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1

Double or twin?

In 1892, the *Yorkshire Herald* announced, 'The twin-bed seems to have come to stay, and will no doubt in time succeed the double bed in all rooms occupied by two persons' (5 November 1892: 4). The *Herald* was ahead of the game, for this way of sleeping and the name 'twin beds' itself were new enough still to be making news in both Britain and the United States. As it turned out, the *Herald* was over-confident in its anticipation of the imminent triumph of the twin bed. It never completely ousted the double, but vied for position in the marital bedroom with its more traditional rival for the next half-century or so. Nevertheless, the unequivocal welcome given to the twin bedstead in the *Herald's* article, together with the circumstantial evidence of its take-up in the last decade of the nineteenth century, prompts the question as to just what proportion of married couples stayed loyal to the traditional double bed, and how many opted for the newly fashionable twins. 'Double or twin?' was a question – variously inflected – that was raised and answered by sleep experts, social commentators and married couples for many years to come.

This question shadows the interests at the heart of this book. To investigate twin beds as a significant cultural phenomenon starts from the premise that this distinctive way of sleeping achieved a substantial degree of acceptance and adoption. The available evidence, drawn from a multitude of sources, from novels and films to advice books, advertising materials and the press, testifies unequivocally to the spread of this sleeping arrangement in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, definitive answers to the questions which follow – how many couples chose twin beds? When were they at their most fashionable? Were they as popular with working-class as with middle-class people? – remain frustratingly elusive, for there are no substantial, statistically reliable surveys to which to turn. This notwithstanding, partial answers can be glimpsed and broad trends in British couples' sleeping preferences charted. These can be deduced in particular from newspapers and household

advice books, which frequently comment on the popularity of twin beds, but literature and film also help us to gauge their evolving popularity and reputation. These materials suggest a century-long rise and fall for twin beds, between approximately 1870 and 1970: a steady and continuing increase in their popularity with married couples from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century; a period of equivocation and ambivalence as their cultural reputation and status changed; and a slow fall from grace, as they ceased to be seen as a desirable way for couples to sleep. This trajectory positioned twin bedsteads first as evidence of forward-thinking and rational householders, then as commonplace domestic objects and finally as risible signs of a failed marriage.

The late nineteenth-century press certainly took note of the advent of twin beds. They appeared frequently in its advertising copy: Messrs Watts and Co., for example, repeatedly advertised 'The New Twin Bedsteads' as part of their 'immense stock' of iron and brass beds in the *Liverpool Mercury* (21 March 1894: 1), but feature writers also showed an interest. In 1894, two years after the *Yorkshire Herald* announced the arrival of the twin bedstead, another regional newspaper, the *Western Mail*, confirmed its growing popularity: 'Fashion has given its sanction to the use of the single bed; and large numbers of so-called "twin bedsteads" are now in the market, many of them made of costly woods, rich with carving' (25 August 1894: 2). Not only were these bedsteads fashionable, they were also expensive. Buying new beds made a statement about your disposable income as well as the stylishness of this way of sleeping. By the 1920s, the manual *The Complete Household Adviser* was able to report that twin beds had become the norm: '"Single" beds (3 feet wide) are now the rule in most houses' (n.d.: 21; original emphasis).¹ While it is impossible to gauge the accuracy of such a proclamation, the statement is unlikely to have been wildly inaccurate: such publications are, after all, dependent on conveying a reliable sense of current taste and fashion. Some thirty years after their arrival on the scene, however, it is striking that these beds' status as 'single' still needs to be identified as new or unusual by quotation marks. Perhaps they were becoming the norm, but they were not yet so ordinary as to need no introduction. If these beds were 'the rule', they were a rule about which *The Complete Household Adviser* deemed its readers still to need information and guidance.

The popularity of twins showed little sign of abating through the interwar period. A 1928 article in the *Manchester Guardian* entitled 'Modern Furniture: The New Bedsteads' reported, 'According to a well-known furnisher, the demand for twin beds in walnut has increased by fifty per cent during the last twelve months. This shows clearly their increasing popularity' (28 June 1928: 8). The newspaper's readership was principally middle class, and twin beds in walnut, while not as costly as mahogany, would certainly not have been

within the purchasing power of those on a restricted budget. Throughout the 1920s, the London furniture store Heal's advertised their Queen-Anne-style walnut twin beds at £26 each (Figure 1). To spend £52 on a pair of bedsteads, not to mention the mattresses and the new bedding needed to go with them, represented a considerable expense, equivalent to about £2,500 today.² This was not a purchase to undertake lightly. The following year, the *Manchester Guardian* followed up with 'Beds and Bedding, Ancient and Modern', reporting that 'the big bed has gone quite out of favour, and single beds are popular everywhere. ... furniture-makers everywhere are concentrating upon the production of neat and attractive single bedsteads' (31 October 1929: 8). Thirty-five years after their introduction, the growing popularity of these bedsteads, and their impact on manufacturers' production processes, continued to be newsworthy.

Testimony to the ubiquity of twin bedsteads was still to be found in the next decade. In 1934, the household advice book *The Home of To-Day* declared, 'Single beds are now almost universally the custom' ([1934?]: 114), and in 1936 the *Manchester Guardian* again noted 'the tendency to replace double beds by twin single ones' (4 January 1936: 8). There are indications here, however, of the broadening of the appeal of twins beyond the wealthier middle classes. *The Home of To-Day* was published by *Daily Express* newspapers, a title appealing to lower-middle-class readers, and the *Manchester Guardian* article

A Pair of Graceful Queen Anne Beds

Bed & Son Ltd
In finely figured English Walnut
3 ft. wide **£26** each.
Also made in Mahogany.
Carriage free to any railway station in the Country.

THESE most attractive Twin Bedsteads are a signal example of Heals' skill in adapting the beautiful old period designs to modern uses. Note the exquisite figuring of the English walnut, the distinguished little shell ornament and the delicate moulding and outline of the panels.

A New Edition of Heal & Son's Wood Bedstead Catalogue showing every style of Bedstead at the Lowest Reduced Prices Post Free

HEAL & SON Ltd TOTTENHAM COURT ROAD
LONDON W 1

BARNHURST, ARTHURIAN, LINDSAYPORT & PLANTAGENET, MARRIOTT, DULCAN OF CHAMPAGNE, CHURCH & FRANCIS & CO. DECORATIVE TRIMMINGS

FIGURE 1 Advertisement for Heal's Queen-Anne-style twin beds in walnut.

noted not only the continuing market for twins, but also that they were being bought for use in 'the small bedrooms of modern houses'. This strikes a very different note from the *Manchester Guardian's* 1928 article about the twin beds in walnut. Here, instead, the twin bedsteads inhabit the small bedroom of the modern house, and their aura is not one of extravagance or opulence but of parsimony, focusing not on the purchase of new bedsteads but on the costs associated with such a change – namely, the need for smaller sheets. The advice is to alter old double sheets to fit the new twins: 'Owing to the tendency to replace double beds by twin single ones ... stocks of large sheets have to be adapted to the new requirements' (4 January 1936: 8). Sheets from the old double should be cut down to single size, and the remnants used to make pillow cases, covers for ironing boards and glass cloths. The shift to twin-bedded sleep might be continuing, but it was doing so in circumstances that, in the hard-pressed 1930s, necessitated the exercise of careful and creative housewifery.

The economic depression of the 1930s required even the middle classes to tighten their belts and to make do and mend, but nevertheless twin beds continued to be discussed as desirable and fashionable objects making inroads into old ways of sleeping, and began to be chosen for the smaller bedrooms of new houses. When new beds were bought, perhaps with the purchase of one of the newly built houses that proliferated in the interwar period, twins were still popular. No longer associated only with those who had both the money and the space to switch to them (commentators frequently note that twins take up more space than a double), they were also finding a place in the bedrooms of those of more modest means.

There was, in these years, a growing association between twin beds and the new urban and suburban way of life. John Gloag's *Modern Home Furnishing*, for example, published in a cheap paperback series, concerned 'the furnishing of small and moderately-sized houses and flats' (1929: 9). His advice explicitly contrasted with what had been possible in 'those spacious Victorian times' (ibid.: 9–10). Now there was a boom in speculative house-building, when much of the furnishing of the new small houses was achieved with the help of 'hire purchase' (HP) or credit schemes, enabling the spread of payments for costlier items over an extended period (Edwards 2005: 190–96; Scott 2009: 811). Such schemes had started in the nineteenth century, and certain companies, such as the Hackney Furniture Company, were closely identified with them. Their advertisements in the mass-market *Penny Illustrated Paper* in 1913 show that twin beds, costing £10 10 shillings, were among many items that could be purchased by the 'system of Gradual Payments, originated by us' (3 May 1913: 2).³ The expansion of such schemes between the wars put the purchase of new furniture increasingly within the reach of less well-off consumers. This transformed the furniture market, so that by 1938 the non-

agricultural working class and the lower middle class accounted for 86 per cent of mass-market furniture purchases (Scott 2009: 811).

With this expansion into mass markets, twin beds lost any sense of being the preserve of the wealthier middle classes. Indeed, tarnished by new lower-middle-class associations, they became the target of scornful class-conscious comment. Gordon Comstock, the impecunious protagonist of George Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), 'belonged to the most dismal of all classes, the middle-middle class, the landless gentry' ([1936] 1962: 42). Gordon has literary aspirations. He has published one small volume of poems and is currently writing a verse satire about the suburban clerks he sees at the Tube station every morning, 'swarms of little ant-like men', each with 'the fear of the sack like a maggot in his heart' (ibid.: 70).⁴ As he works on his poem, he asks himself, 'What do they think? Money, money!' (ibid.: 71), and the thought allows him to write another stanza:

They think of rent, rates, season tickets,
Insurance, coal, the skivvy's wages,
Boots, school bills, and the next instalment
Upon the two twin beds from Drage's. (ibid.)

Gordon derides not just the clerks' anxiety about money, but also their social aspirations. As well as paying for necessities such as the rent, coal and boots, they also worry about paying school bills and the next instalment on the 'two twin beds from Drage's'. Their lives are impoverished on all levels – materially, spiritually and emotionally – owing to their desire for social betterment. Gordon's contempt for them is merciless, his anxiety fuelled by his own impoverished and insecure social position.

The clerks purchased their twin beds from Drage's, one of the largest furniture companies of the time, its success the result of HP sales. At its peak, it had only three stores, but the company's dominance was secured through extensive advertising campaigns emphasizing the inclusiveness of their appeal: everyone was welcome. 'All Classes Furnish at Drage's. Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor – shopkeepers, clergymen, and railway men – solicitors and business women – professional men and artisans. All receive the same cordial welcome' (Scott 2009: 815, 2017: 53–8). However, on the evidence of Gordon Comstock's verse satire, by the 1930s Drage's represented the budget end of the market, their ranges tarnished by their affordability. 'The Drage Way' – the store's advertising line from the 1920s – was not a way with which the more established middle classes wished to be associated.

Drage's again serves as a touchstone of lower-middle-class taste and aspiration in the work of the best-known poetic registrar of the nuances and fine hierarchies of interwar class taste, John Betjeman. In his first

collection, *Mount Zion: or, In Touch with the Infinite* (1931), Betjeman mocks the tasteless domestic accoutrements and emotionally impoverished lives of those marooned in suburbia:

... wifie knits through hubbie's gloom
 Safe in the Drage-way drawing-room.
 Oh how expectant for the bed
 All 'Jacobethan' overhead! (Betjeman 1931: 44)

The couple are nameless, identified only by the déclassé generic diminutives 'wifie' and 'hubbie'. Like a tricoteuse of the French Revolution, the insouciant 'wifie' knits to pass the time, as a defence against the horrors around her. Her 'Drage-way' furnishings protect her, though from what is not specified – perhaps 'hubbie's gloom', or maybe some horror beyond the house. She is marking time until she can retire to her bed, looking forward, the context suggests, to oblivion rather than passion, though whether she will experience it in a double or a twin bed is left unspoken. All we know is that it is 'Jacobethan', Betjeman's contemptuous coinage indicative of inauthentic hybrid style and bastard identity.⁵ The word serves as the culmination of the poem's delineation of the impoverishment of life in the cultural and emotional equivalent of Outer Mongolia: the 'outer suburbs'.

Betjeman's 'Drage-way' sneer at suburban taste confirms the associations of Gordon Comstock's contempt to indicate that by the mid-1930s twin beds had become the objects of lower-middle-class desire, and further devalued by having come within the reach of such consumers by HP schemes. As their appeal spread further down the social hierarchy, what did this mean for the answer given to the 'double or twin?' question by couples choosing their bedroom furniture? The decade concluded with press reference to a survey of sleeping habits, but one undertaken in the United States, not Britain. Despite the American context, or perhaps because of it, the study was reported in the *Daily Mirror* with interest. 'Wives 3 to 1 for Double Beds' ran the headline, referring to a survey of 500 New York married couples. Twins, the survey suggested, were favoured more for pragmatic reasons, doubles for emotional or familial. New York couples were clearly more persuaded by the latter, as 75 per cent of the respondents still favoured the double, and only 25 per cent twins (*Daily Mirror* 8 March 1939: 16). Another survey, again American and this time of a small sample of 131 'typical' families, was reported in *Time* magazine in 1944, and – although its results tell us nothing about British preferences – the study adds some nuance to these statistics and serves as a useful caveat about what precisely such figures might convey. *Time* reported that '87% of husbands and wives sleep in a double bed, but 42% of the wives think twin beds would be preferable' (*Time* 43.16, 17 April 1944: 25).

An enquiry into the kind of bed in which couples currently sleep produces one set of results, but when the question changes, probing readers' wishes rather than their current arrangement, the picture is markedly different, for nearly half of all double-bedded wives would opt for twins. This discrepancy may indicate financial constraints, or a difference of opinion between the spouses. It serves, either way, as a reminder that even if such figures were available for Britain, their focus on the actual rather than the wished-for would give only a partial picture of the cultural status of twin beds.

At last, in 1950, explicit press comment on British predilections began to appear. The *Daily Mirror*, again prompted by American comment, reported that a Chicago bedding manufacturer had blamed the rising divorce rate on double beds, and recommended that people choose twins instead: 'They would get more rest and be better able to meet the strain of modern life, he says' (12 January 1950: 1). He claimed that preferences had changed since the pre-war years. Now, he says, '68 per cent of American couples buy single beds, compared with 25 per cent before the war. "They just don't go in for that cold-feet-in-the-back any more."' The *Mirror* draws a contrast with the situation in Britain, where 'double beds are heavily favoured', according to a furniture makers' spokesman: "'Three double beds are sold to every two single ones," he said'. This, once again, offers a partial picture, telling only about sales of new beds and not about the beds already in place in the nation's bedrooms, and it tells us about them at a time of continuing austerity and severe limitation of consumer choice in the period following the Second World War. Nonetheless, it offers some indication of post-war preferences, suggesting a three-to-one ratio among British couples buying beds in favour of the double, a figure that coincides precisely with the ratio given in the 1939 American survey.⁶ It is unclear, however, whether this is given as indicative of the status quo, or of a new shift away from the twins which had, in previous decades, been so frequently claimed to be steadily rising in popularity and becoming 'the rule in most houses'.

Having reported the opinions of the American salesman and British furniture makers, the *Mirror* turns to someone outside the industry for comment on the relative merits of doubles and twins. Juanita Frances, from the Married Women's Association, gave her opinion that "'twin beds are much better for comfort and appearance. After all, if you want a double bed, you can always move them up to each other'" (*Daily Mirror*, 12 January 1950: 1). Frances was 'one of the outstanding feminist campaigners of her day' (*Guardian* 2 December 1992: 7), and had founded the Association in 1938 to campaign for equal legal and financial rights for housewives and mothers; her organization was a liberal campaigning group, not a socially or politically conservative one.⁷ The solicitation of the views of a prominent feminist on the question of double versus twins, together with the story's front-page position, confirms that the

Mirror was treating the matter seriously. For Juanita Frances to contribute her thoughts suggests that she did not judge the question to be trivial, below her dignity or irrelevant to the Association's agenda, but found it commensurate with her promotion of the rights and interests of married women. Even as late as 1950, therefore, twin beds were being advocated not by a conservative public figure but by one associated with the new post-war feminism with its 'emphasis on equality in difference'.⁸ The question of 'double or twin?' remained front-page news in 1950, where it was also shown to be a feminist issue.

At around the same time, another voice with a radical pedigree was speaking out in favour of twins rather than double. Reginal Reynolds, a satirical poet, Quaker, left-wing commentator, critic of British imperialism (resident in Gandhi's ashram in the 1930s) and conscientious objector in the Second World War, published *Beds: With Many Noteworthy Instances of Lying On, Under or About Them* (1952), a book of wide-ranging, sometimes erudite, sometimes whimsical musings on beds and sleep.⁹ One chapter, entitled 'Out of Zebulon, or Fruits of Solitude', reflects on the demerits of bed-sharing and touches on the current 'fashion of using twin beds', which he characterizes as 'a typical Anglo-American compromise' (Reynolds 1952: 138) and as somewhat controversial, particularly in the United States. He cites research undertaken in 1950 by the Universities of Chicago and Colgate (the same research alluded to in the *Mirror* two years earlier) suggesting that in the United States 'double beds were being abandoned in favour of twin beds. The percentage of twin beds purchased in pre-war days had been only 25 per cent and it had risen to 68 per cent' (ibid.: 138–9). He also notes the furore, for and against, generated by this news, including what he calls the 'extraordinary line of reasoning' of Dr Paul Popenoe, Director of the (American) Family Relations Institute, who had claimed that 'the change from a double bed to twin beds is often the prelude to a divorce' (ibid.: 139).¹⁰ Reynolds is unconvinced: 'If people go on living like lunatics, trying to ameliorate a drab, stupid and precarious existence by drugging themselves with sensations in celluloid, I don't suppose it will make much difference whether they sleep in twin bunks or in a bed the size of Coldingham Common' (ibid.: 140). For him, solitude is the key to a good night's sleep: a bed is where 'a normal person normally prefers to be alone. Here he is relaxed, he is his effortless self, his mind wanders without attempt to recall it to order, until at last it wanders into sleep' (ibid.: 145). He continues (and it is hard not to conclude that he is talking about himself): 'To those who find even a loving spouse an unwelcome partner in the serious business of sleeping, it must be a source of wonder that for centuries people were packed like sardines between the blankets' (ibid.: 148). His discussion, ranging from the 'Esquimaux' to Pepys, and from Dr Macnish (a nineteenth-century physician and author of

The Philosophy of Sleep (1830)) to Montaigne and Kant, concludes with a diatribe against bed-sharing:

But no system, not even that of Kant, can settle a problem so essentially personal if a second person or (Heaven forbid) a whole trinity or a multiplicity of bed-fellows should be tugging, heaving, rolling, pushing, squeezing and making sudden, impulsive movements – especially, as we know, when these movements are made in sleep. Can anything place a greater strain upon human nature than the outrageous selfishness of a partner who – without even having the decency to wake up – rolls to the off side with the entire complement of bedding? (ibid.: 157)

While the jury might be out for some commentators, for Reynolds it is an open-and-shut case. The practice of bed-sharing – no matter how loving the spouse – is to be deplored.

The 1950s proved to be a decade much preoccupied by the question of ‘double or twin?’ but there continued to be little consensus about the answer. Indeed, press discussion comprises a series of contradictory statements about these beds’ popularity. The 1950 *Mirror* article (12 January 1950: 1) reported that British couples favoured double beds by a ratio of three to one, and implied that the American predilection for twins, reportedly accounting for 68 per cent of bed sales for couples, was far removed from the traditional tastes of the British. Five years later, the *Mirror* flatly contradicts itself, retrospectively evaluating the tastes of 1950 very differently: ‘Only five years ago twin beds were the rage. The double was discredited’ (11 October 1955: 9). These words come from a nearly full-page article declaring that ‘twin beds are on the retreat in British bedrooms. *The double bed is back in favour*’ (ibid.; original emphasis). Twin beds are now associated not with the tastes of a particular class, but with a coldly scientific approach to the business of choosing a bed. Scientists were credited with having hastened the downfall of the double by showing how often people move in the night, and how hard it is to do this comfortably in a standard four-foot-six-inch double bed (ibid.). But other qualities are also attributed to those choosing twins. The romantic novelist Barbara Cartland’s newly published marriage manual is quoted: ‘I strongly suspect the woman who says that she has chosen twin beds for reasons of decorative effect, sleeping comfort or hygiene. She is, in fact, excusing the coldness that exists in her marriage. ... The twin bed is a modern invention ... inimical to success in marriage’ (ibid.). This is followed by the words of a judge, blaming twin beds for the rising divorce rate. The article admits of only one valid criterion in the choice of double or twin: its capacity to affect the success or failure of its occupants’ marriage. Earlier rationales, such as hygiene, practicality, style and sleep quality, are now dismissed as at

best matters of secondary importance. Instead, the idea that the double bed is an agent working on behalf of marriage is treated as common sense. 'It may be difficult to clean under', the article declares. 'It may start rows over blanket-snatching, or one partner's cold feet *But one thing must be admitted. It's so darned friendly*' (ibid.; original emphasis). The only legitimate way to judge the bed is in terms of its impact on the emotional (and implicitly the sexual) relationship of its married occupants – and in that regard, the message is loud and clear: 'togetherness' has triumphed, and marriages can only thrive in double beds. This is a striking departure from the tone of discussions in the press and beyond in the 1920s and 1930s. Then, twin beds had signified hygiene, comfort and good sense, on the one hand, and certain kinds of middle-class taste, on the other. This article sweeps away such considerations, making marital intimacy the only relevant issue.

The rekindled enthusiasm for the double expressed in this *Mirror* article might be expected to mark the end of that newspaper's equivocation over the 'double or twin?' question, and to serve as a convenient marker of the pendulum's swing back towards a double-bedded norm. As always, however, the picture is not as straightforward as this. The evidence from the pages of the *Mirror* and other newspapers is that twin beds remained objects of desire for some married people. In 1957, the *Mirror* ran a contest promising to make the dreams of some of their readers come true. The winners were picked by the *Mirror's* longstanding advice columnist Marjorie Proops. 'Listen to the cry of Mrs Alice Batten ... married to twelve-stone Richard', wrote Proops. 'For twenty-three years of marriage they have shared a double bed. And Mrs. B. (9 stone) sent me this poem':

*'I turn, he twists to snore in my ear
And I wish, how I wish, twin beds would appear ...'*

Stand by, Battens, for a pair of beautiful comfortable twin beds. (*Daily Mirror* 10 December 1957: 13; original emphasis)

The article was accompanied by a picture of a smiling Mr and Mrs Batten. For them, the discomforts of bed-sharing, relegated to a position of secondary importance in the 1955 article, are not so easily dismissed. There is clearly no shame for the Battens in their desire for twin beds, no sense that they are confessing to a marriage gone cold, as Barbara Cartland would have it. Likewise, Proops has no difficulty in finding twin beds to be objects worthy of a wife's dreams.

Other readers were as keen to make the change to twins as was Mrs Batten. In 1959, a woman wrote in to the *Mirror's* letters page to seek advice from other readers. Fed up with 'balancing on six inches of the bed every

night', she has suggested buying twins to her husband, but he 'just looks hurt'. She wanted to know what other wives do: 'Go out and buy twin beds or just put up with the discomfort?' The *Mirror* invited readers to comment: 'If any wife has succeeded in swapping a double for twin beds lately and got away with it without hurting her old man's feelings, we'll be glad to hear how she did it!' (2 December 1959: 23). The supposition is that it will be wives who want the twins, and that the realization of this wish will require marital sleight of hand or subterfuge. A week later, the letters column reports that readers had 'piled in with advice'. One reader set out the 'tactics' she had deployed to get her husband not just to agree to twin beds, but actually to suggest them; another enumerates the annoyances she still experiences in the marital double, but concludes 'as for me – with all his faults, I love him still'; and a third tells of a period of illness that forced them to sleep separately, after which she unilaterally ordered twin beds. Her husband, she reports triumphantly, 'admitted it was the best idea ever' (*Daily Mirror* 8 December 1959: 22). All three letters confirm the premise of the original letter: first, that sharing the marital double bed long term is hard work and involves a range of discomforts; and secondly, that women are more likely than men to seek the change to twins.

And so it continued, through the 1960s and into early 1970s: feature articles, letters and advice columns appeared in the press, offering contradictory opinions on the merits and meanings of twin beds. National preferences continued to be asserted, but not with any consistency. The new London Hilton hotel opened in 1963, where 'the French bedrooms were so called because they had a double bed and the English bedrooms were called English because they had twin beds' (*Times* 11 April 1963: 6). In 1954, the *Mirror* had reported that in the United States, 'Seven out of eight couples still prefer the old-fashioned double bed' (17 March 1954: 2), but in 1979, the same newspaper suggested that 'in America they still prefer twin beds', while in Britain 'couples prefer to sleep in double beds, at least at the start of married life' (28 September 1979: 9). Some judges in divorce cases gave their opinion that twin beds did not spell the end of a marriage, but features and reports increasingly suggested that there was a case against twins to be answered – even if the verdict remained, in the end, an open one.¹¹ In 1961, the *Observer* reported on a survey of 3,680 women undertaken for the Bedding Guild, which found unequivocally against twins: respondents thought that 'single beds are for those couples with cultural interests in common, but are not acceptable "where the bed is the focus of the marriage"' (10 September 1961: 27). A feature article aiming to help readers decide whether they are a 'touching person' or not offers a checklist: you're 'not the touching type if you ... would prefer twin beds when you're married'. The tone of the article makes clear that this does not augur well for marital happiness: 'Not to touch would be not to

live' (*Daily Mirror* 15 July 1971: 19). Some articles continue to acknowledge that a double is not, long term, always a source of pleasure: Eirlys Roberts (co-founder of the consumer magazine *Which?*) suggests, 'Most of us, I think, would really like a double bed which, at the press of a switch, would split into twin beds' (*Observer* 4 March 1962: 34). Others continue to detect a longing among married people for twins, but acknowledge that this desire is now experienced as shameful and needs to be kept hidden: 'Lots of married couples would admit, if they were honest, that they would like to swap their double bed for two singles – simply for a more comfortable sleep. One of the reasons they don't is that they're afraid their friends may take twin beds to be a sign their sexual relationship has ended' (*Daily Mirror* 8 August 1968: 16). To wish for twins is now something that is either pragmatically acknowledged or else shamefacedly admitted. A 1964 *Observer* reader's letter celebrating twin beds' capacity to prompt 'a come-hither look, and a frank invitation' was one of the last comments in the press to come down in favour of twins on romantic and sexual grounds (*Observer* 14 June 1964: 31). From then on, any recommendation of twin beds tends to be made on practical grounds only. Twins become a somewhat resigned, even sheepish, but always pragmatic solution to a problem – usually concerning sleep quality – presented by the double.

This chapter has pieced together the century-long narrative concerning the rise and fall of twin beds in Britain's marital bedrooms. It begins with their celebration, and ends either with their rejection as a sign of a marriage gone cold or else with their acceptance as a sensible, needs-must, mid-marriage measure necessitated by adverse conditions in the marital double. It leaves largely unanswered, however, the question as to how many couples opted for twin beds and how many stayed with the double. The only attempt to put a figure to this comes from the 1950 furniture salesman who suggested that three doubles sold for every set of twins – and this in the year which the *Mirror* later designated as the moment when twin beds were 'all the rage'. If the three-to-one ratio in favour of doubles is correct, this provides a fascinating counterpoint to the sense given in the press and advice literature in the first half of the twentieth century that twin beds were on a steady upward curve of popularity and purchase, suggesting that, on the contrary, the double held its place in the nation's affections throughout the century, with twin beds gaining a place in only a minority of marital bedrooms. There is certainly no evidence that they ever became 'the rule in most households', as had been claimed in the 1920s.

This suggests a discrepancy between the actual take-up of twin beds and the amount of interest they attracted. Twin beds, it seems, punched well above their weight. While there seems never to have been a majority of twin-bedded marriages, nor even an equal split between double and twins, the

phenomenon of twin beds achieved an extraordinarily high degree of visibility in the press, in household advice books and in marriage manuals, as well as in novels and films. They were much discussed concerning matters of health and hygiene; they figured large in the worlds of style, fashion and design; and they were a factor in discussions on the rights and wrongs of modern marriage. The importance of twin beds was, in the end, neither numerical nor social, although doubtless they played their part in the material economy of the household and in the balance sheets of manufacturers and furniture stores. How important they were as contributors to the sexual ethos of the marriage, and in what ways, is also (as subsequent chapters will show) ambiguous.

Twin beds' real sphere of importance was, instead, cultural. They promised to answer questions across a range of different domains. To some, they offered an assurance of health, hygiene and individuated security. To others, they embodied the end of the cumbersome Victorian four-poster and a new, simpler and more authentic twentieth-century style. And for those concerned with the new ideals of modern marriage, twin beds suggested a particular vision of the relative positions of husband and wife. For a hundred years or so, they were players in the dramas that took place in these different discursive arenas, their position secured by their patina of the new, the different, the modern. Twin beds may not have persuaded the majority of the bed-buying public to give up their double beds, but the phenomenon of two single beds placed side by side nonetheless spoke loud and clear to the imaginations of all who encountered them. They had their vociferous champions and their equally vehement opponents. Twin beds had an extraordinary capacity to signify contradictory truths. To some, they represented an intrusion, to others, a welcome innovation. Twin beds not only separated fellow sleepers; they also divided opinion. The rest of this book traces the sources of these divisions to the overlapping territories of hygiene, modernity and marriage.