

Book Review

Breen, T.H. *The Marketplace of the Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence*. New York: Oxford, 2004.

By Malia Willey

A Tea, Two Sugars, and Independence

T.H. Breen's *The Marketplace of a Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* examines the role of consumerism in the Revolutionary War. His thesis, that "[t]he colonists' shared experience as consumers provided them with the cultural resources needed to develop a bold new form of political protests" (xv) may not hit the mark completely, but it is easy for the modern reader to swallow.

Breen first uses a rich blend of history and material culture to establish that consumerism permeated the colonies before the war. In a six-pronged attack of archeological and written resources, he proves that British products were widely bought in every colony. He also traces the different routes that would have brought these products into every home. Although Breen admits that economic disparities prevented some from participating in directly or as frequently in the market, the wealth of import evidence is convincing. By establishing that "what was new about the mid-eighteenth century consumer marketplace was the range of choices that it offered and the ability of ordinary men and women to participate," Breen unites all the colonists (65).

He then demonstrates that these imports were imbued with meaning. The imports were a way for colonists to show their support for the motherland through mercantilist Anglicanization. In exchange for political and military benefits, the colonies would participate in the trade world exclusively with Britain. At home and across the sea, the lucrative colonial trade with America was seen as an indispensable resource. Breen explains, "For them [colonists], the interpretation

of imperial commerce spilled over into other topics, into the discussion of liberty and patriotism, into the meaning of reciprocity between colonies and the mother country” (99). Trade became a contract that was linked with the idea of rights. By imposing taxes without their consent, colonists believed that Britain was violating their relationship.

Consumerism became something that the colonists could ideologically and physically rally around. When consumers chose not to buy imports, they were hitting Britain in the heart and in the wallet. Breen explains, “[a]nyone who regularly purchased manufactured goods from Great Britain could become virtuous simply by curtailing consumption. This concept thus linked everyday experience and behavior with a broadly shared sense of general welfare” (264). Since anyone could be a consumer, particularly women, anyone could demonstrate their allegiances. Public lists became a way of identifying patriots and turning against those who did not comply. Breen believes that these demonstrations of non-importation and eventually non-consumption ultimately solidified trust between the colonies. Such displays of commitment shifted the independence movement from theory into further action.

Although Breen is convincing in his argument that material culture helped colonists manifest their beliefs, his interpretation of their ideology falls short. He believes that the Revolution was “a key moment in the history of liberal thought” (23). Breen justifies his Lockean stance with the individual economic participation in the movement. However, John L. Brooks conversely points, “Republicanism, in the broadest sense, meant a sacrifice of self-interest in the public interest” (337). The individual action of the colonists actually helped the common good.

Overall, Breen's consumerist analysis strikes a familiar chord with today's readers. He emphasizes the originality of the Revolution through the insistence that "the consumer boycott

was a brilliantly original American invention" (xvi). As mass consumers, we understand that everyone plays a role in the market. Some certainly have more purchasing power than others, but inhibiting the economy has become a way for citizens to voice their opinion. Breen's argument is something that the modern consumer can literally buy into.