

Household Gods: The British and their Possessions

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The homes of the British middle class in the third quarter of the 19th century, as depicted in contemporary photographs, were cluttered with furniture, soft furnishings and objects. Walking across a room required careful negotiation of lightweight tables that might easily topple over and spill the numerous items that decorated their surface. Textiles added comfort, with upholstered furniture often deeply buttoned, and several layers of curtains swathed the windows; in addition, textiles draped over doorways and even dangled from mantelpieces. Surface pattern was lavish and often in clashing colours and designs which produced gorgeously three-dimensional representations of the natural world. Never before or since had interiors been such a riotous display. Deborah Cohen's book *Household Gods: the British and their Possessions* seeks to analyse how this came about. With particular emphasis on the period between the 1830s and 1930s, she contextualises home-making and taste in interiors by considering the influences that produced the cluttered interiors and the subsequent artful interiors. She focuses on gender, religion, changes in the manufacture and retailing of objects for the home, and the changing advice given to home-makers, as well as the changing nature of the advisors. Her central aim is to explore the 'bad taste' that resulted from 'middle-class self-fashioning' and how 'self-expression' became important in furnishing the home (p. xv).

Cohen harnesses a multitude of sources, many that will be new to her readers and which bring a fresh perspective to 19th-century interiors. Her sources include business archives, diaries, household magazines and a great many photographs of 'ordinary' homes that allow scrutiny of these previously somewhat neglected interiors. However, this is not merely a collection of images or an account of changing styles in interiors but is above all a sustained and provocative argument to explain why homes looked the way that they did.

The organisation of the book is in seven chapters that deal with interiors chronologically and that address the themes that Cohen identifies as significant for leading to the British obsession with their homes. In the first chapter, she establishes that evangelicalism was important for the development of the middle class. The influence of religious conviction fed into a particular form of consumption for the home despite the apparent tensions between morality and materialism. Cohen traces how evangelicalism began and how its religious attitudes resulted, she suggests, in austere interiors due to the fear that luxury was corrupting. Interiors were lacking in objects in comparison with the later 19th century and this was encouraged by low wages that kept consumption down. The turning point for producing the changes in interiors, Cohen suggests, was the 1860s

and 1870s, when religion was ebbing but morality remained. With more disposable income, the middle class felt the need to reconcile material prosperity with their conscience and so made a virtue, she claims, out of consuming for the home.

The somewhat familiar story of the 1851 exhibition is covered, along with the design reform movement and the link between design and morality; 'poor design' Cohen argues 'posed a threat to the decency of a household' (p. 18). Cohen does, however, give a useful re-appraisal of the design reform movement from a cultural and social history viewpoint. What is particularly stimulating is the notion of the British attitude to furnishing the home being forged by evangelicalism together with the subsequent demise of religious observation, and the ongoing concern for giving the home a moral character that would benefit its inhabitants.

The themes of morality and the design of the home are then enlarged on in a chapter on retailing for the home. The chapter gives an overview of its changing nature, and the emphasis is rightly on quantity rather than mass production. Cohen follows in the footsteps of Rosalind Williams [\(1\)](#) who portrayed department stores of the later 19th century as 'cathedrals of commerce'. Consumers' desire for novelty and their love of decoration were catered for by such furnishing emporia as Wylie and Lochhead in Glasgow and Maples on London's Tottenham Court Road. These bigger and better shops, it is suggested, made consumption easier and more tempting with extravagant displays of goods. The opportunity to furnish the home completely from one store was an added incentive to consume. Cohen argues that coupled with the temptation of shops was the increased information and advice as to what to buy to furnish the home since the same period saw an explosion in printed literature connected with home-making and furnishing.

Cohen's argument continues with an exploration of how art became important in the home. Ruskin's and Morris's contribution is well known, as too is the Aesthetic Movement but not so the 'lady art advisors' who made art indispensable in the home. 'The lady art advisors would endow artistic furnishing with an irresistible purpose; they made it something that no self-respecting middle-class household could do without' (p. 65). The material that is presented to support this aspect is intriguing and has been largely ignored before. Cohen demonstrates that such little known figures as Mrs Mary Eliza Haweis probably had a far wider influence on middle-class interiors than the celebrated names of interior design. She suggests that the taste these female writers fostered continued until the 1930s when modernism made artistic interiors appear 'fusty'.

Cohen suggests that up to the 1890s furnishing was a man's world. The earliest home decoration manuals were written by men for men. In the late 19th century and up to the 1920s, this situation, she claims, was reversed. Women became more assertive around the time of the Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882. By this period the home had become 'personal, a reflection of a woman's individuality' (p. 111). Whereas the mid-century angel in the house had been subservient to her husband's wishes, the new woman thought domesticity equalled creativity not self-sacrifice. This was even though women continued to have limited power over property and even less power in society generally.

The central theme, that homes came to express 'personality', is returned to throughout the book. Cohen relates how incarnationism and design reform 'combined forces' and 'redeemed consumption from sin' (p. 76). In the relationship between people and their possessions, art was midway between sin and self-expression. 'Making a good impression had always been important, especially in the middling ranks in society. But the emphasis upon self-expression was new' (p. 84). Cohen suggests that this was a fluid society, upwardly mobile but also insecure. It was not simply who you were that was important but also what you owned. Therefore, how homes were furnished both expressed and conferred status. The self could be defined by the home. Here her argument offers a new way of problematising the notion of emulation as an explanation of consumption. Cohen provides a brief overview of the theory but concludes that it does not fully explain the desire for individuality. A common problem in consumer society is explored: that despite increased consumption people are discontented with what they have and what they have chosen, since choices fail to express individuality adequately.

Having established that women took control of furnishing the homes of the late 19th century, Cohen suggests that men had withdrawn their interest. (2) The growth of suburbs contributed to this process since men were increasingly removed from the home. Also significant was the dubious reputation attached to the new Aesthetic style. The numerous cartoons on the subject in *Punch* and the like helped to give home décor a bad name, and the trial of Oscar Wilde appeared to prove these suspicions correct. Cohen develops her argument of the separation of masculine and feminine home-making through a consideration of antique furniture. It has been suggested before that men distinguished their consumption practices from that of women, by emphasising the supposed 'serious' nature, and therefore masculine character, of their purchases. (3) Cohen's focus on antique collecting as a predominantly male preserve adds to such arguments. Buying antiques also required cultivation and was 'a mark of distinction not easily replicable' (p. 147) since it was beyond the means of most people. These objects were worshiped as household gods. Therefore, although different to Aesthetic interiors, the antique collectors also imbued their homes with 'personality' albeit through the notion of the objects with which they were surrounded being the repositories of the lives of their previous owners. As with other chapters, the practice of antique collecting is illustrated through the example of a little known home-maker, in this instance a Cardiff pharmacist Robert Drane. His diary entries, listing his many acquisitions, are scrutinised for the intentions behind his purchases.

Cohen suggests that following the First World War taste was increasingly levelled down and homogenised. Safety was prized and few broke away from the neutral schemes. This reflected a broad consensus of style across the middle class to the extent that in the inter-war period it was more important to fit in than stand out. However, although this chapter suggests that these views were widely held by the middle class, the evidence is thinner than in previous chapters. Examples are drawn mainly from wealthier protagonists; people who might have used the services of Syrie Maugham or shopped in Fortnum and Mason. The excellent photographs showing the homes of doctors, builders and butchers shown in earlier chapters are not in evidence here but rather the imaginary interiors of shops and exhibitions. Evidence is also taken from magazines and what they recommended but without any suggestion of how their readers might have mediated advice. More visual evidence was needed to show how actual home-makers created their interiors. Similarly, the survey on taste carried out by *The Listener* is used to conclude that the middle class of all levels preferred a safe 'good' taste. However, no discussion is included of how people responded to exhibitions and questionnaires. The lack of mediation is addressed in the epilogue but it is concerned with the present day and it is a pity that this analysis was not present in the discussion of inter-war homes.

There are, perhaps inevitably, problems when presenting material that spans several hundred years to make one strong and coherent thesis. Some of Cohen's premises appear rather contrived at times. For example, the insistence that homes had been austere before the mid-19th century ignores the fact that middle-class homes of the 1830s were far more comfortable and luxurious in comparison with the earlier homes of the middling sort. Indeed, by the later 18th century goods such as ceramics, carpeting and cotton textiles were becoming cheaper, which aided consumption. Similarly, the celebration of shops in the later 19th century as retail 'palaces of consumption' has, buried in a footnote, the point that, 'the term "retail revolution" must be used cautiously' (p. 226 n. 7) since a body of work now exists that traces the many innovations in retailing during the earlier period. (4) Unfortunately, much of the chapter expounds the development of retailing as a dramatic revolution dating from the mid-19th century and, indeed, the term is employed as a sub-heading. This stance amplifies a rather out-moded chronology of retail development predicated on the department store.

This ambitious book attempts both breadth and detail. It brings a fresh analytical twist to some areas much covered in design history; the 1851 exhibition, the design reform movement and Aesthetic design, for example. Many readers will find this wide-reaching overview useful, and the detail, especially for the later 19th century, brings some intriguing new evidence to light. The photographs are particularly welcome. Interiors of 'ordinary' middle-class homes are fascinating to see. The new angles on antique collecting are also very welcome. The exploration of the reasons for middle-class consumption for the home, the gendered dimensions, the reasons for the changing attitudes to the home and how it should look are refreshing and add

much to the debate especially for explaining the curious filling up of interiors in the later 19th century.

Despite the slight reservations suggested above, Deborah Cohen's book is a fine achievement. It is written with style and humour. It makes the changing nature of interiors coherent; it brings together skilfully the evidence and produces a sound and provocative argument that is largely convincing. This will be a much-used book by students and academics with an interest in the design history and the social and cultural history of the home throughout the period covered. Where other historians of this subject have produced fine detailed accounts, whether bound by class, retail history, type of object, gender considerations, named designers and celebrated consumers, this book brings them together to produce a persuasive argument that tries to make sense of the dense and fascinating subject - our relationship to our home.

Notes

1. R. Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late 19th-Century France* (Berkeley, 1982). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. This argument is also suggested in J. Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian Britain* (New Haven and London, 1999). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. C. Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinity, Fashion and City Life 1860-1914* (Manchester, 1999); C. Hosgood, '"Doing the shops" at Christmas: women, men and the department store in England, c. 1880-1914', in *Cathedrals of Consumption: the European Department Store, 1850-1939*, ed. G. Crossick and S. Jaumain, (Aldershot, 1999); L. Ugolini, 'Men, masculinities, and menswear advertising, c. 1890-1914', in *A Nation of Shopkeepers: Five Centuries of British Retailing*, ed. J. Benson and L. Ugolini (London, 2003). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. N. Cox, *The Complete Tradesman: A Study of Retailing 1550-1820* (Aldershot, 2000). [Back to \(4\)](#)

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