GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Among the exhibits at the Great Exhibition of 1851 was a piece of silk from Messrs Redmayne and Son of London showing a 'graceful running pattern' of the rose, the shamrock and the thistle.* Here in a luxurious fabric, the visitors to the Crystal Palace could behold a symbol of the apparently successful British Union which had come to dominate a global empire, not least in India. The bourgeois among those visitors may well have noted it as something they would like to possess, for one of the characteristics of the expanding nineteenth-century bourgeoisie in Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, was a desire to acquire those luxury items that had previously been restricted to the rich upper-class elite of past ages. Silk was indeed just such a product and it came to symbolise wealth and taste. It embraced the intriguing natural aspects of sericulture, transformed through refined techniques and the artist's hand into a fabric which combined technical facility with aesthetic worth.

As Brenda King points out, historians, both of empire and of design, have paid comparatively little attention to silk. Economic historians have been much more interested in volume products, like cotton or jute, while consumables or medicines, like tea, coffee, sugar or quinine, have always featured more prominently among the 'fruits of empire'. Yet silk stuffs seemed to symbolise everything that Europeans imagined about the Orient: richness, craftsmanship, refined taste, and exceptional beauty of design. In the nineteenth century, a more complex relationship emerged than a mere effort to relocate silk production in Europe. That was certainly part of it, and the damp North-West of England seemed an ideal place (for many years my office at Lancaster University virtually looked out on a former silk factory in the village of Ellel). But the connections were also a matter of exchange and learning, in respect of techniques, patterns, designs, and creative values.

In all of these, the exhibition, the museum, the college of design, the craft workshop, the larger-scale factory, and the shop displaying wares founded on eastern trades, each of them such striking characteristics of nineteenth-century Britain, were key. And among individuals enthralled by silk, Sir Thomas Wardle, a classic entrepreneur of the North-West of England, was a central figure. He visited India in order to observe and learn. He brought together all the interests and institutions through which silks could be created and appreciated. He had connections with so many of the significant designers of the nineteenth century, not least William Morris of the Arts and Crafts movement. And his combination of aesthetic appreciation with hard-headed business acumen ensured a premier position for his products.

Brenda King's book is the first sustained study of these developments. The fascination with silks which she recounts is now best understood through the remarkable collections in museums in Manchester, London and elsewhere. She brings a considerable knowledge and a wealth of detailed understanding

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to the phenomenon of silk as a luxury East–West trade in production, technique and design. In doing so, she creates a significant revision of the crudely binary ideas of Edward Said and his followers. Here was a milieu in which there was a genuine respect for an Eastern product and the craftsmanship associated with it, while a striking debt was created in terms of techniques and design values. The additional complexities of the relationship emerge in the fact that the main threat ultimately came not from the industrial and imperial power of the West but from the emergence of new techniques, and also synthetic products, promoted by other Asiatic powers, Japan and China. Silk thus very well illustrates the multilateral channels through which influences, ideas, and production of a fabric like silk can flow. Brenda King's book reveals much of interest and value to historians of empire, of Orientalism, of English industry and its rivalries with France, as well as of art and design.

John M. MacKenzie

* Illustrated in *The Great Exhibition: A Facsimile of the Illustrated Catalogue of London's 1851 Crystal Palace Exposition*, New York, Gramercy Books, 1994, p. 202.