

Only the Clothes on Her Back: Clothing and the Hidden History of Power in the Nineteenth-Century United States. By Laura F. Edwards. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2022. xv + 433 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-756857-6, £26.99

Laura F. Edwards' new book *Only the Clothes on Her Back: Clothing and the Hidden History of Power in the Nineteenth-Century United States* is a masterpiece in detailed research. With a bibliography to rival the best, Edwards has clearly poured her expertise into this account of the history of textiles in the USA and their unique legal standing. Using elements of microhistory, Edwards presents detailed case studies to cement her argument and emphasizes the importance of garments to women who otherwise had little to no legal standing. Marginalized people, largely women and slaves, could own textiles, trade them, and expect courts to maintain their claim to the items. Edwards focuses attention on objects that had their own legal meaning and explores how individual lives were impacted by material culture. The book concerns the decades between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, an era of great transition as the USA established itself as an independent country, separate from Britain, with its own laws and customs. Edwards argues that textiles have often been confined to the realm of consumer goods with their legal importance shifted to the wayside. She emphasizes the fact that women would own men's clothing for its monetary value, while men owned fabric that was appropriate for women's dresses.

The legal importance of garments is highlighted throughout the book with one of the most interesting examples being that of Eliza Cauchois who was accused of stealing a shift in 1803. The New York City Mayor's court acquitted her, believing her defence that she was loaned the shift and had not stolen it. It seems unfathomable to the modern reader that a case could form around stolen underwear, yet the shift was likely one of the most precious possessions of the accuser. Another example that highlights the changing perceptions of clothing is that of Mary Todd Lincoln, who after her husband's assassination found herself in desperate need of money. Deciding to sell her clothes to raise capital, she expected that women would buy them simply because she had worn them in the White House. The opposite occurred and she was victimized in the press with her clothes being described as 'dirty and disgusting, a disgrace to the nation' (p. 291). Her dresses were deemed to be gaudy and to reflect her temperament. When one considers how valuable the clothes of Jackie Kennedy, also the wife of an assassinated president, were deemed to be only a century later, one sees how perceptions of textiles can reflect public attitudes and how the cult of celebrity has progressed.

We may think that our modern garment industry is incredibly global with fabrics produced in India being sewn in Italy to designs produced in the USA and then sold to consumers in the UK. Edwards underlines the global nature of garments with silks and cotton from India, China, and the Middle East reaching Britain and Europe in the early modern period. The contrast with European homespun linen and wool was arresting and westerners formed obsessions with the vivid colours and patterns, seeing the potential for trade. However, contrasting with the bright colours of Indian silks, textiles have a dark history, being inextricably linked to the slave trade. Edwards deals with this period adeptly and does

not shirk from the gory details. Furthermore, while tea is the most well-known taxed product in the American colonies, textiles were equally as important. Knowing that homemade products could not always compete with cheap imports, British officials banned the import of Indian calicos and made it illegal to wear them. Edwards teases out the strands of this tangled web of textile history and excellently portrays the connection between fabric and burgeoning globalization.

Yet, this state of affairs as concerns textiles is not the one that is at all familiar to the modern reader. So, when and why did the legal status of textiles change? Edwards explains that the answer lies not directly through a change in the law but through a change in contemporary attitudes. After the Civil War and the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment, used clothing took on negative connotations, selling highly personal items being conflated with selling the body itself. Associated as it was with slavery and with the dismantlement of legal structures that prevented the marginalized from owning goods, the sale of second-hand clothing fell out of popularity. Thus, a system that had given women some rights was largely abandoned and Edwards emphasizes that second-hand clothing became more associated with disease, anti-Semitism, and misogyny. Here we have a two-part story, one where textiles were prized possessions and the other where if secondhand, they were often shunned. There is a lesson in this for the modern reader in a world that has become subservient to the convenience of fast fashion. Perhaps, we can learn once again to cherish our textiles, to buy those of quality knowing that they will last, and can be passed on to others when the time comes. Textiles were once responsible for connecting our world. They should not now be responsible for destroying it.

Edwards has produced a well-written, deeply thought-provoking monograph that will surely be of interest to a variety of scholars not least in the areas of legal history, property, slavery, and women's history. It will also be a useful text for students of fashion, who so often seem to neglect the study of fashion history except for the twentieth century. While focusing almost entirely on the USA, the global nature of the subject makes excellent reading for historians of all nations.

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