

## Posudek oponentky na diplomovou práci:

### Bc. Veronika Šteflová – Exhibiting 1851: Reflections and References

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The 1851 Great Exhibition was the first international exhibition ever to be held. It had an immense cultural influence on the state of British society because of its sumptuous display of British and imperial products indicating Britain's economic hegemony. The Industrial Revolution created great wealth. It gave work to a massively increased population. The middle class certainly grew in wealth as in size.

Historians mention 1851 as a major year of transformation due to the impact of the Great Exhibition. The early Victorian era (1837-1851) was characterized by the growth of industry, the middle class, re-distribution of population, however also the sense of a greatly divided nation and social conflict. This is so well expressed simply by the title of the future PM Benjamin Disraeli's novel *Sybill; or the Two Nations* (1845) and the growth of Chartism. The Great Exhibition according to some contemporaries and later historians changed this. It created for the next couple of decades the "age of equipoise", social consensus and a period of balance, relative stability and order. Much that we think of as characteristically Victorian belongs to this relatively brief period. It was then that Samuel Smiles wrote one of the most popular books of the nineteenth century, called *Self-Help* (1859) which claimed that success was the product of four virtues: thrift, character, self-help and duty.

Much of this, including the further paradoxes of the impact of the Exhibition itself are discussed in detail in the relatively disproportionately long first chapter (it takes up about half, however, as a thesis written in cultural studies this is fine, nevertheless more discussion and analytical interaction with the latter chapters would have been appreciated). Although described as "theoretical" it does not present any discussion of possible approaches to a methodology of exhibition and/or museum studies. It is rather a detailed presentation of the period context rather than any methodology or theory. The history is described well and in detail. I appreciate the discussion of the socio-economic situation leading up to the event, reasons for its success and also a critical reading of the more paradoxical discourses inherent in the Exhibition's presentation and the general public's expectations.

At first glance, even without reading any of the sections, the formatting is awkward. Long empty sections between words and pages, even chapters. Page 28 even has missing names for quotations. Several unnecessary repetitive passages (e.g. the second paragraph on page 39 and elsewhere). More careful proofreading would have been desirable. There are some flaws in idiomatic English. The passages written in Czech are pitifully bad translations from English. For a native academically educated Czech speaker this is sorrowful.

I have several very specific issues for discussion:

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1. Page 41. The interpretation of the *Punch* caricatures is very interesting, Please, I need help with actually locating the Crystal Palace "left of the scene" in Figure 4.
2. Bottom page 41. The central tree in question cannot be an olive tree. Olives tend to be twisted and short. This is a majestic huge tree reminiscent of the traditional English oak. However, according to historical sources and what still grows in Hyde Park, it is one of the several elm trees that Crystal Palace was built around. See also the quotation from Farrell's novel on page 63 about elm trees.
3. Page 49. The reading of Figure 7 is not mentioning deserted villages but Manchester, at the time one of the largest industrial cities in Britain. Try to correct your reading. Also, Figure 8 alluding to a beehive reminds me of the various functions and roles bees perform in the hive. Remember Shakespeare's *Henry V*, act I, scene 1, the speech

of the Archbishop of Canterbury, when he mentions “how so many a thousand actions, once afoot, / End in one purpose...” This is rather than your reading also a confirmation of the official propaganda and a dream of social consensus.

4. The discussion of Mayhew which goes hand in hand with the style of *Punch* is useful and works well. However, with Howard Spring’s novel *The Houses in Between* (1951, clearly some relation to 1851), the Crystal House functions not only as a location but also as a metaphor. Here the shortcomings of the thesis become more apparent as this motive should not be discussed apart from the structure and themes of the book. Please, take into account the following issues:
  5. Why is the novel called *The Houses in Between*? Apart from being an allusion to a music hall song of the time (1850s), does it have any other relevance?
  6. The opening quotation of chapter 3 (page 51) is immensely interesting if read in conjunction with Sarah’s fascination with the “exquisite” teacups (page 59) You do not deal with it at all and the quotation falls flat. Perhaps more attention should have been paid to the process of Sarah’s growing up within a changing society (1851 – 1948).
  7. One issue regarding *The Siege of Krishnapore*. Does the novel have a more universal theme than imperialism, racialism and disillusionment with the display of industrial success? Consider some of your brief comments on page 64 regarding the allusion to Vanity Fair and spiritual and ethical decline. Although localized in time and place, could the novel have a more universal meaning as a “parable” of humanity? How would then function the inclusion of the Great Exhibition?
  8. My last points regard careful attention to form and quoting. The Resume is just a badly translated Conclusion. In the Bibliography section I would prefer the division into Primary and Secondary sources. If the sources come from the internet, you should also provide a link or at least name the database. Where did you access the *Illustrated London News* and *Punch*? Are these scans or downloads?
  9. I spot checked the bibliography and Adina Cingureanu’s text seems to have been a very influential one to say the least. It also appears as a chapter in a book and a journal article, thus italics are misplaced.
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With all these reservations and questions I do recommend the MA thesis for defence with the preliminary mark of very good. The final result will depend on the viva voce.

Tuto diplomovou práci doporučuji k obhajobě s předběžnou známkou **velmi dobře**. Celkový výsledek bude záviset na průběhu obhajoby.

V Praze dne 7.6.2024

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PhDr Soňa Nováková, CSc,

Oponent práce

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