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Submitting to Limina

Details about the journal and how to submit can be found at www.limina.arts.uwa.edu.au.

Cover Image

Digital image by Nik (@helloimnik), Crisis. Retrieved from unsplash.com.

Cowie, Helen Louise, *Victims of Fashion: Animal Commodities in Victorian Britain*; Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022; hardback, pp. viii + 290, 30 b/w illustrations; RRP: \$56.95, ISBN: 9781108495172.

In the nineteenth-century, the Victorians were dressed head-to-toe in animal commodities. An upper-class lady might wear an alpaca-wool dress, a whalebone corset, a sealskin jacket, tortoiseshell combs, ivory jewellery, a hat with exotic plumage, and luxury cosmetics of ambergris and musk (6).

Professor at the University of York, Cowie specializes in the history of animals and science. In her 2014 publication *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, she focused on the ethics of zoos, menageries, and the monetization of animals in public places. *Victims of Fashion: Animal Commodities in Victorian Britain* addresses the history of animals from a new perspective: the British fashion industries use of animal commodities from 1800–1914. Through a variety of lenses – social, political and colonial – her book explores the destruction wrought by animal-based fashions, often contributing to species that are endangered in our modern world. It goes without saying that this book carries an intense content warning for animal cruelty and exploitation.

Cowie's intention is to consider the 'social and ecological impact' of the Victorian and Edwardian fashion industry (8). She has four central interests: contemporary global sourcing and supply chains (8), manipulating the natural world for profit (9), and the emergence of animal welfare groups (10). In my opinion, her most interesting topic is her fourth; as consumerist fashion was a novel phenomenon (9), Cowie considers the impacts of new-fangled mass marketing, and mass media spreading activism for animal rights (12). Cowie establishes that, through a 'range of different voices and perspectives', this book is her attempt to speak "for" the affected victims, as animal voices 'are harder to recover' from history than human voices and had limited agency in the commodification process (14-16).

Cowie's first chapter 'Murderous Millinery' sets a macabre tone with a quote from 1878, describing a show-stopping ball dress 'trimmed with the skins of 300 robins' (17). The next four chapters, covering sealskin, ivory, alpaca wool, and luxury perfumes respectively, follow a recognizable pattern. Cowie introduces the origins and farming of the fashion item, then analyses its relationship to the four categories from her introduction.

Cowie frames the book as covering multiple topics. Therefore, each chapter focuses on her chosen categories to a varying degree. For example, chapter two 'The Seal and His Jacket' is especially concerned with Victorian animal preservation. Aside from the argument to protect seal populations because sealskin was 'useful to man', Victorian scientists began to argue for preserving animals 'for their own sake...or posterity' (84–85), and Cowie stresses this perspective might have been a cornerstone of modern environmentalism (86). By contrast, chapter five 'Bitter Perfumes' is more focused on marketing. Luxury perfume-producing creatures, such as bears, musk deer, and civet cats, were kept as close to the British public as possible to reduce

suspicious of counterfeit products, as she notes bears' grease was often swapped out for 'almond oil, hogs' lard, or mutton suet' (182).

These chapters share the same methodological structure as a case study - there is minimal overlap of the content and analysis for each animal. However, one consistent through-line are the Victorian people's reaction towards exploitation and cruelty, with the most noticeable connecting point being British imperialism and its knock-on effects. Chapters one, three, four and five all focus on attempts to naturalise and domesticate the featured wild animals on English soil, and chapter three describes elephants being embraced as an 'active ally in the colonisation of the Dark Continent' (107). This chapter details several major attempts at using elephants for labour and transportation, fuelled by the contemporary (and so-called 'humanitarian') argument that the British were 'rescuing [the elephants] from barbarous extermination' to become 'willing servants ... to the care of British property' (121). Her book presents a Western view of colonialism, as the majority of anecdotes are from British sources, and rarely touch on the exploitation of the native inhabitants handling and killing these animal victims.

Cowie states upfront that she means to be a voice for the animal population which suffered during this time. However, her text is relatively free of 'animal voices' (14). Apart from a few memorable exceptions, such as a court case regarding two captive bears which made the street 'resound [during the night] with hideous howls' (168), the majority of her animal studies regard the species as a unit. This makes chapter six 'Monkey Business' a standout, as she covers the trade of exotic pets in Britain.

This section is arguably the most horrific of the book. Cowie does not stint on describing the abuse of monkeys, parrots, guinea pigs, tortoises, and other exotic animals who could not adapt to British weather and domestic life. As bleak as this subject is, there are some passages that verge on darkly comedic, with accounts from the 'Agony & Advice' columns of animal-themed publications. Cowie frames each pet owner's intentions as misguided abuse, but the reader cannot help but laugh at these almost 200-years old viral animals, such as the disobedient pet lemur who demanded his 'daily breakfast of coffee and marmalade' (210).

Therefore, Cowie's final chapter attempts to tap into the mystifying double standards of normalised hunting, farming, and killing, compared to the obvious love felt towards these exotic pets. I believe this book could benefit from further accounts of these victimised animals while they were still living commodities. Cowie has already demonstrated her interest through her *Exhibiting Animals* publication (2014), and this subject is far too intriguing for just the final chapter.

Cowie's subject matter is extensive, incorporating decades of history into 290 pages. However, there are intentional omissions. Her book rarely touches on clothing or 'fashion' trends outside of their relationship to animals. Cowie briefly quotes Alison Matthews David's 2015 *Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present*, but this book stands apart from traditional fashion history, as related by Matthews David's *Fashion Victims* (2015) or *Killer Style* (2019). Aside from Joshua Katcher's 2019 publication *Fashion Animals* (which puts more of a focus on fur and recognizable modern brands such as Vogue) Cowie's book stands as the best example of her specific field.

Victims of Fashion is an excellent reading experience. Cowie's chosen frameworks of analysis are well-realised in each case study, with language that is accessible to every reader. Despite the similar structure of each chapter, the book stays engaging by varying its tone between unpleasant and confronting, to surprisingly funny. Despite her dark subject matter and the plethora of diatribes from period RSPCA advocates, Cowie's own perception of the Victorians remains entirely neutral. Her book seeks to explore and the practises and trends of period fashion, not to condemn, and she does an exemplary job of making fashion even more fascinating.

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