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The Story of Women in the 1950s

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Published in *History Today* Volume 65 Issue 9 September 2015

[Gender](#), [Social](#)

Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes: The Story of Women in the 1950s

Virginia Nicholson

Viking/Penguin 526pp £16.99

Exactly who were the 'perfect wives' of the 1950s? Were they the drably dressed women still queuing for food up to a decade after the Second World War had ended? Or were they sprightly looking females in frilly pinnies, manically waving a feather duster and serving up 'delicious' meals to their husbands?

Following her probes into the lives of women after the First World War and their roles in the Second, Virginia Nicholson moves forward into a decade that has only recently begun to receive the attention it deserves. Sandwiched between the privations and sacrifices of the 1940s and the affluent excesses of the 'swinging sixties', the fifties have long been regarded as a dull decade, when Britain was struggling to rebuild a devastated and shabby country and 'face the future', in the words of the Labour Party's 1945 election slogan. For many women they were years of frustration at wartime gains lost, whereas others nursed a profound desire to return to the certainties of their pre-war lives. But for both the future was to prove circumscribed.

Women might have had the vote on the same terms as men since 1929, but for most that was pretty well the limit of their equality: working women were paid much less than men and despite the responsibilities and sheer hard graft many had endured in wartime, were still regarded as submissive and inferior beings. Educational opportunities were limited. The 1944 Education Act was supposed to give everyone 'parity of esteem', but that is not how it worked out. Many teachers and parents had narrow expectations for girls whose destiny was to be marriage, a home and a family, with work just an interim measure between leaving school and walking down the aisle, rather than a career. Just 1.2 per cent of women went to university in the 1950s.

In many cases, a woman's lot seems to have hardly improved by marriage. Imagining wives to be fulfilled by having an easy-to-clean Formica worktop and a twin-tub washing machine, husbands could be harsh taskmasters, most regarding running the home and parenting solely as a woman's responsibility, expecting meals ready when they returned from work, making all the household decisions of consequence and largely continuing to inhabit a separate sphere of pubs and football.

Nicholson stitches together some telling interviews to support this perception: the wife whose husband confiscated her pearl necklace until she 'learned not to swear', the mother who wept when her daughter called off her engagement since she had already purchased a set of wall-lights in anticipation. However, she also includes exceptions to the *Stepford Wives* stereotypes; Dora Russell who organised a 'peace caravan' of women against nuclear war, pioneers of birth control, the working-class girl who knew her looks would get her out of the factory and ruthlessly fought her way to be crowned *Miss Great Britain*.

As ever, the perfect and the ideal were a chimera, but frequently proved oppressive ones for women in the 1950s.

Juliet Gardiner is a historian and broadcaster and a former editor of *History Today*.