

SHOPPING, SEDUCTION & MR SELFRIDGE

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INTRODUCTION



CONSUMING PASSIONS

The rise of the department store – or what in Paris were more gracefully called *les grands magasins* – in the second half of the nineteenth century was a phenomenon that encompassed fashion, advertising, entertainment, emergent new technology, architecture and, above all, seduction. These forces evolved to merge into businesses that Emile Zola astutely called ‘the great cathedrals of shopping’, and vast fortunes were made by the men who owned them as they tapped into the female passion for shopping. But arguably no one man grasped the concept of consumption as sensual entertainment better than the maverick American retailer, Harry Gordon Selfridge, who opened his eponymous store on London’s Oxford Street in 1909.

In building the West End’s first fully fledged department store, he quite literally changed everything about the way Londoners shopped. His visionary, larger-than-life Edwardian building perfectly reflected the character of its founder – the only modest thing about him being his height. It was Harry Gordon Selfridge who positioned the perfume and cosmetics department immediately inside the main entrance, a move that changed the layout – and turnover – of the sales floor for ever more. Selfridge created window-dressing as an art form, pioneered in-store promotions and fashion shows, and offered customer service and facilities previously unheard of in Britain. Above

all, he gave his customers fun. At a time when there was no radio or television, when cinema was in its infancy, Selfridge's in Oxford Street offered customers entertainment as fascinating as that at a science museum, with as much glamour as on any music-hall stage. In giving his customers a unique 'day out', Harry Selfridge proudly boasted that after Westminster Abbey and the Tower of London, his store was 'the third biggest tourist attraction in town'. The public could buy much of what they needed at Selfridge's, and much that they never knew they wanted until they were seduced by the tantalizing displays.

Harry Selfridge perfected the art of publicity, spending more money on advertising than any retailer of his era. A consummate showman, he himself became a celebrity at a time when there were few identifiable, exciting personalities that the public could see at close quarters. When he arrived at work, there was invariably a cluster of customers waiting to meet and greet the 'famous Mr Selfridge'. His ritualistic 'morning tour' of the store, where his staff of thousands lined up anxiously by their counters in eager anticipation of a personal nod of approval from their boss, was the curtain-raiser to the daily show at Selfridge's – the only difference being that for his audience, entrance was free.

There was no shortage of shops or stores in London and many other wealthy provincial cities in Britain when – after twenty-five years working at the celebrated store Marshall Field & Co. in Chicago – Selfridge masterminded his grand plan to open in the imperial capital. The industrial transformation that had occurred in Britain had created a new spending population who were proud to show off their wealth by acquiring consumer goods, and retailers scrambled to cope with an almost insatiable demand. The new rich had large houses to equip, a prodigious number of children – not to mention an army of servants – to dress, and their own position in society to promote. Happily for retailers, conspicuous consumption, always so crucial in defining wealth and status, had found itself a much larger market.

That fashion became big business was because of big dresses. In

the 1850s, when both the young Queen Victoria and the French style icon, the Empress Eugénie, both enthusiastically embraced the new caged crinoline, clothes billowed to unprecedented proportions. Women of substance were dressed from head to toe in as much as forty yards of fabric. As well as a muslin shift and cotton or silk underwear – not to mention the ubiquitous corset – the ensemble had hoops underneath, and at least three if not four petticoats, in layers varying from flannel through muslin to white, starched cotton. Add to this a lace fichu, bead-trimmed cape, fur or embroidered muff, hat, gloves, parasol, stockings, button boots and reticule – and consider that the entire paraphernalia was usually changed once a day and often again in the evening – and one can begin to comprehend the costs, not to mention profits, in supplying it all. As if this bonanza wasn't enough for retailers who stocked all of the above and ran vast workrooms making the finished gowns, there was the ritual of mourning the dead. This meant the whole thing all over again – but this time in black. Many a Victorian linen-draper's fortune was made merely by operating a successful 'mourning department', and one of the first diversifications into 'added-value customer services' was to offer funeral facilities – right down to supplying dyed black ostrich feathers for the horses that pulled the hearse.

As dress-reformers railed against 'the tyranny of women's fashion', the redoubtable feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton used dress as a topic of debate: 'Men say we are frail. But I'd like to see a man who can bear what we do, laced up in steel-ribbed corsets, with hoops, heavy skirts, trains, panniers, chignons and dozens of hairpins sticking in our scalps – cooped up in the house year after year. How would men like that?'

The answer is that the men – or at least those who owned stores and factories – liked it very much. Fortunes were made in the textile trade – in cotton, wool, linen and silk, growing it, weaving it, dyeing it, and selling it. Associated businesses making all manner of goods from dye, needles and pins, ribbons and sewing thread to bleach and starch boomed. And as distribution systems improved, merchandise

could be moved further and further from its point of production to its point of sale, meaning stores could offer a wider selection of goods than ever before.

The nineteenth-century passion for fashion wasn't the only factor in the rise of the great department stores. Just as the growth of credit had led to an explosion of shops in the seventeenth century, so the ability to buy in bulk – also on credit – benefited the new breed of retailers. The prosperous middle classes may have wanted quality, but above all, their Victorian ethics demanded value for money. Economies of buying in bulk enabled larger retailers to reduce their prices far below those of smaller, specialist shops. These independent shopkeepers – who had for decades catered to the upper echelons of society – were restricted by their credit systems. The richer the customer, the longer he or she took to pay. It wasn't unusual for accounts to be settled annually, and many speciality shops went bankrupt as a result. The emergent stores, however, were mainly cash businesses, with perhaps a monthly charge account offered to more select personal customers. Such stores developed awesome buying power – particularly as many of them operated a wholesale division servicing sales outposts in the Empire or throughout rural America – and they didn't hesitate to use it as a weapon against their suppliers, who were obliged not just to provide goods against a ninety-day payment policy, but often also to store merchandise for phased delivery.

The great stores acted as a catalyst for change in women's lives. For the first time women were able to 'cross the line', venturing out in public to buy goods for themselves, to experience shopping and be observed doing it without in any way jeopardizing their reputations. Not all stores were the size of cathedrals, but certainly fashionable women in London, Manchester and Newcastle, and further afield in Paris, New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, were spending a lot more time shopping than going to church. Small wonder when the stores were light, bright, warm and enticing. Neither did these stores cater exclusively for the carriage trade. The department store was the anchor in a rapidly expanding egalitarian, urban society,

drawing its customer base from a mix of old and new money, and able to offer not just fixed prices but also sale bargains. For many people these stores were infinitely more glamorous and comfortable than their own homes. In 1880s Chicago, Harry Selfridge had pioneered the policy of browsing, making Marshall Field's an ideal location for those who were 'just looking', and opened a 'Bargain Basement' for those on a budget. He had also introduced a restaurant, a reading-room, a crèche and a ladies' rest-room complete with nurse, and so could justifiably claim to have helped emancipate women: 'I came along just at the time when women wanted to step out on their own. They came to the store and realized some of their dreams.'

He made his own dreams come true in turn-of-the-century London where, at the time he arrived, compared to the giant American department stores and *grands magasins* of Paris, many of London's 'stores' were just rather large shops. In the days before lifts and escalators, and in part due to onerous building restrictions, retail space was restricted to the ground, first and possibly second floors, with stock rooms below and workrooms above. Stores like Swan & Edgar, Dickens & Jones and Debenham & Freebody had in-house catering for their staff who ate breakfast, lunch and dinner on site. More often than not, staff lived in a store-tied hostel or in a grim and cold dormitory tucked away on the upper floor. Young people who had eschewed residential domestic service for jobs in retailing soon realized they had merely swapped the servants' hall for the staff canteen. Working hours were gruelling. When West End shopkeepers gave evidence before the Parliamentary Select Committee on Shop Hours in 1886, it transpired that average working hours were from 8.15 a.m. to 7.30 p.m. six days a week, with half an hour off for lunch and fifteen minutes for tea. If romance flourished on the shop floor, it was because workers had little time or opportunity to meet elsewhere.

Most leading drapery stores had, for the main part, evolved from a background in haberdashery, often expanding their floor space by buying sites to the left and right, knocking them through into a rabbit-

warren of levels rather than rebuilding from scratch. From the main street entrance, customers entered a showroom space literally stuffed full with everything from garter elastic and dress pins to embroidery silks and bootlaces. The amount of time spent by a sales assistant in selling a shilling's worth of such goods – haberdashery being the training ground for all apprentices – was totally disproportionate to the return. The mindset of the day, however, was that ladies who bought their buttons would move further on in – or up to the first floor – to buy silks, satins, laces and lingerie.

Selfridge himself had already seen London's retailers and those of Manchester, Berlin, Vienna and Paris when he first toured Europe in 1888. Though admiring the William Morris fabrics in Liberty's and impressed by Whiteley's in Bayswater, in general he found the rest of the city's shops and stores disappointing. He particularly disliked floorwalkers. 'Is Sir intending to buy something?' asked one supercilious man. 'No, I'm just looking,' replied Selfridge, at which the floorwalker dropped his pseudo-smart voice and snarled, 'Then 'op it mate!' Selfridge never forgot the incident and refused to hire 'walkers' when he opened in Oxford Street two decades later. Instead he employed knowledgeable, well-informed sales assistants who loved where they worked and who idolized their boss, whom they called 'the Chief'.

The time Selfridge spent time studying Au Bon Marché in Paris was crucial to his development as a retailing revolutionary. When he first saw the store in 1888, the final phase of rebuilding and expansion, orchestrated by the architect Louis-Charles Boileau and the brilliant engineer Gustave Eiffel, had been completed. What had started as a minor *magasin de nouveauté* opened by the Videau brothers on the fashionable rue de Bac in 1825, had grown to a massive enterprise under the direction of their ex-employee Aristide Boucicaut. Au Bon Marché was a masterpiece, and it set the standard for fine shopping throughout Europe. Monsieur Boucicaut was a great innovator, imposing fixed pricing, annual sales, an 'exchange' or 'money back' guarantee and *entre libre* (no obligation to buy) as well as running the

first French retailing establishment to sell a huge variety of merchandise ranging from homewares, toys and perfume to sports equipment and children's clothes. Indeed, the bourgeois, taciturn Aristide Boucicaut, ably assisted by his thrifty wife Marguerite, took the Paris emporium to such majestic heights that it became the inspiration for Emile Zola's seminal novel *Au Bonheur des Dames*, a book so popular with business historians that it has tended to give the impression that innovation in retailing was the exclusive preserve of the French.

Across the Atlantic, however, another retailing pioneer was making his mark in establishing one of the world's first true department stores. In New York, an Irish immigrant called Alexander Turney Stewart established a sumptuous store so famous it had no name over the door but was simply known as 'The Marble Palace'. Among Stewart's many master-strokes in seducing shoppers was his decision to hire only the best-looking and most charming male sales assistants. He also introduced the first in-store fashion shows and live music, fitted the first plate-glass windows in America, and imported the country's first full-length mirrors, having spotted them first at Au Bon Marché. By the time the American Civil War ended in 1865, he had taken luxury shopping in New York to such heights that simply going to Stewart's was described by the press as 'being notoriously fatal to the female nerves'. *Harper's* considered this growing shopping mania 'a disease peculiar to women', even claiming it to be 'a species of insanity'. In the case of the assassinated President Lincoln's wife Mary, they were right. Poor Mary never got over the shock of her husband's death. Her already extravagant shopping habits became so bad that she ran up a bill of \$48,000 (nearly a million dollars today) at Alexander Stewart's whereupon her family had her declared insane, insisting they weren't responsible for her debts.

Whatever the dangers of shopping, both Stewart and Boucicaut were men with an innate understanding of the powers of salesmanship, marketing, service and quality. It was their legacy, along with the enduring influence of Marshall Field, that inspired Harry Gordon Selfridge.

London's established retailers, although anxious to cultivate women customers, had some serious anomalies. Whiteley's was one of the rare retailers offering any sort of in-store catering, having opened a 'refreshment room' in 1872. However, when Mr Whiteley applied for a liquor licence – thinking that ladies who lunched might enjoy a glass of wine – Paddington's magistrates rejected his application in the 'interests of morality', saying that 'ladies, or females dressed to represent them, might make licensed premises a place of assignation'.

Even drinking tea or lemonade, however, necessitated a ladies' room, but there was no such provision for London's lady shoppers. Nor could respectable Victorian women be seen using one of the rare public conveniences. The only solution was to visit a hotel for afternoon tea.

Steeped in tradition, the city's retailers were alarmed by the idea of change. It was, however, long overdue. When Andrew Carnegie, the Scottish-American philanthropist millionaire, visited London in 1900 he was appalled. 'Just look at the jumble in the store windows – so much stuff you cannot take it in,' he said. 'When you go into a shop they treat you most indifferently. You are scowled at if you ask for goods out of the ordinary, and you are made to feel uncomfortable if you do not buy. These shop people drive away more customers than they attract. What London needs is a good shaking up.'

Nothing excited Harry Gordon Selfridge more than the idea of 'shaking up London', and the spirit of the age was on his side. The concept of selling to 'all classes of trade' was totally alien to existing British retailers. Stores were up-market or they were middle-market – and occasionally they catered to the better end of the lower market – but they never, ever did all three. Selfridge would change all that, just as he changed the traditional merchandise mix. When the trade press reported that he was going to sell everything from photographic equipment to glass and gloves, his drapery competitors derided such diversification, Marshall & Snelgrove stiffly announcing that 'We know what we are and mean to stick to it.'

Thanks to his commercial success, Selfridge enjoyed the lavish lifestyle of an impresario, having a penchant for large houses, fast women and regrettably slow horses. His greatest addiction other than work was gambling, which in one form or another dominated his life, from the risk he took in sinking all his money into a site arguably at ‘the wrong end’ of Oxford Street, to the hours he spent in casinos where he and one of his famous mistresses, the baccarat-addicted Jenny Dolly, won – and lost – hundreds of thousands of pounds. No one knows exactly how much Selfridge squandered over the three decades he lived in London, but it’s reliably estimated at well over £3 million, or nearly £65 million today. The money vanished in a haze of extravagance, frittered away on jewels and furs for his mistresses, a fully crewed yacht that slept twenty, the maintenance of his three daughters’ well-born but largely unemployed husbands and on his insatiable thirst for gambling.

None of these pastimes mattered when Selfridge and his store were making money. Indeed, his glamorous reputation added to the attraction of shopping there. Yet for a businessman involved in dealing with millions of pounds, Selfridge was curiously naïve, and his complex personal and social life and tumultuous business expansion ultimately brought about his downfall. In the late 1920s, advice from one of London’s most flawed financiers triggered acquisitions of staggering proportions. Company revenues were drained and Selfridge was woefully unprepared when the Great Depression took hold. By the late 1930s, his personal lifestyle had left him deeply in debt to the store – and to the taxman.

In 1939, at the age of 83, thirty years after building Selfridge’s, revolutionizing London’s retailing and arguably creating what for years to come would be known as the greatest shopping street in the world, Harry Selfridge was ousted from what he had always thought of as ‘his’ store. The most celebrated retailer of his era, who had lived like a lord in Lansdowne House, was reduced to penury, dying in a small flat in Putney.

His legacy isn’t just his gloriously iconic building in Oxford Street

– although the towering columns of Selfridges are an awesome monument for any man – it is that he modernized British retailing, bringing to it his belief in ‘the power of experience’. A man light years ahead of his time, a true accelerator of change, he deserves to be remembered as the man who put fun on to the shop floor and sex appeal into shopping.