

# THE BRITISH EMPIRE AND THE GREAT EXHIBITION OF 1851

Samantha Kallen

## Abstract:

The Great Exhibition of 1851 in London was a large, highly significant affair that brought the innovations and industries of the world together under one roof. While it was indeed a global event, it has been argued, especially by people at the time, whether or not the exhibition was held for the great benefit of the British. This paper will argue that the primary motivation for the British was indeed their own benefit by looking at British prestige, what they had to offer the exhibition, and what they stood to gain by hosting such an event.

From May 1<sup>st</sup> to October 15<sup>th</sup> 1851, London hosted the first worldwide exposition, largely known as the Great Exhibition.<sup>1</sup> Housed in the magnificent Crystal Palace, the event was a huge success, drawing in hundreds of thousands of visitors from not only across the British Empire, but outside of it as well.<sup>2</sup> These people marveled at the latest advancements of science, technology, and art, and gazed at products that ranged from vases to carriages, jewelry to tableware, and agricultural equipment to statues. Overall, the exhibition held many different meanings for different people and not everyone agreed on its purpose; while some historians argue that the exhibition was a method of self-promotion for the benefit of the British Empire, there are others who emphasize the exhibition's character as an international event, and reject the thought that was merely used to strengthen Britain. In this paper I will argue that the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London was intended as a medium through which Britain could showcase the power of their country, their superior innovations, and the strength of their colonies, and that the exhibition as a whole was seen as a way to bolster Britain's industry and ultimately Britain itself.

With the exhibition being held in London, it is no surprise to discover that the British reserved much of the space within the Crystal Palace for themselves. Of the approximately one million square feet in the building, about four hundred thousand square feet was used solely for the display of British goods, leaving the rest of the space to be divided amongst the numerous other countries that were going to be present.<sup>3</sup> There were a diverse range of products and

---

<sup>1</sup> John R. Davis, *The Great Exhibition* (Stroud, Gloucester: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1999), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Leapman, *The World for a Shilling: How the Great Exhibition of 1851 Shaped a Nation* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2001), 251.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Hobhouse, *1851 and the Crystal Palace: being an account of the Great Exhibition and its contents; of Sir Joseph Paxton; and of the erection, the subsequent history and the destruction of his masterpiece* (London: Butler and Tanner Ltd., 1937), 15.

concepts presented to the visitors, generally falling into one of four categories: minerals and raw materials, machinery, manufactures, and the fine arts.<sup>4</sup>

The selection of British goods on display was meant to show the best that Britain had to offer, and in many cases their products and industry were considered superior to those of other countries. Many British citizens, and even the official catalogue of the exhibition, promoted their own wares, but this self-promotion is both expected and, as argued by some scholars, an aim of the exhibition all together.<sup>5</sup> After all, why would any country host an international exhibition of this magnificence if they truly believed they had nothing to either amaze the crowds, or nothing that could stand up to the products put forward by other nations?

What exactly did the British put forward for public consumption and criticism? Of minerals, many from Britain were displayed, including raw coal, iron, gold, agates, and granite.<sup>6</sup> Machinery was said to be one of the most important categories, and the British excelled with innovations in train, steam, and bridge building technology.<sup>7</sup> This included a model of the largest suspension bridge ever built using iron, which was currently in construction and was designed by an English engineer for the Tsar in Russia.<sup>8</sup> Engines were popular as well, and there were inventors within England that competed against each other in making the newest and most improved model.<sup>9</sup> Other products, such as what was believed to be the world's largest mirror, were also claimed by the British.<sup>10</sup> Another popular exhibit was a way of spinning cotton by

---

<sup>4</sup> Hobhouse, *1851 and the Crystal Palace*, 70.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, *The Great Exhibition*, ix.

<sup>6</sup> Hobhouse, *1851 and the Crystal Palace*, 71.

<sup>7</sup> Hobhouse, *1851 and the Crystal Palace*, 72.

<sup>8</sup> Hobhouse, *1851 and the Crystal Palace*, 77-78.

<sup>9</sup> Leapman, *The World for a Shilling*, 148-149.

<sup>10</sup> Leapman, *The World for a Shilling*, 150.

machine, a process that was made less time consuming with the usage of steam power.<sup>11</sup> These are just a few examples.

In the arts and other manufacturing, the *Illustrated Catalogue* offers many other examples of British superiority. In glassmaking, for example, it wrote that in making crystal glassware, items like goblets, bowls, and wineglasses, England excelled against every other country in the world.<sup>12</sup> It conceded that Bohemia made colored glassware of a higher quality than Britain's, but that they could in no way compete in crystal clear glass.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the *Illustrated Catalogue* dedicates an entire page to a London jeweler, emphasizing the craftsmanship of its bracelet and brooches.<sup>14</sup> Other items of décor, such as a carpet produced in Scotland, was said to feature fabric that was unparalleled in elegance and richness, with a tasteful pattern.<sup>15</sup> Lastly, when discussing porcelain and other earthenware, it was declared that the British Wedgwood company still reigned supreme over all the competition.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, for some of the especially religious peoples of England, the Great Exhibition was not just a way to showcase Britain's manufacturing capability-whether they personally thought this was true or not-but it was also seen as a way to spread what they believed was the superior religion: Christianity, and Protestantism in particular.<sup>17</sup> This was attempted in a couple of ways. In the Crystal Palace itself, there was a British exhibit of one hundred forty-eight different translations of the Bible.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, it was observed that some displays from Catholic

---

<sup>11</sup> Leapman, *The World for a Shilling*, 146.

<sup>12</sup> *The Crystal Palace Exhibition: Illustrated Catalogue, London 1851. An Unabridged Republication of the Art Journal Special Issue* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 138.

<sup>13</sup> *The Crystal Palace Exhibition: Illustrated Catalogue, London 1851*, 138.

<sup>14</sup> *The Crystal Palace Exhibition: Illustrated Catalogue, London 1851*, 127.

<sup>15</sup> *The Crystal Palace Exhibition: Illustrated Catalogue, London 1851*, 153.

<sup>16</sup> Hobhouse, *1851 and the Crystal Palace*, 104.

<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey Cantor, "Science, Providence, and Progress at the Great Exhibition," *Isis* 103, no. 3 (2012): 441.

<sup>18</sup> Cantor, "Science, Providence, and Progress at the Great Exhibition," 442.

countries received attacks against them, simply for just belonging to a country that followed a different religion.<sup>19</sup> With the numerous visitors from outside the British Empire, it was seen as an opportunity to spread what they considered the one true faith to their “heathen” guests.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, as Geoffrey Cantor explains in his article, the British saw themselves as not only the “beacon of the world” in manufacturing, but also as a driving force behind spreading Christianity.<sup>21</sup>

Not only did the Great Exhibition highlight British commodities and innovations, but it also promoted and showcased materials and products from their colonies.<sup>22</sup> There were many exhibits from the British Empire’s imperial colonies, including Canada, the West Indies, Australia, and India. Alongside the physical goods present, the range of exhibits from the empire also showed the diverse nature of the empire itself to the visitors, and guests could even learn about the different colonies in the empire through maps and dioramas.<sup>23</sup> This focus on the overseas colonies showed more than just the wealth of the British Empire, but also its prestige, power, and far reaching nature of the Empire.<sup>24</sup>

From India, one of the most important colonies of Britain, there was a diverse range of items. The exhibition also placed an emphasis on India’s vast amount of wealth and natural resources, which would in turn bring additional wealth to the British Empire.<sup>25</sup> One of the largest attractions from India was the presentation of the Koh-I-Noor diamond, an uncharacteristically

---

<sup>19</sup> Cantor, “Science, Providence, and Progress at the Great Exhibition,” 453.

<sup>20</sup> Cantor, “Science, Providence, and Progress at the Great Exhibition,” 441.

<sup>21</sup> Cantor, “Science, Providence, and Progress at the Great Exhibition,” 453.

<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey Auerbach, “Empire under Glass: The British Empire and the Crystal Palace, 1851-1911.” *Exhibiting the Empire: Cultures of Display and the British Empire*, ed. John McAleer and John M. Mackenzie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 111.

<sup>23</sup> Auerbach, “Empire Under Glass,” 116-117.

<sup>24</sup> Auerbach, “Empire Under Glass,” 117.

<sup>25</sup> Auerbach, “Empire Under Glass,” 114.

enormous stone that was taken from India and considered one of the crown jewels of Britain.<sup>26</sup>

Also present was a life-sized replica of an Indian court, which guests could walk through and admire.<sup>27</sup> Other items included silks, furniture, dyes, leather, ceramics, and personal gifts to the Queen from the rulers of India, which included a throne with a canopy of purple velvet.<sup>28</sup>

Other colonies, like Canada, sent raw materials, especially timber and furs.<sup>29</sup> Of handcrafted items they sent a sleigh, which the *Illustrated Catalogue* described as being a pastime enjoyed by many, especially the wealthy.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the exhibition also presented a couple of canoes, mentioning they were a product of the ingenuity of Canada's native population.<sup>31</sup> The West Indies sent clothing made from palm leaves, alongside wax models of fruits and plants.<sup>32</sup> Other than showing their thriving wool-producing industry, Australia was said not to have shown off many items.<sup>33</sup> However, as historian Jeffrey Auerbach mentions in his article, the British highlighted the fact that Australia had gone from merely a penal colony to an economically important piece of their empire.<sup>34</sup> Altogether, with the emphasis placed on the colonies of the British Empire, it could be expected that not only would British citizens learn more about their vast empire, it would be a display to other nations of the British Empire's wealth.

However, there are some who would argue that the Great Exhibition was not held solely for British benefit. Charles Babbage, for example, wrote at the time that the exhibition was

---

<sup>26</sup> Leapman, *The World for a Shilling*, 170.

<sup>27</sup> Auerbach, "Empire Under Glass," 113.

<sup>28</sup> Leapman, *The World for a Shilling*, 134-135.

<sup>29</sup> Auerbach, "Empire Under Glass," 115.

<sup>30</sup> *The Crystal Palace Exhibition: Illustrated Catalogue, London 1851*, 119.

<sup>31</sup> *The Crystal Palace Exhibition: Illustrated Catalogue, London 1851*, 164.

<sup>32</sup> Auerbach, "Empire Under Glass," 116.

<sup>33</sup> Auerbach, "Empire Under Glass," 116.

<sup>34</sup> Auerbach, "Empire Under Glass," 116.

believed to promote the interchange of materials and knowledge amongst all countries on Earth.<sup>35</sup> He further argued that it was in the interest of every nation that people should become more skilled and capable, and that the spreading of things like scientific knowledge was a boon to all.<sup>36</sup> Even Prince Albert believed that the exhibition was a way of bringing together the collective knowledge of the world and establishing it as a new starting point from which everyone could advance.<sup>37</sup> Some of the men behind the creation of the exhibition did not even consider it an Imperial Exhibition at all, preferring to call it an international exhibition.<sup>38</sup> This is certainly true if one considers that many of the countries present, including Russia, France, the United States, Greece, and Austria were not British colonies at all. The British were not just showing off the glory of their own industry for others to admire; they opened up the exhibition for any country to promote their wares. Naturally, this invited competition between one another, though many British did not mind this fact, as they were not afraid to compare themselves to others.<sup>39</sup>

However, I am going to argue that the exhibition was held largely for the benefit of the British Empire, despite what people such as Babbage, Prince Albert, and other scholars have said. Why would a country spend as much money as they did to build the Crystal Palace and host the exhibition if they did not foresee significant benefit to their own country? One could expect that with the tremendous amount of visitors that London received during the run of the Great Exhibition, the influx of wealth would boost their local economy. Guests would need places to

---

<sup>35</sup> Charles Babbage, *The Exposition of 1851; or, Views of the Industry, the Science, and the Government, of England* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1851), 42-43.

<sup>36</sup> Babbage, *The Exposition of 1851*, 42-43.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Young, "Mission Impossible: Globalization and the Great Exhibition." In *Britain, the Empire, and the World at the Great Exhibition of 1851*, ed. Jeffrey A. Auerbach and Peter H. Hoffenberg (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 9.

<sup>38</sup> Auerbach, "Empire under Glass," 113.

<sup>39</sup> Hobhouse, *1851 and the Crystal Palace*, 8.

stay after all, along with all the other costs that came with traveling, eating out, and accommodations, and it was later reported that just the charge of admission alone brought a total of 186,000 pounds to the country.<sup>40</sup> Even Charles Babbage wrote that while it was mad to think that Britain would undertake a project such as the Great Exhibition purely for its own benefit, he admitted that the British would likely receive the greatest advantage when all was said and done.<sup>41</sup>

Another boost however would come from being able to compare a certain industry to that of another country, therefore being able to study and make advances to British technology. For example, the United States surprised the British with their agricultural machinery, which was said to be of a lighter construction and ultimately cheaper to maintain than its British counterparts, which were more difficult to use and did not perform as well.<sup>42</sup> In relation to their failings in keeping up with machinery from the United States of America, *The Times* wrote that the defeats were embarrassing but enlightening, and that they “will keep our manufactures utilitarian in their character and strengthen vastly the mechanical and inventive genius of the country.”<sup>43</sup> Another example comes from the writings of Henry Cole, who wrote that it would be beneficial to place England and France near one another in the exhibition in order to result in “instruction and emulation” of both.<sup>44</sup> The French were said to be better at many aspects of manufacture than the British, such as in the making of silk cloth or book binding, which they could do in ivory, carved wood, and velvet, among other materials.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps it cannot be said that the Great Exhibition was held exclusively for the sole benefit of the British Empire, but a

---

<sup>40</sup> Leapman, *The World for a Shilling*, 262.

<sup>41</sup> Babbage, *The Exposition of 1851*, 44.

<sup>42</sup> Leapman, *The World for a Shilling*, 172.

<sup>43</sup> Leapman, *The World for a Shilling*, 173.

<sup>44</sup> Hobhouse, *1851 and the Crystal Palace*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Hobhouse, *1851 and the Crystal Palace*, 7, 184.



strong case can be made nonetheless that the British knew that they would gain a great deal from hosting such an event.

In conclusion, the Great Exhibition of 1851 was a grand, successful event that drew people from all over the world. Firstly, the exhibition showcased the best the British had to offer in terms of their own manufacturing and production capabilities, proving to many that they were the best in the world in some cases. Secondly, by including the contributions of their colonies, the British demonstrated the vastness of their empire and their great wealth. Thirdly, by assembling numerous countries in one place, the British were able to observe where the manufacturing capabilities of other nations were at, even learning from those whose products were superior to their own. The Great Exhibition, while an international event rather than a strictly imperial one, nevertheless put Britain and its empire in the spotlight and brought it additional knowledge, prestige, and wealth.

## Bibliography

- Auerbach, Jeffrey. "Empire under Glass: The British Empire and the Crystal Palace, 1851-1911." In *Exhibiting the Empire: Cultures of Display and the British Empire*. Edited by John McAleer and John M. Mackenzie, 111-141. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015.
- Babbage, Charles. *The Exposition of 1851; or, Views of the Industry, the Science, and the Government, of England*. Second Edition. London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1851.
- Cantor, Geoffrey. "Science, Providence, and Progress at the Great Exhibition." *Isis* 103, no. 3 (2012): 439-459.
- Davis, John R. *The Great Exhibition*. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1999.
- Hobhouse, Christopher. *1851 and the Crystal Palace: being an account of the Great Exhibition and its contents; of Sir Joseph Paxton; and of the erection, the subsequent history and the destruction of his masterpiece*. London: Butler and Tanner Ltd., 1937.
- Leapman, Michael. *The World For a Shilling: How the Great Exhibition of 1851 Shaped a Nation*. London: Headline Book Publishing, 2001.
- The Crystal Palace Exhibition: Illustrated Catalogue, London 1851. An Unabridged Republication of the Art Journal Special Issue*. New York: Dover Publications, 1970.
- Young, Paul. "Mission Impossible: Globalization and the Great Exhibition." In *Britain, the Empire, and the World at the Great Exhibition of 1851*. Edited by Jeffrey A. Auerbach and Peter H. Hoffenberg, 3-25. Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008.