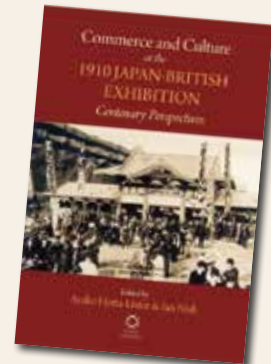


BOOK REVIEW

Commerce and Culture at the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition: Centenary Perspectives

Edited by Ayako Hotta-Lister and Ian Nish

Global Oriental, 2012
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The Japan-British Exhibition was held in 1910, over six months from May to October, in Shepherd's Bush in the western suburbs of London, and attracted 8,500,000 visitors. It was officially a bilateral event that was planned following the establishment of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 (revised in 1905). However, it is known, and reiterated in the book under review as well, that the organizer on the British side was actually a private event producer, and that the British Government was not as enthusiastic as the Japanese counterpart in commemorating and strengthening the two nations' relationship through the event. It should also be noted, in order to understand the era, that it was during this exhibition that Japan completed the annexation of Korea.

The fifteen chapters of *Commerce and Culture at the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition: Centenary Perspectives* analyze diverse aspects of the exhibition from multiple academic perspectives. Hotta-Lister published in 1999 a monograph, *The Japan-British Exhibition of 1910, Gateway to the Island Empire of the East* (Japan Library), and successfully spotlighted this exhibition, which had not been well investigated until then. The present anthology, which is intended to complement her previous work, took shape through several conferences organized in the centenary year of the exhibition, aiming "to repair" the neglect of historical studies till now.

First of all, it is both rare and valuable that a number of scholars assembled to look at one particular exhibition, although of course there are cases where an author writes a book on one or more exhibitions or multiple authors contribute papers on different exhibitions. *Commerce and Culture at the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition* succeeds not necessarily in unravelling all possible elements of the event, but it does demonstrate that the exhibition as a whole was broadly and deeply related to politics, international relations, and other movements of the time. This is clear from the book's focus on preparations, finance, exhibits, associated entertainments, the human agents of different social classes, visitors, and the cultural and commercial impact exerted by the exhibition. Readers will learn from this book that it is nonsense to ignore the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition in discussions, for example, of Anglo-Japanese relations in the early twentieth century.

It is natural to take larger lessons from here. To study international exhibitions in general may be much more important than has been typically thought for an understanding of a wide range of human activities and social changes. While the editors of *Commerce*

and *Culture at the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition* emphasize that the 1910 Exhibition has been overlooked in studies of exhibitions, I would rather upgrade the problem and insist that exhibitions have not been fairly incorporated as essential components of more general historical studies. *Commerce and Culture at the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition* helps change the situation, and this is perhaps a more important outcome of its publication than the repair of neglect of the 1910 Exhibition itself.

In this light, the papers of Ian Nish ("On the Commercial Periphery of the Japan-British Exhibition, 1910"), Peter O'Conner ("The Exhibition and the Media in the Springtime of Propaganda"), and Keiko Itoh ("The Human Legacy of the Japan-British Exhibition") are of especial interest as they avoid confining themselves to the exhibition itself and place it in a broader context. These chapters will surely be of concern to those who have no special interest in the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition *per se*.

Finally, let me point out that the term "exhibition" or *hakurankai* in Japanese—the Japan-British Exhibition is usually translated as *Nichi-Ei hakurankai*—may be problematic. The term can cover a multiplicity of events, from massive multi-national exhibitions like the Great Exhibition in 1851, to bilateral attempts such as this in 1910, and from those events that are multi-national but focused on a limited theme to various small private events in galleries or even in department stores. While space does not permit me to discuss the issue of event categories here, nor to touch upon the question of English-Japanese translation, it should at least be noted that we have to be careful when we engage with an historical event called "exhibition" (*hakurankai*), and be aware that the meaning of the term may vary in context.

Although the 1910 Exhibition has not been well studied, it was of course known and usually understood as occupying a place in the chronology of events that began with the Great Exhibition of 1851. Hotta-Lister and Nish lament the fact that a couple of representative Japanese books on the history of such mega-exhibitions do not include that of 1910. Why after all the need for its inclusion? The editors' lament seems to suggest that their understanding of this event is unnecessarily circumscribed by the term "exhibition" (*hakurankai*). In addition, most contributors to this publication also problematize, as preceding scholars did, the fact that the organizer on the British side was a private promoter, and that the efforts of the Japanese and British Governments were not equal. Is this inequality emphasized because this event is analyzed uniquely as an "exhibition," or would it matter in a different cultural context?

This reviewer learned a great deal from *Commerce and Culture at the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition*, and ended up with the impression that the exhibition, of course rooted in such history from 1851, was already on a separate trajectory. It is not too important whether or not this particular event was officially stamped as a successor to former Great Exhibitions. Rather, it seems to be more meaningful to regard it as the origin of today's cultural diplomacy, which seeks to promote Japanese culture abroad, as well as to celebrate the anniversary years of bilateral relationships between Japan and any given overseas country. In this anthology, this perspective is suggested by Peter O'Conner who touches upon the typical example of the 1991 Japan Festival in Britain.

After all, the greatest legacy of the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition may be the fact that it has bequeathed to us all these topics to discuss, and that a century later it redirects our attention to a key moment in Anglo-Japanese relations.

Reviewed by Sano Mayuko