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Cover picture:

Santa Claus is coming to town: illustration by R.F. Bunner, from 'Santa Claus in the Pulpit' (1887) by Washington Gladden. Santa has brought with him an elaborate contraption which bears a passing resemblance to a magic lantern, and which he describes as his 'Grand Stereoscopic Moral Tester'(!). The text accompanying this illustration is reproduced in 'Bits and Pieces' on page 79 of this issue.

From the collection of Mervyn Heard.

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Thanks for assistance with this issue go to all its contributors, everyone involved with its design, editing and production, and to Mervyn Heard, James Lyons, John Plunkett, Amy Sargeant and Lester Smith for help with contributions.

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Origination and printing for the Society by
Dave Morgan, London

Published by the Magic Lantern Society,
South Park, Galphay Road, Kirkby Malzeard,
Ripon, North Yorkshire HG4 3RX, UK

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IN ONE WAY OF LOOKING at it, any research activity involves much the same process as fitting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. However, most self-respecting jigsaw puzzles will at least provide a copy of 'the whole picture' on the box to make the process easier. If the jigsaw's subject is 'the history of the magic lantern (etc.)', the main problems we face are that we don't have the benefit of knowing quite what the finished picture ought to look like, and in any case many of the pieces have been scattered or lost. The three main articles in this issue, in different ways, offer examples of some approaches we can make to these problems.

Kaveh Askari's article explores the work of a man who has tended to be noticed, if he is noticed at all, as a footnote to cinema history. But by taking a fresh look at Alexander Black's 'Picture Plays' in the context of their time, we learn rather more about the medium he actually used – the magic lantern, and especially some of its connections to other media of the nineteenth century – than about the medium that all too often is supposed to have replaced it. Black worked in complete awareness of the cinematograph but, as Kaveh's excellent article shows, chose to use other methods and media to tell his stories. While Black's creative approach to the lantern remains untypical, this examination of his technique, besides filling in one more of those annoying little gaps in the jigsaw, throws some more general light on how the telling of stories with the lantern related to the telling of stories by other means, and how projected images might move beyond just 'illustration' of a separate narrative to become an integral part of the narrative itself.

In my first editorial (Vol. 9 No. 1) I mentioned the importance of speculation in a research area like ours, and Deac Rossell's article in this issue offers a fine example of an imaginative and thorough, but unashamedly speculative approach. But it is no less important for that: if we do not know the exact appearance of the finished picture, we have to make intelligent guesses and follow up suspicions and hunches in this way. There must be many areas of lantern history waiting for someone to suggest some connections between the scattered fragments of information we do have. This is not easy – the jigsaw's pieces may be held in many different collections, sometimes identified in different ways or not identified at all. But, somehow, we have to begin suggesting connections, being creative with what facts we have to draw lines between the pieces. The connections may be complex, or, as in the starting-point of Deac's consideration of the Bull's-Eye lantern, as simple as asking why a group of items look similar to each other.

My own piece offers a contribution towards an equally important area of research activity, namely the tying-up of loose ends. There are a great many unanswered, or half-answered, questions lurking throughout the works which give us the outline of 'all we know' about lantern history: the questions which could not be answered at the time; those whose answers at the time have been overtaken by later knowledge; those which were left for another day, another author, or a companion volume which never quite materialised; and so on. This is a familiar story in all research activities, and to some extent is unending – good research often identifies just as many gaps for future filling as the previously known gaps it manages to fill. We may never see the 'whole picture', but we have to accept that as a challenge, not a defeat: if we knew all the answers, there would be no point in going on.

A good example of this is found in Wendy Bird's intriguing contribution to the 'Bits and Pieces' section in this issue. If a seventeenth-century nun, who apparently never left Mexico and spent most of her adult life in a convent, could write about the effects of the magic lantern before 1692, where is the rest of the story implied by this fragment? How did she learn about the lantern? Had she seen it in action? If so, perhaps we can assume it was taken to Mexico by the Jesuit network, but what exactly was it being used for? What other evidence can be found of its early use in the New World – whether in the Spanish territories of South and Central America or the other European colonies which are now the United States and Canada? How many more pieces of the jigsaw are there still to find, and what will they show us? As fast as we find pieces and the right places to fit them, we become aware of the other pieces which should fit round them ...

The next issue of *NMLJ* is scheduled to appear in Summer 2004, and will complete the six issues of Volume 9. Some content for Volume 9 Number 6 has already materialised, but there is room for more contributions, of whatever type, length, content or approach. Please send ideas or contributions to the editorial address at the bottom of the Contents column.

The editorial deadline is **1 March 2004**.