

Life's Decor: A Biography of Helen Churchill Candee

by Randy Bryan Bigham

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“When beauty assails, reason has no part.”

— HELEN CHURCHILL CANDEE



Journo, politico, and home interiors guru Helen Churchill Candee explored the exotic Far East, marched for women's rights, nursed troops in World War I Italy, and survived the sinking of the Titanic . Randy Bryan Bigham examines the life of this woman of extraordinary vision, talent and resolve.

In one of the most memorable scenes in cinematic history, lovers Jack and Rose embrace on the bow of *Titanic* at dusk as the great ship plows toward destiny. Was the romantic coupling depicted by Hollywood director James Cameron true? Some historians believe so. Others doubt it. But in an unpublished document, purporting to be a memoir by first class passenger Helen Churchill Candee, there's a moment very like that shown in the 1997 blockbuster film.

Slipping unnoticed onto a deck restricted to crewmen, the adventurous Candee and an adoring beau head for the foremost point of the speeding behemoth. There they feel the power of nature and the majesty of man's achievement as they watch the liner's bow pierce the waves beneath them. According to the manuscript, Helen also savored the thrill on a separate occasion when she was (unlike mythical Rose) unfettered by male hands.

“I stood at the bow alone and absorbed her spirit,” Helen is supposed to have said. “As her bow cut into the waves, throwing tons of water to right and left in playful intent, her indifference to mankind was significant. How grand she was, how superb, how titanic.”



Helen Churchill Candee in about 1905

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Born in New York City on October 5, 1858 to Henry Hungerford and the former Mary E. Churchill, Helen Churchill Hungerford belonged to one of the oldest families in America. Notable descendents included Elder William Brewster, the spiritual leader of the original Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock on the *Mayflower* in 1620. A white ash chair belonging to Brewster, made in the Plymouth Colony in the turned style of the day, remained in the family for many years; it's now in the Pilgrim Hall Museum. Was it this beautiful specimen of early American furniture that inspired the career of Brewster's antiques-loving descendent?

Helen's father was a prominent merchant as was her grandfather, William Churchill, and her mother was a well-known hostess, both in New York and in Paris, where she lived out her final years.

When Helen was a child, the Hungerfords moved to the country, first to New Haven and then Norwalk, Connecticut, where she was reared and privately schooled, attending one of America's first kindergartens, operated by Rose Porter.

Growing up, Helen was close to her mother, whom she remembered as “an absolute, though kindly, monarch,” and in later years the two regarded one another as friends, an unusual perspective for the time.

Helen was musically gifted and showed signs of literary talent at a young age. She was also beautiful and during her first season attracted a batch of eligible suitors. But she didn't want to marry and instead devoted herself to civic and educational causes and charities.

However, in her mid-20s, Helen Hungerford fell in love with Edward W. Candee, a prosperous Norwalk businessman, and the pair soon wed. Unfortunately Helen's new husband was as dissolute as he was wealthy, and the marriage was horrific, Candee severely abusing his wife and their two children, Edith and Harold, and finally abandoning them. Her family's motto “Faithful but unfortunate” certainly held true for her during these years.

With her parents' help, Helen finally managed to acquire a decree of separation from Edward Candee, and to the chagrin of her affluent family and friends, who offered financial assistance, she chose to support herself as a writer, contributing essays to magazines, including the *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Scribner's Monthly*. Much of Helen's early work was geared to practical household hints and advice on etiquette but as her career progressed she wrote on weightier issues such as women's rights, childcare, education, and community government.

Some of Helen Candee's most insightful stories dealt with the delicate art of social interaction at which she was almost too astute. In reading her wise maxims, one catches a glimpse of Helen's gentle yet strategic understanding of humanity. In *Outlook Magazine* she wrote:

You can never learn what people really are, unless you have the grace to listen, not with polite patience, but with sympathetic interest, to anything they may tell you. You are at times terribly bored, but that is of slight consequence in view of the fact that your companion is enjoying the conversation, and you are laying the foundation of a friendship which will in time prove its value.

In an article for the *Ladies Home Journal*, Candee urged readers to hone their skills at empathy. “If we put imagination to work and warm it with love,” she wrote, “we can learn much of what others are feeling.”

While writing encouraging words for others to read in household magazines, Helen's own household wasn't happy. Separation from her husband did not offer the peace of mind and freedom she needed, and she eventually sought a divorce, a far from easy decision at a time when a broken marriage was a social disgrace. Divorce wasn't a simple matter legally either, but Helen finally obtained one in 1895 in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma; she actually lived in the town of Guthrie for several years, recording her bucolic adventures for the press back east.

“In March the whole land is abloom with fragrant pink,” Candee reported. “This is the promise of June and July peaches. They come in abundance; almost everyone has a few peach trees tucked in around the

house.”

It was during this time, through her agricultural stories about the region for such prestigious news journals as *Atlantic Monthly* and *Forum*, that Helen rose to national prominence as a journalist and as a proponent of the U.S. government's settlement of Oklahoma. Her widely discussed articles are considered by historians to have been crucial to establishing the territory's appeal to Americans, leading to its statehood a decade later.

For Helen, promoting Oklahoma was a mission she was glad to undertake, and she minced no words in her veritable campaign, as an article she wrote for *Atlantic* in 1899 shows:

Oklahoma, land of prosperity, sunshine and brotherly love, has a thorn in its side. That cause of pain and irritation is the failure of her sister states — and especially those in the East — to recognize the truth concerning her. They prefer tales of outlawry and border ruffianism to accounts of successful agriculture, and are inclined to shut their ears to all stories save those that thrill the imagination.

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Meantime, Candee's visibility was increasing as a features and fiction writer, columnist and editor for a number of other publications — *Harper's Bazaar*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *Literary Era*, *The Century* and *The Illustrated American*.

For all her progressive views about female independence some of Helen's articles reveal she could be a wily coquette when the need arose.

“If you fling demands at tired men who hold favors you don't get them,” she wrote in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1900. “If you ‘ask pretty,’ tactfully choosing the time that suits the man and never mind yourself, you are more likely to win. And so it comes to this, that you must take your choice of these two things: demand favors and go without them, or win them through tact. And this condition will prevail so long as men are strong and women are charming.”

Helen was also prospering as an author. Her first book, *How Women May Earn a Living*, part of Macmillan & Co's four-volume *Woman's Home Library* series, became an instant best-seller on its release in January 1900, winning rave reviews from the *New York Times* and other highbrow critics for its common sense philosophy. A review in *Book Buyer* noted that it was “descriptive rather than didactic,” was “bright and readable,” and showed “a keen appreciation of current conditions and future possibilities.”

The literary editor of *The Nation* was not convinced Helen was comprehensive enough, but lauded the “candor and intelligence which form the character of the book.”

Even so, Candee's message was a revelation at the time and *How Women May Earn a Living* is considered a landmark in feminist literature. Helen wanted to inspire and help women, but she was honest in her assessment that not all would succeed in a career:

Failure is not always the fault of the occupation chosen, nor of a woman's talents, but comes because she lacks those traits of character that force success.

How Women May Earn a Living instructed readers on the proper approach they should take to work as well as to which professions they might enter. And there was no doubt as to Candee's view of female emancipation — the book was in fact dedicated to “all those women who labor through necessity and not caprice.”

Following this critical and popular success came another — a novel called *An Oklahoma Romance*, based on Helen's experiences in the territory. Published in March 1901, the book brought still more national attention to the settlement that was fast emerging as a mecca for farming and oil. How much of the central story line, a rather steamy affair, was fact or fiction is uncertain, but one has the feeling that Oklahoma offered more than a literary adventure for Candee.

What is certain is that critics liked the book. The *New York Times* lauded its “freshness,” adding that it was “a bit of contemporaneous history, painted with form and color, and has unusual value and interest.”

A review in *Pearson's Magazine* concurred:

It is a love story bringing the hero and heroine together under the exciting circumstances of the great “Run” for desirable plots in the new Territory, and gives a striking picture of the destruction wrought by a cyclone. The atmosphere of the book — its local color — is surprisingly well given. Those in search of novelty may be sure to find it in this Western romance.

Despite the promise Helen showed as a novelist, and the positive reception she won for *An Oklahoma Romance*, she never wrote another book of fiction.



Helen Churchill Candee in 1901 at the time of the publication of her novel, *An Oklahoma Romance*.

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By September 1904, Helen Churchill Candee had moved with her children to Washington, D.C. where she blossomed socially, becoming a favorite with the most powerful diplomatic circles.

“In the touch and go of society,” she said, “a light wit and ready tongue are invaluable.” She obviously had these traits in abundance, for Candee was soon at the center of cultural life in the nation's capitol. As the *Washington Times* noted:

A member of the city's most exclusive smart set, Mrs. Churchill Candee has attained a reputation as a brilliant hostess. At her home some of the world's most prominent persons have visited.

Helen, who spoke several languages, was a natural with dignitaries from foreign embassies, including the French and the Italian, particularly with the military officials of those countries, entertaining frequently for them. Her friendship with an Italian Navy commander and his wife led to the marriage of one of her proteges, the daughter of an American admiral, to a high-ranking Italian officer.



Helen Churchill Candee (at center) with 5 other women on horseback led the historic 1913 “Votes for Women” suffrage parade in Washington, D.C.

Helen was originally a Republican but later supported the Democratic and Progressive parties, entertaining lavishly for congressional and senatorial leaders, cabinet members and candidates of every stripe. One of her closest political friends and allies was the great orator, pacifist and suffrage supporter William Jennings Bryan, who served as Secretary of State under President Woodrow Wilson.

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In Washington, Candee was soon applying more than her beauty and charm to the social mix. She was bringing her marvelous taste to bear on a budding new vocation.

At a time when there were few interior designers and only limited advice about home décor from architects and furniture makers, Helen carved a niche for herself as an adviser, critic and one of the first-ever professional decorators.

“The woman who essays this work should have great taste and ingenuity,” Helen had written in *How Women May Earn a Living*, modestly omitting her qualifications for the job. She added:

On being called in the decorator surveys the drawing room with a critic's eye, knowing at a glance exactly what changes to make in order to transform an ugly apartment. She hangs rugs, drapes portieres, screens the piano, places lights and in many ways works magic. She even searches the house for old bits of furniture, has them refinished and makes happy use of them.



Fashionable interiors arranged by Helen Churchill Candee made use of genuine antiques, such as this room of rare Italian pieces.

Helen Candee never operated a shop or manufacturing business, and seldom in fact advertised her work. But she was the decorator of choice to several influential New York and Washington architects as well as numerous friends and acquaintances. Unlike her contemporary Elsie de Wolfe (Lady Mendl), the first commercial interior designer, Helen was a private consultant on furniture and artwork, working almost as an historian or curator, rather than as an antiques buyer or creator of furnishings and accessories.

Although she didn't always supervise the arrangement of the rooms she was commissioned to refurbish, as most decorators insisted on doing, Helen did at times demand contractual approval of the “assemblage and display of furniture upon initial presentation.” This was the case with architect Nathan C. Wyeth, who

designed one of Helen's own homes, and with whom she worked on several subsequent building projects in Washington, including an expansion of the west wing of the White House in 1909. Another was a Wyeth “show house,” located opposite the Willard Hotel, which “features interior appointments specially chosen by Mrs. Churchill Candee.”

Among Helen's clients were Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson; Viscount Benoit d'Azy, naval attache to the French Embassy; Mathilde Townsend Gerry; the Marchesa Cusati, wife of the Italian Ambassador, and the architectural partnership of Donn & Deming, which built one of three Washington houses owned by Helen. She was also commissioned by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1907 to advise on the “purchase of a set of Louis XVI chairs for the First Lady's dressing room.”

Despite her impressive clientele, Helen Candee's work as a decorator was intermittent. It was therefore as a critic and educator, through her later books and articles on the history of furniture, textiles and art, that she made an impact on early 20 th century interior design.

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Candee's first book on home decor was the profusely illustrated *Decorative Styles and Periods* , published by Frederick A. Stokes, Co. in November 1906. It was well received and quickly became a standard reference on period furnishings and their modern use. It also began a 25-year publishing relationship with Stokes.

Readers of *Decorative Styles and Periods* , a deep green cloth-bound volume with an inset portrait of an Empire room on the cover, were treated to the warmly delicate prose that already distinguished Helen Candee as a novelist and journalist. The book was long and thorough, addressing all major trends and designs, but was also full of human interest and historical sidelights that made it as entertaining as it was instructional.

More than any other book she wrote, Helen's philosophy of design (and living) can be gleaned from *Decorative Styles and Periods* .

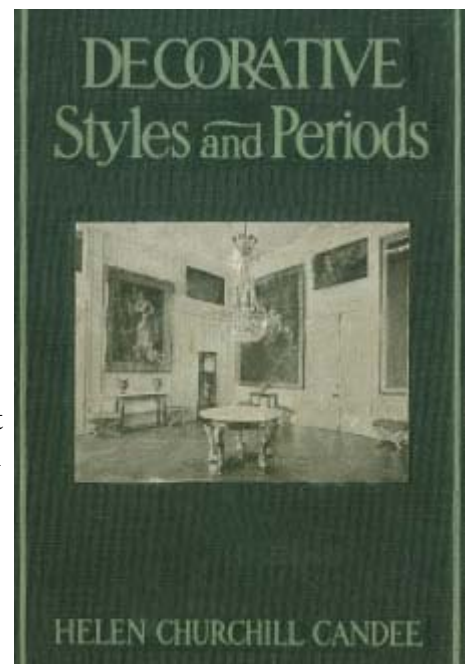
Authenticity was the prime principle of her credo. Candee was a purist in the extreme, insisting on genuine antiques and unswervingly faithful period atmosphere in the arrangement of rooms. The “perfection of the old,” she said, was all-important, adding that the “best is of the past.”

She was very critical of manufacturers and department stores that sold cheap imitation furniture; she didn't even approve of upscale decorators like de Wolfe endorsing good quality reproductions of period pieces for modern interiors.

“The atmosphere of antiquity which is its charm is impossible to describe,” Helen insisted. “It must be felt. By reading you may know its history, by studying you may know its detail but only by contact can you feel its full charm.”

Her elitist standards of acquiring furniture were at odds with the income of average readers. But the educational bent of her writing, and the personal touch that permeated the historical sketches in her book, struck a note of commonality and even intimacy that set it apart from other studies on the subject. Indeed, there was no cold recitation of facts and dates in *Decorative Styles and Periods* , just amusing, intuitive anecdotes that brought the past to life, setting the standard for all Helen's future books on the decorative arts.

Candee's focus was primarily historical when describing period design but occasionally she dispensed practical advice to the homemaker, such as her suggestion of using old lace or other “time-touched”



fabrics:

In rooms where a happy hodge-podge of harmonious objects prevails, instead of a strict adherence to one thought, a length of old stuff or embroidery helps wondrously with the walls in giving an effect of warmth and elegance.

Helen Candee was perhaps alone as a stylist in appreciating period furniture more for its historical importance than its visual appeal. The influence of the great rulers of the past whose political and social impact changed fashion and decoration was what made period design fascinating for her: "Reducing the matter to individuals gives its interest a vitality not possible otherwise."

From Louis XIV's pomp and protocol at Versailles to the humbleness of artisan weavers bent over their worktables, Helen's writing stressed the human element in design, charting new ground in educating the public on decorative arts history.

"The human touch revivifies history," she explained, "and unites humanity."

More than any other writer in the emerging genre of the decorative arts, Helen recognized the significance of humanity in accurately recording the historical worth of interior design.

"What is furniture without man?" she asked. "And of what use are decorations unless the eye of man rests on their loveliness? To give these things value they must be associated with those for whom they were made."

It's been written that Elsie de Wolfe "made America antiques-conscious." If so, then it was Helen Churchill Candee who made sure America was "antiques-educated." Through her lively word-pictures of past times, Helen enabled consumers to appreciate period furniture and treatments beyond their artistic beauty, to see and admire them in relation to history.

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Helen's reputation as an expert on period interiors and the arts in general was spread through her broadening freelance repertoire. In addition to her usual work for *Scribner's* and *Century*, she was now contributing to *American Homes*, *International Studio*, *Metropolitan Magazine*, the *American Magazine of Art* and *Collier's Weekly*. One of her proudest assignments was not related to the arts. In November 1907 she served *Forum Magazine* as political correspondent to the ceremonies in Guthrie that inaugurated Oklahoma as America's 46th state.

As her career expanded, so did Helen Candee's social life. Around the dinner parties and teas she hosted at her Rhode Island Avenue mansion developed one of the most interesting salons in the capitol, attended not only by politicians, diplomats, visiting foreign dignitaries and royalty but by artists, musicians and actors. A typical 1911 guest list included President and Mrs. William Howard Taft, Admiral de Lajarte, commanding officer of the French Squadron, the Duke and Duchess of Newcastle, and writer Natalie Clifford Barney.

Meantime, Candee was involved with a number of committees, including that of the trustees for the Corcoran Gallery of Art and of Wednesday Homes, an "open house" program and garden tour of representative Washington estates. In addition, Helen was active in organizations like the Archeological Society, the American Federation of Arts and the National Civic Federation. Finally, she was a board member of such charities as the Neighborhood House and the Children's Hospital, for which she organized plays, concerts, exhibits and an annual flower show.

She also publicly supported the Washington chapter of the National Woman Suffrage Association, assisting in the planning of meetings and rallies. Helen's connection to the cause of women's rights was questioned by some of her conservative friends, who warned her it might mean having her name dropped from White House guest lists. A negative reception for President Taft at a NWSA conference in 1910 may have fueled the fears of Helen's friends. Despite opposing views of the suffrage question, however, it seems Helen's

friendship with the Tafts was solid.

Helen Candee's parties and benefits were regularly featured in the society columns of the *Washington Post*, which often mentioned her attendance at premiers, weddings and other events as well. The flower display and reception she organized for the Neighborhood House in 1908 was, according to the *Post*, "one of the most attractive charity fetes given at Washington this year."

The fashionable attire of the "lovely Mrs. Churchill Candee" was frequently commented on in these notices. It seems she had a penchant for black velvet and ermine, wore a perfect size 5 shoe, preferred wide-sweeping, feathered hats and was among the increasing number of society women taking up the "sport" of cigarette smoking. Helen readily admitted (and lamented) her vanity, saying that while she wanted to be respected for her intellect, she had no intention of going around "dressed like the matron of an asylum."

In the summers (beginning in 1906), Helen vacationed at York Harbor, Maine, a popular resort for the Washington colony. Here she rested after so much hobnobbing and wrote her articles in the peace of the garden she loved:

The garden is, in fact, a room of the house, a gathering room, especially at the hour of afternoon tea on sunny days. Often I lunch in mine, throwing bits to the birds, and sniffing the flowers.

Candee also enjoyed horseback riding with her son, Harold, now 20, at Warrenton, Virginia, where he kept stables. An enthusiastic member of both the Riding Club of Washington and the Chevy Chase, the sport was Helen's favorite, and she rode a number of blue-ribbon winners in local and national horse shows. Her habits were always chic, as the newspapers never failed to notice, and she was one of the first women in the east to ride astride.

When not mingling with the Washington elite, she spent time with her daughter Edith, now Mrs. H.C. Matthews, in New York. There she was content with quiet family life, helping Edith entertain and looking after her baby granddaughter, Mary.

Helen Candee also spent whole seasons abroad, sometimes traveling with Harold and Edith, visiting England, France, Germany, but especially Italy. "In my heart," she wrote, "was abundant love for Italy and her adorable wiles."

On her trips, she liked to go off alone on little jaunts. Whether boating, hiking or just sight-seeing, she would "sneak away, taking a picnic lunch, books to read, and my easel to paint wildflowers."

When in London, Helen stayed with friends and attended meetings of the India Society. In Paris, she lived in the Neuilly house once owned by her late mother, participated in the gala affairs of Les Amis de l'Orient, of which she was made an honor member, and paid a round of visits to her wide range of friends. These included U.S. Ambassador to France Robert Bacon, stage star Julia Marlowe and sculptor Raymond Duncan (brother of dancer Isadora Duncan).

Her travels weren't always pleasant. In the summer of 1906, Helen contracted typhoid fever while on a tour of the Mediterranean with her son. Doctors expected the illness to prove fatal, but she lived, nursed back to health at a convent hospital in Florence. After recovering, she was true to form, choosing to continue her vacation rather than return home.

Six years later tragedy struck again. In January 1912 Helen went abroad to finalize research on a new book. In April, after spending time in Spain and Italy, she was returning to Paris via the Riviera, when she received a telegram from Edith, informing her that Harold had been seriously injured in a car wreck (some sources claimed it was a plane crash). She booked passage on the first boat out — White Star Line's brand new liner *Titanic*.

Making the great ship's maiden voyage wasn't as exciting as it might have been for Candee had she not

been worried about her son. But friends en route, like Major Archie Butt, President Taft's military attache, and artist Frank Millet, consoled her. Soon Helen attracted a flock of dapper admirers who kept her company wherever she went. When lounging or strolling on deck, playing bridge, lunching, or having a cocktail, she was cheered by the presence of these thoughtful men — “Our Coterie” they became known.

Two of Helen Candee's self-appointed cavaliers were Edward Austin Kent, 58, a New York architect, and Hugh Woolner, 45, a London investor. While Woolner was the more attentive, Helen and Kent had more in common, and the decorator and architect struck up a fond acquaintance. Yet Woolner succeeded in wooing Helen who was “divinely flattered” by the slightly younger man's devotion. They, too, formed an affectionate rapport, and it may have been romantic, to judge from a story Candee later wrote for *Collier's Weekly*.

After *Titanic* struck the iceberg, Woolner rushed to Helen's cabin, assisted her into a lifejacket and accompanied her on deck. On their way up the grand staircase, they ran into Kent, who was just coming down to find Helen. She became emotional on seeing him, and in a singularly beautiful act, presented her tardy protector with tokens of her sentiment — a little gold flask, engraved with the Churchill crest, and an ivory cameo of her mother. Woolner, Kent and others of “Our Coterie” who soon showed up, escorted Helen topside, handing her through the crowd into a lifeboat.

In attempting to board the boat — No. 6 on the port side — Helen was frightened when she realized she'd have to jump down into it. When she did, her feet became wedged between two oars stowed along the gunwale. As she lost her balance, one of her ankles twisted, fracturing it, and she fell into the boat. Despite the pain of her injury, Helen managed to row with the others, clearing the side of the sinking ship by a few hundred yards.

She was also able to lend moral support to Margaret (“Molly”) Brown, the legendary Denver millionairess and fellow suffragette, as she took control of the boat in the absence of leadership from the crewman in charge, Quartermaster Robert Hichens. Under Molly's direction, Candee and the other women rowed Boat 6 to the shelter of the rescue ship, *Carpathia*, the next morning.

On landing in New York, Helen was taken by ambulance to a hospital where she was treated and kept under observation for a few days. After her release she visited her son in another hospital, remaining in New York with Edith until Harold recovered.

In the following weeks, Helen was inundated with letters and cables from friends, congratulating her on her escape, including a personal note from the First Lady, relating her sympathy and that of the President. Strangers contacted her as well, asking questions about missing fellow passengers. One of these was Archie Butt's brother, who begged for news in a series of heart-rending telegrams. Edward Kent's sister also wrote Candee. In mourning her brother, she found comfort in Helen's memories of his brave last hours. As Kent's body was among those eventually recovered, his sister was also able to return to Helen the trinkets she'd given him before they said goodbye.

Helen was pursued by the press. She gave an authentic account of her experiences in the disaster to the *Washington Herald*, but articles appearing in the *Washington Times*, in various New York papers and in syndication were largely erroneous reports.

Her brief interview in the *Herald* revealed Helen's high emotions:

The action of the men on the *Titanic* was noble. They stood back in every instance that I noticed, and gave the women and children the first chance to get away safely. Major Butt was one of God's own noblemen. I saw him working desperately to get the women and children into the boats. What need can there be of recounting the heroic deeds performed by those men who remained on the *Titanic*? To dwell upon them only sickens the heart with the realization of how they perished.

Yet she accepted an offer from *Collier's Weekly* to tell her *Titanic* tale in full. Appearing as a cover story in *Collier's*, it was one of the first in-depth eyewitness accounts of the sinking to be published in a major

magazine. It was certainly one of the most widely read first-hand stories, as *Collier's* circulation was among the highest of American weeklies.

Written in Helen Candee's refined way, it was still more personal than anything she ever published, and it's considered a classic today. Depending on readers' tastes, Helen's long essay was either stirringly beautiful or excessively poetic. Called "Sealed Orders," the theme was the omnipotence of God and His orchestration of the convergence of three unwitting craft upon the sea — iceberg, *Titanic* and the rescue ship *Carpathia*, players in a game of life, hubris and death. Of *Titanic*'s terrible final moments, Candee wrote:

At last, the end of the world. A smooth, slow chute. Life went out on the big ship. The death call of 1500 units of divine selflessness spread its volume over the waters as a single cry to God. There was no shriek, nor wail, nor frantic shout. Instead a heavy moan as of one being from whom final agony forces a single sound.

Helen recovered from her broken ankle, although she was forced to rely on a walking stick for a year, and Harold revived from his injuries after being confined to bed for three months. Helen never published another story about *Titanic* and was seldom interviewed about it. However, her name was released the following year as one of the survivors in a class-action lawsuit seeking compensation from the White Star Line. Helen's claim sought \$10,000 for personal injury and \$4,646 for lost possessions.

Helen tried to put *Titanic* behind her, and she mostly succeeded, though to some extent it haunted her professionally, being mentioned in official profiles, such as her entries in the *Woman's Who's Who of America* and the *Biographical Cyclopedia of U.S. Women*.

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A welcome respite from the horror of *Titanic* was the successful release of Helen Candee's fourth and best-known book, a deluxe volume on the history of tapestries. Called simply *The Tapestry Book*, it was published by Stokes in New York in October 1912 and by Constable in London the following year.



Antique textiles, such as this 1630 design from *The Tapestry Book*, were Helen Candee's greatest interest in the decorative arts.

The Tapestry Book, a lavish tome of 275 pages and 103 illustrations, was a true labor of love for Candee, whose chief interest in the decorative arts was period textiles. Thanks to the popularity of this delightful foray into the history of an under-examined art form, she became the foremost expert on the subject, writing further magazine articles and giving lectures at academies and universities.

The beautiful word pictures in which she specialized — of people, places and moments in time — were everywhere in this thick volume:

To enter a house where tapestries abound is to feel oneself welcomed even before the host appears. The bending verdure invites, the animated figures beckon, and at once the atmosphere of elegance and cordiality envelopes the happy visitor. To live in a house abundantly hung with old tapestries, to live there day by day, makes of labor a pleasure and of leisure a delight. In the big living room of the house, when the family gathers on a rainy morning, or on any afternoon when the shadows grow grim outside and the tea-tray is brought in, whispering its sweet tune of friendly communion, the tapestries on the walls seem to gather closer, to enfold in loving embrace the sheltered group.

The Tapestry Book was probably the most extensively researched of all her works. During her travels, Helen had visited museums and private collections all over the world, examining rich and rare tapestries, draperies, carpets and all manner of ancient materials, studying their construction, design and history. Her concentrated focus on such an obscure branch of the arts might ordinarily have been of interest only to connoisseurs. But *The Tapestry Book*, beautifully bound in natural cloth with an autumnal floral frame on the cover, was actually a best-seller, proving that the decorating mania of the early 1900s, a time of developing, if confused, aesthetics, was at a peak.

Helen may have had to use a cane to walk now but her hurt ankle didn't keep her out of the saddle, literally and politically. In March 1913, the day before the inauguration of President Wilson, she was chosen to ride at the head of the National Woman Suffrage Association's "Votes for Women" parade down Pennsylvania Avenue, passing the White House and stopping at the steps of Capitol Hill. On that day, one of the greatest of her life, Helen and six other dignitaries on horseback led over 10,000 fellow women from all over the United States in one of the largest female emancipation demonstrations to date.

She also continued in her civic and philanthropic duties. She was an organizer of fundraisers for the New York Home for Boys and for the Soldiers and Sailors Club, her loyalty to which increased with the outbreak of the First World War.

Throughout 1915 and '16, Helen was busy as ever writing on home décor, art and design for the *International Studio*, *American Homes* and the *American Magazine of Art*. She also oversaw the re-release of her first book on house decoration, *Decorative Styles and Periods*, and the publication of a brand-new book, her fifth, entitled *Jacobean Furniture*.

Devoted to one of the most popular “revival looks” of the moment, the 17th century English school of design, utilizing oak and walnut in furnishings and treatments, the small book of 56 pages and 43 illustrations was attractively bound in brown vellum in a motif resembling Jacobean paneling. Of her eight books, *Jacobean Furniture* is one of her most delightful.

In it Helen Candee again shared romantic anecdotes, some of them her own:

I must confess to a thrill of delight when sitting at an old oak board, set out with lace and silver. Not only for its obvious beauty, but by the thought of the groups that have gathered there through 300 years, groups of varying customs, varying habits, varying fashions, yet human like ourselves, and prone to make of the dining table a circle of joy.

She also spoke of the “subtle power of furniture to express the spirit of the times in which it was made,” and touched on the innate sensitivity of expert antiques collectors and decorators:

Feeling is a word for the serious collector. Ability to read feeling amounts to a talent and is certainly an instinct. Those who possess it know without recourse where to place a piece of furniture.

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As the European conflict worsened, Candee's writing didn't sustain her spiritually. And with news of the hardships in Italy, a nation she virtually adopted on her overseas jaunts, Helen knew she had to do something to help the cause.

Through friends at the Italian Embassy, she gained an appointment to the Royal Italian Red Cross, which she began serving in 1917, only a few months before the famous Battle of Caporetto in October, a crushing defeat claiming some 300,000 casualties. Helen was among a group of nurses dispatched to the front lines to try and save injured troops.

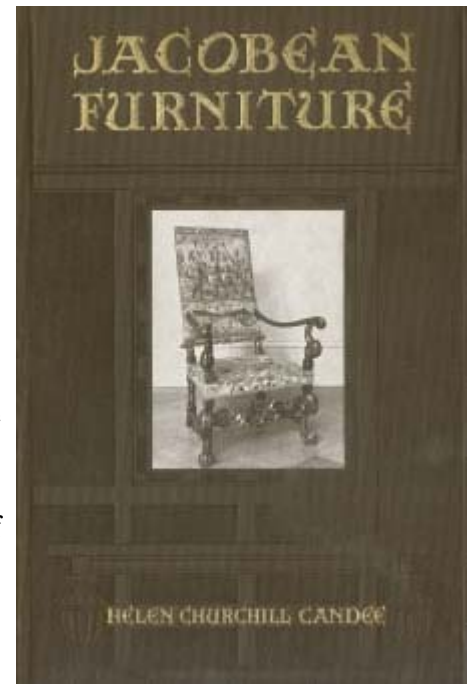
The scene was horrific, Helen recounted, and the task of treating the wounded enormous. One experience never left her memory. She and another nurse approached a young man lying near a dugout. While obviously severely maimed, he was still alive. When they tried to move him, however, his torso separated from his legs. “Drenched in blood,” Candee wrote in a letter home, “we burst into tears and knelt in prayer at the boy's side.”

Helen thereafter labored in hospitals in Rome and Milan well into 1918, proud to aid “the country I love as well as my own.” While in Milan, she was astonished to find herself working alongside an elderly, fatigued nun whom she recognized as one who had nursed her in Florence over a decade earlier. The old Sister noticed Helen, too, exclaiming, “God saved you so you may save us,” and flew into her arms.

It was also in Milan that Helen assisted in the recovery of a young American ambulance driver, riddled with machine gun wounds. His name was Ernest Hemingway. The future renowned novelist would recount his wartime experiences in his best-selling *Farewell to Arms*, which also drew on his romance with another volunteer nurse, Agnes von Kurowsky, one of Helen's young coworkers.

Of course, Helen had more resources at her disposal than the average nurse, and she didn't hesitate to avail herself of them. In addition to endowing an emergency clinic in Italy, she purchased vehicles and supplies for a Belgian field hospital near the Swiss border.

Helen remained in Europe after the Armistice, settling in Paris, where she became a correspondent and



eventually an editor for the cutting-edge New York design magazine, *Arts & Decoration* , contributing a stream of articles on a variety of subjects dear to her beauty-loving heart.

“When beauty assails,” she once wrote, “reason has no part.”

Before returning to the U.S. in 1920 she was decorated by the Royal Italian Red Cross “in honor of her heroic services and devotion to Italy.”

Helen was now in her early 60s but she was still active and vital, although her new job as editor for *Arts & Decoration* didn't work out; she found it too restrictive. Her abiding passion had always been travel, and she wasn't prepared to relinquish adventure for a desk job. As a journalist, she was much better suited to the life of a roving reporter, which she resumed, taking up her freelance pen with gusto. Still, she remained on the editorial staff of *Arts & Decoration* for several years.

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Travel for Helen Candee in the early 1920s increasingly meant Japan, China and the exotic Far Eastern lands of Indonesia and Cambodia. The latter was a chief draw, and in her sixth book, *Angkor the Magnificent* , now a classic travelogue, Helen's facility for words found inspiration in the mysterious, half-hidden temples and palaces, hanging gardens, sculpture and stonework of the ancient “Wonder City.”

In her book, the beauty and symbolism of the architecture of the temple of Angkor Wat came in for rapturous praise:

One can never look upon the ensemble of the Wat without a thrill, a pause, a feeling of being caught up to the heavens. Perhaps it is the most impressive sight in the world of edifices.

The fascinating ruins of Angkor and their Eden-like environs had only been known to Westerners for fifty years, and weren't widely explored or photographed before Candee's ambitious study. Her book, published by Stokes in 1924, was the work Helen was most proud of.

It also brought her the most acclaim. She was commanded to give a private reading of *Angkor the Magnificent* to King George and Queen Mary and was afterwards asked to Their Majesties' annual garden party at Holyroodhouse, being one of only a few Americans invited. Helen was even decorated by the King of Cambodia in a native ceremony.

Captivated by the region, its riches and its people, Helen was pleased that the success of *Angkor the Magnificent* allowed her to focus on Asia in a series of articles and short stories for newspaper syndication the following year, as well as a special feature for *Art and Archeology Magazine*.

The year 1925 also brought grief; Helen's beloved son, Harold, died at age 38.

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When not gallivanting across the world, Helen was with family and friends, commuting between her home in Washington and her daughter's house in New York.

In demand now as a lecturer on the Far East, she was active in several new charities, notably the Boys Bureau and the Toc-H Club, funds for adolescent boys and young men employed on ocean liners. She was for some years on the organizing committee of Toc-H, hosting annual dinner dances aboard such famous ships as *Aquitania* and *Berengaria* . Candee was still involved with the Soldiers and Sailors Union as well, a high point in fundraising coming in 1925 when the group held a sold-out concert at Carnegie Hall.

The year 1927 brought further literary success with the publication of Helen's seventh book, *New Journeys in Old Asia* , a thorough treatment of her Oriental dreamland, touching on Indo-China, Bali, Siam, Java, Bangkok, Singapore and Thailand. *New Journeys in Old Asia* was the culmination of nearly two years of traveling, accompanied by her friend, artist Lucille Douglas, who provided the book's etchings.

In 1929, after receiving a commendation from the government of French Indo-China for her latest work, Candee began to curb her international trips. She spent more time stateside — summers at her cottage in Maine, road trips to Palm Beach with friends, and housekeeping and occasional parties in New York with her daughter.

She also returned to her love of textiles for her eighth and final book, *Weaves and Draperies: Classic and Modern*, published in 1930. One of her longest books (at 300 pages), it was one of her most attractive, too, bound in gilt-lettered purple moire cloth with an Art Deco wrapper. Although some aspects of *Weaves and Draperies* were amply covered in *The Tapestry Book*, the new volume did address current, even avant-garde, design philosophy and principles, and was written in a slightly snappier style.

By 1934 Helen Candee, now 76, was restless for Europe and she set out again in search of new adventures, chronicling them in a series of *National Geographic Magazine* feature articles. These are the best of her travel essays, brimming with wit and romantic detail. The stories, appearing in *National Geographic* between January 1935 and May 1936, included accounts of life in the English countryside, on the Italian Riviera and along the coast of Normandy.

Meanwhile Helen was preparing updates for a re-release of *The Tapestry Book* through Tudor Publishing. This elegantly boxed reissue, with a brighter binding and a spiffy new dust-jacket, appeared in bookstores in 1935; a limited reissue of *Decorative Styles and Periods* also went to press in 1938.

Helen's years were finally catching up with her. By age 80, as she became physically weaker and her eyesight started to fail, she was increasingly dependent on her daughter, Edith, with whom she now lived permanently. Candee, one time party girl, seldom went out, but in 1938 she felt chipper enough to attend the opera in Washington. There she met up with an old friend, former First Lady Taft, and the two Helens posed for news photographers.

Over the next few years, despite deteriorating health, Helen made trips to her Washington house, maintained by the family, and visited her old vacation home in York Harbor, where she was looked after by ever-faithful Edith and Helen's equally loving granddaughter, Mary Matthews.

Her life had moved into the quiet, domestic realm of routine and simplicity. But age and infirmity couldn't take away her imagination, or her love of beauty:

Each morning a perfect servant wakes me with a cup of tea left at my bedside. I look from my pillow at the three open windows, trying to decide which is preferable — red roses or pink, when thrust within the room and screening the sky outside?

Mary, who graduated from college in 1941, married Allan Barker of the British Army in 1946. Helen attended the ceremony, which marked her last known public appearance.

In the summer of 1949, Helen, now 90, paid her usual visit to the cottage in Maine she'd owned for half a century. There she used to recuperate after the grueling social round of Washington. It was where she used to write, where she dreamt of pending travels, and on August 23 where her valiant, tremendous life drew to a peaceful close.

In one of her last articles, about finding a perfect *pied-a-terre*, Helen wrote that “if I fail to obtain the house of dreams, I would say the quest alone had brought lasting joy.”

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The parties, books and trips are in the past. But the fascinating woman who made them happen hasn't been entirely forgotten.

Yet it isn't as a globe-trekker, decorating maven or women's libber that Helen Churchill Candee is remembered. Her immortality has been preserved through the gallant role she played in the *Titanic*

disaster, a human drama that continues to touch the generations.

Regularly mentioned in books about the sinking, Helen was even portrayed in cameo in the Walt Disney 3-D documentary, *Ghosts of the Abyss*, about James Cameron's 2001 expedition to *Titanic*. In the movie, the tale of her sneaking out onto the bow at purple dusk, a lovely phantom in her flying scarves, was recreated.

Helen Churchill Candee's communion with nature as the great ship sped to destruction may not be true. But the image is an indelible one, too picturesque to defy, and too in keeping with the romance and daring of this unusual woman to dismiss. As Helen herself wrote in 1912: "Everything is uncertain."

Acknowledgments and Sources

The timeline of my research was based on back issues of the *Washington Post* and on other nationally syndicated stories accessible through NewspaperArchive.com.

I also collected information from nearly 50 of Helen Churchill Candee's published magazine articles and essays, her eight books and from a brief but richly anecdotal biographical sketch written by her daughter, Edith C. Matthews.

A note of special thanks to Charlotte Hungerford for sharing this unpublished document with me, and for allowing me to use three photos of Helen from her collection. Thanks to the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library and the Oklahoma Historical Society for their assistance in locating files and images.

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