Introduction

A miniature working colliery. A priceless – though poorly cut – Indian diamond. Fossils that glowed in the dark. Waterproof paper. A statue of a Greek slave. A statue of an Amazon on horseback being attacked by a lion (cast in zinc and bronze). Amazone, or ‘essence of meat’. Steam engines. Everlasting chlorine. A pair of anaxyridian (self-suspending) trousers. Cashmere from the goats of Prince Albert. An ivory howdah on the back of a stuffed elephant. Innumerable colossal blocks of coal. A canister of boiled mutton from an Arctic expedition. A sea-water regenerator, a set of whippletrees and any number of machines to remove smut from wheat. All found their way into the Crystal Palace at Hyde Park for the Great Exhibition of 1851. Even though the event went on for just shy of six months, this astonishing and eclectic array of material challenged an individual’s capacity to comprehend it in its entirety. ‘[T]he eye is dazzled, the brain is feverous’ wrote Thackeray’s fictional French reporter, Monsieur Gobemouche (Punch, 20 May 1851, p. 198; see 3.4). As The Times of 2 May marvelled, ‘thirty visits will hardly be sufficient for those who wish to “get up” the whole Exhibition’; many evidently agreed and decided to pay £3 3s (men) or £2 2s (women) for a season ticket. The sense of something epic was palpable. ‘We are’, announced John Charles Whish in his Great Exhibition Prize Essay (1851), ‘upon the eve of an event which may certainly be looked upon as the greatest wonder of the world’ (p. 1). This wonder, in all its glorious miscellany, in its noise, colour and light, perplexed just as frequently as it inspired. Part trade fair, part festival, part shopping mall, part art gallery and museum: what was the Great Exhibition and what did it mean?

Anyone new to the subject of the Great Exhibition could be forgiven for sharing in this confusion. While there has never been much doubt that Prince Albert, Henry Cole and the other Commissioners who organised the Exhibition wanted it to demonstrate to British manufacturers the advantages of embracing free trade, as Louise Purbrick argues, later historians have ‘saturated the Great Exhibition with meanings’. This is partly due to the diversity of exhibits but also because ‘the Crystal Palace Exhibition was a new
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kind of spectacle, a modern-day mass-cultural event too large and unknown for its meaning to be easily pinned down’ (Teukolsky, 2007: p. 84). Rachel Teukolsky’s view is endorsed by the influential historical work of Jeffrey Auerbach and John R. Davis, and the editors of *Victorian Prism*, who have argued that its uniqueness meant the Exhibition became an occasion for debating numerous issues about the position of Britain on a global stage and ‘an unofficial forum on the meanings of modernity’ (Buzard *et al.*, 2007: p. 1).

Part of the Exhibition was always about making sense of novelty and the unknown, about generating meaning from – and, in some senses, finding ways to express and control – the modern, expanding world that was felt to contain a surplus of significance. For Paul Young (developing the argument of Anne McClintock, 1995), it was precisely the fact that many of the objects in the Exhibition were odd or unfamiliar and therefore slightly threatening – often those from abroad, but we might also include the gamut of new mechanical inventions on display – that seemed to necessitate their incorporation within ‘the historical moment of modernity’ (2008: p. 25). Allardyce Nicoll was partly right in arguing that ‘The Great Exhibition was a symbol of an age that was passing away and the premonition of an age that was to come’ (1946: 1, p. 7). Even so, shaping and curating a ‘modern’ world at the Exhibition – a world of incongruity and idiosyncrasy, of gravity and absurdity, of steam power and innovations in trouser design – was manifestly not so much a way of splitting with the past, but of providing reassurance about the future.

If the Exhibition is significant primarily because it represented something new – and it undoubtedly inaugurated a new era of international expositions – Geoffrey Cantor reminds us that there are ‘many ways to map modernity’ (2011: p. 8). Modernity’s meanings are characteristically protean. For Judith Flanders and Thomas Richards the Exhibition was a watershed moment in the development of modern-day consumer habits, ‘the first outburst of the phantasmagoria of commodity culture’ (Richards, 1990: p. 18). The Crystal Palace was, despite the absence of prices, a vast arena for advertising consumer goods. Tony Bennett and, more recently, Dan Smith have aimed to understand the role that the Exhibition played in forging a modern consciousness of behavioural patterns grounded in formations of ‘display’, ‘spectacle’ and ‘surveillance’ (Bennett, 1988: p. 78) that derive from the work of Foucault. Both view the phenomenon of the Exhibition as playing a crucial role in the development of public spaces of display, such as museums and galleries, which perpetuate or critique Western cultural values. Then there is the normalisation of the machine. Purbrick, influenced by Marx, notes that one of the functions of the Exhibition was to illustrate the ‘achievement of industrial technology without reference to the conditions of industrial labour’ (2001: p. 2). Part of the fetishisation of the manufactured object was evidently an attempt to win a larger argument about the relevance of the labourer in
an age of mechanical reproduction which Walter Benjamin had identified as far back as the 1930s. (The average visitor would, however, have been struck much more forcefully by the noise generated by the Machines in Motion than by the alienation of the workforce.)

For all these reasons the Exhibition continues to be significant in the studies of material culture, particularly regarding issues of commodification, which have grown increasingly important to Victorian scholars since the 1980s. As Lyn Pykett puts it, there has been a ‘material turn’ in Victorian studies and Victorian historiography. The Victorians, as with later critics of the period, were ‘preoccupied with the signifying power of things’ (Pykett, 2004: p. 1): the ability of objects to disclose information and meaning, whether this was about individuals or a wider culture. The consumption of objects and the growth of a commodity culture in the nineteenth century has been a focus of critics interested in the development of capitalism – particularly those influenced by Marx and Adorno – such as the social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1988) who extensively theorised the exchange value of commodities. Jeff Nunokawa (1994) traced anxiety about commodities to increased ownership of property, while Asa Briggs (1988) examined the historical reasons for the explosion of consumer goods in the nineteenth century. The attribution of value to material substance has also been the source of friction in material studies where objects are often considered to pass through, rather than abide in, different states that variously decree their use value, functionality, exchange value or aesthetic worth. Consequently the texts selected for this book, and the editorial material which introduces them, are situated within and will periodically refer to some of these debates. At the Great Exhibition they can be seen at work in the contestations of meaning and value that inhere in the most considerable of all its objects: Paxton’s Crystal Palace, which occupied a predominant position as the object housing other objects; remarkable for its prefabricated construction, initially disputed for fears concerning its serviceability, but routinely lauded for its aesthetic appeal. They can also be seen at work in the frequent contrasts made between the functionality of British products and the higher aesthetic merits of French design.

Our critical fascination with the way the value systems of modernity are disclosed by its material products ought, however, to be accommodated to the popular Victorian rhetoric of ‘progress’; indeed, the two words are practically synonymous. ‘[T]he history of England’, wrote Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1835, ‘is emphatically the history of progress’ (Dodson, 2002: p. 135), but in the 1850s many remained ambivalent about the narrative that presented industry and commerce as the instigators of universal peace. It was a narrative on which the Commissioners, particularly Albert, sold the Exhibition to the general public. In an attempt to alter insular British views, according to Siegfried Giedeon, ‘Industry, after all the blight and disorder it had
brought about, now displayed another and gentler side' (2008: p. 249). Albert undoubtedly won over many sceptics. In *A Poem on the Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations* (1852) for example, Henry Tilney Bassett voiced a new confidence that the triumphs of man were now first and foremost industrial, rather than military, in nature:

What has not Genius done with toil combined?
Th’ electric wire has baffled time and space, –
The thundering train outstrips the winged wind,
That drives the clouds along in eddying race, –
They’ve changed the river’s course, the lofty mountains rent,
And turned to human use each wondrous element.

No doubt the four-point taxonomy that Albert proposed to conceptualise the arrangement of exhibits in the Crystal Palace – Raw Materials, Machinery, Manufactures and Plastic Arts – was also designed to demonstrate the view that man was gradually harnessing each ‘wondrous element’ of the natural world, modifying and improving them according to desire, and that industry provided an irresistible centripetal force. The Exhibition, at least in theory, demonstrated Albert’s conviction that his was an age of intellectual enlightenment but also, as Auerbach notes, an attempt ‘to forge a society that was receptive to a certain form of industrialization’ (1999: p. 98). If the military conflicts in the 1850s and 1860s, including the war in the Crimea, subsequently made the rhetoric of peace and progress seem naïve, the Exhibition should nevertheless be viewed as symbolic of the movement from what Nietzsche called monumental history – history measured through the great deeds of great individuals such as Napoleon – to the history of economics, consumerism, nation states and social engineering.

By anyone’s calculation, the Exhibition’s novelty, scale, heterogeneity and ‘mountains of matter’ (Buzard et al., 2007: p. 3) meant that its meanings were not easily digestible. The official line of the Commissioners was also put under enormous strain by competing narratives and subtexts. Modern critics, some of whose work I have summarised above, have added to the proliferating readings, but one thing that has come to be accepted is that the Exhibition was as much an issue of reading as it was of viewing, of textuality as of materiality. The Exhibition had ‘a seemingly boundless capacity to inspire description’ (Buzard et al., 2007: p. 1), which is the occasion for this book. The sources collected and edited here demonstrate that the Great Exhibition was exhaustively documented in all sorts of ways, from private diaries and letters, to the official communications of the Royal Commission and Executive Committee, from the vast numbers of stories and commemorative poems, to the many column inches in the organs of the press. The viewpoints captured here are
domestic – both metropolitan and regional – but also foreign; indicative of the opinion of upper, middle and lower classes; and taken from those who championed the Exhibition and from those who protested vehemently against it. Right wing and left wing politics are here, as are modernists and protectionists, the labouring man and the aristocrat.

Compiling such a book and sifting through the large number of potential texts that could be included does, however, involve an ongoing process of selection which is implicated in some of those same problems about reading, writing and representing the Exhibition – belonging to the Victorian period and our own – that I have begun to identify and outline. Central to these is the relationship between language – particularly language’s tendency to categorise – and materiality. That relationship is, as many recent theorists of ‘things’ – including Bill Brown (2003) and Elaine Freedgood (2006) – have told us, a vexed one. Rather than transparently disclose objects, language often has a tendency to become opaque. This phenomenon might be seen in two introductory examples: the floor plan of the Palace and the compilation of the *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue* (1851).

The first of these is well known and so can be dealt with briefly. There was an incongruity between the physical space of the Exhibition (indicated by the floor plan of the Palace that readers can find in Figure 5 in this book) and the attempt to superimpose an organising taxonomy upon it (see 2.1), which eventually ran to an arrangement of thirty classes; as Joseph Childers explains, these were ‘conflicting cartographies’ (2007: pp. 203–15). Whilst it was originally intended that a visitor could follow the story of industrial production (and therefore of Victorian progress) in the aisles and bays of the Palace, beginning with Class 1 – ‘Metallurgy and Mineral Products’, passing through classes such as ‘Agricultural and Horticultural Machines’, ‘Cotton’ and ‘Ceramic Manufacture’ and eventually arriving at Class 30 – ‘Models and Plastic Art’ (the crowning achievements of culture), there were, in practice, a mountain of logistical problems which meant that the science of classification yielded to expediency. The original idea that the space designated for each country could be distributed throughout the Palace by class – and so the products visibly compared and contrasted – was replaced by divisions based on nation. ‘[T]he only course now open’, according to a Memorandum of the Commission, ‘is to assign one particular location of the Building to each Nation’. Only the British exhibits, which occupied the western nave, were in fact arranged by the class system, designed by Lyon Playfair, but whether this was adequate to capture and master the objects on display is open to debate.

The *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue*, compiled by Robert Ellis, functioned in a similar way to the Commissioners’ taxonomy by imposing another official narrative upon the Exhibition, wherein Britain was presented as the paradigm of modern occidental society. Originally intended as
a two-volume work, the Catalogue eventually grew to three volumes (with further supplementary volumes added later).\(^7\) A one-volume, ‘Small’ edition for the price of a shilling was also published at the opening of the Exhibition in May (largely due to the fact that only the first volume of the comprehensive catalogue was ready by 1 May, but also to capitalise on the market of immediate visitors). British exhibits occupied the first two volumes of the Official Catalogue, along with a general introduction and accounts of such things as the construction of the Crystal Palace and the catalogue’s compilation, with ‘Foreign States’ relegated to the third volume (colonial exhibits were described separately in the second half of volume two). No doubt hugely informative, the descriptive categorisation was clearly designed to codify a set of British values indicating commercial supremacy. We learn, for example, that Germany’s ‘territorial divisions … have always proved a material hindrance to the advancement of industry and commerce’ (Official Catalogue, 3, p. 1,046), and India, one of the cradles of civilisation, has, despite its vast mineral wealth, failed to advance commercially in contrast to Britain (2, p. 857). It also becomes clear, as Eileen Gillooly explains, that whilst Britain ‘begrudgingly admitted aesthetic superiority to France’ in design, they ‘claimed ethical superiority’ (2007: p. 31) for placing emphasis on use value and affordability.

Do generalisations such as these represent the actual experience of visitors who witnessed the masses of material in person? This is a difficult question to answer and involves engaging with the unknown (and, to a degree, unknowable) man and woman discussed by Darling and Whitworth (2007: p. 2).\(^8\) We might note contrasts in the reception and representation of some of the exhibits as a way of providing an answer. One of the most striking and celebrated pieces of statuary on display in the whole Palace was Professor Kiss’s Amazon attacked by a tiger, part of the German contribution, which dominated the main avenue. The impressive Bavarian lion (Figure 1) by Ferdinand Müller of Munich, displayed in the Eastern Avenue, likewise provided evidence that the trade union of the Zollverein – a collection of German states and potential economic rival to Britain (Davis, 2008: p. 151) – offered supreme artistic achievement. As Davis has pointed out, however, the significance of the industrial products of the Zollverein, which were legion and had the potential to knock British industrial confidence, was underplayed in the likes of the Official Catalogue and Robert Hunt’s Hand-Book to the Official Catalogues (1851). The praise for German art could be viewed as distorting the industrial significance of the Zollverein which was encountered just as extensively by visitors.

Or we might go further and examine the compilation of the Official Catalogue for evidence of the inconsistencies which classification could promote. Ellis’s introductory material to the one-volume edition explains that all exhibitors were asked to provide a written account of the items submitted for
display, which would be edited by a group of ‘scientific gentlemen’ to form the bulk of the material in the *Catalogue*. The undertaking was, he admits, too much for one man:

The desirableness of obtaining a symmetry of proportion in the works, and as far as possible a harmony of style and consistency of expression, in addition to the great importance of attempting to communicate to them a character of scientific accuracy, demanded the adoption of general principles of correction and reconstruction. But the varied nature of the contents of the Exhibition, and of the descriptions supplied, rendered this a duty difficult to be undertaken by any single individual (‘Shilling Catalogue’, p. 7).

Ellis’s specific remit is worth noting. He was tasked to render each object with ‘scientific accuracy’, to attain an ‘Archimedean point’ (Buzard *et al.*, 2007: p. 4) from which to make the exhibited material legible and expressively coherent. The description of the Bavarian lion presents a reader with the kind of technical accent we might therefore expect, the exhibit remarkable for ‘showing the possibility of executing casts in one piece’ and for ‘preserv[ing] the pure natural metallic colour of the cast without [the founder] being obliged to use the chisel’ (3, p. 1,102). Recording the processes of production, rather than aesthetic merit, is the *Catalogue*’s function and there is no place
for the kind of aesthetic judgement that we find, for example, in the Art-Journal’s appraisal of Hiram Powers’s Greek Slave (see 2.3). Statuary, like all other exhibits, had its place in the thirty-class taxonomy. In the one-volume edition of the Catalogue that William Clowes & Sons produced to coincide with the opening in May, which was unpretentious and little more than a list of exhibits, the entry for the lion of Munich has been trimmed down to one measly sentence – ‘Colossal Lion, fifteen feet long and nine feet high, by Müller of Munich’ (‘Shilling Catalogue’, p. 15), undifferentiated from the adjacent ‘bell of brass, 383 kilogr. weight, with iron clapper and tackle, by F. Gruhl, Kleinwelka, near Bautzen’. There is no way, within the remits of the one-volume catalogue, to make any appraisal or value judgement. It should be remembered, however, that this is the same lion that prompted extensive, contrary and powerful reactions from public and art critics alike; it was lauded as a testament to ‘the pre-eminence of Saxon genius in treating subjects on a grand and colossal scale’ (Timbs’ Year-Book, 1851: p. 102), but described in Tallis’s History (1851–52) as ‘a so-so affair’ (1, p. 169) and by the Morning Chronicle as having ‘far too gentle and amiably simple an expression’ (15 September 1851) to provoke fear. The indelible impression left upon the public imagination is, however, felt by the sheer weight and frequency of its reference, captured most successfully when The Times imagined it prowling the courts ‘amid a perfect wilderness of boxes’ (12 November 1851) following the closing ceremony. Like many, Thackeray’s Gobemouche felt his descriptive powers baffled by the Exhibition’s statuary – ‘How select a beauty where all are beautiful? how specify a wonder where all is miracle?’, but it is precisely language’s capacity to make distinctions and serve different functions, dependent on context and purpose, that readers of this book might like to look out for.

In a sense the Official Catalogue (and certainly the shilling version) could be viewed as a textual version of what McClintock has called an ‘anachronistic space’ (1995: p. 40): the display of objects shorn of their ability to signify diversely through their incorporation in an encyclopaedic system. The indexing function of a catalogue presents distinctions that are arbitrary or syntactic rather than evaluative, perhaps an example of one of the many ‘taxonomic troubles’ that Gillooly has identified at the heart of nearly all writing about the Exhibition. In the absence of an adequate ‘scientific classificatory system’, she argues, textually the Great Exhibition ‘constitutes a paratactic narrative’, or a series of narratives placed side by side, resulting in ‘a spectacle of national exhibits seen contiguously’ without proper connections (2007: p. 25). This is precisely the experience that the Catalogue – and Albert’s taxonomy – attempted to remedy but, in some ways, ended up amplifying.

In the absence of that adequate scientific classificatory system it could be argued, however, that reading the Exhibition becomes a more interactive
process, generating the kinds of other distinctions through which the texts presented in this book are organised. Bearing in mind taxonomic imperatives and the challenges of classification, readers will, I hope, approach the contents of this sourcebook alert equally to pattern and singularity. Each chapter title has been chosen because it is prominent in the growing body of critical work on the Exhibition in disciplines such as History, Design, and Literary and Cultural Studies. The chapter headings – ‘Origins and organisation’, ‘Display’, ‘Nation, empire and ethnicity’, ‘Gender’, ‘Class’ and ‘Afterlives’ – all break down into further subsections so, for instance, the chapter on Class contains themes such as welfare, the ‘Shilling Days’, the radical press and local committees, and ballads. Each section is prefaced with an introductory guide, which will draw your attention to related issues and documents and provide some historical context, but these are not intended to set a limit on evaluation and analysis. At times I have found that a single document crystallises all pertinent issues but at others, the complexity of the subject matter meant that it was appropriate to include numerous texts. Subdivisions are not consequently uniform in length.

Some of the documents that I have chosen to include in one section may also address the concerns that predominate in another. In section 4.3 for example, the extract from John Bull of 19 April on the presence of Queen Victoria at the Palace carries the kind of sceptical tone, and objections to free trade, that speak to the texts collected under ‘Doubts and objections’ in 1.3. The decision I made to include an extract from John Tallis’s History and Description of the Great Exhibition (1851) in subsection 3.1 on Patriotism was due to the fact that he addresses specifically British achievements in industry when his overtly masculine rhetoric means it could easily feature in the discussion of this topic in Chapter 4. Some subjects such as work, technology and mechanisation are so widespread and multifarious that I felt they were best accommodated in different chapters such as Organisation and Class, whereas peace and warfare feature in the chapter on Gender, when they could have filled a chapter on their own.

By its very nature, and due to the amount written on it, many of the sources in this volume have been used elsewhere in books about the Great Exhibition. In some ways this has promoted piecemeal reading, where famous statements, such as those made by Albert in his speech at the Mansion House on 21 March 1850 (see 1.2), have come to represent a whole series of views. One of the main functions of this book therefore, is to allow students and researchers to read some of these texts in their entirety for the first time – some which have never previously been reprinted in full and are only otherwise available in the archives of the Royal Commission and the Victoria and Albert Museum – and, granting my editorial interventions, make their own, essentially, unmediated evaluations. Where there has not been space enough
to reproduce a long text in full I have tried to give as accurate a picture of its substance as possible. Alive to the fact that books on the Exhibition often raid the same texts again and again, I have also tried to provide readers with as wide a range of sources as can reasonably be included. It was often the case in the Victorian period that regional publications, and those in the colonies, sourced their material from articles in the London press, and so any searches of the online catalogue of Nineteenth-Century British Library Newspapers will usually reveal the same report featuring multiple times in various outlets. Despite this fact, there remains a good deal of press coverage – in working-class newspapers such as the *Northern Star* for example – that is independent of the major outlets of the metropolis and that I have been able to reproduce.

Those who will take most from *The Great Exhibition, 1851: A sourcebook* are students and researchers new to the topic and particularly those who want to teach the subject without resorting to hours of trawling through primary texts to produce course material. So the book is primarily conceived as a teaching aid, but it also offers numerous departure points for researchers in the history of the Exhibition, and material culture more generally, and those working on specific issues such as British imperialism, social class and the representation of gender politics in the Victorian period. To a great degree the documents speak for themselves: I have provided endnotes for each chapter where some of the contemporary references are obscure but have endeavoured to keep these to a minimum. If certain issues are raised on a number of occasions, I have tried to explain them in detail just once and included notes to that section of the book for the purposes of cross-referencing. Full references for each text can be found in the comprehensive bibliography. In the case of text taken from newspapers, I have indicated date and page reference wherever possible. All emphasis is in the original. It may not be feasible to ‘get up’ the whole Exhibition in one book, but I hope that readers coming to the subject for the first time, and those returning to it, will alike find that here, they will come pretty close.

**Notes**

1. All of these items appear in the *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue* (1851) of the Exhibition. A howdah is a seat for riding on the back of an elephant or camel while a whippletree is used to distribute force evenly in the mechanisms used by draught animals.
2. This is part of the blurb to Purbrick (2001).
3. The list of books is extensive but the most notable include: Appadurai (1988); Briggs (1988); Richards (1990); Nunokawa (1994); Miller (1995); Brown (2003); Freedgood (2006); Waters (2008); Shears and Harrison (2013).
4. See, for example, the article from *The Times* for 20 October 1849 in section 3.1.
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5 Bassett’s 1852 essay received the Vice-Chancellor’s first prize awarded by the University of Dublin. It was published in stanzas, without line numbers.

6 See 3.2 for the full document.

7 For any student of the Exhibition, it is worth remembering that the numbering of these volumes is somewhat problematic. The *Official Catalogue* is usually taken to be three volumes plus one supplementary volume, but in some cases parts are counted rather than volumes.

8 Unknowable in the sense of being unnamed: that is ‘the factory worker, the shop clerk, the house wife’ (2007: p. 2).

9 As Auerbach notes, the editors who assisted Ellis – including Robert Owen, Philip Pusey and Brunel – ‘could add scientific annotations, but could not offer criticism’ (1999: p. 243).

10 Although in the case of some newspapers and obscurer sources – and these are usually only extant at the Archive of the Royal Commission and have minimal reference data – that information is missing.