

Refined Tastes: Sugar, Confectionery, and Consumers in Nineteenth-Century America. By Wendy A. Woloson. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. xi + 277 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, photographs. Cloth, \$44.95. ISBN 0-801-86876-9.

Reviewed by Gail Cooper

This wonderful history of nineteenth-century American confectionery fills an important gap in the literature. It does not intend to be a study of the confectionery industry per se. Wendy A. Woloson focuses on the juncture of production and consumption, treating the reader to a view of changing technology, packaging, advertising, business financing, and competitive practices, and of the shifts in consumer responses. The author begins with an idea put forth by Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff: material things not only have “social lives” that change according to the contexts they inhabit, but they even have individual “biographies” as well (Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 1997). The subsequent chapters, unsurprisingly, take up specific products: penny candies, ice cream, chocolates and bonbons, wedding cakes, and homemade sweets, chronicling the changing role of these confections in American society over the course of the nineteenth century. As a group, these products reiterate a similar tale: once the expression of male power and privilege, they became accessible to the general population, including women, during the late nineteenth century.

Either force—democratization or feminization—would have been enough to dissolve confectionery from its association with exclusivity and status. Sugar’s scarcity and expense at the beginning of the century were the result of its production in equatorial climes, largely with slave labor. Its luxury status was an expression of the producers’ ability to command and control men and nature, and its use at that time, according to Woloson, was largely confined to the elite. Early “consumption” of confectioneries in the form of novelties (elaborate sugar sculptures) was mainly symbolic: they were intended as feasts for the eyes rather than for the stomach, and guests at exclusive banquets featuring the novelties were often encouraged to take a piece home to save, uneaten, as a permanent memento. By the end of the century, the introduction of beet

sugar and modern refining shifted the location and costs of production, dramatically altering the availability of sweets and transforming the social meaning and rituals of their consumption. A small measure of the democratization that occurred was the rising rate of sugar consumption from an estimated 8.4 pounds per person per year in 1801 to an astonishing 70.6 pounds in 1905 (p. 194).

However, Woloson's analysis is not so much economic as it is cultural. She is more concerned with the feminization of sweets, arguing that "democratized to the point of insipidness, confectionery became increasingly linked to and discussed in terms of genteel feminine lives—ornamental, inessential, ephemeral, and easily dismissed" (p. 224). At times she veers into diffuse theorizing, as when she maintains that the link between women and candy was based upon their shared identity as something "sweet" (p. 101). Yet each chapter is filled with details of the distinctive role played by female consumers in the growing market for candy. Sweethearts were the recipients of enticingly sensual chocolates during courtship; brides were symbolically represented by wedding cakes; mothers were championed as important sources of safe, unadulterated sweets in the family home. While charting the ways that women consumers were important to the industry, Woloson is less specific about the importance of confectionery to women. By her own account, the ice-cream saloon and soda fountain provided a public space for them—a rare commodity, according to historians like Kathy Peiss. Perhaps only the department store equaled these gathering places in importance.

Woloson is eloquent on other aspects of commercial space, particularly in her chapter on the arrival of ice cream. She tells us that "the physical locations in which people ate ice cream constituted its packaging and created its commercial aura" (p. 71). She follows this with a detailed study of pleasure gardens, modeled on London's famous Vauxhall Gardens. Her description of the gardens' ice-cream saloons, soda fountains, and street vendors' stalls conveys a sense of the changing status of ice-cream consumption in a way that no account of the product alone could have achieved. A consideration of spaces not only reveals the realities of the confectionery business but also offers a persuasive avenue for talking about democratization and feminization.

Woloson documents the social opprobrium that paralleled the rise of sugary treats. Critics linked the consumption of sweets with spendthrift habits and a lack of self-

discipline, weaknesses found in all classes of people but believed to be particular to women. Yet she also explores the ways in which people were encouraged to eat candy, and she links these promotional efforts to larger patterns of consumption. In candy stores, for example, children learned that a penny bought them not only a bag of candies but also the right to browse. Though it might be stretching the point to call children's prolonged deliberations at the candy counter the action of "competent, educated consumers" (p. 45), nevertheless it was clear that the proprietors valued children as customers, using premiums, endless variety, packaging, and gimmicks to sell sweets to their pint-sized clientele.

Readers of this tale will be delighted to discover the different routes taken by each product as it became incorporated into the rituals of American consumption, and they will be persuaded as well by the author's overall thesis.

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