

Review: *Science Museums in Transition: Cultures of Display in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America*, edited by Carin Berkowitz and Bernard Lightman, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017

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Edited by **Carin Berkowitz** and **Bernard Lightman**

# Science Museums in Transition

*Cultures of Display in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America*



## Keywords

Museums, history of science, exhibitions, nineteenth century, British history, American history

## Review

This book emerged, the preface tells us, from discussions at a conference on 'Curators, Popularizers, and Showmen: Science in Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Exhibitions and Museums', held at the Chemical Heritage Foundation in 2015. That

conference raised a number of questions: What is a museum? What made a museum? What were its precursors and comparators? How do British and American museums compare with one another? The book attempts to answer, or at least explore, these questions about the time of the emergence of professional science education by trained scientists. It also looks at science as presented in books, shows and in other entertainments. It addresses the question 'What is a museum?' by looking at the people who worked there. In so doing, the book is, we are told, about expertise: Who got to define what a museum was? Who could claim authorship in ordering nature? Who, in some cases, could profit from these activities? Answers included natural philosophers, collectors, showmen, experts and nations.

Private museums were widely found in the first half of the nineteenth century in both Britain and the US. Initiated by entrepreneurs (Barnum is the most famous example), the commercial aspect of these spectacles sat uncomfortably with the twentieth century historiography of museums. These private enterprises were replaced by more organised, if anonymously authored, displays of grand narratives towards the end of the century. By the mid-late century, museums had largely consolidated their practices, around collecting, organising, exhibiting and interpreting. Expert knowledge was presented to lay publics, often with a civilising mission linked with public education, and with civic and national identity and pride. In the introduction, Berkowitz and Lightman identify two main tracks of scholarship on the history of scientific exhibitions and museums. The first draws on popular tastes for exhibitions and scientific spectacles, drawing especially on Richard Altick's *Shows of London* (1978), which explored Victorian London; more recent scholars continue this vein of research, exploring all manner of magic lantern shows, electrical experiments and more. The second vein of research focuses on the development of the great museums, usually through the life lens of their champions and intellectual architects: Richard Owen (the force behind the present Natural History Museum in London) and Louis Agassiz (founder of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University) are the foremost examples. Other strands of research focus on the materiality of collections and the exchange networks that existed between museums as they each built their own collections.

The first section of the book, 'Sites of Miscellaneity' is a romp through some of the pre-eminent showman shows: the London Colosseum, Barnum's American Museum and Samuel Goodrich's books. These two chapters blur the separation between science and art, and between education and entertainment. In a section on 'Display and expertise', Sam Alberti presents the example of the Royal College of Surgeons (London) to emphasise the connection between changes in the architecture of the museum and changes in the relationship between the museum and a variety show. Iwan Morus re-emphasises the importance of scientific showmanship, exploring the National Repository that existed briefly in Charing Cross in London, and the importance of discriminatory seeing by spectators to cultivate a scientific public.

Part three, 'The Scientist-Showman' continues to explore the activities of key individuals: Jeremy Brooker explores the construction of the scientific reputation of Henry Morton, Faraday, Tyndall and others. He shows that scientific lectures in Britain and America followed similar lines and were given with a common purpose: to build and cement reputations. Morton in particular drew inspiration from the work of Tyndall and Pepper, but the great success of his lectures influenced Tyndall and Pepper's public appearances in the US. Lukas Rieppel presents the example of Albert Koch and his *Hydrarchos*, the fossil of what to all intents and purposes looked like a sea monster. Koch toured the US with this sea serpent. Quickly, a professional scientist (to use an anachronistic term) showed that it was not a serpent of any kind, but the skeleton of an ancestral whale. Rieppel makes the point, correctly in my view, that exhibitors were not solely concerned with drawing a profit from their spectacles, noting Barnum's various contributions towards scientific enterprises. Rieppel focuses on exploring Koch's public persona and credibility.

Part four deals with 'The National Museum', in terms of displays of scientific work for the good of the nation and its industries. Pamela Henson explores G Brown Goode's vision for the United States National Museum, a 'nursery of living thoughts' (as opposed to a 'cemetery of bric-a-brac', Goode's words) for the adolescent nation, serving scientific, educational and economic needs and focusing on the various productions of the nation, and instituting many of the features we still associate with US natural history museums. Caroline Cornish discusses Kew's Economic Botany Museum, insofar as scientific knowledge was [re]produced in the Museum, and its status as a relational museum. Cornish shows how the Museum was designed to meet the needs of a number of audiences, and political-scientific agendas.

In part five, 'The Research Museum', Carin Berkowitz explores scientific networks (correspondence and collecting) through the work of polymath Joseph Leidy in Philadelphia. Sally Gregory Kohlstedt's contribution is on the development of academic museums, in relation to curricula around natural history and biology. John Tresch gives an afterword returning to the various questions raised in the introduction.

The book is an enjoyable contribution on nineteenth century scientific spectacle and exhibition. The terms 'science' and 'natural history' are used loosely and I would have liked to have been able to better understand what those terms meant to the various key figures. While presumably unintended, the book could look like a Whig history leading 'from' the spectacles produced by enterprising entertainers such as Barnum 'to' the codified, disciplinary museums of the later nineteenth century, and it wasn't clear to me what the transition was. The suggestion that museums were primarily about public ownership of collections for the purpose of public exhibition (p 268) is too simplistic, and the 'space' between private, aristocratic cabinets of curiosity and encyclopaedic collections (I am reluctant to call it a trajectory) was a complex one that was negotiated over a long period. Museums were, are and probably will continue to be many things to many people, and equating museums with exhibitions oversimplifies the story. I would have liked to have seen more on how nature and natural science were presented in media beyond museums and spectacles, notably in zoos and aquaria, and the development of public parks and notions of scenic landscape, which are not featured in the collections. That said, the book is a very rich source on a wide variety of topics that would be of interest to anyone interested in the history of museums and public exhibition in the nineteenth century, and is suitable for both a general audience, and undergraduate and postgraduate students in relevant topics.

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## Tags

- [Museology](#)
- [Exhibitions](#)
- [Science museums](#)
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