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"Well-Dressed" in Suits of Australian Wool: The Global Fiber Wars and Masculine Material Literacy, 1950–1965

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Abstract

The global explosion of synthetic fibers in the mid-twentieth century challenged Australia's wool industry, demanding new ways of marketing the natural fiber to compete with these so-called modern miracles. The menswear market changed profoundly with the convenience of synthetic fabrics and the excitement that surrounded the power of science embodied in these clothes. Some Australian men turned to the "Your Clothes" feature in *Man: The Australian Magazine for Men* to understand what being "well-dressed" meant across these years of rapid change. A suit was a key component. Though pure wool had long been the cloth of choice, those made from new synthetics or a blend of wool and artificial

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fibers proliferated at the time. This article explores the efforts of *Man*'s fashion columnists to help their readers navigate the changes taking place to textiles across 1950–1965 by developing their material literacy. It further captures how the mid-century fiber wars played out across the pages of the magazine, contributing a distinctly Australian perspective to the global competition for consumers that was shaped by the nation's pride in its fine wool and its intensifying efforts to combine the fiber's natural advantages with those of "modern science."

KEYWORDS: men's suits, *Man* magazine, Australian wool, synthetics, materiality

The development of synthetic fibers had huge economic, environmental and cultural implications across the globe after the groundbreaking emergence of rayon in the early twentieth century. These disruptive effects only intensified in the mid-century decades. This was partly because the enormous demand for wool during the Second World and Korean Wars fast-tracked research into the production of artificial alternatives (Shaw and Fitzsimons 2019). The uptake of synthetic fabrics in the 1950s and 1960s was further aided by the ease with which advertisers were able to market them for their convenience and as an embodiment of the miraculous power of science and "man's" mastery over the natural world. The extent to which synthetics were seen to materialize these modern values added a luster to new textiles such as nylon (known as Banlon, Bri-Nylon and other brand names), polyester (Terylene and Dacron) and acrylic (variously called Orlon, Acrilan, Courtelle and others) (O'Connor 2005, 2008, 2011; Handley 1999, 75).

The close association between synthetics and modernity posed acute challenges for the producers of natural fibers. How might wool, cotton and linen be marketed if they were to successfully compete against so-called modern miracle fibers? Grappling with this question was made all the more difficult by the fact that the answer depended on the fiber, the category of clothing, and the gender and geographic location of the consumers concerned. To think about wool in the context of the Global North meant considering men's suits, for example, given the historical significance of wool to this core component of middle-class men's attire on either side of the Northern Atlantic and in Australasia.

The culturally problematic relationship between masculinity, consumption and fashion (Breward 1999) also meant that thinking about men's suits involved considering how these items of dress had more often been marketed for their supposed embodiment of timeless elegance, or alternatively for their redolence of businesslike propriety, than for their fashionability. The connection between fashion, consumption and masculinity was particularly complicated in frontier capitalist societies such as Australia, the world's biggest producer of apparel wool in

the mid-twentieth century. Apart from anything else, Australian men had long been encouraged to imbue wearing wool with connotations of patriotic duty due to the industry's significance to the national economy (for example, *Farmer and Settler*, May 16, 1931, 3; *Canberra Times*, October 22, 1958, 6).

The writers of fashion pages in magazines played an important role in defining and describing sartorial style in the mid-century era. These writers presented new trends to their readers and sought to help them accommodate themselves to those trends. It was partly for this reason that fiber manufacturers saw magazines as a key "battleground for fashion credibility" in the global fiber wars (Handley 1999, 71). This article accordingly focuses on the fashion pages of an Australian men's magazine, *Man: The Australian Magazine for Men*, in the 1950s and 1960s. *Man*'s fashion columnists were not like *Playboy*'s or *Esquire*'s in seeking to advocate for a new kind of fashion-conscious, unabashedly consumerist cosmopolitan masculinity in which connoisseurship of fine clothes, food and travel played starring roles (Osgerby 2001). These fashion writers instead emphasized an older trope when they discussed menswear: the idea that a man should seek to be well-dressed rather than pursue up-to-the-minute fashion, and that being well-dressed required wearing a quality suit.

At the same time, *Man*'s fashion writers emphasized how the feel of one's suit fabric was a crucial component of well-dressed masculinity. In a sense, these writers were prefiguring the approach that wool promoters now take when they emphasize the breathability, softness on the skin, and other benefits of wearing the natural fiber (for example, Australian Wool Innovation 2020). One might argue that they were also anticipating the attention paid to sartorial comfort by scholars of material culture, fashion and textiles (Hebrok and Klepp 2014), and to the question of how clothing feels on the body (Bide 2017; Miller 2010; Woodward and Fisher 2014). Like Heike Jenss and Viola Hofmann (2020, 1) who call attention to "feeling the imprint of fabrics and garments on the body," or Lucia Ruggerone (2017) who focuses attention on affective experiences produced *within* the body, *Man*'s writers urged their readers to think about what they wore in a material sense with implications for how they moved in the world. The magazine's fashion columnists encouraged readers to consider themselves "material subjects" (Kaiser 2020, 21), fashioning their bodies to "move through time and place."

Concentrating on *Man*'s columnists' interpretation of being well-dressed is further valuable as it complements how historians and commentators of mid-century masculinity have approached this topic. Scholars have sought to show that middle-class mid-century masculinity was a site of tension and transformation rather than of the bland uniformity implied by the popular stereotype of armies of suburban office-working breadwinners dressed alike in grey flannel suits (Murphy 2000;

Barnett 2015, 2018). Thinking about the mid-century suit at the level of fiber similarly draws attention to a conflict and dynamism not apparent at first glance. The work of scientists in Australia was at the forefront of wool innovation that combined tradition with modernity. Improved wool and wool-synthetic blends captured the values of mid-century modernity that were tempered not only by the "traditional" middle-class masculine appeal of being well-dressed, but by a focus on a fabric's feel.

Why Consider *Man*'s Fashion Column?

The anonymous writer who produced a monthly fashion column for *Man* in the early 1950s aimed to guide the "average" man in "how to be well-dressed" (*Man*, June 1952, 68). This required avoiding flashiness or experimentation in clothing. No "really well-dressed man," he cautioned, was "an adventurer in taste" (*Man*, January 1951, 66). Such men instead dressed in subtly fashionable wool suits. At the start of the 1950s, this meant a suit of the "drape" style that emphasized wide shoulders and buttoned low on the waist, or the slimmer "Continental Look" by its end. Crucially, though, being well-dressed meant choosing a suit of a cut and fabric that set the wearer at ease. When the Sydney identity Paul B. Nelson took over as *Man*'s fashion columnist in 1962, his advice remained much the same. The well-dressed man was still one who wore a suit whose quietly stylish cut gave him "a feeling of self-confidence" (*Man*, June 1964, 60). As Nelson saw it, the fabrics that best achieved this feeling were the new lightweight worsteds developed with competition from synthetics in mind, though the options had become increasingly varied in pure wool, artificial fibers or a blend of the two (*Man*, November 1960, 54–60; *Man*, May 1963, 58).

One has a sense here of just how different *Man* was in register from *Playboy,* the magazine launched in the United States in 1953, pitched at young, single men keen to sample erotic pleasures amid "a sumptuous profusion of consumer goods" (Osgerby 2001, 104). Throughout and beyond the 1950s, *Playboy* proved influential in advocating hedonism, "personal expression and self-fulfilment" as core values (Fraterrigo 2009, 7). The magazine did this by suggesting that attending to fashion, décor, fine food and modern gadgetry was acceptable in a man (Osgerby 2001, 104). Since *Man*'s fashion editor addressed the "average" man, as he called his readers, needing guidance on how to be well-dressed (*Man*, June 1952, 68), the magazine was not located at the cutting edge of global developments in postwar consumerism in the same way.

Yet *Man*'s columnists provided the magazine's readers with something valuable: new ways to think about wool and artificial fibers as synthetics exploded onto the clothing scene, causing a "manmade fashion revolution" (Handley 1999). Scholars have treated synthetic fibers as both a symptom of and participant in the seismic social, economic

and cultural changes taking place at that time (Blaszczyk 2006; Finnane and Sun 2018; Handley 1999). For Jane Schneider (1994) and Kaori O'Connor (2005, 2008, 2011), artificial fibers were indeed a materialization of social values emerging in the period: an emphasis on convenience, faith in the miraculous powers of science and industry, and a vaunting of "man's" dominance over nature.

Synthetics shifted how men dressed; they transformed how men felt in their clothes. In the pages to follow, our focus is on the efforts of *Man*'s fashion columnists to help their readers navigate the changes taking place to textiles in the mid-century. The central means through which *Man*'s fashion columnists sought to do this was by helping to develop their material literacy. They encouraged readers to think about clothes as something that could be felt between their fingertips: as soft, stiff, smooth, coarse, or a myriad of other forms. They urged men to consider how clothing felt against the skin: not only warm or cool but more. They reminded men that clothing was not imaged but embodied; it was tangible and real with the potential to bring about experiences ranging from pleasure to discomfort, confidence to uncertainty. Being "well-dressed," then, had tactile and corporeal dimensions as much as it drew on subtly fashionable styling. Our concentration on the years 1950–1965 recognizes *Man*'s columnists' deep interest in reporting on the developments occurring at this time, and ends as the global Woolmark symbol was introduced in Australia, marking a shift in wool promotion.

Man was, in fact, published much longer: from its inaugural issue in December 1936 to 1974. "To be a man about town, correct clothes are the tops for distinction," *Man*'s first fashion columnist Phillip Lewis wrote in the magazine's opening issue (*Man*, December 1936, 69). Lewis's address to the "man about town" gestures to the magazine's original conception of its readership. Inspired by the U.S. magazine *Esquire, Man* initially pitched itself at cosmopolitan and urban bachelors, though in reality its readers were more socially diverse (White 1979, 147–149). That this focus represented something at once novel and attractive to consumers of Australian magazines was reflected in *Man*'s growing circulation. In early 1938, the monthly magazine sold 41,000 copies. A decade later, this had more than doubled to 90,000. But the magazine's most successful years, according to circulation, were still to come. Between 1952 and 1955, *Man*'s sales jumped to an average of 175,000 copies per issue (AMAA 2019), a time when the Australian population was just under nine million (Carver 1956, 6). The peak year for the magazine's sales was in 1953, the same year that Hugh Hefner launched *Playboy* (Fraterrigo 2009; Pitzulo 2011), when one of *Man*'s issues sold more than 200,000 copies (Barnett 2015, 154). *Man*'s sales fluctuated across the following decade, dropping to 115,000 copies each month by 1960 before rising again in 1964 to 140,000 (AMAA 2019).

Initially titled "Fashion," then "His Clothes" until the end of 1950, *Man*'s fashion column was renamed "Your Clothes" in 1951. The column retained this title until 1968 when it returned again to "Fashion." Under one or another of these titles, the column appeared in every issue of *Man* except for the period between January 1942 and December 1946 when content realigned to reflect wartime concerns. The radio personality and humorist, Phillip Lewis, wrote the column from its first issue until June 1939. The column's author, or authors, then remained anonymous until Paul B. Nelson joined *Man* in October 1962. Nelson had first come to Australia as an officer of the United States Navy during the Second World War. Marrying a socialite divorcee in Sydney in 1944 (*Truth*, April 30, 1944, 24), he remained in Australia after the war had ended. From the early 1950s, Nelson worked as the managing editor for the Australian trade journal *Tailor and Men's Wear* while also providing expert commentary on menswear in the Sydney tabloid, *Sun* (for example, *Sun*, November 23, 1951, 12). Nelson continued in his role at *Tailor and Men's Wear* after he began working as the fashion columnist for *Man*.

As the columnists changed, so too did the presentation of fashion content. From the first column spanning a number of pages (*Man*, December 1936, 69–70, 72, 96), in January 1950 the column took up only half a page of text (*Man*, January 1950, 64). A year later, it had expanded again to spread across five pages. By then it incorporated a number of illustrations: of men in full ensembles and individual accessories (*Man*, January 1951, 66–68, 70–71). Photographs appeared in the column from May 1952 (*Man*, May 1952, 66). The column continued to contract and expand across the years to follow, as did the space dedicated to text or photographs. Paul B. Nelson introduced an extra feature entitled "Ask Mr. Nelson" in 1963. Men were invited to send him their clothing questions for which they would receive a "prompt answer" (*Man*, February 1963, 58). From 1965, a selection of these letters was published as part of "Tell Me, Mr. Nelson" (*Man*, February 1965, 65). By December that year, the column's photograph-rich pages were accompanied by brief captions, with the majority of the text in "Tell Me, Mr. Nelson" (*Man*, December 1965, 60–64).

That the magazine's readers shifted across these years is hardly surprising. Australian historians have shown that the magazine had become more uniformly suburban in its readership and less urbane in its content by the 1950s than had been the case when it first launched (Laurie 1998; Murphy 2000). Richard White (1979, 164) has argued that *Man*'s target reader transformed "from the young city sophisticate" of the 1930s to "the middle-aged, hen-pecked suburbanite" in the 1950s. Chelsea Barnett (2015) has extended this further, analyzing *Man*'s cartoons as a conception of Australian masculinity and gendered discontent. *Man* presented a "story of unhappy, frustrated men [that] challenged the suburban breadwinner model," Barnett

argues, problematizing the "manhood we usually understand as central to 1950s life."

By 1965 *Man*'s readers, as they appeared in the "Tell Me, Mr. Nelson" letters, spanned the continent: from men in Albany on the Western Australian coast and Launceston in the southern island state of Tasmania, to suburban Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. A small handful of female letter-writers also appeared. Some writers were young, such as seventeen-year-old "R. McG." who wrote to Nelson seeking guidance on what to wear for his first job in the public service (*Man*, March 1965, 65). Other correspondents were bachelors, while others still were older married men. For all of this diversity, the prevailing social demographic was white-collar. The writer from Adelaide who described himself as a builder was unusual. He wrote to say that he had noticed his mates wearing smarter workwear, and asked Nelson to elaborate on these trends for "fellows who work hard but want to look better" (*Man*, June 1966, 64). Many more questions came from men eager to learn about the latest news in suits.

As Frank Mort (1999) has noted in his study of the British menswear store Montague Burton, it is problematic that most discussions of postwar consumption treat what was happening in certain sectors of U.S. cultural and economic life as the yardstick against which all else is measured. Mort (1999, 57) warns against the "persistent tendency to over-generalisation" in studies of postwar consumption based on extrapolations of what was happening in cities such as New York or Los Angeles. In Mort's view, the best way to avoid this over-generalization is to be concrete rather than abstract. As soon as one considers developments such as "the crystallisation of a mass market in goods," the representation of commodities in advertising, and the implications for individuals' behaviors and subjectivities "at particular points in time and in limited settings," their piecemeal character becomes obvious. So does the diverse ways in which postwar developments in consumption played out in different localities (Mort 1999, 58). Thinking about how *Man*'s fashion writers framed men's consumption of dress for an Australian readership from 1950 to 1965 offers a way to contribute to this effort—all the more because of the counterpoint that the magazine provides to *Playboy*.

The role of commercial magazines in mediating between the interests of the corporations advertising in their pages and their perception of what appealed to their readers has been noted by media scholars (for example, Pendergast 2000). This mediatory role has led researchers of mid-century consumption to explore how particular magazines sought to shape their readers' views of certain commodities. This is another reason to take an interest in the fashion column in *Man*. While it is impossible to know how many men actually read this column or how they responded to its contents, it likely influenced a section of the magazine's readership's views of fabrics and clothes, especially when combined with

advertisements across the adjoining pages. Since they paid to advertise in *Man* and appear to have frequently provided the columnist with copy, numerous fiber and clothing manufacturers and industry groups such as the Australian Wool Board seemed convinced of the magazine's influence. *Man's* fashion column thus provides a valuable site through which to explore the Australian experience of the global fiber wars.

Why Focus on Australia in the Global Fiber Wars?

In her discussion of middle-class consumers in the United States, Jane Schneider (1994) traced the dramatic rise and spectacular fall of synthetics as part of the "global fiber competitions." Beginning in the 1950s and continuing for two decades to follow, Schneider (1994, 6) identified 1973 as the turning-point in synthetic fibers' fortunes as they fell from grace. Australia's role as the world's largest producer of wool gave it a particular stake in these global fiber competitions. Australia's 100 million sheep produced in excess of one-quarter of the world's wool. More significantly, Australia's merino wool dominated the global apparel market (AWB 1951, 87). That Australia rode "on the sheep's back" was an often-repeated phrase. Wool had driven the country's economic prosperity from the nineteenth century and remained its largest single industry and export product in the mid-twentieth century (Tsokhas 1990; Massy 2007).

The significance of wool to the national economy had prompted the Australian government to form the Australian Wool Board (AWB),[1] a statutory body representing the country's woolgrowers in 1936 (AWB 1937). The following year, the AWB joined with equivalent bodies representing New Zealand and South Africa to establish the International Wool Secretariat (IWS) in London. The leaders of these bodies were concerned about the catastrophic drop in world commodity prices during the Depression. They were also worried about the threat to the wool market posed by the first generation of synthetic fibers particularly rayon, a regenerated cellulosic fiber that boomed in the 1920s (Abbott 1997, 4–7; AWB 1946). The IWS was tasked with global wool promotion in the lucrative northern hemisphere markets (IWS 1987), while the AWB focused on Australia as synthetics production and marketing became increasingly sophisticated.

Though "man-made" fibers had been commercially manufactured from the turn of the century, it was only in the 1940s that the first "true synthetics" were produced. Beginning with nylon, chemical fibers expanded rapidly in the postwar period (Coleman 2003, 933, 944). The new artificial fibers were promoted as excitingly modern, harbingers of new possibilities in the postwar age (Handley 1999, 75). The aggressive promotion of synthetics by their key producers, Du Pont in the United States and Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) headquartered in Britain (with an Australia and New Zealand subsidiary), had an immediately

disruptive effect on global textile markets (Schneider 1994, 6). From 18% of the world's textile fiber production in 1950, synthetics for clothing, home furnishings and industrial uses increased to 41% in the space of two decades (Roberts 1973, 1).

The rapid developments in these "newer synthetic fibres" convinced the AWB in the early 1950s that global textile markets were poised on "the cusp of momentous change" (AWB 1953, 5; Massy 2007, 928). This recognition was intensified by the soaring wool prices triggered by American demand during the Korean War at the start of the decade (*Tailor and Men's Wear*, June 1950, 34; Shaw and FitzSimons 2019). While the boom was a windfall for wool growers in the short term, it fueled predictions of an accelerated use of synthetics and blends (*Man*, July 1951, 68). The AWB consequently played an increasingly active role in funding innovation in wool cloth improvements across the 1950s and 1960s by directing funds to the wool research laboratories at Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO).

The CSIRO-developed "Si-Ro-Set," a permanent pleating process for wool, the wrinkle-preventing "sironise," and similar treatments aimed at positioning these fabrics alongside synthetic and blended rivals with their easy-care qualities. Combining an emphasis on convenience and faith in science with wool's "traditional" strengths, including its ability to insulate the body against heat and cold, absorb moisture and resist flames, these fabrics promised their wearers a kind of moderated modernity in material form. Such textile innovations had broad implications for menswear, due to the degree to which wool was used in men's suits, sportswear and knitwear—or to put it another way, because of wool's place in being well-dressed.

Shifting Approaches to the Well-Dressed Man

In his exploration of Montague Burton's efforts to promote its menswear to consumers in the early postwar era, Mort (1999, 61) observed that an image of the gentleman functioned as a "clearly identifiable icon" in major British menswear company's advertising campaigns between the 1930s and mid-1950s. The gentleman represented "the peculiarly negotiated discourse of modernity preferred by many British [menswear] entrepreneurs." In Burton's advertisements, the gentleman was "a hybrid; a retailing compromise between traditional codes of social honour and more up-to-date, democratising influences." Though he was sometimes depicted "about town," he was otherwise portrayed *en route* to the office. His standard pose was "upright, if not stiff" (Mort 1999, 61). His typical garb was a suit, the "quintessential product" of the menswear industry (Mort 1999, 58).

Australian dress was not the same as Britain's. As far back as the first gold rushes of the 1850s, a trope had begun to develop in

Australian popular culture: practical, hard-working clothes worn by miners or bushmen striking poses of easy muscularity—far from stiff—were upheld as a form of distinctively colonial dress (Maynard 1994, 165–181). Tropical garb had long had a following in northern Australia: whether patrol jackets and trousers of white duck or drill worn in towns including Darwin, Broome and Townsville from the late nineteenth century (Bellanta and Cramer 2022; Lowrie 2018; Miles and Warren 2017), or the tussore silk suits popular from the turn of the 1900s (*Brisbane Courier*, November 9, 1899, 5).

Commentary around men's "dress reform" had circulated in Australia since the early twentieth century (*Bairnsdale Advertiser*, August 29, 1911, 4), following earlier discussions of reforming women's dress. These debates encouraged a move away from heavy suits to clothes made for comfort and better suited to the environment. They drew on international counterparts (Burke 1996; Burman 1995; Peoples 2011), but were influenced by local climactic conditions: the tropical humidity in the north and the hot dry summers in many other parts of the continent. In addition to these developments, Australian leisurewear influenced by clothes worn in California (Scott 2008) gathered momentum in the interwar years. This trend greatly expanded during the 1950s (Cramer 2021). By the end of that decade, the industry magazine *Tailor and Men's Wear* informed its retailer readership that a sports jacket with several pairs of trousers constituted "the main wardrobe of a great many Australians"—"for business" as well as for leisure (*Tailor and Men's Wear,* June 1959, 33).

In spite of this locally distinctive mix of factors, the notion of being a well-dressed man still exerted an appeal in Australia. Young bankers and sharebrokers in New South Wales goldfields towns had ushered in fashionable business wear with colonial flair in the 1870s (Bellanta 2017). A few decades later, suits had taken on a critical role in non-white men's assertion of masculine dignity (Bellanta and Cramer 2023), following the passing of the *Immigration Restriction Act* (1901), widely known as the White Australia Policy. Conservative Anglo-Australians still looked to Britain for the gentlemanly sartorial ideal, identifying the "mother country" with ideals of propriety, quality and elegance. *Man*'s first columnist, Phillip Lewis, had described the look of the "London gentleman" for his readers in the late 1930s (*Man*, April 1938, 113). At the same time, the trade journal *The Draper of Australasia* published monthly notes on "London Styles for Men" compiled by an author using the pseudonym "Saville Row" (*The Draper of Australasia*, January 31, 1939, 58–60).

When *Man*'s fashion columnists exhorted their readers to be "well-dressed" across the 1950s and 1960s, then, their rhetoric was underpinned by a local version of the gentlemanly ideal which nonetheless carried echoes of Britishness. Yet that ideal was in flux even in Britain at that time. As Mort (1999, 61) noted, the gentleman only remained a

consistent icon in advertising until the mid-1950s. Not surprisingly, this ideal was in even greater flux in Australia. It was not just that the country was rethinking its imperial loyalties after the war. There was an excitement about new sartorial styles for adolescents and young men associated with American popular culture, turbo-charged by the presence of hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops posted in Australian cities during the Pacific phase of the war (Stratton 1984). There was also an influx of Continental European immigrants in the postwar period, and at the same time Rome began to compete and arguably overtake London as the city most widely perceived within Australia as the mecca for menswear.

Man's "Well-Dressed" Man

Man's fashion writers might have invoked the old-fashioned ideal of the gentleman, yet what this meant in practice was flexible enough to accommodate more sartorial developments and styles than one might initially assume of the period. A lingering perception of the uniformity of the suit has likely contributed to fashion historians' relative lack of interest in Western menswear during the 1950s and 1960s, save for the dress of young men sporting subcultural styles. Attention has instead concentrated on dress in the preceding period of wartime austerity and its immediate aftermath (Biddle-Perry 2017; Cramer 2021; Bellanta and Cramer 2022; Howell 2013; McNeil 1993) or fashions in the mid-to-late 1960s: whether the proliferation of new youth styles or the increasingly individual expression evident in the "Peacock Revolution" in menswear (Hill 2018; Hrynyk 2015; Kutulas 2012; Paoletti 2015). Less has been said about the suits and other office wear of middle-class Western men across these years, however: the clothing supposedly revolutionized by "peacock" styling.

It is true that the magazine's columnists remained convinced that the suit was the last word in dressing smartly for men. In a column published in 1958, *Man's* fashion writer expressed his distaste for men who went to work at the office "dressed in clothes suitable only for week-end sports" (*Man*, January 1958, 62). The columnist also disparaged any man taking style cues from "bodgies," an Australian term for working-class youth influenced by the emerging rock'n'roll scene, occupying a subcultural terrain equivalent to that of Britain's Teddy Boys (Evans 1998; Stratton 1984; Trainer 2017). Since bodgies wore oversized jackets with exaggerated shoulders or banded cardigans with "yellow stove-pipes", they were the kind of "adventurer in taste" of whom *Man's* columnist disapproved (*Man*, January 1951, 66). When it came to suits, however, cultural values favoring "ease, comfort, and informality" (Blaszczyk 2006, 492) could be read in the recommendations *Man*'s fashion writer made to his readers about what it meant to be well-dressed.

The expanding market for items of apparel across these years affected what *Man*'s columnists wrote about suits. Underpinning this development was the notion that the "everyman's ideal wardrobe" should be more extensive than had been the case in previous decades (*Sun*, April 30, 1950, 4), fueled by new forms of advertising seeking to capture men's sartorial imaginations (Crawford 2008; see also, Jobling 2014). In Australia, the most significant spur for the growth of the suit market was the concept that a man should own several seasonally appropriate suits. This idea had only previously been normalized in Australia in tropical and semi-tropical sites. By 1950, and increasingly across that decade, more middle-class men in the far more populous and temperate regions of south-eastern Australia were also purchasing lightweight suits for the summer in addition to heavier suits geared toward cooler weather (*Tailor and Men's Wear*, January 1950, 19). This expansion of the suit market was evidently a factor in the decision of the AWB to direct more of its marketing attention and research-and-development funds to menswear, focusing on lightweight fabrics.

Apart from the greater comfort they offered in the heat, lightweight suits could be worn with more ease than the kind of structured stiffness linked to the "traditional" tailored broadcloth suit of earlier decades. This made them the ideal item to represent the modified notion of what it meant to be well-dressed. A more relaxed bodily posture was possible, for example, in the new style of drape suit made fashionable by Hollywood's leading men in the postwar period. When *Man*'s columnist wrote about the style in 1947, he aligned it with "a loosening-up tendency in the male fashion field" (*Man*, March 1947, 60). The drape suit created a "broad-chested and chunky looking" masculine silhouette (*Man*, April 1951, 66), but as this comment and accompanying illustration suggested, it also promised men greater freedom of movement.

"You are not poured into a suit these days," *Man*'s columnist explained in 1951, gesturing to suit styles favored in previous decades that were tailored to closely fit the body (*Man*, January 1951, 66). As the photograph of a salesman dating the year before indicates (Figure 1), the drape suit incorporated wide padded shoulders and a cut that flowed "from a 'natural slope' on the shoulder to a longer and smoother line over the body" (*Man*, January 1951, 66). Though the style had gone out of fashion in America by the start of the 1950s (Hill 2011, 215–216), *Man*'s columnist continued to refer to the drape of the suit's cut for years to follow for his Australian readers. It was not until 1957 that the columnist declared "the drape is out and the shape is in" (*Man*, June 1957, 84).

Over the course of the 1950s, the fashion for the drape suit gave way to other suits featuring a slimmer silhouette (*Man*, January 1958, 62). At the same time, Italy began to exert an increasing influence over Australian perceptions of fashion in menswear, most notably through the growing popularity of the "Continental Look" in suits by the end of

Figure 1
Max Dupain (photographer), 'Desk Projector, Salesman, and Businessman in Office', 14 August 1950. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, ON 559/Box 4/no. 422. Taken for an Australasian electronics manufacturing company rather than a fashion business, this image captured a salesman wearing a double-breasted drape suit like that illustrated in *Man*. The salesman modeled the easy bodily posture featured in promotional images of Australian men and male fashion across the 1950s and 1960s.

the decade (Figure 2). This influence had become so marked by 1965 that Nelson assured readers that Rome was "the style centre of the world" (*Man*, October 1965, 64). It is striking that the Italian influence was growing at the same time that an influx of Continental European, and particularly Italian, immigrants were arriving in Australia (Ricatti 2011). Yet, the increasing status of Rome and Milan as what Breward and Gilbert (2006) would call "fashion's world cities" was evident well beyond Australia's shores. Comprising a single-breasted jacket that was cut high, often with a three-button front and narrow lapels, the slim-line Continental Look was indeed popular in Britain (Mort 1996, 142–143) and the United States (Hill 2011, 217) as well as further abroad.

When Nelson described "the 1963 version" of the Continental Look (Figure 3), indicating the subtly-shifting form assumed by this fashion, he noted that the trouser legs that year were "tapered but not extremely so" (*Man*, April 1963, 54). The Continental Look fit the body in a "trim, uncluttered, and decidedly masculine" way, yet Nelson still emphasized ease of wear. Suits styled in the Continental Look were

Figure 2
Photograph for "Your Clothes: Light is right," *Man*, November 1960, 56. Courtesy: Are Media Pty Limited/aremedia syndication.com.au/*Man*. This slimline, three-button suit was an example made by "Australia's top manufacturers," the columnist noted, from "superfine, lightweight wools."

comfortable, he assured, thanks to minimal padding and typical use of summer-weight cloth (*Man*, January 1963, 55).

These shifts in what counted as a fashionable suit were one example of a greater dynamism to menswear than is often assumed of the mid-century years. More significant, however, was the growing emphasis on a different mode of comportment, and indeed of embodiment, accompanying depictions of the well-dressed man. Ease of movement played an important part in this mode of embodiment. So did the weight, texture and breathability of a suit's fabric, plus the feeling of self-confidence that came from wearing a good suit. The magazine's writers indeed developed new approaches for how to think about desirable menswear over the period, sparked by the increasing array of synthetic fabrics suitable for menswear but also by wool manufacturers' efforts to draw attention to their product's material qualities and *feel*.

Feeling Wool and Synthetics

In 1957, *Man*'s fashion writer published a column that read as if written by marketers at the Australasian subsidiary of the British-based chemical

Figure 3
Photograph for "Your Clothes: Dress up for the cold," *Man*, April 1963, 54. Courtesy: Are Media Pty Limited/ aremediasyndication.com.au/*Man*.

company Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI). That month's "Your Clothes" column was entitled "Wonder weave synthetics: the shape of things today." A photograph of a model dressed in a sharp suit, slimmer

in line from that worn in earlier years of the decade illustrated the column (Figure 4). In the accompanying text, the writer announced the arrival of "a new era in men's wear—the completely synthetic age." Synthetics might "be sneered at by dyed-in-the-wool fashion pundits," the columnist wrote, gesturing to men who placed greater stock in the quality of wool. Now, however, it was "possible for a man-about-town to be both smart and synthetic and have an entire wardrobe of durable, washable, crease-resistant non-iron clothes" (*Man*, April 1957, 84).

The grandiosity of the columnist's language—the dawning of a "new era," the launching of a "synthetic age"—mirrored the language used by the major synthetics' producers to promote artificial fibers in the mid-century. Whether in the form of "versatile" nylon, polyester's "superb

Figure 4
Photograph for "Your Clothes: Wonder weave synthetics: the shape of things today", *Man*, April 1957, 84. Courtesy: Are Media Pty Limited/ aremediasyndication.com.au/*Man*.

blending qualities," or "[l]ight and springy" acrylics, artificial fibers were portrayed as exciting testaments to "man's" ingenuity and ability to master the natural world through science and industry (Hill 2011, 218). As *Man*'s "Wonder weave synthetics" column made clear, artificial fibers were also marketed for being easy to wear, simple to wash and quick to dry: for what they *did* more than what they looked like (O'Connor 2005). The fast-drying, wrinkle-resistant features of mid-century synthetics were presented as the key to a newly carefree, no-fuss lifestyle both for their wearers and those responsible for keeping them clean: women, mostly, but also bachelors and commercial travelers, to whom *Man*'s columnists directed much of their advice.

The marketers at ICI Australia and New Zealand evidently saw *Man* as a home for their message. In addition to clothing companies such as Bisley, advertising shirts made from its "magic Nylopoplin 666" (*Man*, June 1957, 83) and sports trousers made from "Terylene 75" (*Man*, September 1957, 89), ICI Australia and New Zealand paid for many advertisements in *Man* across these years (for example, the inside back cover and back cover of the September 1957 and April 1963 issues). It also seemingly provided the writer with at least some of the copy appearing in the "Wonder weave synthetics" article. "Terylene is the bouncing 'baby' of Imperial Chemical Industries of Australia and New Zealand, Limited," *Man*'s columnist wrote, noting "It certainly looks like synthetics are the shape of things to come" (*Man*, April 1957, 85).

Though one would hardly guess from this puff-piece, the "Your Clothes" feature never presented a consistent pro-synthetics message. In previous years, the writer of the column had reported on the clamminess experienced by people wearing synthetic fabrics in warm weather, particularly as shirts. The writer noted that some men likened synthetic shirts to "a tin roof – cold in the winter and hot in the summer" in 1950 (*Man*, February 1950, 68). Two years later, he compared the feeling to "wearing oilskin instead of a shirt" (*Man*, July 1952, 66). Another two years passed before he denounced the early nylon shirts as "unsuccessful sweatbag[s]" (*Man*, May 1954, 64; see also, *Man*, July 1955, 81). Each of these descriptions vividly captured a sense of bodily discomfort for synthetics' wearers.

Wool continued to appear in the column across these years. In June 1957, the columnist paraphrased "Sydney manufacturer and clothes expert" Allan Huntington, saying that "[suit]makers have swung back to the new, durable, lighter weight worsteds which have a soft, live feel—a feature no synthetic can get" (*Man*, June 1957, 85). As the 1950s drew to an end, the AWB's influence started to become more evident in the "Your Clothes" column. The AWB's promotional activities had escalated over the decade. It had first concentrated its advertisements in metropolitan and rural newspapers, women's journals, radio campaigns and other marketing strategies including in-store promotions (AWB 1950, 6–13). The AWB began taking a more concerted interest in

menswear in the later years of the decade when it turned its attention to *Man*.

The first AWB advertisement appeared in the magazine in 1959. Without referring to synthetics explicitly, the advertisement alluded to their reputation for sweaty discomfort while foregrounding wool's ability to allow the body to perspire. "Man!," this advertisement exclaimed, "When you feel like a cat in a hot tin suit – get into wool and let your body breathe!" In hot weather, wool prevented "that clammy, sealed-in feeling," the AWB reassured *Man*'s readers (*Man*, August 1959, 63). This emphasis on wool's superior feel would have been instantly recognizable to many of the magazine's readers. Those who had grown up in Australia had long been schooled that the country's high-grade merino wool was the finest in the world. Yet woolgrowers and manufacturers were still concerned that consumers' familiarity with the fiber had led some to become "complacently forgetful" of its benefits amid the excitement surrounding synthetics after the mid-century (Lipson 1962, 547). This concern was part of what drove the pioneering British wool textile scientist John Speakman to promote the benefits of adopting a "common objective language" that would describe "the more elusive factors, including handle" of wool at an international wool research conference held in Sydney in 1955 (Massy 2007, 1097). Speakman was gesturing at the way wool felt in the hand though the use of this term, anticipating the definition of wool's "handle" to refer to its reaction to touch and degree of softness today (Massy 2007, 1193).

The developing relationship between *Man* and the AWB from the end of the 1950s saw more of its advertisements appearing in the magazine to alert readers to the "[w]onderful things" that were "happening to wool" (*Man*, May 1960, 59). At the same time, the AWB began to supply images and content tied to its promotional activities for "Your Clothes." These activities aimed to reposition a more modern and desirable image for the natural fiber: connecting consumer preference for Australian wool and its new, easy-care properties to contemporary fashion (AWB 1961, 8; see also, Ferrero-Regis 2020). The promotional activities in question included the Wool Fashion Awards, an AWB program introduced in the mid-1950s that recognized the best new designs and top-quality workmanship using Australian wool. Pertinently, these Awards included prizes for the designers of mens- as well as womenswear (AWB 1957, 12–13; *Man*, April 1964, 60–65). The AWB's activities also included a Men's Style Show introduced in 1960 (AWB 1961, 8–9). Nelson duly reported on these innovations in his column. He described the 1965 Wool Fashion Awards as "exciting, distinctive, comfortable" (*Man*, April 1965, 60), and the Men's Style Show held the same year as an "excellent showing of young-minded fashions" (*Man*, July 1965, 62).

Throughout its varied efforts to influence fashion writers, buyers and consumers alike in the 1950s and 1960s, the AWB conspicuously

avoided promoting blends of synthetic fibers with wool. Wool was "capable of holding its position on its own merits," the AWB maintained (AWB 1958, 3). This placed it somewhat out of step with the menswear market, in which a middle ground of textile blends such as cotton-nylon for shirts and wool-polyester for suits was gaining in breadth and prominence. Wool-Terylene suits entered the Australian market in 1957 and quickly rose in popularity—so much so that the AWB would respond by the end of the decade by funding innovations in the treatments of wool fibers that would mimic some of the "easy-care" qualities of Terylene. Amid these developments, *Man*'s columnists published commentaries in which they weighed up the benefit of blends against pure-wool suits and reported on a new generation of wool fabrics for their readership.

Lightweight, Easy-Care in Pure Wool or Blends

Man's fashion columnists had promoted the benefits of lightweight suits from the magazine's earliest issues (*Man*, February 1937, 71), yet in 1951, the "Your Clothes" columnist observed with frustration that this message had not been received. "If you're the average bloke you think dress reform (for which you yearn and do nothing about) is an extreme measure," he wrote disapprovingly, convinced that the "average" Australian man failed to distinguish "between a heavy tweed suit and slacks and a safari jacket" (*Man*, November 1951, 68). His desire for change was crucial to his many efforts to increase readers' material literacy over the 1950s. In 1957, these efforts included drawing attention to suits made from new lightweight "tropical worsteds"—fabrics that he described as "really soft to the touch"—or alternatively the emerging range of wool-Terylene blends (*Man*, December 1957, 64).

In the United States, the rise of synthetic-wool blends was critical to address the scarcity of wool which had led to pure-wool cloths being removed from "the mass-consumer range" during the Korean War (Handley 1999, 56, 68). Blends and synthetics also gained ground there because oil was the postwar base raw material to make synthetic fibers, and the United States was rich in oil (Schneider 1994, 6). For consumers, however, the key attraction of synthetic-wool blends was that they were seen to "represent the best of all worlds," combining the advantages of natural and man-made fibers in order to achieve "[h]igh technical performance, wide adaptability, and broad availability" (Blaszczyk 2006, 493). This was also the case in Australia.

When Terylene was mixed with wool, it made a suit more easily washable, faster to dry, more likely to retain crisp trouser-creases and indeed to avoid the need for ironing altogether. Like other blends such as the Terylene-viscose variant featured in *Man's* "Your Clothes" column in 1958 (*Man*, October 1958, 60) (Figure 5), Terylene-wool mixes reflected the alignment of lightweight cloths with technological and

Figure 5
Photograph for "Your Clothes: Drip'n dry summer," Man, October 1958, 60. Courtesy: Are Media Pty Limited/ aremediasyndication.com.au/*Man*. The Terylene-viscose suit at the center of this image had detachable shoulder pads so that it could be washed and pressed at home.

social change: the increasing use of washing machines; advances in indoor heating and heated transport that reduced the need for heavy woolen cloths; and shorter working weeks shifting attention from business wear to informal leisure and sports clothing made from fibers other than wool (Gutman and Fead 1962, 563–564). *Man*'s fashion writers indeed echoed these points in the "Your Clothes" column. They described the blended suits as smart and cool, combining comfort with professionalism, in line with advertisers' claims.

Even as they did so, it was clear that *Man*'s columnists never lost their interest in pure wool suits. As the initial enthusiasm for blends stabilized and the scientific work on wool advanced to enhance the natural fiber with modern attributes, *Man's* columnists refocused on suits of improved wool as part of what it was to be well-dressed. In 1960, the "Your Clothes" writer assured readers that new applications of science to wool meant that the fiber now possessed all of the modern "advantages hitherto claimed by the synthetics" even as it retained "all

its advantages of good hang, long wear, heat- and cold-repelling factors and amenable disposition" that Australian men had long known and trusted (*Man*, October 1960, 54). Five years later, Nelson published a letter in his "Tell Me, Mr. Nelson" feature, sent by "B.M." in Fremantle, asking: "With all this talk about synthetics and blends, can I still buy a pure wool suit?" "Nothing has the soft, warm feel of wool," Nelson reminded the letter's writer. Australia's woolen mills were producing very lightweight cloth that rivaled Terylene-wool blends, he explained, while wool suits remained "the very best garments you can buy for cooler weather" (*Man*, June 1965, 65).

Permanent pleating for wool cloth was a key technological advance at the start of the 1960s. The AWB had flagged this as a research priority after observing the eager embrace by consumers of the crisp crease of a Terylene-wool trouser leg (AWB 1957, 12). The "Si-Ro-Set" chemical treatment offered the equivalent for wool (AWB 1959, 17), adding "another string to [wool's] bow," as the AWB put it for *Man*'s readers (*Man*, November 1960, 55). The Australian-developed process reflected the CSIRO's move into wool textile science as a result of funding it received through woolgrowers' levies (Massy 2007, 1081). "Si-Ro-Set"s international launch was spearheaded by the IWS in 1958–1959 (AWB 1959, 17). It was quickly adopted by Australian manufacturers: by 1959–1960, 34 Australian firms had been licensed to use the "Si-Ro-Set" process (AWB 1960, 8).

Another development was silicone-coated wool that left clothing water and stain resistant. *Man*'s fashion writer attended a demonstration in which "glasses of wine and spirits were thrown over worsted suits" made of the treated wool. The audience watched as they "ran off the fabric leaving no apparent stains" (*Man*, September 1956, 85). The "sironise" treatment was a still further development. This process prevented wrinkles and reduced the need to iron woolen cloth after washing. Other easy-care advances in shrink-proofing and moth-proofing further positioned wool alongside those desirable "miracle" qualities previously possessed only by synthetics (AWB 1961, 8; Lipson 1962, 547–548; *Man*, October 1960, 54). Aware of claims by manufacturers of Terylene suits that their products were perfect for the commercial traveler as they unpacked wrinkle-free, the AWB confidently declared in a 1960 advertisement in *Man* that pure wool suits now "travel like a cloud." The advertisement assured *Man*'s readers that the new wool suits could be packed and unpacked, retaining their crisp creases while unwanted lines dropped out as the cloth "revitalize[d] itself overnight" (*Man*, May 1960, 59).

Man's columnists had long encouraged their readers to remain alert to "[t]exture, colour, cut, ability to hold shape and creases, wearability and durability," reminding them that above all else "quality is what counts" (*Man*, May 1953, 66). They continued to incorporate suits of pure wool, blends and synthetics into the "Your Clothes" column, taking

their own earlier advice that "there isn't any law to say that you aren't well dressed unless you wear wool" (*Man*, May 1953, 66). A leaning toward "new and improved" wool, however, became unmistakable. "We won't take sides," the columnist assured *Man*'s readers in 1960, "except to say that a fine, pure wool cloth has more admirers among good dressers than any other fabric" (*Man*, November 1960, 54).

Conclusion

The struggle between wool and synthetics played out across the pages of *Man* beyond 1965, though not with the same intensity as it did in the decade and a half when *Man*'s fashion columnists repositioned the value of suits in dressing well against the rising tide of informality. In directing readers to focus on the cloth from which their suits were made, *Man*'s fashion writers asked readers to consider how suits felt on and interacted with their bodies. Just as they showed readers that wearing suits of improved wool balanced modernity with tradition and convenience with quality, so too they suggested wool cloths balanced the possibilities for cool, comfortable ease with a professionalism that could generate self-confidence. Though it was the AWB who promised *Man*'s readers as the 1960s began, "[w]hen you're best dressed you're wearing wool" (*Man*, October 1960, 61), it was the fashion columnists who had effectively built an attractive, desirable and modern image of the natural fiber for Australian consumers of menswear enticed by the new. *Man*'s columnists had also given these men the tools to help judge the quality of the clothes they wore through being attentive to their material form.

By adopting an Australian focus, attending to men's suits and foregrounding masculine material literacy, this discussion has offered a nuanced picture of the mid-century global fiber competitions. This competition was felt particularly keenly in Australia. This was because Australian pride for the nation's fine wool helped to ensure a continued attraction for fabrics made from this natural fiber, even as the market share of its artificial rivals and blends that combined "the best of both worlds" increased. The rise of wool fabrics marketed as uniting the fiber's natural advantages with those of "modern science" better positioned wool to complete with these rivals. Whether the fibers were coated in silicone or the cloth was treated with the "Si-Ro-Set" or "sironise" process, they refused to fit into the distinction that Kaori O'Connor (2005, 45) has drawn between artificial and natural fibers: the first "created 'to order'" and the second "basically 'as found'." The wool altered by the CSIRO and promoted by the AWB contained aspects of both. One might argue that these treated woolen fibers were the materialization of a hope that the "tradition" represented by wool might be used to temper the "modernity" embodied by synthetics.

Note

1. The Australian Wool Board (1936–1953) changed name to the Australian Wool Bureau (1953–1963), then reverted back to the Australian Wool Board (1963–1972). Since it carried out very similar functions of working on behalf of Australia's woolgrowers across these years, we refer to both the Board and Bureau as the AWB.

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