



GEORGE AUGUSTUS SALA AND HIS PANORAMA THE GREAT EXHIBITION 'WOT IS TO BE'

Professor Peter Edwards offers a detailed examination of *The Great Exhibition 'Wot Is To Be'* and its notorious creator George Augustus Sala.

George Augustus Sala turned twenty-one in 1849, the year before *The Great Exhibition 'Wot Is To Be'* was published. His full baptismal name was George Augustus Henry Fairfield Sala and up till then he had usually signed himself 'George F Sala'. But on his twenty-first birthday he was probably told that Captain Charles Fairfield, the godfather after whom he was named, was in fact his biological father. Although he went on preserving the fiction that he was descended from 'an ancient Roman family' which had been settled in England since 1770, he hastily changed his signature (and nom de plume) to George Augustus Sala. On the title page of *The Great Exhibition* this is abbreviated to 'George Aug. Sala', but most of his other panoramas, including an earlier one than *The Great Exhibition*, are signed with what became his trademark monogram 'G.A.S.' (often crowned with an emblematic gaslight).

Early in 1850, the year before the Great Exhibition in London opened, Sala had himself apprenticed to an engraver, borrowing the necessary funds from the noted publisher Adolphus Ackermann. Previously he had eked out an exiguous livelihood as a theatrical scene-painter, a writer, illustrator and even editor of short-lived magazines, and an illustrator of cheap 'shilling novels' and 'penny dreadfuls'. Now he began a new career as a self-styled

'professional engraver'.

The Great Exhibition 'Wot Is To Be', and *'How it's all Going to be Done'*, by Vates Secundus - to give it its full, and as Sala himself felt, 'rather imbecile' title - was the fourth of seven panoramas he engraved for Ackermann in 1850-51. A 'panorama' is defined by the OED as 'A picture or a landscape or other scene ... unrolled or unfolded and made to pass before the spectator so as to show the various parts in succession'. In this sense, the genre originated in the late eighteenth century. By Sala's day the most common form of panorama was in effect a comic-book with folding pages, depicting scenes from a public event with inked-in captions, usually beneath the illustrations. Sala's panoramas for Ackermann all fall roughly into this category. He was responsible for the text as well as the engraving of all seven. Most of the others were just as topical as *The Great Exhibition*: for example, one was devoted to the mass demonstration against the introduction of a Roman Catholic hierarchy into Britain in 1850, and another to places and controversial public figures associated with it. A little later, Sala jointly authored a panorama of the funeral procession of the Duke of Wellington for Ackermann.

Because of their topicality, and their brightness and cheapness, panoramas commanded a ready market, at railway bookstalls especially. Sala says that Ackermann paid him a hundred pounds for *The Great Exhibition*, and some of his other essays in the genre were no doubt equally remunerative. The only other whose proceeds he indicates was his

Above:
Cover page and a section of a panorama scene from *The Great Exhibition 'Wot Is To Be'*, London, The Committee for Keeping Things in Their Places, 1850. T690.L1 S35 1850



Above and side:
A section of a panorama scene from George Augustus Sala, *The Great Exhibition 'Wot Is To Be'*, London, The Committee for Keeping Things in Their Places, 1850. T690.L1 S35 1850

first panorama, a comic guide-book for continental travellers named after Turner's painting *Hail, Rain, Steam, and Wind*, for which he received only twenty pounds; this is also the only one whose price he gives: one shilling plain or two shillings and sixpence coloured. But being more topical, and certainly more proficient, *The Great Exhibition* may well have been more expensive - though, given the mass market it was aimed at, not much more.

The idea for a panorama devoted to the approaching Great Exhibition was suggested to Sala by the ubiquitous pictures of the Hyde Park site and the huge glasshouse that Paxton had designed for it in the illustrated magazines. But in the full-page engraving at the beginning of the panorama Sala pretends, for reasons he leaves vague, that the site and winning design have not yet been selected: his Great Exhibition is housed inside a balloon hoisted above (of all places) the Isle of Skye, albeit anchored to a glass and steel building. (He made amends in two later panoramas, *The Great Glass House Opened* [sic] and *The House That Paxton Built*.)

Like all Sala's panoramas for Akermann, *The Great Exhibition* has cardboard covers ('boards') and was printed in both plain and coloured copies. Fully extended, its folding plates would stretch eighteen feet (nearly five and a half metres): or so Sala's first biographer Ralph Straus says. Sala states that he etched it on 'four large lithographic stones'. Apart from the full-page engraving at the start, each plate contains multiple separate sketches illustrating the 'Arts and Manufactures' of a country, generally with only a single page or not much more for each country, though Ireland for some reason gets two whole pages. Towards the end there are sections devoted to more general topics, including 'Miscellaneous Arts and Manufactures' and 'The Vegetable Kingdom'. Two of the China exhibits

suggest that Sala was already developing the interest in flagellation that later found expression in two books of literary pornography (anonymous of course, and not sold by reputable booksellers). Among the America exhibits are (again) a slave being whipped with a cat-o'-nine-tails, and 'A gigantic spittoon' - iconic of America ever since the publication of Mrs Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. New Zealand features 'specimens of the art of cookery', including 'Pate de femme grasse', 'Cold boiled missionary', and a huge stew-bowl labelled 'Emigrant'. In 'The Vegetable Kingdom', Thomas Carlyle holds up a board advertising his recently-published *Latter-Day Tracts* with his right hand while balancing 'A gigantic pumpkin' on his left shoulder and neck.

Sala's career as an artist came to an abrupt end in September 1851 when he submitted an article to Dickens for *Household Words* which not only struck the great man as 'exceedingly superior to the usual run of such writing' but also, incredibly, was remembered by Thackeray as 'one of the best things I ever read'. When he sent the article, 'The Key of the Street', to Dickens, Sala naturally made a point of reminding him that he was the son of the actress Madame Sala, who in her heyday had appeared in two farces by the then-youthful Boz; a few years afterwards, when illness forced her retirement from the stage, Dickens had helped drum up support for a benefit performance for her at the Haymarket Theatre, in which his friend Macready appeared, gratis. Sadly, Sala was not permitted to change careers gracefully. The day after 'The Key of the Street' was published in *Household Words*, he innocently referred to himself as 'an artist' in a letter to the Times, and, although he corrected this to 'a poor caricaturist' only a few sentences later, he was cruelly ridiculed for his presumption by a leader-writer in the *Morning Post*.



In purchasing *The Great Exhibition* for the Fryer Library the now-disbanded Victorian Fiction Unit of course understood perfectly well that it is a curiosity, not a deathless work of art; a bibliophile's rather than aesthete's delight. But while the humour is far from subtle, and often 'vulgar' (as Sala's snooty contemporaries would have hissed), it is the product of a sharply observant satirical eye, and the drawing is competent enough for its purpose: lively, inventive, and – especially in colour – quite decorative. As an illustrator he was at any rate as competent as Thackeray, indeed arguably more so (though unlike Thackeray he was too modest to illustrate his own novels).

Still only 23 when his first article appeared in *Household Words*, Sala had found his true métier: as a journalist and travel-writer, and briefly a novelist. He quickly became one of the most frequent contributors to *Household Words* and perhaps the best-known of the group of half a dozen or so up-and-coming young writers dubbed 'Dickens's young men' by the newspapers. But the quite substantial income he earned from his writing was never enough to fund his notoriously bohemian lifestyle and Dickens soon came to repent the instruction he had given Wills, the editor of *Household Words*, not to press him too hard for repayment of the advances that had to be doled out to him. Eventually Dickens's generosity was exhausted and he and Sala quarrelled. At least once Sala was imprisoned for debt. And even after he had become one of the most famous daily and weekly journalists of his generation – 'G.A.S.' of the *Illustrated London News*, and the chief of the 'young lions' of that stronghold of Victorian philistinism, the *Daily Telegraph* (as characterised by Mathew Arnold in his *Friendship's Garland*) - he had to endure the indignity of appearing before the Bankruptcy Court.

Sala visited Australia in 1885, giving a series of not very successful and not always audible lectures in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, and major regional centres in the eastern states, and sending back thirty-three letters to the *Daily Telegraph* describing his impressions of the country. His first wife, Harriett, died in Melbourne while waiting for him to return from New Zealand and is buried there. Sala either coined, or played a crucial part in popularising, the phrases 'Marvellous Melbourne' and 'The Land of the Golden Fleece'.

It was of course Sala the literary man rather than Sala the 'artist' who initially attracted the interest of the Victorian Fiction Research Unit. The Unit, then an offshoot of the Department of English, but largely funded by ARC grants and the proceeds from the sale of its publications, devoted a double-volume in its series of Victorian Fiction Research Guides (of which thirty-one in all were issued) to a scholarly edition of 170 letters from Sala to his close friend and literary associate, Edmund Yates (another of Dickens's young men). The manuscripts of these letters, probably the largest collection of Sala's letters anywhere in the world, form part of the Edmund Yates Papers which The University of Queensland Library purchased a quarter of a century ago, at the instigation of the Unit. Now, the Unit plans to repay its debt to the Library (or at any rate this part of it) by purchasing books for donation to the Fryer Library with accumulated funds that remained unspent at the time when it ceased operating. *The Great Exhibition* is the first such donation.

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