

HOUSEHOLD GODS

THE BRITISH AND THEIR POSSESSIONS

DEBORAH COHEN

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

CHAPTER 4

IN POSSESSION

MEN, WOMEN AND DECORATION

In September 1867, the long-suffering upholsterer Mr Edmonds, proprietor of a well-regarded furnishing shop in the town of Newbury, received the latest letter from one of his most demanding clients. The upholstered door that Edmonds had supplied for the customer's dining-room was all wrong: 'I wish the baize door to be *red* instead of green, and of showy quality; not fine, nor with brass nails or any other ornamentals.'¹ No sooner had the door been replaced than Edmonds received word that his client had purchased Russian pine bookcases for the room. Though the bookcases were nicely carved and designed, their purchase threw the room's original decorative scheme into disarray.² This turn of events provided an opportunity for Edmonds' client to pester the beleaguered upholsterer with tedious new assignments – where to put the bookcases, how to paint the woodwork. The correspondence continued until the following year, when Edmonds' client died unexpectedly, perhaps to the upholsterer's relief.

Such preoccupation with decoration, the taste for 'showy quality', suggests patterns of behaviour and longing that we tend to associate with women. But Edmonds' client was a man, a Mr J.F. Winterbottom – and a married man at that. If this fact surprises, it is because the history of the domestic interior has most often been written as a history of women.³ There are, of course, good reasons to associate women with consumption for the house. Women, and Victorian women in particular, have been defined by their domesticity.⁴ And yet, middle-class Victorian men were, in an unprecedented fashion, also domestically minded.⁵ The gradual separation of workplace from residence had made the home a welcome sanctuary from the money-grubbing world outside. Preoccupied by moral concerns, devoted to their children, men – or so claimed John Stuart Mill – no longer gave their 'spare hours to violent outdoor exercises and boisterous conviviality with male associates; the two sexes now pass their lives together'⁶

72 Defined by domesticity. William Henry Hunt, *Woman Sewing in a Bedchamber*, 1837.



classes, men played a crucial role in the fitting-out of the home. Most often, husbands and wives made decorating decisions collaboratively. But men did not merely follow; more often than not, they seem to have led. The archives yield up in abundance stories of husbands like Mr Winterbottom, whose preferences determined the arrangement of interiors. This interest in decoration was not restricted to married men; bachelors, no less than spinsters, evinced concern for their rooms, and stores offered lines of furniture designed with the single man in mind. Until at least the 1880s, the business of furnishing was almost entirely a man's world. The earliest home decoration manuals were written by married men for married men. Decorators were men; the cause of design reform was led by men; upholsterers were men, as were the clerks on the shop floor.⁷

But by the 1920s and 1930s, home decoration had become nearly exclusively a woman's domain. Men played a limited role in choosing possessions for their houses; smart lady decorators such as Syrie Maugham set the fashions. This represented a dramatic change from the Victorian era, but one which has been obscured by the assumption that women's claim on the house remained much the same throughout this period. We begin, therefore, with men such as Mr Winterbottom, in order to investigate why Victorian masters of the house took such pains over their decorative schemes. Why many men seem to have abandoned home decoration after the turn of the century, how women claimed it, and to what degree, if any, a struggle ensued are the questions we take up next. What changed, we will see, was more than the hand that furnished the house. Along with the emancipated 'New

Woman' of the late nineteenth century came a new ethos of domesticity characterized specifically by the novel belief that a woman's décor served to reflect her personality.

AN ENGLISHMAN'S HOME

Sir Edward Coke's famous dictum – the Englishman's home is his castle – reflected the realities of a husband's authority within his own four walls. At marriage, a woman ceased, according to the dictates of common law, to exist as a separate legal entity. Until the sweeping reforms of marriage law enacted in 1882, a married woman's property became her husband's, she could neither sue nor be sued, make neither contracts nor a separate will without his consent.⁸ A small minority of women, usually from wealthy families, had separate property bestowed upon them in the form of trusts; on these funds a woman could, subject to the trust's limitations, draw.⁹ Otherwise, any property a woman inherited during the marriage came under her husband's control, as did her earnings (if any). Moreover, after the ancient and nearly obsolete right to dower (usually a one-third interest in her husband's freehold lands) was repealed in 1833, wives had no absolute right to inherit from their husband's estate.

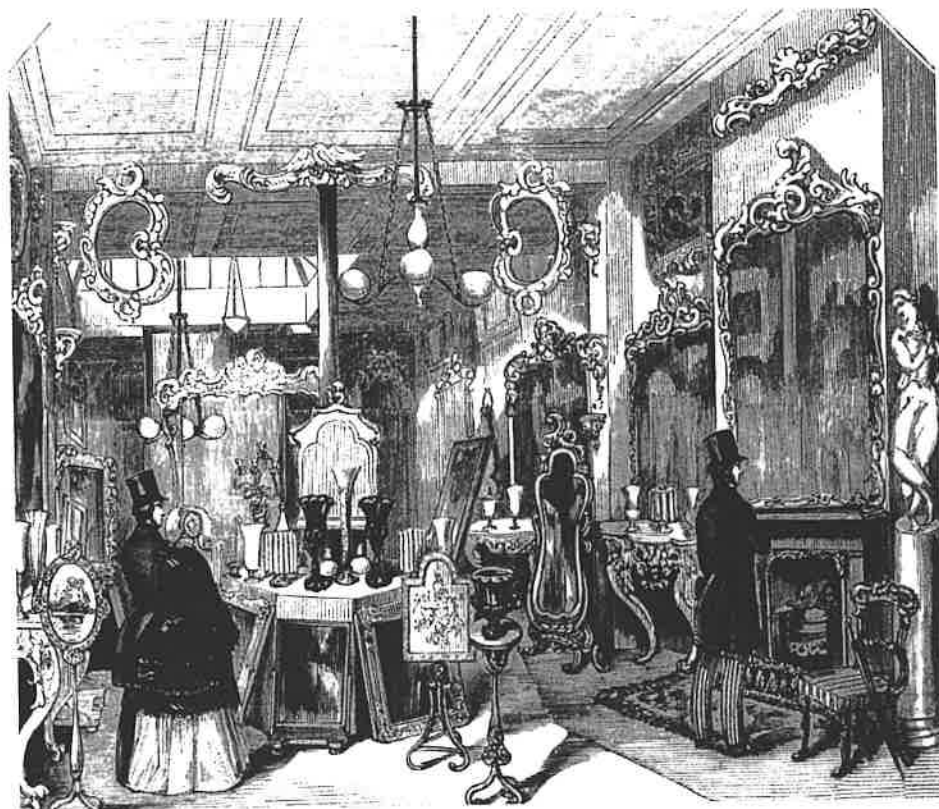
Constrained by restrictions on property-holding, married women were debarred from contracting debts in their own name. Common law dating from the age of Henry VI had allowed wives to pledge their husbands' credit for goods deemed 'necessary'. However, women could not be held liable for the debt.¹⁰ So long as shopping remained a local, face-to-face, personal transaction with tradesmen who knew their customers' finances, this arrangement sufficed, though it was not without its hitches. Husbands who could not control their wives' spending were forced to place embarrassing advertisements in local newspapers disclaiming their purchases. But with the advent of high-speed trains to London and other major cities and the blossoming of the retail sector, the problems raised by the law of 'necessaries' became more serious.¹¹ Husbands could disavow their wives' purchases, claiming never to have authorized them, and unlucky tradesmen were left with little recourse other than to sue for the payment of debts. The county courts became a staging-ground for family dramas featuring putatively extravagant wives and stingy husbands, each blaming the other for stacks of unpaid bills. Called upon to assess responsibility, judges often faulted the innocent tradesman, charging that shopkeepers had unwisely extended credit without sufficient security. Tradesmen thus tended to regard women, especially those who were shopping far from home, with suspicion. Not until the 1930s did married women gain the right to contract debts in their own name.

Furnishing was an expensive proposition, and women – as Virginia Woolf reminded her readers – were poor.¹² Outfitting a house in the 1860s might require

that a middle-class man spend as much as his entire annual salary.¹³ Some men decorated their residences before marriage. Men of means were the most likely to do so. Titus Salt, Jr, son of the famed mill owner and himself a wealthy man, bought his Gothic-inspired furniture the year before he married.¹⁴ A furnished house signified prosperity and stability; it helped a man to attract a desirable wife. Men who advertised for a wife noted their business or income, their appearance, and – if they had one – their ‘nice’ or ‘comfortable’ home.¹⁵ In his 1864–5 novel, *Can You Forgive Her?*, Anthony Trollope satirized the efforts of a Mr Cheesacre, a wealthy but uncouth farmer, to find a wife. In courting the moneyed widow Mrs Greenow, Cheesacre threw open the portals of his prized residence, ‘Oileymead’, to ensnare his catch, displaying ‘every bit of china, delft, glass, and plate in the establishment’, and beseeching his intended to ‘feel the texture of the blankets’. After proposing marriage, Cheesacre pressed the beleaguered Mrs Greenow for an answer: ‘Come then, say the word. There ain’t a bedroom in my house, – not one of the front ones, – that isn’t mahogany furnished!’¹⁶

Before the 1880s, those who wrote about home decoration largely directed their advice to the man of the house. Robert Kerr’s 1864 treatise on dwellings of ‘the

73 Shopping together:
Mr Silverlock’s Shop in
New Oxford-Street,
1847.



better sort' was baldly titled *The Gentleman's House*, and the 'views of the ladies' were accorded a paltry one out of 470-odd pages.¹⁷ While women might pride themselves upon their taste, too often (or so design reformers warned) they fell under the upholsterer's spell.¹⁸ According to the prodigiously self-promoting designer Christopher Dresser, it was 'almost impossible that women who have not had special advantages of education can be good judges of what is necessary to good taste in house furnishing'.¹⁹ Women who wished to inform themselves looked to the ladies' periodicals in vain; neither the *Lady's Newspaper and Pictorial Times* nor the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* devoted columns to the topic; nor did they attract furnishing advertisers.²⁰ In *A Plea for Art in the House* (1876), the Reverend W.J. Loftie assumed that men were his audience.²¹ The earliest women writers on the subject followed suit. Rhoda and Agnes Garrett were pioneering suffragists. And yet they wrote their *Suggestions for House Decoration* (1877) for the benefit of men. The 'amateur' to whom they refer throughout is male; their book would, they promised, 'enable him to speak with more authority to the upholsterer or the paper-hanger'.²² Women's sovereignty in the furnishing of the house, even as the Garrett cousins imagined it, was limited. Only when it came to the drawing-room were 'the ladies of the family . . . told that it is now their turn to have their taste consulted'.²³

In practice, furnishing probably most often began as a collaborative endeavour between man and wife, but one in which husbands ultimately made the decisions. There were of course those husbands who turned over to their wives complete authority in furnishing. Thomas Carlyle entered into his marriage with Jane Welsh full of fierce language about the man's 'rule in the house', but in practice he left her in charge of all household matters; decoration fell within her purview, as did the battle with the bugs that infested their Cheyne Row home.²⁴ There were also harmonious couples who made decisions about purchases together. According to the wife of the painter E.M. Ward, she and her husband 'were entirely of one mind . . . and as we both had a passion for antiques and old masters, after our work was over we would take long walks through the streets, examining old furniture'.²⁵ In many families, houses were, in all likelihood, divided into spheres of influence: because the drawing-room was, as the Garretts noted, widely seen as the ladies' chamber, a wife's preferences might rule; similarly, the study or library (if the house had one) reflected her husband's desires. To women, in addition, belonged the minor tasks of bric-à-brac, of furbelows and valences – in the words of the Garretts, the job of getting right the 'small and comparatively insignificant details'.²⁶

But in the case of a dispute, men had the last word. An 1878 article in the *Cabinet and Upholstery Advertiser*, a leading trade journal, related what happened when husbands and wives disagreed. A newly married couple visit a furniture store in search of a bedroom suite. The wife adores an ornate Eastlake set; her husband 'who dislikes show or gaudiness of every kind, is particularly pleased with a rich but plain black walnut one . . .'. And in an incident which, according to the journal, 'happens



74 Robert S. Tait,
*Thomas and Jane
Carlyle in the Drawing
Room of their House in
Cheyne Row, 1857–8.*

almost every day', 'The husband . . . is a very decided man when he is inclined to be; and although he does not care to offend his wife by appearing mean or contemptible in her loving and confiding eyes, still, on this occasion, he is obliged to tell her frankly what suite of furniture he shall take.'²⁷ The home may have been woman's sphere, but she did not there reign. Coventry Patmore, author of that notorious tribute to nineteenth-century femininity, *The Angel in the House*, did not – according to his biographer – permit his second wife the liberty of arranging her heavenly domain, bought with her fortune: 'Patmore . . . ruled the home as his own, managed the property, inaugurated changes, and was in all respects the complete master.'²⁸

Control over decoration was not simply common practice, but, in some quarters, the ideal. 'I can scarcely imagine a task more agreeable for a gentleman of means, taste, and leisure than to set himself to the consistent decoration and furnishing of a Gothic villa,' wrote the critic J. Beavington Atkinson in the *Art Journal* in 1867.²⁹ After the Irish poet Katharine Tynan's first literary success in 1885, her father decided that she needed a room of her own in which to write and receive visitors. Andrew Tynan was a gentleman farmer, with a large dairy concern outside Dublin to manage. But the job of decorating Katharine's room was a task he entrusted to no



one else.³⁰ Father and daughter spent days poring over wallpapers, weeks more in the auction houses in search of suitable furniture. Contrary to his daughter's aesthetic taste, he insisted upon a large looking-glass for her room. He chose for her a davenport in walnut wood.

Stories of acquisitive men and husbands who were intimately involved in the details of furnishing abound throughout nineteenth-century records. In the archives of the Scottish interior decoration firm of William Scott Morton & Co. for 1881–2, we meet Mr David Anderson, a very 'particular' man who haunts the shops in search of dining-room chairs, and wishes his decorator to accompany him; Mr Robert Stewart, who commissions some 'velvety cushions' from the firm; C.E. Willet, who proposes a 'red crape material' for curtains; Mr W.H. Henderson, who wishes his mantelpieces 'nicely arranged'; Mr James Templeton, who firmly believes that the 'yellow green' colour should be used all over his room.³¹ Women who wrote to decorating columnists for advice often made explicit reference to their husbands' preferences and demands. 'Marta's' husband refused a Brussels carpet as "dreadfully inartistic" while 'Myrene's' would "never permit a pile carpet."³² 'Idri's' husband 'only likes plain walls'.³³ Some men exercised their will in a fashion

75 The college living room of an unidentified undergraduate man, c. 1890, as photographed by Henry Taunt. Taunt's photographs of Oxford record the attention that male students lavished upon their rooms.

76 The discerning man of the house, ensconced in his library. From Lewis Day's 'How to Decorate a Room', *Magazine of Art*, 1880–1.



that was, to say the least, idiosyncratic. 'Pauline's' husband was literal-minded. 'I find it very difficult to put myself in your position,' *Hearth and Home's* decorating columnist wrote to her, 'because I can't grasp the idea that the name of the house including the word "oak" compels you to a dining-room painted oak brown. Indeed, I can fancy nothing more gloomy. But if your husband really *is* firm about it, the yellowy shade of light oak will be one degree less hopeless than your present dark brown . . .'³⁴

Even in those unusual marriages where wives enjoyed the financial upper hand, decoration could still be a man's due. Dinah Mulock was the author of the wildly popular romance, *John Halifax, Gentleman*.³⁵ Still unmarried at the age of forty, Mulock appeared destined for spinsterhood. And then one day – true to the spirit of her own romantic novels – she opened the door of her Hampstead cottage to find a surprise visitor who changed her solitary life. The visitor was George Craik, the

young nephew of a friend of hers. Craik had been injured in a railway accident. Mulock devoted the next months to nursing him; the pair married the next year. The Scottish novelist Lucy Walford recounted with amusement her visit in the 1870s to the Craiks. The romance novelist and her husband were in the midst of decorating their new house; a grey-felt carpet had just been laid down in the drawing-room. When Mrs Craik deplored the carpet, Walford expressed surprise. Her hostess' earnings, notoriously, had paid for the house. Mrs Craik explained: "It is my husband's taste I have to conform to, —" and she put on a demure look.³⁶ Mrs Craik, the elder, richer, and more famous of the two, conspicuously deferred to her husband to right the obvious imbalance. And for George Craik, the conferral of decorating supremacy proved a means of establishing his authority within the marriage.

Why, apart from the expense, did men care so much about grey-felt carpets and nicely arranged mantelpieces? Motivations, we can assume, varied dramatically. There were, for instance, those men who sought through their décor to safeguard the righteousness of their households. The home, as envisioned by evangelicals, had redemptive power; there, the man could throw off the temptations to which his work had exposed him. In very religious households, men were the arbiters of display, though the prevailing asceticism did not provide much scope for manoeuvre. By contrast, the coming of incarnationism after the mid-nineteenth century, combined with rising prosperity, made decoration a pressing issue for the paterfamilias. If beauty was a moral virtue, as the Reverends Boyd and Loftie had claimed, men were obliged to attend to even the most minute details of room decoration. This was not simply a matter of protecting his family from possessions that might exercise a pernicious influence. It also implicated a man's moral cultivation. In the process of beautifying his surroundings, the house — or so the advice manuals promised — worked a change upon him. Painting one's walls and studying the form of furniture became acts of grace, which 'humanized' the amateur home decorator.³⁷

Houses also served to convey a man's wealth and standing. Where and how a man lived might do more to advertise his position than could his occupation or profession, especially if he were involved in a grimy business such as factory management or a lucrative but not quite respectable line of work like stockbroking.³⁸ In 1875, the designer Christopher Dresser complained that his clients often exaggerated the amount that he had charged to impress their friends: "The work perhaps proves satisfactory, when the host, with the view of extolling himself, says that "Dr. Dresser did this for me, but he is a very expensive man. The thing has cost me so and so."³⁹ For the men of the Forsyte family, the novelist John Galsworthy's emblematic, upper middle-class clan, old gold lacquer and Worcesterware functioned as the visible emblems, even the guarantors of status. Retired from the (in his mind) 'deplorable' profession of land agency, Swithin Forsyte counted on his ormolu-encrusted



77 Colonel Harold Esdaile Malet (1841–1918), *Interior at Cox Hoe*, 1867–8. Over the course of an itinerant military career, Malet, an enthusiastic amateur watercolourist, made a habit of drawing the places where he lived. Using photographic montage, he inserted himself twice into this picture.

furnishings to attest to his gentlemanly qualifications: 'out of the knowledge that no one could possibly enter his rooms without perceiving him to be a man of wealth, he had derived a solid and prolonged happiness such as perhaps no other circumstance in life had afforded him'.⁴⁰

For men who wished to demonstrate their refinement, the home became a show-place. It was not uncommon for a visitor, upon calling for the first time on an acquaintance, to be conducted through the premises by the man of the house, who directed his guest's attention to the improvements he had made.⁴¹ Writing to a friend in 1862, one Bloomsbury man boasted about the renovation of his drawing-room, to be papered in pink, white, and gold. 'In doing this we are taking a very bold step, as people are always nervous about colour in Drawing-rooms. I am having a paper prepared to my own taste.'⁴² William Morris drew his best clients from the ranks of successful entrepreneurs. For a class charged with 'philistinism', an artistic interior offered a defence: its inhabitants proclaimed their love of beauty.⁴³ But even

those men whose taste fell far short of the high-minded ideals of the day prided themselves upon achieving a genteel effect. In his autobiography, Frederick Locker-Lampson recollected a visit to friends in Pentonville, who had just (in the 1880s) purchased a garish mid-Victorian-style carpet in deep pile crimson and orange. The husband of the couple was, as his wife readily acknowledged, very 'particular': 'You can't conceive how awfully fidgety Edgar is about his carpets – it's perfectly ghastly.'⁴⁴

A taste for collecting old Worcester-ware or Regency clocks might accompany a man's interest in decoration, but the middle-class men we have thus far encountered had not assembled collections in any systematic sense. They simply took charge of the job of furnishing their house. The distinction between collectors and furnishers is important, because though some men continued to collect, by the 1920s and 1930s the consumer landscape for home furnishing had shifted. Men played a limited role in choosing possessions for their houses; home decoration had become predominantly a woman's domain. According to *Furnishings*, the leading trade journal of the 1920s: '... woman is the purchaser of at least 90 per cent of the furnishings for the home'.⁴⁵ Marketing campaigns featured female shoppers, while stores courted their clientele by emphasizing women's preferences in walnut or French china.⁴⁶ The fashionable furnishing business was, as the



78 Relegated to package carrier – from 'My Wife's Shopping', a tale of a drawing-room refurbishment published in *The House*, 1898.

Cabinet Maker put it on the eve of the Second World War, a 'woman's world'.⁴⁷ Apart from their neatly arrayed collections of pipes and pottery, men's part in domestic decoration – if indeed they had one at all – had been reduced to do-it-yourself home repair.⁴⁸

What explains the transformation? The decade of the 1890s witnessed a change in the relationship between a man and his possessions that though gradual was nonetheless significant. Suspicious commentators had long mocked the fad for artistic furnishing as insufficiently masculine.⁴⁹ In the *Saturday Review's* scathing depiction, the 'aesthetic friend' who insinuated himself into the household 'screams with a pretty feminine horror at the mention of mauve or magenta'.⁵⁰ Even before Wilde's trials discredited the public face of the 'House Beautiful', Mrs Talbot Coke, decorating columnist for *Hearth and Home*, distinguished between two kinds of men. Her preference was for (in her words) a 'real man', who loved sport and outdoor life. 'As to another class of man, the handy man who "does his own draperies" (I know one who also makes his own lampshades, poor thing) . . . I could never feel the same unwilling respect I do for one who will have none of my artistic notions in his own den, but only wants to "know where to find his things", and be able to smoke undisturbed and unreprieved'.⁵¹

Oscar Wilde's 1895 conviction on charges of 'gross indecency' transformed Mrs Talbot Coke's innuendo into overt public disapproval. If a whiff of femininity lingered around aesthetes and, by extension, home decoration before Wilde's public humiliation, afterwards the link between effeminacy and homosexuality was forged solid. During most of the nineteenth century, there was of course no homosexual identity or consciousness as we today know it.⁵² Men might have sex with or love other men without thinking of themselves either as embodying or rejecting a set of traits. But in the aftermath of Wilde's trials, it is possible to catch a glimpse of a homosexual identity in the making – one which would, in the twentieth century, turn the home into a place for uncloseted self-expression and allow men to transcend provincial prejudices by allying themselves with good taste.⁵³ But the cause of gay liberation, even as it would eventually open the closet door, also led heterosexual men to narrow their aesthetic worlds. Too conspicuous a pursuit of the House Beautiful left a man open to ridicule, possibly even misperception. The men who wrote in to decorating columnists in the 1890s and after sought, above all, to avoid creating the wrong impression: they wanted manly furniture. 'Little Paddy' aimed at the 'good and plain style of the male apartment', but it eluded him. Mrs Talbot Coke blamed his cream ground floral paper: 'It is that which gives the "sentimental spinster" look you so amusingly deplore'.⁵⁴

While Wilde's disgrace did much to alter the public perception of masculinity within the home, men's relationships to their houses were already changing. By the end of the nineteenth century, the enthusiastic domesticity that had characterized mid-Victorian men was under increasing strain. For a small but vocal minority of

men, domestic life had come to seem a suffocating burden, full of financial encumbrances and daily tedium. They rejected the cosy virtues of hearth and home in what the historian John Tosh has termed a 'flight from domesticity', seeking refuge in clubs and sporting associations.⁵⁵ Even among avid family men, however, the growth of the suburbs meant that many husbands were increasingly absent from their homes. Between 1880 and 1939, entire new districts shot up around Britain's major cities, built on speculation by developers who recognized the needs of the growing middle classes for more spacious accommodation at lower rents, with the benefits of greenery and fresh air.⁵⁶ The first building boom, which lasted until the First World War, was responsible for the creation of single-class suburbs like Twickenham and Chislehurst on the outskirts of London. After the war, building resumed at a feverish pace to house the middle class's latest additions to its ranks: the legions of white-collar workers and new professionals who, thanks to newly affordable mortgages, could for the first time buy their own homes.

'Suburbia', a term coined in the 1890s, described a social phenomenon – in the Liberal politician C.F.G. Masterman's phrase, a 'civilization'.⁵⁷ Its manners and mores were very different from those of the early suburbs, the puritanical enclaves created by high-minded evangelicals in Clapham and Streatham. This new suburbia meant getting and spending. Unlike the older suburbs, close enough that a man might walk to work, the new suburbia took the nineteenth-century process of the separation of home and work to its logical conclusion. The bowler-hatted suburban man caught the 8.05 train to town, and did not return until six or even seven, perhaps after dinner at his club. His wife was left in charge of their detached or semi-detached Tudorbethan house, furnished with goods bought on credit from the stores and tantalizingly shielded from passers-by with gardens, walls, and lace curtains. For contemporary observers, the husband's absence from his own home jarred. In 1909, Thomas Crosland, a firebrand social critic of the day, scornfully described suburbia as a 'country whose population consists almost wholly of women, children, and tax-gatherers'. Crosland continued: 'This absence of responsible male population throughout the day may be reckoned a much more serious matter than appears at first sight Practically it gives over the household and all that dwell therein to the unquestioned rule of woman, which is not good.'⁵⁸ A few years later, Philip Gibbs, a harsh judge of the 'New Man', agreed: 'Gradually he effaces himself in a home governed by the feminine influence.'⁵⁹

Men did not abandon the pursuit of home decoration altogether. Those men who worked at home – especially the clergy and some professionals such as doctors – continued to take charge of the furnishing and decoration of their homes. Ursula Bloom describes her father, Harvey, a country clergyman in the Church of England, as an avid connoisseur of antique furniture, with a 'genius for interior decoration'.⁶⁰ Like his nineteenth-century predecessors, Harvey placed a high value on a well-designed room. His diaries indicate a network of similarly inclined

country clerics: 'I then went to see Tredington Rectory, to visit the Rector Edwards and see their pretty furniture.'⁶¹ Some of the keenest furniture-hounds were doctors, whose profession brought them into the homes of the sick and elderly, and, as disgusted dealers noted, they took antiques as payment in kind: 'We could . . . give the names of some doctors who can classify chairs as readily as diseases and medicines.'⁶²

Perhaps because they lived for so long with no fixed home (and did not fear the taint of effeminacy), military men, too, continued to cultivate a reputation for discernment in domestic matters. Beryl Booker's father, retired from the 11th Hussars in India, was known by friends and neighbours for his good taste. At their house in Cambridge Square, he 'made a clean sweep' of Victoriana, stripping the fireplace of its polished oak and bevelled glass overmantel, evicting the Brussels carpets, and adding fresh chintz covers to the chairs.⁶³ In his autobiography, Colonel Montague Cooke extolled the virtues of tasteful home decoration, observing that 'even as a youth, I have ever appreciated loveliness in all its forms.'⁶⁴ Some military men even made a second profession out of their furnishing habits. In her trawl around London's shops, published in 1924, the journalist Elizabeth Montizambert discovered a number of shops for antiques run by ex-officers, singling out the Old

79 Dr Frederick Treves, Welbeck House sitting room, 1899. Treves, the son of an upholsterer, was a well-known surgeon. The Hunterian professor of anatomy at the Royal College of Surgeons, he is remembered today as the doctor to the 'Elephant Man'.





80 Major Joicey,
59 Cadogan Square,
drawing room. In
1890, Major Joicey
commissioned Bedford
Lemere to photograph
his flat.



81 Lieutenant
L. Walker Munro's
drawing room at
Lady Cross Lodge,
Brockenhurst, Hants,
1890.

Farmhouse Salon and the General Trading Company managed by a Major Christie Millar for praise.⁶⁵

Herbert Kitchener, the ruthless hero of Omdurman, was known for his voracious appetite for china and curios and his talent for flower-arranging. From 1906, he was accompanied by a constant companion and ADC, Captain O.A.G. Fitzgerald. Kitchener's tastes were luxurious, and his methods unorthodox. When re-doing his Indian bungalow (as Commander-in-Chief), he ordered his military aides to craft a decorative ceiling of papier mâché from discarded official files. From India he wrote to Lady Roberts: 'I shall set up as a House Decorator when I leave here.'⁶⁶ Kitchener's acquisitiveness literally knew no bounds; he looted without regret and, on occasion, even pilfered choice specimens from other people's houses.⁶⁷ After Kitchener's death at sea in 1916, *Country Life* noted (without, presumably, arousing any untoward suspicions) that his few leisure hours were spent on the 'beautifying of his home, Broome Park, Kent'.⁶⁸ Field Marshal Lord Grenfell, Kitchener's old rival in the Egyptian campaign, was possessed by a similar fixation: 'I have,' he acknowledged in his will, 'been a slave to my furniture for years.'⁶⁹

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE HOUSE

If a number of men retreated on their own accord from the house, still others were pushed out by their wives. The struggle for the house began with the campaign for reform of the marriage laws. In the 1850s the artist Barbara Leigh Smith, daughter of the radical MP for Norwich, petitioned Parliament to improve married women's lot. Raised in an unconventional household, Leigh Smith was 'never happy in an English genteel family life', and she diagnosed married women's inability to hold property as a critical part of their problem.⁷⁰ Her petition, signed by more than 26,000 people, marked the beginning of a concerted campaign for reform, though the issue of married women's property eventually stalled in Parliament. Opposition to married women's property and education, wrote the feminist Josephine Butler, was above all rooted in a 'secret dread' that women's claims would 'revolutionize society [and] our *Homes*'.⁷¹

The first Married Women's Property Act of 1870 – co-sponsored by John Stuart Mill but defanged in the House of Lords – granted English wives some limited authority over registered investments, inherited property, and their own earnings, but fell far short of the reforms that women's rights campaigners had urged. Instead of granting women the right to hold property on the same terms as men, the 1870 Act provided limited protection from the abuse of feckless husbands. Not until twelve years later, in 1882, were all married women vested with property rights. Even then, Parliament did not grant wives comparable rights to their husbands', but simply extended to all women the prerogatives that wealthy wives with separate

property settlements had long since enjoyed. They could hold property and make a will without their husbands' agreement.⁷²

Against the backdrop of the parliamentary crusades, the right to make a home became a feminist rallying cry. This was a new domesticity, a more militant domesticity – which points up the degree to which Victorian women's rights within the home were neither as secure nor as extensive as has been assumed. As women entered the public sphere in unprecedented numbers in the service of social purity campaigns or to demand entry into higher education and the professions, they also demanded new domestic privileges. In *The Duties of Women*, Frances Power Cobbe asserted that the home, famously women's sphere, was also her prerogative. Cobbe, exiled from her girlhood Irish home by common law governing property, staked a woman's claim to home-making: 'The making of a true home is really our peculiar and inalienable right, – a right which no man can take from us; for a man can no more make a home than a drone can make a hive . . . It is a woman, and only a woman, – and a woman all by herself, if she likes, and without any man to help her, – who can turn a house into a home.'⁷³ For Cobbe, the objective was not the woman's own 'aesthetic gratification' – a proposition she had roundly criticized in her attacks on the worshippers of salt-cellar – but the comfort and moral soundness of those who came to her drawing-room.⁷⁴ Hers was a feminism rooted in women's moral supremacy.

Although men still commanded the heights of retailing and design reform, and would do so until the 1980s, women in the late nineteenth century increasingly took the lead in the 'business' of decorating. The first woman decorators opened shops in the 1870s; by the 1920s and 1930s, they had been joined by many others.⁷⁵ In these early years, feminism and home decoration were complementary pursuits. To identify the early female decorators as pioneers of emancipation may appear a contradiction in terms. To our eyes, Laura Ashley and Martha Stewart scarcely seem forces for women's liberation. But women's entrance into the field of professional decoration was relatively slow and hard-fought. The Incorporated Institute of British Decorators excluded women as members until the end of the First World War; as late as 1930, only a handful of the professional society's 1,070 members were women.⁷⁶ The designer Lewis Day characterized house decoration as a profession for men: 'His is a manly art, and remains for the most part in the hands of men.'⁷⁷ The first female decorators came either (like Mary Eliza Haweis and Jane Panton) from artistic circles or – like the first female physicians – from wealthy families that could afford to finance the costs of training and setting up shop.⁷⁸

In Britain's most famous suffrage families, the women's cause and the business of home decoration became mutually sustaining enterprises – intertwined aims best understood within the context of a new domesticity. Of the talented Garrett sisters, Elizabeth (1836–1917) would become the first female doctor in Britain, Millicent (1847–1929) the leader of the liberal suffrage cause, and Agnes (1845–1935), an



82 Rhoda Garrett, as depicted in 1883 in the *Cabinet-Maker*.



83 Rhoda and Agnes Garrett.

early woman decorator.⁷⁹ Unmarried at the age of twenty-six, Agnes decided that it was time to embark upon a career. Her father, a prosperous malter, wanted to make a place for his clever daughter in the family business.⁸⁰ But Agnes' brothers protested: they wanted the business for themselves and believed that any public role for Agnes in the brewing enterprise would shame the family. That possibility foreclosed, Agnes and her cousin, Rhoda, decided to go into business on their own. Like Agnes, Rhoda was an ardent suffragist and had already become known as a fiery public speaker.⁸¹ House decoration, they decided, would permit them both to earn money and to advance the feminist cause.

But many obstacles lay in wait. Despite her father's objections, Agnes moved to London to study under the furnisher Daniel Cottier who had agreed to teach her the decorating trade.⁸² Rhoda came to London, too, though for her it was still riskier, since she was older than Agnes, and virtually penniless. Cottier, though he took the cousins' money, taught them little, perhaps because, like so many of his colleagues, he believed that decoration was no profession for women.⁸³ After some struggle, they eventually found a sympathetic patron in J.M. Brydon, an architect of the 'Queen Anne' persuasion who had a few years earlier opened his own decorating and furnishing business. Their apprenticeship lasted three rigorous years. The Garretts travelled the countryside sketching the interiors of old houses, and they worked in Brydon's office. But despite their skill as designers, the decorating firm they approached in the early 1870s declined to give them work. The manager mocked their proposal, claiming that they would be fatally handicapped by their

inability to swear at workmen or climb ladders. At that point, one of the cousins responded: 'As for swearing at the workmen, they would not need that if it were ladies who made requests; and as for the ladders, bring one here and see whether we can climb it or not!'⁸⁴ In 1875, the Garrett cousins opened their own shop dealing in old oak and other furniture at 2 Gower Street, Bedford Square and in 1876, published a book on house decoration for the middle classes. They exhibited some of the furniture they designed at the first Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society.

The Garretts built their furnishing business against the backdrop of their campaign for the vote. Agnes served as an honorary secretary to the National Society for Women's Suffrage, while Rhoda spoke from the platform about the obstacles and 'almost overwhelming prejudice' she had faced in attempting to learn her trade. Rhoda was much in demand as a speaker, but her health, even then, was fragile.⁸⁵ Despite Agnes' best efforts to shield her cousin from the 'slings and arrows which are the reward of pioneers', Rhoda died of tuberculosis in 1882 at the age of 41.⁸⁶ Agnes carried on the business on her own, establishing a reputation for unyieldingly high standards, and a speciality in panelled rooms. 'I like all my work,' she told a reporter in 1890, 'to bear the individual impress of my mind.'⁸⁷ She undertook the decoration of private homes, her clients including the composer Sir Hubert Parry and the scientist Lord Kelvin, and executed the interiors of the Ladies' Residential Chambers in Chenies Street, which provided accommodation at a moderate rate for working women in London. Agnes Garrett never married, and



84 A drawing room chimney piece designed by the Garretts, probably in their house at 2 Gower St, London.

continued her business for almost fifty years, training two generations of pupils to follow in her wake. She was, as one reporter observed, 'bound heart and soul' to her profession.⁸⁸

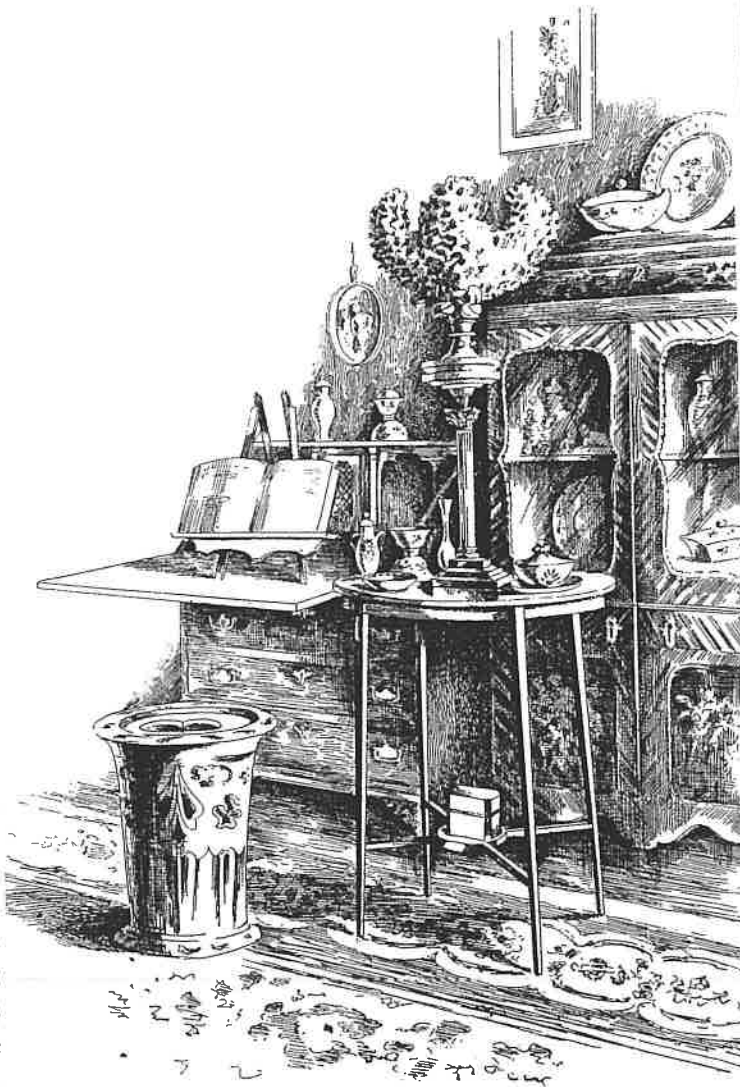
The connection between suffrage and home decoration was not limited to 'moderates' like the Garretts. In 1885, the year of the match girls' strike, Emmeline Pankhurst – later founder of the militant Women's Social and Political Union, ruthless organizer, passionate orator, inveterate window-smasher and imprisoned hunger striker – opened a furnishing shop in London.⁸⁹ As a young woman, she had lived in Paris and moved in artistic circles. After her husband lost his campaign for a seat in Parliament, the struggling family moved to London, where Mrs Pankhurst decided to go into business. She wanted to make money, and thought a business permitted its owners greater freedom of opinion than did a professional career.⁹⁰ Her store, Emerson & Co., was located in Hampstead Road, home to cheap food stores: a worse choice for the artistic enamelled milking-stools and picture frames she proffered would be difficult to imagine. Still, she had high hopes, as her daughter Christabel later remembered: 'With a shop she would lay the financial foundation of a great movement of social and industrial reform and, of course, the enfranchisement of women.'⁹¹

Although Mrs Pankhurst's Hampstead Road enterprise was not a success, she persisted in the business, opening a shop on Berners Street, a more refined location off the Oxford Street thoroughfare. There, she added stock: Persian plates, oriental brass, embroidered hangings. She designed white-painted furniture with fretwork, and engaged a carpenter to make it according to her designs. When her lease on Berners Street ended, she took a still more expensive shop on Regent Street. Even after she closed her failing London enterprise in 1893, home decoration remained for Emmeline Pankhurst a calling to which she would return again and again, despite the fact that her shops rarely, if ever, earned money.⁹² After her husband's death, in need of a source of income, she opened another store in Manchester selling 'artistic' wares. 'I think you could do something better than that!' was her daughter Christabel's reproof.⁹³ Only when the family moved from Manchester in 1906 to devote themselves full time to the suffrage cause did Mrs Pankhurst finally abandon her store.

The Garretts and the Pankhursts are the best-known suffrage pioneers. But there were many other purveyors of this new and more militant brand of domesticity, whose lives bear out the link between a struggle for the house and agitation for women's rights. So prominent were decorating ladies like Mrs Haweis and the Misses Garrett that house decoration garnered considerable attention at the turn of the century as a suitable occupation for women. It was the second type of employment (after teaching) discussed in *Woman's* regular 'World of Breadwinners' column of 1890; other periodicals, including *The Young Woman* and *Our Home* carried similar notices.⁹⁴ In the pages of the trade periodicals, we catch a glimpse

of lady decorators who have left little trace: Miss Coleman, Mrs Mary Masters, Miss Millicent Cohen, a pupil of the Garretts.⁹⁵ 'Flitting' between two shops in Manchester and London around the 1890s was the formidable Miss Charlotte Robinson, who, once employed, demanded the right to carry out her schemes 'without further interference or suggestions from her customers'.⁹⁶ Some of these decorators were society ladies, like Mrs Eugenia Merry, who opened a shop called Madame Aileen.⁹⁷ Others appear to have been sisters who joined their capital to found a business together: the Misses Helen and Isabel Woollan, 'decorative artists' at 28 Brook Street, or Miss Caroline Crommelin and Mrs Florence Goring-Thomas.⁹⁸ Miss Stapylton-Smith dealt in antiques, decorated and had, by the late 1890s, qualified as an appraiser and valuer for probate.⁹⁹ Mrs Charles Muller set up a model flat on Sloane Street to show callers what a 'cozy and tasteful home should be . . .'.¹⁰⁰

While decorators catered principally to the well-to-do, 'decorators on paper' – always women – served the middle classes. Beginning in the 1880s, domestic art advisors such as Mrs Jane Panton in the *Lady's Pictorial* or Mrs Talbot Coke in *Hearth and Home* offered their readers suggestions on how to finish curtain rods with pine cones or rescue an outdated decorative scheme. They provided individually tailored advice to subscribers who wrote in to them, printing their replies at the back of the magazine.¹⁰¹ The redoubtable Mrs Talbot Coke was married to a general, always on the move (she lived in twenty-five homes in as many years), and the mother of seven children. And yet, by her own proud reckoning, she devoted six



85 A corner of the Misses Woollan's shop on Brook St, London.

86 Charlotte Talbot
Coke in 1888.

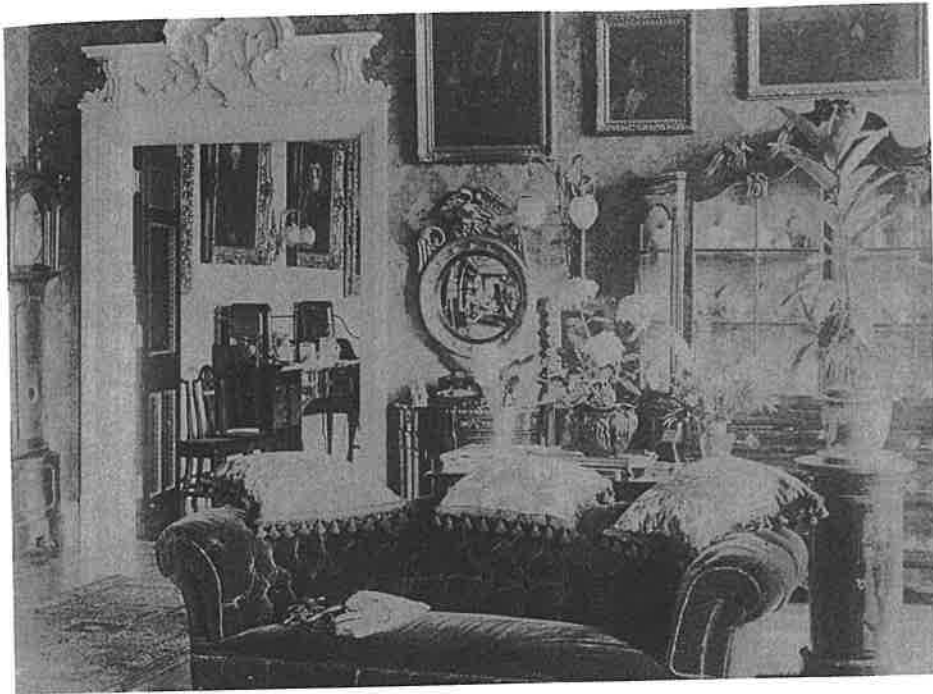


hours every day to answering the letters that poured in by the thousand. Possessed of an 'abnormally sound constitution, both mental and physical' and 'inexhaustible energy', Mrs Talbot Coke was at her writing desk by six o'clock every morning.¹⁰² In the pages of *Queen*, where she got her start, and then at the magazine she founded, *Hearth and Home*, Mrs Coke appealed to the socially ambitious woman reader navigating the perilous shoals of originality and good taste. Mrs Coke was fortunate enough to possess family heirlooms, thereby establishing her pedigree, while at the same time remaining a woman of 'energy and inborn love of work', values prized by her middle-class readers.¹⁰³ Her own taste was, it went without saying, impeccable.

During her more than two-decade-long rule at *Hearth and Home*, Coke liked to claim that her name was a 'talisman' to conjure with in the shops.¹⁰⁴ That was no exaggeration. Not only did she advise her readers to buy certain fabrics or styles from particular retailers, but furniture stores advertised their products as 'recommended' or 'designed' by Mrs Talbot Coke, thereby contributing (as the designer Gustav Haite acknowledged) to an improved selection in the shops.¹⁰⁵ She claimed credit for the invention of the cosy corner, a late nineteenth-century cushioned recess by the fireplace shielded with Moorish fretwork arches and heaped with oriental pillows, and soon ubiquitous in middle-class homes.¹⁰⁶ Of all the columns in *Hearth and Home*, including those on dress and health, hers attracted the most voluminous correspondence. She created a sense of intimacy with her readers, welcoming back her 'old friends' with inquiries about their former rooms and demanding that new correspondents send her photographs of completed arrangements. She urged her readers to act 'boldly', liberally sprinkling her answers with exclamation marks and French phrases, but did not hesitate to chastise those she thought had gone astray.¹⁰⁷ Bad news she dispensed with élan: 'How I wish I could be truthful and at the same time pleasant after all the nice things you say about my columns! But it is useless my pretending that autotypes will ever satisfy the eye in such a panelled room as yours, and with all your fine old china and old furniture.'¹⁰⁸

n
f
F
r
t
h
f
s
t
I
f
'

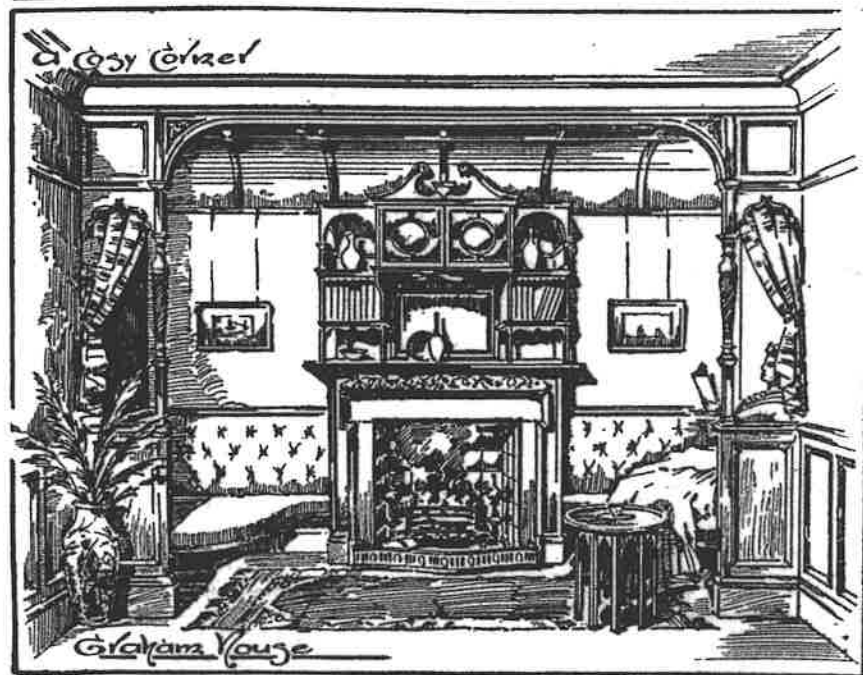
I
t
'
I
'
'



87 Mrs Talbot Coke's
own house – Trusley
Hall.

By the turn of the century, the decorators on paper had captured the middle-class market. Decorating advice, once scarce in the ladies' press, now became a standard feature. Every woman's paper employed a decorating columnist, whose advice – and persona – was carefully calibrated to the sensibilities of her audience. In the down-market *Lady's Companion*, 'Torfrida' advised ladies whose decorative reach exceeded their financial grasp. Behind her Nordic pen-name, she wrote, was a woman just like her readers: she lived in a cottage, did her own housework, and had decided to go in for poultry-keeping to make extra money.¹⁰⁹ A sofa was beyond her means, though she had a piano on hire purchase. With £52, she had managed to furnish her cottage throughout, a feat made possible by a brave disregard of all the rules. In days gone past, a drawing-room hung with deepest red wallpaper or a dining-room done in green would have scandalized observers, but such strictures no longer applied. 'Freedom of opinion,' Torfrida exulted, 'is now allowed to each individual.'¹¹⁰

Lady art advisors such as Torfrida and Mrs Talbot Coke understood that the house had become, in late nineteenth-century Britain, increasingly feminine territory and – above all else – personal, a reflection of a woman's individuality. 'All decoration is,' as Coke put it, 'an opening for individual opinion.'¹¹¹ Blithely disregarding the shibboleths of design reform, Coke endorsed the sham if that was the most expressive option. She was not interested in what was right, but what her correspondents wished to have. 'Because I do not like a glass shade over a clock or ornament, I should be sorry to say it is "wrong".'¹¹² She preached self-expression

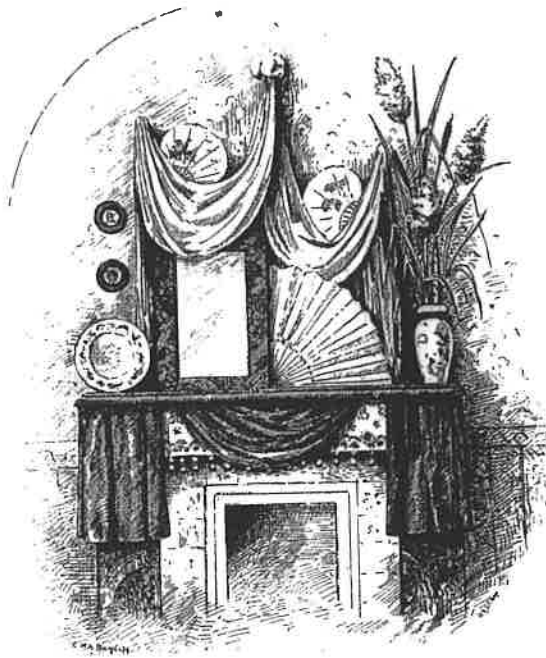


rather than fidelity to the rules: 'It is such a help when anyone tells me she "likes bold designs and conventional as possible", for I would always rather fall in with views (any not absolutely vulgar) than force a certain decorative dogma on unwilling recipients.'¹¹³ Mrs Coke could be censorious or disapproving, but she always indicated a way that a lady might show herself to best advantage. According to the journalist Mrs C.S. Peel, English women the world over followed Mrs Coke's counsel. 'Wherever English women were,' Peel wrote, 'there were decorative schemes chosen for them by Mrs Talbot Coke.'¹¹⁴

To those who had wearied of the rules of design reform, Mrs Talbot Coke's appeal was obvious. Her 'heterodox and "free-lance" notion as to decoration' unshackled the timid and self-conscious, licensing a broad range of furnishing caprices in the name of individuality.¹¹⁵ As a chorus of admiring press notices attested, her evident sympathy for the 'mere average woman' and her eclectic sensibilities helped to distinguish her from 'the exponents of so many doctrines and theories'.¹¹⁶ In 1892, *Winter's Magazine* drew an illuminating contrast between Mrs Talbot Coke and Oscar Wilde. Where Oscar Wilde and his kind 'manifested a certain insincerity', Mrs Coke demonstrated a wholesome and unselfish womanly desire to help those 'struggling to work out their own artistic salvation'. As a consequence, her counsel had 'penetrated into places' that Wilde could never have reached.¹¹⁷ According to the *Globe*, she had won for herself the confidence of 'half the matrons in the kingdom'.¹¹⁸ 'Perhaps no living woman,' observed *Winter's Weekly*, 'has so

completely set her seal upon
ence, measured in terms
William Morris, whose 'sev

For their efforts, 'lady ar
makers such as the design
pretentiousness and trivial
than jargon, and was so i
about with pots, "Benares"
Their columns bore the ta
Day's criticism marked c
amateurs and male profess
But unlike the case of mid
losing side. Decorators on
press to that of the retail
that men like Day had ho
and the middle-class consi
'take art seriously', Day w
Talbot Coke did not let th
ence to the dogmas of d
rigidly righteous – or as sl
message a threat.¹²⁵



89 Mrs Talbot Coke's determinedly asymmetrical arrangement of a mantelpiece in *Queen*, 1887.

completely set her seal upon the taste of to-day as Mrs Talbot Coke.¹¹⁹ Her influence, measured in terms of contemporary sales, probably far exceeded that of William Morris, whose 'severe' style she firmly rejected.¹²⁰

For their efforts, 'lady art advisors' like Coke were roundly mocked by male tastemakers such as the designer Lewis Day.¹²¹ They displayed, charged Day, 'mingled pretentiousness and triviality'.¹²² Their practical advice amounted to nothing more than jargon, and was so indistinct as to be useless: 'Every room must be strewn about with pots, "Benares", "repoussé", or whatever may be the newest thing . . . ? Their columns bore the tarnish of the shops. 'The advice is always buy, buy, buy!'¹²³ Day's criticism marked one more episode in the long battle between female amateurs and male professionals fought over the course of the nineteenth century. But unlike the case of midwives displaced by doctors, this time the men were on the losing side. Decorators on paper had joined the power of the exploding periodical press to that of the retail revolution and new rights for women.¹²⁴ The monopoly that men like Day had hoped to exercise over design principles was slipping away, and the middle-class consumer would not be his to control. To those who meant to 'take art seriously', Day warned, the lady art advisor represented a menace. Mrs Talbot Coke did not let the charge pass un rebutted. Given Day's unyielding adherence to the dogmas of design reform, retorted Coke, it was no wonder that the rigidly righteous – or as she called them, the 'unco guid' – found her individualistic message a threat.¹²⁵

In 1892, Mrs Talbot Coke pasted into her scrapbook a letter of which she was especially proud. A month earlier, she had sent a copy of her new book, *The Gentlewoman at Home*, to the sixty-seven-year-old Reverend Andrew Boyd, whose treatises she had long admired. Charlotte Coke did not know Boyd personally, but his incarnationalist sermons seem to have struck a chord with her.¹²⁶ To the unexpected gift of a decorating manual for gentlewomen, Boyd responded with courtly grace. He had not yet had a chance to finish Mrs Coke's book, but a quick browse through its pages enticed him. *The Gentlewoman at Home*, he wrote, 'is the kind of book I delight in . . . I remember what my countryman Archbishop Tait used to say, that "it is debasing, & even demoralizing, to live among ugly 'things'". You and I agree with him.'

In presuming that Mrs Coke wished to demonstrate the moral virtues of decoration, Boyd demonstrated his attachment to a mid-Victorian idea that the lady art advisors had long since passed by. The religious and ethical concerns that Boyd foregrounded in his published sermons were entirely absent from *The Gentlewoman at Home*.¹²⁷ What 'moral support' Mrs Coke offered her readers came in the form of enthusiasm for 'bold' colours and patterns; she aimed to buck up those ladies whose individualistic convictions might flag in the face of opposition.¹²⁸ She viewed herself as a preacher in the cause of individuality, who defied 'the most determined sleeper to even desire to close an eye when she mounts the pulpit steps'.¹²⁹ Decorators such as Lewis Day, Mrs Coke believed, were like clergyman who made 'reforming oneself appear an utterly hopeless task'. She, by contrast, thought that everyone could be saved, decoratively speaking, simply by expressing their own tastes.¹³⁰

From Frances Power Cobbe to Mrs Talbot Coke, women had evolved from the guardians of morality to the innovative and industrious creators of the House Beautiful. Domesticity had gained a new meaning. As the old-style nineteenth-century angel in the house, woman had neither the right nor the means to determine its contents. For the 'New Woman', by contrast, domesticity meant creativity rather than self-sacrifice, and reflected the strengthened position that came from new opportunities in higher education, the professions, and, eventually, the vote.¹³¹ Where women were once content with 'puerile pursuits' such as cross-stitch, reported Mrs Talbot Coke, 'the active minds, clever fingers, and bolder grasp of to-day seek a wider scope wherein to find full expression'.¹³² Women's artistic training in the home had, according to one paper, emboldened them: 'Women . . . know that they have gained independence by an almost unconscious education in art, and in their way are no more cowardly regarding criticism than Raphael was when he designed the hangings of the Vatican'.¹³³ In 1911, amid the militant campaign of picture-slashing and window-breaking led by Emmeline Pankhurst, the suffragette



90 As depicted in a *Hearth and Home* cartoon of 1895, the 'artistic girl' trod the path from painting the drawing-room door panels to decorating pots and furniture to art school.

journal, *Votes for Women*, reported on a trade exhibition of modern furnishing: 'No one is more keen about the home than the Suffragette.'¹³⁴

With their prospects in the wider world of professions and property finally improved, middle-class women took charge of the home. The vast majority of those who wrote to the decorators on paper were women, though there were a few men, like 'Little Paddy' or 'Medicus' who wanted rooms fit for their sex (Day, for his part, believed these male correspondents to be fabrications). Men's preferences, when they were aired, came chiefly in their wives' letters.¹³⁵ In the late 1890s, the poet Rosamund Marriott Watson, no fan of the amateur decorator and her paintbrush and stencils, observed with disapproval that 'there is no escaping the evidences of increased feminine activity'.¹³⁶ John Benn's magazine, *The House*, launched in 1897, was aimed at women, though it sought, too, a readership in the 'cultured "master", who, be he married or single, believes with Sir Edward Coke that a "man's house is his castle", and is constantly studying to make it a palace of delight'.¹³⁷ By contrast, the raft of home decoration periodicals that made their début after the First World War, among them *Ideal Home* and *House and Garden*, largely dispensed with the appeal to men.

The middle-class interior has often been depicted as an upholstered cage, in which women frittered away their creativity and ambition on Berlin-work or furbelows.¹³⁸ But neither restraint nor its opposite pole, liberation, is a sufficiently subtle concept to capture accurately women's stake in interior decoration. The women who wrote to the decorators on paper talked most often about the *pleasure* their rooms gave them.¹³⁹ Thanking Mrs Talbot Coke for her advice, 'Giroux' exulted that her renovated drawing-room 'has been "a daily joy ever since"!'¹⁴⁰ Forced by unspecified 'circumstances' to move from a grand house into smaller quarters, another woman wrote: 'I am happy in this little nest, made beautiful by your advice, happier than two years ago I ever believed possible for me to be again.'¹⁴¹ The delight these women took in the material world marks their distance from the evangelical ideal of the home as a moral training-ground. Mrs Coke, though stringently observant of propriety, encouraged in her correspondents the sentiment that 'money spent on one's home is a daily, hourly pleasure'; her own 'hereditary instincts' verged, she confessed, 'towards extravagance'.¹⁴² A trip to Maple's, advised Mrs Conyers Morrell of the *Lady's Pictorial*, might turn up 'some specially covetable article, the annexation of which, if possible, would be a life-long joy'.¹⁴³ What melancholy her readers felt, Mrs Talbot Coke proposed might be remedied, by a new colour or a new wallpaper: 'I don't think it is the red paint in the hall, but the dismal red-and-green paper which depresses you.'¹⁴⁴

Like men, middle-class women wished their interiors to attest to their social position. Women's magazines were full of letters from readers who (because of their husbands' business failures or death) had suffered one of the reversals of fortunes common enough in the boom-and-bust late Victorian economy, yet wanted – at all costs – to keep up appearances.¹⁴⁵ The home, always a sensitive barometer of status, offered a last retreat for those who had fallen on hard times. Familiar was the story of a widow in straitened circumstances, forced to sell all of her furniture aside from a table in the window, upon which an aspidistra plant, visible through a small parting in the lace curtains, proved to passers-by that she had not lost her dignity.¹⁴⁶ Buoyed by the notion, common in the advice literature, that good taste costs no more than bad, decorators on paper gave comfort to their downwardly mobile readers. To 'Perdita', compelled to sell her silver, Mrs Talbot Coke offered encouragement: 'I know houses full of silver where nothing is a bit nice. Once you get over the idea that you must have things "just like everybody else", you will see what pretty things can be bought for very little.'¹⁴⁷

As was true of men, women also wanted to demonstrate cultivation and distinction through their homes. Many a provincial lady aimed to be the first in her town to have an 'artistic' overmantel festooned with blue-and-white pottery. Married later in life, Jeanette Marshall set about making her Clapham home, The Limes, a showpiece of modern taste. She even contributed her own savings to pay for the furnishing of her new home. Her husband, Dr Edward Seaton, did not need his

e, in
 urbe-
 ible
 men
 their
 that
 d by
 'ters,
 vice,
 The
 van-
 ntly
 that
 itary
 ised
 able
 What
 new
 smal

ossi-
 heir
 nes
 it all
 itus,
 tory
 rom
 mall
 y.¹⁴⁶
 s no
 ible
 our-
 over
 what

inc-
 own
 ried
 es, a
 the
 his



91 The home as a
 setting for pleasure –
 A.I. Rossi's *The Love
 Letter*, c. 1900.

bride's money, but the determined Jeanette insisted, at least in part because some of her husband's furniture did not accord with her own advanced sensibility. Although Seaton had before their wedding in 1891 declared his conversion to the aesthetic interior, his duties as a medical officer in Surrey took him away from the home for much of the day. In pace with fashion, Jeanette's tastes had moved well beyond the aesthetic style. With her sister, she bought second-hand inlaid, Sheraton-style furniture for her apricot-and-ivory rooms, and carved walnut for her blue rooms. If Edward protested at all (which he probably did not), photographs of The Limes indicate who carried the day. It was, after all, in substantial measure her money.¹⁴⁸

Women's sense of themselves seems from the 1890s onward to have been tied up increasingly in their décor. The Sisyphean task of furnishing and refurnishing might be understood within this context. Your parlour told you and others who you were: this was the prescription of the advice literature, but it also reflected lived experience. Where the male collector viewed his 'things' with objective disinterest, women's investment in their domestic possessions was personal. Despite advances in public life and improvements in their legal status, women's life possibilities were still constrained: in the absence of an office or an occupation, women's things constituted the tools of their trade, the ingredients of their personality. A woman's furnishings were, to quote the middle-class spinster Miss Florence Gardiner, 'dear . . . from association, or on account of the memories they recall'.¹⁴⁹ While a middle-class man might identify with his profession, women – in the words of the society dressmaker Lady Duff Gordon – became 'a part of their surroundings'.¹⁵⁰ A beautiful woman reclining on a sofa, wrote Mary Eliza Haweis, 'becomes for a time a part of the sofa, and the sofa part of her'.¹⁵¹ Together, a woman's things made up a composite portrait of their owner. As an advertising brochure from the furniture store Shoolbred's read: "L'état c'est moi" exclaims a Mussolini or Lenin. "L'ameublement c'est moi", declares your up-to-date hostess.¹⁵²

Middle-class women in the early twentieth century were still a work in progress, forged (among other ingredients) from the raw materials of the home. The contrast with lower middle-class men is instructive. In Edwardian-era autobiographies and diaries, men of the lower middle classes depicted themselves in soul-searching transition – as immigrants to a new land of gentility, their selves under construction. They were acutely aware of, and indeed often embarrassed by, the homes in which they had grown up. Their accounts provide detailed descriptions of the dwellings and furnishings of their youth. But their own adult homes are left almost entirely undescribed. The central drama of lower middle-class men's lives consisted of their professional aspirations: their work told the world who they were.¹⁵³ For middle-class women, the home was the prize they had won and, for a time, they would define themselves by what they put in it.



92 Mrs Thomson in her flat at 2 Macclesfield Chambers, 1898. The fact that Bedford Lemere's interiors almost never included individuals suggests that Mrs Thomson may have insisted that she be photographed in her sitting room.

* * *

As befitted a man whose love life brought him many times over to the brink of ruin, H.G. Wells believed that men and women were incurable antagonists. Wells' novel, *Marriage*, published in 1912 as his second marriage faltered, is an exposition of that elementary premise. Trafford is a brilliant young chemist destined for a research career of great significance. Marjorie is a spirited young lady who, like so many of Wells' heroines, chafes at the restrictions in her parental home. The couple elopes. By the world's reckoning, Trafford has married up; his own family is not quite respectable, and Marjorie is an industrious and ambitious variant of the species

New Woman. But the flaws in the marriage become evident immediately. Obsessed with furnishing and decoration, Marjorie gives way 'to spending exactly as a struggling drunkard decides to tipple'.¹⁵⁴ Not content with the Bokhara hangings and brass-footed work-boxes purchased for her newly-wed dwelling, she fixates upon larger and more picturesque houses in more central locations. She decorates with abandon, acquiring *cloisonné* jars, lacquer cabinets, and post-Impressionist paintings – none of which her husband can afford. Unable to rein in his extravagant wife, Trafford is forced to abandon his research career and enter the synthetic rubber business.

Marriage, as Wells described the novel in his autobiography, is an archetypal tale: the story of how 'masculine intellectual interest met feminine spending and what ensued'.¹⁵⁵ Marjorie is not a sympathetic character, but neither is she a villain.¹⁵⁶ Her four children are not sufficient to keep her occupied or satisfied. The narrow confines of her life thwart her. 'You cannot consume your energies merely in not spending money.'¹⁵⁷ But neither is Marjorie corrigible. Trafford's misery in his business career prompts the couple to flee to Labrador to try to save the marriage. In that icy wilderness, Marjorie redeems herself after Trafford is attacked by a lynx, and they decide, full of resolve for a new future, to return to England. But even at the novel's climax, when her husband asks her to cease her 'Jackdaw buying' and become a 'non-shopping woman', Marjorie cannot stop imagining her life in terms of furnishing.¹⁵⁸ She translates all experiences into acquisitions. The life they would live upon their return was, for Marjorie, 'framed in a tall, fine room, a study, a study in sombre tones' with 'rich deep green curtains' and 'furnishings of old brass' and, to commemorate their year in the arctic Canadian north, 'a touch of the wilderness about it; a skin perhaps'.¹⁵⁹

Consumption was, in Wells' depiction, a physical need for women, an ingrained biological imperative much like child-bearing: 'Men were released from that close, continuous touch with physical necessities long before women were.'¹⁶⁰ But, as we have seen, men's independence from the world of possessions was of rather more recent vintage than the author of *Marriage* allowed. His Edwardian presumptions – the product of a very specific set of historical developments – have shaped our own views, and coloured what we take for granted.¹⁶¹ Too often have we read present-day arrangements back into the past world of consumption. Because we assume home decoration to be a preoccupation of women and gay men, so, too, must it always have been. For the Victorians, by contrast, acquisitiveness in the matter of furnishing was both a male and a female trait. Taste-makers like the Reverend Loftie took to task men such as his neighbour 'Brown', who had lovingly and expensively furnished his sitting-rooms with mid-Victorian Gothic monstrosities.

In the nineteenth century, women's sphere may have been the house, but the angel who resided there – without property rights and earning power – had little control over its disposition. Middle-class women could only fight, and win, the

battle for the house when their standing in society at large had improved. The house proved an easier castle to besiege than would education and the professions. New conceptions of domesticity, married women's separate property, suburbanization, and the downfall of Oscar Wilde all combined to cause men gradually to abandon decoration as women claimed it as their right. For the pioneering first generation of lady art advisors, for women such as Mrs Haweis and Mrs Talbot Coke, the domestic interior offered a potent means of self-expression, even the key to individuality. But their gospel of the home had its limits. As the insatiable Marjorie would discover, the pleasures of furnishing all too often proved short-lived, even as the habit of thinking in terms of things endured.