

BOOK CHOICE ...

THE BLACK COUNTRY A HISTORY IN 100 OBJECTS

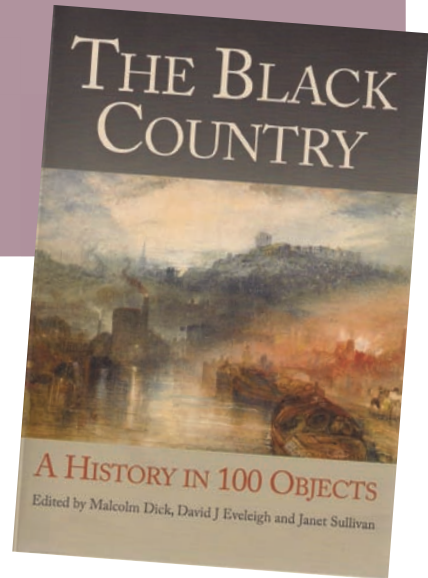
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Review by Dr. Trevor Raybould

The structure of this book is unusual but most effective in achieving its aims.

In the Introduction we are treated to the most comprehensive and effective examination of the term, 'Black Country', to date. Every aspect is acknowledged: the many histories of religion, politics, education, migration, art, science, culture, and the changing identity as industrialisation impacted two centuries ago. The critical issue of defining the term 'Black Country' acknowledges the importance of the physical and industrial characteristics of the region, the somewhat negative depictions are considered, and also, the more positive depictions of their culture by Black Country people themselves! Its origins are noted in Leland's reference to Birmingham's smiths and their sources of iron and coal from Staffordshire (1538), Plot in 1686, and the impetus given by steam power in 1779, and mineral smelting. The arrival of the artificial cut on the plateau in the 1760s signalled easier access to wider markets at reduced transport costs.

Particularly interesting is the section 'Inventing the Black Country'. Woodhouse and Keir described the Black Country before the term was first used. Woodhouse, born in Rowley Regis, a shoemaker and a poet, wrote about the area in three distinctive themes: place, geol-



ogy and industry. James Keir, 'Minerology of the South-West of Staffordshire', (in Stebbing-Shaw, History of Staffordshire 1798-1801), analysed the local geology which 'underpinned' the local economy. Tellingly, Plot had recorded that South Staffs produced 45,000 tons of coal a year. Keir noted that this was 'less than three weeks' production' a century later. The effects upon the environment were reflected in Princess Victoria's scrapbook comments following a visit to Birmingham and Wolverhampton in 1832: 'The men, women, children, country, and houses are all black...The country is very desolate: there are coals about and the grass is quite blasted and black... The country continues black, engines flaming, coals in abundance, smoking and burning coal heaps, intermingled with wretched huts...and little ragged children.' And this was before the massive expansion of the mineral and iron trades through the nineteenth century! The famous quota

-tion from Elihu Burritt's *Walks in the Black Country and its Green Borderland* (1869), as viewed from Dudley castle: 'the sublimist battle scene ever enacted on earth', is evidence of the effects of the enormous increase in productive capacity during the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

The famous etchings of Richard Chattock in the 1870s certainly reflect decay and desolation in some colliery areas and in the domestic hand nail-making sector, but, just as inventions led to massive growth in productivity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, so productivity expanded in the latter half of the nineteenth century driven by new inventions in scale and quality. Nasmyth's steam hammer (1842) increased productivity and accuracy in the production of wrought iron. In consequence, metal working expanded and diversified from such large items as the anchors for the 'Titanic', (Noah Hingley & Sons, 1912), to consumer goods such as locks, pots, pans, flat irons etc.

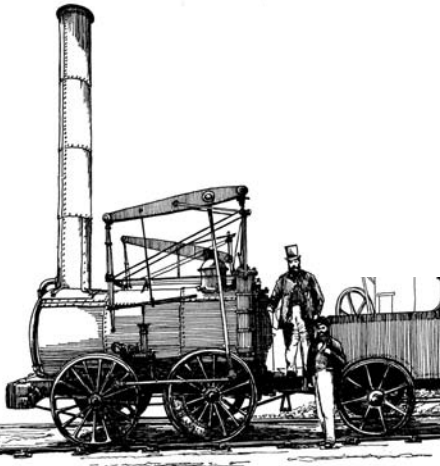
Migrants were attracted from surrounding areas by the growing opportunities. This trend continued into the twentieth century as the local economy further diversified in gas and electrical engineering, the internal combustion engine, motor cars, motor cycles, tanks and aircraft, and, in more recent times, plastics and electrical components. An important aspect of this increase in population was the flourishing number of organisations from the mid-eighteenth century onwards such as the Methodist chapels, Friendly Societies, self-help groups, and welfare all of which was to be echoed by immigration from the Commonwealth countries after the 1950s.

The wide-ranging and comprehensive Introduction provides the context for placing the 100 objects in the overall scheme of things. There is no Index or list of objects – this is not a criticism, but serves to enhance the pleasure and anticipation as the page is turned to discover the next object and discover its place in the overall scheme of things. The first object, p.26, is not man-made but is a fossil – a trilobite from the limestone deposits of the Dudley area known locally as 'The Dudley Bug'. Limestone was a fundamental material in the manufacture of wrought iron. In contrast, is the Papal Charter of 1182 granting the right to found a priory on the land of Gervase Paganel, Baron Dudley – early evidence of the close involvement of the Lords of Dudley in the affairs of the region (p.32). Dud Dudley's map from his book, 'Metallum Martis', (1665) reflects the continuing involvement of the Dudley family in the iron industry and the dubious claim that Dud successfully smelted iron with coal instead of the usual charcoal (p.36). The often pioneering role of the Dudley area is reflected again by the print (p.38) showing Thomas Newcomen's revolutionary Atmospheric Steam Engine erected near Dudley in 1712. A valuable development, as water was a constant problem in the Black Country coal pits because of the seams of clay. By contrast, the copy of Athena, giving William Shenstone a scroll: 'Hints towards the Elements of Taste' from *The Works in Verse and Prose of William Shenstone, 1773* (p.42), shows that other aspects of eighteenth century society could be found as in Shenstone's estate at The Leasowes in Halesowen which he designed in the 'naresque' or landscape style as a contrast to the growth of mines and forges near his home. Also, in contrast to the expected emphasis on

mining and ironworking, is another object: an enamel patch box, 'A Trifle from Bilston' describing the intricate and delicate production processes involved (p.46). John Wilkinson's copper half-penny trade token, 1792 (p.51), speaks to us about the significance of his Bradley Ironworks which introduced coke-smelting to the area, the shortage of copper currency, and the drop forge hammer found throughout the region at that time. Noyes' painting of the Bradley Ironworks (p.59) speaks volumes about the Black Country depicting the smoky atmosphere, the typical features of a large ironworks, and the proximity of the Birmingham Canal. The painting of the interior of a glass cone (p.61) reminds us that the flint glass industry was well-established in the Black Country before the expansion of the iron trades in the eighteenth century and clearly records the production stages involved.

The range of Objects continues to confirm many of our expected choices, but also surprise and inform us in an entertaining way including the 'Agenoria', the first steam locomotive in the Black Country, in 1829 (p.65), the General Election Handbill, Dudley, 1832, the Medallion to raise funds for St. James' School in Dudley, 1842 (p.69), and a poster concerning the infamous cholera outbreak in Bilston, 1832 (p.71). The lock industry was well-established in Willenhall, Walsall and Wednesfield by the late seventeenth century and thirteen lock-makers exhibited at The Great Exhibition in 1851, and a prize medal was awarded to the Albert Lock by Carpenter and Tyldesley of Willenhall (p.74). The item on Axle Shaft, Wednesbury (p.84) reflects so many aspects of Black Country history: the initiative of a local church minister, Hardy, who invented a new design for axles, and a grocer from Toll End, Samuel Hodgetts, who purchased a forge at Lea Brook in Wednesbury to manufacture the new 'patent shafts'. The dioptric lighthouse lens (p.86) exhibited by Chance Brothers at the Great Exhibition was installed in 2,300 lighthouses in 73 countries. The objects continue to educate, interest and surprise us as we turn the pages to discover production of motor cars, aeroplanes, the Revo Electric Cooker, The Wolverhampton trolley bus, and many more.

Overall, this book is a fine example of placing an 'object' in its time, place and significance in the overall scheme of the many 'things' and places which illustrate the meaning of the Black Country. The clarity and range of the illustrations of each object gives focus for the text. This is a book to enjoy and inform, in equal measure.



*Agenoria steam locomotive by Austin Moseley.
Built by Foster-Raistrick, Stourbridge, c1828
and used on the Pensnett (mineral) railway.*