

BOOK REVIEW

DUTCH PERSPECTIVES

350 Years of visual entertainment based on the research of Willem Albert Wagenaar and Annet Duller
Willem Albert Wagenaar, Annet Duller and Margreet Wagenaar-Fischer

It is always a bit of a cliché when someone passes away to say that they will be 'sorely missed'. But this is certainly true in the case of Willem Wagenaar, who died in 2010. Alongside his more pre-eminent work in the field of experimental psychology, Willem Wagenaar spent a great deal of his time delving into the mysterious history and origins of the magic lantern and transforming himself into the most innovative of lantern showmen. His presentations, staged together with other talented members of his family and often in their own purpose-built private theatre in Zeist, were imbued with a vitality and spirit which turned the humble lantern show into an energetic form of live picture-theatre.

Dutch Perspectives was conceived by Willem Wagenaar and brought to fruition thanks to his principal co-author Annet Duller, his wife Margreet and other friends and relatives. It is a fascinating study of various aspects of the lantern's use in 'the seven counties' as well as a fitting tribute to the enterprise of Wagenaar himself.

Essentially the book comprises a chronological series of essays exploring the Dutch influence on the development of the magic lantern. More specifically, to follow the intention set out in the prefacing acknowledgements: 'to deal not only with the invention of the instrument and its diffusion all over Europe, but also with the subject matter of performance'. And with an eye to 'performance' in particular this book works equally as a well-researched source book and a lively entertainment.

Since the book is not intended as a straightforward and complete retelling of lantern history we should examine some of the essay chapters in more detail.

After a brief introductory chapter written by Margreet, the second follows Willem Wagenaar's own early investigation into the thorny issue of the lantern's Dutch origins. Referencing some essential Dutch history he explores the various claims associated with Huygens, Walgenstein and of course Kircher. It is a testament to Wagenaar's thoroughness that, when re-examining the vexatious illustrations in the second edition of Kircher's *Ars Magna*, he did not simply accept that these are inaccurate, but carried out his own practical experiments, concluding that the arrangement was actually realistic, albeit a very poor method.

Subsequent early chapters explore the output of the earliest known Dutch lantern workshops including, most importantly, the Musschenbroek factory, which was engaged in lantern and slide production possibly from as early as 1659 through until 1765. An outline of the factory's output is accompanied by beautifully presented



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The Magic Lantern Society, London, 2014 ISBN 978-0-9929628-0-7
228pp, over 600 illustrations, pbk, 22 x 24 cm
£39.50, available through the MLS website

examples taken from the Wagenaar and other private collections.

There is also a separate study of Willem Wagenaar's fascination with the precursors of the lantern in the form of the illuminated peepshow and other transparent devices.

Following on from these details of early developments in Dutch visual media Annet Duller takes a look at the lantern show as portrayed in contemporaneous printed books and the use of the lantern as a political instrument.

History is not confined to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Later chapters explore the widely divergent activities of two practitioners in the first decade of the twentieth century. The first of these examines the work of a painter of Life Models, J.W.H.C. Van Staveren, between 1900 and 1910. The second looks at the performance work of the serpentine dancer Martha Riozzi, with many examples of the brilliant and colourful pose slides incorporated into an act that also included stage illusions. This unique discovery – to use a stock showbusiness phrase – 'is worth the ticket price alone'.

The last chapter in the book is reserved for those who may think that the art of the magic lantern is passé and outmoded and that cinema eclipsed it all. Here we take a close look at Willem Wagenaar's own ingenious use of the lantern, its material and ways of re-imagining and presenting the various existing and specially created lantern curiosities in the family collection.

And, finally, just a word about the design of the book. This is yet another shining example of the many skills of Dennis Crompton, whose publications for the Magic Lantern Society are always outstanding.

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. It stands as a fitting epitaph to the work of that sorely missed twenty-first-century lanternist, Willem Wagenaar.

Mervyn Heard
December 2014