

CATALOGUING AND RESEARCHING SLIDE COLLECTIONS: AN ARCHIVE'S EXPERIENCE

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FOR THE PAST five and a half years I have been the Moving Image Archivist of the South East Film and Video Archive (SEFVA), occupied mostly with the accessioning and cataloguing of film material. However, the magic lantern does enter our remit from time to time, and hopefully this branch of SEFVA's activities will grow in the future.

Perhaps the first question is why would a film archive collect lantern material? There is of course my personal fascination and research interest in the lantern. More specifically to SEFVA, there are several close links between lantern practice and film pioneering in the South East of England. But most importantly, the lantern is a distinctive screen practice which is due a rightful place within an audio-visual heritage, and its developments and culture should be considered a public archival responsibility.

There are obviously similarities between documenting lantern slides and cataloguing films, such as aspects of inspection, identification, definition and description. But as the object is different, so are the approaches, the tools used and the problems encountered. My aim here is merely to point out some findings that have bearing not just on the archiving of this type of material but also on additional future research. Though most of what follows is related to more general issues, it describes what took place during the accessioning of one specific collection of lantern slides. SEFVA obtained this group of lantern slides in July 2000 and named it 'The Mantle Collection'.

FIRST INSPECTION

My first inspection of the material took place in the house of the owner. The table and floor were littered with slides: some in old cardboard boxes, some in original wooden lantern boxes and others in a number of plastic bags. They were all standard-size slides, some 800 of them, and were a real mixture: lots of religious and temperance subjects, but also slides of rural England, travels in Europe, aesthetic effects and local outings.

The initial assessment was ambiguous: the sets seemed muddled and incomplete. Lots of slides were physically poor in quality, with torn bindings, some faded imagery and cracked glass plates. As a collection it most probably would not appeal to the collector's eye.

Yet I was keen for SEFVA to obtain the whole lot, because it appeared an interesting 'corpus for research'. This was not a discovery of highly aesthetically pleasing series or unique sets, but a collection with a historical relevance to a particular place and practice. Though the slides seemed an arbitrary lot, they might prove to shed light on some questions about slide exhibition and reception. For example, who showed the slides? When were they shown and for what purpose? Where were they shown and to which audiences?

IDENTIFYING THE COLLECTION

So, why is the collection called the Mantle Collection? Contact with the owner gave me some clues. The slides had belonged to her late

husband. His first wife had been a relative of the Mantle family and the slides supposedly belonged to their circle. The Mantle family were Wesleyan Methodists, closely associated with the Clarendon Mission in Brighton and Hove. Unfortunately the owner of the collection was not a direct relative and she knew no more of the Mantle family.

From the *Sussex Daily News* I learned that a Reverend J. Gregory Mantle had commenced his pastorate in Brighton on 6 September 1896. Mantle was known for his experience in socially deprived areas. In an interview from early 1897, he was quoted as saying that 'any church can be filled on the principle of concentration and adaptation' and 'I believe many services nowadays are killed by dullness'.¹ He was further described as a keen man, capable of adapting his methods to the population he encountered.

Stephen Bottomore has done some further research into the career of Gregory Mantle, especially his relationship with film production, and it will be interesting to find out more about this intriguing figure. Gregory Mantle was in Brighton for only a short while, after which he travelled a lot, going to America and India among other places. So although the collection is named after him, it is almost certainly more appropriate to consider the corpus of slides as a church community collection.

EXAMINATION OF THE SLIDES

I hoped to acquire further knowledge from examination of the slides. What quickly became apparent was the 'organic' status of this collection, a feature shared with many other collections. The 800 slides were neither bought nor shown simultaneously. The collection was obviously assembled over a number of years, and for each presentation a group of slides was selected to suit a particular use. This 'continuum of growth and change' was clearly inherent in the collection, but it was impossible to make out how these selections would have been made, and when or to whom they were shown. Unfortunately no written information accompanied the collection – no readings, and also no notes.

The order of the slides (as found at accessioning) only served to confuse matters. The order was too arbitrary: series were scattered out of sequence and the subjects did not show any apparent cohesion. Their grouping in the containers made little sense. This was not a compilation of slide sets as they may have been last used in missionary presentations, but rather an arrangement established at (possibly various) later dates when family members or associates had a rummage through the collection.

ORGANISING THE COLLECTION

Therefore, to get a better understanding of the corpus of material I decided to re-group the slides according to titles, themes and production. Apart from identifying content and dates, I looked at the particularities of image treatment, the type of masks and bindings used, and any text and signatures that could be established from the binding or the images themselves.

Some groupings were simple to ascertain, with a clear and obvious identification. One of these was the set 'The Way to Heaven', a complete series of 38 slides (see 2). The writing on the mask reads 'From Life Models – Copyright' which suggests a series made by Bamforth, and there is an entry for the series in the Bamforth slide catalogue of c.1908. It is mentioned that the series can be arranged as a Service of Song.

It is known that Gregory Mantle was interested in the role music could play in his congregation. Also the missionary use of slides in the context of religious meetings has been well established. It is therefore not surprising that the Mantle Collection holds a varied selection of religious themes and hymn slides.

Another slide series fitting this exhibition practice is 'Pilgrims Progress by John Bunyan' (see 3). This was easy to identify as a

1. Church Interior, 1939 Harvest Fete



NOTES

1. 'Brighton Society', *Sussex Daily News*, 23 January 1897, p. 9.



2. Slide from 'The Way to Heaven'



3. Slide from 'Pilgrims Progress by John Bunyan'

story, but the assemblage of slides as a series turned out to be a bit of a puzzle. I could not find one complete set, but there were images belonging to various series showing a different treatment of this subject. One group (the original drawings signed by H.C. Selous, artist, and W.J. Linton, engraver) was coloured by H. Hilton of Hove. It was interesting to find another slide in the collection with his signature, but this one was a photographic portrait. Brighton and Hove had several photographic studios and shops, some of which also dealt in lantern materials.

The Mantle Collection holds quite a few slides showing posed portraits, of both groups and individuals. Some of these are certainly of members of the church community, but unfortunately most are without any identifying marks. Although it is unclear if these slides were made by professionals, most of the portraits do show a certain technical standard. One other slide that could be identified shows a portrait of a young woman. Written on the mask is 'Williamson, Maker, Hove, Brighton'. Could this be James Williamson, the Hove film pioneer?

Another puzzle is found in a group of American slides. There are only 23 of these slides, mainly reproductions of the work of artist Frank Beard, marked as 'Copyright 1895 by Frederick L. Chapman & Co.' Some show a distributor's name, 'Stereopticon and Film Exchange, 108 Franklin St, Chicago'. There are also a few odd educational slides with diagrams. However, there is a possible connection, since it is known that Gregory Mantle spent some time in the United States. Did he show these slides in America? Or did he bring these slides back from this trip and were they then shown in Brighton?

It is interesting that the collection reflects a long period of use. Most of the slides can be dated between the 1890s and 1910s. However there are several series documenting community outings (see 6), covering periods between c.1910 and 1941. Again there are more questions than answers. Were these slides made by a keen amateur or a hired professional photographer? Who are the people in the slides? Are they souvenir snapshots or did they have a missionary function? They can certainly be identified as outings organised in South East England for specific communities. Some

document trips to the seaside, others show picnics or strolls in the countryside. The portraits of groups sitting on carts and charabancs are especially charming.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

The largest puzzle remains the mixture of slides. Even after several attempts I still have not achieved a finalised categorisation. Many of the photographic slides are devoid of any physical identification marks, and in many other cases the text has come off, bindings are torn and some slides bear more than one number. As mentioned already, it was easy to extract themes (such as biblical subjects, travel and temperance), but the slides do not seem to make up complete sets. They are a mixture from various manufacturers and distribution

companies. This is further exemplified by the odd mix of Life Model slides. Besides the one complete series 'The Way to Heaven', there are another 37 Life Model slides, but they come from 21 different sets.

One has to conclude that either the collection SEFVA obtained is only a proportion of the slides that were once owned by this family or church community, or that this mixture was acquired deliberately because it suited their purpose to continuously make up new narratives for different presentations. This clearly applies to the varieties of slides which fit so well with a religious and temperance mission. Most probably both reasons apply.

THE NEXT STEPS

These findings are obviously only a starting point and leave much to be researched. To gather a more comprehensive insight into the diversity of lantern practices, a combined effort of academic and archival interest is long overdue.

One necessity for the future is a co-ordinated and coherent data resource development project. As an archivist I became acutely aware of the importance of logging all information as explicitly as possible, using strict definitions, values and categories. Of course this is more easily said than done. Period sources and research generated by members of the Magic Lantern Society do supply lots of valuable information. Yet a standardisation of terminology and identification procedures, as well as development of comprehensive descriptions of technological and subject matter and the building of a special thesaurus, is a project in need of public funding and professional archival dedication.

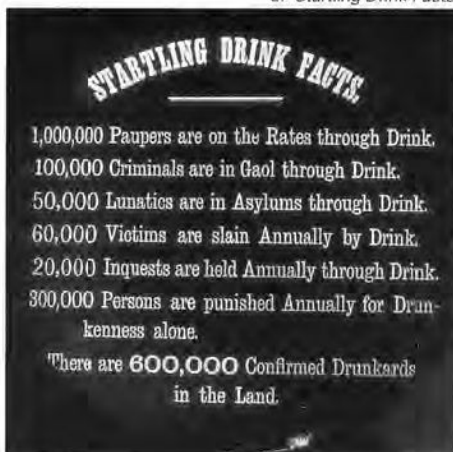
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4. 'Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap'



5. 'Startling Drink Facts'



6. Brighton Gas Co. Centenary Outing, 1918(?)

