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ON THE COVER: This cartoon, depicting the farmer as a rooster about to be eaten by the Non-Partisan League as the big bad wolf, was published about 1915.

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Kate Donnelly and the 'Cult of True Womanhood'

By Gretchen Kreuter

Amid all the issues that the contemporary women's movement has raised in recent years, one theme seems to recur again and again: the contrast between what society had said that women are like, what women are capable or incapable of doing — and the realities of what women actually do. It is the contrast between myth and reality, or between stereotype and reality. In a time, like our own, of rapid change, realities alter more quickly than in times past, and the myths and stereotypes appear more obvious. This does not mean that they were not there before. They were only obscured by heavier layers of convention.

We can see the contrast clearly in the lives of Minnesota women a hundred and more years ago, and it is well personified, I think, by the example of one of the first families of Minnesota, the Ignatius Donnellys.

Ignatius Donnelly — or the Sage of Nininger, as he came to be called when he grew old enough to be a sage — pursued half a dozen careers that took him from civilized Philadelphia to pioneer Minnesota. He was a Republican; he served as lieutenant governor of Minnesota, then as a congressman, then as an agrarian radical who was interested in third party movements; he dabbled in Shakespearean scholarship and he even wrote some very successful novels. Without a doubt, the man was an exemplary model of a 19th century, broad-minded man.

In 1895, however, the sage sat down to write a memoir of his wife of 40 years. The little book was called, *In Memoriam of Mrs. Catherine Donnelly*, and in its pages, Don-

nelly recorded his memories of his wife, the mother of his children and his companion through a dozen political campaigns. In short, he set forth her noble qualities so they might never be forgotten.

"She was," he wrote, "always happy, jovial and cheerful. But above all was her goodness." When he had first brought her to Minnesota, he recalled, she had considered the Catholic priests there dissolute. She had formed a Sunday school and a church choir in Hastings; she had awarded trinkets, religious tokens and books to her pupils to encourage them in the way of righteousness. "And," Donnelly continued, "when illness struck the community, she served the sick with the doctor's instinct. When trouble came, she was everyone's counselor."

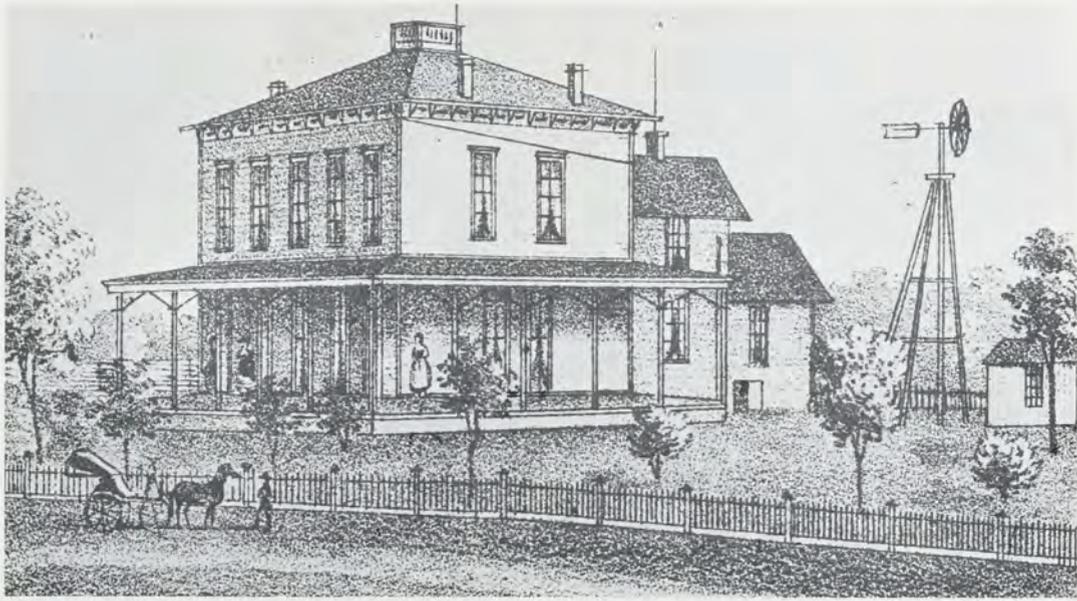
She had a beautiful voice, Donnelly recalled. "She mingled the simplest household tasks with bursts of triumphant song." Had he done wrong to gather such an artist into his home? he asked rhetorically. Of course not. She had chosen to abandon a musical career, for, he said, she was without vanity or ambition: "She would rather listen to the crooning of her children on her knee than win the thunderous plaudits of an audience of music lovers."

AFTER DESCRIBING THESE virtues and a few chaste incidents from their early married life, the bereaved husband skipped at once to the final deathbed scene where Kate had revealed, in her final extremity, the courage, modesty and forbearance that had characterized her whole life.

Donnelly's contemporaries would have found this little book's categories of description very familiar because they were the literary and moral conventions of what can be called the "Cult of True Womanhood" — the 19th century's way of describing what the ideal woman was like, and therefore, what every woman ought to be.

This was no localized phenomenon. In popular magazines of the times, in gift books, from the pulpit and from the plat-

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The home of Ignatius and Catherine Donnelly at Nininger is shown above as it appeared in the *Andreas Atlas* of 1874. At right is Donnelly's study with his portrait above the desk.

form, from shore to shore, this concept of the True Woman was spread. Purity, piety, domesticity and submissiveness were said to be her distinguishing characteristics. And, interestingly, these were the very qualities that Donnelly now declared were most distinctive in his now departed wife: the *piety* that led her to direct Sunday schools in the wilderness; the *purity* that led her to reform those "dissolute" missionaries; the joy of *domesticity* that made her prefer the gurgles of infants to the applause of music lovers, and the *submissiveness* that kept her jovial and cheerful in the face of her husband's reverses, family hardships and, ultimately, her own death.

DEATHBED scenes were a favorite subject of those who wrote True Womanhood literature. Deaths of women and children especially gave authors a chance to expound on the virtues of submission. In fact, Donnelly's description of his wife, the qualities that he chose to admire were nothing more than an American, middle western variety of Victorian morality — middle class notions of what was proper for women — and an idealized conception of the female. This description, however didn't sound very much like Kate Donnelly.

Perhaps, indeed, she was pious and pure, but if piety meant the constant attention to religious cruples, and if purity meant an unwillingness to talk about delicate matters,



she was neither. In her letters to her husband she described bodily functions and physical distresses in detail that was, if not clinical, at least indelicate by Victorian standards. In a happier vein, she wrote to her absent husband to inquire if he missed "your own bedfellow." Sometimes she speculated that a woman really ought to have two husbands, one to keep her company at home while the other was off doing the work of the world.

Domesticity, it is true, was her chief preoccupation, but she was really unsentimental about the joys of family life:

"I don't like Christmas dinner in the family way," she observed during one holiday season that was crowded with relatives. "Tables are all pushed together, nobody has enough room and everybody gets cold food."

AS FOR SCORNING the world's applause, her letters to Donnelly suggest otherwise. "I sang magnificently," she wrote after she had sung for a funeral in Philadelphia. "After it was over, no one talked of anything else." In fact, Catherine Donnelly continued to perform for many years, in Philadelphia, Washington, and St. Paul, and she never told Donnelly that she sounded anything less than splendid.

As for submissiveness, Kate Donnelly was not the submissive type. She did not conceal her hatreds and her jealousies, and she did not turn the other cheek. She despised her mother-in-law, and she was quite frank to tell her husband so: "The more I hear and know her, the less do I desire any further acquaintance."

She feared not even the artist's temperament. In his earlier years, Donnelly wrote a good deal of poetry, and on one occasion, when he sent her some of his work, she said it was "slop," and she urged him not to publish it.

Far from being preoccupied with the ideal and the spiritual, Kate was constantly reminding her husband of the stern realities of life — especially those that had to do with money. When he received the nomination for lieutenant governor of Minnesota in 1859, she wrote, "Good. Does the office pay? Write me about the salary."

Throughout her life, Kate Donnelly behaved in ways that were distinctly contrary to the ideals of the Cult of True Womanhood. She was a witty, articulate, and irrepressible personality who defied ordinary categories of description. This is not to suggest that Kate Donnelly was in any way a typical 19th century Minnesota woman. But her example was not unique. She was a lady with a strong sense of self, who was obliged to cope with the realities of life . . . with situations that were *never* encompassed within the strict but sentimental idealization of the Cult of True Womanhood. Certainly her experience was duplicated thousands and thousands of times by the women who came to Minnesota in the 19th century, who shared the common

joys and sorrows of 19th century family life.

THE QUESTION becomes, then, why was this Cult of True Womanhood so strong? Take the case of Ignatius Donnelly. He was a most unconventional man in many many ways — even about women. Through the year he collected clippings on nearly all aspects of the women's rights movement. He read John Stuart Mills' essay on the rejection of women; he was concerned about the common law disabilities of married women, and he mused about the fact he had discovered that, in proportion to their numbers, far more queens than kings were distinguished. Yet even he, when it came to publishing his remembrances of his wife, described her entirely in term of the Cult of True Womanhood.

Why was this so? Such a cult did not exist before the 19th century. Possibly it was a phenomenon which could only have developed in a country like the United States — a country divided by the Civil War, the birth of industry, rapid territorial expansion, and an accelerating geographical mobility. Americans may have been looking for something to provide order and unity. And what they found was that changeless creature, the True Woman, and her natural habitat, the home and family.

As one woman wrote in a woman's magazine of the 19th century: "There is something sedative which the duties of the home involves. It affords security, not only from the world, but from delusions and terrors of every kind."

THE HOME WAS supposed to be a cheerful place, so that husbands and brothers and sons would not need to go elsewhere in search of a good time. Woman was supposed to dispense comfort and cheer. In the home she was not only the highest adornment of civilization but she was supposed to keep busy at morally uplifting tasks. And, as the popular magazines of the 19th century claimed, most housework, if looked at in true womanly fashion, could be regarded as uplifting.

And so, at a time when all of life was becoming increasingly specialized, women were endowed with a specialized function and sanctified with a whole set of endearing or, depending on one's point of view, suffocating qualities. In the women's magazines, in the popular and religious literature of the 19th century, woman was really a hostage in



Ignatius Donnelly

the home. Society's values might change frequently, fortunes might rise and fall, but one thing could be counted on to remain the same in all kinds of crises: the True Woman was a True Woman, north, south, east, or west, in Massachusetts or Minnesota.

The whole set of attitudes was perhaps summed up best in the *Faribault Republican*, which, in 1897, published some reflections on woman:

"The True Woman is the mother who, having triumphed over unhealthy ambition, is ever active, alert, untiring in her devotion to humanity . . . May such live to be 80 and die in the harness." It is doubtful whether this was any more appealing in 1897 than it is today.

In other words, if the family were the only institution holding society together, then how on earth could any True Woman want to leave her family behind? Only selfishness could make one wish to prepare for life outside the home or think that an education ought to prepare one for professions and careers.

OBVIOUSLY, THERE IS a lot that is pure hokum about the Cult of True



Catherine Donnelly

Womanhood and about the notion of home as a sanctuary against the rude world to which the man returns at night. Kate Donnelly never talked about the hokum; she just acted in ways that didn't fit the requirements of the stereotype. But other women were more explicit. There was, for example, in Minnesota, an amateur poet, a woman, who in the 1880s, wrote a piece of doggerel that she called "The Great Unwashed":

*"Mother of ten, priestess of home,
but her face needs soap, her hair a comb.
The dishes have stood on the table since
morn,
And now 'tis time for the dinner horn."*

It is hard to believe that there was much serenity in the 19th century family of this size.

Another woman wrote much more extensively about what she considered were the absurdities of the idealizations of women in the home.

In 1903, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, writer, feminist and social critic, published a little book called, *The Home, Its Work and Influence*. In it she observed that, "We are taught that man most loves and admires the domestic type of woman. This is one of the roaring jokes of history. The breakers of hearts, the queens of romance, the goddesses of a thousand devotees, have not been cooks . . . The best loved women of all time have not been the little brown birds at

home." As for man's desire for the refuge of home and wife, Mrs. Gilman wrote, "The best proof of man's satisfaction with the home is found in his universal absence from it. It is not only that his work takes him out (and he sees to it that it does), but the man who does not have to work also goes out for pleasure."

What Mrs. Gilman and others put their fingers on are, of course, the inconsistencies and the ambivalence that were wrapped up in the 19th century's idea of women in the family and in the home. If, indeed, women exemplified all that was best in humanity, then why didn't men try to become more like women? The very thought would, of course, draw a blush to the cheek of any good Victorian. And if women were truly morally superior to men, then why should they submit to men's wills? On the other hand, if they were so weak mentally, how could they be safely entrusted with that most important of tasks, the care and nurturing and upbringing of children?

MOTHERS IN THE 19th century, far more than mothers today, were called upon to make life and death decisions about their children. Cookbooks of the 19th century always included recipes for home medicines, and other remedies. Illnesses and accidents were common visitors to the hearthside.

How, then, could any responsible father, under such circumstances, leave his ignorant wife — that fluttering, dove-like creature — without his constant wisdom and counsel? Probably the most outrageous question these inconsistencies suggest is that, if to preserve the home and family, one had to confine half the population indoors and keep it submissive and uneducated, was that kind of family worth preserving?

Despite these inconsistencies, and despite all the changes that have occurred since the 19th century, a strong case can be made for the argument that the Cult of True Womanhood is still with us today, albeit often in a less assertive way. The bestseller, *The Total Woman*, by Marabel Morgan, tells women how to be subservient and domestic. The book describes men, women, home and society in terms that are almost identical with those used in the 19th century by people who wrote about the Cult of True Womanhood. There are, of course, some cosmetic differences. The True Woman of the 19th century welcomed her husband home with a Bible and a little Mozart

number at the piano, while the Total Woman greets him in patent leather boots and babydoll pajamas. Some may feel that's progress. It may be one reason women who have decided that they'd rather be eagles than doves or little brown birds, are in conflict about their choices and uncertain about their identities. A sense of internal conflict can be a real and difficult problem. If as society has persisted in saying over and over, that there is only one way to be a True Woman, then what are women when they show ambition or self-interest? Women have been taught to think of the needs of others — and that's a very good thing to be taught. But are women, then, less womanly when they begin to think of their own needs?

ONE HUNDRED YEARS ago — even 25 years ago — it was more realistic to tell a woman that her whole life was going to be wrapped up in the rearing of children. Kate Donnelly's was. Kate Donnelly died when she was 62 years old, after years of ill health that followed a series of painful and difficult gynecological operations. But now we live much longer. Society no longer puts a premium on bearing children, and medical technology gives us potentially more effective control over our reproductive lives.

In the 19th century, when all those hosannas to the Cult of True Womanhood were raised, society was fearful of the forces of disorder and disunity that were plaguing it. Life was changing rapidly. Familiar values were losing their meaning, the family was seen as the last stable institution that would save the nation, and women were given the responsibility for saving it.

We are as worried about these things today, and many Americans are ready to hold women responsible for what is going wrong. This is an old technique. Remember poor Eve who was blamed for what went wrong in the Garden of Eden, and Pandora who opened the box and let all those evils out into the world?

Those who feel drawn to that technique — of curing our ills by restoring woman to the place of priestess of the home and hearthside — should be reminded that we tried that, and it didn't work. More and more women have been slipping out of the temple, because more and more of them have wanted to be full, functioning human-beings instead of priestesses. But we have not yet tried equality. I think we are moving in that direction — and I don't think women can afford to wait much longer to become true human beings and not True Women.



THE GIBBS HOUSE

at 2097 West Larpenteur Avenue, Falcon Heights, is owned and maintained by the Ramsey County Historical Society as a restored farm home of the mid-nineteenth century period.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958, the Society erected a barn behind the farm house which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings.

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society will be located in the Old Federal Courts Building in downtown St. Paul, an historic building of neo-Romanesque architecture which the Society, with other groups, fought to save from demolition. The Society presently has its offices at the Gibbs Farm. The Society is active in identification of historic sites in the city and county, and conducts an educational program which includes the teaching and demonstration of old arts and crafts. It is one of the few county historical societies in the country to engage in an extensive publishing program in local history.