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Cover picture:
Title slide from Willan G. Bosworth's 1930s lantern lecture set Under the Big Top. The 'home-made' nature of the slide is obvious, and quite typical of its time: by that period there was practically no commercial slide publishing business, and the lantern lecturer, a distinctly endangered species, had little choice but to produce his or her own materials. However – as is made clear in Philip Banham's article under the same title in this issue – such sets can often display a richness and individuality that the mass-produced photographic lecture sets of the 1880s or 1890s somehow lack. The identity of the flexible young lady is regrettably not known.

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COMPLIMENTS OF THE SEASON

Richard Crangle

PERHAPS BY THE TIME this issue of our Journal creeps through your letterbox, Christmas and the New Year will seem a slightly distant memory; nonetheless, it comes to you with seasonal greetings and good wishes from its Editor and all others connected with its production.

The compliments of this season are perhaps particularly appropriate for a lantern publication, since the period around Christmas was always the highlight of the 'lantern season' which, for a couple of centuries, governed the lives and working practices of the lanternist, the slide and lantern supplier, and all the other trades associated with the arts of light and shadow. In certain ways the lantern season was simply a product of necessity: the winter months, with their long dark nights, offered the best conditions for projection, while the summer was a time for preparation and (in later years) photography. Yet the importance of winter, and Christmas in particular, as a subject in lantern slides, is still noticeable and significant – from the cosy image of the Victorian family parlour show, through innumerable Nativity slides and the snow which torments many a ragged Life Model waif, to 'Christmas Day in the Workhouse'. But perhaps there is something more basic in this, such as the human need for festivals of renewal at the darkest time of year. Light, even though it may be artificial, will always cheer the human soul. And if the light can be coloured and made to tell stories, so much greater is the cheer.

It is appropriate, therefore, that we kick off this issue with a seasonal article – Peter Gillies' fascinating examination of another of those slide sets which have to be seen in their original context to understand even half of their original meaning. The traditions of nineteenth-century pantomime and harlequinade, which in themselves are now almost lost from English culture, offer an enlightening insight into what would otherwise be curious but incomprehensible slide images. As Peter remarks in his article, it has often been observed that we no longer understand many of the visual references in nineteenth-century and other slides. His investigation shows that it is possible to break through this barrier by placing seemingly confusing images in their original context, where they make perfect sense.

Philip Banham's circus article in this issue – besides dealing with another popular entertainment subject which reminds us how the lantern reflects and illuminates other activities and interests – also highlights another important point for the study of the lantern (and all other popular media); namely, the significance of oral history. While traditional archive-based historians may have reservations about the reliability of individual memories or anecdotes, such records are indispensable for a subject like ours which, for one reason or another, simply does not have large archival resources. Like all research, Philip's exploration of his set of circus slides included a certain amount of luck and coincidence, but its great strength lies in making the connection between the artefacts – the images on some pieces of glass – and the people to whom they were significant. Lantern history, like all history, is made up of people and the stories they tell, and it is by beginning to put the pieces of those stories back together that we can reveal the subject's wider meaning.

Elsewhere in this issue we have, once again, a rich mixture of examples of the kinds of lantern scholarship which make our subject as 'alive and well' as it is today. These include Wendy Bird's translation of a rare contemporary account of the Phantasmagoria, which could well have connections to Robertson himself; a welcome intervention by Bill Barnes to broaden the 'who invented the lantern' debate; and Mark Butterworth's piece on – once again – the context of a set of slides which could otherwise be overlooked as 'simply' another children's set. Mark's title, 'The Story Behind the Slides', is one which should give us all a cue for further work.

There is one other timely feature in this issue (in the 'Bits and Pieces' section), in the shape of Raymond Newport's follow-up to his article on the Bath lanternist and inventor John Arthur Roebuck Rudge, which appeared in our pages five years ago. J.A.R. Rudge died on 3 January 1903, so it is appropriate that this Journal should remember this still under-recognised pioneer of the moving image on the centenary of his death. His ghost, if such a phantasmagorical creature cares to watch, might be surprised by the interest his 'moving' pictures – created with a modified lantern and a few glass slides – are still capable of generating in the twenty-first century.

The next issue of NMLJ is scheduled for Summer 2003, with a number of interesting articles already lining up to grace its pages. However, as always, further contributions will be very welcome. Please send material to the Editorial address at the bottom of the Contents column. The editorial deadline for Volume 9 Number 4 will be 22 March 2003.