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Joe Kember, John Plunkett and Jill A. Sullivan (eds), *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship, 1840-1910*

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Joe Kember, John Plunkett and Jill A. Sullivan (eds), *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship, 1840-1910* (London : Pickering & Chatto, 2013), 283 p, ISBN 9781848933064

- 1 The Victorians are well known for their love of spectacle and their enthusiasm for science. In the wake of Richard Altick's ground-breaking book *The Shows of London* (1978), the interpenetration of science and spectacle has been much studied in relation to the exhibition spaces promoted by emerging scientific communities, especially museums. Yet, as Altick himself indicated, the sciences were put on show across a wide range of display sites, including those which were not hallowed with the approval of intellectual elites, and not restricted to London. This fuller spectrum of science-spectacle interactions is the subject of this new collection of essays edited by Kember, Plunkett and Sullivan.
- 2 Most of the case-studies in this book concern Britain, with one chapter on Ireland (which was also part of Britain in this period) and one chapter on exchanges between North America and Continental Europe. The quality of analysis and insight is extremely high : the book brings together scholars from diverse disciplines whose work converges in mutually illuminating ways on scientific showmanship in the long Victorian period. On the one hand, fresh interpretations are offered of familiar display genres and locations, such as dinosaur exhibitions, public lectures and the Great Exhibition. On the other hand, science is seen to have manifested itself in sites as varied as panoramas, bazaars, freak-shows, magic shows, performing animal acts, pantomimes, exhibitions of exotic peoples, and the staged unwrappings of Egyptian mummies.

- 3 The editors indicate that one of their aims is to probe the extent to which these performances helped shape scientific knowledge itself. Examining how science has been practised in spaces beyond those officially designated “scientific” has been a rising concern among historians of science, as seen (for example) in the landmark collection of essays *Science in the Marketplace* (2007), edited by Aileen Fyfe and Bernard Lightman, and in recent monographs by James A. Secord, David Willis, Sadiya Qureshi and Adelene Buckland. Thinking of science as communication has opened the door to explorations of how genres not normally associated with scientific practices have, in various ways, participated in the “making” of science, rather than merely “representing” it.
- 4 *Popular Exhibitions* is an important contribution to this body of scholarship. Whereas almost all the contributors to *Science in the Marketplace* are historians of science, *Popular Exhibitions* embraces a wider range of disciplines, from media and performance history to geography, animal studies and literary history, as well as history of science (and including splendid contributions from Lightman, Willis and Qureshi themselves). It thus extends the “scientific marketplace” still further. Generally, in post-conference volumes like this, the conversations between contributors in different disciplines ends when everybody goes home, and it is up to the editors to forge links in the Introduction. The Introduction to this volume does indeed perform that task admirably (much better than most examples of its genre), but the editors deserve particular praise for ensuring that contributors engage with each other’s work throughout the drafting process, thus raising intriguing and unexpected parallels. For example, the exhibiting of live Zulus and replica dinosaur fossils might not sound the most promising candidates for comparison, but Ilja Nieuwland’s fascinating study of the latter case is deepened by using Qureshi’s chapter on the former case as a springboard for discussion—the parallel being based on both scholars’ meticulous reconstructions of the politically and personally fraught relationship between donor and recipient in the life of an exhibited object. This is just one of many ways in which this book’s case-studies enrich the wider field of nineteenth-century studies, rather than remaining buried in antiquarian histories of individual display traditions.
- 5 The chapters approach the central question of science’s links with showmanship in different ways. Many of the chapters exemplify a broadening of historians’ reference-points when discussing scientific spectacle. In some chapters this broadening is geographical and social. Plunkett and Sullivan’s richly documented contribution demonstrates the importance of looking beyond London and beyond the patronage of scientific societies in understanding science’s role in *conversazioni* and bazaars. Conversely, Diarmid A. Finnegan vividly reveals geography’s role in the rhetoric and reception of public science lecturing, contrasting lectures on science and religion delivered by the same Irishman in two Irish cities. In both this chapter and Martin Hewitt’s cogent and timely exposition of the rhetorical skills deployed in public science lectures, we are reminded of the continued centrality of the spoken word in even the most visually rich of science lectures.
- 6 Elsewhere the broadening is achieved in relation to the practices considered as “scientific”. Willis argues convincingly for the inclusion of magical shows and séances, thus demonstrating the continued importance of wonder to scientific shows, and questioning assumptions about rationality and “amusement” embedded within the Victorian category of “rational recreation”. These assumptions are further

problematized in Verity Hunt's brilliant chapter. Focusing on the panorama analogy in contemporary responses (and supplements) to the Great Exhibition, Hunt uncovers the fragility of its claim to present a legible compendium of the world's arts. Qureshi's chapter on the display of Zulus in London elegantly dismantles two further assumptions embedded within many histories of display, namely the showman's unchallenged authority over his exhibit and his audience, and the implied distancing of spectator from spectacle—a distancing all too easily subsumed within simplistic narratives of colonial subjugation. By revealing the Zulus' active agency in their dealings with managers and patrons, and the refusal of patrons and performers to conform to the images projected by promotional material, Qureshi's chapter corrects received understandings of the politics of human displays and the dynamics of spectacle itself.

- 7 Other chapters, too, focus on particular sites or exhibits as exemplars of the hybrid and politically contested nature of scientific display in this period. Lightman's chapter on James Wyld's "Great Globe" and Nieuwland's chapter on Andrew Carnegie's donations of *Diplodocus carnegii* casts to European museums present compelling, painstakingly documented case-studies, revealing the range of meanings embodied by these self-declaredly educational exhibits. A similar fluidity is seen in the more overtly sensational objects whose display-history is analysed by Fiona Pettit, Caroline Radcliffe, John Miller and Beverley Rogers: human "freaks", a talking seal, Paul Du Chaillu's gorillas, and Egyptian mummies. These were (claimed to be) objects of great scientific interest; but, in an age when science was validated by asserting its distance from "mere" showmanship, scientific practitioners had to tread carefully if they were to avoid undermining their own authority. Pettit, Miller and especially Radcliffe adroitly tease out the dynamics of this balancing-act in hospitals, theatres, exhibition spaces and the press, once again underlining the entanglement of the ostensibly separate worlds of science and commercial spectacle. Rogers's chapter is less carefully documented, as well as being less clear on the science-spectacle relationship; but it presents important new perspectives on the relationship between spectator and spectacle in the period and the book would be the poorer without it.
- 8 This volume intervenes in significant ways in some of the most productive fields of inquiry in the histories of science and display. It deserves to be widely read: if it is, it will redefine the way in which scholars approach the relationship between science and shows. One could take issue with some points. The notion of what constitutes scientific authority, and what undermines it, is sometimes presented in a slightly simplified manner during the course of Pettit's and Miller's otherwise excellent contributions: one is sometimes invited to infer that the mere use of showmanlike rhetoric was enough to compromise a self-declaredly "scientific" utterance. This may be to swallow too readily the nineteenth-century positivists' image of what science is. The volume as a whole shows that science not only rubbed shoulders with, but was made and reinforced by, showmanlike practices far removed from official ideologies of scientific practice. In other words, although accusations of showmanship were commonly used to attack the authority of specific scientific claims, science itself as a cultural phenomenon lived and breathed *within* those debates.
- 9 The book's academic quality is unfortunately let down by editorial problems common to several books in Pickering & Chatto's otherwise excellent list. At just seven pages, the index is inadequate. "Geography", for example, is a central concern of the chapters

by Finnegan, Plunkett and Sullivan, yet this word's index entry gives just one page-reference (on geographical content in Du Chaillu's book). The many scholars who study geographies of science and spectacle will find no opening here. Much of the index comprises proper names, but random spot-checks revealed that many performers, artists and scientific figures whose work is discussed, described and quoted in the chapters are not named in the index. The book has not been properly copy-edited, with the names of key figures and exhibits misspelt (17-18, 53), familiar howlers such as "gentleman" for "gentlemen" (60) or "principle" for "principal" (74), and poor French such as *animeaux* for *animaux* (166) and *l'Egypt* for *l'Egypte* (200). There are numerous punctuation errors, albeit not in all chapters. In Rogers's chapter the phrase "the beginning of mummies being used as part of theatrical entertainment" is repeated twice in four lines (207). There are other gripes common to all books in this series, such as the use of a squashed-up, hard-to-read format for the contents page (saving the publishers the cost of one extra page), and the invisibility in the main text of the book's helpful division into four Parts, except in the contents page (saving the cost of four pages). Readers interested in buying this book may feel that these economies, and especially the lack of copy-editing support, are unjustifiable for a book costing 60 pounds sterling.

- 10 Nevertheless, this book is a magnificent achievement. For the quality, range and originality of the research it presents, applying diverse disciplinary perspectives to central research questions, *Popular Exhibitions* deserves an honoured place in the ever-expanding bodies of scholarship on nineteenth-century spectacle and science, and makes a decisive contribution towards bringing those fields closer together.

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Mots-clés: expositions, sciences, spectacle, théâtre, vulgarisation scientifique

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