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Review of Catherine Clay, Maria DiCenzo, Barbara Green, and Fiona Hackney, eds, *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture, 1918–1939: The Interwar Period* (2018)

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# Reviews

**Catherine Clay, Maria DiCenzo, Barbara Green, and Fiona Hackney, eds, *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture, 1918–1939: The Interwar Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018). 529 pp. ISBN 978-1-4744-1253-7**

For many commentators in Britain between the First and Second World Wars, the image of a woman reading a newspaper or magazine became a symbol of a world that had drastically changed, and not for the better. Women's appetite for reading — and the print marketplace that sought to satisfy it — focalized a wide range of cultural fears concerning, among other things, changing gender norms, consumption, commercialism, the future of literature, and the viability of democracy. Women, it was suggested, were trivializing public culture by providing a market for escapism, gossip, commodity advertising, and trivial 'human interest'. 'To one man who buys a paper nowadays, there are perhaps ten women', wrote editor, solicitor, and MP Arthur Baumann in 1920: 'For the majority of women there is but one topic of interest: namely, clothes.' Like many before and after him, Baumann went on to accuse periodical publishers of 'vulgarity, even depravity' and to lament the decline of journalism from a profession to a 'branch of commerce'.

As far as generalizations go, Baumann's are rather crude. But what becomes evident over the course of the 529 pages of *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture 1918–1939: The Interwar Years* is that virtually any generalization about women's reading — its content, form, social effects — is going to fail when confronted with 'the startling complexity of periodicals aimed at women readers and the various notions of the modern woman they suggested', as the editors argue in this book's general introduction (p. 1). The volume sets out to survey, describe, and analyze periodicals and periodical writing published by and for women in

the years between the wars. It succeeds as both a reference volume of sorts and a collection of original scholarship. The book contains a nicely detailed appendix listing bibliographic information, including archival availability, for fifty-six women's papers and magazines. Its concise, pithy section introductions and the essays themselves — with their thorough primary and secondary research and deep contextualization — make the volume remarkably rich in information. This collection is thus indispensable for anyone who studies print culture or women's issues in early twentieth-century Great Britain. In sum, the volume seeks to 'open up the category of the women's magazine [...] and to demonstrate the central role of women's print media in reshaping public discourses of gender by defining women's interests, activities, and identities in the period' (p. 1). It does so over thirty essays arranged in five sections. 'Culture and the Modern Woman', edited by Catherine Clay, looks at how women's periodical writing engaged in the evaluation of art and literature; 'Styling Modern Life', edited by Barbara Green, focuses on fashion as a source for women's identity formation and a powerful force of modernity; 'Reimagining Homes, Housewives, and Domesticity', edited by Fiona Hackney, probes the multiple circulating visions of the domestic woman; 'Feminist Media and Agendas for Change', edited by Maria DiCenzo, examines specifically feminist writing and publishing in the aftermath of the gaining of the franchise in 1918; and 'Women's Organizations and Communities of Interest', also edited by DiCenzo, concerns a set of women's periodicals organized not

around activism but other special interests or groups.

So what *were* women reading, in periodical form, between the wars? Daily newspapers, notably their women's pages. Fashion magazines. Women's 'service' magazines, with their expected mixture of advice on clothes and cosmetics, housewifery, and child-rearing — and their (perhaps less expected) primers for recently enfranchised women voters. Denominational religious magazines. Magazines for women produced by feminist organizations and political parties. Magazines for childcare workers, journalists, teachers, and civil servants. A few also read magazines promoting fascism or working to dismantle the gender binary. In their pages, women found diversion and advice but also — and this is a major focus of the volume — multiple, overlapping, competing, and ultimately incommensurable visions of what it meant to be a modern woman. As the introduction notes, debates about the 'modern woman' continued after the war; women's increased power as workers and consumers prompted both celebration and backlash; and the increased number and diversity of women's periodicals gave space for this conversation to spread and diversify, 'multiplying the ways in which women's gender identities could be constructed, sometimes in conflicting ways' (p. 2). As the chapters in this volume show, women used periodicals to advocate for and against a loosening of divorce laws; to promote modern fashions and cosmetics and to inveigh against the frivolity of such consumption-driven living; to conduct radical socialist analyses of housework; and to try (unsuccessfully, it turns out) to square feminism with fascism. Despite this variety, pejorative generalization about journalism for women is not limited to breathless contemporaries such as Arthur Baumann. *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture, 1918–1939* takes aim at two more recent generalizations about women's print culture between the wars: first, that commercial periodicals for women

were simply or solely 'retrograde organs for conservatism and/or consumerism' and, second, that women's print culture supported a conservative retrenchment in women's lives — a lengthy pause in feminist activism and a 'return to home and duty' after the public, strident, and often radical work in favour of suffrage before 1918 (p. 2).

This volume utterly refutes the second of these theses — the sense that the women's movement died out after 1918, its demise abetted by the dominant messages in women's print culture. As multiple chapters show, activist women and organizations agitated in print for access to birth control, reform of divorce laws, provision of a state maintenance wage for mothers, and an end to the ban on married women in civil service jobs. In separate chapters we see these debates play out in the socialist *New Leader*, the co-operative movement's *Woman's Outlook*, the feminist *Woman's Leader* and the *Vote*, even in religious publications such as the Anglican *Mothers Union* and *League of the Church Militant*, the *Catholic Citizen*, and the *Jewish Chronicle*. And women's positions on these issues could not be reduced to organizational creeds: women disagreed with each other, with conflicts evident between and within organizations and their periodicals. The Anglican *League of the Church Militant*, Jacqueline deVries recounts, adamantly opposed reforms to divorce laws; the *Woman's Outlook*, Natalie Bradbury tells us, supported divorce reforms — at the cost of losing its crucial annual subsidy from the national Cooperative Union (p. 422). Political life, and women's disputed roles in it, informed not only explicitly political publications. *Good Housekeeping*, as Alice Wood reveals, sought to mentor women towards full political participation, advocating for women's entry into the professions and their rights as citizens even as it figured — and celebrated — domestic labour as women's work. As Hackney argues in her introduction to the 'Reimagining the Housewife' section,

many publications and writers sought to turn the shared cultural value of domesticity towards 'alternate ends'. These ends included a socialist reorganization of labour, including housework (discussed in Karen Hunt's chapter on *Labour Woman*) and Welsh national self-determination (as in *Y Gymraes*, or *The Welshwoman*, discussed by Lisa Sheppard). These and other chapters demonstrate resoundingly how reductive it is to summarize women's life between the wars as a 'return to home and duty', or to claim that the 'one desirable image' of femininity circulating in the period was that of the housewife and mother (p. 1). In its totality the book provides a large, fine-grained picture of the often-fractional discourse for and about women in the period, marked by concerns about sexuality, domesticity, and women's agency; the excitements and discontents of consumerism, fashion, cinema, and beauty culture; and the present and future of women's political involvement, which took on a more urgent edge in the 1930s.

The book's second broad aim — its desire to complicate readings of commercial publications for women as purely frivolous, consumerist, or, worse, agents of women's relegation back to the home — produces results that are at least as interesting if more equivocal. Chapters here by Hackney and Wood, as well as Gerry Beegan on the cinema fanzine the *Picturegoer*, are committed to finding uses of mass print that are empowering to women. Wood differentiates *Good Housekeeping*, which consistently if subtly advocated informed and active citizenship, from the more conservative *Modern Home*, which saw domestic labour as 'women's particular contribution to society' (p. 210). Hackney, drawing on interviews with women's magazine readers and writers conducted in the 1990s, finds that women's magazines met a wide range of psychological and practical needs, at once opening new horizons to women and reflecting them back to themselves, thus offering 'opportunities to engage with modernity in meaningful ways' (p.

295). Beegan swerves from readings that would say that beauty culture, fashion features, and coverage of film celebrities enforce narrow and homogenizing standards of beauty. Women 'were far from passive consumers of these messages, naively reproducing on their bodies the appearance of glamorous stars', Beegan writes. Rather, images of celebrity film stars allowed women to 'explore a range of conceivable options, embodied in a variety of stars' and thereby develop 'a pleasurable and powerful visual expertise' (p. 202). But if some chapters locate space for agency and conscious self-fashioning in women's reading of commercial print, others emphasize attempts to interpellate women into circumscribed roles or to normalize less salutary aspects of modern life. Ilya Parkins, analyzing the women's magazine *Britannia and Eve*, finds a tension between its images, which depict women in poses of seemingly powerful 'spectacular femininity', and its verbal text, mostly written by men and using the authoritative, impersonal stance of contemporary journalism to contain and interpret the potentially anarchic gender energies emanating from the pictures (p. 149). Men, in other words, are visually absent but present in the magazine's editorial voice, which comments repeatedly on the frivolity of visual culture. *Britannia and Eve* is thus an arena in which 'a defense of the public sphere as a masculine preserve' is subtly advanced against the challenge from 'feminine spectacle' embodied in its images (p. 151). Likewise Vike Plock, who analyzes *Eve* before its merger with *Britannia*, finds a 'conservative modernity' working beneath *Eve's* surface, as the magazine balances contradictory norms and possibilities emerging for women in the aftermath of the First World War. *Eve*, she writes, negotiates 'a possible tension between tradition and modernity by alternating the occasional approval of progressive outlooks with a thinly veiled promotion of patriarchal standards and nationalist viewpoints' (p. 29). This orientation, Plock

argues, explains *Eve's* otherwise perplexing embrace of experimental modernist literature, which it was treating as cultural news that up-to-date, consuming women needed to know about.

So, were commercial magazines empowering to women? Or were they conservative forces of acculturation to circumscribed roles? *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture* in effect answers 'both, and much more' — an orientation that well describes the volume overall. The book's number of chapters and variety of approaches are major strengths: while there can be no such thing as a comprehensive book about periodical writing for women in this period — the marketplace is simply too large and heterogeneous — this book offers a convincing, detailed sense of main themes and conflicts animating writing for and about women in these years. The editors promise, further, that the book will provide 'not simply an introductory survey' but 'original arguments' about the periodicals covered in the chapters (p. 5). In practice, some chapters succeed in presenting compelling analyses with wide-ranging significance, while others function more as descriptions and content analysis — not inappropriate in the case of such obscure but interesting phenomena as the co-operative movement's *Woman's Outlook* — or *Urania*, a little magazine dedicated to documenting the long history of homosexuality across cultures, thereby critiquing gender norms and 'compulsory heterosexuality'. But if some chapters' chief virtue is descriptive and introductory, others intervene boldly and broadly, with arguments about the nature and function of periodicals, the methods of periodical studies, or the history of femininity. Beegan, for instance, argues that the nexus of cinema and fan magazines made the use of cosmetics ubiquitous, transforming expectations for feminine appearance. He adds that none of this would have been possible without the development of rotogravure, the technology that made large, attractive, color photographs of stars possible in mass magazines. Elizabeth

Sheehan's brilliant chapter theorizes the links between changing modern temporalities, fashion, and periodicals. Fashion magazine readers sat at a crux of overlapping temporalities — the regular, repetitive appearance of the magazine; fashion's paradoxical investment in being always new while plundering the past for designs and styles; the ambient, perhaps vestigial faith in historical progress, matched with an apocalyptic sense that the catastrophe of the Great War would recur. Sheehan argues that, by enforcing some regularity and periodicity on fashion, magazines played a role in sorting and making manageable this unsettling temporal mix, offering 'ways to navigate multiple temporalities and structures of feeling, including nostalgia for the past, anxiety about an uncertain present, and anticipation of a potentially disastrous or glorious future' (p. 126).

I would not want to change anything about this volume, which is going to rest in an easy-to-find spot in my office for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning a few things one will not find here. The empire is not foregrounded — all of the titles discussed were published in Britain, and issues of imperialism surface only briefly and intermittently. While queer theory is mobilized here and there for argumentative advantage, the periodicals covered overwhelmingly assume heterosexual desire and pairing as the norm — one that only a few of the essays problematize purposefully. And the volume does not include any work that uses or addresses the possibilities for periodical studies opened up by digital methods such as text mining and data visualization. But the book succeeds completely on the terms it sets out for itself — as 'an opening gambit rather than a final word', as the introduction suggests (p. 5). The volume is one of five projected in a series called 'The Edinburgh History of Women's Periodical Culture in Britain'; one other volume, on the long eighteenth century, is out, with two more scheduled for 2019 release. In gathering the impressive scholarly energy

## REVIEWS

that has been building around women's history. It will serve as a source and an inspiration for new work for years to come.

periodicals for a decade or more, the series is performing an invaluable service. This volume has opened up, advanced, and defined the field for its slice of the larger

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