

BOOK REVIEWS

BEFORE THE MOVIES: AMERICAN MAGIC-LANTERN ENTERTAINMENT AND THE NATION'S FIRST GREAT SCREEN ARTIST, JOSEPH BOGGS BEALE

Terry and Deborah Borton, foreword by Charles Musser

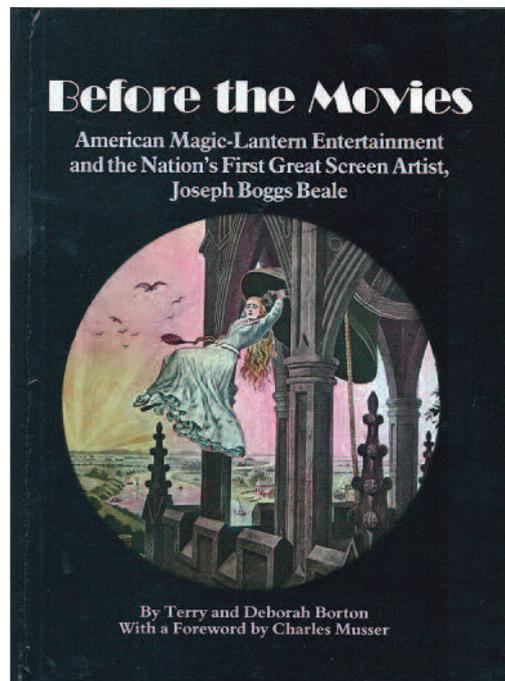
The American slide artist Joseph Boggs Beale (1841–1926) is in general little known amongst European magic lanternists, though his importance in the American context can scarcely be overstated. By the authors' own calculation, by the end of WWI, 62% of all secular stories and songs and as much as 80% of all the religious stories and hymns listed in the principal American slide catalogues were from his pen; as attested by the ubiquity of his slides today on American eBay.

The present volume champions the importance of Beale both as an artist in his own right and as a key figure in the development of American screen culture, laying the groundwork for a forthcoming biography. The bulk of this volume comprises a generously illustrated and comprehensively annotated Catalogue Raisonné. As anyone who has attempted this kind of work will attest, this is a remarkable achievement. In Beale's case we are fortunate in that many of the original wash drawings and the negatives taken from them, and occasionally even Beale's preliminary sketches, have survived. Even so, distinguishing his work from that of other artists is a tricky business. In this exemplary research, we are left in no doubt the basis on which individual attributions were determined.

Claims for the artistic merit of Beale's slide art are well made. Working on grey paper, Beale developed an extraordinarily wide tonal range which gives great subtlety to his work, and his enhanced sense of perspective and his skill in keeping a clear visual focus to his images while at the same time filling his field with rich detail is perfectly suited to lantern projection. The Bortons make fair comparisons with the meticulously detailed paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites.

The title of the book suggests the relationship of Beale's screen art to an emerging film culture. There are claims that many techniques later adopted by cinema are prefigured in Beale's work, though there is no evidence of direct influence from one medium to another. Surely the significance of Beale's work is that the vast bulk was created in parallel with film. Indeed, as the Bortons so amply attest, Beale's images were in continuous use first as film strips and later as 35mm slides well into the 1970s, with some Masonic groups using them even to the present day. This is a story that runs in parallel, and not simply in competition, with cinema.

This handsomely produced volume forms an invaluable counterpart to the Magic Lantern Society's own Illustrated Bamforth Slide Catalogue (2009), and allows for some intriguing comparisons. Beale created relatively few temperance slides, perhaps reflecting a difference in culture between the British and American temperance movements. On the other hand, there are religious slides aplenty. Less expected are the vast number of slides made for secret societies like the Masons or the Knights of Malta, along with many less familiar organisations like the Woodmen



Before the Movies: American Magic-Lantern Entertainment and the Nation's First Great Screen Artist, Joseph Boggs Beale
Terry and Deborah Borton, foreword by Charles Musser
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of the World and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. Of particular interest are uniquely American subjects: literary adaptations, scenes from American history, lives of eminent Americans and depictions of contemporary wars and natural disasters.

This is an important publication which elevates the status of magic lantern slides as an art form – complete in itself, but also providing the basis for future research. It is also a beautifully illustrated book that would be a welcome addition to the bookshelves of any lantern enthusiast.

Jeremy Brooker

RECENT MAJOR PUBLICATION BY THE MAGIC LANTERN SOCIETY: DUTCH PERSPECTIVES

350 Years of visual entertainment based on the research of
Willem Albert Wagenaar and Annet Duller
Willem Albert Wagenaar, Annet Duller and Margreet Wagenaar-Fischer
The Magic Lantern Society 2014, 240 pages, over 600 illustrations, most in colour
ISBN 978-0-9929628-0-7 £39.50

The official book presentation in The Netherlands took place on 14 December 2014 at the Boerhaave Museum in Leiden.

There will be a launch at the Society AGM on 24 January 2015.

Copies of this magnificent publication can be obtained through the Society website and will be available at the AGM.

A full review of the book, by Mervyn Heard, will appear in the next issue of *The Magic Lantern*.

