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Shopping, Seduction & Mr. Selfridge



Synopsis

If you lived at Downton Abbey, you shopped at Selfridge's. Harry Gordon Selfridge was a charismatic American who, in twenty-five years working at Marshall Field's in Chicago, rose from lowly stockboy to a partner in the business which his visionary skills had helped to create. At the turn of the twentieth century he brought his own American dream to London's Oxford Street where, in 1909, with a massive burst of publicity, Harry opened Selfridge's, England's first truly modern built-for-purpose department store. Designed to promote shopping as a sensual and pleasurable experience, six acres of floor space offered what he called "everything that enters into the affairs of daily life," as well as thrilling new luxuries "from ice-cream soda to signature perfumes. This magical emporium also featured Otis elevators, a bank, a rooftop garden with an ice-skating rink, and a restaurant complete with orchestra "all catering to customers from Anna Pavlova to Noel Coward. The store was a theatre, with the curtain going up at nine o'clock. Yet the real drama happened off the shop floor, where Mr. Selfridge navigated an extravagant world of mistresses, opulent mansions, racehorses, and an insatiable addiction to gambling. While his gloriously iconic store still stands, the man himself would ultimately come crashing down. The true story that inspired the Masterpiece series on PBS is a co-production of ITV Studios and Masterpiece "Enthralling . . . [an] energetic and wonderfully detailed biography." "London Evening Standard" "Will change your view of shopping forever." "Vogue" (U.K.)

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Customer Reviews

This is a fascinating account of the life and times of Harry Gordon Selfridge. It covers not just his career, but the changing fashions and world events that accompanied it, and the twin passions that fuelled his existence, and led ultimately to his downfall. The author lays bare Harry's double life; he was a widower with four children, and always appeared to be a very correct Edwardian gentleman. He never exercised droit de seigneur in the store, but his private life was a different matter, and the story is peppered with the names of showgirls on whom he lavished his affections, and showered with gifts. Lindy Woodhead is an excellent guide on matters sartorial and cosmetic, but when it comes to the showbiz side of the story she is less assured. In 1910, we're informed, the public was dancing to big-band music, then buying phonograph wax cylinders to play the music at home (soon superseded by pressed discs in cardboard sleeves, courtesy of Columbia Records). In reality, the big-band genre did not appear for a further two decades, and the wax cylinder was already losing ground to the gramophone record by the turn of the century. Sleeves appeared around 1910 with the introduction of double-sided 78s, but the cardboard ones came courtesy of the retailer, manufacturers like Columbia and HMV provided paper sleeves. On the subject of records, whilst it's true that sides for the Key label, which is mentioned on page 211, were selected by Christopher Stone and pressed by Decca, it's stretching a point to say that these were the top dance band hits of the day, recorded under the store's own label. The label used masters from Panachord and Winner, and only about thirty were issued, during 1933/34, usually under pseudonyms.

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