



Kimberly S. Alexander. *Treasures Afoot: Shoe Stories from the Georgian Era*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2018. 248 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4214-2584-9.

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Shoshana Resnikoff on Kimberly S. Alexander, 'Treasures Afoot: Shoe Stories from the Georgian Era'

Kimberly S. Alexander writes *Treasures Afoot: Shoe Stories from the Georgian Era* on parallel tracks: one documents the realities of making and retailing shoes in Georgian England and British America, and the other explores the variety of meanings—economic, social, and personal—of those shoes for the wearers and their communities. This dual perspective lends itself to intersecting stories, as wealthy British American women purchase footwear from well-established cordwainers in England and New England.

Fashion's ability to reflect personal agency within social and political contexts has long made it a subject of material culture analysis. Much of that research has focused on the wide array of sartorial options available through the industrial and retail revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but texts such as Linda Baumgarten's *What Clothes Reveal* (2012) and Kate Haulman's *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (2014), among others, have brought a similar perspective to the study of eighteenth-century clothing. Alexander argues that focusing on a single type of object—in this case, the shoe—can illuminate and complicate our understanding of the lives and decisions of both makers and users. In

Treasures Afoot she uses both costume and library collections from the Bata Shoe Museum, Colonial Williamsburg, Strawberry Banke Museum, and historical societies throughout New England to explore specific shoes as well their owners, their makers, and the networks connecting all three.

Readers meet American shoemaker Samuel Lane and his British counterpart, John Hose, in the first chapter of *Treasures Afoot*. These two men and their wares pop up throughout the book, but this first introduction explores their workshops, business models, and family and professional histories. Exploring the similarities between Lane and Hose's shops (their use of silk, calamanco, and leather) and the differences (the size of their workshops, their supplementary incomes) Alexander also hints at how the small shops of Samuel Lane and his colleagues would grow and change in the nineteenth century. This foreshadowing is important, but also frustrating, as she never fully explores the future role of New England as the center of footwear production in nineteenth-century United States.

Alexander turns from shoemakers to shoe-wearers, highlighting a series of wedding shoes from the period. From these she draws out a vari-

ety of connections: for example, Hannah Edwards's wedding shoes, made of handmade embroidered uppers and likely assembled by a local shoemaker, represent both the role that women played in their own self-fashioning and the home-made alternative to British-imported luxury; and Mary Wise Farley's shoes reveal her likely physical disability through platforms of uneven height. Alexander also posits why wedding shoes survive at a higher rate than other wedding garments. Her answer, that shoes are smaller and therefore make better keepsakes, is correct but incomplete; shoes are also relatively fixed in their size and construction and therefore less likely to be remade and reused by successive family members, surviving intact at greater percentages.

The rest of the book switches back and forth between cordwainer and wearer, with a chapter that explores the use of labels—British makers who exported their shoes were more likely to use labels, while American shoemakers only started adopting the practice later in imitation—and another detailing materials available for shoes in Britain and British America. Here Alexander explores the great paradox of costume collections: that there are often a greater percentage of objects made of refined materials held in collections than would have been used by the general populace. She points to a curatorial bias for beautiful and prized objects, writing, “when confronted with a well-worn or very simple shoe, one that was utilitarian in appearance, museum curators with a limited budget might err on the side of beauty” (p. 111). This is an important and self-reflective point coming from a curator herself, but in many cases the problem begins before the objects make it to the accessioning committee: beautiful, refined materials are preserved and held on to by the family, while everyday wares are worn to pieces and discarded.

Alexander finds much to mine in the intersection of fashion and politics, in both overt and covert ways. In one chapter she explores the diverse meanings of London shoes in a colonial set-

ting—for Loyalists, an expression of civility and style, and for Whigs, decadence and decay. The Stamp Act plays an unexpected role in the story as well, as John Hose's impassioned address about the law to Parliament reflects the experiences of everyday manufacturers in the economic heart of the British Empire.

While many of the women featured in *Treasures Afoot* are unfamiliar to the average reader, a chapter devoted to George Washington and his family allows Alexander to dive deep into the long-standing relationship between Washington and his London cordwainer while also providing context for the hero worship that emerges when, in a later chapter, women save the shoes they were wearing when they met Washington. Here the reader gets the chance to see the transformation of wearable object to artifact, a metanarrative that is threaded throughout *Treasures Afoot* as Alexander explores the afterlife of shoes within generations of family caretakers and eventually, museum collections.

Treasures Afoot is not a comprehensive history of the eighteenth-century shoe, which is both its strength and a weakness. Alexander weaves together the stories of specific shoes and their users and makers, connecting personal events, regional history, and international politics. This storytelling approach illuminates the intimate lives of Britons and British Americans and specifically highlights the experiences and choices of the women, primarily wealthy or of middling class, who wore the shoes explored in the book.

Alexander's deep dive into the lives of specific figures, backed up by documentary research, has a narrative quality that make the book highly readable as well as content-rich. The “story” structure, however, results in unanswered questions about the role of footwear in eighteenth-century British America, especially beyond the elite classes. Where, for instance, are the shoes of impoverished men and women? Where are the shoes of enslaved people? Alexander focuses on the shoes she can access in New England costume collections. This is

understandable, but the book, and the reader, would have been better served by a clearer articulation of why other “shoe stories” are missing from the narrative.

In chapter 6, “For My Use, Four Pair of Neat Shoes,” Alexander cites letters from Washington to London shoemaker John Didsbury detailing the purchase of work shoes for “the family’s servants and slaves” (p. 145). The chapter quickly moves on to the footwear Washington ordered for his family and himself, however, never returning to the intriguing mention of these work shoes. A few pages earlier, Alexander quotes Alonzo Lewis’s 1829 *History of Lynn*, writing, “the reputation of Lynn [MA] shoes soon found way to the cities of the South, and the manufacturers began to extend their business by taking apprentices and employing journeymen” (p. 123). While Lewis chose not to include the final destination of these shoes, there is no question that a certain percentage of shoes made in New England were fated to be worn by enslaved workers on Southern plantations. Very few of these shoes survive today, due both to wear and racial and class biases in historical societies and museums, but more attention paid to those absences would have deepened readers’ understanding of the period and further highlighted the agency of the men and women who, in contrast, did have the opportunity to make decisions about their footwear.

In *Treasures Afoot*, Alexander has assembled a diverse array of stories connected to eighteenth-century footwear. Using the shoes themselves as her jumping-off point, she explores local production, regional and international economies, colonial politics, and gendered self-presentation. Tightly written and thoroughly researched, the text does a great deal of work using the idea of “stories”—discrete explorations of specific people, objects, and fleeting events—to document the significance of the eighteenth-century shoe. *Treasures Afoot* cannot tell every “shoe story” in British America, but brings to life the ones that it does.

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