

The Children's Prize Gift Book: Children as Consumers

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“Does it not look like one of those magnificent palaces we read about in fairy tales?”¹ So asks the anonymous author of an 1851 children’s guidebook about the Crystal Palace, a massive glass-and-iron structure built specifically to house the 1851 Great Exhibition. Firmly placing the modern, structurally-significant building in the terms of children’s legends and stories, the author of *The World’s Fair; or the Children’s Prize Gift Book of the Great Exhibition of 1851* immediately draws in his audience of young children, who were eager to learn about the Exhibition and all it had to offer. Though one of many books about the Great Exhibition for children during the mid-Victorian age – defined here as 1850 to 1870 –, the *Children’s Prize Gift Book* is uniquely important because of its vividly-described content, historical significance for consumer culture, and illumination of Victorian social understandings of children.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 represented both an advent and culmination of consumerism. Fully titled the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, the event opened in Hyde Park, London, in May of 1851 and closed in October that same year. The Exhibition featured technological and industrial innovations from nations and territories across the entire globe, but served primarily as an aesthetic and powerful showcase of Great Britain’s cultural and mechanical superiority.² It was housed in the Crystal Palace, a stunning and enormous architectural creation by Joseph Paxton that was constructed out of iron and glass and represented the merging of architectural design, modernism, and technological innovation.³

One of the most culturally significant events in England in the 19th century, the Great Exhibition has been studied and analyzed by a plethora of historians, each with their own

¹ *The World’s Fair; or the Children’s Prize Gift Book of the Great Exhibition of 1851* (London: Thomas Dean and Son, 1851): 10.

² Jeffrey Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 1-3.

³ Bradley J. Macdonald, *William Morris and the Aesthetic Constitution of Politics* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1999), 32.

interpretation of the event and its various facets of interest. The broader scholarship tends to agree on common themes surrounding the Exhibition: that it was a key event in the development of consumerism and the climax of Victorian Britain, that it created and depended on an idea of British national superiority, that it sparked incredible enthusiasm and passion throughout the country, and that it interacted with all classes in very specific ways.⁴ Recent scholarship, however, has called these long-term assumptions into question. In his pinnacle work, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display*, historian Jeffrey Auerbach complicated the over-simplified version of the Great Exhibition propagated by past historians. While he does not reject the prominent themes altogether, Auerbach dismisses the tendency to paint the Exhibition as a uniform, static event; instead, he argues the Exhibition represented a multiplicity of meanings, themes, and purposes, all of which interacted to form a culturally significant event and cement a strong national identity in Victorian-era England.⁵

Other scholars have also compellingly contributed to the historiography of the Great Exhibition. Paul Young builds on Auerbach to include the significant tension between the Exhibition's attempted building of global community and its inherent 'othering' of global cultures. He argues that at the Great Exhibition, a British sense of national identity was built in opposition to other, inferior cultures that were then commodified for the consumption of British citizens.⁶ Finally, Richard Young makes a strong connection between the Great Exhibition and commodification, writing that the Exhibition represented the "first outburst of the phantasmagoria of commodity culture...it inaugurated a way of seeing things that marked indelibly the cultural and commercial life of Victorian England."⁷

⁴ K.W. Luckhurst, "The Great Exhibition of 1851." *Journal of the Royal Society of the Arts* 99 (1951): 413; Robert Dalzell, *American Participation in the Great Exhibition of 1851* (Amherst, Mass.: Amherst College Press, 1960); Eric De Maré, *London 1851: The Year of the Great Exhibition* (London: Folio Society, 1972).

⁵ Auerbach, 5.

⁶ Paul Young, "Mission Impossible: Globalization and the Great Exhibition," in *Britain, the Empire, and the World at the Great Exhibition of 1851*, eds. Jeffrey Auerbach and Peter Hoffenberg (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008): 12.

⁷ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 18.

The Great Exhibition affected a majority of British citizens, and children were no exception. Children represented a large part of the population and were deeply intertwined with Victorian society and culture. English historian Anthony Fletcher argues that the mid-Victorian age saw an evolving conception of the child, heavily influenced by Romanticism; as such, the child shifted from being understood as a young adult expected to work, to a more innocent, free adolescent that needed both parental molding to be good citizens and personal leisure time.⁸ Building on this and similar scholarship, Ginger Frost emphasizes that the promotion of a British national identity and pride also influenced the shift in perceptions of childhood, and led to a gradual expansion of childhood as an ideal and the promotion of British pride in children throughout all social classes.⁹

Despite all the surveyed historians and the varied arguments, the literature of the interaction between children and the Great Exhibition has a deep and noticeable gap. Some historians include brief and uncritical mentions of various children's books in their broader arguments, as Edmund King does in his informative survey of publications surrounding the Exhibition.¹⁰ In her critical investigation of how the Great Exhibition was narrated and conceptualized by the general British public, Verity Hunt showcases how the public framed the Exhibition as a complex visual experience, but does not connect these processes to children, despite relying on children's books for primary source evidence.¹¹ Even foundational scholars Auerbach and Young neglect to pay any critical attention to the physical and cultural involvement of children in the Exhibition, despite a burgeoning sense of

⁸ Anthony Fletcher, *Growing Up In England: The Experience of Childhood, 1600-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 10.

⁹ Ginger Frost, *Victorian Childhoods* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 143.

¹⁰ Edmund King, "The Great Exhibition at Hyde Park and Its Publications." *RSA Journal* 144 (1996): 61.

¹¹ Verity Hunt, "Narrativizing the World's Show: The Great Exhibition, Panoramic Views and Print Supplements," In *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship, 1840-1910*, eds. Joe Kember, John Plunkett and Jill Sullivan (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012): 115-132.

childhood in this time period and a growing conception of children as cultural consumers.¹²

Gillian Lacey is one of the few who addresses children as active agents and consumers of the Exhibition. She investigates various recorded interactions between children and exhibits, and argues that these interactions formed the basis both for creating an English national identity for children and emphasizing their inherent ability to consume marketed cultures and products.¹³

More important, there is no scholar who provides a deep historical study and analysis around the convergence of childhood and cultural consumption in Victorian-era Britain. Understanding the historical and cultural significance of this interaction, Dennis Denisoff attempts to fill this gap in an edited collection of essays from various scholars. Building upon past scholarship while addressing ignored aspects, Denisoff argues that consumer culture developed “not simply in step with the new model of childhood, but *through* it,” as British society became gradually aware of a new class of consumers in children and consumerism adapted to fit.¹⁴ Denisoff adds to previous scholars’ work to effectively examine the process by which material and cultural consumerism, through various forms including the Great Exhibition, was marketed to children and how children themselves became deeply intertwined in the consumer economy and culture.

By critically evaluating *The Children’s Prize Gift Book*, this analysis aims to build on Denisoff’s essential contributions and Lathey’s important groundwork to provide a more specific, historically grounded analysis of the significant links between children, consumption, and the Great Exhibition in the Victorian age. Serving as a reflection of

¹² Dennis Denisoff, “Small Change: The Consumerist Designs of the Nineteenth-Century Child,” in *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture*, ed. Dennis Denisoff (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008): 2.

¹³ Gillian Lathey, “Figuring the World: Representing Children’s Encounters with Other Peoples at the Great Exhibition of 1851,” in *Imagining Sameness and Difference in Children’s Literature*, eds. E. O’Sullivan and A. Immel (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 76.

¹⁴ Denisoff, 6.

important cultural trends regarding children in the mid-Victorian Age, the *Children's Prize Gift Book* reveals that not only was the Great Exhibition marketed to children in terms of commodification of global cultures, but that this direct targeting reflected a growing and significant social framing of children both as active participants in consumer culture and active agents of commodification.

Written and published in 1851, the *Children's Prize Gift Book* promotes an idealized version of the Great Exhibition and its purpose. The book is lengthily but aptly subtitled: *describing the beautiful inventions and manufactures exhibited therein; with pretty stories about the people who have made and sent them; and how they live when at home.*¹⁵

Beginning with a vivid description of the Crystal Palace, the author then delves into a detailed survey of all of the countries that sent items to be displayed at the Great Exhibition, their customs, cultures, and prized items, and finishes with a long, impassioned portrait of the opening of the Exhibition by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Hand-drawn images accompany the various descriptions, and the author strikes a conversational tone throughout the book's entirety. The author quickly makes it clear that children are his primary audience, and speaks directly to the young reader, inviting him on this important journey throughout the Exhibition and its various displays.¹⁶

In keeping with the powerful English nationalistic sentiment of the historical period, the intended purpose of the book is to teach about the countries of the world while glorifying England and her contributions. The author begins his story by writing:

The Great Exhibition is intended to receive and exhibit the most beautiful and most ingenious things from every country in the world, in order that everybody may become better known to each other than they have been, and be joined together in love and trade, like one great family; so that we may have no more wicked, terrible battles, such as there used to be long ago, when nobody cared who else was miserable, so that they themselves were comfortable.¹⁷

¹⁵ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 8.

¹⁶ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 8-13.

¹⁷ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 10.

This idealization of the Great Exhibition sets the stage for the rest of the book, as the author attempts to prove this conception of a common global community through each of his country descriptions. In reality, however, the author actually reinforces the imperialist attitudes of the time and promotes socially established English values to his child audience. He emphasizes the technological and aesthetic contributions of each country while still maintaining the ultimate industrial superiority of England.

The author describes each country and region in terms of their culture, their products, and their people in plain language to be accessible to his young audience. Every description begins with the products the country has sent to the Exhibition that “are well worth looking at, as they are so ingenious.”¹⁸ Russia sent woolens and linens, Norwegians displayed their furs, and Greek sculptures and silk were beyond compare.¹⁹ Above all, the author celebrates that superior industry and manufactures of England, and promotes the commercial and productive prowess of London; each town in England is praised for their rich mines, plentiful gardens, and most of all, dedicated laborers.²⁰ Here, the author reinforces the strong sense of English national identity existing in the broader time period, and reminds the reader that while the rest of the world offers substantial contributions to the Exhibition, England remains the ultimate global superpower.

More importantly, by providing in-depth examinations of each country, their culture and their contributions, the author is also marketing the Great Exhibition to his audience of children in terms of commodifying these global cultures. As an event, the Great Exhibition displayed countries as commodities to be visually consumed by onlookers, and the author conveys this sentiment by linguistically displaying countries for the consumption of the child reader. The author treats each country as a commodity to be consumed; by reducing each

¹⁸ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 53.

¹⁹ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 71.

²⁰ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 111.

country to a brief paragraph or two, the author neatly packages different cultures so that they are easily understood by young children.

This distinct commodification, however, is in direct tension with the author's assertion of the Great Exhibition's stated goals of community building, and throughout the book the author emphasizes the English identity in opposition to 'other' cultures. The author treats non-Western countries such as China, India, Turkey and Syria as particularly foreign, and communicates their customs and priorities with an attitude of cultural superiority and subtle derision.²¹ The author remarks that the Chinese strangely do not care about their displays at the Exhibition, and shares a laugh with the reader at the presumption that the Chinese consider themselves the only civilized nation on Earth.²² With this air of superiority, the author places foreign cultures in direct opposition to England, implicitly separating them into two groups of English and 'other'. The 'other' is then commodified for the benefit of the English child reader, who understands these foreign countries strictly in terms of a cultural product to be consumed. The author even specifically directs his reader to look for the 'other', describing a scene at the Exhibition as full of "grave Turks, swarthy Spaniards and Italians, East Indian Princes, glistening with gold and jewels, clever French and German workmen in blue cotton blouses, Chinese gentlemen, Tartars, Russians, energetic Americans, and many more."²³

Thus, the author purposefully frames the Great Exhibition in a global consumerist narrative. While this framing is significant in terms of understanding how children conceived of the Exhibition and the global world around them, this book also reveals how the author and the broader English society understood children as active in the cultural processes of consumption and commodification as a whole. As such, the author directly markets both his

²¹ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 26.

²² *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 25.

²³ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 10.

Exhibition and his book to an audience of children, as an acknowledgement of their participation and interest in European consumer culture.

Throughout the book, the author consistently speaks directly to the child, engaging him in every discussion of countries and their customs. He refers to the reader as “my little friend”, and makes assumptions as to their likes, dislikes, and overall cultural preferences.²⁴ These preferences, such as finding pleasure in Spanish oranges and not enjoying Russian winters, reflects what the author believes children will relate to and understand.²⁵ By persistently involving the young reader in his cultural exploration, the author both appeases the child’s natural curiosity and acknowledges the child as a burgeoning consumer, eager to hear of and absorb foreign products, industries, and customs. Many times the author invites the child to share his opinion on the various products, such as a piece of German lace that could be the finest the child has ever seen – what do they think?²⁶ The author shifts the various countries into commodities, and with his direct language, makes it clear that the child readers are meant to consume them. Many of his vivid, in-depth descriptions are preceded with a direct anticipation of the child’s delight, as the author relishes in his ability to satiate the consumptive desires of his audience.²⁷

Additionally, the author directly appeals to children with allusions to fairy tales, fables, Bible parables, and other stories, using them as metaphors and points of reference to more clearly paint a picture of another country’s customs. In his description of Egypt, he asserts that the reader will recognize the country from the Biblical tales of Moses and Solomon, which shows a cultural assumption that the reader will have read the Bible and be familiar with its important figures.²⁸ French tapestries and carpets are compared to the

²⁴ *The Children’s Prize Gift Book*, 21.

²⁵ *The Children’s Prize Gift Book*, 33, 37.

²⁶ *The Children’s Prize Gift Book*, 14.

²⁷ *The Children’s Prize Gift Book*, 141.

²⁸ *The Children’s Prize Gift Book*, 68.

magnificent and legendary rugs in the palaces featured in the story of “Arabian Nights”, a distinct comparison made to emphasize the luxury of French products on display at the Exhibition; the author insists the Fairy Queen Pari Banou had never sat on a finer rug than those made by the French.²⁹ Using these childhood stories and fables, the author consistently orients his descriptions around his audience and allows his reader to use their previous-consumed knowledge of stories to aid in their consumption of these new tales and images. With these references, however, the author clearly indicates he expects his audience to be of a higher social class, with access to these stories and the ability to recognize their allusions. This implicit assumption showcases the classed nature of consumption and makes clear that the Victorian conception of the child as a consumerist primarily applied to upper-class children.

By speaking directly to the child reader and referencing common stories throughout the book, the author purposefully interacts with and targets the child as a cultural consumer; he inherently recognizes them as active and willing participants in consumer culture. While he most clearly demonstrates this recognition by his commodification of global cultures, the author also concedes to their participation in consumer culture by including hand-drawn images to accompany his summary of countries. Realizing the importance of visuals to convey the full impact of his descriptions, he provides small but detailed images alongside almost every country. The majority depict the people of each nation, engaging in activities such as ice-skating or reading, while others portray notable landscapes or showcase the main industry of the country, such as ship-building.³⁰ The title images of the entire book are the interior and exterior of Crystal Palace, showcasing the grandeur of the architecture and the exhibited items housed inside. These cover pictures are the only images in color, and the

²⁹ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 102.

³⁰ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 86.

interior image includes a variety of the world's flags, helping to promote the Exhibition's idealized goal of global unity and comradery.³¹ The images help retain the child reader's interest and attention as he moves through the book, and provide yet another medium for the child to consume.

Additionally, as he traverses through the various countries, the author makes a point to discuss the people and children who inhabit each region, providing English children the opportunity to both compare themselves to these foreign people and consume their lives as they would characters in a story. The author proudly tells of impoverished yet joyful Belgium children who sing harmonies at school, but mentions the historical enslavement of "dear innocent little children" in Jamaica with great sadness.³² The West Indies provide nuts that are beloved by children, while the author pities little boys in Italy who are unable to ice-skate in the warm climate.³³ In each case he parallels the foreign child with the child reader to further draw in and relate to the child reader.

The author also continuously focuses on the industry and products of each country. While their overall culture and some customs are described as well, the agricultural and technological goods that bring in profit receive the most critical attention from the author. He describes colorful Turkish bazaars and frozen Russian markets; the highest compliment the author pays to foreign peoples is that they are "industrious".³⁴ The author reacts in shock that Peru only sent one product to be displayed at the Exhibition, and expects his reader to share his disbelief.³⁵ This implicit prioritizing of consumerism in a children's book indicates an understanding children will have the same priorities and interest in the consumerism of other nations.

³¹ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 1, 2.

³² *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 79, 95.

³³ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 38, 87.

³⁴ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 49, 54.

³⁵ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 85.

Ultimately, however, the *Children's Prize Gift Book* showcases children not just as participants, but as independent, active agents that actually *propelled* the processes of consumerism and commodification. The very existence of the *Children's Prize Gift Book* indicates a recognition of a new market for children's books, as children needed a way to fill their new, socially encouraged leisure time. The author of this book and other authors writing at the same time recognized this burgeoning demand and aimed to satisfy it with their publications. This book also ends with an apology for leaving and a promise to come back with more stories soon, showing an implicit understanding of the growing market for children's stories and leaving the possibility open for another publication.³⁶

Likewise, throughout the book is a subtle but pervasive emphasis on children's products as physical items for consumption. To appeal to a child's interest, the author included objects as physical items for consumption that Victorian children of the day would have enjoyed. After describing in colorful detail a gold and tortoiseshell chessboard on display at the Exhibition, the author remarks, "I dare say you would like to play a game with me on this chessboard!"³⁷ The author laughs at a German collection of stuffed animals reenacting Reinecke Fox – a series of fables featuring a trickster fox – and asks the children if they were laughing as well.³⁸ Miniature objects, such as a tiny English steam-engine and a model of the Crystal Palace itself, were highlighted throughout the book, as their tiny size made them appealing to children since they could easily have control over them.³⁹ By including objects bought for children's leisure time in his description of items on display at the Exhibition, the author is both acknowledging the new conception of children as adolescents with time to play and children as agents of their own leisure time.

³⁶ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 151.

³⁷ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 125.

³⁸ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 139.

³⁹ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 12.

Finally, at the end of the book, the author urges children to go to the Great Exhibition and see the wonders and the Crystal Palace for themselves. Having used the entirety of the book to codify all of the nations on display and cater to the child as consumer, the author then concludes by inspiring his child reader to visit the Exhibition, witness all of the industrial and cultural contributions, and keep in mind Prince Albert's blessing of the event and proclamation for a more harmonious world.⁴⁰ In this ending, the author acknowledges that his book has been a producer of a specific picture of the Great Exhibition; while that picture was meant to be consumed in a myriad of ways, the author urges his child reader to consume the Great Exhibition as a cultural event first-hand. This book and its author recognize the ability of children to engage in *and* push for physical and cultural consumerism and encourage the child as reader to continue this pattern and join adult consumers at the Great Exhibition and World's Fair.

The World's Fair; or the Children's Prize Gift Book of the Great Exhibition of 1851 represents a highly significant moment in English and European consumer culture. Situated at the historical intersection between increased cultural consumption as a whole and the commodification of other cultures at the state-sponsored Great Exhibition, the *Children's Prize Gift Book* illuminates the growing recognition of children as participants in and agents of consumerism and commodification. The author promotes an English national identity in opposition to other foreign cultures, while simultaneously commodifying those cultures for the benefit of English consumers. Ultimately, this book places children in a social framework that understands them as fully invested in consumer culture. The author is not only writing a children's book, he is writing a book *for* children; children not only read about magnificent palaces in fairy tales, they create the need for fairy tales.

⁴⁰ *The Children's Prize Gift Book*, 35.

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