

Demons of Domesticity: Women and the English Gas Industry, 1889–1939. By Anne Clendinning. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004. xvii + 352 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations. Cloth, \$99.99. ISBN: 0-754-60692-9.

Reviewed by Katrina Honeyman

The success of the gas industry from the late nineteenth century on the basis of widespread diffusion of domestic appliances can be largely attributed to the work of female demonstrators, who, before audiences of would-be domestic goddesses at trade exhibitions, village halls, and, later, gas showrooms, performed culinary miracles with gas cookers while sustaining a soothing and persuasive patter, and whose work later took them into the homes of the working class to provide on-site instruction. Supported by clever advertising and contemporary interest in household management, the work of these “lady demons” promoted sales and rentals of gas cooking equipment. Until the interwar years, gas for domestic usage faced little competition from other new power sources. In many working-class homes, gas gradually replaced the dirty and bulky coal and coke for cooking and heating; and although electric lighting carried many advantages over the gas alternative, for other purposes gas remained the fuel of choice for most until well after the Second World War.

Clendinning’s history of the gas industry is informed by qualitative rather than quantitative evidence. Her discussion concentrates on the mechanisms for change and the social, cultural, and gendered context in which growth took place, rather than on trends in production, productivity, and profitability. Existing histories of the gas industry, mostly produced by business historians, have concentrated on technical developments, industrial relations and welfare, and political policy. Surprisingly, the role of women has been almost entirely neglected. Yet, as this study shows, women were central to the gas industry during most of the period under consideration, not only as consumers—it is estimated that women were responsible for over 70 percent of gas consumption in the interwar years—but also as sellers, administrators, and, intermittently, as producers. Clendinning writes about the impact of women in the tough and heavy sectors of the industry during the First World War as they temporarily, and very effectively, replaced

their fighting menfolk. When women gave way, as promised, to the returning men in 1918, the recognition of their wartime contribution opened employment opportunities elsewhere in the industry, especially in sales and administration. But it is women's roles as lady demons and home-service demonstrators, mainly in London and the southeast of England, which interests Clendenning, not only because of their substantial economic contribution to the industry but also because of the relationship between the demonstrators and contemporary constructions of femininity. Because they were employed formally and operated visibly in the public sphere, the lady demons appeared to challenge Victorian notions of appropriate (that is, invisible, quiet, and homebased) activities for women. And certainly as professional women, who not only lectured but also wrote promotional material, the lady demons infiltrated an essentially male corporate world. However, it could be argued that the nature of the job—a mixture of retailing, domestic-science teaching, and health visiting, which were already established roles for middle-class women—as well as the nature of the message that they conveyed, together diffused elements of women's prescribed role. Through their knowledgeable and expert demonstrations of cooking on the latest gas appliance and of cleaning it afterward, the women addressed by the demons might go on to enhance both the quality of the meals they provided for their families and the home environment more generally. The theme of domestic improvement also featured in advertising material, yet, significantly, the representation of women in advertisements for domestic appliances, as flirtatious and alluring, sharply contrasted with the image of the respectable and modest lady demons. The tension between the ideal and the reality of women's position suggested here is also reflected in the case of domestic servants, who allowed others to exude respectability, while themselves allegedly behaving promiscuously. But the ideal was powerful: lady demons and others believed that the diffusion of such domestic "labor-saving" appliances as the gas cooker would free women to spend productive time in the public sphere, but sadly it simply raised the expected standard of domestic activity and required women to spend even more time in the home. Ironically, therefore, through the excellent services of a small group of professional women the interests of both the gas companies and the wider society were met. By breaking out of their own restrictive bounds, by deviating even, the lady demons taught others how to conform well.

This is a highly readable book with some entertaining moments provided by tales of exploding cookers and of embezzlement from prepaid meters. But mostly it is a scholarly and wide-ranging work. It is carefully researched, and the author demonstrates dexterity in moving between disciplinary approaches. It purports to be a social history of the gas industry; and this is a fair description. It could equally justifiably be described as a gendered business history, as it certainly is a valuable addition to this neglected field. For although the focus is on women, female employees, and constructions of femininity, it also examines gender divisions and gender relations. By taking gender as a reference point, the business of gas is greatly illuminated. My main criticism of this erudite and comprehensive study is that it explores too many avenues, and occasionally the objective and the argument become blurred. The lady demons, for example, who are foregrounded in the first half of the book, become submerged by other issues once the discussion moves to the interwar years. Nevertheless, few could read this book without learning something of value; and business historians in particular might reflect with benefit on its approach and its findings.

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