If walls could talk: an intimate history of the home, Lucy Worsley (book review)

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Sibley, Jon M. The Pope Who Quit: A True Medieval Tale of Mystery, Death, and Salvation. Image: Crown. Mar. 2012. c.224p. index. ISBN 9780385531894. pap. $14. HIST Born of humble birth in an Italian village, Peter Morrone spent much of his life as a hermit monk who inspired many followers. He was improbably elected pope, as Celestine V. in 1294 and reigned for five tumultuous months before becoming the first and only pope to abdicate. His reign was spent outside of Rome, and his poorly judged actions alienated many cardinals. After his resignation, he was imprisoned by his papal successor, Boniface VIII. Sweeney posits that Celestine may have been murdered on Boniface’s order, but the author’s prose style lacks a dramatic power equal to the events being narrated. Nonetheless, he draws a relatively well-rounded portrait of the pope, including contextual details of medieval cultural, political, and religious life likely to be unknown to the lay reader. The depth of his research shines through the narrative, and the lush prose and quick pace make for engaging reading. Anyone interested in Hawaiian history or American imperialism will find this an absorbing read. [See Prepub Alert, 7/10/11.]

VERDICT A well-written and extensively researched book, recommended for both general and scholarly audiences. [See Prepub Alert, 7/25/11.]

—Ed Goedeken, Iowa State Univ. Lib., Ames

Worsley, Lucy. If Walls Could Talk: An Intimate History of the Home. Walker. Mar. 2012. c.368p. illus. bibliog. index. ISBN 9780802779553. $27. HIST Was tea once considered a dangerous drink? How often did people bathe hundreds of years ago? With the lack of household privacy during many eras, where did people go to be alone? Worsley (chief curator, Historic Royal Palaces; The Couriers: Splendor and Intrigue in the Georgian Court at Kensington Palace) explores these and other questions as she looks at four major rooms of the home—bedroom, bathroom, living room, and kitchen. Drawing only from published British history sources, she examines how the uses of these rooms and ways of thinking about them evolved from the medieval era to the modern day in response to technological advances, changing social attitudes, and the constant desire for increased comfort. Worsley’s enthusiasm for her subject is apparent, but her organization is somewhat muddled and many of the subjects discussed receive only a cursory glance; this volume, written to accompany a BBC series she hosted for a popular audience, will best please casual readers.

VERDICT Full of factoids, but with some small errors, this might serve as a good introduction to those new to the history of houses or the study of material culture, but it lacks citations and will not appeal to more serious readers. [See Prepub Alert, 9/22/11.]

—Kathleen McCallister, Univ. of South Carolina Lib., Columbia