

HISTORY

INSIDE THE VICTORIAN HOME: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England.

By Judith Flanders. Norton. 499 pp.
\$34.95

We use “Victorian” as a synonym for “old-fashioned,” but the strait-laced era between 1850 and 1890 was also a time of extraordinary progress. *Inside the Victorian Home* examines this buttoned-up but tumultuous period through the keyhole of each room in the middle-class British house.

Readers whose vision of Victorian domestic life derives from the aristocratic mansion of *Upstairs, Downstairs* will be taken aback by Judith Flanders’s picture of the bourgeois home. In contrast to the industrial workplace, the Victorian house, presided over by Charles Dickens’s “ministering angel to domestic bliss,” was meant to be a clean, orderly sanctuary. For a middle-class woman, who often worked alongside her one or two servants, maintaining this ideal was a Sisyphean task.

By the end of the first chapter, which focuses on the bedroom, readers will have a new appreciation for their vacuum cleaners and washer-dryers. Simply protecting the bed from omnivorous vermin and omnipresent soot required constant, backbreaking vigilance: In addition to the ordeal of soaking, boiling, washing, bluing, and drying linens, Victorian homemakers were burdened with the task of turning and airing heavy horsehair mattresses. Considering the rigors of merely adequate housekeeping, Flanders concludes that, like most readers of *Martha Stewart Living* today, most Victorians regarded the daunting standards of the hugely popular *Mrs Beeton’s Book of*

Household Management (1859–61) as “aspirational in nature.”

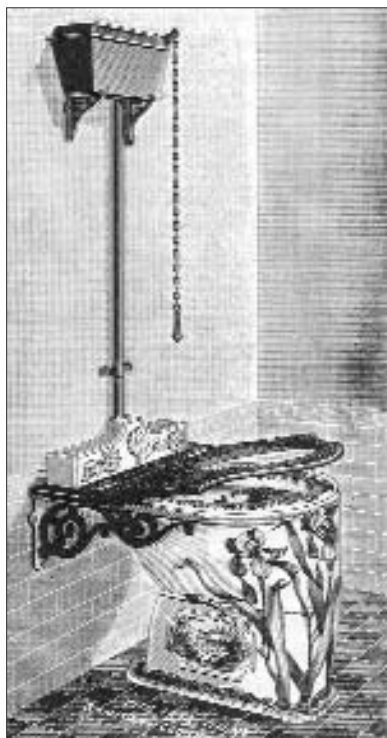
The average Victorian kitchen was “a dark, miserable basement space, running with damp,” writes Flanders. The scullery, where pots were scrubbed, was, well, Dickensian—and left largely to servants, including workhouse children, like the Orfling in

David Copperfield, and an unfortunate third of the population of young London women. The dirty, brutal labor of the 12-hour days increasingly drew women away from domestic service to jobs in factories and shops.

The Victorian mistress had her own trials. Many a lady was sickly and subject to “nerves,” surely not least because she wore up to 37 pounds of constricting clothing; the Rational Dress Society campaigned to limit the amount to a mere seven pounds. Female minds as well as bodies were cruelly corseted at puberty, when girls’ home education mostly ceased.

Victorian men ruled the world. Even in the home, women’s power was mainly confined to social spaces such as the drawing room, a formal place for the important business of receiving callers and impressing them with status symbols—the hostess’s fern collection, for example, or her piano. The Victorian version of our family room was the dining room, used for after-dinner activities such as reading books and writing letters—the latter a major occupation before phones and e-mail.

Advances such as indoor plumbing and the microbe theory enabled the Victorians to link a hygienic home with high status



An elaborate Victorian-era commode bearing a popular iris pattern.

and morals. As Flanders observes, evangelist John Wesley's assertion that cleanliness is next to godliness "before the 19th century would simply have made no sense." Victorian children were the first to have their own rooms and furnishings, and many sanitary measures focused on the nursery. Domestic hygiene's sine qua non, however, was the new bathroom. Following the flush toilet's triumph at the Great Exhibition of 1851, fine china manufacturers such as Wedgwood and Doulton produced "lavatories" as gorgeous as dinnerware.

Inside the Victorian Home is an engaging, informative book. Its strength is Flanders's research, which encompasses the motto of Thomas Crapper's eponymous product ("A certain flush with every pull"), the sometimes-lethal use of opium for teething, the domestic observations of eminent Victorians such as Jane Carlyle and John Ruskin, and much else. Picky readers might sometimes wish for less matter and more art, but even they will never again see a Victorian house in the same old cozy, comfortable way.

—WINIFRED GALLAGHER

STALIN:

The Court of the Red Tsar.

By Simon Sebag Montefiore. Knopf.

785 pp. \$30

In 1935, enchanted by Grigory Alexandrov's cheerful films (*The Jolly Fellows* left him feeling as if "I'd had a month's holiday"), Joseph Stalin decided to get personally involved in the director's work. Alexandrov had planned to call his next film *Cinderella*, but the Soviet dictator proposed 12 alternative titles. His favorite, which Alexandrov wisely adopted, was *Shining Path*. Stalin also decided to compose new lyrics for a song in the film, producing this verse:

A joyful song is easy for the heart;
It doesn't bore you ever;
And all the villages small and big
adore the song;
Big towns love the tune.

Since Stalin had an excellent voice—one memoir suggests that he might have become



Joseph Stalin

a professional singer—the old brute can be imagined singing the lyrics to himself at his Kremlin desk.

"The foundation of Stalin's power in the Party was not fear: it was charm," writes Simon Sebag Montefiore, a novelist and biographer. The father of the Gulag "worked hard to envelop his protégés in an irresistible embrace of folksy intimacy that convinced them there was no one he trusted more." The charm seems to have worked on the ladies, too. Stalin told one woman, "You should teach Soviet women how to dress!" This is Stalin unzipped, as it were, and for the first time a credible human character begins to emerge.

The book's mid-1930s vignettes provide all the more grisly a contrast to the period immediately after, when the purges get under way and we are back in the familiar territory of Stalin the psychopath. Montefiore develops this murderous phase in numbing detail, but his long interviews with descendants of Kremlin survivors and his excavations in family archives and memoirs manage to bring the horror to life. Some people seem to have been purged merely for their housing. When internal security commission chief Genrickh Yagoda fell, his successor, Nicolai Yezhov, took his apartment and Stalin assistant Vyach-