

## Stitched into History: A Brief Review of Some Tailors' Labels in Academic Dress

By Stephen Wolgast

What tales do tailors tell? In the cut of the clothes and the drape of the cloth are stories that come together like grammar and syntax to express the style of the person wearing them. Messages like these are seen from the outside. Your friends recognize you in your favourite blazer because when you wear it, the blazer becomes part of who you are. When you get home and hang it up in your wardrobe, it is just another navy jacket with shiny buttons. Yet if you look inside the blazer, seeking not the thread count or the dry cleaning instructions, you may find a story in the tag with the tailor's name on it.

Labels never meant much to me other than as a mark of how much a person paid for an outfit. So when I visited the archives of the Science Museum in London, I selected gowns to view based on their age and how unusual they seemed or how colourful they promised to be.

When I arrived at the Museum's archives, in Blythe House, West Kensington, in October 2016 with my colleague Alex Kerr, we were shown into a conservator's room with an array of gowns laid out before us on massive steel tables which were covered to protect the garments we were shown. Donning cotton gloves, we were allowed to inspect the gowns, hoods and caps gingerly, as many had started falling apart after what must have been considerable use decades ago. Looking closely at various yokes and trimmings, I would turn to the label, where the Museum added the item's catalogue number. The prominent robemakers' names were well represented, but also there were some I had never seen before, and one that promoted its gold medal-winning atelier, which tickled my interest into finding out more. After returning home, I visited the costume archive at my university and found a few more labels with stories waiting to be told.

This report of my excursions is far from a thorough examination into the makers of academic dress. I think of it instead as just cracking open a door into a different way of looking into the history of academic dress, seen outside the usual context of university pageant and from the perspective of the robemaker. What did these firms want their clients to remember about them?

The shop's signature is its label, and like signatures some are neat, some are spare, and others are rather grand. Unlike signature, luckily, labels are reliably legible, though few offer details beyond an address and an obvious description, such as 'tailor'. Take for example the label in the doctoral gown worn by the president of Kansas State University, James A. McCain (Figs 1, 1A).<sup>1</sup> The maker, John Burton Ltd, would appear to be British

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The author is indebted to Alex Kerr for his review of the many details in this article and for strengthening it throughout.

<sup>1</sup> 'Gown, Academic', No. 2013.1.1a, 'worn by James McCain', Historic Costume and Textile Collection, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kan.



FIG. 1 (Left) John Burton Ltd, of Secunderabad, India, 1967, maker of Intercollegiate Code doctoral gown, with black trim, for James A. McCain. FIG. 1A (Right) The V-shaped folds over the yoke come to a point that does not meet exactly the peak of the skirt's fluting.

from the description of its business as 'Limited' rather than the 'Company' or 'Incorporated' one would expect of a gown made to the specifications of the Intercollegiate Code and worn by an American. Was it made in the UK?

Far from it. Secunderabad, the location noted on the label, turns up in India, in the state of Telangana, where it is described as the twin city of Hyderabad. McCain, who earned his EdD from Stanford in 1948, received an honorary DSc from Andra University, in Visakhapatnam, in 1967.<sup>2</sup>

Secunderabad has a British connection: it was founded in the early nineteenth century as a British cantonment. As a shop for the British in south-central India, John Burton Ltd was likely to provide more than bespoke suits, as 'outfitters' would suggest in its description as 'tailors & outfitters', but the shop itself does not appear to exist any more. An internet search will take one down the wrong path, to Auckland, where John Burton Ltd is a 79-year-old coffee and tea importer. While the firm's age makes it tempting to imagine a strapping New Zealander clearing hillsides in the 1940s for his coffee plantation, then popping into town to supply expats with tea, jodhpurs, and even the occasional academic kit for the gent who left his hood back in England, the scenario is fanciful. Alas, the John Burton Ltd of Auckland did not come into existence under that name until 1985, nearly two decades after the gown was first worn. The firm started in 1936 as H. E. Burton Ltd and was sold to a French company in 1982, and says it has no connection to a tailor and outfitter in India.<sup>3</sup>

2 'James A. McCain', Kansapedia, Kansas Historical Society, at <[www.kshs.org/kansapedia/james-a-mccain/19748](http://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/james-a-mccain/19748)> [retrieved 25 June 2017]; 'James A. McCain', Office of the President, University of Montana, at <[www.umt.edu/president/people/pastpresidents/mccain.php](http://www.umt.edu/president/people/pastpresidents/mccain.php)> [retrieved 25 June 2017]. He served as president at Montana from 1945 to 1950, and as president of Kansas State from 1950 to 1975. Date of honorary degree from correspondence with University Archivist Cliff Hight, Kansas State University, citing *Who's Who 1978-79*, 26 June 2017. The university was also known as Andra Pradesh State University, alternatively spelled Andhra.

3 'History', John Burton Ltd, at <[johnburton.co.nz/history/](http://johnburton.co.nz/history/)> [retrieved 25 June 2017]. A representative of the firm confirmed by email that it is not connected to the business of the same

FIG. 2 Ede, Son & Ravenscroft label on case for 1909 Birmingham LLD of Sir Charles Tomes, at the Science Museum, London. It is one of three label styles on the kit made for Charles S. Tomes.



FIG. 2A Museum conservator Bryony Cairncross with Ede case, black bonnet and hood.



FIG. 2B The watered silk lining of bonnet matches the hood lining and shows a different style of label.



FIG. 2C (Left) The third style of Ede label appears in Tomes' gown.



FIG. 3 Ede, Son & Ravenscroft label from 1902, in Dame Mary Scharlieb's MD gown.

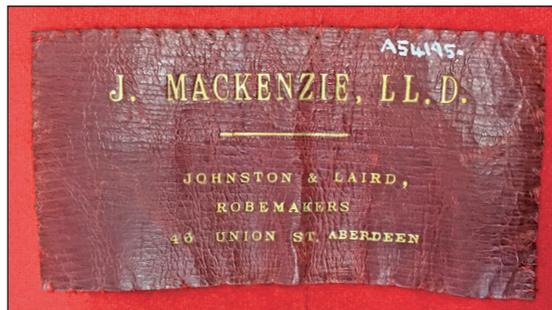


FIG. 4 Johnson & Laird Aberdeen LLD gown, c. 1910, for Sir James Mackenzie

Most labels do not take us nearly so far from home. One in particular would make a splendid gift for the Burgon member who has everything: It is attached to a metal case for a set of academic clothes, identifying its source as Chancery Lane, London (Fig. 2).

The case and contents accompany the gown of the honorary LLD from Birmingham of dental surgeon Sir Charles Tomes, from 1909.<sup>4</sup> The label is familiar to everyone who follows academic dress, but the reason this one stands out, aside from the older name of Ede, Son & Ravenscroft, are the dimensions.<sup>5</sup> At nearly 5" x 3", the label's printed script is

name in India. Email correspondence with Fiona Carlson, 25 June 2017.

4 The gown, hood, bonnet, and case are identified as RC61304, Science Museum, but a query on the Museum's web site returns no result. Instead, they can be found at <<http://collection.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects/co179238/sir-charles-tomes-lld-robles-london-england-1909-academic-robe>> (or by the shortened url <http://bit.ly/2uj9fPr>) [both retrieved 28 June 2017]. Tomes (1846–1928), 'was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1878 and later became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England in 1909. Tomes was knighted in 1919 for his pioneering dental research', according to the Museum's web page.

5 Alex Kerr points out that the firm has changed its name over the years:

Joseph Ede:	1848 –	Ede, Son & Ravenscroft:	1902 –
Ede & Son:	1868 –	Ede & Ravenscroft:	1921 –

finer than possible with embroidery, and extensive enough to include references to Ede's appointments to the King (Edward VII), Queen Alexandra, and the Prince of Wales, and a full-colour depiction of an achievement of the royal arms. While the gown is now kept separately to preserve it, the case was meant to contain it with the hood and bonnet (Fig. 2A). Of note in the dress is the bronze green watered silk that trims not only the gown and hood but also the lining of the bonnet, where the label is much smaller and printed on the silk (Fig. 2B). Inside the gown, the label is embroidered on cloth and lists accolades similar to those on the case's label with the addition of the badge of the Prince of Wales but with thread in only one colour, golden yellow (Fig. 2C). The firm's name is arched across the label, along with the words 'Robe Makers', not unlike the arched yoke of a proper gown. The letters' curved baseline is a typographic style common today, with computer programs that offer countless variations that require no special skill to create, but it was far less common when it took a practised eye to pull off neatly.

In fact, only a few years earlier the label in another Ede, Son & Ravenscroft gown has lettering that is arranged on straight baselines: it is entirely horizontal. Dame Mary Scharlieb's MD gown dates from *c.* 1902 (Fig. 3).<sup>6</sup>

Another label offers far less detail. In addition to their name and trade, the robemakers Johnston & Laird included only their address in Aberdeen on the label in their Aberdeen LLD gown for the medical researcher Sir James Mackenzie (Fig. 4). Dated *c.* 1910, the leather label includes Mackenzie's name printed on it.<sup>7</sup>

While some labels leave little more information than a calling card, others are far more interesting as they are jammed with details and even illustrations, one of which is in the Science Museum collection.

Arranged on this 1927 Scottish label (Fig. 5) are three typefaces in six sizes on straight and curved baselines with words in all-caps and small caps, along with depictions of both sides of two medals and a bit of scrollwork, all inside two boxes, done up in gold and printed on crimson leather.<sup>8</sup> If Twitter had been invented a century ago, the information inside this Aberdeen LLD gown would have needed two tweets,<sup>9</sup> assuming you had inserted the medals as art instead of text, reprinted in Chart 1.

For a clothing label, that text is practically a novella. But wait, wasn't that a reference to a gold medal—for robes? And not just one among many gold medals for robes, but the 'only' one (Fig. 5A). Quite an accomplishment, one that draws attention to the National Exhibition of Industry, Art and Science, hosted by Edinburgh in 1886 and again four years later, and why it would recognize excellence in robemaking. The exhibition was part of the series of events that became known as the World's Fair, and in fact termed itself Interna-

<sup>6</sup> The gown and hood, bonnet, and square cap are identified as A635938 at the Science Museum.

<sup>7</sup> Item No. A54195, described by the Science Museum as including 'black velvet cap, hood with pale blue lining and scarlet gown with pale blue lining ...' Mackenzie (1853–1925) earned his MD from Edinburgh in 1882 and was a pioneer in the study of cardiac arrhythmias. 'Sir James Mackenzie', Encyclopaedia Britannica, online at <[www.britannica.com/biography/James-Mackenzie](http://www.britannica.com/biography/James-Mackenzie)> [retrieved 3 July 2017]. He was awarded the LLD by Aberdeen in 1910. Repository: Royal College of General Practitioners GB2134 Collection: GB/2134/ B MCK SIR JAMES MACKENZIE (1870 to 1987). Thanks to Nicholas Groves for providing this citation.

<sup>8</sup> Academic cap, gown, and hood in box, item No. A635930, Science Museum.

<sup>9</sup> Minus the text on the medal depictions, the character count is 244, or one and <sup>104</sup>/<sub>140</sub> tweets.



FIG. 5 R. W. Forsyth label in a 1927 Aberdeen LLD gown.

tional rather than merely National, as the label and its reproduced medallions suggest.

For decades, large European and American cities had been hosting fairs to promote consumer goods and manufacturing advances at what were essentially trade shows that were dressed up to appeal to visitors regardless of their interest in production efficiency. In 1886, three other exhibitions drew crowds to demonstrations of international shipping, in Liverpool; colonial and Indian trade, in London; and art, in Folkestone.<sup>10</sup> If you notice a certain tendency in geographic locations, you are not alone. Of the forty-seven exhibitions around the world from 1880 to 1886, eighteen were held in England with all but two of those in London, a list that demonstrates important advances of the day: electric lighting (1880), smoke abatement (1881), fisheries (1883), and inventions and music (1885). While the second industrial revolution made England a natural base from which to show off manufacturing advances, the rest of the Western world took part as well. The intrepid traveller could visit such fairs in Adelaide (1881), Christchurch (1882), New Orleans and Prague (both 1883), Marseille and Turin (1884), and the list goes on. Notably, the only host city outside the UK, US, Europe, Australia and New Zealand in



FIG. 5A Detail: 'The Only Gold Medal for Robes' from the 1886, 1890 International Exhibition of Science, Industry and Art, in Edinburgh.

<sup>10</sup> The complete list is at Ken Harman, 'A List of World Expositions, Part 2: 1878–1904', at <[www.studygroup.org.uk/Archives/38/A%20LIST%20OF%20WORLD%20EXHIBITIONS.htm](http://www.studygroup.org.uk/Archives/38/A%20LIST%20OF%20WORLD%20EXHIBITIONS.htm)> [retrieved 2 July 2017]. Not everyone agrees on which of these early productions should be counted as a precursor to the World's Fair; the World's Fair Collection at the Henry Madden Library of Fresno State University excludes the 1886 art exhibit from its list at <<http://guides.library.fresnostate.edu/c.php?g=289187&p=1928035>> [retrieved 1 July 2017].

## Chart 1

R. W. Forsyth Limited  
(James Middlemass & Co Incorporated)  
Robe Makers  
Edinburgh & Glasgow

[*Medal on left:*]

The only gold medal for robes

[*Text on medal obverse:*]

National Exhibition  
Industry Sciences & Art  
Edinburgh 1886

[*Caption:*]

Edinburgh 1886  
Edinburgh 1890

[*Medal on right:*]

Award Silver Prize Medal

[*Text on medal obverse:*]

Republique Francais [*sic*]

[*Text on medal reverse, partially obscured:*]

... International

Paris

[*Caption:*]

Paris Exhibition 1878  
Kimberley 1892

Professor M. Hay, M.D. L.L.D.

these years was Calcutta, whose International Exposition in 1883–84 drew 1 million visitors, a rather sparse turnout for such an event.<sup>11</sup>

The attraction of bringing large crowds to a demonstration of trades proved irresistible to civic leaders outside large capitals. The municipal élite in Edinburgh, among other cities, cultivated support for their exhibition with promises that call to mind the modern efforts to lure the Olympic games to one metropolis over another. But unlike the modern Olympics and their inclusion of participants from nearly every country on the planet, the international exhibitions tended to draw exhibitors from much closer to home. Without a governing body to approve the title ‘International’, exhibition organisers adopted it freely. Yet with eight other exhibitions in 1885 and 1886 in five countries across three continents, it is hard to imagine that many firms could afford to arrange displays simultaneously and far from home. Whatever the reason, the result was an exhibition of ‘preponderantly Scottish origins, and the strong showing of Edinburgh firms amongst them, [which] undermined any claims to true international status.’<sup>12</sup>

11 Harnan. Both the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial, in New Orleans in 1884–85, and the Exposition Universelle d’Anvers, in Antwerp in 1885, drew an attendance of about 3.5 million, while the Colonial and Indian Exposition in London in 1886 drew 5.5 million.

12 George Wilson Smith, ‘Displaying Edinburgh in 1886: the International Exhibition of Industry, Science and Art’ (doctoral dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2015), p. 155. At <www.era

For the Edinburgh and Glasgow robemaker R. W. Forsyth, the lack of global competition is likely to have increased its chances of receiving the only gold medal for robes. Exhibitions bestowed various awards in part to give them some scientific credence.<sup>13</sup> But why a medal for robes in the first place? The question is unanswered in its specifics,<sup>14</sup> but at the exhibitions robes were not only judged but worn by some participants. An illustration of the 1882 Fisheries Exhibition at Waverley Market shows in one of its panels 'Professor Blackie & the Town Clerk', the professor in his square cap and flap-collared gown (they are shown from the back).<sup>15</sup>

The presence of the town clerk brings up a point to consider: an award for robes was likely to include on its recognition robes besides those of academics. When Queen Victoria visited the Edinburgh International Exhibition in August 1886, '150 municipal representatives turned out in a gorgeous array of municipal robes, legal gowns, military uniforms and Court dress'.<sup>16</sup> To mark the Queen's visit, local notables organized a nighttime procession, one which left the *Dispatch* swooning:

In no other home of living men ... could so fine effects of height, of space, of romantic boldness and variety of outline be found; nowhere the stature, the air and the majesty to carry and to grace those jewelled robes of many-coloured lights.<sup>17</sup>

We don't know which robes they were, or even if 'those jewelled robes of many-coloured lights' is a figurative description, but we read that the *Evening News* was less impressed, comparing the procession unfavourably to the tercentenary of the University of Edinburgh, in 1882, whose ceremonial would have at the least included academic dress.<sup>18</sup>

The success of the exhibition, with 2.7 million visits and a profit of £5,555, led organizers to stage another one four years later, in 1890. Forsyth claimed another victory for its robes that year, but the exhibition fared poorly in part because it was held west of Edinburgh, at Meggetland, and required a journey by horse-tram to visit. The event lost money and was the last international exhibition Edinburgh hosted.<sup>19</sup>

While the attendance at a fair is an unlikely fact to appear in this journal, it shows that a titbit of information can expand our view of the popular perception of academic dress—or, at the least, robes. The owner of the one in question, Matthew Hay, received it

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.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/11771> [retrieved 2 July 2017].

13 Smith, p. 36.

14 The answer may well be out there. The author was surprised by the amount of information, both popular and scholarly, that is available about World's Fairs and their predecessors and hopes that someone else may make a more complete study of it.

15 Reproduced in Smith, p. 37, from *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 22 April 1882, p. 136. The Waverley Market, in Edinburgh, is now The Waverley Mall but was a market in the nineteenth century, between Princes Street and Waverley Station. 'Waverley Market', EdinPhoto.org.uk, at <[www.edinphoto.org.uk/1\\_edin/1\\_edinburgh\\_history\\_-\\_recollections\\_waverley\\_market.htm](http://www.edinphoto.org.uk/1_edin/1_edinburgh_history_-_recollections_waverley_market.htm)> [retrieved 3 July 2017].

16 Smith, p. 235. Not to be outdone, 'Provost Macandrew of Inverness def[ied] convention to appear in Highland costume.' *Ibid.* No word on medals handed out for tartans. See fn. 14.

17 19 Aug. 1886, quoted in Smith, p. 239.

18 The procession 'did not rival in extent, in variety, or in brilliance the display at the University Tercentenary', 19 Aug. 1886, p. 2, quoted in Smith, p. 239, n. 112.

19 Statistics from 1886: Smith, Table 6-1, p. 280. Outcome of 1890 exhibition: Peter Stubbs, 'Edinburgh Events', EdinPhoto, at <[www.edinphoto.org.uk/1\\_edin/1\\_edinburgh\\_events.htm](http://www.edinphoto.org.uk/1_edin/1_edinburgh_events.htm)> [retrieved 1 July 2017].



FIG. 6 Thomas A. Peterson bachelor's gown, c. 1980.

with an honorary LLD from Aberdeen in 1927, towards the end of an impressive career. Born in 1855, 'Hay graduated in medicine at Edinburgh University in 1878 and proceeded MD in 1881. He was elected an honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland in 1898 ... was Professor of Forensic Medicine at Aberdeen from 1882 to 1926 and Medical Officer of Health for Aberdeen from 1888 to 1923.'<sup>20</sup>

By comparison, the tale to be unravelled from the next label is patchy (Fig. 6). The maker, Thomas A. Peterson, is no longer in business but when it was, in Kansas City, Missouri, it was one of the few outside the northeast or Chicago.<sup>21</sup> Records on the firm are scant, though an internet search turns up the predictably large number of men with the same name. Thomas A. Peterson the robemaker appears to have been in business as early as 1941 and as late as 1987, when the gown was worn. The label before us is on a bachelor's gown made for off-the-peg purchase (or, more accurately, folded-and-wrapped-in-plastic purchase) as we can see from the range of heights it is intended for. Of interest is the little shield in the middle of the label, which depicts a young woman in her cap, gown and white collar, along with the aspirational legend 'veritas' inscribed on a scroll.<sup>22</sup>

It was not the only woman's visage to identify an American robemaker. The best known of them all, Cotrell & Leonard, promoted the Intercollegiate Code—and sales of its

<sup>20</sup> 'Professor Matthew Hay's academic cap, gown and hood in a box, Scotland, 1927', Science Museum, at <<http://collection.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects/co179032/professor-matthew-hays-academic-cap-gown-and-hood-in-box-scotland-1927-academic-robe>> [retrieved 25 June 2017]. The 'box' resembles a fairly ordinary suitcase of the time and is nothing so grand as the Ede case for Charles Tomes.

<sup>21</sup> Indeed, its location was just over an hour's drive from the author's boyhood home, though his interest at the time lay more in Royals baseball and wearing the team's jersey than anything academic.

<sup>22</sup> Gown, academic, Item No. 1988.9.1a, Historical Costume and Textile Museum, Kansas State University; worn in 1987. Thomas A. Peterson's history: from 1941, 'News Notes of Local Happenings', *The Chillicothe (Missouri) Constitution-Tribune*, 7 Feb. 1941, p. 9, at <[www.newspapers.com/newspage/2791851/](http://www.newspapers.com/newspage/2791851/)> [retrieved 2 July 2017]. Another reference places the firm in Indianapolis with an incorporation date of 1927, but whether it is the same firm, and later moved to Kansas City, is unclear. <<https://aboutus.com/PetersOncaPandGown.com>> [retrieved 20 July 2017]. A Peterson hood is kept at another museum: 'Academic Hood of Nesby Moore, Jr.', Missouri History Museum, item No. 2014-051-0001, at <<http://collections.mohistory.org/resource/214637>> [retrieved 2 July 2017].



**COTRELL & LEONARD,**  
Albany, N. Y.  
472 & 474 BROADWAY,  
Inter-Collegiate Makers of  
**CAPS, GOWNS & HOODS.**  
Class Contracts a Specialty.  
Particulars on Application.  
Official Makers to Columbia University,  
Office: Room 9, 54 East 49th Street.

FIG. 7 Cotrell & Leonard newspaper advertisement in the *Columbia Spectator*, 20 Nov. 1890, p. vii, also depicts a woman in cap and gown.

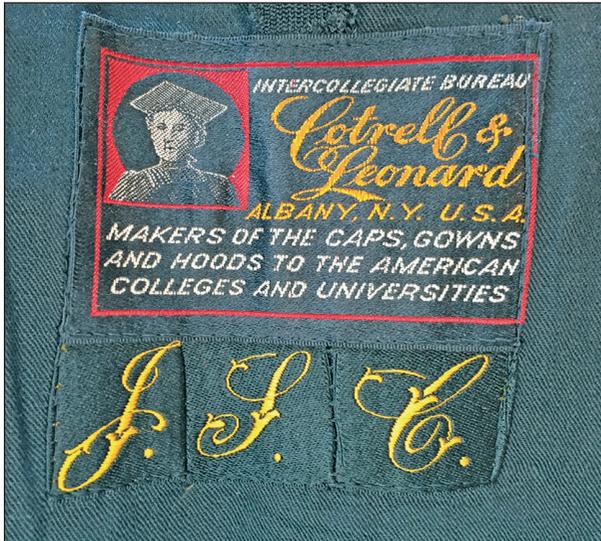


FIG. 8 The label in a Cotrell & Leonard bachelor's gown, c. 1900, includes a portrait of woman.



FIG. 8A The cap with the gown in Fig. 8 shows a very different label.

FIG. 9 (Right) The much simplified Cotrell & Leonard label in a PhD gown, c. 1980, of Prof. Doretta Hoffman.





**FIGS 10 (Left) and 10A** Blythe House, in West Kensington, is the home of the Science Museum’s storage facilities. Bryony Cairncross and Dr Alex Kerr, left, examine Sir James Mackenzie’s Aberdeen LLD gown, with blue silk faded to green (see Fig. 4), while the author, right, poses with the Aberdeen LLD gown of Prof. Matthew Hay (see Fig. 5).

gowns, no doubt—with photographs of women (and not a few men) in academic dress and featured a photographic bust of a woman in square cap and gown in newspaper advertisements around the turn of the last century (Fig. 7).<sup>23</sup> A woman in cap and gown made an appearance in another medium: the firm’s embroidered gown label (Fig. 8). The model has changed, and the gown looks a bit different, as if the yoke has a stiffer interlining, though drawing too firm a conclusion from a one-inch embroidered portrait is not the best way to evaluate academic dress. The rest of the label, like Forsyth’s, introduces the firm with the story already familiar to us. ‘Makers of the caps, gowns and hoods to the American colleges and universities’, it reads.<sup>24</sup>

To see how Cotrell & Leonard varied its label, look inside the square cap that accompanies the gown (Fig. 8A), where the label includes a demi-pegasus as a crest ensigning a shield emblazoned with the retailer’s street address (partially worn away, it reads ‘472–474 Broadway’, in Albany, New York). Years later, in around 1980, a Cotrell & Leonard doctoral gown bears a much simplified label, with only the firm’s name, city, and year of foundation (Fig. 9).<sup>25</sup>

What else can we find from looking at a gown’s label? An index of robemakers by location would be a start. Adding dates, or approximate years of manufacture, would add another dimension to the database. And once in while, someone with a sharp eye may find another story to tell, one worth, maybe, a gold medal.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Advertisement from the Columbia University *Spectator*, 20 May 1890, p. vii. See Stephen Wolgast, ‘“A Pleasure and an Honor”: Students’ Writing on Academic Dress at Columbia University, 1820–1950’, *TBS*, 14 (2014), pp. 94–106 (p. 100). The ad continued with only minor changes into the twentieth century.

<sup>24</sup> Bachelor’s gown, cotton, c. 1920, in author’s collection. For more on Cotrell & Leonard, see Stephen Wolgast (compiler), ‘The Intercollegiate Code of Academic Costume: An Introduction’, *TBS*, 9 (2009), pp. 9–37.

<sup>25</sup> Item No. 1991.19.1a, Historic Costume and Textile Museum, Kansas State University.

<sup>26</sup> One new source is the collection of labels in the Burgon Society archives from the estate of Maurice Ward. Colin Fleming, ‘Archive Notes’, *Burgon Notes*, 41 (Autumn 2017), pp. 1–2.