Buying into a World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia (review)

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the technology introduced (and its timing) is missed. These concluding remarks, however, do not rest significance to this ambitious work, which will be very welcome by those interested in the insights of the company and, in general, in telecommunications history.

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Ann Smart Martin. *Buying into a World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2008. 276 pp. ISBN 0-8018-8727-5, $38.88 (cloth), $15.20 (paper).

Ann Smart Martin's *Buying into a World of Goods* is an impressive example of what thinking in multidisciplinary ways about the uses and meanings of material culture can reveal about past lives. In this volume, she musters a careful analysis of a variety of sources—first and foremost being the extensive records of eighteenth-century backcountry storekeeper John Hook—to quite deftly throw some light on, and present some interpretive possibilities about, regional mercantilism, consumption, and thus the lives of an entire region. By "teasing and tugging" at a number of different primary sources, Martin creates a sense of what the consumer's world was like in this place and time (60). The result is a series of exceptional vignettes that frame period merchants and consumers in different lights and from different perspectives.

Quite admirably, Martin is not only interested in using material culture to examine the lives of wealthy white elites, but also the lives of the lower classes of various ethnicities, women, and enslaved African-Americans. In each of her six expansive chapters, she refocuses her analytical lens on material culture and mercantilism in the Virginia backcountry. The first chapter examines John Hook, "[a]n Atlantic man in a local world" (55), and his connections to global and local economies. The second chapter provides a detailed look at local acquisition of good, while the third chapter explores what eighteenth-century accounting practices can tell us about Hook and his customers. The fourth chapter is an examination of changing styles and standards in the Virginia backcountry. The fifth chapter looks at stores as spaces of consumption and how they have changed through time, and, finally, Hook uses

the sixth chapter to attempt to get at African-American consumers, a vastly understudied demographic in preemancipation economic research.

As an anthropologist and archaeologist, this reviewer is sympathetic with Martin's contention throughout this volume that "material culture can tell us about the flow of information, cultural standards, ethnic identity and relationships" (95). This is doubly true when examining the complex set of choices available to the inhabitants of a place of cultural hybridity such as the eighteenth-century Virginia backcountry. However, Martin feels that traditionally "historians have asked different questions. Historians of economy and technology discuss the cost or importance of, say, British woolens or burgeoning mills but seldom delve into the details of use and preference" (79). Quite rightly, she contends that "this collapses the whole story of backcountry consumerism into action without agency" (94). Martin attempts to ask what these researchers have not: what creates a desire? The author does this largely though looking at historical records and material culture—switching rapidly between her role as a historical "quantifier" of records and qualitative material culture analyst who inquires, "why?" (173). For Martin, "material culture analysis begins with an object and moves to makers and users" (65–6), thus moving from things (or names in records) to reconstructing lives (71).

Like many contemporary historical archaeologists, Martin gets at agency and desire through studying mundane objects. It's not just elite goods, Martin contends, but "small, less expensive manufactured and processed goods that tell the story" (42). These objects reveal, of course, prices and qualities of goods, but they also tell the careful researcher about consumer choices, patterns of behavior, and they even reveal complex personal and professional relationships. For instance, buying for one's self may be an expression of class aspiration, but buying for others speaks to relationships and reciprocity—a web of relations, friends, business associates, mercantile partners both local and abroad (44–5).

Martin's effective methodology is best illustrated by the detailed stories of objects provided at the end of each of the chapters (each reflecting a concrete example of the subject addressed in the respective chapter). These include William Meade's Scottish clock (36), cast iron plates that mimic Queen's ware forms (60), John Hook's mysterious and informative business ledgers (89), the contents of the Wade cabin in the "valley that time forgot" (134), fair ribbons that may have been symbolic of desire and sexual favors (167), and a looking glass purchase by an enslaved African-American named Suckey,

which may have had deeper, multiple cultural resonances (186). These examples demonstrate the complex connections and meaning behind the objects that were consumed as a part of the mercantile system—and they are one of the most impressive (and most entertaining) aspects of this work.

Vignettes like these, along with the constant jumping from one data source to another, might make *Buying into a World of Goods* seem disorganized and confusing to some readers, but I feel that they are what makes this volume so important. Martin focuses on the interpretive possibilities of objects in a very effective way and weaves them into a narrative that builds on the strengths of both traditional history and material culture analysis. In the process, Martin challenges several traditional notions about consumerism in the period. For instance, she looks for women in transactions typically thought of being made by the "head of household" and understands that "a dramatic tension existed in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century households over authority, ownership, choice, and decision" (55). Moreover, the assembled data suggest a constant awareness of fashion in the backcountry and that the "quality, variety, and fashionability" of these goods "belie the pervasive currently held notions of rugged, self-sufficient backcountry life" (55).

However, not everything in Martin's narrative works flawlessly. For instance, although I believe her assertion that "five actions" (differentiate, simplify, exaggerate, hybridize, and replicate [108]) can explain how John Hook (and the people living in John Hook's world) "navigated through change using material things" (143), I do not think the author operationalized these concepts in a consistently useful way.

In closing, the width and breadth of John Hook's mercantile records are impressive in their own right, but it is Martin's ability to tack back and forth between these records, pieces of material culture, and other various sources that makes this book a stand out. Martin has melded several approaches to her subject of study to great effect, and this work will be incredibly useful not only to those interested in the eighteenth-century Virginia backcountry, but also to any historical scholar who wishes to understand consumerism and its relationship to things and individual identity.

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