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Endeavour

Volume 36, Issue 1, March 2012, Pages 6-13

Feature

The Great Exhibition of 1851: the struggle to describe the indescribable

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.endeavour.2011.10.004>

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Despite efforts to lay out the Great Exhibition in a rational arrangement, it was so vast and variegated and overwhelming in its single 18-acre building that it was literally indescribable. Robert Hunt in his *Synopsis* argued that every visitor needed to find a thread “any thread” through the labyrinth; but this proved elusive, even for professional journalists, who must overall be judged to have failed. With description impossible, journalists tried other strategies, notably epistolary form, and also fiction, which excused the writer from providing any more than a few personal impressions. The legacy of the Exhibition is ambiguous: judged at the time an overwhelming success, it proved to be all too easily forgettable and ephemeral.



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