

The Great Exhibition of 1851: a Nation on Display

Review Number:

132

Publish date:

Saturday, 1 July, 2000

Author:

Jeffrey Auerbach

ISBN:

9780300080077

Date of Publication:

1999

Pages:

286pp.

Publisher:

Yale University Press

Place of Publication:

New Haven, CT

Reviewer:

John R. Davis

A scholarly history of the Great Exhibition these days is both a welcome and a brave undertaking. Welcome, because despite the fact that the event has been a commonplace of school history teaching and a recognisable landmark for historians of the nineteenth century, it has not been appreciated in a three-dimensional manner. The hagiography of contemporary accounts, the generational revolt of mid-twentieth century historians, and post-colonial distaste for things Victorian have all prevented this - despite valiant corrective efforts by Asa Briggs, Paul Greenhalgh, and Utz Haltern. Brave, because the Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations, to give it its full title, was just that: a huge and monumental enterprise, of importance in art, science and technology, of political, economic and social significance, and involving not just a huge swathe of British society, but elements from just about the whole globe. To bring the Exhibition back to us in all its glory (and perhaps ugliness) is an exercise of vast complexity and scope.

Jeffrey Auerbach's superbly packaged and well-researched book represents a significant step towards reappraising the Great Exhibition and recapturing its true meaning. Its main remit is to explore and identify the Exhibition's cultural value. This it does, in a way that is erudite, sensitive to detail, and yet also accessible and even entertaining. Divided into three general sections devoted to the making, experience and legacy of the Exhibition, Auerbach's account is drawn from archival material held at the Royal Society of Arts and the Royal Commission of 1851, the private correspondence of Royal Commission members, newspapers and journals, and countless literary and private sources. It argues persuasively, that the Great Exhibition was given a multiplicity of meanings; both by its organisers, as a way of achieving support for the event, as well as by its audience. The Great Exhibition's success - it becomes clear - owed in part to the great conversation that it caused.

In this respect, Auerbach's book is helpful. Rather than portraying the Exhibition simplistically as a grand demonstration of national prowess fuelled by vanity, or as a covert imperialist plot, or even as a piece of

bourgeois propaganda in the face of grinding poverty, it shows that a whiff of all of these characteristics and also many others surrounded the event in Hyde Park. Faced with the uphill prospect of generating support for the Exhibition - Auerbach counters the notion that it was popular from the start - and funding difficulties, a situation not dissimilar to the Greenwich Dome, the organisers of the Great Exhibition carefully chose to accommodate public concerns and anxieties to a great degree. The original desire of the group at the Society of Arts, which came to include Henry Cole, Charles Wentworth Dilke and John Scott Russell, to raise the standard of design of Britain's industrial produce in an artistic and scientific sense, was soon accompanied by Prime Minister Lord John Russell's concern to celebrate commercial liberalism and Free Trade, the liberal view of the advantages of the British political and social model, the East India Company's conviction of the wealth of the empire in terms of raw materials, the Church's belief in God's benevolence, and so on.

The result of this situation was a display with a variety of purposes and often containing discordant themes. Hence, the Exhibition could incorporate elements of patriotism and even bigotry while trumpeting the value of internationalism and universal peace. The original intentions of the close circle round Prince Albert were overlaid by those involved in the Exhibition's wider organisation. Further interpretations were offered by press and public, and were not rejected but instead tolerated and even courted by the Royal Commission. As Auerbach concludes, the meaning of the Great Exhibition can not be reduced to one explanation alone. Another result was the popularity of the Exhibition: while observers disagreed with each other, the compromises of the Royal Commission ensured that people talked about it. Negative reactions were also valuable in rooting the Exhibition in the national consciousness.

The heart of Auerbach's argument is that the variety of interpretations put forward and the discussion that took place regarding them was a major event in the formation of a British national identity. A nation, as he puts it, was on display. There were a variety of ways in which the Exhibition provoked further disintegration and partition in British society. For example, Auerbach shows how class-consciousness became more defined as a result of contact at the Exhibition and London's difference from the provinces was revisited during the process of its organisation. Certain sectors of British society were excluded from the discussion - notably the radical working classes and much of Ireland. Protestants and Catholics renewed old antipathies in their critiques of Gothic furniture or their commentaries on differences between southern and northern European exhibits. And, as mentioned, contradictions abounded in the message broadcast from the Crystal Palace in its original setting. However, despite all this, in general, the Exhibition and the discussion surrounding it helped create and disseminate a loosely defined set of values. A consensus of sorts about what was British was the result.

Auerbach's book has many strengths. In terms of content, it pays due regard to the process of organisation of the Exhibition, often shirked by historians, perhaps on the (erroneous) assumption that the subject is a dry one. As Auerbach shows, local committees were sometimes in danger of being hijacked by Chartists, included women's fund-raising activities, and were played off each other by the Royal Commission in its attempt to drum up support via local rivalry. The archival correspondence on this subject provides an intriguing spotlight on local politics and issues, and the way in which local elites were exploited by the Royal Commission to drum up support for the Exhibition. The comparison of local committee fund-raising with electoral returns is useful in showing the umbilical link between the Exhibition and political liberalism - even while the Exhibition organisers tried to paint the event as a non-partisan, national affair. The process of organisation is, as Auerbach shows, important in terms of dictating the way the Exhibition finally looked. This also extends to the subject of funding, which is also given consideration, and the fact that, order to avoid accusations of sleaze, the Royal Commission had to throw the whole project upon public charity, which, in turn, meant allowing the public a say.

The book is highly illustrated, and the images are apposite and fascinating. They include, for example, razor sharp cartoons from Punch, which drew much inspiration and mirth from the Exhibition's hypocrisies, but was generally won over to the event, maps showing how the Exhibition's success depended to a degree on recently-constructed railway lines, beautifully coloured reproductions of the display from Dickinson's and other picture books, examples of Crystal Palace memorabilia, demonstrating the Exhibition's imprint in a commercial sense, and photographs showing the smouldering remains of the building after its destruction by

fire in 1936.

Overall, the work contains a great deal that is of value in terms of research on the Great Exhibition, and also provides a fascinating read for the general reader. Auerbach has provided more detail than perhaps any other writer so far on the public discourse in relation to the Exhibition's organisation and its reception. The central thesis, that the Exhibition provided an opportunity for the British to discuss themselves, and to air views on moral, social and political questions, with the result that there was some overall integrative effect, is useful and thought-provoking. It carries forward with detailed literary and cultural research ideas raised by Walter Benjamin, Utz Haltern, Ingeborg Cleve and others.

Putting forth a historical thesis and substantiating it always involves the danger of selectivity or over-emphasis - the reduction of the three-dimensional of an event - especially if a book is still supposed to be marketable and readable: providing all angles on a topic and simultaneously presenting an argument with its requisite evidence is a tough task, and this is particularly the case with such a multifaceted event as the Great Exhibition. It would also, perhaps, be unfair to criticise Auerbach's book for not being something the author never intended: this, after all, is a look at the Great Exhibition's value as an exercise in self-reflection on the part of the British. It is to this purpose most of the book's structure is directed. This is the point of much of the evidence that is provided. Finally, it has to be said that Auerbach has made a brave effort to encompass as much in the way of explanatory background as feasible. His discussion of, for example, the aesthetic debates of the mid-century, or the possibility of a second industrial revolution, is appreciated.

Yet one does feel that the momentum of the book allows certain contextual elements to appear as undeveloped and that, in some cases, a more defined treatment of these would aid rather than hinder Auerbach's thesis. Take, for example, the social question. In the first half of the book, the reader is given a detailed history of the organisation of the Exhibition and the way in which the guiding forces of aesthetic reformers, the Society of Arts, Prince Albert and the Government came together. While this is certainly contextual information, the question is somewhat allowed to hover in the reader's mind as to what the driving force was which brought these actors together. Later on, it becomes clear that concerns about the social divide arising from industrialisation were an important part of this. However, an initial discussion of the social and political context in Britain might have helped. Aesthetic reformers were afraid of the social consequences of declining standards of design, and were convinced that aesthetic education bred social harmony just as increased profits would put food on the table. The governments of Peel and Russell faced an ugly social situation in the 1840s, and were desperate to rebuild respect among the masses for government and to dispel the rift that had opened between the manufacturing classes and the landed interests. The continental revolutions in 1848 created a real sense of paranoia in political circles in Britain, and concentrated many minds on the value of an event that could uplift and unify the whole country.

One figure to whom the social question was apparent was Prince Albert. Auerbach correctly notes Albert's reluctance to become involved in the Exhibition at first - in contrast to the popular wisdom of its being his project. Yet this stemmed not just from a finely tuned sense of the fragility of his own position in British constitutional life but also a conviction of the situation of weakness of the monarchy as an institution in Britain. A well-rounded depiction of Albert's position was rather needed, and one wonders if this had to do with the omission of the Royal Archives at Windsor from an otherwise impressive list of archives visited. The Royal Archives collection held at the Royal Commission of 1851, which was used, though it is voluminous, is essentially the weeded-out official material. Albert's personal thoughts are recorded in the private correspondence at Windsor. Certainly, behind Albert's apparently flippant responses to the fears of Frederick William IV of Prussia that the Exhibition might spark off revolution lay an acute awareness of the political message his involvement in the project was sending to the people, as well as to absolutists abroad. Once the Exhibition's popularity was assured, he moved to support it openly, in the knowledge that this would constitute a new venture for the monarchy, and that this was an urgent necessity in Britain at this time. The monarchy would be seen to be dirtying its hands in industry, and working for the good of the masses. This would extend beyond the symbolic to a personal involvement quite repugnant to foreign monarchs: Queen Victoria's presence at the opening ceremony, walking unprotected before thousands of people, caused a sensation abroad because it was a death-defying show of confidence of the monarch in her

people as well as a demonstration of the unity of the monarchy with industry.

Another subject, which might have been given earlier priority, and firmer treatment, was Free Trade. Auerbach is right to point out the equivocation on this subject of the Exhibition organisers. They were keen to include all sections of Britain in the project, for financial reasons as well as to help calm social differences, and so resisted connections of the Exhibition with Free Trade in their rhetorical pronouncements and any official correspondence. Still, one senses an ambiguity in Auerbach's own identification of the Exhibition as a Free Trade exercise. Indeed, the early stages of the book tend to deny the link, whereas the latter affirm it. Perhaps this arises from a reluctance to accuse the Exhibition organisers brazenly as dishonest on this score - as arguing that the Exhibition had nothing to do with Free Trade, when it obviously did. Auerbach points out, for example, that notable protectionists were included on the Royal Commission. However, here again it feels rather as if the bull is not being grasped by the horns. The mere facts that Peel was not only involved from the start, but also served as an important back-room fixer in the early stages of the Exhibition's organisation point to a concrete connection with Free Trade. Peel also served as a conduit to Lord John Russell, the Prime Minister, who was seriously worried by the danger of a protectionist backlash at this time, and was keen to see something done which would consolidate the Free Trade legislation of 1846-8. Yes, the Royal Commission included Lord Stanley for the non-Peelite conservatives. But it has to be said that Stanley's protectionism was weak, and his credentials as a spokesman for landed interests were already being publicly questioned. The Exhibition would serve for him, as well as for many others conservatives (including Disraeli), as the scene of his conversion to Free Trade. Auerbach is right to point out the efforts the Exhibition's organisers undertook to include all parties, but what Peel, Russell, and even Albert, were aiming for was a new consensus in the wake of the transition to Free Trade; in other words, to perpetuate it.

The social question and Free Trade are two dimensions of Auerbach's book which might have been confronted more squarely, had the work not been configured so strongly round its integrative thesis. The same reason appears to have caused another aspect to have been dropped altogether: namely, the international angle. The book does talk about foreigners. However, the discussion revolves solely round the image British people had of foreigners, with a view to showing how they felt they differed from them. In other words, the aim of showing how British prejudices and views on foreigners helped forge a sense of national identity, which Auerbach fulfils superbly, drives the treatment of foreign involvement in the Exhibition: how foreign countries arranged their exhibitions, what foreigners thought of the event, and the impact it had abroad, are omitted. This is rather unfortunate, perhaps, as it tends to support one of long-held popular notions about the Exhibition; that it was a British affair. Readers today have to be reminded that half of the building was devoted to foreign goods, even a large part of the British section consisted of imperial produce. The Exhibition's organisers - and Albert particularly so - were concerned not just that British manufacturers should see foreign artistic produce, but that the Exhibition should have an economic and political message abroad, and thus they went to great lengths to involve foreign countries. The post-revolutionary economic and political circumstances in North America and Europe, arguably, meant the Exhibition had results there greater than might otherwise have been the case - for example in terms of technology transfer or the stabilisation of regimes. The title *A Nation on Display* is apposite in terms of Britain's view of itself and the formation of a sense of 'Britishness'. But it might equally have encompassed foreigners' perceptions of this moderately liberal, industrialised and commercially permissive country. Indeed, Auerbach might have acknowledged Haltern's argument that while it served as a spring-board for internationalism in many forms, and was arguably an important milestone in the process of globalisation, the Great Exhibition also did much to solidify senses of national unity and divergence abroad, and not just in Britain.

One or two other elements fell prey to the need to argue the Exhibition's integrating value. The Exhibition's classification system is given some solid treatment, though the way it arose from the London committee of selection is not. The jury system is not treated in great detail, possibly because of its complicated nature, possibly because it constituted one of the most concrete examples of international collaboration, and may have clouded the issue. Beyond a brief discussion of the technology revolution, economic aspects of the Exhibition are downplayed - though this is a common feature of historical literature on exhibitions, where

economic results are hard to quantify. The treatment of the political legacy of the Exhibition, in terms of its success in securing exactly what Albert, Peel and Russell had hoped - a new liberal consensus - could be more biographically detailed.

To some extent, then, Auerbach's book does not allow the Exhibition to speak for itself. However, it more than succeeds when it comes to arguing its case that the Exhibition was an important stage in the development of a British national identity. Here it is a solid, thought provoking and satisfying piece of scholarly work, and should attract the attention of cultural and political historians of the nineteenth century. It is also destined to reach a wide readership. Its thesis will help the re-evaluation of the Great Exhibition after 150 years of partial treatment.

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