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Clothes and things

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IN a newspaper article not so long ago, Capt. Basil Henry Liddell-Hart, a British military analyst, let himself go on the subject of women's clothes. This was unwise of the captain. It is unwise of any man.

Capt. Liddell-Hart, however, went a little beyond the ordinary male habit of picking on women's hats and the cost of feminine ornament. He proceeded to hail feminine style as a barometer of social change. His theory was that you could predict the political weather by a good gander at milady's bustle. He spoke of the "tranquil hoopskirts of the tranquil early 19th century." He said, "When women begin to flatten their figures and wear exaggerated hats, there is trouble brewing."

Well, we like nothing better than seeing a two-pipper go out on a limb, so we grabbed the captain's statement, neatly clipped from the morning paper, and rushed down to quiz Miss Elizabeth Hawes on her reactions to same. We thought they would be worth hearing.

We picked on Miss Hawes because, of all the women we could think of at the moment, she seemed most completely to combine clothes and articulate opinions. Her whole life up till now has been a busy mixture of the two and it shows no signs of abating to placidity.

Miss Hawes went to Vassar in the 1920s. She graduated and went to Europe, where she studied dress designing and wrote for the *New Yorker*. She came home to the U. S. in 1929, started her own dress business and wrote two books. Both the books and the dress business were overwhelmingly successful as very damn little else that started in 1929 was successful. In the books and in her business, she crusaded for more sensible clothes for both men and women. She gave up her business in 1939 and went to work on the new New York newspaper *PM*; she acted as a buying counselor to make up for the paper's ban on advertising. She left *PM* and went to work in an airplane-engine plant. She wrote another book. She left the airplane-engine plant to devote all her time to the UAW-CIO Education Department. Now she's momentarily sloughed off everything else to write her first novel.

If there was anyone who could give us the *pukka gen* on Capt. Liddell-Hart's remark, we thought, Miss Hawes was it.

Miss Hawes answered our insistent bell-ringing and let us into her apartment. She poured us a cup of coffee and asked, What was it?

She was wearing a checked shirt—wool, we thought—open at the collar, and blue slacks, softly pale with much washing, patched with a darker blue square on one knee. We showed her the Liddell-Hart clipping.

She read for a second and tossed the clipping down, digested.

"He's all right, but he doesn't go far enough," she said. "And he puts the cart before the horse."

"The way he says it, it sounds as if you should look at women's clothes to find out what's going on in the world. It's the other way around. Look at what's going on in the world and you know what women's clothes are going to be like."

"Ask any designer if she wouldn't give good money to know what conditions were going to be like in advance. If you know what conditions are, you can guess what kind of clothes will be in demand."

She thought for a moment, balancing her own coffee cup on her knee.

"But it works both ways," she said. "There was something Anatole France said—but maybe I'm being highbrow?"

We hastened to reassure her that every GI knew who Anatole France was and, if he didn't, we could always put somewhere in the story that he was a famous French writer, born 1844, died 1924.

"Anatole France said something about if there was one book he could have in the afterworld he would want a book of current women's fashions," Miss Hawes said. "From looking at the fashions he could tell what was going on in the world."

Elizabeth Hawes



whether people were happy or afraid or at war or at peace."

It seemed very simple, for Anatole France or Elizabeth Hawes.

"But Liddell-Hart's wrong about 'trouble brewing' when styles are unnatural," Miss Hawes took up the bit again. "Trouble isn't brewing when styles are unnatural; trouble is already there. Styles are direct; they reflect what's going on, not what's going to go on."

WE asked her what signs, if any, were abroad in styles now, that the wise man might look and learn.

"There's nothing much startling to learn," she said. "Only that things haven't changed much. If anything, clothes have gone backwards since the war. They aren't as experimental or, usually, as comfortable as they were getting to be.

"I was in Cleveland last week, getting some work done, and I talked to a lot of girls. Mostly kids in war plants and so on. They were worrying about whether their skirts were too short."

We lifted an eyebrow.

"Women are nervous now," Miss Hawes said. "All their men are coming home and the women don't know how their men will want them to be. They know the skirts ought to be pretty high. But how high?"

"It's a problem for a woman," she said, sliding away from the original subject in her enthusiasm. "Lots of them dress like tramps, particularly upper-class women. And their men like them to dress like tramps up to a certain point. Then they begin to worry. The girls are worrying before that.

"The girl wants to dress enough like a tramp to attract her man's attention in the first place and not so much like a tramp that he thinks he doesn't have to marry her."

We never got a chance to ask Miss Hawes by what signs one could tell infallibly whether a girl had her mind set on marriage or on something a little less binding.

"The girls are out to get married now and the GIs coming back better look out," she said and was off again with her commentary on Capt. Liddell-Hart.

"One reason clothes seem to be falling into the same pattern as after the last war," she said, "is because they are the same. Designers here are just copying old Paris patterns of the '20s. I know; I swiped 'em in the '20s and I can still recognize them.

"But what the captain missed noticing is men's clothes. Men's clothes reflect events just as much as women's and quicker and more accurately. After all, it's men who run most things and make policy, so their clothes are a better barometer.

"Before the war, men's clothes were beginning to get a little more sensible. You saw slack suits in the streets, even delivery boys would be wearing them—light trousers and an open-collar shirt of matching color. They were cool and comfortable. Some of them had a little color to them and quite normal men were not ashamed to wear them.

(continued)

DuBois' expression softened a little after he had finished telling me about the insubordinate ways of dictionaries. "What do you call that thing you have on?" he asked.

I hemmed and hawed, knowing I'd be wrong. "Do you call it a blouse? Well, it's not a blouse. It's a coat! A service coat!"

It seems that a blouse was a "standing-collared garment" of the kind worn by 1918 doughs and that it went out of Army style in 1924. I said I'd been calling a coat a blouse ever since the GIs at the induction center had told me to call it that many long years ago. DuBois indicated that he didn't have much of an opinion of induction-center GIs.

DuBois should not be mistaken for one who has a low opinion only of GIs. A colonel from Fort George G. Meade called twice while I was in the office, and DuBois wouldn't speak to him either time. "Tell him I've got to finish this interview," DuBois told his secretary. "Just one thing at a time." There is a story around the Pentagon that DuBois even turned down a Secretary of War once on the ground that he was not at liberty to divulge the military information the Secretary wanted.

DuBois has been collecting information about insignia, ribbons and such for the Quartermaster Corps for the past quarter of a century, and it's estimated that it will take him at least a year and a half to write down all the facts he has stored away in his head and hasn't bothered to file anywhere else.

At the moment he has a one-man campaign under way to get people to distinguish among medals, decorations, badges and insignia. "Some soldiers talk about the 'Purple Heart Medal,'" he commented hotly. "Well, it's not a medal. Invariably, they get the medal and the decoration mixed up. A decoration is an award beyond the call of duty. A medal is for a campaign or service. A badge is for a qualification. An insignia is an identification. They'll invariably call all of them insignia or medals. They ignore the fine distinction."

Fine distinctions in these things are DuBois' meat. One of his jobs is to collect facts about symbols that may later be used on new sleeve insignia. Some symbols seem to be practically timeless and common to nearly all countries. The acorn, for example, has been the symbol of strength or growth since time out of mind.

In his quest for symbols, DuBois spends many hours reading ancient books on heraldry. He is an authority on the knighthood business and can tell you all about torteaus, hurts, pellets, golpes, bezants, dexter bases, sinister chiefs and crosses coupéd and voided. He often puts this curious lore to contemporary use when an outfit writes in and says it wants a new patch designed.

"But don't call them patches," DuBois warned. "It gripes me."

At the end of our talk, DuBois conceded quite pleasantly that I am not the only one who wears his theater ribbon upside down.

"I don't know what's causing them to be upside down," he said in a puzzled tone. "In individual cases, when soldiers come into my office, I call their attention to their mistake so they can correct it."

On the street, however, DuBois does not interfere with returned overseas men wearing their ribbons upside down.

"If I stuck my neck out," he explained, "I'd be apt to get a punch in the nose some time."

Despite his knowledge of decorations, ribbons and medals, DuBois has none of these himself. He was 18 at the end of the first World War and was 41 at the start of the second and has always been a civilian. The only insignia he personally displays is a service flag outside his office door. It has a "10" on it, symbolizing the number of War Department civilian employees who have left DuBois' section for a more intimate part in the military trade. God help them if they come back talking about the shoulder patches they wore as GIs.

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