

*Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia.* By Ann Smart Martin. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 260 pages, ISBN-978-0801887277.

As the title of this book cleverly captures, consumer purchases entail both a physical transaction and a cultural expression. Ann Smart Martin combines documents and artifacts in a manner that produces a fresh perspective on the expansion of consumer markets in the later eighteenth century. The core of her material comes from the papers of a merchant named John Hook who operated in the counties of Bedford and Franklin in backcountry Virginia, supplemented with selected artifacts from the area such as cupboards and clocks. Consistent with the material culture emphasis, the text is accompanied by a number of illustrations, including a set of handsome color plates. Each chapter addresses a particular theme and closes with the consideration of a particular object related to that theme.

John Hook came to Virginia from Scotland in 1758 as a thirteen year old apprentice clerk and shopkeeper. By 1766, Hook managed his own store, working as a factor for a Scottish firm that bought Virginia tobacco from local producers, attracting their business by conveniently supplying manufactured goods. Virginia was a competitive environment and success required not only a good location, but also partners who were reliable and had an eye for selecting appropriate wares. The contents of Hook's little store were assembled from numerous producers, in various grades, and calculated quantities. Even in a remote corner of the empire such as the western reaches of Virginia, people had come to expect a high degree of commercial service and selection. Martin ably shows the judgment, care, and luck involved behind a successful country store.

That any rural merchant could keep his head above water in such a situation seems a minor miracle, and of course many failed (especially in the credit crunch of the early 1770s). Martin devotes a full chapter to a close analysis of John Hook's ledgers, closely examining the accounts for 1771. Autumn racked up the greatest number of transactions, some four thousand in 1771, plus others that involved cash and were therefore not recorded. Martin locates these purchasers geographically, explores wealth holding, and traces buying patterns. The most frequent transactions involved consumables—rum and textiles. The latter constituted about forty percent of Hook's fall sales. Another ten percent came from shoes, hats, and handkerchiefs. Although many of these products could have been manufactured at home, people preferred British fashion. Most amazing, however, is the tremendous appetite for such items as colored silks, fancy bonnets, and bright ribbon. People also indulged in sugar, salt, coffee, molasses, tea, and pepper. They purchased housewares such as teakettles and basins. Most purchases were trifling in value, but important in terms of the experience of a bright moment or rare comfort—and a growing commercial orientation.

In another chapter, Martin explores the elusive matter of a unique backcountry style, a question complicated by differences of ethnicity and wealth. Martin shows how consumer choices, artisan skill, and material availability shaped the fabrication of local products. Furniture items, for example, could reflect several different objectives. Ethnic heritages might be expressed in the retention of certain distinctive forms or decoration. Other pieces offered a simplified application of a more complex motif or design, or alternatively, accentuated decorative features. Artisans might also combine or hybridize stylistic features. And, of course, some objects were closely replicated or specially imported from distant craftsmen. Style and taste are also evident in the crafting of domestic housing. Probate inventories reveal that backcountry households did not

differ all that much from people living in less remote areas in terms of such things as knives and forks. An astounding number, however, lacked chairs and a common table.

Equally interesting is the chapter devoted to the shopping experience and the physical store environment. John Hook's store, like others, had a deliberate floor plan. Goods were carefully displayed, yet kept beyond consumer reach. Customers had to be both tempted and controlled. Here is dramatically rendered, more so than at any other point, the significance of entry into the exotic world of goods and a new set of relationships. Swept into this world were not only elites, but also people of more modest means, including women and slaves. Concerning the latter, while the slave economy has been amply demonstrated for later periods, Martin masterfully brings together mercantile and archaeological data for an important earlier era.

The smooth blend of documentary and material evidence tells such a fascinating story that it is easy to forgive this book for raising more questions than it answers. In part, the difficulty is that the author asks questions that the evidence—even when meticulous analysis of ledgers is combined with insightful artifact analysis—may not be able to support. New light is shed upon the way commercial life infiltrated a more primitive economy. The contribution to historical understanding of business systems, sales patters, and shopping experiences is major. Equally important if not more so is the methodological achievement. The material culture evidence addresses a major historiographical issue, and does so in an integrated rather than merely decorative manner. The book might have benefited from another pass to tighten the argument and streamline some of the content, but this judgment does not detract from Martin's impressive achievement.

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