

# BITS AND PIECES

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## THE LANTERN IN LITERATURE – 1

The cover picture for this issue of *NMLJ* comes from an intriguing little children's book simply entitled *The Magic-Lantern*, written by one Robin Ranger and published in 1862 by the Sunday-School Union of 200 Mulberry Street, New York. It measures 3 by 4.5 inches (75 x 110mm), with 56 pages of large type telling a simple story in simple language.

The story tells of three young American children, who are eagerly awaiting the arrival of their Aunt Clara from the city. When she arrives on the river boat, she is carrying a mysterious bundle which causes much curiosity. When this is unwrapped it reveals a strange instrument which is eventually explained to the children as being a magic lantern. In the evening Aunt Clara gives a lantern show, to the delight of the children and the amusement of the family's (more than slightly caricatured) Irish servant Bridget.

What is interesting about this little story – apart from its portrayal of a lantern presented and operated by a woman, which is unusual for its time – is the account it gives of the show itself. The slides are described in such detail as to suggest that a particular set of images is in the author's mind, and while the description of the show could be imaginary, at the same time the reactions of the children and the other details have an air of authenticity. In other words, this may be as close as we can get to a first-hand description of a family lantern show of the mid-nineteenth century.

Aunt Clara sets up her lantern in the sitting-room, with suitable explanations for 'my little readers' of the various parts of the lantern and their functions. She makes an announcement alluding to 'some of the most wonderful and curious things you ever saw in your lives', and the show begins:

*They all looked toward the sheet on the door, for a bright light came out of the lantern through the glasses in the tin tube, and made a great ring of white on the sheet. They had not seen it before, because Aunt Clara put her hand over the tube when she shut the door of the lantern, and did not take it away until she made her speech to the 'ladies and gentlemen'.*

*O see that pretty moon!' said Susie.*

*Katy was about to tell her it was not a moon, when Charlie called out: 'Susie, I guess your moon has a man in it.'*

*And, sure enough, there was a man in the bright ring on the door. He had a round-top hat on his head, a pack on his back, and a stick in his hand. His coat was red, and his pantaloons green. [This is the frontispiece image, reproduced on our cover].*

*Aunt Clara had put one of the painted glasses, which lay on the table, in the lantern between the light and the tin tube. The glasses in the tube were like the glasses in your grandpa's spectacles; they made things look larger than they really were. Hence, although the man painted on the glass was very small, not longer than a pin, when he was seen on the sheet upon the door he was about as large as Susie. The light going through the glasses in the tin tube made him look larger. [...]*

*The man with the red coat passed on, and next came a man with a blue coat. He too held a stick in one hand, while in the other he had a string or rope. The children wondered what was at the other end of this rope; but they could not see until Aunt Clara moved the glass a little, and the man went out of sight. Then the string or rope was seen to be fastened to a mule, who followed his blue-coated master. [...]*

*Mr Muley passed on with two feet on the ground and two off. He had a green bundle tied to his back; but what was in it nobody could find out.*

*This was all that was on the first glass, excepting a red house with a yellow sign, and an old tree that seemed to have lost its top.*

*Aunt Clara drew out the glass, and all that could be seen on the sheet was Susie's moon. But in a moment or two she put in another glass. Then there came on the wall a man with a goose under his arm, and another man pushing along a wheelbarrow with a heavy load upon it.*

*There was also a third man, at sight of whom the children shouted and clapped their hands. He was a funny-looking man indeed. His hat was red, his coat was green, and his trousers were brown. A trumpet was placed to his lips, and he seemed to be blowing it.*

*He led some queer-looking animal by a string. What it was, the children did not seem to know. They thought it must be either a dog, or a pig, or a bear; I suppose it was meant for a bear. But I think the man who painted that glass ought to have been more careful, because a bear is a bear, and it's of no use to try to make anything else out of him.*

*The next glass showed a deer prancing and jumping as though something ailed him. But what was the matter with him nobody could tell, until Aunt Clara moved the glass, and showed on the sheet a man with a very red face and a very little gun making a great smoke, and pointing the gun toward the deer. Besides, there was a large dog, with his big red mouth wide open, going right after the deer.*

*No wonder the poor thing looked frightened. The dog of itself was enough to scare him. But dog, and gun, and red-faced man together, made him jump and run for his life.*

*Then there came a man who seemed to be in great trouble, because the wind had blown off his hat. That may teach him to put his hat on tighter after this when the wind blows. [...]*

*I have not time to tell you about all the glasses that passed through the lantern. There were kings and queens, ships and forts, churches and castles, horses and carts, men with big noses and women with little eyes, besides leopards, lions, elephants, and tigers.*

*Just as the elephant showed himself on the sheet, he was seen to shake as though he had the ague. The door opened, and in walked Bridget, who had got through washing her dishes, and had come to see the show. She did not know that the sheet was on the door, or she would not have come in that way. It was her opening the door that made the elephant shake.*

*'O Bridget,' said Katy, 'you've killed our elephant.'*

*'Shure, and how did I know ye had any ilephant here?' said Bridget.*

*Aunt Clara told here there was no harm done; the door was closed, and Mr Elephant got over his ague, and stood as quiet as if he had never been shaken.*

*Bridget seemed to be as much pleased as the children with the strange sights, and quite added to the pleasure of the little ones by her queer sayings.*

Similar descriptions of two or three more slides follow, with further reactions from the children, before bedtime arrives. The moral of the piece (this being a Sunday School book) is that 'It is a great blessing to have kind parents and friends who try to make you happy', and that one should thank God for such pleasures as lantern shows.

*RC, with thanks to Mark Butterworth.*

## THE LANTERN IN LITERATURE – 2

In complete contrast is this lantern reference from no less a pen than that of the great English novelist Thomas Hardy (1840-1928). One of Hardy's less well-known works is an epic dramatic piece entitled *The Dynasts*, published in three parts between 1904 and 1908. This covers the wars and tribulations of European history revolving around the central tragic-hero figure of Napoléon Bonaparte. Literally hundreds of characters, from statesmen to soldiers and farm workers, play out the great drama under the watchful eyes of various Spirits, who have the Chorus function of commenting on the action from time to time. The whole world is under the control of an unseen force called 'the Immanent Will'.

In Part First, Act IV, Scene VI, we find Bonaparte watching the surrender of the Austrian army at Ulm (which took place in 1805). He has a brief philosophical speech about the demise of Austria as a European power, claiming that 'the English only are my enemies' and musing to himself that 'they may see what these see, by and by' (that is, the English too may be defeated, like the Austrians). The watching Spirits then comment:

### SPIRIT OF THE YEARS

So let him speak, the while we clearly sight him  
Moved like a figure on a lantern-slide,  
Which, much amazing uninitiate eyes,  
The all-compelling crystal pane but drags  
Whither the showman wills.

### SPIRIT IRONIC

And yet, my friend,  
The Will Itself might smile at this collapse  
Of Austria's men-at-arms, so drolly done;  
Even as, in your phantasmagoric show,  
The deft manipulator of the slide  
Might smile at his own art.

So even the great Bonaparte, like 'a figure on a lantern-slide' is controlled by the 'Will' which presents the show. The reference to the 'phantasmagoric show' is, of course, rather an unusual description for a lantern show in the early twentieth century, but presumably Hardy is deliberately using a reference which fits the historical period in which his drama is set. As such, the image of the Napoleonic Wars as some kind of grand phantasmagoria is an intriguing one.

*RC, with thanks to Amy Sargeant.*

## LANTERN MEMORIES

My late father C.J.E.J. (Jack) Selway was born in 1899, and from an early age took an interest in photography – perhaps as early as 1915–18. This hobby – maintained throughout his life and centred mainly on his home town of Wednesbury in the West Midlands – was complemented by his interest in local history. In 1948 his interest in photography led him to form the Wednesbury Photographic Society with three similarly minded friends, and this is still in existence today. In the late 1960s he presented the club with a trophy to commemorate his fifty years in photography. Because of his interest in the projected image and the fact that he had been presenting magic lantern shows for many years, he became the Society's slide projectionist, a position he held for many years.

I do not know when my father first obtained a magic lantern but I believe this to have been sometime during the early 1920s. He began by giving shows to his friends and this developed into his being asked to present shows to local clubs and chapels during evenings and weekends. During this time he became acquainted with a local doctor, Dr Edward Alfred Dingley JP, who, in addition to being the local Poor Law Officer, was also a very keen photographer. This friendship developed over the years, and ten or twelve years before his death in 1948, at the age of 88, the doctor gave my father a large part of his collection of lantern slides and whole-plate glass negatives. This collection comprised 4–5 cwt (200–250 kg) of glass negatives, related mainly to local scenes in the Wednesbury area, and some sixty boxes of slides relating to all parts of the country.

Storage of such a large collection proved difficult and after

several years my father decided to give the glass negatives to the local library for he firmly believed that, as they were an important part of local history, this was the best home for them. About fifteen years ago I tried to locate the collection to obtain copies to add to the small collection of local history photographs that had been made into slides by Dr Dingley, which now form part of my collection. To our great disappointment the local librarian, after trying for many months, failed to locate the negatives – neither could he locate any record of the contents of the collection. It would appear that cataloguing was not considered essential in those days and therefore it was common for such items to be accepted but not indexed. We all sadly came to the conclusion that either they had been discarded because of their size or had been smashed whilst being moved from place to place.

The storage of the slides also created problems, and they were left in my father's shed where they competed for the limited space available. Following the death of my father it transpired that only three or four boxes remained. I can only assume that many of the boxes had been given away or had deteriorated to such an extent that they had been thrown away. This latter situation, however, seems unlikely, as my father was not a person to throw things away, particularly if the slides could be re-used as cover glasses.

Although some of the slides which featured in my father's shows were from his own collection, the majority were hired in. I well remember, when I was six or seven years old, seeing the wooden crates arrive at home from the local LMS railway goods yard, as they did every few months. On one occasion which sticks out in my mind, a crate was delivered by one of the LMS railway company's few remaining horse and cart teams. For some reason there were never more than two boxes in the substantial wooden crates – whether this was all that was required for a show or whether that was the maximum that you could hire I do not know. I believe that some of the slide sets were obtained from Birmingham Reference Library but I have never confirmed this as a source. One of the most popular sets of slides my father remembered was *Buy your own Cherries*. I am not aware that slipping and mechanical slides formed part of any of his shows, and the reason for this was probably his liking for demographic slides.

As well as making slides for himself and others, my father also preferred to build his own magic lanterns, nearly always from zinc sheet, using appropriate lenses. He was also very keen on experimenting with projectors, and when army surplus lenses became available after the Second World War he tried these out but abandoned them in favour of the readily available commercial variety. The slides my father produced were mainly demographic, but I remember him producing a superb butterfly out of a mixture of coloured transparent sweet wrappers which was fixed to the slide glass.

With the demise of the 3¼ inch square slide, the 35mm film strip took over for a relatively short period only to be replaced in later years by 2-inch-square slides. My father continued his amateur projecting role as the different formats evolved up until 1990, when poor health curbed his activities. During this time he still continued to give the occasional demographic magic lantern show to audiences in his hometown. He died in 1991.

My interest in the magic lantern stems from watching my father's shows, as well as other shows which took place at the local chapel. This building could seat several hundred people and for the last show I remember seeing there – a coloured set of slides featuring a polar explorer – every seat was taken, including those in the balcony. My interest continued but was effectively put on hold as schooling, full-time work, night school, getting married and settling down became my preoccupations. My interest was rekindled in the late 1970s when I had to stand in for my father, who was unable to present his slide show of 'Old Wednesbury' because of a bad cold. From this date my interest gradually developed, culminating in my joining the Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain in January 1981 – the rest, as they say, is history.

*John Selway*