

... and the



RUSSELL DOUST FINDS A 1910 NEWS ITEM THAT SENDS HIM ON A SEARCH INTO THE 'SUPERIORITY' OF THE 'NEW DOMESTIC SCIENCE'

too early for such items as electric frying pans or ovens. Were there advertisements for these 'superior' kitchen machines in the pages of *The Argus* or in magazines for women? Certainly *The Argus* for 1910 carried no pictorial advertisements for these kitchen machines and women's magazines had yet to become commonplace. I wondered, too, whether there was a vast literature on ways of doing things in the kitchen (as distinct from recipe books). To answer this question, I set off on a research journey in the National Library of Australia's reading rooms and found that there was not only a mass of books on the topic but that they also dated back to the 1530s (*The Boke of Husbandry* by John Fitzherbert was published in 1533).

We heard no more about kitchen appliances in issues of *The Argus* for 1911 or 1912. Who arranged for these Methodist Ladies' College (MLC) pupils to make a public appearance? Was the event sponsored by a manufacturer or importer of the appliances? Did the girls all become cooks or housewives after they left school?

Based on quite unconnected research that I had done some years earlier in the MLC registers of pupils, I knew that many of the girls had professed an interest in working in an office. (I do not recall any of them saying 'housewife' although marriage must always have been expected, if not always achieved.) My own mother, an MLC girl in 1910, did not work in an office but did get married (although after she pursued some other interests first), and was an ordinary but competent cook of the 1930s.

One could spend many, many days in the Library finding examples of how-to-do-it books on 'domestic science' (also sometimes called 'home economics')—and it is interesting that in the 1910 news item the word 'science' was used not to refer to all the activities of keeping a home, but for the actual 'scientific' machines which were employed in the cooking demonstration.

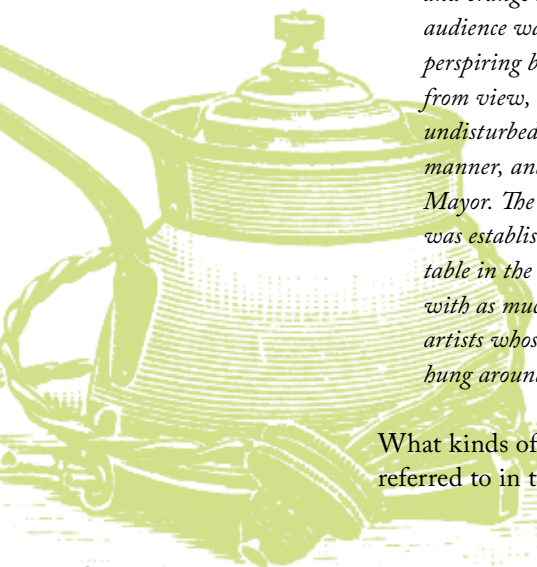
ABOVE  
Adelaide Electricity Co.  
'Do It Electrically with These Labor-saving Devices!' 1932 reproduced from *The Spirit of Progress: Electricity, the Modern Way* (Adelaide: Adelaide Electricity Co., 1932) Ephemera Collection nla.aus-vn2597809

BELOW AND OPPOSITE TOP  
Unknown artist  
Electric frying pan and saucepan featured in the 1905 Feldheim, Gotthelf and Co. catalogue reproduced from *Chandeliers and Billy Tea: A Catalogue of Australian Life* by Peter Cuffley (Hawthorn, Vic: Five Mile Press, 1989)

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER WITH THE Melbourne *Argus* of 13 December 1910 caught my eye:

*Eight young ladies walked on to the platform at the Town-hall last evening for the purpose of proving the superiority of the new domestic science over the old housework. In front of the audience, where there could be no deception, these pupils of the Methodist Ladies' College began operations with electric appliances. Some broken eggs displayed to those behind the scenes foreshadowed omelette, and a dainty omelette was delivered in about ten minutes. But THAT was not all. Fish fried and fish boiled, toast, coffee and orange soufflé were made while the audience waited. Instead of a flushed and perspiring band of cooks, hastily retreating from view, a bevy of ladies, with ribbons undisturbed, bowed in their most becoming manner, and handed the menu to the Lord Mayor. The superiority of domestic science was established, and the confection of the table in the centre of the room reposed there with as much pride as the works of the other artists whose numerous paintings were hung around the walls.*

What kinds of 'electric appliances' were being referred to in the news item? Surely 1910 was



# schoolgirls showed the way

The Methodist Ladies' College in Melbourne has not been neglected by its own historians. In *Seventy-Five Years at the Methodist Ladies' College Hawthorn 1882–1957* (1957) (followed 25 years later by the excellent *They Dreamt of a School: A Centenary History* by former pupil Ailsa G. Thomson Zainu'ddin), I read of the founders' goal of providing wide educational opportunities for the girls there, as expressed at its first Prize Day in 1882:

*In his report the President, the Rev W. H. Fitchett, B.A., said '... the purely educational work of the College falls into line with the University course, and curriculum ranges from the most elementary studies to the highest University distinctions. Also the training aims at being earnestly practical and is intended to be such as will fit girls for home, and its duties, and for the pursuits opening for ladies in so many directions'.*

Training girls in 'domestic science' was obviously considered a necessary and important part of their education, as illustrated by two of the exam questions for the subject 'Home Science' in 1885:

- (1) *Write directions for sweeping and dusting a sitting room*
- (2) *Give directions for making (a) bread, (b) oatmeal porridge, (c) beef tea, (d) bread crumb pudding*

And in 1887, for 'Domestic Economy', the questions included:

- (1) *What difference would you make in the diet of a clerk and of a ploughman?*
- (2) *What would guide you in the choice of a dwelling?*

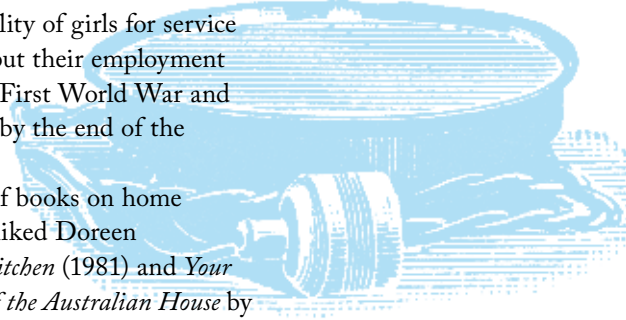
Clearly, it was expected that these girls would become the mistresses of their own households, perhaps as wives of squatters or of city business men. Many middle-class homes employed at least one domestic servant; the 1885 exam questions clearly imply the need for

their direction. Availability of girls for service was not yet a problem, but their employment was in decline after the First World War and practically non-existent by the end of the Second.

There is no shortage of books on home economics. I especially liked Doreen Yarwood's *The British Kitchen* (1981) and *Your Home: The Inside Story of the Australian House* by John Archer (1998). From the first, I learned that, although electric lighting was adopted in Britain from the 1880s onwards, cooking with electricity was slow to arrive. Gas cookers were advertised and available, even in Australia, by the 1890s, but the electric stove came later. Yarwood points out:

*The cookers were not attractive to look at ... they were, of course, cleaner to use since there were no dirt-making burners, but this very quality was the one which made most people distrust electric cooking. The heat was not visible ... but the most important factor mitigating against electric cooking was that most people already possessed a solid fuel or gas stove and few homes [in Britain] until the 1920s were wired for electric current.*

In a few Australian country towns—Tamworth and Young in New South Wales, and Nhill in Victoria, for example—electricity was available in 1888, but neither Melbourne nor Sydney had electric power and lighting until several years later and, although electricity soon became the preferred way of lighting both streets and most houses in towns and cities, electric cooking did not become popular until the early hotplates (which took minutes to heat up) were replaced by near-instantaneous ones. Yarwood notes that electric food mixers did



ABOVE  
Science Museum, London  
A Carron electric cooker,  
c.1912  
featured in *The British Kitchen*  
by Doreen Yarwood (London:  
Batsford, 1981)  
Courtesy Science Museum/  
SSPL

BELOW  
John Flynn (1880–1951)  
*An Unidentified Woman  
Baking, Fitzroy Crossing*  
between 1912 and 1951  
b&w negative; 8.5 x 11.3 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an24698481





ABOVE  
Unknown photographer  
A housewife in her fully  
equipped kitchen, 1950s  
reproduced from *Your  
Home: The Inside Story of  
the Australian House* (Port  
Melbourne: Thomas C. Lothian  
Pty Ltd, 1998)  
Courtesy Hachette Australia

RIGHT  
Unknown artist  
Electric oven  
featured in the 1905 Feldheim,  
Gotthelf and Co. catalogue  
reproduced from *Chandeliers  
and Billy Tea: A Catalogue of  
Australian Life* by Peter Cuffley  
(Hawthorn, Vic: Five Mile  
Press, 1989)

BELOW, FROM LEFT  
Advertisements for the  
Coleman 'self-heating flat iron'  
and the Coleman Quick-Lite  
lamp, 'the sunshine of the night'  
reproduced from *The Argus*,  
7 October 1925  
(Melbourne: Argus office, 1925)  
Newspapers and Microforms  
Collection  
NX 11

not become generally available in Britain until after the Second World War. Archer's Australian book has a photograph of a 1950s Australian kitchen, complete with electric jug, mixer and stove, although I do not see a toaster.

So what, then, was available to the housewife of 1910 in Melbourne? What was advertised or mentioned in the popular press? I tried *The Argus* for 1913 (more than two years after the Town Hall demonstration) for electric appliances but found none save advertisements for the new and improved tungsten lamps ('the last word in modern science'). There were advertisements for many other things that families needed or wanted: Sanatogen, 'for nervous disorders'; Zam-Buk, 'the everyday healer'; Hoadley's chocolates; Laxettes, 'effective as castor oil, delicious as a chocolate cream' (I hated them); and pianos and pianolas of many makes. There was also a surprising number of advertisements for motor cars, for instance the Kellow Motor Company selling Talbot cars ('103 miles in one hour').

Not finding any evidence of electric appliances in 1913, I jumped to *The Argus* for

1925. Surely electric irons should have been available, but I found none. Instead, I came across an ad for the Coleman Self-heating Flat Iron, powered by an attached petrol burner (yes, petrol!), 'the iron with the cool blue handle'; and the Coleman Quick-Lite gas lamp, 'brighter than twenty oil lamps'.

However, further along on my research journey I did discover, much to my surprise, images of an electric oven, an electric frying pan and an electric saucepan from a 1905 catalogue of Feldheim, Gotthelf and Company reproduced in *Chandeliers and Billy Tea: A Catalogue of Australian Life* by Peter Cuffley (1984). I cannot imagine that these esoteric articles were in common use but, coming back to the schoolgirl cooking demonstration in the Melbourne Town Hall, *The Argus* report does imply that the girls used an electric frying pan for the omelette and perhaps for the fried fish, something electric to boil the fish in (why would you want to boil fish?), an electric toaster, an electric coffee maker and some kind of electric oven (you cannot make a soufflé without an oven). MLC's cooking school, opened in April 1910, could have been equipped by Feldheim, Gotthelf and Company. We cannot be certain of this, but we do know that this firm sold all the right electric appliances. The Town Hall demonstration would have been a great advertisement for the company—and for the Methodist Ladies' College!

RUSSELL DOUST, a former State Librarian of New South Wales, has cooked on solid fuel, gas and electric stoves, is happy to use various electrical appliances in his kitchen, even a microwave, but has never lost his preference for gas under his pots and pans

**The Iron with the Cool Blue Handle**

Economical and Convenient.

No more dragging of heavy straps behind the ironing board and the hot steam. The Coleman Self-Heating Flat Iron takes the place of a whole set of heavy, obsolete iron. Goodness! You'll find the iron in the minutes from price! Contacted in the morning.

**Genuine Hot Point Construction.**

The Coleman Self-Heating Flat Iron has the genuine Hot Point, which makes the ironing swift, efficient and simple. Good Blue Handle is protected by international law.

**IRON IN COOL COMFORT.**

Price 35/- each. Demonstrations with Pleasure.

**The Coleman SELF-HEATING Flat Iron**

Costs 1/- for an average week's ironing. Write for illustrated folder.

**Coleman Quick-Lite Lamp** *The Sunshine of the Night.*

**300 CANDLE-POWER.**

The Coleman Quick-Lite Gas Lamp sheds the soft, pure-white brilliance that is easy on the eyes of the young and old. It is the ideal light for reading or sewing.

**Brighter Than Twenty Oil Lamps.**

The Quick-Lite Lamp generates gas from petrol, and gives 40 hours' brilliant light to the gallon. Gas! Isn't the petrol! can't be filled when lighted.

Price 75/- Complete with equal shade and four mantles. Call or write for illustrated folder.

**COLEMAN QUICK-LITE CO. OF AUSTRALIA,**  
325 COLLINS STREET — MELBOURNE.