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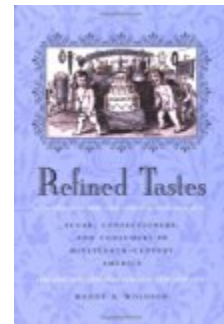
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Wendy A. Woloson. *Refined Tastes: Sugar, Confectionery, and Consumerism in Nineteenth-Century America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. xi + 277 pp. \$46.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6876-4.

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We have traveled in human history from reflections on how “sweet and noble it is to die for one’s country” to a country defined by “the sweet life.” Sweetness and civilization have had a long tradition of mutual association and one which Wendy Woloson seeks to explore in more detail in her historical monograph, *Refined Tastes: Sugar, Confectionery, and Consumerism in Nineteenth-Century America*. Woloson’s book, as its title implies, is an examination of the role of sugar and sweetness in American social order and culture during the nineteenth century. In it she does a fine job tracing the development of sugar both as an industrial as well as a cultural commodity. Her account is deftly peppered with details regarding the evolution of sugar production as well as its various incarnations in edible, as well as inedible, forms in such a way as to render it both savory and sweet.

The strength of her work is clearly found in the details she manages to cull from her own research as well as the research of others. Those with a particular interest in the culinary arts and their history will be fascinated by Woloson’s book. Her account provides the reader with an informative overview tracing the development of sugar production and of various forms of sweets, an overview which ranges both historically and geographically from the plateaus of the Aztec empire to the T’ang dynasty, Persia, Renaissance Italy, and the slave plantations of the Caribbean. All of this, of course, culminates in nineteenth century America where sugar consumption grows sixteen fold to an impressive per capita consumption rate of 83 pounds year (p. 187).

Obviously, this staggering intake of sugar is not consumed straight or by simply mixing it in with tea or cof-

fee. The nineteenth century saw a profusion of sugar-based dishes, which Woloson chronicles. Her research, in particular with respect to this aspect of the book, is really quite thorough and elucidating. Her approach, which is more object than theme driven, allows her to separate the various sugar dishes into separate categories, and cover them in greater detail. The meat of her book is divided into brief histories of specific forms of confectionery: candy, ice cream, chocolate, and cake. In each section, she nicely demonstrates the evolution of a confectionery—for example, with the iconic wedding cake from a European tradition, to a dark fruit cake, to our modern understanding of a light angel cake with frosting.

Woloson also provides a history of the technical innovations which were a key factor in determining the shape of confectionery through history. Such things as automated dippers and vacuum steam pans Woloson demonstrates had a tremendous impact on both confection production as well as consumption. In addition, Woloson adds to her account a cultural analysis, and examines the associated meanings that link sugar with femininity in American culture. It is here that some interesting problems and possibilities occur and point to a number of aporias that make cultural history so engaging as well as frustrating.

The linkage of sweetness, sugar, and confectionery to women is certainly a plausible one, but the meaning and significance of that link is not so clear. Woloson, however, asserts clearly, and somewhat simplistically, that this link denotes a devaluation: “As [sugar] became cheaper and more prolific [...] it became linked with

femininity: its economic devaluation coincided with its cultural devaluation" (p. 3). For Woloson, sugar is derivatively linked to women by a mutual association with all things insubstantial, common, and cheap: sugar is the culinary equivalent to literature's infamous character, Madam Bovary. Woloson does provide compelling evidence for this contention but it is far from certain that this contention entirely exhausts all the possible connotations associated with sugar and its linkages with women. The basis for this interpretation seems to be the underlying assumption, which Woloson puts forth frequently, that characterizes both sugar and women as "ephemeral" and "inessential" and interprets that characterization as a devaluation. This is undoubtedly a possibility but it is not the only one. Many nineteenth century writers from Schiller to Emerson actually championed the ephemeral and the inessential (i.e. non-utilitarian) as being of the highest value so the meaning of these terms is potentially ambiguous within the historical context.

Furthermore, Woloson's own argument begins to trip over this somewhat inflexible contention. At times she seems to be arguing simultaneously that sugar was suffering from a "cultural demotion" and was an object of "resonant cultural meaning" (p. 3). How can you assert that sugar (and women by association) is devalued while also asserting that "sugar possessed magical properties that could transform almost anything into a pleasure" (p. 116). In this case, the tawdry and the common are reborn as newly valued simply by the introduction of sugar. Woloson might argue that these relative valuations and devaluations occurred at different times during the nineteenth century but she never really specifies when this change takes place and for all I can see sugar seems to retain a magical quality throughout the many examples she provides in her book. Even today, one look at the advertising of candy and sugar coated cereals to children makes plain that sugar has lost none of its magical luster in our culture.

Some of this tension within Woloson's own thesis results from her interpretive use of Marx's commodity fetish concept: "sugar itself assumed a social life that transformed it from an inanimate state into something almost in possession of its own life force;" and, sugary

confections were treated by people in the nineteenth century "almost as entities with lives of their own" (p. 16). Commodity fetishism is clearly a hyper-valuation rather than a devaluation but this conflicts with her gender analysis which points toward a devaluation. Gender analysis is the interpretive core of Woloson's book and her approach to gender in the nineteenth century as being dominated by power relations is well-founded. Her interpretations are consistent with numerous historiographies of the era which have shown the hierarchical assumptions underlying gender roles and associations. These interpretations, however, become somewhat crude and inflexible when combined with other objects of interpretive analysis as is the case here with commodity fetish but this is precisely what cultural history has to do if it is going to offer us anything more than a radically fragmented and narrow vision of history.

Part of the problem is that gender analysis and all other forms of historical analysis, though self-contained as interpretive frameworks, often describe historical phenomena that are not entirely contained within the exclusive categories of relations they seek to analyze: gender, for example, frequently touches other social categories (such as race and class), making its meaning extremely difficult to define in any uni-dimensional sense. For example, it is well-documented that in the nineteenth century, "primitive" societies, non-white societies, and the lower classes have all been described in language that associates them with the feminine. Yet here in *Refined Tastes* we see the feminine associated with all the trappings of civilization. Woloson gives an account describing one mid-nineteenth-century ice cream saloon: "more than the ice cream, the space itself—forty-five feet deep, with an inlaid margard to sugar that range throughout—modern consumer culture is very close to a circus wherein politics, sex, and economics all mix together."

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