

# PROMINENT MAGIC LANTERNISTS

## MERVYN HEARD

*An interview profile by Jeremy Brooker*

When I first started this series of interviews in 2014, Mervyn's name was at the top of my list. I wanted autobiographical sketches that went beyond a list of personal achievements and asked questions about the nature of magic lantern performance. How had the leading performers of our times come to adopt this curious art form? What were they hoping to achieve? And what did it all mean to a modern audience? Mervyn expressed great interest and enthusiasm for the project, but somehow the interview was never forthcoming.

This is a pity because if anyone deserved the accolade 'Prominent Magic Lanternist' it was surely Mervyn. He enjoyed a glittering career as a great ambassador for the lantern, his influence spreading far beyond his homeland. Sometimes this brought him to prestigious venues like the Royal Opera House and the Tate Gallery or to international Cinematheques in Turin, Lisbon, Girona and Frankfurt. There was also an impressive range of work for TV and feature films, as mentioned on page 1. But he was just as much at home presenting a 'Decadent Cabaret' in Vienna or appearing in a shopping centre in Japan, an outdoor arena in Australia or raising strange phantasmagoric spectres in an echoing cavern under the Clifton Suspension Bridge in Bristol.



Alongside his professional work Mervyn was for 40 years a prominent and much-loved member of the Magic Lantern Society. A memoir describing the *Magic Lantern Scene* in the early 1970s recalled the difficulty of finding information in those distant pre-internet days and the importance of the Society to him as a source of both knowledge and friendship. During that time Mervyn adopted different roles. He was a regular presenter at our quarterly meetings and Conventions, an ardent contributor to our various publications and held several important positions. He was for many years editor of our Newsletter and more recently of our monthly e-letter *New Light on Old Media* which he created. His five-year term as Chairman proved his determination to widen the appeal of the magic lantern – not only trying to find ways to attract new members but also appealing to a wider audience by organising two series of public lectures at the University of Westminster which were open to all. Mervyn was perhaps the most prominent of all prominent magic lanternists, a man whose mischievous sense of humour and generosity endeared him to everyone fortunate enough to meet him.

This collection of interviews is unarguably the poorer for not including Mervyn's own voice. Clearly nothing can now bring us his unique insights



Joe Milburn

and inimitable wit. However, this set me thinking. Was there some way to conduct a kind of interview after all, a personal tribute to put alongside the other contributions he richly deserves?

The answer came when Carolyn and I recently visited Mervyn and Jo's house in Bath. Jo invited me to look through his books and identify any which were



specifically related to the magic lantern and which might be of special interest to lanternists and collectors. It quickly became apparent that it wasn't that sort of collection. There was, of course, plenty about the lantern – classic texts from the 19th century and a comprehensive library of books published in modern times, not least those published by the MLS.

At the same time, I was struck by the way this idiosyncratic and highly personal library represented a kind of 'mind map' where you could almost follow Mervyn's chain of thought. On these shelves could be traced the whole story of his long involvement with the magic lantern.

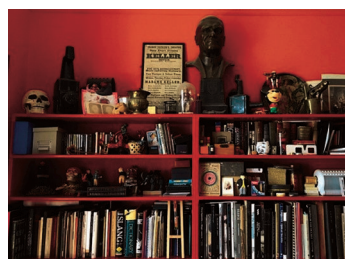
### MERVYN'S LIBRARY

The bulk of Mervyn's library is contained in a generous-sized room lined from floor to ceiling with bookshelves. The upper reaches are unattainable without steps and were perhaps rarely visited. Here I found a large and eclectic collection of books once owned by Joe Milburn, the man who first introduced Mervyn to the wonders of the magic lantern.

In an article published in the *New Magic Lantern Journal* (NMLJ 5.3 April 1988) Mervyn recalled that first introduction in 1969. A local newspaper article had piqued his interest and led to a meeting with Joe, a founding member of the MLS. Performances with 'The Sciopticons' soon followed and before long Mervyn was giving his own shows first as White's Wonders (named for his performing alter ego, Norris White) and later as Mervyn Heard and Company. When Joe died he left his books to Mervyn, who kept them from affection for that much much-loved 'evil tempter' and 'weaver of spells'.

More readily to hand was an impressive collection of books on Victorian magic and stage illusion. Mervyn was a keen amateur conjurer from childhood, had a life-long interest in the history of magic and was a member of the Magic Circle, corresponding with such luminaries as Eddie Dawes, Ricky Jay, Paul Kieve and Derren Brown. Amongst these books were several by Jim Steinmeyer, author of the best-selling *Hiding the Elephant*. According to Steinmeyer, the layman imagines that the secrecy of magicians is intended to conceal knowledge. In reality, most tricks are based on simple principles – misdirection, a scientific principle or a piece of manipulative cunning. The raw materials are often mundane and even banal. It is the skill and artistry of the magician, through the minute and subtle refinements he introduces in performance, who creates a sense of wonder. You might say that in preserving his 'secrets' the magician is protecting his audience from the disappointment of knowing!

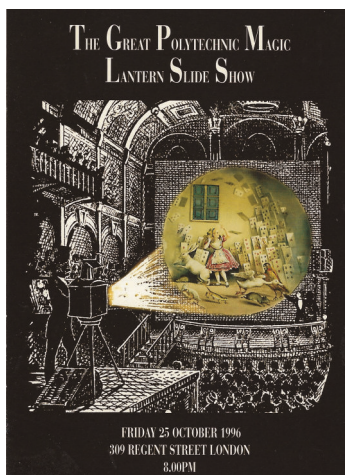
I believe this observation may go some way to understanding Mervyn's distinctive style of lantern performance. From his earliest days, Mervyn saw himself as a kind of maverick. At a time when the prevailing fashion was







*Wild Beasts and Living Pictures*



for presenting the most beautiful slides shown with the greatest technical perfection (an approach epitomised by Doug and Anita Lear or Herman Bollaert), Mervyn took an almost perverse pride in using the worst material he could find. I remember a show in his early days when a journey across the Atlantic was marked not with an impressive mechanical effect slide but by a fairly mundane image of a ship at sea, further disfigured by a large and very visible crack. The crack, he informed us in mock-solemnity, was the trans-Atlantic cable. The return journey was accomplished by showing that same disfigured slide facing in the opposite direction. A slide which might have found its way into the dustbin was here used to the greatest humorous effect – twice! Though the quality of Mervyn's slides improved greatly over the years, this instinct for creating something out of nothing remained central to his whole philosophy.

Another prominent strand running through the library is books on the occult, séances and a range of other esoteric and often morbid subjects. Mervyn was a renowned authority on the *Phantasmagoria*, which formed the subject matter for both his PhD from the University of Exeter and subsequent book *Phantasmagoria – the secret life of the magic lantern*. Although he wore his knowledge lightly, Mervyn had a rare and instinctive gift for research. Unusually, this was coupled with a penchant for playful wit and appalling puns. The three parts of his groundbreaking study *Paul de Philipstahl and the Phantasmagoria in England, Scotland and Ireland* were disarmingly titled 'Boo!', 'Shoo!' and 'Phew!'; and one of his book chapters bore the heading 'Séance and séance-ability'.



We should not be deceived by this informal style of writing. The traces of his investigations scattered throughout the library represent serious research, much of it truly groundbreaking. From the beginning, these enquiries formed the basis of not only academic publications but also his work as a showman.

His pioneering work on touring

bioscope shows (now housed in the Fairground Archive, University of Sheffield) led to the publication of *Wild Beasts and Living Pictures* in 1983. This was written to accompany a tented show which enjoyed a ten-week tour of South West England and Wales. It featured 'walk-up' acts, film, magic lantern and a cast of actors and musicians. He has also worked closely with Ludwig Vogl-Bienek at the University of Trier, notably as a major contributor to the DVD collection *Screening the Poor 1888–1914*. More recently Mervyn turned his attention to 'pose' slides with living actors, which led to a research fellowship at Ohio University in the USA.

At first glance, many of Mervyn's books have no obvious connection to the lantern. Music hall artistes, snake-oil salesmen, pioneer air balloonists, obscure clergymen and long-forgotten showmen rub shoulders on these shelves. On closer examination, links to his areas of research emerge but I suspect their real appeal lay in the curious characters they revealed. In his own words, he delighted

in those "off-the-wall lantern-lecturers who have intentionally or unintentionally amused, bewildered and terrified audiences down the centuries". William Francis Hannaway-Rowe, 'The Great Sequah', who enlivened his magic lantern performances with public demonstrations of painless tooth extraction. The Great Snazelle, self-proclaimed 'Rogo Rogo Vinaka' of the Fiji Isles, who would accept payment in coconuts and even "skulls and polished thigh bones" when visiting the cannibals of New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Or Paul de Philipstahl [Philidor], the great hero of his book on the *Phantasmagoria*, described with great relish by Mervyn as an "infuriating ... old reprobate ... a double-dyed villain; a thief of ideas, a bully, a charlatan; a showman arrogant beyond measure".

Scattered through the collection are several publications either written by Mervyn or to which he contributed in some way. In addition to his books, scholarly articles and research notes there are play scripts, scripts for lantern shows and even an unpublished novel. Mervyn could adapt his literary style to any audience, though his playful sense of fun would almost invariably creep through. His final book contribution was a piece on the *Phantasmagoria* for Joanna Ebenstein's wonderful *Death: A Graveside Companion*. Mervyn took great delight in leaving this prominently displayed in his hospice room, his gallows humour never deserting him to the end.



*'Professor' Heard and his Grand Congress of Lanternists, 1996*

Mervyn will be remembered for many things. His showmanship, his scholarship, his wit, his generosity of spirit, his gift for friendship. He also possessed a great gift for language and in this tribute, which purports to be an interview of sorts, it seems fitting to end in Mervyn's own words. This beautiful passage is taken from the Prologue to his *Phantasmagoria* book and imagines the experience of local indigenous people when they first encountered a magic lantern with visiting missionaries. To me, it perfectly captures the mystery of the magic lantern. Like the stage magician's stock-in-trade the ingredients seem modest, but by some strange alchemy these unpromising materials come alive on screen. Even in today's rich visual culture they can retain a magic which is hard to quantify. Like Mervyn himself, the magic lantern somehow becomes more than the sum of its parts.

*"Lying dark and dormant in its wooden box, smelling of whale or colza oil ... a magic lantern may have seemed singularly unimpressive. But at night, perched incongruously on a crate of Bibles in a tropical rainforest, with its three-wick illuminant ablaze and its one shining eye, it had the capability to fill the unwary with awe, each shadowy movement of the slide changer casting a brilliantly colourful, magnified image of extraordinary ... stories onto the starched white cotton sheet ... [The doubtful audience] pulled up short at the church door... 'and melted before the attractions of a magic lantern, like a glacier in spring'."*

