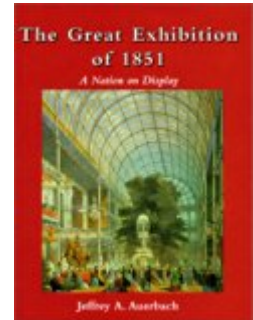


Jeffrey A. Auerbach. *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999. viii + 280 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-08007-0.



Reviewed by Geoffrey Tyack

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Since 1851 the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, held in London's Hyde Park, has fascinated historians and cultural commentators. The spectacular glass shed in which the 100,000 exhibits were housed has always been regarded as one of the most innovative structures of the nineteenth century, and there are few books on the history of modern architecture which do not mention it. The achievement of the organisers in assembling goods from all over the world for what was in effect the first of the great world fairs has been hailed as an example of the organisational ability which helped make Britain the 'workshop of the world'. And, with a fifth of the whole British population attending without any of the rioting and disorder foreseen by the prophets of doom, it has often been taken to demonstrate the dawning of a period of social equilibrium after the turbulent first half of the century, when British society underwent the trials of pioneering industrialisation and unprecedented urban growth.

Jeffrey Auerbach's well-illustrated and well-produced book tells the story of Exhibition in a

readable and reliable manner, drawing heavily on the unpublished records of the Royal Commission which organised it, and on the contemporary press -- not only the national broadsheets and reviews but also more popular and ephemeral material. His account of the origins of the Exhibition, and of the meetings and local committees which drummed up support for it, is especially enlightening. But the main aim of his book is not so much to describe the Exhibition as to draw out its meaning. Like several contemporary British historians, Auerbach is interested in the construction of nationality, and he believes that the Exhibition was 'arguably the greatest defining occasion for nineteenth century Britons between the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 and Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897' (p. 4). Showcasing as it did the nation's manufacturing and commercial prowess, he even goes so far as to say that it 'defined Britain as an industrial nation' (p. 127).

Auerbach takes pains to distance himself from earlier historians, who, he claims, have taken the rhetoric of the Exhibition's organisers at face value. He shows convincingly that the event

was first conceived more as a means of stimulating what he calls a 'sputtering economy' (p. 10), still suffering from the travails of the 1840s, than as a chauvinistic celebration of Britain's superiority as a manufacturing country. Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's consort, was less involved in its conception and planning than has been widely believed, and large sections of the British public responded to it, at least at first, with 'apathy if not outright opposition' (p.1). Far from demonstrating the superiority of British to foreign goods, the design reformers who first conceived the Exhibition believed that their juxtaposition would help the cause of better design in Britain and remedy perceived deficiencies which, then as now, were attributed in part to inadequate education. And although machinery was much in evidence, many of the goods on display, like those in A.W.N. Pugin's Medieval Court (itself an implicit criticism of the prevailing values of the Exhibitions promoters), were hand-crafted.

Yet, despite all this, many, perhaps most, visitors seem to have come away from the Exhibition with an enhanced awareness of Britain's commercial and industrial achievements; with a stronger belief in the benefits of free trade and 'globalisation'; and with a greater sense of the nation's 'manifest destiny' as a land of liberty and progress relatively untrammelled by the restraints of interventionist government. Though the poorest of the poor did not attend, 'respectable' workers showed up in large numbers after the price of admission was reduced, and they behaved in an orderly way, even if they frequented different parts of the building from their frock-coated and crinolined social superiors. The mere fact of attracting so many people from all parts of the country to one place, many of them travelling by train, helped to create an integrated national culture (though the Irish, significantly, showed little interest). And, by placing goods, and especially raw materials, from the colonies at the very heart of the building the organisers played a part in 'domesticating the British Empire, displaying it as 'a cog in the manu-

facturing process' (p. 101). So in many respects Auerbach confirms the traditional Whiggish interpretation of the Exhibition, while showing more sensitivity than previous writers to its cultural nuances. The Exhibition, he believes, is best understood as a huge bazaar with 'something for almost everyone' (p. 2), and that is perhaps how we should understand its significance today.

The Great Exhibition cannot be divorced from the building in which it took place -- at the time the largest enclosed space on earth --but here Auerbach is a little disappointing. He refers to the jeremiads of John Ruskin and William Morris, but he conveys relatively little of the excitement felt by many visitors as they saw the huge 'crystal palace' -- so named by the journalist Douglas Jerrold -- glittering in the summer sunshine. He points out that Joseph Paxton's scheme for a pre-fabricated structure of glass and iron removed many of the practical and aesthetic objections which had threatened to place the project in jeopardy, but he says little about its construction, and he does not enlarge on the crucial role played in the design by the contractors, Fox and Henderson. To a very large extent the message and meaning of the Exhibition were embodied in the building, and in the process of its construction and recycling, just as that of the 1887 Paris Exhibition was, and is, embodied in the Eiffel Tower. We can still enjoy the Eiffel Tower, but the Crystal Palace is alas no longer with us, having been removed to Sydenham when the Exhibition closed and then destroyed by fire in 1936 -- seen by some, as Auerbach points out, as a portent of worse horrors to come. Yet the optimistic, rationalistic and enquiring spirit of the Exhibition still lives on in the South Kensington estate bought by the Commissioners out of its profits, and subsequently laid out with educational and cultural buildings including the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Natural History Museum, the Albert Hall and many more. Though somewhat perfunctorily treated here, South Kensington or Albertopolis was surely

the most valuable of the Exhibition's gifts to posterity.

Reference to the cultural legacy of 1851 cannot help but provoke comparisons with later exhibitions in which the British have endeavoured to define themselves to each other and to the world at large. Auerbach has some interesting things to say about the 1951 Festival of Britain, which he sees as representing a paradigm shift away from the liberal ideals of the Great Exhibition. Fortunately perhaps, his book appeared before the opening of the vacuous Millennium Dome, a monument to political vanity and cultural dumbing down, which will provide ample material for future historians. But, as far as the 1851 Exhibition is concerned, Auerbach has justified his book's subtitle - 'a nation on display' - and has produced a book which will be read with profit by anyone interested in the history of nineteenth-century British society.

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