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# Is the Magic Lantern Dead or Alive

MIKE SIMKIN

During the Convention of the Magic Lantern Society in April 1983 the scope of the lantern was displayed to its fullest potential through excellent exhibitions, live shows, prints, ephemera and displays from enthusiasts of the 1980s: a visual medium in its own right with over three hundred years of tradition and rich heritage which has brought together a multitude of disciplines and cultural, social and technical influences.

With the applause and memories of the Convention still fresh in my mind I began to feel that we were, perhaps, in danger of paying too much attention to this heritage and therefore failing to note that the magic lantern is today competing with other fantastic electronic media and, by all accounts, holding its own more than adequately; the magic lantern is not dead today, thank you! The showmen, the historians and media entrepreneurs are building upon its technical, aesthetic and cultural repertoire — interpreting the original material and language with great vivacity and sensitive vitality, proving that the genre of the magic lantern is both a flexible and imaginative medium.

Not only is the magic lantern being shown in its glory by showmen such as Mike and Janet Bartley, Anita and Doug Lear, Mervyn Heard and many others, but I am sure the revival is also being sustained by the knowledge that Hermann Hecht, John and Bill Barnes, David Francis, David Henry

and others keep the showmen in check with their knowledge and understanding of the medium.

Perhaps we should stop for ever looking over our shoulders at the accomplishments of the Victorian period and claim with enthusiasm the role of the magic lantern today! 'Traditions are beautiful', Franz Marc declared, '— to create, not to follow'.

Our new traditions are being created in the day-to-day contemporary activities and promotion of the lanterns and the showmen. These should not go unrecorded for future generations and I believe that our *Journal* should be the organ for this record — just as its predecessor of the 1890s was for its time. We should fully record through this *Journal* the lantern showmen of today and the state of the medium in the 1980s.

Having said that, what happened in the 1960s and 1970s? Believing as I do that a record should be kept, I will start the ball rolling in the hope that other members and supporters of the lantern will feel able to follow suit.

In 1962 I discovered my first slides and crude lantern and for two years tried to put these odd items into context. Immediate reference points were the Barnes Museum in St. Ives, David Francis, Hermann Hecht and a few books of the past — those by 'An Expert' (1893), T. C. Hepworth (1891), W. I. Chadwick (1885) and a *Mere Phantom*. Contemporary books were few and far

between — *The Origins of the Motion Picture* by David Thomas (1964) and *Movement in Two Dimensions* by Olive Cook (1963). From memory these were the only reference texts available when I started collecting equipment, ephemera and research information.

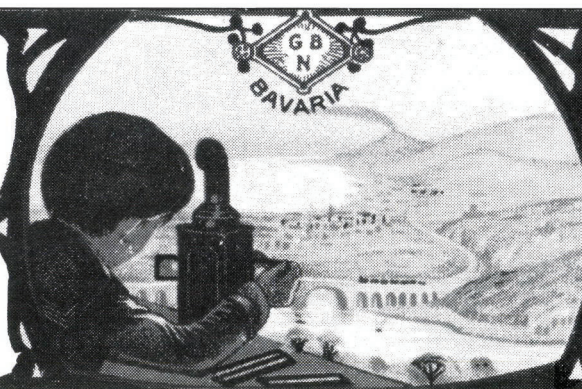
Since 1966 we have given ninety-one shows with lanterns and slides. This is a simple statistic which belies a multitude of complex frustrations, joys and memories. For our first programmes between July 1966 and March 1968 we were innocently using a chromo-litho biscuit tin converted to use Edison's candle with fragmentary transfer slides and a few Carpenter & Westley chromatropes. This was followed by a W. C. Hughes single lens lantern and a Steward binocular during the period 1968-1979. I was well aware of the inadequacies of this equipment and so was very pleased when we were able to add the Noakes No. 3 Triple (patent no. 6154) to the collection, as this enabled us to extend the versatility of our programme to include dissolving view sets like those of the *Watermill* and the *Exeter Theatre Fire*.

From 1979 to the present our projection equipment has remained the Hughes single lantern and the Noakes Triple. Starting with a team of Liz and myself, the shows now involve our sons (when available) — David, as technical advisor and Andrew, on vocals and storytelling. (cont. p2)

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These shows have taken place in often wonderful environments from at one extreme a Steam Rally in a tent under the shadows of Harry Lee's magnificent swing boats (in October 1967), to the lecture room of the Victoria and Albert Museum (in April 1971). In between these two locations we have worked in village halls, colleges and, even, private garages! In some cases we have had to remove grand pianos, harps and dog excrement before the show could begin.

Each show has its particular memory to this day, but the flavour and structure of each programme has always had its basis in the past while remaining aware of the contemporary climate. The content has always been related to material in the collection but staple ingredients have usually included: humour, travel, education, entertainment and dissolving effects. The programmes have usually been adapted towards the specific interests of the audience, if known beforehand. Their reactions have usually been wonder at how those effects are achieved 'up there on the screen'. When presenting shows it has always been a pleasure to meet the public – even if we were nervous that there might be a local lanternist in the audience who can recall their shows of the past. Indeed, there once was a lanternist who had cycled the country lanes with a lantern strapped to his back and who recalled that he always tried to avoid the screen appearing totally white between slides – a timely criticism!

These ninety-one shows are all chronicled in my present phantasmagoria display. It is possible to identify individual shows but generally I extol the pleasure all the shows have given and feel in a small way one is trying to keep alive a tradition of cultural heritage which has horrified, entertained and given pleasure to many people before us on an international scale. Like T. C. Hepworth, I maintain that:

The magic lantern has always been one of the most popular instruments ever made. So popular has it been, that children by the thousand recognise its charms, while many of more mature years have a secret hankering after it, which they would fain leave unacknowledged: 'For it is but a toy' think they, 'and we have left toyland behind us since we reached man's estate'. Let me sympathise with these feelings and own for my part a weakness for pantomimes and fireworks, which weakness I have occasionally the opportunity of indulging, on the plea of taking my children out for a treat. But let me say at once that the magic lantern is now no toy, but it is recognised as a valuable aid to education far and wide.

#### EDITORIAL

We are pleased to print Mike's characteristically passionate and modest statement and hope that it will encourage others to write to the *Journal* with their thoughts and feelings about lantern activities and possible directions we could consider taking. We also hope that, as he suggests, other Showpersons will offer documentation of their histories and current activities. There is indeed great scope here for material which is both of current interest and considerable future importance.

On our centre pages we begin the promised *Primus Department* with a brief glimpse at some of the firm's output. We should like to follow this up with a detailed study and would like someone with a particular interest in this area to step forward and offer his services.

We also welcome offers of services in all other departments – and will attempt, as we said previously, to find a home for all material offered.

David Henry

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The Quarto Press

Mike & Elizabeth's poster for a 1975 show, surname mis-spelt

## CONVENTION PROCEEDINGS III

9th April 1983

# THE HISTORY OF PROJECTING PHANTOMS, GHOSTS AND APPARITIONS Part 2

HERMANN HECHT

We have definite information of a 'camera obscura lantern' (to coin a phrase) in the 'Contrivance to make the Picture of any thing appear on a Wall', which was designed by ROBERT HOOKE, first curator of experiments to the Royal Society and later its secretary. Although details were not published until 1668, some years after its first demonstration, the Society obviously attached a great deal of importance to the instrument:

It produces Effects not onely very delightful, but to such as know the contrivance, very wonderful; so that Spectators, not well versed in Opticks, that could see the various Apparitions and Disappearances, the Motions, Changes and Actions, that may this way be represented, would readily believe them to be super-natural and miraculous... So far our Inventor; who has not contented himself with the bare speculation, but put the same in practice some years since, in the presence of several members of the R. Society, among whom the publisher had the good fortune to see the successful performance of what is here delivered.<sup>1</sup>

I have as yet been unable to discover the exact date that Hooke demonstrated his 'contrivance' with which, in essence, three different projection methods were made possible: i) the projection of transparencies, ii) the projection of opaque objects which can be placed upside down, and iii) the projection of opaque objects, like live animals, which have to be kept upright (most seem to prefer it that way) and where the use of two lenses is suggested to re-invert the inverted image. The reference to supernatural effects may be misleading: if one attempts a reconstruction of Hooke's 'Camera Laterna', one can only come to the conclusion that it must have been an arrangement on the lines of a very large optical bench taking up an entire room – a projection booth in the true sense of the word – a very remarkable instrument for its time and far more sophisticated than the puny magic lanterns which were then just about appearing in public. It is perhaps little wonder that the Royal Society simply ignored them!

The pictures shown with these lanterns quite naturally depicted the same subject matter as had the ghost and devil shows. The first description we have is of WALGENSTEIN's lantern and dates from 1664: it comes from Paris where PETIT refers to it as 'the lantern of fear'.<sup>2</sup> Walgenstein was in Lyons in 1665 where he referred to it as his MAGIC LANTERN.<sup>3</sup> Three hundred and a score years later we still call it that and forget that when he gave the lantern its name and called it MAGIC, he meant it to be taken literally. He was in Copenhagen in 1670 where he gave a lantern show before King FREDERICK III just a few days before the king died.<sup>4</sup> A figure of Death was among the pictures shown to the Court which badly frightened those present; the King alone kept calm and asked for Death to be shown three times more – he died three days later – the first victim of the magic lantern? – I often wonder.

Kircher,<sup>5</sup> with his quite often wrongly maligned lantern showed a poor soul in purgatory (1) – and Death with his hourglass and scythe (2). In 1696 EDWARD PHILLIPS in the third edition of his *General Dictionary* defines the 'Magick Lanthorn' as:

a small Optical Macheen, that shews by a gloomy light upon a white Wall, Spectres and Monsters so hideous that he who knows not the Secret, believes it to be perform'd by Magic Art.

In the same year DE VALLEMONT in his *La Physique Occulte* says that:

The magic lantern is an optical machine. It is called 'magic', no doubt, because of its prodigious effects and the apparitions, and horrifying monsters that it reveals, and that people who do not know of its secret attribute it to magic.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of pleas for enlightenment, this attitude to the magic lantern persisted: even as late as 1720 scientists like 's GRAVESANDE,<sup>7</sup> who