

Book Reviews

Comptes rendus de livres

Helen Damon-Moore, *Magazines for the Millions: Gender and Commerce in The Ladies' Home Journal and The Saturday Evening Post, 1880-1910*

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Helen Damon-Moore, *Magazines for the Millions: Gender and Commerce in The Ladies' Home Journal and The Saturday Evening Post, 1880-1910*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, 263 pp., illus. Cloth US\$59.50, ISBN 0-7914-2057-4. Paper US\$19.95, ISBN 0-7914-2058-2.

"The Overwhelming Power of Sex Appeal," "He Doesn't Write, He Doesn't Call," and "18 Ways to Keep a Man Faithful" are only a few of the titles featured on a recent cover of *Cosmopolitan*. Above these, the pale turquoise letters of the glossy American journal's title are partially blocked by the cocked head of a lithe, long-lashed blonde model, sporting white pedal-pushers and a see-through lace top. She appears to lean against the edge of the magazine, grasping one ankle, looking innocent and a bit dazed.

It is hard to believe that this slick, super-market magazine, with its emphasis on glamour and money as means of attracting men, was first launched as a magazine for men. That popular journals for men frequently underwent this kind of editorial "sex change," consciously broadening their audiences to include women and thereby attract lucrative advertising, is one of the many fascinating insights presented in Helen Damon-Moore's *Magazines for the Millions*. Journals first intended for women, however, did not survive such radical surgery.

Damon-Moore's book is a case study of two of the most influential American magazines ever published: *The Ladies' Home Journal* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. In eight lively chapters, the author traces the history of these

powerful cultural icons during three tumultuous decades, showing how both the *Journal* and the *Post* played significant roles in the commercializing of gender and the gendering of commerce. Through their editorial stances, advertising, regular columns, fiction, and contemporary news reports, these magazines — both run by the Curtis Publishing Company of Philadelphia — solidified assumptions about what sorts of material goods American women and men might wish to buy and about the highly gendered nature of the marketplace in which goods are sold.

Damon-Moore's perspective of each magazine is through the stance of its editor. Previous research, too, on *The Ladies' Home Journal* has focused on its conservative and headstrong second editor, Edward Bok, who steered the contents of the magazine for three decades. Damon-Moore begins, however, with a fascinating glimpse of the journal's first editor, Louisa Knapp Curtis, who was also the wife of publisher Cyrus Curtis.

It was during this crucial period of Knapp's guidance, according to Damon-Moore, that the journal cemented its role in the so-called Consumer Revolution. Knapp saw women's increased activity as consumers as a means by which they could expand their autonomy. This did nothing to challenge the patriarchal nature of capitalism, of course, whereby men were paid for their work while women were not. Under her editorship, nonetheless, circulation jumped from 25 000 at the end of its first year to 440 000 when she retired in 1889.

The confidential tone of Knapp's writing was done away with by Bok, who not only took

over as editor of *LHJ* but also married the Curtis' only daughter, Mary Louise. Bok communicated with *LHJ* readers in a more condescending, almost preachy tone, instructing them how to live rather than sharing information, as had his predecessor. He signed his editorials and included collections of his own articles, while Knapp had edited the magazine more anonymously. And under Bok, readers were given less and less space in which to react to the magazine's content. Nevertheless, circulation figures continued to grow. Damon-Moore points out how Bok's editorship institutionalized the patronizing tone that still characterizes popular women's magazines. "The notion that women need help was institutionalized," she points out in an insightful chapter on Bok's role in the context of reading in America at the time.

Whereas Knapp had suggested that women's and men's spheres overlapped considerably, Bok was a firm believer that women's place was in the home. Threatened by women's advancing role in American society, Bok focused on raising the status of domesticity, rather than supporting the advancement of women outside the home. In fact, he opposed both higher education for women and the vote, despite evidence that thousands of *LHJ* readers supported these causes.

Damon-Moore claims that Bok's tenure coincided with a profound shift in the relationship of gender and commerce — from consuming as an activity for middle-class women to "viewing women as the culture's primary consumers and women as primarily consumers." The author claims this as *LHJ*'s lasting contribution to American culture, by examining the "mixed messages" embedded in the content of the increasingly commercialized magazine under Bok.

The author's mandate shifts considerably half-way through the book. Chapter 5 introduces *The Saturday Evening Post*, acquired by Cyrus Curtis in 1897 as a magazine for men. Here the gender analysis gets complicated. Damon-Moore points out that the *Post*'s editor, George Horace Lorimer, had more in common with Knapp than with Bok, thereby suggesting that an editor's character may be a more important factor than her or his gender.

The real contribution of *Magazines for the Millions* lies in the complex comparison undertaken by Damon-Moore between the directives of the two journals. While most feminist authors study women's culture in isolation, typically emphasizing how it differed from men's (i.e., mainstream) culture, Damon-Moore shows

how "men required gender construction just as women did." Her analysis of the *Post*'s content in the context of other social forms of masculinity (Boy Scouts, boxing, fraternities) turns previous scholarship on its head, suggesting that there were simply fewer options available to men at the turn of this century, rather than a real "crisis of masculinity," as has been suggested by other historians.

Magazines for the Millions is a must-read for scholars interested in gender, the histories of reading, advertising, business, and shopping. Material Culture scholars, however, may be disappointed that the author focuses solely on the content of the journals and pays little attention to the real power of the magazines in determining the ways particular goods may have been perceived, displayed, sold, made, used, or even discarded. Granted, the author did go to great lengths to analyze the few instances in the magazines when readers voiced their opinions; sources in the histories of particular companies, however, may have enriched her interpretation of changes in content. Damon-Moore analyzes advertisements for Pearline soap, for example, which appeared in nearly every issue of the 1890s *Journal*, pointing out how they contradicted many of Bok's conservative editorials. How many people bought Pearline? How did it compare to other washing powders? How was it packaged? Where was it sold? How did women respond to the progressive images portrayed in Pearline ads?

And surprisingly, there is no mention in *Magazines for the Millions* of the *Journal*'s unsurpassed power in reforming the design of American homes, particularly through its regular publication of model houses by famous American architects. Bok began this practice in 1895, offering readers the chance to purchase house plans for as little as \$5. Since the editor frequently offered prizes for photographs of the best houses built from *LHJ* designs, there is considerable information about the number of these houses actually constructed, their builders, and their locations. Bok's power in this regard was well understood even in his own day. Theodore Roosevelt allegedly commented that Edward Bok was the only one he knew "who changed, for the better, the architecture of an entire nation."

The reasons for the seeming lack of interest in both material culture analysis and architectural history are clear from the one-page "Methodological Note," which appears at the end of the text. Damon-Moore read some 300 issues of *LHJ* and surveyed over 600 issues

of the *Post*. These were her sources; the book is truly a survey of the magazines. It is not a study of their direct impact on an increasingly materialistic America.

Despite these shortcomings, *Magazines for the Millions* is an insightful, clearly written, and well-illustrated text. Besides, it puts a whole new twist on reading *Cosmo*.

Michael S. Bird, *Canadian Country Furniture, 1675–1950*

JANE L. COOK

Michael S. Bird, *Canadian Country Furniture, 1675–1950*, Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co. Limited, 1994. 403 pp., 704 photographs. Hardcover \$75, ISBN 1-55046-087-0.

Canadians have long awaited a definitive text on the nation's country furniture heritage. Michael S. Bird, a recognized authority on western Canadian furniture and folk traditions, has produced the first text of its kind investigating vernacular domestic wares. Ethnic groups and their North American and European roots are investigated in order to reveal the design, decoration and stylistic origins of the furniture they produced. The author also discusses which designs and forms survived transplantation and how they were adapted within the New World. Because of Bird's emphasis on the influence of foreign immigrant cultures upon cabinetmaking traditions we are left asking "what is Canadian about Canadian furniture?" Perhaps the answer to this lies in the origins of this country's peoples, and, more importantly, the way in which they interacted and adapted to their new worlds.

The main text is divided into three sections: furniture as an object of study; histories of ethnic group cultures and furniture forms in the Atlantic provinces, Quebec, Ontario and the Western provinces; and an illustrated catalogue of furniture made in these same regions. Photographs therefore are divorced from their respective regional histories, and the text at the front of the book is separated from these figures by endnotes. This rather bizarre arrangement leads to the necessity of flagging pages so that the furniture, histories, and references can be more readily accessed in conjunction with each other.

Such minor irritations should not detract from the overall usefulness of this book. In the first section a brief introductory discussion on utility and beauty leads to a controversial and thought-provoking essay on defining country furniture. Bird's writing is knowledgeable and embraces a considerable understanding of the

field of furniture studies. Of more technical interest is Bird's thoughtful inclusion of a periodization of influential international styles and a glossary, the latter appearing at the end of the book (more bookmarks).

Bird includes discussions of high-style city furniture manufacturers such as Tullies, Pallister and McDonald of Halifax and George W. Hancock in St. John's, something we might not expect from a study of vernacular furniture. The fact is that there are few biographies of country furniture makers, most of whom remain anonymous and cannot be linked to their products.

Unfortunately, the text is marred regularly by petty historical inaccuracies. The reader is constantly aggravated by minor flaws, for example, when Bird claims on page 26 that Nova Scotia was divided into two regions in 1783 (rather than 1784). Errors also arise when Bird refers to details regarding individual cabinetmakers' histories. For example, when Bird speaks of the Anglo-Americans in the Atlantic provinces on page 25 he refers to New Brunswickers Thomas Nisbet of Saint John (operating 1814–1838) and Alexander Lawrence in St. Stephen (operating circa 1835–1880). In reality, Thomas Nisbet, Sr., a Scotsman, became a wright in 1813, registered as a cabinetmaker in 1814, and worked until his retirement in 1848. His son Thomas Nisbet, Jr., became a freeman in 1832, partnered with his father in 1834, and died in 1841. Alexander Lawrence (1787–1843) was a contemporary of Nisbet, Sr., a fellow Scot arriving and establishing a business in the city of Saint John in 1817. The city newspapers carried notice of Lawrence's death in 1843, but his sons Joseph Wilson Lawrence (1818–1892) and George Hunter Lawrence (1819–1880) continued in their father's footsteps, taking over the business in 1842. On the other hand, perhaps Bird is not referring to any members of the Lawrence family but to one of St. Stephen's most illustrious cabinetmakers, John Warren Moore (1812–1893). But there is no direct mention of