

LURLEY AND LURLINE AT THE POLY

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In 2019 I gave a talk to the MLS entitled 'Wilkiepedia' (pun intended!) about one of the most celebrated lecturers of the Royal Polytechnic Institution (RPI), Edmund H. Wilkie (1857-1935), based on the chance discovery of some of his papers (see *TML* 36). The following day, with invaluable help from Monique Wezenberg, I embarked on the enormous task of trying to locate every surviving 'Polytechnic' slide. A little later I was asked to appraise some large hand-painted slides which could have been associated with the RPI. It quickly became apparent that these were three different parts of the same research project.

Many articles and books have been written about the rich and diverse history of the RPI. However, few have yet given a detailed study of the slides shown there, nor the whereabouts of the surviving slides. This article is a first attempt to summarise some of the questions raised, using one part-set as an example.

1867: *Lurley, or the Bridal of Belmont*

The Times of 19 October 1867 included a review of the RPI's new autumn programme:

"Though the list of entertainments is very lengthy, there is one which is especially worthy of notice, not only on account of its novelty, but

also of its really graceful and poetic attributes. This is Mr John Millard's entertainment of 'Lurley, or the bridal of Belmont' – a sketch founded on one of the poems of Praed [...] A series of very beautiful scenes illustrate the various phases of the story, and the views of the Rhine [...] are remarkable as well for the artistic arrangements by which they are exhibited as for their merely pictorial excellence. Miss Blanche Reeves sings some pretty and appropriate songs during the entertainment, and Mr Frewin's instrumental music sustains the charming interest of the weird story of Lurline."¹

'The Bridal of Belmont' is a narrative poem by W. Mackworth Praed (1802-39), an English lawyer and politician, subtitled 'A legend of the Rhine'.² It tells of Count Otto, a shy bachelor who captures and aims to wed a Rhine maiden who entrances him, with an ultimately disappointing outcome.³ The poem (468 lines, in rather forced rhyming verse) has a witty tone satirising contemporary English society while recounting the romantic supernatural legend. We don't know of a script for Millard's 'sketch' based on the poem, but the *Times* review suggests a mixture of songs, recitation and dissolving views.

Most of the *Lurley* images (Figs 1-5) were painted in 1867, though a few more were added in 1880 for a revival under a different title. They were created by the famous slide painter W.R. Hill (1831-1901), supposedly the first slides he painted for the Polytechnic after ending his partnership with Henry Langdon Childe. The surviving slides don't



1. Rheinfels Castle. Wilkie's notes from 1894 read: "Viewed from the outskirts of St Goar the ruins of Rheinfels Castle present a highly romantic appearance with its long rambling corridors and ramparts. It does not owe its decayed state to the ravages of time, but principally to the French, who blew up a great part of it. This view is a comparatively modern one having been painted by Mr W.R. Hill in 1880."

Rheinland was very different from *Lurline* – "illustrated by upwards of 60 exquisite Dioramic Dissolving Views, and accompanied by National Instrumental Music,"⁴ it was later billed as "Personal Experiences of a Journey from London to Heidelberg and Back": "The Entertainment embraces the whole of the Castles, Cities and natural beauties of the Rhine, from Cologne to Mayence; and, during the progress of the Lecture, Mr Wilkie will read THE LEGEND OF THE DRACHENFELS, and THE LEGEND OF THE MOUSE TOWER, both specially written by the celebrated Dramatic Author, Robert Reece."⁵

Both verses by Reece also appeared in *Lurline*. Clearly the *Rheinland* lecture used more images than *Lurline*, and it's likely that most, if not all, were standard 3¼-inch slides. Wilkie also gave the same lecture elsewhere, suggesting that its slides were more standard and portable than the large Polytechnic format of *Lurline*. Some of the *Rheinland* slides are now in Robin Palmer's collection.

1882: the Polytechnic auction

The Institution's contents were auctioned at its premises on 28 February 1882, including about 3,800 slides in 126 lots. Wilkie purchased 574 slides, of which 232 were standard 3¼-inch slides, suggesting that 342 were 'Polytechnic-size'. About 51 were the original 11-inch square format, which would leave 291 slides measuring 13 by 11 inches. This tallies with an *OMLJ* report of April 1894 that "Mr Wilkie possesses



3. The Mouse Tower. This slide is described in the *OMLJ* report of the visit to Wilkie: "a picture of the 'Mouse Tower' on its rock, by moonlight. By the aid of special mechanism swarms of mice are then seen swimming the river, tumbling one over the other, and on arriving at the rock they turn upwards, scale the Tower, and disappear over the battlements."

illustrate specific episodes from the story, instead showing spectacular Rhine landscapes, but possibly there were other slides showing characters and action.

1880: *Lurline, the Rhine Maiden*

In 1880 the RPI dusted off the Rhine slides for *Lurline*, a new entertainment delivered by George Buckland with text by the comic dramatist Robert Reece (1838-91). This used Hill's original dissolving views with at least two new slides added. Wilkie's personal copy of the printed libretto, with handwritten notes for an occasion when he stood in for Buckland, is among the papers mentioned earlier.

Lurline follows the same general premise as *Lurley*, but is also loosely based on a successful three-act opera of the same title, written by William Vincent Wallace (1812-65) and first performed at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden in 1860. Our hero (this time Sir Rupert) is led astray by the siren nymphs who lurk by the Rhine, and "very decidedly drowned" as a result. The tone of the verse is highly comic: despite the aesthetic beauty of the slides, and presumably uplifting orchestral music, the text is clearly played for laughs and seems like a burlesque on Wallace's romantic opera.

1881: *Recollections of Rheinland*

The last performance of *Lurline* was probably on Saturday 20 August 1881, but the following week Wilkie presented a new lecture, *Recollections of Rheinland*. This was a late alteration to the programme for Thursday 25 August (added by hand in Wilkie's copy), but afterwards was a regular fixture until the RPI's final day, 21 January 1882.



2. Bingen. This slide is not listed in *OMLJ* as being shown to the Lantern Society in 1894, but is mentioned in their account of the earlier visit to Wilkie. From the position of the buildings and bridge, it appears to show the (then) small town of Bingen, with the River Nahe in the foreground flowing to join the Rhine in the middle distance.

article it states: "the choicest of the hand painted slides [...] are now the property of Mr Edmund H. Wilkie, who, being connected with the institution, was privileged to purchase them from the directors at the time when they were officially short of funds."

Wilkie owned at least three Polytechnic sets (*Baron Von Munchausen*, *Lurline* and *Christmas and its Customs*, all painted by Hill) which weren't in the 1882 catalogue, so he must have purchased them privately before the RPI closed – perhaps providing emergency funds for the struggling Institution (his papers show he loaned the Christmas set back to the RPI in December 1881). Six of the *Munchausen* slides reappeared in the 1980s, randomly discovered at a London market, and are now in a private collection. Two others are in the National Science and Media Museum in Bradford, and another in the V&A Museum, London. How, and why, did Wilkie's prized sets get split up?

1894: Wilkie's slide collection

Most of what we know about Wilkie's *Lurline* slides comes from two articles from *OMLJ* in 1894.⁷ In the first, the editor visited Wilkie and admired "a number of the old slides which had created such a sensation at the time," with descriptions of some

of the *Lurline* slides including some effect sequences which are now unknown. The second article described the editor projecting 57 of the slides (helpfully listed by title) at a meeting of the Lantern Society in London.

Wilkie's typed notes for the Lantern Society showing have survived and are now in the Wellcome Collection in London. They include his summaries of the views shown (quoted in the captions here).

1931: another auction

On 6 February 1931, a sale was held by Stevens's Auction Rooms (an established firm who advertised in *OMLJ* in the 1890s) at Covent Garden. Several lots corresponded to Polytechnic material known to have belonged to Wilkie, so he must have decided to part with some of these treasures – perhaps because he was in poor health.

The slides in the Stevens catalogue exceeded the 300 Wilkie claimed to own, but Wilkie was only referring to his Polytechnic-size slides, not the later standard slides. Lot 264 comprised "220 framed lantern slides," which corresponds roughly (allowing for a few losses and breakage) to four sets that Wilkie purchased in 1882: *Afghanistan* (38 slides); *The Servian War* (46); *The Russo-Turkish War* (69 plus 3 'panoramas'); and *Paris Before and After the Siege* (76).

We can't know for certain, but the Polytechnic material from Stevens's auction may have been bought by the pioneer cinematographic collector Will Day, whose business was not far from King Street. Certainly numerous Polytechnic slides found their way into his collection, and are now in the Cinémathèque française.

Day was a businessman as well as a collector, and it's likely that he parcelled-up the Polytechnic slides to sell on in small batches, not necessarily in complete sets. We don't have space here to detail the routes they might have taken, but Polytechnic slides are now in the Oxford Museum of the History of Science, the Deutsches Optisches Museum in Jena and the National Science and Media Museum (via the former Kodak Museum), among others. For one example, in 1944 the Oxford museum bought the collection of Dr Reginald Clay (1868-1954, a scientific instrument historian), including numerous Polytechnic slides which were in the 1931 Stevens catalogue – either Clay bought them from Stevens, or from Day.

In 1934 Day offered his collection for sale (unsuccessfully) in a privately-printed catalogue.⁸ This included several lots of Polytechnic slides. There were more slides in his catalogue than eventually reached the Cinémathèque française, so Day probably sold some in smaller batches. For example, on 20 February 1936 the RPI's successor, the Regent Street Polytechnic, organised a 'Lumière Celebration' for the 40th anniversary of the first British public cinematograph show. Day supplied items for the exhibition, and also offered items for sale at the event. Many influential people and institutional representatives attended, and it must be possible that some went away with parcels of 'old slides'.

And finally...

A couple of years ago I became aware of some slides belonging to a gentleman in Yorkshire, who wondered if they might be genuine 'Polytechnic' slides. They clearly were, showing beautiful hand-painted views of Rhine landscapes. Fortunately the gentleman agreed to part with the slides, and even more fortunately he had some further information.

My contact was the grandson of Lawrence J. Hibbert (1886-1969), who was Head of the School of Photography at Regent Street Polytechnic. Hibbert retired to Yorkshire, taking "a good deal of bits and pieces including the box containing the Magic Lantern slides" that were kept "in a junk room in the attic" but luckily survived several house moves. With some digging (and more luck) I found L.J. Hibbert in the programme of the 1936 Lumière Celebration in which Will Day was involved – in fact he was the Secretary of its organising committee.

So Hibbert and Day were in contact. It's very plausible that Hibbert was one of Day's buyers at or after the 1936 event, acquiring eight Polytechnic slides (my five

5. *Heidelberg*. Wilkie's 1894 note is: "One of the grandest of all the ruins on or near the banks of the Rhine is undoubtedly Heidelberg which in its prime must have combined the beauties of nature and of art. This picture was used in the late Mr George Buckland's musical entertainment entitled 'Lurline', written by Mr Robert Reece."



4. *Lurline on the Rock*. Wilkie says "We have heard a great deal about *Lurline*, and here we see her seated at close of day on her favourite rock, singing a German edition of *Tara-ra-boom-de-ay* to lure victims into the Whirlpool above which she is seated. This view is one of the original set and was also used in Mr Buckland's entertainment."

from *Lurline*, one from *Christmas and its Customs*, two unknown), which gives a provenance for these slides from the RPI to the present day. There may be similar stories relating to the (roughly) 400 other Polytechnic slides known to survive – we just have to keep looking, and know how to spot a connection when we come upon it.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *The Times*, 19 October 1867, p. 9. Advertisements for *Lurley* continued to appear in *The Times* until at least the start of January 1868.
2. The legend of an enchantress who lures passing boatmen to their doom at the Lorelei rock on the Rhine has been retold in many versions – perhaps most famously in a poem by Heinrich Heine in 1824.
3. A collected edition of Praed's poems (*The Poems of Winthrop Mackworth Praed*) published in 1886 is available online at Project Gutenberg. It would be inaccurate to describe his work as great poetry.
4. RPI programme, week commencing 29 August 1881, p. 5
5. RPI programme, week commencing 2 January 1882, p. 12
6. 'Old Polytechnic Slides,' *Optical Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger [OMLJ]*, Vol. 5, No. 59, April 1894, pp. 69-70
7. 'Old Polytechnic Slides,' also 'Old Polytechnic Lanterns and Slides at the Lantern Society,' *OMLJ*, Vol. 5, No. 67, December 1894, pp. 202-203
8. *Illustrated Catalogue of the Will Day Historical Collection of Cinematograph and Moving Picture Equipment*, Will Day, London, 1934. The Polytechnic slides are listed on pp. 31-32.

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