THREE HUNDRED YEARS OF WOMEN'S MAGAZINES, 1693-1993

Jill Allbrooke

This article briefly outlines the development of British women's magazines over the last 300 years and attempts to illustrate how the changing content of the magazines reflects the changes in the status and aspirations of women over the same period.

1993 marks the three hundredth anniversary of the publication of the first British periodical published specifically for women, the Ladies Mercury. The publisher, John Dunton, a London bookseller, intended it to complement the Athenian Mercury, which he also published. Intimate problems were aired within the pages of the Ladies Mercury with a forthrightness typical of the age.

In the eighteenth century there was a growing female reading public, as upper and middle class women found themselves with more leisure time on their hands. There were two main types of publication for women: annual pocket books, such as the Ladies Diary, and general magazines such as Steele's Tatler, which were aimed chiefly at women readers. Two well known women's titles from the early eighteenth century are the Female Tatler of 1709 and the Female Spectator (1744-1747). The former, edited by Mary de la Riviere Manley under the pseudonym "Mrs Crackenthorpe", circulated scandal and abuse to such an extent that both the editor and the publisher, Anne Baldwin, were indicted for libel. The Female Spectator, edited by actress, playwright and novelist Eliza Haywood, offered practical advice to its readers on a wide range of subjects and advocated a more liberal education for women. Such titles were intended not only to entertain, but also to educate, and included philosophical, political and news items as well as fashion and fiction.

In the second half of the eighteenth century there was an expansion in the number of titles produced specifically for women but they tended to be less idiosyncratic than the pioneers mentioned above. Titles such as the Lady's Magazine (1770-1847) and Lady's Monthly Museum (1798) concentrated on fashion and household management rather than politics.

By the beginning of the Victorian era this narrower view of the role and interests of women had come to prevail even more, though the readership was still largely concentrated in the upper classes until the middle of the century. A major breakthrough came with the launch in 1852 by Samuel Beeton of the Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine (1852-1879), the first cheap magazine aimed at middle class women. Beeton later launched the Queen in 1861, which was aimed at an upper class readership but was similarly successful and lasted until 1970. The middle class magazines concentrated on household management, dressmaking, etiquette and romance, those topics which were regarded as appropriate reading matter for Victorian womanhood. A small number of publications appeared...
which did reflect the fledgling interest in women's rights, such as the Female's Friend (1846), Lady's Review (1860) and Ladies (1872-1873), but these were all singularly unsuccessful.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the appearance of magazines devoted chiefly to fashion, most famously Myra's Journal of Dress and Fashion (1875-1912), run by Matilda Browne, who had previously worked for Samuel Beeton using the pen-name Myra. The inclusion of paper patterns and later colour fashion-plates were to be dominant features. Weldon's Ladies Journal (1879-1954) became the model for the "home weeklies" which appeared in the 1890s.

Between 1880 and 1900 a total of 48 new titles for women were launched, reflecting amongst other things the growth in the number of women in the workforce and the greater range of leisure pursuits available for women. There was more diversification and specialisation: magazines such as the Gentlewoman (1890-1926) and the Lady (1885 to date) were aimed at the upper class woman. The Lady is the longest surviving women's magazine and still remains in private ownership. It became highly successful after Rita Shell became editor in 1894 and is still famous for its small-ads, which she introduced. The biggest expansion came in the middle market. Arthur Pearson's Home Notes (1894-1958) followed by Alfred Harmsworth's Home Chat (1895-1959) became the indispensable companions of middle class women and concentrated on housewifery skills, including budgeting. The Matron (1909-1916) was the first title aimed specifically at older women and the Girl's Own Paper (1880-1950) one of the first magazines for girls.

After the turn of the century came a number of titles which appealed to working class women and included more sensationalist fiction, such as Woman's World (1903-1958). My Weekly (1910 to date) is the second oldest surviving women's title and inspired the immensely successful Woman's Weekly (1911 to date). The latter was edited by Biddy Johnson from 1916 to 1960, who had previously edited Forget me Not (1891-1918) for Harmsworth. It reached sales of over two million in the 1950s and remained the top-selling weekly until overtaken by the newer breed of magazines such as Bella in the late 1980s.
After World War One a number of titles appeared which appealed to the “new rich”, such as the UK edition of *Vogue* (1916 to date) and *Eve* (1919-1929). The latter can be said truly to embody the spirit of the “Roaring Twenties”. This trend was followed by a corresponding increase in titles aimed at the middle and working classes, such as the UK edition of *Good Housekeeping* (1922 to date), *Woman and Home* (1926 to date) and *Woman’s Own* (1932 to date). The star performer, however, was *Woman* (1937 to date), the first women’s magazine to be printed by colour-gravure. This made possible not only a dramatic improvement in appearance, but also meant that magazines could at last aim for a truly mass market. The editor, Mary Grieve, aimed to entertain and give useful information about the home to a wide cross-section of women. By the 1950s, *Woman* had reached a circulation of three and a half million. The vast majority of women’s magazines at this time reinforced the social pressures on women to return to the home after the War: housewifery was elevated to the status of a profession and motherhood advocated intensely in an effort to counteract the declining birthrate. The mill-girls and others who did work outside the home were catered for by story magazines such as *Peg’s Paper* (1919-1940), *Red Star* (1929-1983) and *Lucky Star* (1935-1960).

During World War Two, all publishing was adversely affected by paper rationing but the women’s press took on a new social significance and played a major part in promoting British wartime social policy. The Group of Editors of Women’s Magazines volunteered their services to the Ministry of Labour’s Advisory Committee on Woman-Power and actively promoted wartime service. For once, the woman factory worker and service girl became role models.

The promotion of the working woman lasted no longer than the War, however, and the magazines of the 1950s pointed women firmly back to the home. The increasing affluence of the mid Fifties filled the magazines with features on consumer goods, beauty and fashion. Fiction became more realistic, personal and medical problems were given serious consideration for the first time, and new production methods and the use of colour photographs greatly improved the magazines’ appearance. *She* (1955 to date), under the editorship of Joan Werner-Laurie, was the first magazine to deal with controversial subjects in a down-to-earth manner and appealed to readers across the range of class and age (and even gender). The 1950s also saw the pre-war “mill-girls magazines” give way to the teenage weeklies, such as *Mirabelle* (1956-1977) and *Valentine* (1957-1974). These were dominated by picture-strip romances, pin-ups and problem pages. Over the following years editors were surprised to find the readership age dropping dramatically to 13-16 years, while older teenagers, for whom the magazines were originally intended, turned to what was once considered more adult reading.

It was not until the mid 1960s that the “woman-as-housewife” image was challenged to any extent. In 1965 the launch of *Noa* (1965-1975) and the relaunch of *Woman’s Mirror* (1958-1967) saw the promotion of a new ideal, with the emphasis on independence and broadmindedness. Neither of these was
successful, but the launch of the UK edition of *Cosmopolitan* (1972 to date) certainly was and it has continued to thrive on its reputation for sexual frankness. In the same year the burgeoning women’s movement produced *Spare Rib* (1972-1993), a feminist magazine which was not a commercial venture and managed to survive much longer than might have been predicted at the time.

Recent years have seen a flurry of new, more traditionally targeted women’s magazines, such as *Bella* (1987 to date), *Best* (1987 to date) and *Chat* (1985 to date), which tend to be fairly lightweight and aimed at (though not necessarily restricted to) housewives and young mothers, containing show business gossip, fashion, cookery and fiction. The ownership of most magazines is now concentrated in the hands of four large companies, one of the few exceptions being *Hello!* (1988 to date), which is owned and tightly controlled by a small family firm in Spain.