

REVIEW:

DESTINATION ST KILDA and *MARKETING MODERNITY*

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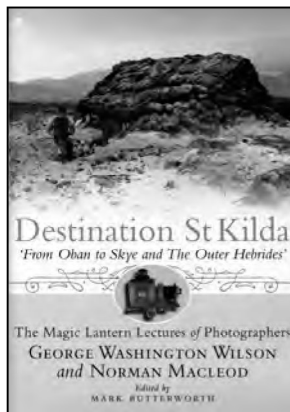
Mark Butterworth (ed.),
Destination St Kilda: from Oban to Skye and the Outer Hebrides
Isle of Lewis: Islands Book Trust, 2010
76pp, ill. Hardback, £19.99
ISBN 978-1-907443-03-9.

Joe Kember,
Marketing Modernity: Victorian popular shows and early cinema
Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009
296pp, ill. Hardback, £47.50
ISBN 978-0-85989-801-0.

ON THE FACE OF IT, it would be hard to find two lantern-related books that have less in common than these two, and reviewing them together (other than indicating that they arrived on the editorial desk at around the same time!) might seem an odd choice. Mark Butterworth's *Destination St Kilda* is a high-quality reproduction of two linked sets of George Washington Wilson slides from 1886, with some supporting text, while Joe Kember's *Marketing Modernity* is a fairly densely packed and thoroughly researched discussion of one aspect of the history of early cinema, in which the magic lantern plays a significant but supporting role. But I want to suggest that, in their different ways, these two excellent books show some directions in which 'lantern studies' can head in the future. The directions are rather different, but not incompatible, and to some extent books like these support each other.

Destination St Kilda takes quite a traditional book-approach to lantern slides: a brief introduction with some background to the history and significance of the particular slide set; very nice colour reproductions of the slides themselves, here accompanied by the text of their original readings; and an afterword with an outline of 'the origins and development of the magic lantern'. In this respect it very much follows a format defined early on by (for example) Colin Gordon's *By Gaslight in Winter* of 1980, and that's not a bad thing. Being published for a general readership (the Islands Book Trust aims 'to further understanding of the history of Scottish islands' and publishes a wide range of very fine-looking books to do so) means that some things get re-explained that 'we', the lantern *illuminati*, would take for granted – but again, that's not a bad thing if it makes things 'we' know available and accessible to a wider audience. Equally, the foreword by the Trust's Chairman helps to put the slide sets into their historical context, and that helps 'us' understand the slides more than we might have done otherwise.

Of course a picture book doesn't give the same experience as viewing the slides, and there's a limit to how many books of this type the market will bear (even when, as in this case, they have a specialist or local angle to help promote them). But when a book is compiled, written and produced as well as this one has been, it's a perfectly appropriate way of bringing the images to wider attention. This seems particularly fitting where GWW slides are concerned, given the various different ways that the firm marketed its images (in some ways, their lantern slides were just another way of getting some income value out of the stock of negatives). And for all the special beauty that attaches to large-scale projection of slide images, at the same time there are some whose images need more time to



consider and appreciate, and that can be better done by having a copy of the image in front of you for perusal at your leisure.

Marketing Modernity won't be to everyone's taste – it depends how you feel about academic writing, and whether or not you're interested in early cinema in Britain. If you *are* interested in early cinema in Britain, and don't mind a fairly (but not excessively or painfully) theoretical approach, you really ought to read this book. There have been plenty of books in recent years about early cinema, and even some that attempt to recognise that moving pictures are part of a longer continuum of other media and other developments, but this is the first I've seen since Laurent Mannoni's *Great Art of Light and Shadow* that takes a properly researched look at the earlier media in relation to the moving picture. If it were possible to sum up Joe Kember's argument in a sentence (and I'm not sure that it is), it would be that the early cinema succeeded, commercially and in other ways, because it tapped into existing traditions and audience expectations, and used that degree of familiarity to explain (or just exploit) some of the things about modern life that were very unfamiliar. That seems to me like a correct interpretation.

The book is in five chapters covering, in turn, a mainly theoretical account of early film as an institution; a discussion of popular lecturing traditions; a look at traditions of showmanship (with an interesting distinction made between the worlds of the lecture and the show); early screen performances; and some of the practitioners of early film, nicely described here as 'conjurers and adventurers'. Perhaps the most interesting of these, at least to my specialised taste, is that on popular lecturing traditions, with particular reference to lantern lectures. This is a well-researched and well-written account of an area that's been somewhat neglected even in lantern scholarship, and rewards a careful reading. It's not without the occasional small problem – there's a bit of confusion between Riley and Bamforth as slide producers, for instance – and while generally very clear and intelligible will also sometimes challenge a casual reader (I don't recall ever meeting the word 'veridicality' before, but will now be making a point of using it in conversation). But I've read many less accessible academic texts than this one, and the fact that mainstream(ish) academia is prepared to take seriously media that have previously mainly been researched by amateurs ought to be an encouraging sign.

As I said, the point in reviewing these two diverse books together is to suggest that there's room for both, and that books like these have things to offer to each other's world. If these represent two (among several) current and future directions for 'lantern studies', the way they diverge is a positive thing as much as it's an indication that different forces are pulling in different directions. On the one hand we can reproduce fine facsimiles of historical materials and use them to wonder about what our ancestors did (though Mark Butterworth's book, to be fair, does rather more than just give us pictures to look at); on the other hand we can try to develop theoretical models for how those historical materials achieved their effects (and Joe Kember doesn't just theorise, being brave enough to have gone back to the original sources).

That distinction between them is certainly not meant to sound like a negative criticism of either of these books, which in their different ways are enjoyable, instructive and challenging. In an ideal world, perhaps we'd be producing more work that managed to combine these approaches – uncovering original sources and putting them into context, and at the same time thinking more seriously about what all this stuff *means*. But in the meantime there will always be different strands to our attempts to understand 'old media', and sometimes they will seem like opposites. It would be too easy to prefer one route and pretend that the others are too superficial or too difficult: to really understand a complicated story we have to be prepared to see it from all sides.

