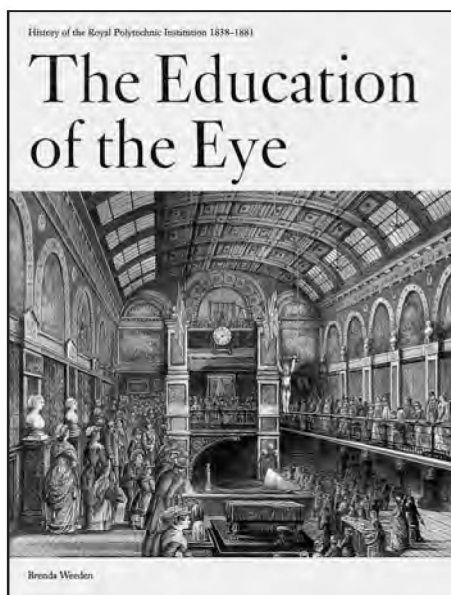


REVIEW: DELIGHT AND INSTRUCTION

Richard Crangle



Brenda Weeden,
The Education of the Eye:
History of the Royal Polytechnic Institution 1838–1881
Cambridge: Granta Editions, 2008
110pp, ill. Paperback ISBN 978-1-85757-097-1. £25.00

OF ALL OF THE MILLIONS OF VENUES around the world where, at one time or another, for one reason or another, one or more magic lantern shows took place for the edification of some kind of paying audience, the London Royal Polytechnic Institution may be the one single establishment about which we know the most (though perhaps supporters of the Royal Albert Hall and the Crystal Palace might have something to say). There have been a number of authoritative accounts of the Polytechnic, of one sort or another – Richard Altick in *The Shows of London*; part of a chapter in Laurent Mannoni's *Great Art of Light and Shadow*; and more recently detailed articles on the Polytechnic's shows and music by Lester Smith and Jeremy Brooker in the Society's own *Realms of Light*. So, do we really need another telling of the same story?

Well, if it's going to be as good as this one, the answer to my own question would be a loud and definite YES. For a start, this is the first book-length treatment of the whole forty-three-year history of the Institution 'proper': all other accounts of which I'm aware look at one or other (important) aspect of its operation, or treat it as an (illustrious) episode in a longer or different story. Brenda Weeden considers the Polytechnic on its own terms, examines its reasons for existing in the first place, its ups and downs along the way, and its operation and development in relation to other cultural activities of its time.

It's a wide-ranging account, touching on technical, financial, educational and entertainment aspects of the Polytechnic without ever spending too long on any of them. There are some telling insights, like the observation of the Polytechnic's 'anomalous status somewhere between a scientific institution and a trading company' and the 'tension between science and profit which runs through the history of the Institution' (p. 13). It's all done with a light touch, like a kind of while-you-wait sketch – it would have been quite possible to turn this all into a turgid business history of details and figures and annual reports, and perhaps the lack of surviving business archive resources which Weeden laments in her Introduction does us a favour in this respect. There are clear expositions of the pressures bearing on the Institution, like the changes in the market which (ironically) it brought upon itself: it's quite possible to believe that there wouldn't have been a Great Exhibition in 1851 had the Polytechnic not met with success in its early years, but the Exhibition

itself, and the public museums and galleries that its profits helped to develop, changed the Polytechnic's appeal and had clear effects on the way its programme and management developed subsequently.

To tell the truth, there's not a great deal of detail about lanterns or projection in this book. But for me that's one of the things that makes it most interesting and useful. As I suggested above, we already know (or perhaps *think* we know) quite a bit about the technical practices of the Polytechnic lantern shows and slides, not to mention Dircks's – sorry, Pepper's – Ghost, and this works as a balance to that knowledge by putting it into context with other things going on elsewhere in the building. Most lantern-biased accounts of the Polytechnic make a passing mention of the other attractions, like the Diving Bell and the various electrical and other machines, but here we get a sense of why they were placed there in the first place, how they operated, and how they were regarded by people who paid to see them. Plenty of mysteries remain, of course – can anyone explain just *how* Wheatstone's 'telephonic concert' of 1855 (p. 61) was actually supposed to have *worked*, if indeed it worked at all?!

This is all done as a first part of a projected multi-part history of the University of Westminster, and there are odd occasions where its nature as a 'corporate history' nudges through, with slightly too-obvious reminders of just whose history this is supposed to be – like the gratuitous sentence at the start of the chapter on photography at the Polytechnic: 'Photography has occupied a unique place in the history of the University from the earliest days of the Polytechnic'. But Weeden manages to present a self-contained account that has the space to develop its own narrative and analysis without needing to prove points in a larger overall argument.

It's quite a nice coincidence to find myself reviewing this and Deac Rossell's book in the same issue, for there are a lot of similarities, in approach and achievement if not in subject matter. Here, as in *Laterna Magica*, is a concise but clear summary of a much bigger story, which manages to be coherent and engaging and to cover both the broad picture and enough detail to engage the curiosity. Here too is a wealth of fine illustration, much of it not familiar to those of us who haven't recently been haunting the archives of the University of Westminster. Using a title such as *The Education of the Eye* sets a tough challenge from the start in terms of visual appeal, but this book more than satisfies: there seem to be very few double-page openings without illustration, and the illustrations themselves are very fine, much more than the same familiar images recycled. And here too are some very high production values: a good measure of how well a book is made is to count the proof-reading errors, and in this case, I found *one* (two spaces between a pair of words rather than one – yes, I know, but Editors worry about these things). That's pretty good, in my view.

All in all *The Education of the Eye* is an excellent thing that easily matches the ambitions of its subject in simultaneously informing and entertaining. It balances the word and the image nicely, and reads well with an easy fluent style. It's a valuable addition to the literature of the lantern, not least because it tells us about things other than actual lantern practice, and in a remarkably short span tells us a lot about the social and educational environment in which the lantern moved through much of the English nineteenth century. It would grace any bookshelf, and I can't recommend it highly enough.

Auditorium of the Large Theatre at the Polytechnic, with the windows of the lantern projection box visible in the centre of the back wall below the balcony.

