

Turning Houses into Homes: A History of the Retailing and Consumption of Domestic Furnishings. By Clive Edwards. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005. viii + 294 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$99.95. ISBN: 0-754-60906-5.

Reviewed by Erika Rappaport

Until recently, the history of the consumer and that of the retailer in Britain have been the subjects of separate studies. Organizations such as the Centre for the History of Retailing and Distribution (CHORD) and publications such as the volume edited by John Benson and Laura Ugolini, *A Nation of Shopkeepers: Five Centuries of British Retailing* (2002), have applied diverse methodologies to merge these distinct histories and to link them to wider political, cultural, and social questions. Clive Edwards's *Turning Houses into Homes: A History of Retailing and Consumption of Domestic Furnishing* is part of this new retail history. *Turning Houses into Homes* is a study of the "home-making process" since the eighteenth century. Edwards argues that throughout the modern period retailers have been central to the creation of real and imagined homes and to ideals of domesticity. He thus is concerned with the economic aspects of processes explored in books like Thad Logan's *The Victorian Parlour: A Cultural Study* (2001).

The argument of this ambitious study is clear. The history of domestic furnishings joins ideas about the self and the home with the economics and geographies of business. Issues related to class, gender, nation, production, and reproduction have also shaped this story. Instead of concentrating on particularly modern forms of retailing, such as the department store, Edwards emphasizes the diversity of forms that have existed in the furnishing trades. He describes the business practices of large- and small-scale specialty retailers, second-hand shops, chain stores, auctions, fairs, concept stores, itinerant traders, mail-order and catalogue businesses. Edwards argues that changes in retailing should be seen primarily as creative responses to shifting markets. The book also touches on the history of credit, advertising, and cultural debates about taste and fashion. There is a good overview, for example, of the various efforts of reformers from John Ruskin to Terence Conran to improve the "bad taste" of the mass of British consumers.

This well-written and clearly organized book is a synthetic and descriptive account. There is little archival work, though Edwards does an excellent job of culling from published primary and secondary materials. Throughout, he draws liberally from the work of others in a wide range of fields, from design history to anthropology and sociology. He also uses examples from other nations, especially the United States and France, emphasizing national similarities rather than differences. *Turning Houses into Homes* is thus especially useful to anyone interested in the history of furniture or retailing in general. The book is organized chronologically by century; each section is divided into chapters on the retailer and the consumer. Chapters on the consumer look both at how furnishings, in particular, have related to consumers' sense of identity and at the shifting history of identity itself. The chapters on retailers are filled with interesting details about individual shops, primarily in urban settings but by no means entirely limited to London or other major metropolitan centers. We get a sense of the experience of buying and selling furniture in a wide range of times and places.

The breadth of Clive's study is impressive. Yet larger analytic questions about the distinctive nature of the British furnishing trades are not pursued. Edwards does not engage in a detailed study of any particular concern or type of retailing. Some furniture stores, such as Waring and Gillow's, were particularly innovative, and it would have been interesting to compare their strategies with those of other institutions, such as the department store, the museum, and the exhibition. When he first arrived in London, the American department-store entrepreneur Gordon Selfridge had gone into partnership with Waring, but the furnisher lost his nerve and pulled out of the venture. Why were furnishers more reluctant than drapers to transform their concerns into department stores? We do learn about the *Daily Mail* Ideal Home Shows in the interwar years, but Edwards doesn't really consider the relations among different public displays of domestic wares. Similarly, in an effort to see the retailer as tastemaker, Edwards underplays the importance of other experts, such as the decorator and the fashion journalist. Leora Auslander, in *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (1996), and Lisa Tiersten, in *Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Fin-de-Siècle France* (2001), have analyzed the new professions and argued that debates about taste were highly political and related to

national, gender, and class identities. Perhaps a section on the cooperative movement would have been the place to examine such questions.

Finally, Edwards missed an opportunity to see the ways in which family dynamics and gender relations within the home were crucial to furnishing decisions. Because of the expense involved in furnishing a home, husbands and parents of grown children were often a part of this process. Court records, for example, suggest that furnishers were more reluctant than drapers to sell to wives on credit without the presence of their husbands. Business practices shaped family dynamics and vice versa. Exploring such issues would not only have brought the male consumer more squarely into the picture and enhanced Edwards's important argument about the connections between the home and market. It might also have produced a far less harmonious portrait of buying and selling than the one that emerges in *Turning Houses into Homes*.

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