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Karen Sayer

Illuminating Women: The Case of Candles in the English Home, 1815–1900

My contribution assesses the domestic use of candles and candlelight in Britain throughout the nineteenth century in order to illuminate the non-linear, non-progressive nature of energy transitions. It is about small everyday things, inflected by class as well as by sex. By looking at women and candle-lighting we find that, in this period, energy consumed within the home was shaped more by continuity than change. This is a history of utility, of entrenched decision-making, and habits of thought rather than eye-catching innovation.

The candle is rarely written about in history perhaps because it has a less “heroic” tale to tell than gaslight or electricity, or even the eponymous Argand oil lamp. Those who brought in and profited from new sources of artificial light in the period often treated candles as part of a darker past, in which existing forms of illumination were supposed to be inadequate and their safety poor. They told thrusting teleological tales of improvement and invention that capitalised on dominant Victorian cultural conventions that associated the idea of lighting with luxury, progress, and civilisation. Nevertheless, the evidence shows that all sorts of candles continued to be used, despite innovation and competition. By the end of the period, at least one of the major manufacturers, Price’s Candles, was able to report a comfortable increase in sales, both at home (i.e., within the UK) and overseas, resulting therefore in profits for the shareholders, and successful reinvestment in their factory as a result.

We will not be able to understand and therefore address climate change until we recognise the intimate relationships that have always existed between people when they purchase, consume, and labour to create energy. These become visible in the small domestic histories of candlelight. Candles were made from all sorts of materials, each with their own social meanings and impacts. Though the range of those materials expanded through the nineteenth century, very few dropped away altogether. Candles can be fuelled by almost any animal, mineral, or vegetable oil. In the nineteenth century, candles were made of beeswax, tallow, stearic acid and sperm whale oil, paraffin wax, palm or coconut oil, or combinations of these, plus other ingredients (most famously arsenic,

to whiten and brighten the light). The diversity of candles available, and financial and aesthetic choices to be made, complicate traditional linear histories that focus on one-directional change.

There is *some* change in this story, as we can see when we look at the legislative and commercial context within which candles were bought and sold, and the social, political, and economic history of the period. At the start of the century, the cheapest candle of all was the homemade rushlight, made from peeled rushes dipped in fat with the pith as the wick. Held in a simple clamp these could burn for up to an hour, and could be made at home, a task seen as women's work, as we find in sources like writer and reformer William Cobbett's *Cottage Economy* (1822). Aimed ostensibly at the "cottager"—the poor labouring man—*Cottage Economy* was a carefully costed social commentary intended to offer both a political critique of the new capitalist class and to support the rural working class by offering practical advice. Drawing on his upbringing, his experience of travelling extensively during various revolutions on the European continent, and the periods in which he was a political exile in the United States, Cobbett gave instructions on making bread, brewing beer, caring for livestock, and making candles. Though writing for a male readership, he leaves an incidental trace of women's skill in making light, which is represented as a commonplace domestic task, and through his political rhetoric makes the economic value of that skill visible. In his view (framed by his radical political reading of past life in rural England, and recollection of his grandmother's domestic work), "potatoes and taxed candles seem to have grown together." In the past, he suggested, "the labourer" had been well-fed with bread and good "meat dinners," which resulted in left-over grease that was turned into rushlights—the rushes gathered near the home, stripped and soaked in the grease. But by the 1820s the money and labour had shifted from buying good meals and making free rushlights to the purchase of (taxed) candlelight and digging potatoes.

Yet, there was also *continuity*. The 1907 edition of *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* still detailed the work of setting candle and matches next to the bed as part of a housemaid's tasks. She explained how they should clean tallow from candle sticks, despite having access to incandescent gas mantles or even electric light in well-to-do homes. In this description of the housemaid's work, this prescriptive text also shows the gendered labour involved in the housewife's management and use of candlelight within her household economy. In Mrs Beeton's book, the aspirational middle class wife allot-

ted the tasks of scraping candlesticks and the careful placing of candles and matches when setting up a room for the night to the housemaid. Choices about energy and material showed social standing, because of the necessary purchasing power required. Expensive beeswax was burned in candelabras for social display and aesthetic effect in the public spaces of wealthy homes (dining rooms and drawing rooms), to the hostesses' credit. Cheap tallow was reserved for the servants' quarters, carried late to bedrooms. Different materials required more or less human effort to manage in order to deliver the best effect in terms of illumination. The cost of a candle could be matched to the use of energy either in terms of the material burned or in women's labour required to trim or snuff a candle ("snuffing" was the regular trimming of a candle wick, which had to be done to reduce the impact of "guttering," i.e., to keep the light steady and to stop it wasting the melted wax through dripping, and was a task that needed to be carried out more often with lower-grade materials like tallow). In 1843, Price's "Composite Candles" that needed no snuffing cost 1s. (*shilling*) per pound (lb), whereas their "Coco Nut Candles" that needed snuffing cost considerably less at 10d. (*pence*) per pound (lb). It is here that you can see that decisions about energy use were the complex products of a class-bound and gendered economy.

When writing history there is a temptation to project our ideas onto the past. In the case of energy transitions, the temptation is to write muscular rhetorics that offer heroic grand narratives of change over and above continuity. The danger is that we do not write about life as it was lived, and overlook small details, such as candles and those who were responsible for dealing with them. As Virginia Woolf asked in "The Art of Biography":

Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography—the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what is greatness? And what smallness?

In my work, the wish to reconstruct the fullness of past lives—"the humble as well as the illustrious"—means that I need to pay attention to the small traces of the past, and those traces include material culture. Domestic objects such as Clarke's "Pyramid" infant food warmer (1884) that relied on a safety "tea light" designed to warm the "pap" (soft food) used to wean babies, or the spring-loaded reflective reading lamp designed to increase the light from a composite candle, capture the "smallness" of connections within everyday life. These are evidence of past decisions about energy as it crossed

the small boundaries between women of different classes living and working in the household, and of energy as it shifted back and forth between the human body and the technological.



"Pyramid" food warmer invented by Samuel Clarke, England, c. 1884. Image via Wellcome Images Collection Gallery (contributed by the Science Museum, London), CC BY 4.0.

This history was messy and never linear. Sometimes innovations took off, but sometimes they did not. Sometimes old technologies persisted with new meanings—soft candlelit dinners, for example, have come to be preferred in some situations over the glare of electric light. Sometimes change is incremental, such as the demise of stearine for the manufacture of candles as the whaling industry failed slowly in the face of rapeseed oil, kerosene, and gas-oil. Multiple types of lighting were consumed in parallel. The candle remained popular through the century, despite the adoption of new lighting technologies such as gas and then electricity.

I argue that we should recognise the importance of the history of everyday life, in particular its gendered inflections. If we are going to change the ways we use energy now, we need to have a fuller picture of the past, and understand the minutiae of energy choices in our own lives. The continuing histories of women's capacities, skill, knowledge, and physical labour in the home, and the intricacies of their domestic relationships across classes—embodied in something as "small" as candlelight—have been overlooked, to the detriment of a proper and nuanced understanding of the histories of energy. If we tell history through a series of convenient, technological moments, strung together in series as the grand narrative of change, we simplify a much more complex and interesting story that is crucial to our understanding of decision-making in the present.

Further Reading

Cobbett, William. *Cottage Economy*. Oxford, New York, Toronto, Melbourne: Oxford University Press 1979. First edition published in 1822.

Beeton, Isabella. *Mrs. Beeton's Household Management: A Guide to Cookery In All Branches*. Ward, Lock and Co., 1861. Reprint of the first edition with abridged preface by the author, 1907.

Woolf, Virginia. "The Art of Biography." In *The Death Of The Moth And Other Essays*. Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1981.