

## Chapter 4 *The Anti-Feminist Reaction*

War had had the effect of focusing attention upon women in general and young women in particular, and after 1918 the popular press kept them in the public eye. If, as some contemporaries believed, the whole experience had unsettled the relations between the sexes, then it was almost inevitable that there would follow a debate over the proper roles of men and women in peacetime. In this debate we can distinguish three broad views. Many men and some prominent anti-feminist women, reacting sharply against the entire wartime experience, simply wanted everything put back in its proper place; thus men must recover lost ground in employment and women devote themselves to their homes. The magazine *Home Chat* breathed a sigh of relief: 'Now we are feminine again'. A second and intermediate position was held by those women, including many feminists, who had long accepted the fundamental differences between the sexes. For them war had not changed anything so much as sharpened their perception of the relations between men and women. While it was a matter for satisfaction that women had laboured in the war, war itself was the especial work, indeed crime, of man; as women their responsibility lay in using their political power for peace and conciliation in the post-war world. This approach culminated in the kind of argument used by Mary Stocks, an articulate critic of 'equal rights' feminism between the wars, when she contended that no sensible woman would wish to take equality to the length of joining her country's armed forces on the same footing as men. At the far end of the spectrum stood those feminists for whom sex equality remained the paramount goal. For them war had proved their case as to the capability of women, but had by no means settled the question; male-vested interests remained too deeply entrenched. As Rebecca West put it:

I am an old-fashioned feminist. I believe in the sex war. ... When those of our army whose voices are inclined to coo tell us that the day of sex-antagonism is over and that henceforth we have only to advance hand in hand with the male I do not believe it.<sup>1</sup>

This awareness of the dangers of a reaction amongst the mass of women, carelessly glorying in their new-found freedom, is reflected in the post-war writing of Cicely Hamilton, actress, author and former suffragette:

It would be a mistake to imagine that we, of the enfranchised twentieth century, are proof against the danger of a return to femininity, and the dependence femininity implies ... the flow of every tide is followed by its

ebb. ... The crop-haired young women of the present day who array themselves in gym suits, run, jump, and swim – they may live to see their daughters falling over draperies, languishing in flounces or filling up doorways with hoops ... ere they know what they are doing they will have lost the precious right to show their legs! And woman, once more, will be a legless animal – and reduced to the state of dependence implied by her unfortunate deformity!<sup>2</sup>

### Femininity and Feminism

However, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the experience of 1914–18, the uncompromising views of West and Hamilton were rejected by large numbers of women. They saw feminism as a threat to their femininity. Charlotte Haldane poured out her contempt for the 'war-working type of women – aping the cropped hair, the great booted feet, and grim jaw, the uniform, and if possible the medals of the military man'.<sup>3</sup>

This charge was developed in the writing of Arabella Kenealy who claimed that the underlying object of the women's movement was masculinism, that is the training of women in order to enable them to compete with men in every sphere. In her view female subjection was a blessing ordained by Nature.<sup>4</sup> Between the wars such women persistently emphasised the distance between 'proper women' on the one hand and on the other, the feminist who was by implication a spinster. Witness Janet Courtney's account of the Women's Institutes movement which she pronounced to be feminine not feminist because 'it contains too large a proportion of married women'.<sup>5</sup> This stereotyping was to prove a considerable handicap to the women's movement during this period, and one has the impression that some feminists played to their weakness. Lady Rhondda's scathing comments on married women are a case in point: 'lacking in vitality ... rather vapid conversation ... what a world in which a whole class of human beings is condemned to a life which turns the majority of them into devitalised bores ... the kept-wife has no *raison d'être* as a person.'<sup>6</sup>

Of course, critical feminists were often themselves reacting to another stereotype which attracted a great deal of attention during the 1920s: the ultra-feminine, shallow-minded flapper. The visible signs of this phenomenon included the craze for dancing and cinema-going without chaperons, the fashion for dieting and slimming and changes in dress design which seemed to favour the flat-chested, narrow-hipped figure. 'The modern girl is as slim as a lamp post', declared the *Daily Mail*, which emerged as the foremost authority in this field. Typically,

it drew the connection between her physical attributes and her responsibility for the 'lower standard of morality' of the post-war period: 'the social butterfly type has probably never been so prevalent as at present. It comprises the frivolous, scantily clad "jazzing flapper", irresponsible and undisciplined.'<sup>7</sup>

For the average girl, cheap dances, cinema tickets and copies of fashionable clothes were but a pale echo of the social life enjoyed by the wealthy. The atmosphere of the 'roaring twenties' is well captured by magazines like *Vogue* and *Eve* which clearly catered to the upper-class female. Founded in 1920, *Eve* encouraged its readers to pursue a relentless round of shopping, hunt balls, tennis, golf, ski-ing, sailing, shooting and flying, and regularly regaled them with 'Tennis tattle from the Riviera', 'People who count at Cannes', and 'Eve and her car'. *Eve* was prepared to be serious about fashion and gardening, but its awareness of new horizons for women was only rarely perceptible. Presenting one of its full page portraits of Asquith's daughter, Violet, with her two children, *Eve* explained, as though introducing readers to an unfamiliar breed: 'Lady Bonham-Carter is an intellectual, and, according to rumour, is likely to enter the political arena in the near future.'<sup>8</sup> Clearly *Eve's* challenge to conventional notions about the sexes was confined to the social sphere: the emancipated woman drove her own motor car, she did not stand for parliament. This reflects a not uncommon assumption that the political side of women's struggle was now essentially over; those who continued to fight such battles were indelibly associated with the gloom of strong-mindedness and spinsterhood.

That many feminists found themselves at odds with ordinary women in their attitude towards women's social life was to a large extent a direct result of the experience of wartime, in that the opportunities available to young working women to enjoy themselves and seek boy friends and husbands led to friction with the various patrols and women police volunteers, many of whom were erstwhile suffragettes and suffragists. Yet, as we know, feminists' eagerness to participate in such wartime work was but a reflection of the long-standing concern about morality within the women's movement. For them freer relations between the sexes, especially if it involved earlier and easier sexual activity, was overwhelmingly in the interests of men. Although most had to discard their uniforms after 1918, their concerns about the double standard in sexual morality remained undimmed. As a result they earned an unfortunate reputation as interfering, strait-laced and

priggish older women, keen to deny to younger generations the heterosexual pleasures they themselves had never had.

Even before 1914 a debate had been simmering within the ranks of feminism about the whole value of sex and marriage. Perhaps the most effective spokesperson for those who thought women should deliberately opt for spinsterhood was Cicely Hamilton, who had written *Marriage as a Trade* in 1909. In this she characterised marriage as a sordid deal in which a woman sold her body in return for her keep but no wage; for many women sexual intercourse was simply not a necessity, and in any case, it entailed the unacceptable risk of venereal disease. The signs of a retreat from marriage during the Edwardian period suggested that the message was getting across. However, even before the war women were being offered a wholly different view of their sexuality by men like Havelock Ellis, author of *The Psychology of Sex*, and socialist-feminists such as Stella Browne and Dora Marsden, the editor of the *Freewoman*. They challenged Victorian assumptions about women as sexually passive, arguing instead that sex was as essential to their health and pleasure as for men's. *Freewoman* bitterly attacked the spinster as 'the barren sister, the withered tree, the acidulous vestal' and deplored her influence in schools.<sup>9</sup> Stella Browne declaimed:

It will be an unspeakable catastrophe if our richly complex Feminist movement with its possibilities of power and joy, falls under the domination of sexually deficient and disappointed women, impervious to facts and logic and deeply ignorant of life.<sup>10</sup>

While both sides in this dispute expressed extreme minority views, Browne's positive attitude towards sex was much closer to post-1918 ideas, as the runaway success of Marie Stopes' *Married Love* suggests.

However, many leading feminists felt alienated from the younger generation of women. As Mary Agnes Hamilton observed, it was dismaying for feminists to see young girls eagerly applying cosmetics in public and generally showing their desire to gratify the male sex.<sup>11</sup> 'They have ruined their beauty by a clown's splash of lipstick, bloody claws and the everlasting dental grin', complained Helena Swanwick. 'The emancipation of today displays itself mainly in cigarettes and shorts', noted Sylvia Pankhurst. Even Mrs Fawcett inveighed against the women's pages of the national press for their 'inane observations on the length of skirts or the shape of sleeves'.<sup>12</sup> Clearly a wide gulf had opened up between the serious-minded feminist and the flapper who took for granted the gains that older women had fought so hard to win.

### Masculinity and Feminism

From the male perspective the craze for clothes and dancing on the part of young women was clearly reassuring in so far as it pointed to a return to femininity. But the vigorous pursuit of an independent social life seemed a little threatening in the context of a number of attempts to invade the male sphere or compete with male authority. From the pages of *Good Housekeeping* Lord Birkenhead pompously denounced 'This Intrusion of Women' into the fields of politics, the law, employment and even sport.<sup>13</sup> Certainly women were being encouraged to take up golf, athletics, cricket or rowing; magazines like *Good Housekeeping* and *Eve* gave much prominence to the lady motorist, which must have antagonised the majority of men for whom a motor car was still out of reach. The 1920s also saw female mountaineers scaling Kilimanjaro and the Eiger; while in 1927 a Miss Mercedes Gleitz became the first woman to swim the English Channel, a feat soon emulated by others of her sex. Perhaps even more publicity attached to the female pilots such as Lady Heath and Lady Bailey who flew the London to Cape Town route. Most celebrated, of course, was Amy Johnson for her solo flight to Australia in 1930 after only 50 hours flying experience. Rather tactlessly she proceeded to beat her own husband's record for the flight to Cape Town in 1932. The strain which this competition put upon their marriage led them to undertake joint flights, but they divorced in 1938. From this the women's magazines drew a moral: no good could come of attempts to play roles for which nature had not fitted women.

In retrospect the excitable and often crude language in which the defensive reaction against women was expressed during the 1920s seems out of proportion to the real changes which were taking place. How can one account for the concern especially over young women after 1918? To some extent the issue was deliberately orchestrated by influential elements in the national press particularly in papers owned by Alfred Harmsworth (Lord Northcliffe), his brother Harold (Lord Rothermere) and Lord Beaverbrook. They were largely responsible for popularising the term 'flapper', in a derogatory sense, especially to denote the young, unenfranchised woman, though women's magazines like *My Weekly* used it in a neutral way when referring to clothes to 'fit the Flapper' and 'more Flapperstyles'. The key fact is simply that young women, conspicuous during the war, had been providing the press with good copy. What changed after the war was the light in which they were presented. For several years it had suited proprietorial purpose to depict women in terms of patriotism and national unity. But

by the time of the armistice they had already begun to change tack with alarming speed. Where recently they had heaped praise on women they now began to identify them in a threatening light as a section of the population lacking true public spirit. To some extent women became merely scapegoats or weapons made to serve the political purpose of press barons. For example, Northcliffe's sudden switch in favour of women's suffrage in 1916 was not unconnected with his desire to destroy the Asquith government over the electoral register; similarly attacks upon the costs of unemployment benefit for women from 1919 may be seen in the context of the anti-waste campaign against Lloyd George; and the furore over equal franchise after 1927 provided the *Daily Mail* with another stick with which to beat Stanley Baldwin.

A second strand in the debate about young women was simply the sheer numbers – 'Our Surplus Girls' as the *Mail* began to call them from 1919. As a result of wartime male losses the traditional excess of women over men in the population rose to 1.9 million, a shift which was widely believed to constitute a serious political and social problem. By 1921 there were 1176 women to every 1000 men in the 20–24 years age group and 1209 to every 1000 in the 25–29 years age group. Many of these women would inevitably seek permanent paid employment, and hence try to retain their wartime jobs at a time when work would be desperately needed for men returning from the forces and those made redundant by the collapse of industries linked to war production. Hence the sudden resurrection of mid-Victorian expedients such as mass emigration for 'superfluous' women by the *Mail* and other newspapers.

It was also feared for a time that women might exploit their new political muscle to defend their position in the labour market. Already in 1919 the enfranchisement of those under 30 years old was widely taken for granted, and politicians of all parties showed themselves anxious to establish their credentials as supporters of equal suffrage. This particular question did not come to the fore until the spring of 1927 when the home secretary, William Joynson-Hicks, announced a government bill on the subject. This provided the opportunity for an unusually bitter and relentless attack upon women in general and 'Votes for Flappers' in particular. The *Daily Mail* had already familiarised readers with the idea of the 'sex war'; its scaremongering tactics built upon this by highlighting the number of extra women voters in various constituencies: 'Men Outnumbered Everywhere'. It went on to argue not just that women would dominate elections, but also since the young women comprised an incorrigibly irresponsible

and ignorant section of the population, they would easily be manipulated by socialist propaganda.<sup>14</sup>

The third kind of rationale behind the reaction against women lay in concerns over morality and the future of the British family. As more women sought careers, it was claimed, fewer would settle down to marriage. Corroboration for this was found in the patent determination of so many females to enjoy a fuller social life and to adopt a more self-confident and assertive approach to sexual behaviour. During the war much alarm had been engendered by the growing opportunities for girls to engage in sexual relations outside marriage, and the increasing familiarity with methods of preventing pregnancy; this removed the traditional pressure to get married at a time when economic conditions favoured the single, self-supporting girl. Symptoms of this supposed tendency towards immorality were popular films and novels written by women such as Elinor Glyn and Ethel M. Dell: 'They have made the world safe for pornography; declaimed the *Daily Express* in a typical outburst.<sup>15</sup> The real fault with the so-called 'sex novel' was that its author cast women as heroines who pursued an adventurous sex life – by implication women in general were encouraged to make the same escape from passivity.

Contemporary critics detected an ominous connection between looser moral standards and changes in the physical appearance of young women. Arabella Kenealy attributed this to wartime experience:

Many of our young women have become so de-sexed and masculinised, indeed, and the neuter states so patent in them, that the individual is described (unkindly) no longer as 'she' but as 'it'. ... Cruelty lies in the fact, however, that the womanhood of many will have been wrecked quite needlessly by the strain of superfluously strenuous drill and marchings, scoutings, signalings and other such vain and fruitless imitations of the male.<sup>16</sup>

Soon the press began to warn of the consequences of this unnatural experience:

With short hair, skirts little longer than kilts, narrow hips, insignificant breasts, there has arrived a confident, active, game-loving, capable human being, who shuns the servitude of household occupations ... this change to a more neutral type ... can be accomplished only at the expense of the integrity of her sexual organs.<sup>17</sup>

Barbara Cartland summed it up more succinctly when she said that the new slimline girl would have weak babies, if she had them at all.<sup>18</sup> And, as always, the medical profession stood ready to lend a spurious scientific respectability to anti-feminist propaganda; one Guy's Hospital

consultant pronounced that 'in trying to look like boys women of the present day destroy the character of their sex ... they are poor creatures sheathed from throat to hips in rubber'.<sup>19</sup> Some politicians were even prepared to speak in public about their fears over the presumed connection between the single woman, feminism and lesbianism. In 1921 the House of Commons approved an amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill which would have made homosexual acts between women illegal as they were between men. Professing great reluctance to bring the topic to members' attention, the MPs spoke of the lesbian as a lunatic who ought to be incarcerated or possibly incur the death penalty so that she might be eliminated from society. They hesitated only for fear that severe punishment would publicise lesbianism and thereby give dangerous enlightenment to women presently ignorant of the very idea.<sup>20</sup> In the event the amendment failed to become law only because the government refused to accept any major alteration to what had been an 'agreed' bill. However, feelings ran so high that members preferred to lose the entire measure rather than pass it without the anti-lesbian clause.

Part of the explanation for these excitable and intolerant views lay in the belief that changes amongst women were undermining masculinity; while girls grew more boyish, the young men seemed increasingly languid, effeminate, intellectual and passive. Thus Kenealy argued:

The male becomes emasculate when the women invade his domain. And with the increasing hugger-mugger of the sexes, it grows, every day, more and more difficult for men to escape into the bracing, invigorating environment and moral of their own sex ... if they are to cope with the new Feminism men must needs look to their laurels and produce a new Masculinism. For truly these weak-chinned, neurotic, young men of the rising generation are no match for the heavy-jawed, sinewy, resolute young women Feminism's aims and methods are giving us.<sup>21</sup>

This kind of comment persisted throughout the inter-war period. Barbara Cartland recalled that young men back from France had often sought the reassurance of marriage; if thwarted they became emotional and dramatic even to the extent of threatening suicide.<sup>22</sup> In an article on 'This Generation of Men' Vera Brittain commented on 'the charming ineffectiveness of so many present-day husbands'. She argued that men who had survived the war or been too young for it suffered from poor physique and a lack of vitality and public spirit; they often had to be supported by their wives, and as a result we were heading for a matriarchal society.<sup>23</sup> These far fetched remarks did, of course, have some basis in the emotional and physical damage done to so many

onwards *Woman's Own* campaigned for domesticity as, say, the Beaverbrook press campaigned for empire free trade. This is by no means fully apparent from a breakdown of the articles printed in the paper in 1935 which comprised: household tips etc. - (35 per cent); fiction - (28 per cent); babies and children - (10 per cent); dress - (8 per cent); cookery - (4 per cent); film and radio - (4 per cent); editorial/gossip - (4 per cent); personal problems - (4 per cent). Each of these topics reflected the paper's philosophy that 'any girl worth her salt wants to be the best housewife ever - and then some'.<sup>7</sup>

The most innocuous feature was apt to be exploited to propagate the cult of domesticity. If marriage was the best job for a woman, paid employment could be acceptable as a prelude to marriage, not as in *Woman's Own* view for relevant skills, but ideally as a route that led to marriage. To this end writers helpfully drew attention to the occupations most likely to yield husbands: nurse, library assistant, private secretary ('short cut to a prosperous marriage') and telephonist ('many a man falls in love with a voice').<sup>8</sup> This was the positive case. On the negative side *Woman's Own* liked to depict the fate of the woman misguided enough to devote her life to a career as a lonely and neurotic individual: 'You have only to go into a restaurant, and note the strained, dissatisfied look on the face of a woman feeding alone.'<sup>9</sup> This message was reinforced by articles from a number of wimpish men who explained how easily they were alienated by the successful, career-minded female. One pleaded that in spite of his admiration for 'the modern girl' who achieved such feats as beating her husband at golf, 'I would be terrified of marrying one of them ... what have I to give in return to such a paragon?'<sup>10</sup> The nub of the matter was that success in a wife was practically impossible for a husband to cope with unless he were particularly dull, pathetic and unambitious himself. 'All the talk in post-war years of equality in marriage, legal, social and financial, has not made an atom of difference to the character of man.'<sup>11</sup> A real man felt the need to support a woman for 'a marriage in which the wife is also a breadwinner isn't a true marriage at all ... I like to think that I alone am my wife's shield against the world .... Even now I can grow cold at the thought of living on my wife's earnings if I fell out of work.'<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the subject of cosmetics and fashion was tackled on the assumption that the over-riding purpose of a woman's life consisted in acquiring and keeping a husband. Consequently the beauty page in *Woman's Own* appeared under the leader 'Looks Do Count After Marriage', and carried endless advice on the don't-let-yourself-go theme:

He will notice - none quicker - if you cease to be the attractive alluring girl he married. Resolve - early in your married life - never to get slack about your appearance.<sup>13</sup>

This swiftly developed into a rather insidious attempt to thrust guilt upon women for failure to retain their physical appeal:

It's very bad policy to care for your furniture and neglect your face ... (if you do) you aren't being quite fair to that man. ... He never suspected, poor darling, that a day would come when you would care more for the brass candlesticks than those precious cheeks of yours.<sup>14</sup>

As the words of a popular 1930s song expressed it: 'Keep young and beautiful, it's your duty to be beautiful, keep young and beautiful if you want to be loved.' From this emphasis on a woman's responsibility it was of course a short step to the third great theme of *Woman's Own*, the campaign to shore up the institution of marriage by arming its readers against threats such as reforms in the divorce laws and flirtatious girls, referred to as 'vamps'. Thus Barbara Hedworth in a one of a succession of counter-blasts intoned: 'Dress for your husband. After all he pays the Bill, and he is the one to please! Read this bracing article.' She went on to suggest that when a husband was ensnared by a typist or shop assistant his wife should:

Stop to think how often these lapses on the part of a devoted husband are due to the fact that their wives refuse to dress up for them ... really it was your face, the physical charm of you which first made you attractive and winsome to the man.

She reached a climax with a diatribe against the practice of wearing bedroom slippers around the house, a practice which,

warns a man that the beginning of the end has come so far as his wife's personal appearance is concerned and in my opinion the wife who greets her spouse in this slovenly type of footwear deserves all she gets.<sup>15</sup>

A battalion of female writers specialised in instructing other women on the techniques they would need for maintaining their marriages. Barbara Cartland insisted that a wife should pander to her husband's selfishness. Laura Sayle explained how badly men needed their sense of freedom, and felt they should be encouraged to feel like bachelors: 'when you come to think about it the average man gets a fairly raw deal out of marriage in comparison to what he puts into it'.<sup>16</sup> Real women, so the argument ran, gladly surrendered their freedom for 'the spiritual security of some one to look after us'; they should therefore be prepared to put up with a good deal of difficulty in married life because 'a bad

husband is better than no husband at all'.<sup>17</sup> Marital instability increasingly concerned the magazine columnists. For example, Barbara Hedworth tried to reassure readers that: 'the happily married man has no more inclination to have affairs with any other woman than his wife desires with other men'. The way to avoid affairs, apparently, was to encourage his flirtatiousness:

there is no reason why married women should not be able to hold their own against these vamps ... you can vamp your own husband throughout your life if only you will take the trouble to understand him.<sup>18</sup>

If in spite of all this advice a wife found that her husband was unfaithful she might be tempted to seek a divorce, particularly in view of the legislation of 1923 and 1937 which put the two sexes on an equal footing. This was anathema to the magazines. *Woman's Own* repeatedly printed articles along the lines of 'I Wish I Hadn't Divorced My Husband', and 'Dragooned Into Divorce'. In every case the moral was that a hasty resort to the law as a way of punishing an errant male was unnecessary and counter-productive:

Men get these attacks like kiddies get measles. ... Let him have his fling and he'll come back a thousand times more in love with you than ever.<sup>19</sup>

Thus the writers cautioned against accepting the advice of relations and friends who were chiefly anxious to pin the blame on the husband. In this perspective divorce seemed merely a form of self-indulgence for a wife, and one obtained at the expense of her children who must suffer from their father's absence.<sup>20</sup>

However, by the later 1930s even *Woman's Own* had lost some of its original stridency. Its features on beauty and fashion became less didactic. The emphasis shifted towards a more realistic consideration of marital problems, with less preaching and more practical help in home-making. Romantic fiction occupied an even larger proportion of the paper than before. This tendency towards blandness may have been a sign of the need to compete with the hugely successful *Woman* from 1937 onwards. Nonetheless, the message never changed, it simply became less blatant.

How much significance should be attached to the inter-war women's magazines? There are broadly three views of this question. They may be seen as the proprietors professed to see them as essentially a reflection of the interests and aspirations of British women. Alternatively, they may be considered as a formative influence on women; however, their highly prescriptive approach must be measured against the evidence of female behaviour in this period. Yet again, one might

well dismiss the magazines on both counts; for it is quite possible that they were purchased simply as ephemeral entertainment regardless of the message they carried. It has also been suggested that they were really middle-class in orientation. This is true in the sense that middle-class women bought more copies per capita. However, since the late Victorian period there had existed a vigorous literature aimed at working-class girls and women; the only change between the wars was the rise of journals such as *Woman*, which exploited a market that crossed the class divide; it could scarcely have achieved such impressive sales and advertising revenue otherwise.

Perhaps the most obvious charge which must be considered is that the magazines represented an imposition upon women by male proprietors, editors and journalists concerned to propagate the domestic ideology. This, after all, was a common interest of men in other walks of life where they enjoyed positions of power. Clearly there is some basis for the criticism, in that, with rare exceptions like Lady Rhondda, women did not control the British press. Moreover, the regular contributors to the women's papers included men such as Godfrey Winn who wrote on topics like 'First Love' and 'What has happened to the Femme Fatale?', not to mention the blatantly misogynist Beverley Nicolls. His forte was the brisk and bracing piece designed to emphasise that the female sex still enjoyed no political influence and that all would be well if women applied themselves properly to polishing up their traditional skills. 'You may not be a "clever" woman, and indeed I hope you are not, for the women I most respect are wise rather than clever. They are wise in a hundred adorable, subtle ways', he opined by way of introduction to a characteristic rant on housewifely duties.<sup>21</sup> On the strength of a few days without his servant and housekeeper Nicholls decided to test his own ability to fend for himself. Inevitably came the triumphant report on how easy it all was:

I had hours of leisure. ... And at the end of the first day, the slackest day I had ever spent in my life, I found myself asking the question, 'What do women do?'<sup>22</sup>

Needless to say he was full of excellent ideas designed to help women make constructive use of all their spare time.

However, such contributions scarcely seem sufficient to justify the view of women's magazines as a male conspiracy to check the progress towards female emancipation. Winn, Nicholls and their like were only the token males amongst the mass of women writers, and their message sat squarely within the prevailing ideology of the day. *Good House-*

magazines directed readers' attention towards certain types of product or new areas of expenditure.

### Housework Expands to Fill the Time Available

Perhaps the most important point about the popular propaganda disseminated in the 1930s is that in certain respects the domestic ideal was becoming more attainable by British women. Since the 1870s when real wages had been boosted significantly by sustained reductions in prices, living standards had risen. Large numbers of working-class families began to enjoy a modest surplus of income with which to buy more interesting food, small luxuries, entertainment or pay the rent on a better house. The choice in these matters was generally exercised by the housewife. The greater the choice the more satisfying her role; if the spread of grocery chain stores, the explosion of advertising, or the fortunes made by purveyors of cheap consumer goods like William Lever's soap all depended upon the housewife, then she herself felt less of a victim and more an independent decision-maker.

While the growth of real wages was checked in the late 1890s and early Edwardian period, the expectations engendered by consumerism were not. During the First World War price rises in combination with higher family earnings seem to have stimulated aspirations to better living standards, and this helps to explain the growth of organisations such as the Women's Co-operative Guild which took a great interest in housewives' concerns. By 1920 real wages were about 10 per cent higher than they had been on the outbreak of war. Thereafter prices fell, sharply from 1920 to 1923, and then gently right up to the late 1930s. Meanwhile average money wages also dropped back during 1920 to 1923, but then remained fairly static, showing only slight falls even in 1926 and 1931-3. The result was a marked improvement in real wages. Those in employment (the majority even at the depths of the depression) enjoyed a higher standard of living in the 1920s than in the Edwardian period, and a higher standard in the 1930s than in the 1920s. The working class also benefited from a steady if modest redistribution of income in their favour via direct taxation and greatly increased expenditure on social welfare. Moreover, as families shrank in size there was more to spend per capita in many homes. It has been estimated that between the Edwardian period and the late 1930s average consumer expenditure per head of population had risen in real terms by nearly a quarter. This was the very real and tangible basis for

the consumerism which pervaded the pages of the inter-war women's magazines and which manifested itself in the development of advertising, sales of canned, packeted, processed and bottled foods, the mass market in cheap women's fashions, the rise of the cinema, and the housebuilding boom.

It was not just that a woman's resources enabled her to do more in this period; there are also grounds for thinking that the household was becoming a more attractive place for women. Increasingly women married younger and had fewer children which meant that on average they had completed their families by the age of 28 years. This opened up opportunities. A woman might decide to return to paid employment, but in the 1930s she was more likely to remain at home and concentrate on improving the quality of life for her family by her efforts in and around the house. This did not mean she had more free time or that she escaped the burden of housework but it did tend to create an air of optimism and improvement for many. One of the things women wanted, and from which they were the major beneficiaries, was improved housing standards. They spent much of their lives in the home and had to cope with its inconveniences, its unhealthiness and inadequate space. A total of just over 4 million new houses were constructed between the wars, of which 1.1 million were council houses and 2.9 million built by private contractors. This alone made the period a remarkable one for women. Moreover, some two-thirds of the houses were produced in the 1930s. Since most of the homes appeared on large estates, whether on 'garden city' sites or council estates outside the towns, they tended to weaken old ties of community and to reinforce the centrality of home-and-family in British society. Thus women who derived inspiration and interest from the domestic orientation of their magazines were by no means the victims of an illusion. New semi-detached houses could be purchased for as little as £250 to £300 in the provinces, with a deposit of £25 and an interest rate of 4½ per cent on the mortgage. This put them within reach of many working-class families. Moreover, inter-war housing, especially council housing, was built to standards markedly higher than those attained hitherto, or since for that matter. With the recommendations of the Tudor Walters Report of 1918 on desirable housing density, size and arrangement the state began to set high standards which in due course speculative builders also followed. Housing is one of the few areas of policy where the authorities took some trouble to find out what women wanted and to see that their views were reflected in policy. From the housewife's perspective the need was for a larger kitchen with proper light and ventilation, an indoor

toilet, a bathroom, more bedrooms and a cheap electricity supply.

Clearly the very increase in the size of the home threatened more housework for women; but it is important to remember that this was seen as a genuine gain at the time. A journal like *The Labour Woman* waxed as enthusiastic about the advantages of electricity as any popular women's magazine.<sup>28</sup> This was another area where government was seen to play a beneficent part in women's lives. In 1919 the country was divided into districts each under a Joint Electricity Authority responsible for increasing the supply; the government allocated £20 million for investment in new plant. In 1926 the Central Electricity Generating Board and the National Grid were set up so that by 1939 two-thirds of all houses were wired for electricity. Many women, were, however, thought to be nervous of the new form of power and to overcome this a pressure group, the Electrical Association for Women, was formed by Caroline Haslett in 1924. It sponsored travelling exhibitions and cookery classes. This crusade inspired on the one hand such propagandist works as Wilfred Randall's *The Romance of Electricity* (1931), and on the other a determined if belated effort by manufacturers of electrical appliances to increase their output.

None of this, however, revolutionised the daily lives of housewives in Britain. The spread of electrical goods was slow and patchy; for example by 1931 there were 1.3 million cookers, 400,000 vacuum cleaners and only 60,000 washing machines in use. The introduction of protective tariffs stimulated British manufacture of certain items hitherto dominated by American producers, but adoption of the new equipment was determined by calculations which varied from family to family. For middle-class women much depended upon how difficult and how expensive they found it to employ servants. There were in fact still 1.3 million female domestics in Britain by 1930, though they were increasingly likely to come in to a home for a day or two rather than be full-time residents always on call. The significance of electrical appliances in this context is best understood as facilitating the gradual reduction of middle-class dependence on servants. With a washing machine one might require a servant to come in only one day each week. But for the other six days the housewife would herself have to cope with cooking, fires and cleaning carpets; while the equipment made this possible it could not stop housework filling up a woman's time. In a sense the appliances helped to turn many middle-class wives into domestic servants. For working-class women most of the new appliances were still too expensive. Even the new houses were frequently built with the traditional kitchen range, and so there was no

escape from the heavy and dirty work of solid fuel fires. The chief gain here was the greater use of anthracite which was cleaner than coal and would burn through the night. Elizabeth Roberts' study of the housewives of this period underlines strongly how life continued to be a matter of heavy lifting and carrying, bending and stretching, scrubbing and sweeping; this was especially so with the washing of clothes which still necessitated heating up the water, rinsing and mangling as well as ironing.<sup>29</sup> The most common piece of machinery in working-class homes was the sewing machine which involved much time-consuming activity.<sup>30</sup> A woman might devote more to this if she managed to save time on other aspects of her work. Thus, there is clearly no case for the view that the burdens of housewives diminished as a result of 'labour-saving' equipment; at most they improved the quality and range of their work.

Betty Friedan has aptly summed up this dilemma in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) when she says that housework expands to fill the time available. She places much of the blame for elevating domesticity as the highest form of fulfilment for a woman upon the women's magazines of the 1940s and 1950s in America. However, if this reached a climax after the Second World War it was very clearly a marked feature throughout the post-1918 period. It would be anachronistic to portray British women between the wars simply as passive victims of the prevailing ideology as Friedan does for her society. The cult of domesticity has to be seen in a context in which women were showing great determination, in the face of disapproval from most male, political, religious and commercial pressures, to have fewer children. The smaller family was all of a piece with the domestic ideology in that it, too, was a way of raising the standard provided by the wife for her family. Moreover the oral evidence shows how much women took pride in their skills as housewives. Their strategies changed a little in this period; they made less use of the pawnbroker and more of the Co-op; with fewer children they had less washing to do but more clothes per head and better; their meals might be more varied and adventurous; their family might wash more frequently. This was all part of an improving life style in which they themselves had a central role to play. Many younger women, who had seen the near impossibility for their mothers of having a clean, attractive and comfortable home, in spite of their efforts, could now see the ideal being realised in part in their own homes; the hard time-consuming work remained virtually unchanged, but the greater reward increased their self-respect as managerial figures.



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