



***William Harry Rogers: Victorian Book Designer and Star of the Great Exhibition*, by Gregory Jones (London: Unicorn Publishing Group, 2023), 312pp., £50.00 (hardback)**

William Harry Rogers (1825-73) was what we would today call an industrial designer although he is best known for his book cover designs. From about 1848 to 1872 he produced an astonishingly large range of complex designs that transformed the mundane rectangle we know as the front of a book into exquisitely complex golden geometries.

A precursor to the early-twentieth-century concept that a useful object can be valued for itself separate from its utility (its 'thingness'), in the middle-1800s Victorians feverishly took up the hobby of collecting. The book became valued as an object distinct from its intellectual content and demand for beautiful books soared. The market was wide open for someone with Rogers's unique artistic predilections.

He also designed tableware, wallpaper and playing cards and dabbled in other areas like designs for wood carving and interiors.

The stated goals of this book are to bring together "many new discoveries [...] and provide in effect a catalogue raisonné for the artist". Indeed, it is the first book-length work on Rogers and, without question, it achieves its aims and exceeds expectations by being both thorough and readable.

Rogers was a product of his era and this book places his life and achievements well in their cultural context. Rogers's creations reflect changes occurring at the time. For example: Manufacturing processes became more automated and cotton was readily available so book covers were not restricted to hand-tooled leather one-offs.

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Increased rates of literacy among a growing middle class boosted demand for more widely distributed print material. The rise of the children's genre followed on from stricter regulations against child labour and an expanding school system. More disposable income and higher rates of literacy meant book retailing was a growing sector where an appealing book cover could improve sales.

Rogers had a family to support and, like most artists, would take commissions that required skill but not necessarily creativity. Much of his work documents other people's product designs in the days before photography. Additionally, many of his commissioned illustrations appear to be merely decorative. So, the reader might legitimately ask if Rogers was capable of personal creative expression as an artist in the true sense of the word or might he have just been a talented illustrator? And, while he may not have pushed the envelope or presaged Modernism as did Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the example on page twenty-nine, excerpted from the interior of *Quarles' Emblems* (1861), should settle the debate.

When Rogers had the opportunity to let his imagination flow it was a formidable thing to behold. *Quarles' Emblems* reveals a playful yet haunting convergence of flora, fauna, flying skulls and fabulous creatures set into a deceptively-beautiful graphic context. It is a sign of his highly-cerebral approach to illustration that Rogers flirts with the third dimension. Is the dark circle of flames a hole in the page? Is the hand of love restraining a flying orb from speeding into a gaping maw? It is difficult to divert one's eyes.

An even more extreme example showing the true nature of Rogers's genius is a book he created from start to finish called *Spiritual Conceits* (1862) which is given a chapter of its own in Jones's book. It is a staggering revelation from first page to last as Rogers developed his own illustrative symbology to accompany a collection of religious and poetical inspirational passages. Only an artist emerging from a culture of heraldry and monarchical symbols could have created this elegant language so convincingly.

That said, one feels some trepidation when on page ten, after listing Augustus Pugin, William Burges, Christopher Dresser, Rossetti and William Morris as his contemporaries, the author states, "it can be argued, [Rogers is] THE great artist-designer of the Victorian period". Rogers's primary competitor, the better-known John Leighton, is given mere paragraphs and dismissed by Jones as "competent but mundane". Leighton lived to be ninety so his output was many times that of Rogers and it allowed him to develop his talent over a much longer creative arc in a way that Rogers

could not; we can see how his skills developed and his work gained in creative confidence over the decades. He was very prolific and his work varied from imaginative to ordinary and commercial. But cursory research shows that, in fact, Leighton was the equal of Rogers in ways that matter: he was witty; he played with illusion and symmetry; his technical partnership with his bindery resulted in a large body of beautifully produced books. Without taking anything away from Rogers, it would have been instructive to have a more in-depth comparison of the two artists. Because of Jones's clear admiration for his subject the book sometimes veers towards hagiography.

Sadly, we will never know how far Rogers's talent could have taken him. His productive years were cut short by an early death from tuberculosis at the age of forty-seven. Still, this book, like all good reference works, provides the basis for further research by future academics; sources are meticulously documented, footnotes and robust appendices are informative reading, even if Jones did need to make a stronger case for Rogers's "star" status. Identification of book marks, signatures and labels mean this book is a must-have for collectors and dealers of Victoriana.

As a side note, given the topic of this book, a review cannot end without some reference to its design. Rogers's deliciously textured books were characterized by a layering of extremely intricate hand-cut dyes stamped with gleaming gold foil and blind debossing. Sadly, this effect cannot be reproduced today; rather than attempting to so do here, the publisher should have opted for a well-designed dust jacket.

Ann E. Gray (Independent Researcher)