Historians are good at putting objects in their place. Details about context, manufacture, use, abuse, meaning, significance, decay, and so on are layered so that an object itself becomes a carrier of its moment in history. Putting material back into the fabric of history itself enriches that history. The historians in this volume represent an exemplary range of skills and array of methodological tools for the analysis of historical stuff. Dynamics of power, presences of historical bodies, traces of historical selves, all emerge from material evidence and the ways in which it has been marked, used or applied. As an advertisement for the importance of material history, this book could not have done a finer job. The editors’ introduction alone is an essential primer on work in this field, and recommended as a good place to begin for anyone seeking exposure to the variety of methods historians use to handle the physical stuff of history.

Yet this book has two objects in mind, entangled in a single purpose. Not only does it intend to show the importance of historical materiality, of the vitality of objects, it aims to do this by pointing to the ways in which such objects reveal the history of emotions. The field of the history of emotions, still rapidly expanding, desperately needs substantial work in this area in order to exemplify some of its key theoretical and methodological claims. The addition of material history to the history-of-emotions repertoire has great promise in allowing historians to rebuild contexts of feeling, in combination with other kinds of more familiar sources – intellectual history, life writing, art, etc. Here is an opportunity, through the language and the physical evidence of feeling, to connect the sensory and the affective with the cognitive. The language of feeling, which this book explicitly evokes, promises to break the field out of a categorical binding of its own creation, in order the better to analyse historical experience holistically. The phrase ‘I feel’, after all, can be supposed to mean ‘I think’, or ‘I am having an emotion about’, or ‘I am touching’, and very often comprises an aggregate of all these things, representing the complexity of affective-sensory-cognitive experience. As an impetus to becoming open to and critically aware of the historicity and specificity of forms of feeling in the past, in all their delicious unfamiliarity, it is compelling. On the whole I found this impetus not rigorously pursued.

Where the book succeeds in its theoretical sophistication with regard to the treatment of historical artefacts,
it does not always succeed in its attempt to connect this to the affective or experiential life of the past. The chapters are uneven in this respect. In general I missed the theoretical insights of Sara Ahmed in the book, though she is briefly mentioned in a couple of chapters. She is notably absent in Lara Farina’s chapter on *Handlyng Synne* as a tactile, ‘sticky’ object, and also in one of the strongest chapters, by Alicia Marchant on the Stone of Scone, which deals directly with the notion of ‘sticky-ness’ that Ahmed has developed so thoroughly in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Marchant’s contribution charts the temporality of stickyness, of the connection of the stone’s power to magic, its affective weight being a reification of belief in divine intervention or authority in the matter of kingship. It is caught in a web of myth and legend that, in some moments more than others, make it a physical signifier of past, present, future, identity, belonging and belief. At other moments, more recently, it has become non-stick, if you will, as belief systems and political situations have changed. It is a tourist attraction, a curio, but not much more. At one point (p. 205), Marchant suggests that the crowd assembled to welcome the stone’s return to Scotland ‘did not know how to react or feel’ about it. This is the closest any of the authors come to a genuine disruption of emotion knowledge, raising an awareness of the effort involved, however apparently unconscious, in the formation of feelings in specific temporal spaces and contexts. It is an expression of the uncertainty of evocation. An object does not automatically produce any emotion in a person’s encounter with it. Whatever appears to be affectively projected from an object first has to be projected into it. It is, and this the book as a whole does indeed seem to suggest, a constant dynamic process of movement.

Engagement with theory and method in the history of emotions is much less prominent in general than engagement with theory and method in the history of materiality. Across many of the chapters, a tendency to conceive *a priori* of emotional categories (generally speaking, canonical contemporary categories), projecting them back onto objects and into historical contexts, short circuits one of the history of emotions’ principal aims: to historicise emotions themselves. For all the acute awareness that objects are historical, something called ‘emotion’ is here employed by editors and authors alike as a self-evident category of analysis, appealed to as if the experiential meaning of words – fear, awe, hope, love, etc – is clear and fixed, across time and across languages. The general category of ‘emotion’ gives way to the adjectival form ‘emotional’, which operates as an empty qualifier that serves as self-explanatory analysis. What does it mean to say that an experience or encounter was ‘emotional’, or even ‘deeply emotional’, as Susan Broomhall does here (p. 178, p. 186)? These phrases are the beginning points of inquiry, not the end points of analysis. The general effect is to project a contemporary set of ‘emotions’, conceived of in English, onto the whole set of diverse objects and materials. Those exemplary analyses of historical stuff, therefore, remain stuck to an out-of-place affective language, approaching only with difficulty the contingency and situatedness of historical languages of experience, sense, and ‘emotion’.

To some extent, this appears to be a conscious choice. The most compelling (and best written) chapter in the book is Carolyn Steedman’s extraordinary reflexive account of the act of ‘hearing’ voices in the archive: the simultaneously convergent and divergent practice of being exposed to historical voices alongside the curious realisation that the life given to those voices comes from the mind of the historian. At the core of this reflection is the notion of a ‘project of modernity’ that began with Adam Smith’s ‘empathetic turn’. It is a notion that I do not share, and it makes for an interesting methodological impasse that historians of emotion are clearly not finished discussing. To me, the phrase ‘empathetic turn’ is itself anachronistic. Adam Smith’s account of sympathy is fundamentally not an account of empathy; sympathy has had its own history since Adam Smith; empathy too is a multivalent relative neologism, its meaning difficult to pin down. But I do see the point that the historian wrestles, implicitly or explicitly, with the question of ‘how would I feel if that happened to me?’ when dealing with the experiences of historical actors (p. 211). Short of comprehensive contextual knowledge of the time, place, circumstances, epistemologies and beliefs that are formational of historical voices (and of the affective meaning of objects), empathy lurks, ready to supplant historical experience with the historian’s experience, to cover over the cracks of historical uncertainty with experiential anachronism. For my part, I think it is essential that we do recover the question that Steedman seems to be uncomfortable with, of how the historical actor felt. We must work against our tendency to grapple with how it would feel if it happened to me. It is difficult, but possible, and perhaps begins with such
processes as the one Steedman so eloquently presents, of candid and complex self-examination.

The book concludes with a useful afterword by Joanne Begiato, which points forward to future research directions. One cannot help thinking that this book as a whole would itself have benefited from heeding these comments, though clearly they were written when the chapters were already substantially complete. In particular, Begiato’s call to ‘be more experimental about what constitutes an emotional object, incorporating a sensory approach’ (p. 236) is well taken. There are hints at this in the book, especially in Elina Gertsman’s allusion to ‘sensual encounters’ (p. 27) with medieval relics and John Gagné’s chapter on prosthetic hands crafted out of iron. Here, more than elsewhere, the language of ‘feeling’ encompasses touch as well as ‘emotion’, and one detects throughout an opportunity to have complicated the language of feeling, to disrupt the category of the ‘emotional’, and to begin to rebuild past experience in its historical complexity. Yet the extensive and well developed historiography on the senses is, by and large, overlooked. Given that encounters with objects are visual and tactile, and that objects might evoke a response through smell or taste (leather springs to mind, as in Hilary Davidson’s chapter on shoes), and are sometimes defined by what they sound like (bells, most famously), there does indeed seem to be much more to say. My own feeling is that self-conscious attempts to explore the language of emotion, with concerns limited to those things that fall under a presentist understanding of ‘emotional’ categories, can get in the way of reaching a more complete and complex picture of the experiential past.

Notes


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