Party was seen to misunderstand the complexity of why bodies are clothed, and this could be argued as to why the reformers’ dress was ridiculed.

The internationally renowned radiologist, Dr Alfred Charles Jordan (MD, MRCP, CBE) was derided for wearing tailored shorts as he rode his bicycle to
work. He was seen to be transgressing the line between the professional and the worker, as it was generally thought that a male of his occupation should not appear in public with exposed legs. The MDRP wanted informal dress, such as Jordan’s shorts and open-neck shirts, to be accepted as professional wear, rather than as clothing worn in the privacy of the home or at leisure. Jordan was photographed wearing a medieval-style tunic, and in the Tailor and Cutter, July 1931, another reformer was photographed wearing a short belted smock and bare legs. Although these garments facilitated ‘air baths’ which were promoted by the MDRP, they brought into question the wearers’ sexuality.

J.C. Flugel’s suggestion of ‘Better brighter clothes’ and Grainger’s use of patterned towels did not fit into the prevailing hegemonic male fashions. Bold stripes and zig-zag patterned towelling outfits were far from the woollen suits against which the MDRP was reacting. Grainger’s designs were influenced by indigenous clothing seen in the South Pacific and South Africa, folkwear worn not only by performers of folk songs that he was collecting, but also by ordinary people he noted while waiting and travelling by train throughout Europe and Scandinavia. As well, he sought out folk displays in museums, from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London to small ethnographic displays in New Zealand. Grainger also saw the Ballets Russes perform in London in 1913. Many of the artists and designers for the dance company were looking to and experimenting with folk dress in their bid for modernism. Grainger demonstrated a creative solution to dress that was rational and complemented his physical lifestyle away from the performance world.

The tenacious influence of military dress links to one of the concerns of the MDRP. Although health reform was the party’s mandate, it also responded to a number of other issues, some of which were linked to men’s experience of war, but particularly to the military uniform. The Party argued that military uniforms had brought about a strong notion of conformity. John Harvey’s Men in black documents the uniformity of dark colouring in men’s dress, particularly in the 19th century, and its lingering in the 20th century. Black or near-black suits became a uniform for men. The MDRP complained that men had begun to prefer, in fact were ‘proud’ to be wearing, identical clothing. While this paper argues that Grainger was in many ways aligned with the MDRP, in the spotlight of the music stage his clothing conformed to the norm. Any public display of his idiosyncrasies, particularly as a colonial, had to be curbed. He could not afford to do away with the high stiff collars, ties, waistcoats and tailored suits as he negotiated the professional ladder. Like military clothing, dress for musical performances could camouflage, among other traits, class and nationality.
The MDRP was not only concerned that male fashion imitated military dress. Discomforts of hot and restrictive clothing, made from woollen textiles and dyed in ‘rather sad colours’, were said to depress the spirits.44 Suits and jackets were not washable, which the hygienists saw as a risk to a healthy life. Clothing made from man-made fibres was one solution; Grainger’s solution was all-towelling clothing that washed easily.

**Convict dress in Australia**

I now turn to examine, from a historical perspective, why dress from such an extraordinary collection at the Grainger Museum may not have been accessible, nor acceptable, to the Australian public at that time. Jennifer Craik argues that Australian male clothing has a continuous and strong link to military dress.45 I expand this by suggesting that the forming of taste can be attributed to convict dress. Although not all convicts wore the magpie suit, it was the most despised.

Prison dress must be seen in the context of the whole prison system. At its best, prison clothing covers the body. Elizabeth Fry in the 18th century argued for ‘decency’ in clothing prisoners.46 At its worst, prison dress is a punishment, diminishing self-esteem and eliciting ridicule. In the 18th century, uniforms were designed for the military elite, not for those considered the lowest of society. Notions that uniforms provided identity, hierarchy, discipline, order, conformity and moral rectitude were transferred to convict dress. Early colonial Australia was essentially a military camp and uniforms provided hierarchy and social organisation that aligned with military culture. Ridicule is not normally aimed at those wearing military dress, but the wearers of one particular type of Australian convict dress, the magpie suit, were mocked.

The British prison system was undergoing reform during the 18th century. Michel Foucault notes the shift during this period from physical punishment as a theatrical spectacle to more abstract concepts and consciousness.47 Punishment began to have a ‘higher aim’ than just retribution. The concept of fines rather than physical punitive action became more common, and punishment was hidden behind the walls of prisons, away from village squares. Penal settlements like Port Jackson, so far from the homeland, also obscured those undergoing punishment, rendering them invisible.

Prison reformers of the time such as John Howard, Jeremy Bentham and Elizabeth Fry argued for changes in the prison system and sought to improve the physical conditions of gaols, making them cleaner, improving the health of the prisoners by introducing infirmaries and appointing visiting doctors. As well, they called for the provision of an adequate diet and clothing.48 The majority of these proposals were not, however, acted upon until well into the 19th century. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, convicts in the
overcrowded prisons of Britain relied on families, friends and religious groups to provide clothing and food while they languished, either waiting for court proceedings or serving sentences. Those committed to transportation on the First Fleet were able to bring with them on the eight-month voyage to the new penal colony in Australia what belongings they could procure. Convicts were able to wear the ‘slops’ that were provided on board ships. Replicating the British justice system was the initial mandate on arrival and a ‘natural’ division of the group formed between the military and the approximately 750 convicts. Dress facilitated that separation. Nevertheless, as the long sea voyage and harsh environment caused clothing to deteriorate and wear out rapidly, maintaining that division became difficult. The delay in the arrival of the Second Fleet meant food and clothing stores were desperately low. Without ready replacement, the value of clothing rapidly increased and subsequently became a form of currency, blurring the boundaries between the two classes. The lessening of visible state power caused anxiety among the military. Once regular supplies for the colony were established almost two years later, Governor Phillip ordered set clothing for the convicts, as their existing attire was threadbare and almost non-existent. For Phillip, such decisions were determined by sheer practical necessity rather than moral reform. Male convicts initially wore working men’s clothing of blue cloth or kersey (coarse ribbed woollen cloth), duck trousers (made of untwilled cotton), coarse linen shirts, yarn stockings and woollen caps. The eventual re-supply of smart uniforms for the ‘red-coats’ stood in contrast to the bedraggled convicts.

In the military colony, after the initial struggles, a hierarchical system of signifiers for convict clothing was introduced as, inevitably, more crimes were committed in the new colony. Convicts who committed further serious crimes were re-transported to new penal settlements that were specifically established to deal out severe punishment, rather than to building those skills desperately needed for the colony. It was at Moreton Bay, Norfolk Island, Port Macquarie, Macquarie Harbour and Port Arthur that the magpie suits were used as part of the punishment system.

**The magpie suit**

There were general types and trends in the Australian convict clothing system. Although this paper concentrates on the magpie suit to indicate the greatest source of ridicule and shame, a brief description of other convict clothing gives a clue to the systemic context in which this dress operated. The penal system roughly divided the convicts into five groups. ‘Ticket-of-leave-men’, those at the top of the convict ranking, were free to wear their own clothing or buy from the government stores. For the largest group of convicts, the next group down, good behaviour entitled them to wear clothing of white/grey
ducking (untwilled cotton). The distinguishing feature of their dress was a blue cap with a leather peak and a neckerchief of black twilled cotton. Educated convicts were allowed a grey dress, as were prisoners on probation for good conduct. Some of these convicts also wore their own clothes when uniforms were not available. However, the courts ordered that the tail or frock of a refractory convict’s long coat be cut off. This indicated that the man was not free, almost as if removing his tail feathers or clipping his wings. He was under state control and was emasculated. The short jacket was considered to be a juvenile garment and was intended to signal the wearer’s powerlessness.

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The next tier down wore the all-yellow ‘canary’ suits. In 1833, in Port Arthur and Macquarie Harbour, Van Diemen’s Land, the standing order was that all convicts, on arrival, wear the standard yellow suit. The decree stated that the imposition of the coarse yellow dress was considered severe punishment. The suits were replaced about every seven or eight months. Conversely, withholding new uniforms was also a punishment and after working in the very cold waters of Macquarie Harbour on the west coast of Van Diemen’s Land or in the scorching sun of Moreton Bay, Queensland, one can imagine why. The worn-out clothing provided little protection against the elements. The constant physical reminder, through coarse and uncomfortable fabrics chaffing against the skin, added to a psychological prompt of being an actor in the spectacle of public torture of convicts working on chain gangs.

The lowest group of convicts carried out hard labour in gangs and wore the black and yellow woollen magpie suits (Fig. 2). The colours were juxtaposed like harlequin or jester outfits, and were not only denigrating to the men, but like all convict uniforms, assisted in surveillance and served to identify them if caught after escaping. In the Australian bush the yellow and black together was particularly difficult to disguise or camouflage. Some enterprising convicts worked in pairs to take apart the magpie suits; the yellow components could be remade into a yellow suit which could be traded. More subversively, a black suit could also be remade, and used to avoid detection if a convict was given the opportunity to escape. The most enterprising, such as convict William Thompson, remade black pants and used red fabric from discarded or traded marines’ uniforms to make a military stripe down the leg of the trousers for sale to needy members of the military. The replacement of clothing was a very real problem for all in colonial Australia.
Fig. 2: Convict uniform and two caps, maker unknown, Van Diemen’s Land, c.1830–1849. Hand-sewn suit comprising black and yellow trousers, coat and sleeveless jacket of ‘Parramatta cloth’; grey knitted cap and brown leather cap. Collection of the National Library of Australia, Canberra. Presented by Senator H.J.M. Payne, 1933.
The colloquial naming of the magpie and canary suits gives the impression that the convicts were wearing costumes or indeed masquerade costumes. A broad arrow or the ‘monarch’s mark’ was stamped onto all government-issued suits to indicate property of his majesty, the King. Thus, identity rather than personal expression was tied up with the role of the dress. Yellow was a European colour of disgrace foisted upon prostitutes, perjurers and impostors. ‘Canary’ was old English slang for gaolbirds, that is, prisoners, long before its use in Australia. The addition of the black in the parti-coloured magpie suit gave a bizarre appearance, emphasising the stigma of being a ‘government man’. Linguistic bird metaphors resound with the idea of flight, of escape, of being elsewhere. It was powerful language that reflected that the experience of wearing these outfits was used to form some sort of conceptualisation of a reality beyond incarceration.

The visual language of convict dress was meant to humiliate the wearers, marking them out from the general population. It seems that the practice of segregation from society, not only through clothing, but also of moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar through transportation, was aligned with new ideas of shifting from physical punishment to more abstracted notions of incarceration. Isolation, surveillance and placing penal colonies so far from the centre of power became common practice to emphasise humiliation; a practice that continues today.

Although the purpose of prison dress claims to strip identity, this is near impossible. As with school uniforms—indeed any uniforms that are mass-produced—each garment appears to be the same, yet the wearer always adds their own inflections: the way they move their body or walk, the angle of their hat, the way their hair is styled, gestures that articulate and so on. These ‘techniques of the body’ are a product of cultural specificity and historical variability. They are learned and become second nature, hence we think that the way people walk and talk are instinctive, yet Marcel Mauss argues they are cultural and are indicative of class, ethnicity, gender and age.

Mauss takes this relationship between the psychological and the biological further, by adding the sociological effects. He argues that the body is a social construction and specific bodily practices need to be acquired to survive. This was particularly so for those in the Australian colonies. Convicts continued with these practices long after they had left incarceration. Likewise members of the military maintained their learnt techniques of the body. Indeed, Grainger noted in one letter that he had to ‘spread a full-blown chest’ like a bantam cock as he went on to perform. Again this emphasises the importance of learning the correct techniques for performing.
Ridicule

Craik argues that all uniforms are part of the fashion system. However, fashion is not always a linear process with cycles and revivals, ‘trickle down’ and ‘trickle up’ and bricolage from various cultures and classes. The convict uniforms were remarkably similar to condemned prison clothing of the 14th century in London. Linda Young notes that the regulations of the new penitentiary gaols of Horsham (1779) and Gloucester (1792) in England specified that all prisoners were to be clothed. At Horsham they were to be in ‘mixed pieced’ green and yellow, while for Gloucester the uniform was to be bright blue and yellow. Those who were damned were paraded in public on the way to the gallows, ‘wearing a striped coat and white shoes, his head covered by a hood’, and the convicted man was ‘drawn upon a horse, facing the tail, and wore a fool’s cap’.

Bentham had proposed dressing prisoners oddly and shaving their heads to increase their infamy as well as acting as ‘a deterrent effect of the punishment without harming the criminals’. This appears to have been taken up through the magpie suit. It could be argued that the suit was a jester-like garment with its black and yellow, therefore having little to do with the emerging modern system of reform. The dress harked back to the spectacle and theatre of violence. The visibility of criminality persists today and embodies stigmatisation.

Very little extant convict clothing is held in museum and library collections; the uniform was hated and convicts destroyed the threads that linked them to their incarceration as soon as freedom was attained. Jane Elliot has shown that labour was in scarce supply. The convicts were paid for their labour and (other than the two lowest classes) out of work hours they were free to spend their time and money how they wished. The ex-convicts, and even convicts at the top of the tiered system, earned relatively good wages from tending precious vegetable plots and working for officers. Scarce labour was relatively well paid, with the men spending their income on clothing, in fact favouring the haberdashers over the beverage suppliers, partly dispelling the prevailing myth that Australian colonials spent all their money on alcohol. Elliot’s examination of consumption and import records illustrates that the spending habits of the convicts and ex-convicts greatly departed from those of their contemporaries in the lower classes in England. Although prices of food, alcohol and clothing were exorbitant in the colonies, the lower classes were still able to purchase what they wanted. They could never have hoped for this had they remained in England, where their counterparts survived with two outfits while the new colonials could own up to seven. The external markers of status and class through dress began to blur in a curious way—far more quickly than back home. The preference for imported luxury items, despite 90 per cent of the population being convict or ex-convict, was
satisfied. It has been shown that prior to 1815, more money was spent on clothing, particularly haberdashery, than on any other consumable item.71

Elliot indicates that wearing convict clothing brought about economic and social reform rather than moral reform.72 Looking like the successful squatter or land-owner was the aim of the ex-convicts. The convict who worked his way up through the physically and psychologically demanding system became what Elliot calls the ‘convict dandy’.73 However, punishment was inscribed on the bodies: the poor diet, heavy chains and beatings often meant convicts did not have a cocky jaunt to their gait, nor the gentlemanly repose. Although their dress aspired to the middle class, their bodies reflected the culture they had survived, and did not align with the new dress.

The military and the middle-class free settlers despised these dressed-up dandies who promenaded, or rather shuffled and limped, along the dusty streets. The accounts of the early colonial days either ridiculed the excessive finery or demonised the love of outrageous luxury of the lower classes. This discourse was powerful. It maintained myths about the consumption of large amounts of alcohol, overriding the reality of a fast-growing and economically successful colony. Although convict letters and diaries are extremely rare, there exists a strong narrative of their lives in the account books of merchants. For the convicts, destroying the hated clothing was one way to get rid of the source of ridicule.

**Imposition of dress and dress codes**

What happens when uniformity is imposed on unwilling bodies? Michel Foucault argues that where there are ‘forced relations’, those bodies invested in by power, there is the potential for resisting or subverting that power.74 As noted, enterprising convicts subverted authority by unpicking the black and yellow suits to remake black ones suitable for disguise. Convict clothing continually reminded the wearers of their fall from grace. Only one full magpie suit and about 20 various parts of these convict suits exist today, as the stigma associated with them led to their rapid disposal. Reclaiming individuality through the dress of the elite was a priority for ex-convicts.

For the MDRP, the intention was not to subvert, but to assert men’s right to select from a larger wardrobe, other than that derived from the military. Craik argues that by the end of the 19th century, male dress was unmistakably military in its choice of garment (jackets, collared shirts, trousers, headwear etc) and decorative effects (lapels, cuffs, straps, pocket flaps, decorative buttons, buckles, epaulettes, pleating).75 This has continued with mass-produced suits made from wool and wool-mix fibres in the male-dominated political and business world. In Australia, there was the short deviation into the linen safari suit, in response to the practicalities of a hot climate, and the
occasional forays into velvet—both breaching the line. Today, motifs in textiles used in men’s fashion still have links to the military. Horse-related icons such as horseshoes, straps and crops are to be found on shirts, ties, linings of jackets and embroidered motifs on polo shirts. Sailing and aircraft motifs are used similarly. Fashion houses such as R.M. Williams, Rivers, Rodd & Gunn and Country Road continue to evoke the landed gentry by using remnants of military styling. The symbiotic relationship between military uniform and male fashion has been difficult to interrupt.

Conclusion
Accounting for Australian male dress by examining military uniforms with the attributes that are transferred to the wearer, the convict uniforms, dress promoted by the MDRP and Grainger’s dress practices has shown that dress outside the dominant masculine ideal has had difficulty in surviving and is rarely given serious consideration as dress practice of power. We may feel disquieted by the way in which uniforms continue to inveigle fashion; however, one of the roles of uniform is to signal hierarchical power and normative masculinity. In the late 20th century a raft of economic, social and political change enabled and was accompanied by an expansion and diversification of male dress codes in Australia. Hence changes in political style, body imagery and gender representation followed. The male ‘peacock’ dress of the 1960s, the safari suit, through to the drag queens and drag kings, the punks and the Goths and all manner of social hybridisation, all reflect such political changes. Yet reforming the body through these alternative and non-normative dress practices has not led to political or economic power; the power held by the various parliaments, legislative assemblies, courts and boardrooms of Australia remains tied to the tailored wool suit, in both masculine and feminine forms, with military inflections. Hegemonic masculinity continues to dominate the body politic.

Dr Sharon Peoples completed her PhD at the Art History Department of the Australian National University in 2009, investigating the issue of appearance and power in military uniforms in the 18th century. While this project began by examining cross-dressing in the military, the research turned to the formation of the ‘normative’ masculine body and examined how a female body might inhabit, not only such an institutional masculine dress, but also what Marcel Mauss termed ‘techniques of the body’. Peoples lectures in museum studies at the Research School of Humanities and the Arts at ANU, is an arts practitioner specialising in textiles, and is currently co-authoring The fashion book (Routledge).

This article has been independently peer-reviewed.
NOTES


3 For fuller description see Dawkes, ‘Percy Grainger, towelling costume’; and Grainger, ‘Towel clothes’.


14 Grainger, ‘Towel clothes’.


Percy Grainger, Letter to Karen Holten, 21 October 1906, in Farthest north of humanness, p. 82.


Peoples, ‘Military uniforms in the eighteenth century’.


Hughes, The fatal shore, p. 328.


Hollander, Sex and suits, p. 89.


Bourke, ‘The great male renunciation’, p. 27.


For example, Percy Grainger, Letter to Karen Holten, 15 November 1913, in Farthest north of humanness, pp. 512–513.


43 Perhaps the MDRP did have some effect in musical circles. Burman notes that in 1931 the MDRP had the support of Henry Wood and Adrian Boult, when the evening dress of the BBC Promenade Orchestra incorporated soft white shirts with attached soft collars and black Palm Beach jackets. Members of the orchestra were pleased to be relieved of the starched collar, shirt front and heavy coat. Burman, ‘Better and brighter clothes’, p. 280.


49 Slops were some of the first cheap, mass-produced clothing supplied to sailors in the navy.

50 Hughes, The fatal shore, pp. 96–104.


53 For more detailed descriptions see Maynard, *Fashioned from penury*, pp. 18–22; and Linda Young, ‘The experience of convictism: Five pieces of convict clothing from Western Australia’, *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society*, no. 22, 1988, pp. 70–84.

54 Young, ‘The experience of convictism’, p. 78.

55 Young, ‘The experience of convictism’, p. 82.


58 The symbol of the broad arrow was taken from the head of the pheon, or mace-like javelin. It was used from the 14th century to mark the property of the monarch and became a heraldic device. Families who were granted its use also marked ownership of their property down to their sheep. Ash, *Dress behind bars*, p. 23.


60 Although I have used ‘convict’ throughout this paper, ‘government man’ was the term used by the convicts themselves. For discussion see Ian Duffield and James Bradley (eds), ‘Introduction: Representing convicts’, in *Representing convicts: New perspectives on convict forced labour migration*, London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1997, p. 9.

61 The Australian magpie is notorious for attacking pedestrians and cyclists during the spring nesting season. However, the European magpie is known for its thieving behaviour and thus the link becomes obvious. ‘Canary bird’ is old English slang for a gaolbird, ie a prisoner, and given the use of yellow wool in Australia, the term is apt. Another avian term for a prisoner was a cockatoo; this is still in use, but in colonial Australia was also used to describe those incorrigible convicts who were sent to Cockatoo Island (Amanda Laugesen, *Convict words: Language in early Australia*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 45).


63 Mauss, ‘Techniques of the body’.

64 Percy Grainger, Letter to Alfhild de Luce, 2 November 1905, in *Farthest north of humanness*, p. 51.


67 Cited in Ash, *Dress behind bars*, p. 15.


75 Craik, ‘Uniforms and men’s fashion’, p. 429.