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The Ideal of Professional Housekeeping

Glenna R. Schroeder-Lein

Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home*. Edited by Nicole Tonkovich. Hartford, Conn.: Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, and New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002. xxxviii + 400 pp., illus. \$60 (cloth), ISBN 0-8135-3078-4; \$20 (paper), ISBN 0-8135-3079-2.

When sisters Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe published *The American Woman's Home, or, Principles of Domestic Science; Being a Guide to the Formation and Maintenance of Economical, Healthful, Beautiful and Christian Homes* in 1869 as both a textbook for girls' schools and a home reference work, the new book quickly became the standard in its field. It replaced, and drew heavily from, Catharine's earlier *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841). In addition, the sisters used material from columns written by Harriet, and in some instances copiously quoted male authorities on certain subjects. The result was not a book to be read straight through but a sort of encyclopedia to be consulted for advice in specific situations.

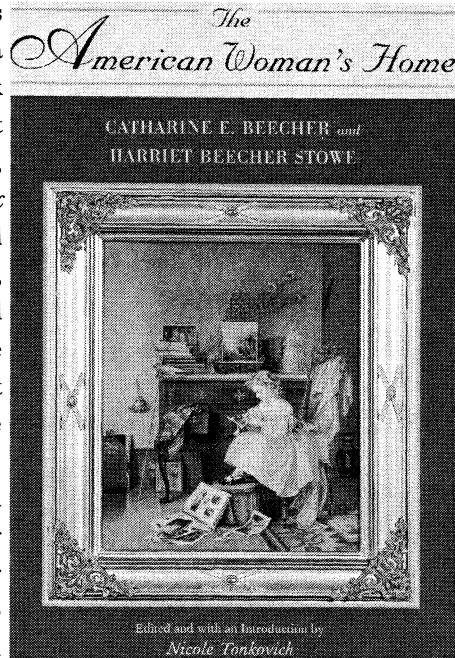
Should the reader be planning to build a house, the sisters provided several floor plans, complete with discussion of their advantages. The reader could learn how to "tastefully" furnish a parlor for less than

eighty dollars in 1869 money values (chapter 6). The sisters always encouraged modest living and advised against spending money ostentatiously or carelessly. Their advice on a healthful diet suggests that not so much has changed between 1869 and 2002 as some might suppose. The sisters wrote: "Were one to believe all that is said and written on this subject the conclusion probably would be that there is not one solitary article of food on God's earth which is healthful to eat" (95). In this case, as in many others, the authors espoused the use of certain general principles and common sense, rather than giving specific directions. In fact, they often spent the greater part of a chapter complaining about a subject, such as the evils of bad cooking (chapter 13), rather than on providing solutions, which tended to be short and quite general.

On the other hand, the sisters were by no means loath to give specific directions, such as exactly the best type of kitchen stove. Due to patent protection, however, the authors could not mention the specific name of the appliance, and the interested reader had to write to Beecher for a brochure (chapter 5 and 316). Another example of specific recommendations is chapter 35, which is devoted to the supposed advantages of

using an "earth closet," essentially a toilet using dirt rather than water. The dirt supposedly could be dried and reused five or six times, allegedly without odor, and then be used for a rich manure to replenish the soil, rather than flushing this valuable natural resource down the drain.

Overall, the sisters repeatedly (and repetitively) stressed the need for proper ventilation in homes and other buildings. Bad air was allegedly the cause of all sorts of disease, and disability generally, leading in some cases to inadvertent murder by impure air. The authors provided numerous



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descriptions and illustrations of proper ventilation systems. In a period when tuberculosis was very common and germs were undiscovered, better ventilation of stuffy rooms could only help. The sisters were just a part of a widespread movement of doctors and others (including Florence Nightingale) to improve health through ventilation.

The sisters had several reasons for writing this book. A major one was certainly financial. Catharine was a single, self-supporting woman in a period when such independence was discouraged and opportunities were limited. Harriet had been the sole financial support of her family through her writing, since the retirement of her husband, Calvin Stowe, a professor.

Their second, and stated, purpose for writing was to spread the viewpoint that women should be professionals in charge of their homes, made so through education and training. They wanted “to elevate both the honor and the remuneration” of women’s domestic duties, “to render each department of woman’s true profession as much desired and respected as are the most honored professions of men” (19, 23).

Although the sisters did not explicitly say that their intended audience was not Irish washerwomen and others of lower class, they nevertheless made the nature of their intended audience quite clear through their references, comments, advice, and instructions. The book was directed at white, upper-middle-class, Protestant women—generally married women whose husbands owned homes and who probably had a servant or two. These were educated women who needed the self-respect that would come from competence in doing, as well as supervising, their domestic tasks, and who also needed to instruct their daughters and their incompetent domestic servants in proper modes of housekeeping. Thus, the emphasis was on intelligent, educated household management using the principles of science, common sense, and Protestant religion. Ironically, for women who had been in the forefront of the movement to provide girls with the equivalent of a classical education, the sisters bowed to the current notion of the importance of women’s place in the separate domestic sphere, with such statements as, that to understand how stoves work “will cultivate the intellect quite as much as the abstract reasonings of Algebra and Geometry” (60).

The stress was on the married woman’s family as a unit, which was supposed through “self-sacrificing labor of the stronger and wiser members to raise the weaker and more

ignorant to equal advantages” (23–24). However, the authors also proposed that single women could form families by banding together and adopting children. This relatively radical idea should not be interpreted as any endorsement of lesbianism and did not occupy any prominent place in the book. It was mentioned several times (25, 328, 330) no doubt both because of Catharine’s own understanding of singleness and also because it could provide a practical alternative for the large number of women of that generation who would never marry because so many eligible men had died during the Civil War.

Within the general category mentioned, the sisters could hope certain groups of people would purchase their book. These would include persons who had bought Catharine’s earlier books, fans of Harriet’s writings such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and numerous short stories, teachers and students at girls’ schools, and those who needed advice on particular domestic subjects. In addition, the book was cheap—fifty cents, or about six dollars in 2002 money.

The sisters were quick to state their personal qualifications for writing such a volume. Catharine was the oldest of thirteen siblings and half siblings and had been trained by a domestically skilled mother, stepmother, and aunt. She also had been a teacher and dispenser of written domestic advice for a number of years. Harriet was married with seven children, and had also taught and written domestic advice. Ironically, neither woman exemplified the ideals they wrote about. Catharine was, of course, single and had never had her own household. Harriet, though married, depended on servants, and sometimes on Catharine’s management skills, so that she could write. A housewife who did any other work but household management (with the exception of voluntary assistance to charity) was not even considered in the sisters’ book.

The twenty-first-century reader may wonder why this book has been edited and reissued in 2002. It is surely not because anyone at this point wishes to consult and act upon the sisters’ outdated domestic advice. Not only have styles, tastes, and appliances changed drastically since 1869, but the sisters’ writing style, as daughters and sisters of Protestant ministers, is preachy beyond what most people in 2002 would be willing to accept.

The editor, Nicole Tonkovich, does not say why she has chosen (or was chosen) to edit this book. It is clearly within her line of interest, as her own monograph is entitled *Domesticity with a Difference: The Nonfiction of Catharine Beecher*,

Sarah J. Hale, Fanny Fern, and Margaret Fuller (1997). This edition of *The American Woman's Home* is issued by Rutgers University Press in conjunction with the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center in Hartford, Connecticut, which probably wishes to keep this work in print. Certainly, it provides a perspective on American upper-middle-class domestic ideals in the immediate post-Civil War period that is valuable to some scholars.

Although the reason for this edition is not clear, some idea of the editorial apparatus used can be gained. The text was reprinted from the 1991 facsimile edition published by the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center (Stowe-Day Foundation; see xxxvii). The original book, first published by J. B. Ford and Company of New York in 1869, included a table of contents in the nineteenth-century style—a detailed summary of each chapter. The text was enhanced by seventy-seven line drawings or diagrams, as well as a few other unnumbered illustrations. Beecher and Stowe included “A Glossary of Such Words and Phrases as May Not Easily Be Understood by the Young Reader” that ran to sixteen pages. Given the reference nature of their work, the sisters also provided an “Index: Analytical and Alphabetical.” The work concluded with facsimiles of the original advertisements for other books published by J. B. Ford and Company, including several by the authors’ brother, the famous clergyman Henry Ward Beecher. All these things are included in the edition under consideration.

What, then, has Tonkovich added to the original volume? First, “textual and typographical errors and oddities have been silently corrected” (xxxvii). Tonkovich has also added a twenty-three-page introduction and a four-page selected bibliography to set the work in the contexts of the sisters’ lives, domestic expectations of the period, and scholarship on women’s studies. In the back of the book are sixteen pages of explanatory notes, prepared by research assistant Jason Homer, which clarify details of nineteenth-century life and other matters of context that are not included in the original glossary. In short, the volume is very lightly edited, but nothing further seems necessary.

Students of nineteenth-century domestic life, and libraries that cater to them, will want to have a copy of this volume in their collections.

Assistant/Associate Editor Papers of John Adams

The Adams Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston seeks an assistant/associate editor. The person filling this new position will contribute to each series of the edition but primarily will be employed on the Papers of John Adams. Candidates must possess good editorial skills with documentary editing experience. A graduate degree in early American history with research experience in the Founding Generation is preferred with French or Dutch language skills an asset. Candidates should have the basic computer skills necessary to assist with in-house desktop publishing and preparation of indexes for each volume. Position to begin no later than July 2003. Send application, including cover letter, resume, and the names of three references, to: The Adams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, 1154 Boylston Street, Boston, MA 02215. Application deadline: 15 March 2003.

SUMMER INTERNSHIP

The Harriet Jacobs Papers is seeking applications for a limited number of positions in its 2003 summer internship program.

The Harriet Jacobs Papers, an internationally-known historical editing project headed by Dr. Jean Fagan Yellin, has contracted with the University of North Carolina Press to produce a two-volume documentary edition of the papers of 19th Century author, abolitionist, and reformer Harriet Jacobs. This will be the first scholarly edition of papers of an African-American woman held in slavery. While Jacobs is best known as the fugitive slave author of the landmark American slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (Boston 1861, London 1862), she and her family circle were also actively involved in reform movements before, during, and after the Civil War.

Interns will assist the project staff in preparing the papers for publication, acquiring experience in research and historical editing. Applicants should be detail-oriented, have strong research, writing, and computer skills, and possess some background in African-American history or literature, women’s history, or women’s studies. Applications are due 15 March 2003.

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