

MURIEL MATTERS AND MAGIC LANTERNS

Steven Anderson

A noted suffragist who used a magic lantern for political purposes was the Australian-born Muriel Matters (1877-1969). By 1902 most women in Australia had the vote so when Muriel came to England in 1905 she soon found herself working to support the cause of women there. Muriel is remembered for three events carried out while a member of the Women's Freedom League (WFL), a non-violent suffrage group that agitated for the vote in the UK. Firstly, she was the paid organiser for a WFL caravan tour (Fig. 1) that toured the south east of England from May to July of 1908 (in a second caravan tour she went as far as Wales). Secondly, on 28 October 1908 she chained herself to the grille of the Ladies Gallery in the House of Commons, a much loathed piece of ironwork that obscured women's view of the parliamentary debates happening below. While attached to the grille Matters, by a legal technicality, was judged to be on the floor of the House and thus the words spoken by her that day are still considered to be the first delivered by a woman in the House of Commons. Muriel and the grille had to be removed together (Fig. 2). Thirdly, in February 1909 Muriel organised an aeronautical demonstration to protest about King Edward VII neglecting to mention



TO ADVOCATE "VOTES FOR WOMEN": THE SUFFRAGISTS' VAN.
The Suffragists are to tour the country in a van which they will use as a lecture-platform. Three of the leaders of the movement, Miss Matters, Mrs. Dapard, and Miss Hicks, appear in the photograph.

1. Newspaper photograph of the caravan tour

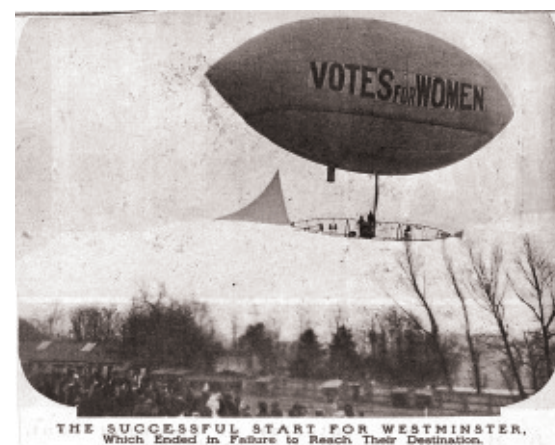
women's suffrage in his speech to open Parliament (Fig. 3). However the early-model dirigible was blown off course and the leaflets, intended to be dropped over the King on his way to open Parliament, were instead distributed over the suburbs and countryside further afield.

After these actions on behalf of the WFL, Muriel returned to Australia from May to July of 1910 for a speaking tour. She gave lectures in Perth at the Literary Institute, in Adelaide at the Town Hall (Fig. 4), in Melbourne at the Princess Theatre and in Sydney at King's Hall. She gave three talks in each city, each focusing on a different theme – prison reform, equal pay for equal work, restoring the rights of women in the breakdown of a marriage and, naturally, for universal suffrage in Great Britain (*The Advertiser*, 1 August 1910, p.9).

The lantern slides shown were connected with the suffrage movement and many of them were supplied to her by the *Daily Mirror* in London. Her use of lantern slides is explicitly mentioned in the Australian newspapers:

"The attractiveness of Miss Matters' first lecture, 'The Suffrage Movement in England,' should be enhanced by the announcement that it will be illustrated by lantern slides supplied to Miss Matters by the *Daily Mirror*, London, depicting some of the most exciting scenes in the history of the women's struggle for the vote." (*The Daily News*, Perth, Western Australia, 18 May 1910)

"All the lectures will be brilliantly illustrated, the pictures, it is said, being



THE SUCCESSFUL START FOR WESTMINSTER, Which Ended in Failure to Reach Their Destination.

3. Newspaper photograph of the aeronautical adventure



4. Advertisement for the lectures in Adelaide



2. The House of Commons incident (Illustrated London News, 7 November 1908)

eyeopeners [sic] to all in Australia who have not an accurate idea of the exciting episodes connected with the movement in which Miss Matters has taken such a prominent part. Among them are views of Miss Matters starting on her astonishing airship voyage giving her farewell message, and rising to a height of 3000 ft. Mr Bernard Shaw is shown listening to suffragist speeches, and Mr Forbes Robertson, the famous actor, is depicted as a strong supporter of the suffragettes. Miss Ellen Terry's daughter on picket duty, pictures of demonstrations by the suffragists, and their conflicts with politicians and police, and many other thrilling and humorous episodes will also form part of the programme." (*The Advertiser*, Adelaide, South Australia, 6 June 1910)

"The lecture was illustrated by a number of lantern slides, depicting prominent suffragettes, scenes from the stirring times round the British House of Commons, and in Downing Street; Holloway Gaol, with its suffragette inmates in prison garb, the airship in which Miss Matters made a flight across London ..." (*The Advertiser*, Adelaide, South Australia, 13 June 1910)

From 1905 Muriel Matters was based in England and, after a career as lecturer, journalist, educator, actress and elocutionist, she died aged 92 at St Leonards-on-Sea.

Steven Anderson is Researcher, Muriel Matters Society. The Muriel Matters Society Inc. is a local history group very interested in tracing depictions of Muriel in magic lantern slides as well as any of the slides used by her on the lecture tour of 1910. If you have any information please contact the Society via their website (www.murielmatterssociety.com.au).