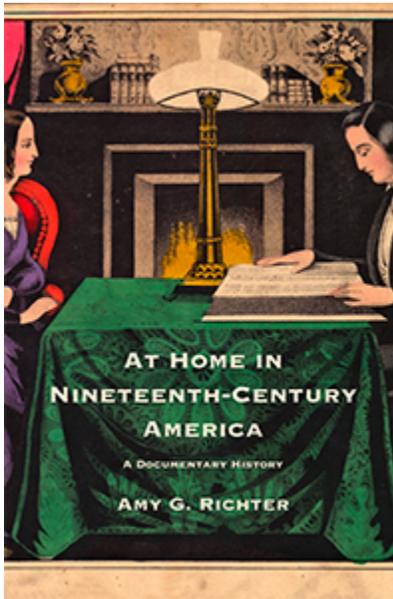


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How To Make a House a Home

[*At Home in Nineteenth-Century America: A Documentary History*](#). Amy G. Richter. New York: New York University Press, 2015. 251 pp.

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<1>Home as domestic ideal has long been an important topic in nineteenth-century studies. As scholars are well aware, issues of privacy, gender, separate spheres, labor, race, and class are bound up in notions of domestic space in nineteenth-century British and American culture. In *At Home in Nineteenth-Century America*, Amy G. Richter invites the reader 'to eavesdrop on a wide-ranging conversation that included a diverse group of historical actors' (1). Richter suggests that listening in on this 'unwieldy conversation' (1) yields complicated insights into how nineteenth-century Americans understood and manipulated the idea of home. Sweeping across a wide swath of primary sources — including fiction, photography, speeches, legislation, letters, essays, diaries, and architectural designs — Richter subtly orchestrates our reading while simultaneously allowing us to experience this cacophony first-hand.

<2>Allow me to explain. Let us consider Chapter Three, titled 'Home, Civilization, and Citizenship.' Richter opens with a brief (four-paragraph) introduction. From there, with a

paragraph to introduce each new speaker, she drops us into an excerpt from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) followed by images of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* game cards and a rather bizarre 1866 print of a newly emancipated 'Happy Family.' Next we read W. E. B. Du Bois's 1901 commentary on the 'rude uprooting of the African home' (104), peruse photographs (circa 1899) of the genteel homes of the 'black elite' (107), and consider excerpts from the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, which aimed to break up tribal land in order to encourage mainstream domesticity among Native Americans. Then we see an 1885 print of a 'model Indian cottage' (113) and read Susan La Flesche's 1892 musings on her experiences as an Omaha physician working to bring progress to her people. In a speech from 1876, temperance leader Frances Willard takes the floor to explore the connection between alcoholism and women's voting rights. Anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells discusses the lack of a 'proper home and moral training' she found among her impoverished black students in the South (123). The chapter closes with excerpts from labor leader William Sylvis, feminist Caroline Dall, and the *Woman's Standard's* 1889 retelling of the case of Nancy Miller, a housewife who sued her husband for failing to pay wages. (She lost). The chapter ends there.

<3>As a reader, I must admit to feeling a bit unmoored at times as I navigated this sea of voices. I clung to Richter's succinct paragraphs introducing each new speaker or image. I found myself combing each chapter for Richter's voice, relieved when I could sink into her brief notes for clues on how to interpret the material. Although she does not close out her chapters with commentary or summary, and the book does not have a conclusion, at times Richter does use the descriptions to pose rhetorical questions or direct the reader's attention to previous iterations of similar issues. This spare yet deft approach anchors the selections. However, throughout the book, Richter keeps the promise of her introduction: she allows the reader to experience the disorientation she describes when she writes, 'Throughout the nineteenth-century, many Americans were talking all at once about home; they were speaking to and past one another and often meant very different things' (1). The book's schema results in a rich, dynamic experience for the reader; it vivifies the very complexity Richter seeks to elucidate.

<4>The organization of the chapters is both thematic and chronological. Following a concise Introduction, Chapter One explores the ways in which domestic spaces served as markers of morality. As an architectural space as well as a metaphorical haven from the public world, the home was viewed as the special province of women, and as a possessor — albeit inanimate — of potential morality. Let us not forget, however, that throughout most of the century, married women could not own property. 'Male authority' (12) did in fact extend to the inner sanctum of feminine control, and the relationship between domain and ownership was difficult to unravel.

<5>Chapter Two, 'The Persistence of Domestic Labor,' takes on the important issue of labor and the home. Pundits may have idealized the middle-class home as a respite

from the workaday world, but the reality is that ‘middle-class women continued to cook, sew, and clean for their families, often beside hired domestic servants’ (52). In this chapter, diverse speakers describe boardinghouses, the homes of the urban poor, slave quarters, the ‘tiresome housework & drudgery’ of domestic employees (77), and middle-class chores. This chapter’s jumble of voices illustrates the growing reality that ‘homes that failed to conform to the rising standards of privacy and refinement came to be seen as moral problems — threats to proper family life, values, and social order’ (52).

<6>As described in detail above, Chapter Three explores ‘Home, Civilization, and Citizenship.’ Chapter Four, ‘The American Home on the Move in the Age of Expansion,’ explores the mobility of the nineteenth-century American home. With pioneers literally camping their way across the Wild West to settle far from family and tradition back East, ‘domestic details’ retained enormous significance because they ‘enabled white settlers to offer their families some physical comfort while also maintaining ties to communities and family they had left behind’ (132). Perhaps the most intriguing element of this chapter is the images of various domestic spaces, including white homesteaders posing with their pump organ — and not their sod house (a dug-out house with a turf roof that was popular with pioneers) — on the open prairie, the markedly different interiors of a Pullman ‘parlor-car’ versus an immigrant boxcar (139-142), and domestic spaces included in the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. This last included exhibits as strangely divergent as a faux Colorado ‘Cliff-Dwellers’ reproduction, a recreation of Marie Antoinette’s bedroom, the Ceylon Tea Room (built to woo consumers with the delights of Singhalese tea), and Theodore Roosevelt’s ‘Hunter’s Cabin.’

<7>Richter turns to the evolution of the late-nineteenth-century city in Chapter Five. Here we read of public parks, tenement houses, multifamily domiciles, and the rise of apartments and flats. At the heart of this chapter lies the reality that ‘the experiences of living beside a diverse collection of strangers raised concerns about routine social encounters and urban morality’ (160). Again, Richter presents a collage of voices: an excerpt from Stephen Crane’s *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893) jostles with a 1904 photograph of a shared tenement outhouse (calling attention to the ‘public nature of domestic life in the tenements’ [171]) and a strangely prescient 1908 *New York Times* article on the popularity of summertime roof sleeping.

<8>In the final chapter, ‘Dismantling the Victorian Ideal and the Future of Domesticity,’ Richter points out that ‘for all the unfamiliarity and inconsistency of the nineteenth-century domestic ideal, Americans continue to live with its echoes’ (199). This chapter surveys the trend of masculine ‘home workshops’ (223), arguments in favor of ‘cooperative living [...] with public kitchens, dining rooms, and child care’ (210), the ‘radical’ popularity of the bungalow (217), the decline of servants, and the rise of ‘labor-saving devices’ (220). Richter notes that, contrary to optimistic prediction, technology

'ultimately increased women's domestic labor' (220). The chapter concludes with advice from the Industrial Housing Associates, who encouraged employers to investigate and improve their workers' housing. As they argue, 'good housing pays from every standpoint' (232). With that line, and without further commentary, the chapter — and the book — ends.

<9>Richter does well to emphasize the 'echoes' of Victorian domesticity which Americans continue to hear. Readers may be aware that in recent years Persephone Books has reprinted once-popular but now obscure mid-20th-century women writers. Pithy titles such as Kay Smallshaw's *How to Run Your Home Without Help* (1949), Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *The Home-Maker* (1924), Winifred Peck's *House-Bound* (1942), and E.M. Delafield's *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930) offer amusing evidence that Victorian domesticity continued to rankle well into the twentieth century.

<10>Historians and literary critics alike will find much to savor in *At Home in Nineteenth-Century America*. With meticulous annotations and exquisite research, it is clear that Richter has carefully curated the content of each chapter. While at times I craved more interpretation and closure, Richter's light touch allows the reader to eavesdrop on a cacophony of nineteenth-century voices 'talking all at once' (1). We are invited to draw our own connections and experience first-hand the discord and dead-ends, along with the multivalent heft of the words and ideas under consideration. The nineteenth-century home has never been more vexing, or more delightfully fraught, than it is in this fine collection.