

## **The Great Exhibition and the Explosion of Print**

The Great Exhibition of 1851 sparked an explosion of printed materials commemorating, commenting upon, satirizing, and circulating around the Crystal Palace. This paper finds within the exhibition's diverse culture of print a palpable preoccupation with accident and material disaster. Such preoccupations are part of the prevailing concerns leading up to the opening of the Crystal Palace, including those about working class agitation, the invasion of foreign radicals, and even the failure of food supplies. But in apprehensions about accidents and structural failures, we can find an interesting connection between the perceived material instabilities of the Crystal Palace and the dynamic, often ephemeral materials of its print culture.

Histories of the exhibition emphasize that, relative to predictions of disaster, nothing really happened. But the printed evidence tells a different story: something happened to texts. As Isobel Armstrong and others have pointed out, the exhibition changes the status of printed text as commodity, as stable material form, as a category of knowledge. Developing these insights, I examine texts preoccupied with accidents not merely as critiques of the exhibition or its architecture, but as texts uniquely sensitive to the instabilities of their own materiality, to the contingencies of their own production. My materials include a variety of texts, including safety reports, an exhibition catalogue, a ballad collection, and a comic novel held in Special Collections at the University of Edinburgh Library: Mayhew and Cruikshank's production *1851; or, The adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys and family*. These texts show us the fractures in Victorian notions of materiality which the Crystal Palace was to enshrine.