Home Economics (Book Review)

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I have long enjoyed Bill Bryson's books on travel. He has a rare ability to both entertain his readers, often with side-splitting humor, and get them interested in the history of the places he travels. My favorite, in part because of the humor, is In a Sunburned Country, his book on Australia. But if I were to judge his books solely on the importance of the history he uncovers, my favorite, by far, would be his latest, *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*.

Bryson has pulled off a marvelous feat. He devotes almost every chapter to a room in his Victorian house in England. He then considers why the room is the way it is and what preceded it. In doing so he produces an important economic history, only some of which will be familiar to economic historians and almost all of which will be unfamiliar to pretty much everyone else. A large percentage of it is important, for two reasons: One, you get to pinch yourself, realizing just how wealthy you are; and two, you get a better understanding than you'll get from almost any high school or college history textbook of the economic progress that made you wealthy. Not surprisingly, given that I'm an economist and Bryson isn't, I have a few criticisms of places where he misleads by commission or omission. But At Home's net effect on readers is likely to be a huge increase in understanding and appreciation of how we got to where we are.

One of Bryson's most striking descriptions is about the life of a servant when houses had two stories but no running water. The worst days for the servant were when family members or guests wished to take a bath. Bryson writes:

A gallon of water weighs eight pounds, and a typical bath held forty-five gallons, all of which had to be heated in the kitchen and brought up in special cans — and there might be two dozen or more baths to fill of an evening.

Nor did servants seem to get much appreciation from their mistresses. Although Bryson specifies too infrequently the time periods of which he writes, one gets the impression that this attitude to servants lasted into the 20th century. He quotes two 20th-century mistresses' complaints about servants. Virginia Woolf said that servants were as irritating as "kitchen flies," and Edna St. Vincent

Millay stated, “The only people I really hate are servants. They are really not human beings at all.”

Bryson describes, in detail, one of the toughest jobs — that of the laundry maid. One highlight of that description is what she (yes, Ms. Millay, they actually were human beings) needed to do to get stains out. The way to deal with stained linens was to steep them in stale urine or a diluted solution of poultry dung.

Bryson leads off his chapter on the drawing room with a discussion of the words “comfort” and “comfortable.” Until 1770, he writes, the idea of being comfortable at home “was so unfamiliar that no word existed for the condition.” “Comfortable” meant simply “capable of being consoled.” But by the early 19th century, it was quite common for people to talk about having a comfortable home or making a comfortable living. “The history of private life,” writes Bryson, “is a history of getting comfortable slowly.” In other words, standards of living increased gradually due to the many labor-saving inventions that — though they reduced the demand for servants — made even the lives of servants easier.

Indeed, improvements in technology were so important that the one chapter Bryson devotes to something other than a room in the house or a physical area in or around the house is his chapter on the fuse box. Electricity truly revolutionized life. Bryson writes, “The world at night for much of history was a very dark place indeed.” A good candle, he adds, “provides barely a hundredth of the illumination of a single 100-watt lightbulb.” Although Bryson makes a good case for how important lighting was and is, he would have made an even stronger case had he drawn on the pathbreaking work by Yale University economist William D. Nordhaus. In a study done in 1996, Nordhaus found that failure to adjust appropriately for the plummeting cost of light has led economic historians to dramatically understate the growth of real wages over the last 200 years. That one invention, plus many others, led to a burgeoning middle class.

The term “middle class,” writes Bryson, was coined only in 1745. By the early 19th century, of course, the middle class was substantial. Something that fueled this growth, besides labor-saving inventions such as running water and light, was the increasing globalization of production through free trade. Take wood. Before the British engaged in extensive international trade, they used only one

kind of wood in their furniture: oak. But Bryson notes that the British started getting (he doesn't say when) walnut from Virginia, tulipwood from the Carolinas, and teak from Asia.

Because At Home is about various rooms in the home, not all of it is about technological change. Some of it is simply about how people's consumption patterns changed as Britain industrialized and became wealthier, and it is no less interesting for that. In a chapter titled "The Cellar," for example, Bryson details the enormous increase in coal usage for heating British homes. By 1842, he notes, Britain alone used "two-thirds of all coal produced in the Western world." Coal burning became a bigger problem in cities as the cities grew: During Queen Victoria's lifetime, writes Bryson, the population of London alone rose from one million to seven million. It would have been nice to see Bryson lay out how many people were saved from death by the switch from coal in fireplaces to coal burning in electricity generation and to oil, natural gas, and nuclear power for heating. But, as I noted, that's not his point. Bryson wants to detail how his early 19th-century house contains a lot of history.

Bryson occasionally breaks with the pattern by using a room as an excuse to discuss interesting technological developments that had little to do with the room. No matter — his discussion is always illuminating. A chapter called "The Study," for example, doesn't really deal with the study but does discuss mice, mousetraps, rats, plagues (naturally), mites, bedbugs, and germs. I will never put my head on a pillow in a hotel room again without remembering that ten percent of the weight of a six-year-old pillow (six years, says Bryson, is the average age of a pillow) is made up of "sloughed skin, living and dead mites, and mite dung." On a somewhat more comforting note, Bryson points out a positive change in the insect world: the disappearance of locusts a little over a century ago. We are so used to hearing about a species disappearing because of man's activity that we sometimes forget to notice that the disappearance of some species is a welcome development. It turns out that the locusts hibernated and bred every winter in the high plains east of the Rocky Mountains. When new farmers there plowed and irrigated a little over a century ago, they killed the locusts and their pupae.

It is impossible to read Bryson's chapter on the bedroom without emerging with an appreciation of economic growth and modern medicine. At inns, strangers

often shared beds into the 19th century, and “diaries frequently contain entries lamenting how the author was disappointed to find a late-arriving stranger clambering into bed with him.” He tells of a squabble in 1776 between Benjamin Franklin and John Adams when they shared a bed in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The issue disputed was not the role of the federal government. It was the far more important question of “whether to have the window open or not.” With increasing wealth, people no longer had to share beds.

Bryson tells just how primitive medical knowledge was before 1850 and sometimes even later than that. For example, virtually all doctors were men, and it was not considered proper for men to examine a woman’s private parts. The American Medication Association expelled a gynecologist named James Platt White for allowing his students to observe a woman giving birth, even though the woman had given them permission. Nor did doctors seem to understand much about germ theory. Bryson writes that when President James Abram Garfield was shot in 1881, he wasn’t killed by the bullet but by doctors “sticking their unwashed fingers in the wound.”

One shortcoming of the book is that Bryson doesn’t seem to have much appreciation for — or maybe it’s just a lack of interest in — how wealth is created. This comes out most strikingly in his discussion of “Commodore” Cornelius Vanderbilt. Vanderbilt, writes Bryson, “had a positively uncanny gift for making money.” True. But then he tells the reader of Vanderbilt’s immense wealth without saying anything about how he acquired it. The story that Bryson leaves out is that Vanderbilt made a large part of his wealth by making steamship travel relatively cheap for many Americans in the New York area, in the process challenging a monopoly that the New York legislature had unconstitutionally granted to Robert Fulton. In other words, Vanderbilt created wealth for himself by also creating wealth for consumers.

Bryson also accepts many of the myths about the evils of child labor that various defenders of the aristocracy and advocates of socialism propagated in the 19th century as part of their opposition to British industrialization. Bryson does what virtually every opponent of child labor in factories has done: discuss the horrible conditions of work in mines and factories — they really were horrible — without comparing them to the even worse conditions in agriculture, which is where these same children would have been employed had they not worked in mines

and factories. Bryson's work is so well researched generally that it's a pity that he didn't come across economist William H. Hutt's careful refutations of the critics of child labor. (See his "The Factory System of the Early Nineteenth Century" in the Hayek-edited 1954 book Capitalism and the Historians.)

So, where are these old Victorian houses and the huge mansions that the newly rich built in the 19th century? Many of them, notes Bryson, were torn down after their contents were sold. And the reason so many of them disappeared is ironic given the author's criticism of property rights. On the one hand, Bryson chides 19th-century critics of historical preservation laws, who saw such laws as "an egregious assault on property rights." Just two pages later, on the other hand, he details the legal attack on property rights that caused many of these treasures to be sold off. The law I refer to is the British government's death duty — in the United States, it is called an estate tax. This tax started in the late 19th century at a modest eight percent rate on estates valued at one million pounds or more. But by 1939, the rate was a hefty 60 percent. By the 1950s, writes Bryson, the stately homes were disappearing at the rate of about two a week.

There is so much more in At Home than I've discussed here. One thing Bryson does often, for example, is tell the price of various goods and services at various points in time. Many of these prices were very high relative to wages. Realizing this gives the reader still another way of understanding and appreciating the awesome wealth created for all economic classes — in Britain and the United States — by two centuries of economic growth.