BOOK REVIEW

**Treasures Afoot: Shoe Stories from the Georgian Era**; By Kimberley Alexander. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2018. 234 p.

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Shoes tell stories. They are fashion garments and expensive consumer articles that can tell us a great deal about their owner and the image that they wish to project. As Kimberley Alexander relates in this fascinating new book, they reveal ‘the hopes, dreams and disappointments of the people who made them and those who wore them’ (p.178). She considers the shoe from a range of historical perspectives – including social history, biography and material culture – and draws on documents and surviving examples of shoes from archives and museums on both sides of the Atlantic. The focus is on North America rather than ‘the Georgian era’ as such. We hear about London shoemakers only insofar as their wares were exported across the Atlantic, to consumers in the colonies who wanted the latest styles and an association with metropolitan sophistication. Despite the growth of a shoemaking trade in America and the problematic political associations of highly taxed luxury imports from Britain, even rebels such as George Washington patronised famous London cordwainers like John Didsbury. On the other hand, Alexander suggests that a focus on this one consumer article complicates the usual arguments about ‘anglicisation’. Americans were selective consumers, seeking out particular makers, buying large orders for their plantations and modifying shoes to their own local needs. This was therefore ‘literally a process of self-fashioning’ (p.13).

The emphasis here is very much on high fashion rather than on more mundane shoes. This is probably a reﬂection of the shoes in museum collections: few shoes for working people survive, as they were worn until they could no longer be repaired, so collections are dominated by fancier examples. These also tend to be women’s shoes, as men’s were plainer and therefore less likely to be kept. None of Didsbury’s shoes for Washington survives, and only one male shoe is analysed in detail (the very last in the book). This is therefore primarily a book about elite female consumerism, and there are fascinating insights here, such as a wonderful chapter on wedding shoes. Given that Alexander notes that the early colonists relied on ‘sensible shoes’ to traverse ‘rough paths, primitive roads, and even the few pocked and muddied lanes that served as streets in the colonies’ (p.25), it would have been interesting to hear more about what women wore when they had to walk somewhere. The gorgeous silk and wool creations that are beautifully reproduced in the book do not look like they would have stood up to such conditions.

*Treasures Afoot* has much to offer the burgeoning ﬁeld of material culture. Alexander pays particular attention to the materials with which these shoes were made. We learn about calamanco, a worsted with a glazed surface created by forcing the wool through hot rollers, which was one of the most popular materials for women’s shoes in this period. The book focuses on both production and consumption, and in particular on the relationship between customer and producer. The artefact of the shoe is considered visually and symbolically, but we could perhaps learn more about the physicality of the object and its relationship with the bodies it shod: how did it affect bodily motion, and how did the foot impact on the shoe itself? Instead, the emphasis is on biography, using the shoe as a starting-point for thinking about the lives of their wearers. The book presents a succession of vignettes, providing some intriguing insights into women’s lives in early America. Chapters tend not to conclude, and this reader wanted to hear more about the implications of all this for larger themes, such as gender or class relations. The book is very engagingly written, however, and the press have produced a very attractive edition with rich colour illustrations, at an accessible price. Shoe history is a very popular ﬁeld, and the book deserves to be widely read, as it is an excellent contribution to the histories of material culture and transatlantic consumerism.