

THE 10TH INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION OF THE MAGIC LANTERN SOCIETY

BIRMINGHAM AND MIDLAND INSTITUTE (BMI)
28–30 APRIL 2017

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No Society member could have missed the growing anticipation as we approached our quadrennial magic lantern extravaganza at the end of April. By late Thursday 27 April magic lanternists from all over the globe had begun gathering in Birmingham ready to immerse themselves in three days of magic lantern paradise as the Society embarked on its tenth convention and probably most ambitious yet. Early on Friday delegates began signing in and by mid-morning they were being greeted on arrival by Tony Lidington, The Raree Man, and his amazing peepshow.

This was a taste of things to come. Whenever presentations were not taking place, there was a fantastic choice of what to see and do. In addition to the peepshow, you could visit Nicole Mollett and Frog Morris in their phenomenal *Cabinet of Curiosities*, take part in a wide range of sideshow activities (including a popular flea circus) presided over by Alexia Lazou, watch Annet Duller's wonderful shadow show, marvel at the objects in Lester Smith's superb exhibition or find some treasures and bargains in the market.

The main programme began with a welcome from Chairman Jeremy Brooker, setting out the main theme of the convention – music and the magic lantern. Next Margaret Bergh picked up the theme with gusto. Not only was her presentation about American song slides, but the songs themselves all featured music or musical instruments – such as *That Slippery Slide Trombone* and *Mellow Cello*. With specially recorded renditions of the featured sets, we were off in style and with a good sing-along with the choruses. Our new research officer, Lydia Jakobs, then gave us an update on current research projects (see separate article), including *A Million Pictures* and two other major pieces of work.

Tony Lidington followed with some fascinating insights into the world of the peepshowman. Particularly thought-provoking was his description of the very different experiences of those looking into the peepholes and those waiting their turn or passing by – all entertained in various ways simultaneously by the showman.

The late afternoon session began with Jacques and Annette Prenez talking about 'seditious images' (also known as 'ambiguous images'). The focus was on post-Revolution France where the hidden images were either the Royal Family or Napoleon Bonaparte and his family, depending on who was in power. We saw a vast range of prints and objects (eg candlesticks, needlecases and nutcrackers) with hidden images – some very difficult to spot in tree branches and foliage. Next we were enlightened on the genius of Christiaan Huygens (1629–1695) – inventor of far more than the magic lantern, it seems, including go-faster ice skates and other wonders of the age.



According to Sarah Dellman and Gwen Sebus the answer to life, the universe and everything is not '42' but 'Christiaan Huygens'.

Friday ended with a show open to the public – *Magic and the Muse* – at the Crescent Theatre with Jeremy and Carolyn Brooker at the lantern, Richard Navarro, Nicholas Thurston and Miriam Gould on stage and Mervyn Heard doing the introductions. This was a stunning performance featuring the original slides once used by Peter Sellers' parents to turn Miriam into a butterfly, Venus emerging from a shell, a polar explorer, a mermaid and many more. Other sequences were a mix of old and newly created images blending perfectly with music from the excellent trio on stage, stretching our visual and aural imaginations in new directions. This was the magic lantern in the 21st century at its very best.

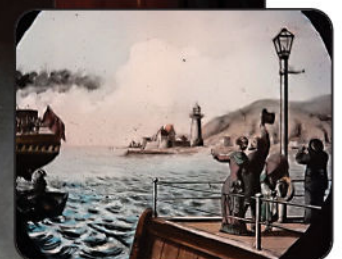
Saturday began with a fascinating presentation from Yoriko Iwata and Hana Washitani based on a filmstrip *When Grim Senji Grinned*. A trade union production from 1950s Japan this was made with almost feature-film production values and used extraordinarily detailed lifelike puppets. The miners portrayed were protesting not for higher wages or shorter hours but to be treated with respect – and they won it.

Next Margery and Ian Edwards from Australia treated us to tales of early travellers to the Antipodes – both willing and unwilling – illustrated by lantern slides that were mainly those used by Ian's grandfather, the Rev. Percy Edwards. We learnt about the routes out and stopovers, the Pentonville system for penal colonies and underground cells, orphan street children despatched and 'remittance men' (younger sons sent out, with an allowance remitted if they stayed there), the shipwreck coast and many other interesting facts. Keeping up the musical theme, Margery played appropriate well-known tunes on the harmonica.

Mary Borgo from the USA followed after tea, continuing the clerical theme with *Rev. Smithurst's Wish List*. She explored the slides used by missionaries starting with Rev. Smithurst's written requests from the Canadian frontier and expanding to missionaries in Africa, the South Seas and beyond. The range of images Smithurst requested was truly eclectic – and his letters of complaint at the mixed quality and expense of those he received filled with righteous indignation.

Dick Moore, also from the USA – the adopted country of journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley (he was born in Wales) – brought us the story of Stanley's final expedition to Africa in 1886. His exquisite hand-coloured slides came mainly from the same engravings used in Stanley's account of the journey – *In Darkest Africa* (published 1890). Dick discussed how Stanley influenced public perceptions back home through the images and in some cases showed how different versions of the same scene could create quite different perceptions of the events described. The expedition was not without controversy, mainly due, alas, to the appalling behaviour of some of the British 'officers and gentlemen' accompanying Stanley.

Our second Antipodean presentation of the day came from John Hyett talking about Albert James Abbott and his scandalous activities. 'Professor' or 'Pastor' Abbott (John was unable to verify any of his claimed qualifications) had several brushes with the law as he essentially lied his way through life on the fringes of Australian society. For example, he claimed to have





gone with explorer William Scoresby to Greenland as a botanist but the last expedition was 1822 – before Abbott was even born. It appears that little in his self-aggrandising autobiography of 1901 can be believed.

The BMI part of the day concluded with Bernd Scholze showing his marvellous collection of slides by Friedrich August Boettcher – once described as ‘the greatest lantern exhibitor in Europe’. These beautiful hand-drawn and hand-coloured slides are of Royal Polytechnic proportions – and quality – so Bernd commissioned special lanterns to show them properly. The result was a rare and wonderful visual feast for delegates, transporting us to the sheer rock faces, falls and glaciers of Switzerland and Germany, to the streets of Berlin then India for a tiger hunt on elephants (tigers 1, hunters 0), a temple visit and dissolving view with purple mountains.

The day ended with dinner and a cabaret at the Birmingham Council House. The international line-up began with Sergi Buka producing flames from books and elsewhere, then throwing wonderful hand (and head) shadows such as a swan preening some troublesome tail feathers. Next Dick Balzer entertained us with his own brand of political stand-up and ‘Little Red’ (Riding Hood). Finally Martin Gilbert and daughter Emily treated us to the surreal spectacle of award-winning young Irish dancers from Birmingham dancing to a background of the most extensive collection of phantasmagoria images probably ever seen.

Sunday morning was the grand auction and a *tour de force* by John Townsend with 207 lots under the hammer – about 30 more than in 2013. Total sales were over £11,100 giving the Society a commission of just over £1,900 including £262 from items donated to the MLS. There were bargains to be had and members were especially pleased when younger colleagues secured them (a full list of prices is available from the Secretary). Our thanks to John for his heroic and highly entertaining auctioneering, to Richard Crangle for skilfully administering the whole auction behind the scenes – and to members for their generosity.

A ‘work in progress’ opened the afternoon programme. Judi Sissons (librettist) and Omar Shahryar (composer) together with their singers gave us a sneak preview of their new opera on the magic lantern. The story focuses on a young Savoyard girl left alone with her magic lantern in London, the family marmots having escaped too. The aim is to bring opera to young people and, judging from what we heard, both the music and story are highly compelling and imaginative – watch out for the revolutionary marmots! We are hugely looking forward to seeing the finished piece.

Annet Duller followed with the extraordinary and unique slides of Honoré le Sablais, director of the projection department of *La Bonne Presse*, a catholic publishing house. In line with our musical theme this also included a live performance of some of the songs commissioned by le Sablais from Estéban Marti of the *Opéra Comique* to accompany his magic lantern slides. These dated from the early 20th century. We learnt that le Sablais also produced films – a truly multimedia output.

The convention came to a close in style with the Utteridges’ Travelling Light Magic Lantern Company, again with live music and singing – although somewhat lighter in mood. If we thought the advertising break arrived with TV, think again. At the climax of a dramatic house fire rescue, we had a series of contrastingly calm adverts from ‘sponsors’ Bovril before returning to the tense action. Other popular highlights included the company’s updated versions of *Pussy’s Road to Ruin* and *Jane Conquest* (with ‘Sure rings a mean church bell’ ... by The Who). Having been thoroughly entertained, members departed clutching their copies of that scurrilous publication *The Sunday Illuminant* edited with great skill by Mervyn Heard.

There was truly something for everyone in the programme. This summary does not do justice to the wonderful presentations we enjoyed at the Convention so we intend to feature articles based on many of them in this and future editions of *The Magic Lantern*.



THE MAGIC LANTERN is edited, designed and produced by Mary Ann Auckland, Gwen Sebus and Dennis Crompton assisted by Annie Bridges.

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Printed by MPC for Dave Morgan

Published by:
The Magic Lantern Society,
17 Dean Street
Exeter EX2 4HH, England

Web site: www.magiclantern.org.uk
© 2017 The Magic Lantern Society
ISSN 2057-3723

