

REVEREND SMITHURST'S WISH LIST

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While we might imagine Reverend John Smithurst as a staid or perhaps dour person from his photograph (Fig.1), his letters reveal his ambition to give lively lantern shows for his congregation. Reverend Smithurst joined the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1836 after he was forbidden to marry his true love, Florence Nightingale.¹ He arrived in Canada in September 1839 and worked among the Cree at the Red River Settlement at the mouth of Netley Creek, an outpost of the Hudson Bay Company about 50 km north of Winnipeg in what is now Manitoba. Unlike missionaries before him in that area, Smithurst learned the Cree language and also actively trained indigenous catechists.²

By 1845, Smithurst had enough congregants and students to warrant a Christmas party. In a letter to Dandeson Coates, the CMS Secretary, he wrote: "I have often wished for something that would enable me to afford the School Children a treat by way of a little amusement at holiday times. ... I should be glad ... if you would send me a good Magic Lantern, taking care that the pictures upon the sliding glasses are interesting objects which would combine instruction with amusement."³

Based on his wish list, it appears that Smithurst wanted to take his Cree congregants on a journey around the world – a virtual tour which would include not only spectacular sights on the European continent but would also show them the wonders of modern European technology. Their imagined journey would begin by heading east on the St Lawrence Seaway in "a ship in full sail" or a "steam packet". Such a journey would not be without its perils, as seen in a horrendous "storm at sea." Fortunately for the audience, they would arrive safely in London where they would see magnificent buildings, including "St Paul's, Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace, the New Houses of Parliament, etc. etc.", and technological wonders like "a Railway train". His audience would enjoy "a mountain view", perhaps high in the Alps, before witnessing the spectacle of "a volcano". As with many Victorian lantern shows, Smithurst would bring the evening to a close with views of "the Queen, Prince Albert, and the Young Princes & Princesses."

use your imagination to reduce it to a "wretched daub". The slides offered one small consolation in that they depicted London both from above ground and from below the Thames. Although not explicitly part of his list, the slide of the "Thames Tunnel" was one of the few "fit to be seen" (Fig.3). It must have been a particularly welcome addition. Smithurst would have not seen the tunnel in person as, when he left for Canada in 1839, construction had been halted due to flooding and frequent accidents. But word of the tunnel's completion in November 1841 would have reached Netley Creek by way of *The Illustrated London News* which was included among the books and other supplies sent to Smithurst and his congregation.



1. Magic lantern slide of Rev. Smithurst (courtesy of Cannon Collection, Archival and Special Collections, the University of Guelph)

Despite the poor quality of the slides that he received, the magic lantern show seems to have been a smash hit among the Cree children that Christmas and each Christmas thereafter. Smithurst wrote: "After singing some of their best tunes, and my saying a few things to them suited to the time and the occasion, I showed to them the Magic Lantern. After having gone through all of the views, I asked if there were any they wished to see a second time over. Several voices called out St Paul's Cathedral and others the Queen's Palace so that I showed them again ..."⁵ Smithurst's account of the lantern show might be interpreted as subtly reinforcing his work as a missionary – the children's request to see St Paul's suggests that he has instilled in them a pious attraction to Anglicanism and all its accoutrements, while their interest in the Queen suggests a curiosity about, or dependence on, the crown's authority. Smithurst's account of the magic lantern show positions it as a (perhaps unconscious) extension of Britain's colonising mission in Canada. In turn, the children's reactions to the magic lantern show might be seen as reflecting Smithurst's own priorities, with any other reactions they may have had unrecorded.

While missionary magic lantern shows were fairly common, detailed descriptions of what they showed are not. This makes Smithurst's letters all the more extraordinary. His requests and subsequent lantern shows stand in sharp contrast to those given by his more famous contemporaries, John Williams and David Livingstone, for neither of them (as far as we know) showed images of London. Furthermore, Smithurst omitted the scripture slides that were so often at the core of the missionary's repertoire. Though he was one of many missionaries who used a magic lantern while abroad, Smithurst offers a rare example of a missionary magic lantern show designed primarily to entertain rather than to instruct. In addition to complicating our understanding of the missionary magic lantern show, Smithurst's wish list also highlights the importance of unpublished material in piecing together the global history of lantern shows. Journals, diaries and unedited reports offer a dramatically different view from published accounts of missionary work, for they often represent magic lantern shows as moments of interaction and cross-cultural conversation.

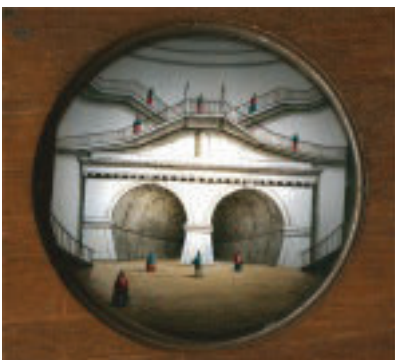
I would like to thank Peter Gillies, Lester Smith, and Philip Banham for helping me illustrate an early version of this piece at the Magic Lantern Society Convention in Birmingham, 2017.

NOTES

1. Neither of them ever married but two items attest to their enduring affection for each other – a pair of Cree moccasins owned by Florence Nightingale in the Wellcome Medical Collection and a silver communion set donated to Smithurst's congregation
2. A. N. Thompson, 'John Smithurst', *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 9, University of Toronto/Université Laval
3. Rev. Smithurst, Letter to Dandeson Coates Esq., 29 December 1845, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham Special Collections, p.4
4. Reverend Smithurst, Letter to D. Coates Esq., 18 November 1846, *ibid.*, p.3
5. Rev. Smithurst, *Journal from Red River*, 1 August 1848–1 August 1849, *ibid.*



2. A beautiful view of St Paul's Cathedral (Peter Gillies collection)



3. Into the Thames Tunnel (Lester Smith collection)

Alas, this show was not to be. When the lantern and the slides finally arrived in November 1846, Smithurst was disappointed to discover that the lantern had endured a rather rough journey. "Indeed," he wrote, "it is a wonder every part was not broken from the careless manner in which it was hacked."⁴ Out of the twenty slides that he requested, he received five, one of which was broken and "two out of the five are wretched daubs." The slides that survived the journey included

none of the spectacular visual effects he had hoped for – nor did they encompass the global scope that Smithurst had originally envisioned. Instead, he received a few slides of London, including one particularly poor view of St Paul's "in which no part of the Cathedral is seen except the dome." The slide shown in Fig.2 is compositionally similar to the one described in the letter but