INSTRUCTION AS HOME ENTERTAINMENT

The Primus Junior Lecturer's Series Martyn Jolly

Among the thousands of magic lantern slides offered up for sale on auction sites every year, there are always hundreds of chromolithographic transfer slides. They are often of hackneyed fairy tales or clichéd subjects, so they are not highly sought after. But the fact that they are so readily available, 120 years after they were first produced, indicates that they must have played an important role in the visual culture of the period.

One of the biggest producers of these slides was the British firm W. Butcher & Sons. In November 1900 the magic lantern trade journal announced that they were:

... at present making a special feature of lithographic slides pertaining to the Boer war. Of course slides made by this process cannot for a moment compare with photographic slides, but all things considered they are good of their kind, and with, say, an oil light, will look very well when projected on a screen. These sets of slides are known as the Junior Lecturers' series, and are sold at a low price.¹

Like many British magic lantern firms, Butcher was vertically integrated. They imported and manufactured apparatus – the 'device' – and also produced the imagery which their lanterns would project – the 'content'. They gave the series their existing brand name 'Primus' (Fig.1). The Primus series brought together several different industrial processes and emerging social developments into the one package. The slides themselves were an offshoot of the massive chromolithography industry which had been growing in popularity throughout the 19th century. The image was drawn in separate colours onto multiple stones,



1. W. Butcher & Sons advertisement in The Optical Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger (OMLG), November 1901, p.v.

The Optical Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger.



2. 'The Boer War of 1900'. Butcher's advertisement in OMU, November 1900, p.x

but instead of being printed in registration onto paper or cardboard for posters or packaging, the layers of pigment were printed onto a transparent decal, and then transferred to a square of glass.² The decorated boxes made use of developments in cardboard manufacture and offset printing in coloured inks to look attractive in the retail space of a fancy goods store, and to be of a comparable price to the toys and games with which they were competing.

Through chromolithographic transfer a diverse range of different pictorial sources from different periods could be brought together into sequences of visually homogenous images. The format of eight numbered and boxed slides could be expanded progressively into different series and sets, comprising a large 'library' in many different genres. Eventually there were over 170 different boxed sets.³

The series was aimed not at the assembly hall but at the home parlour. Most importantly, the Primus series was interactive – children could unfold the prepared readings and read them as the corresponding slide was passed though the lantern. Supported by this systematic structure a child with a 'Primus' lantern and slides could become a 'Junior Lecturer' for their friends and proud parents. As their catalogue claimed:

The colouring is of the finest quality and is very transparent, so that the slides give perfect results with the minimum amount of light, making them very suitable for home use where incandescent gas or electric light bulb is the only illuminant available. The sets are all carefully selected, and offer a varied choice of humorous, historical, educational, and religious subjects suitable for both young and old. The slides are prepared in many instances from specially taken photographs – others from drawings by famous artists. In every case the draughtsmanship and colouring leave nothing to be desired. ... [They] are accompanied by a well written and interesting lecture.⁴

The series was launched with five sets about the Boer War (Fig. 2).⁵ As many scholars have argued, the Boer War was a media watershed because public demand for up-to-the-minute war news provided a catalyst for new technologies such as the cinematograph and half-tone newspaper reproductions alongside well-established media such as the telegraph, illustrated newspapers, music halls and the magic lantern. This produced an emergent media space where audiences demanded different kinds of immediate experience delivered in new ways.⁶

A 1901 newspaper advertisement from the town of Castlemaine, Victoria (Fig. 3) illustrates the changing structure of this crowded media space very well. It promises Australian-made films of that year's Federation celebrations as well as 'All the Latest War Films' from South Africa. But more encouragingly for the audience, it also promises 'No dreary lecture, no magic lantern'.⁷ In this context, while capitalising on the established educational prestige of the lantern lecture, the Junior Lecturer slides were also carefully placed not in the 'dreary' world of old but in the new world of 'the most interesting entertainment'.

To keep 'up to the minute' Butcher contracted with illustrated newspapers such as the *The Graphic* and *The Sphere*. *The Sphere* was a new illustrated newspaper that had begun in late 1900 as a response to the public's appetite for images of the war. The monochrome paintings made by the special war artists it sent to South Africa were translated

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3. Theatre Royal, Castlemaine, Mount Alexander Mail, Victoria, 7 February 1901, p.3

into square colour slides by artists for the Junior Lecturer's Series.

Such immediacy continued to be an aspect of the Junior Lecturer's Series. For instance, in November 1901 the death of Queen Victoria and the accession of King Edward VII was marked in an advertisement for 'New Lithographic Slides'.⁸

Fourteen years later, with the beginning of the First World War, the series once more began to produce up-to-the-minute historical sets. Eventually numbering ten sets, twice as many as for the Boer War, the slides once again relied on illustrated newspapers such as *The Sphere*, now not on paintings by war artists, but photographs by press photographers (Fig. 4).

However, the set on which I now want to concentrate is not 'historical', but putatively 'educational'. That set is 'Australia', the third 'chapter' in the series *Our Colonies*, which also included Canada, New Zealand, India and South Africa. Although produced around 1906, the Australian set seems to reside in some atemporal time of empire – a time which was already disappearing because of Federation in 1901. To provide context for this anachronistic colonial imagery I want to look at three other British and American lantern slide firms who sent photographers to Australia during this period.

Firstly, in the late 1890s the Scottish firm George Washington Wilson hired an Aberdeen photographer, Fred Hardie, to travel by train and horse cart across Australia. He eventually produced five sets of photographic slide lectures with accompanying readings, one on each colony except Western Australia.⁹

Secondly, between 1909 and 1910 the artist and photographer Hugh Fisher travelled through Australia on an itinerary organised by the geographer Halford Mackinder. He was gathering lantern slides for the Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee who were producing 42 lectures to show the empire to British children. Of these, the committee eventually produced eight lectures on Australasia.¹⁰ Although part of the Colonial Office, The Visual Instruction Committee had to enter the highly competitive business of lantern slide retailing as a semi-commercial body in order to manufacture and distribute their slides. Their slides and textbooks were made and sold by Butcher's main rival, the firm Newton & Co. The entire set of 489 hand coloured photographic slides from Australasia could be purchased from Newton's for £39 – a hefty 1s 7d per slide. For the ordinary consumer this price compared unfavourably to the boxes of eight Butcher's Junior Lecturer's slides which retailed from a mere two shillings a box, less than a sixth of the price.¹¹

Thirdly, in 1907 and 1908 the American stereograph company Underwood & Underwood sent their photographer James Ricalton to New Zealand and Australia.¹² The stereographs he shot became the 'Australia and New Zealand Tour' within the Underwood & Underwood 'Travel System'. This system combined printed guides, maps, stereoscopes and sets of sequenced stereographs into boxes representing faux book bindings.

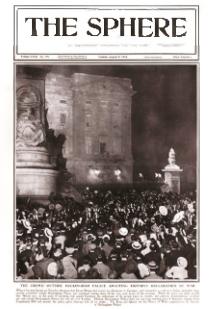
Like the other firms, Underwood & Underwood also saw value in a systematic global library of stereoscopic and lantern views aimed at educating children. A few of the stereographs Ricalton shot became a small part of their massive visual library marketed as *The World Visualized for the Class Room: 1000 travel studies through the stereoscope and in lantern slides classified and cross referenced for 25 different school subjects.* Of the 1,000 slides in the set, a grand total of 19, less than two per cent, came from Australasia and Oceania.¹³

However, when it comes to *Our Colonies*, unlike George Washington Wilson, the Colonial Office, or Underwood & Underwood, Butchers did not send a photographer to Australia. Nor did they contract with specific magazines such as *The Sphere* and *The Graphic* as they had for their historical sets. And nor, as they claimed in their publicity, were the slides prepared from 'specially taken photographs' or 'drawings by famous artists'. Rather, the images seem to have been found, more or less at random, from within the vast pool of colonial imagery which had been produced and reproduced over the previous 30 years, and which was swirling around in the London printing trade.

The *Illustrated London News* was one useful source for the slides. For instance, an engraving from 1876 of the Prince of Wales killing a tiger did duty 40 years later as the source for slides in both the set *India* and the set *Wild Animals and How They Are Hunted* (Fig. 5). And another *Illustrated London News* engraving, the entirely fanciful 'Kangaroo Hunting in Australia' of 1876, also did duty 30 years later to represent Australian sport in *Our Colonies* (Fig. 7).

The opening image of the set, 'Government House Melbourne', comes from 20 years before 1906 – an 1886 book *Australian Pictures Drawn with Pen and Pencil* (Figs 6(a) and 9).¹⁴ This introductory slide demonstrates the extraordinary laziness of the series as a whole. The text reports that the colonies had recently federated to become a commonwealth, but rather than showing the grand exhibition buildings in which the first parliament had been held, the slide shows the unprepossessing residence of the Governor of Victoria, whose powers had recently been diminished by Federation.

The same 1886 book is the source for the background image in the final slide of the set, 'Australian Aborigines' (Figs 6(f) and 8). The foreground image comes from even earlier, from the South Australian photographer Samuel Sweet's 1880 album *Views in South Australia*. The

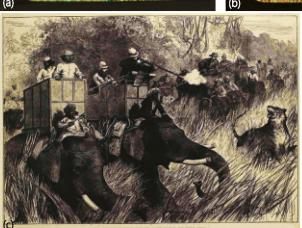




4. 'The Crowd at Buckingham Palace Awaiting Britain's Declaration of War', The Sphere, August 1914 (left) and 'The Crowd Ouside Buckingham Palace, August 4, 1914', slide 4 from 'A Call to Arms' ch.1, The World War, Primus Junior Lecturer's Series, W. Butcher & Sons, 1915 (above)



eye-watering racism of the lecture children were meant to read out as they projected this slide contrasts with the slightly more enlightened lecture produced by the geographers at the Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee for their equivalent slide. For Butcher's: "The Australian 'black fellow' is a savage of a decidedly low type: he has a steady objection to work, has no ideas on the subject of crops, but is marvellously acute as a tracker, and an adept at throwing that peculiar weapon – the boomerang."¹⁵ The attitude of the Colonial Office was more nuanced: "The hostility of the native to the

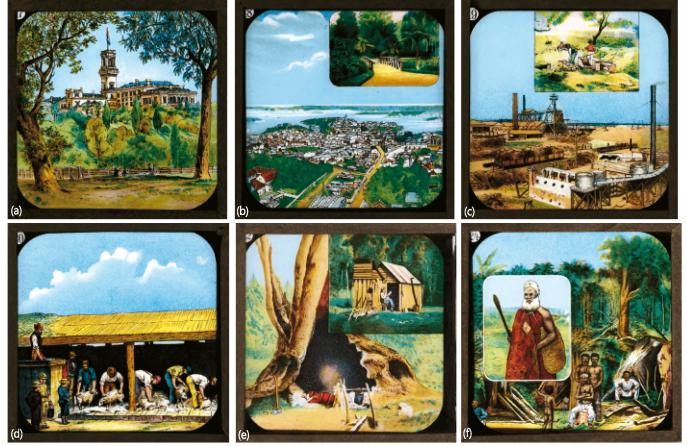


5. (a) 'Shooting a Tiger', c.1905. Slide 5 from Wild Animals and How They Are Hunted, Primus Junior Lecturer's Series. (b) 'Tiger Hunting with Elephant', c.1905. Slide 32, 'India', ch.4, Our Colonies, Primus Junior Lecturer's Series, W. Butcher & Sons. (c) 'The Prince of Wales Tiger-Shooting with Sir Jung Bahadoor: The Critical Moment. From a Sketch by One of Our Special Artists', Illustrated London News, 25 March 1876.

European colonists often arose from their interference with his natural food supply, or to their careless ignorance of his semi-religious ideas or customs, such as the tabu."¹⁶

Although most imagery in *Our Colonies* was decades old, some images were contemporary, but they were taken by photographers who were themselves retailing a retrospective, nostalgic view of Australia. The source images for the slide 'In the Bush' were the popular 'bushmen' photographs of Nicholas Caire (Figs 6(e) and 11). At this time Caire was himself also turning his stock of negatives into lantern slides and postcards for the expanding tourist trade. Caire's customers, who were day-tripping office workers catching the train from the bustling modern metropolis of Melbourne to nearby beauty spots, saw these photographs as nostalgic evocations of a disappearing past.

In conclusion, the vertically integrated W. Butcher & Sons were extraordinarily successful in appropriating images from a residual 19th-century print and photographic culture and an emerging 20th-century media culture for the cheap chromolithographic slides which they used to sell their magic lanterns into homes around the world. In this respect they, and other firms like Underwood & Underwood, are like later media conglomerates, such as



6. Chromolithographic transfer slides from 'Australia', ch.3, Our Colonies, c. 1906, Primus Junior Lecturer's Series, W. Butcher & Sons. (a) 17 'Government House, Melbourne'; (b) 18 'Sydney Harbour'; (c) 19 'Gold Mining, Past and Present'; (d) 20 'Sheep Shearing'; (e) 22 'In the Bush'; (f) 24 'Australian Aboriginals'



computer games manufacturers, where technology development is integrated with content development.

But, even in the context of the period, the imagery of the Junior Lecturer's Series was egregiously reactionary, ignorant, racist and, frankly, lazy. This was because their business model was not the middlebrow visual instruction of George Washington Wilson, nor the imperial geography of the Colonial Office, nor the virtual travel of Underwood & Underwood. Although they borrowed the rhetoric of 'education', their ultimate purpose was not, in fact, educational. It was to sell apparatus into homes and 'education' was a useful way for children to activate the apparatus by enacting the new role of 'Junior Lecturer'. For decades the watchwords for 'reputable' magic lanternists had always been 'instruction AND entertainment', but Butcher's innovation was to turn those familiar watchwords into: 'instruction AS entertainment'.



8. 'Native Encampment' in Australian Pictures Drawn with Pen and Pencil (above) Samuel Sweet, 'Aboriginal man, Point McLeay Mission, South Australia', c. 1880. Albumen silver photograph in the album Views in South Australia (see Fig. 6(f)) (right)



9. 'Government House, Melbourne' by Skelton in Australian Pictures Drawn with Pen and Pencil¹⁴ (see Fig. 6(a))





10. 'Sheep Shearing' by the French artists and engravers Achille Sirouy and C.H. Brabant in Australian Pictures Drawn with Pen and Pencil (see Fig. 6(d))



7. 'A Kangaroo Hunt', c.1906. Slide 23 from 'Australia', ch.3, Our Colonies, Primus Junior Lecturer's Series (left)

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- 16. Sargent, p.13



11. Nicholas Caire, 'Big tree camp, King Parrot Creek, Victoria, Australia', hand-coloured albumen silver photograph, c. 1903 (National Gallery of Victoria Collection) (see Fig. 6(e))