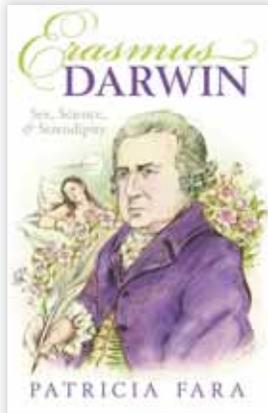


BOOK REVIEWS



Erasmus Darwin: Sex, Science, & Serendipity

by Patricia Fara

Oxford University Press, 2012, 336pp, £20

In her highly readable book on the life and work of Dr Erasmus Darwin, Patricia Fara takes a thematic rather than chronological approach to her subject. Rather than providing a conventional 'birth to death' account, Fara structures her book around Darwin's poems in order to consider him as a scientist and philosopher.

This is the strength of Fara's work, using Darwin's poems to explore his ideas, his life and his relationships with others, including his Lunar Society friends. Fara is also adept at contextualising Darwin, placing him in the broader context of the English Enlightenment, encompassing technical innovation as well as political and philosophical thought. She provides a wide range of information about the subjects that interested Darwin and the ideas that informed his poetic works. Fara herself is also very much a part of the story. She describes the pleasures and frustrations of researching an historical figure such as Darwin, allowing the reader to share in her journey as she explores the scientific and political references in his poetry. Fara's account is a welcome addition to the existing works on Darwin and offers a new way of understanding him as an important figure of the Enlightenment.

Kate Iles



Birmingham Town Hall: An Architectural History

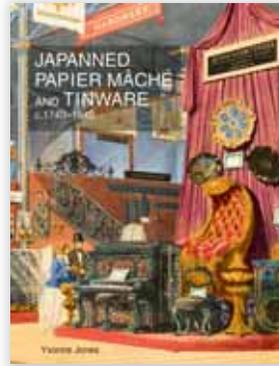
by Anthony Peers

Lund Humphries, 2012, 248pp, £27

Birmingham Town Hall is an evocative and enduring testament to the political, social and cultural history of the town and Peers, project historian during much of its extensive renovation, has produced an

impressive account of its evolution. Organised chronologically and displaying a remarkable array of illuminatingly-captioned images, the first half of the book details the planning, decision-making processes and construction of the building during the comparatively narrow span from the first recorded proposal for a town hall in 1827 to its opening in 1834. Accordingly, the remainder of the book is dedicated to the examination of its subsequent evolution and concludes with a consideration of the building's twenty-first century renovation and the discoveries which were made during the process. Throughout, Peers writes with an academic yet highly readable style that is both compelling and informative, with an occasional nod to the ironic. He takes great care to counterbalance the much-vaunted, highly commendable ideals and intentions of the Town Hall's champions with the less-than-salubrious circumstances surrounding its evolution, such as rivalry, bankruptcy and highly suspect commercial practices. The result is an absorbing, 'warts-and-all' history of both the Town Hall and its wider locality.

Pete Bounous



Japanned Papier Mâché and Tinware c.1740-1940

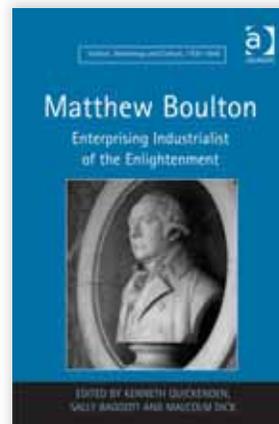
by Yvonne Jones

Antique Collectors' Club, 2012, 304pp, £45

Despite the scholarship which underpins the content of this history of the Midlands' japanning industry, this is an easily readable work. In its more than 300 pages it contains a chronological history;

detailed references to the processes; a historical directory of the manufacturers of japanware within Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Bilston; a glossary of the products produced; known artists and decorators; and notes for collectors. In addition the text is skilfully supported by the extensive use of contemporary references that are frequently fascinating in their own right. Throughout, this beautiful book is lavishly illustrated with pictures of highly decorated products, which, whether to the individual's taste or not, are eye-catching and it will surely take its place as a standard reference to a previously poorly recorded Midlands industry.

Roger Bruton



Matthew Boulton. Enterprising Industrialist of the Enlightenment

edited by Kenneth Quickenden, Sally Baggott and Malcolm Dick

Ashgate, 2013, 312pp, £65

This book is a selection of fifteen papers originally presented at the 2009 international conference, 'Where Genius and the Arts Preside', to mark the bicentenary of the death of Matthew Boulton. The subjects reveal the

astonishing breadth of Boulton's interests and activities. They range from the philosophy of the 'industrial enlightenment', to social and political tensions in Birmingham; the layout of the Soho Manufactory; Boulton's scientific interests; his sometimes visionary and sometimes chaotic approach to business; steam engine improvements; mechanical paintings; silverware; the Assay Office; copper; the mint; workers; his French-Jewish trading partners; portrait prints of Boulton; and his death, funeral and commemoration. Nicholas Goodison has written the foreword and there is an introduction by the three editors. One of the purposes of the conference was to seek to bring Boulton out from James Watt's shadow and examine the balance between historic views of Watt as the engineering genius and Boulton as the socialising entrepreneur who did not get his hands dirty, images largely originated by Samuel Smiles and increasingly recognised as too polarised. This collection represents a useful up-to-date addition to the scholarship. There is also an extensive Boulton bibliography.

Shena Mason