



PROJECT MUSE®

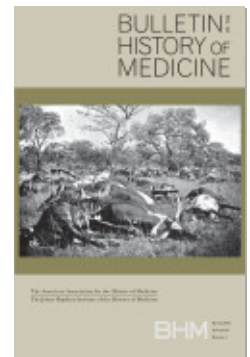
*Desperate Housewives, Neuroses and the Domestic Environment,
1945–1970* by Ali Haggett (review)

Rachel Ritchie

Bulletin of the History of Medicine, Volume 89, Number 1, Spring 2015,
pp. 151-152 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.2015.0004>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/579693>

troubling dimensions of Freeman's practice. Freeman's excesses were a failure of zeal more than intent. An important message of this book may be that historians are not required to relax critical judgment simply because someone's intentions were more benign than the outcomes. While Raz disavows a primary interest in explaining why well-intentioned people might do bad things, her book does serve as a reminder that therapeutic zeal can be dangerous, and that the very real suffering of the sick cannot be used as a rationale to simply "do something."

Jonathan Sadowsky
Case Western Reserve University

Ali Haggett. *Desperate Housewives, Neuroses and the Domestic Environment, 1945–1970*. Studies for the Society for the Social History of Medicine. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012. ix + 239 pp. Ill. £60 (978-1-84893-310-1).

Despite the title, at no point in *Desperate Housewives, Neuroses and the Domestic Environment, 1945–1970* does Ali Haggett refer to the internationally popular television show with which her book shares its name. This surprised me. I expected at least some acknowledgment of the program, especially because it illustrates the extent to which the stereotype of neurotic homemaker, the desperate housewife, is entrenched in the public imagination on both sides of the Atlantic. This absence seems all the more surprising as the author discusses modern-day movie depictions of conventional family life in the U.S. suburbs as part of her concluding remarks, but still makes no mention of the television namesake. This seeming oversight is, however, the greatest criticism that I can level at this meticulously researched book.

The six chapters bring together and make connections between a broad range of sources. "Reflections on the Desperate Housewife" outlines existing debates about gender, domesticity, and feminism, including images within popular culture and literature. The second chapter investigates understandings of marriage and motherhood in the years after 1945, specifically in postwar Britain. Haggett revisits some well-known examples such as the work of Bowlby and Spock but also introduces case studies that readers may be less familiar with, such as the writings of National Marriage Guidance Council. This is followed by personal accounts of housewifery and mothering in the third chapter, with the interviews conducted by Haggett providing both the evidence and main focus. Chapter 4 draws upon very different material, situating "desperate housewives" in medical, psychiatric, and psychological debates of the time. Chapter 5 returns to the oral history interviews, considering participants' recollections of anxiety and depression alongside other contemporary accounts including examples from women's magazines. The final chapter examines gendered imagery within pharmaceutical promotions and advertising, challenging widely held assumptions about women and medication by comparing advertising across different genres of publication.

Haggett analyzes all of the areas covered with clarity and precision. This is particularly apparent in sections about the specialized medical debates that are central to the book. For example, she writes confidently about the pharmacological aspects of the topic, such as the different types of medication prescribed, but in a way that is clear to the nonspecialist reader. Indeed, *Desperate Housewives* will be of interest to scholars outside of medical history. For instance, it makes an interesting contribution to social and cultural histories of postwar Britain. Like other recent publications such as Sean Nixon's *Hard Sell: Advertising, Affluence and Transatlantic Relations, c. 1951–69*,¹ the book explores the influence of the United States while revealing distinct national differences. Haggett also aptly demonstrates the long shadow that the Second World War cast over British society, arguing that the psychological impact of war shaped life choices and attitudes for years to come.

Desperate Housewives adds to understandings about women's lives in the mid- to late twentieth century too. The oral history interviews play an important role in this. They are a particular strength of the book, with the women's voices articulating a range of viewpoints and emotions, including humor (p. 61) and a moving account of maternal pride (p. 123). These testimonies provide the backbone to one of Haggett's main arguments, namely that interpersonal relationships rather than domesticity and motherhood were a major source of psychological distress. She also uses evidence from the interviews to discuss big issues and small ones, from changes over the course of a lifecycle (p. 73) to the multiple factors affecting how much a husband helped with housework (pp. 62–63). The latter is one of numerous passages where the role of men features. Over the course of the book, men's lived experiences emerge as an important theme, both as a complement to women's and in their own right. This provides an interesting additional angle to debates about neuroses and the domestic environment, albeit one that is somewhat obscured by the *Desperate Housewives* title.

Rachel Ritchie
Brunel University, London

Linda Bryder. *The Rise and Fall of National Women's Hospital: A History*. Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press, 2014. vii + 323 pp. NZ\$49.99 (978-1-86940-809-1).

Hospital histories are not easy to write—each has its own personality that over time can shift due to changes in the political and social context and the hospital's internal dynamics. The National Women's Hospital (NWH) took in its first patients in 1946, had its own facility in 1964, and closed in 2004. For a major

1. Sean Nixon, *Hard Sell: Advertising, Affluence and Transatlantic Relations, c. 1951–69* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).