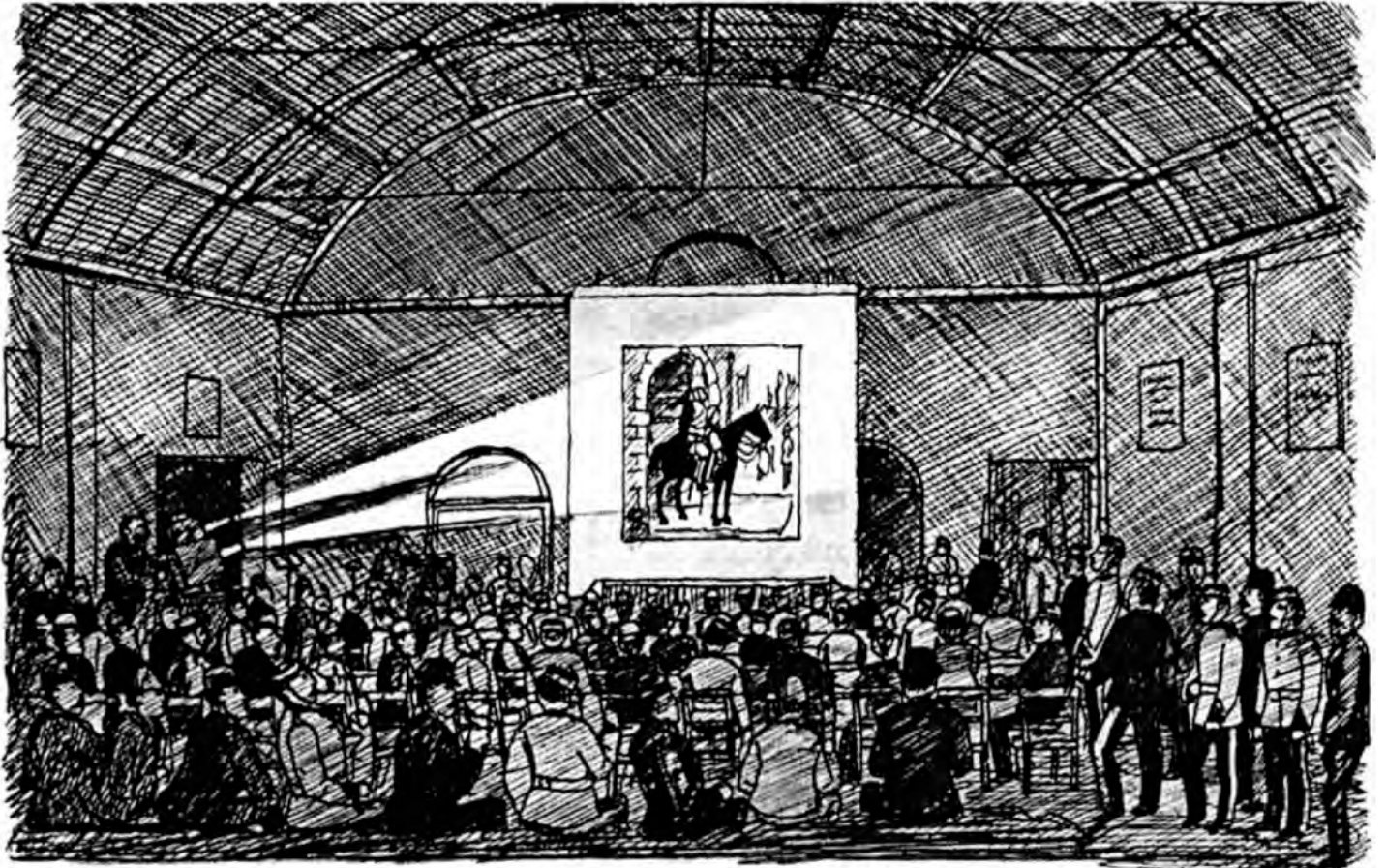


MORE ON HARRY BOW

Ian Mackley

THE COVER OF THE LAST ISSUE of the *New Magic Lantern Journal* carried a rare first-hand glimpse into the late Victorian world of the magic lantern. This was a pen-and-ink drawing (Fig. 1) showing a magic lantern event that took place in Bristol in 1893. The picture was one of over 90 illustrations that formed part of a diary for that year written by William Henry Bow, popularly known to his family and friends as 'Harry'. An abridged typeset version of the handwritten diary, which retained the writer's idiosyncratic use of the English language and included reproductions of some of the original drawings, was published in book form, in 1986, as *The Diary of a Bristolian 1893*.¹

1. W.H. Bow, 'The Magic Lantern Show of Military Scenes and Views ...' (p.36)



**THE MAGIC LANTERN SHOW OF MILITARY SCENES AND VIEWS
AT THE ENGINEER VOLUNTEERS DRILL HALL .**

What gives this diary its social significance is that it is the work of a seemingly simple and unassuming man, a genuine 'man of the people'. Although Bow had occasional contact with those better placed than himself, he was essentially a member of an underclass struggling to make a living in and around the prosperous city of Bristol at the end of the 19th century. The diarist travelled the city and its environs, recording as he went his personal experiences in a straightforward but surprisingly detailed manner. The account describes his somewhat haphazard employment arrangements in casual labour for the local funeral parlour trade, as well as giving more prosaic detail of his domestic situation and leisure pursuits.

From the diary we learn of Harry Bow's enthusiasm for attending local attractions and events, which included numerous excursions to places of interest – visits to nearby Bath, steamer trips into the Bristol Channel, an Indian bazaar at the Victoria Rooms, the caves at Cheddar. He demonstrates a particular penchant for spectacle, for example going to see new electric street lighting, a cabinet maker's shop on fire and the opening night of the New Empire Palace of Varieties. Of special interest to us, however, is the fact that included in the diary are two contemporary (and very rare) first-hand accounts of magic lantern practice that he witnessed, both of which are illustrated.

The first magic lantern reference appears as the entry for Saturday 4 March 1893, when Bow went to a public entertainment arranged by a local army unit. Here it

NOTES

1. W.H. Bow, *The Diary of a Bristolian 1893* (Bristol: Engart Press, 1986).

should be noted that a recurring theme evident throughout the entire diary text is Harry Bow's fascination, almost to the point of obsession, with military matters. He takes every opportunity to witness, and sometimes join in with, events that are connected with the armed forces, clearly revelling in the connected ceremony and pageantry. This fixation explains why his text carries with it many military phrases and references.

During the day I done a general skirmish around. Seen Mr Cook and he tells me of entertainment what would interest me, gives me 3d, and then I hurried over to Trinity St. to the Engineers Headquarters where they were to hold a magic lantern display. I forked over 6d to the officer in charge for a ticket and got down in the hall, and an officer shows me to a seat on the gallery at the back. A good many people were there, and Engineers in undress, some of the fair sex also. They turns down the lights and left the place in darkness and begins the show. The lantern throws a lot of fine views on a big sheet, consisting of the portraits of the Col, officers, captains, major &c of the Regt, the Regimental Camp at Kelston and the various aspects of their life there, good twas too. Also some fine battle scenes, troops drilling and on the march. Types of the British Army, Horse and foot &c. and the last was a view of the Horse Guards, London, with one of the mounted sentries on duty, and looked fine. That ended one part, and they lights up again, then a fellow came on the platform with a pair of Indian Clubs and gave a display, whirling and swinging them over his head &c. Then there was songs on a piano, a lecture on military matters, speeches &c which was all fine, and the people took it all free and easy, a lot of em smoking &c. During the show a fellow who was on top of the gallery, got pushed or fell off down on the floor, hurt himself a bit, and caused some stir.

It lasted two hours and was good on the whole what I could make out of it. Then I mixed about among the soldiers, doing a squint round then came out and went to library again, then back home all serene.²

The second lantern event Bow describes was a lecture given on Wednesday 22 November 1893 at the Merchant Venturer's Hall (Fig. 2).

Today, I seen Lord Chief Justice Grantham arrive in state at the Guildhall, to open Assizes. He was in wig and scarlet gown, attended by Mayor, Sherrif, heralds, mace and sword bearers, and an escort of mounted police with drawn swords around him. In evening, I went to a lecture, called 'War on a White Sheet' by Mr. F. Villiers, war artist and correspondent to the 'Graphic'. I went over to the Merchant Venturers Hall, in Unity Street, paid 1d, and got a good seat. The place soon fills up, with a good many standing. A big sheet was up on the platform, the gas was turned out, and Mr. Villiers came forward. He was in campaign dress, Norway jacket, havresack and knife, then the lantern goes to work, with views. There was one, with him sketching on the battle field, with dead men lying around him, and views and battle scenes of the Russo-Turkish war he served through. Plevna, the great Gravitza redoubt retreat of the Russians, destruction of a gunboat, and the Czar and staff on another, Russians storming forts. Also the Egyptian war, the bombardments of forts at Alexandra, a shell bursting on an ironclad, the storming of Tel-el-Kebir, with highlanders carrying the trenches, British fleet at anchor, torpedo boats. The Soudan war, and relief of Gen Gordon, crossing the desert on a camel, and battles with Arabs on the Nile. Some humorous views, of a visit to King John of Abyssinia, with him on a donkey, a river scene with a big crocodile swimming about. All the time, Mr. Villiers explained his thrilling doings and adventures in the campaigns he showed. I wish I was able to take his words in, as twould have interested me indeed, but I could not unfortunately.³

Included in the two accounts are the poignant comments 'it lasted two hours and was good on the whole what I could make out of it' and 'I wish that I was able to take his words in, as twould have interested me indeed, but I could not unfortunately'. These are both references to the fact that the diarist had suffered a hearing defect from childhood. So although he wrote that he had enjoyed the lantern images shown at both shows, the sad truth was that he was probably unable to follow the narrated explanation that accompanied the showing of the slides. For Harry Bow the magic of the lantern experience could only ever be one without the sense of sound, and his quest to embrace the full spectacle that others around him enjoyed therefore remained, in part at least, unfulfilled.

Throughout his life Harry Bow lived in the family home in Bristol. His schooling was fractured and troubled, possibly as a result of his poor hearing. From an early age, however, he showed an aptitude for art. After leaving school he continued to develop his artistic skills, attending local classes first using watercolours and later concentrating on pen-and-ink work. He regularly produced sketches in both media, some of which he sold for small sums to his immediate family and friends. The



2. W.H. Bow, 'War on a White Sheet ...' (p.154)

2. Bow, 35.

3. Bow, 153.



3. W.H. Bow, 'The Bristol Industrial and Fine Arts Exhibition 1893' (p.136)

4. Bristol Industrial and Fine Arts Exhibition of 1893: a contemporary lantern slide (maker unknown)



accuracy and attention to detail of his artwork can be judged by comparing his drawing of the newly opened Bristol Industrial and Fine Arts Exhibition building (Fig. 3) with a photographic lantern slide image taken of the same scene at around the same time (Fig. 4). It is clear that the drawing is a fair and faithful representation that carries with it a wealth of well-observed detail.

There is every reason therefore to assume that his penned drawings of the magic lantern shows should also be considered as wholly reliable representations of the two events. The purist may take issue with the artistic licence taken by Bow in positioning the lantern apparently at right angles to the screen, and maybe also in showing the twin light beams illuminated together in his illustration of the first lantern lecture. However, this seems a perfectly acceptable means of demonstrating the whole technology of the magic lantern show – the lantern, the option of using its two optical systems and finally a full-screened image that was available for everyone in the audience to see. In the second lecture by Villiers, the two drawn

representations are more literal, with the emphasis on full-screen views and the magic lantern omitted, its presence in the hall merely being implied.

A third spectacle that is described in the diary, but unfortunately not illustrated, is an evening visit to Poole's Myriorama at the Colston Hall in Bristol on Friday 27 January:

In the evening of this day I paid another visit to Poole's Myriorama at Colston Hall. I went early and got among the crowd and after the usual wait I got in & up in the gallery & the place soon fills up. After a while it begins as usual, and the pictures were the same as I seen on New Years Eve, so I need not go over all of em again, but they was A1. The variety artistes want a lot of notice though & they were a treat.⁴

This diary entry continues with a full description of the circus and variety acts that were displayed before the grand finale:

To finish up with they had a new spectacle just added, of a tableau, representing the defeat of the Spanish Armada, which was a treat indeed. The first scene showed Plymouth Hoe, with Sir Francis Drake, Frobisher and his officers & captains playing at bowls on the green as recorded in history & they gets the news that the Armada was in sight and they goes off to their duty. Next scene was the Armada coming up the English Channel with all the big Spanish galleons, and ships of war to invade England, huge vessels too they was, and the English Fleet comes up to engage them. The next scene shows the fierce sea fight between them, with a lot of ships, boats &c all over the place, and they fires the guns, and big broadsides flashed out and clouds of smoke and reports went up. They had a terrible battle for to save England, and they drifts along & fires guns, and some ships blew up, and caught on fire & blazed up in big red fire & flames and wrecks all round the sea, galleons all full of men looked real indeed, and they also had a scene of the English boarding a Spanish ship & the desperate hand to hand fight on the decks firing shots &c and finally gained the day over

the Spanish. That finished it, having lasted until 10.30 and it was a first rate and tip-top show & no mistake and a good 3d worth indeed. A good evenings recreation that was, and cheap too. Then we all streams out and I came back home well pleased with what I had seen.⁵

Just five years after the diary was written, Harry Bow was dead. He died in a Bristol hospital at the age of only 33 years, and is buried in Grave No. 20 at Bristol's Ridgeway Cemetery. It is suggested that the driving motivation for this man of both limited education and opportunity was, like many of the Victorians, the underlying desire for self-improvement. Whether or not this is the case, through his words and drawings he unknowingly left a rich legacy of social comment for future generations. We are indebted to a descendant of this chronicler of the ordinary for recognising the value of his work and making his unusual document available for publication.

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4. Bow, 19.

5. Bow, 21.