Masculinity and fashion are awkward companions. The very phrase ‘men's fashions’ verges on oxymoron since fashion has long been gendered feminine. Fashion connotes instability, irrationality, and willing submission to the dictates of its mysterious and arbitrary authorities. These are hardly characteristics one associates with conventional notions of manliness, least of all during the Victorian period when gender definitions were particularly polarized. We all have a vivid mental image of the hyper-differentiated gender distinctions of Victorian dress – women’s colourfully curvaceous with the aid of crinoline and corsetry, men’s drably linear from stove-pipe hat to spats. Thorstein Veblen famously based his economic theory of conspicuous consumption on the excesses of Victorian women’s fashion. The curves and colours varied; waistline and necklines fluctuated, but the demands it made on quantities of costly fabric, and on the time of both maker and wearer, remained symbolically high so as to advertise the status of the woman who wore and the man who paid for its excess. In contrast, men’s dress particularly after the era of the Dandy ended around 1840 is generally thought of as being fairly stable in appearance, conveying the impression of seriousness and sobriety appropriate to the bourgeois male while emphasising the functionality and mobility of the arms and legs as opposed to the immobilizing implications of women’s dress.

Men were not expected to give much thought to their dress. To do so, or to dress as though one did, implied insufficient attention to more important matters. The ‘best dressed man,’ according to that notable authority on Victorian manliness, Thomas Hughes, ‘is he whose attire sits on him with careless and apparently unstudied simplicity.’ (Hughes 1885, 179) Advice on dress in men’s conduct books consistently placed greatest emphasis on neatness and above all cleanliness, particularly at the extremities – clean gloves, clean shoes, immaculate collar and cuffs, well brushed hat. Cleanliness was both acceptably functional for its associations with good health, and an effective status signal given the costs of maintaining it amidst the
manure-strewn streets and smoke-laden skies of a horse-drawn, coal-burning civilization. While warning his readers that whoever paid too much attention to dress would become ‘the laughing stock of his own sex,’ Hughes saw fit to devote 15 pages of his handbook to the subject of men’s dress. It is evident that like him many Victorian men paid considerable attention to dress. That they did so was vitally important to the livelihood of the tailoring trade. Reconciling fashion with the ideology of masculinity was central to its prosperity. How it did so is the subject of this chapter, which focuses on Tailor and Cutter, the leading journal of the tailoring trade.

Tailor and Cutter commenced publication in 1866 as the Tailor, a news sheet serving as a national clearing house for information concerning trade practices, local scales of time required for piece work (known as the ‘log’), labour disputes and agreements in various parts of Britain. The Cutter and Index of Fashion began in 1868 as a separate paper directed towards the trade’s elite, the specialists who make up the customer’s pattern according to his measurements and then cut the cloth by that pattern for journeyman tailors to sew up. The two papers amalgamated officially with the 9 October 1869 number and continued as a weekly under the name of Tailor and Cutter until May 1936. It also came out as a monthly under several different titles during its 69 year existence. As an ‘insider’s’ publication, it takes fashion for granted to a certain degree and is by no means hostile to it. Nonetheless it demonstrates an awareness of the problematics of men’s fashion, offering strategies that position the tailor-reader, the beneficiary of fashion, as an honest broker between fashion’s mystified origins and his suspicious customers. One of the first things to impress the attentive reader of Tailor and Cutter may well be the surprising variety of Victorian gentlemen’s clothing, and the inadequacy of John Flugel’s often-quoted summary of it as ‘the great masculine renunciation’ – a retreat from the manly panache of Dandyism into the oppressive conformity of the subfusc suit. To be sure, the variations in Victorian men’s fashion are less dramatic than those in women’s, but compared to the limited range through which men’s formal, semi-formal and business fashions differ today, its variety was remarkable. But much of that variety turned on nuances and details which do not necessarily leap off the page and capture the uneducated eye. Students of Sherlock Holmes will recall how closely the great detective scrutinized the minutiae of dress that revealed so much about a man. [Longhurst 60] There was indeed much minutiae to scrutinize. Going from the top down, the detachable collar allowed great variety in collar height and style, quite apart from the late-Victorian advent of the fold-over collar and the softer, unstarched collar. Tie widths varied considerably as did the variety of knots, with rather more of the bow type than today. Tie patterns varied less since much less tie was exposed given the universality of the waistcoat, which had to be fully buttoned. The waistcoat itself, however, was the field of greatest opportunity for variety of colour and pattern.