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Review of:

Paul Dobraszczyk, *Iron, Ornament and Architecture in Victorian Britain: Myth and Modernity, Excess and Enchantment*.Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, xvi + 310 pages, £70 hardcover.

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In the 1860s, the parish church of St Mary’s in the expanding London suburb of Ealing was knocked down and replaced. In the words of Bishop Tait at the consecration of the new building, ‘a Georgian monstrosity’ had been replaced by a ‘Constantinopolitan basilica’. Subsequent architectural responses to St Mary’s have been rather different, with Nikolaus Pevsner being predictably sniffy about the substitution of Georgian simplicity for Victorian decoration and ornament. For contemporaries, anxiety was less about the style of the new church, than the materials used in its construction. St Mary’s was one of the very first religious buildings with an iron rather than wooden or stone frame, and there was particular concern about the ten load-bearing decorated columns supporting the roof of the nave. These were in cast iron, a material closely associated with the profane rather than the sacred (suitable for street lamps, railway stations, and even public urinals, rather than the glorification of God). St Mary’s is one of very few British Victorian public buildings constructed with cast iron *not* considered by Paul Dobraszczyk in his detailed and thought-provoking study of the development of mechanised architectural ornament in iron in Victorian Britain. However, the wider theme of the moral worth of mass-produced ornamentation runs through the volume. John Ruskin was the most vociferous of the Victorian critics of mass-produced cast iron. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), Ruskin declared the dishonesty of cast-iron ornament a ‘sin’, since it pretended ‘to a worth which it has not’ (p. 13). For others, however, like the architect Henry Whitaker, writing in 1873, the mass-production of ornaments was ‘the glory of modern civilization’ precisely because its democratisation of design allowed ‘a more general distribution of God’s gifts’ (p. 13).

Dobraszczyk places Ruskin’s castigations at the centre of a Victorian culture war over the moral worth of cast iron. What is striking is that this contest prefigured many of the debates in the twentieth and twenty-first century concerning the nature of art in an age of mechanical production, to adapt Walter Benjamin’s words. Anxieties about the effects of photography, plastics, digital reproduction, and, perhaps most currently, 3D printing were anticipated in the response to cast iron. The pouring of molten pig iron into a mould had the capacity to turn cheap base metal into almost limitless copies of works of art. The technology first focused on the mass production of domestic utensils, but by the late-eighteenth century was increasingly used to produce a construction material that combined load-bearing strength with almost inexhaustible capacity for the reproduction of decorative effect. Dobraszczyk concentrates on cast iron in public space, and on its role in the making of the aesthetics and culture of the modern city, particularly in Britain (although the influence of, and competition with, other European metropolises—Paris, Berlin and others—is a running theme).

In the opposite corner to Ruskin, with his ‘almost pathological hatred of cast iron’ (p. 277), were the architects and engineers who made use of the new materials in the construction some of the most iconic structures of the nineteenth century, among them John Nash, Joseph Paxton, Joseph Bazalgette, and Isambard Kingdom Brunel. However, if there is a cast-iron hero in this story, it is the Glasgow manufacturer Walter Macfarlane. By the second-half of the nineteenth century, Macfarlane’s company was one of the largest cast iron manufacturers in the world, and had outstripped earlier pioneers of the industrial revolution, like Abraham Darby’s Coalbrookdale Company. Macfarlane’s Glasgow factories were vast industrial sites, but were also designed to make a statement about the artistic importance of the enterprise. The Washington Street foundry that opened in 1862 in Venetian gothic style, was followed ten years later by the even more flamboyant Empire-style frontage to the giant fourteen-acre Possilpark complex. These factories stood as monuments not just to the commercial success of the Victorian cast iron industry, but also to its increasing confidence as a central force in the making of the Victorian world, and in shaping the aesthetics and textures of that world.

The marketing catalogues, records, and exhibition stands of the Macfarlane company are the principle primary sources for much of Dobraszczyk’s study. What they show is the active and creative involvement of the manufacturer, who was often the dominant player in partnership with artists and architects. What they also do is to turn attention away from the spectacular, one-off triumphs of Victorian iron architecture, towards the way that the replicability of cast iron design for street furniture like lamps, railings, benches, balustrades, and drinking fountains, and for the component parts of station buildings and seaside piers, created an extremely ubiquitous texture to the Victorian urban world. The frontispiece to Macfarlane’s catalogue of 1882 (reproduced at p. 75 of Dobraszczyk book) shows an urban crossroads with examples of the company’s products at all points. What is remarkable is that despite the overt product placement, if the picture is imagined outside its commercial context in the catalogue, the cast iron design fades to a transparent sign, and the picture becomes an idealised representation of the Victorian metropolis. The most obvious parallels are with the use of plastics in twentieth- and twenty-first-century public spaces. There are striking aesthetic contrasts between, say, a bright yellow plastic bucket seat in an airport or fast-food outlet and one of Macfarlane’s highly decorated park or sea-front benches, yet both speak to the ways that cheap mass-produced designs are fundamental to the microgeographies of everyday life, and yet how quickly they can become unseen and taken for granted.

*Iron, Ornament and Architecture in Victorian Britain* is an important achievement. Dobraszczyk combines rich documentary history with provocative excursions into significant theoretical debates. Street lamps are used to discuss repetition in public space, urinals to discuss the moral geographies of obscenity, drinking fountains to discuss cultures of purity, street fountains to discuss memorialisation, and seaside piers to discuss the architectures of demotic pleasures. What is built up in the volume is not just a detailed survey of cast iron decoration, but also a wider treatise about Victorian debates on design and the nature of urban space. The volume is richly illustrated, for which credit must go to the publishers, Ashgate, but also to the support of the Paul Mellon Foundation. The ‘unbound ornamentation’ of much Victorian cast-iron decoration may not be to everyone’s taste, even with the distance of history, but this book does it full justice, and will be a lasting point of reference. The book ends with a beautiful meditation on time and its effects on decorative ironwork. Perhaps less than a quarter of Victorian ironwork survives in Britain, the effect of the requisition of railings for the war effort in the 1940s, of changing tastes, particularly during post-war and 1960s reconstruction, when the attack on Victorian aesthetics was at its height, or of fire, vandalism, and neglect. Much of what is left has rusted—a sign of decay, but also perhaps also a materialisation of passing time and even collective memory. As Dobraszczyk concludes, ‘what remains of this obdurate material might yet tell us something of the hopes and dreams of a past that is not yet vanished’ (p. 279).

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