

REVIEW:

# FROM MAGIC LANTERN TO MOVIES

The Optical Magic Lantern Journal 1889-1903

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From Magic Lantern to Movies:  
The Optical Magic Lantern Journal 1889-1903  
DVD-ROM.

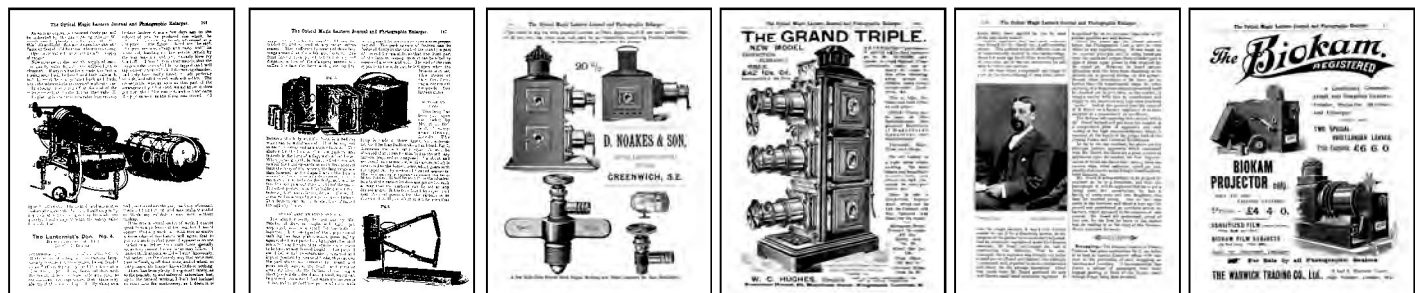
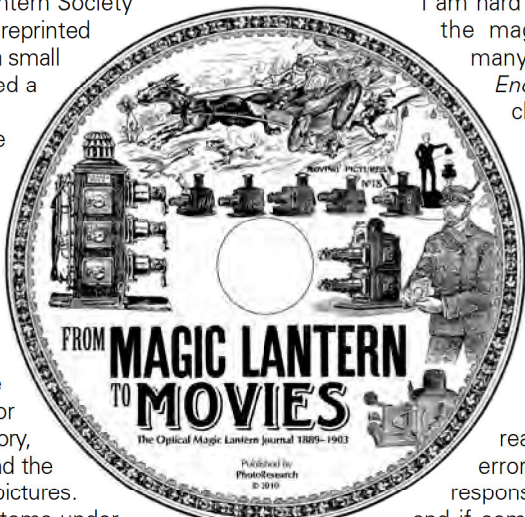
London: PhotoResearch, 2010  
ISBN 978-0-9523011-1-0  
£60.00, available from the Society at [www.magiclantern.org.uk](http://www.magiclantern.org.uk)

**THE OPTICAL MAGIC LANTERN JOURNAL** was the premier publication for the magic lantern fraternity in the UK between 1889 and 1903. Its aim, as defined by its editor J. Hay Taylor, was 'to keep our readers *au courant* with all that transpires in the world of lanternists'. Running to a total of 160 issues, it covered all aspects of the lantern trade, from new developments to discussions on technique and the history of projection. Only one complete set of the original Journal is currently known (at the Bodleian Library in Oxford). Most other known copies and bound volumes are incomplete as their extensive advertisement pages were usually discarded. Several years ago the Magic Lantern Society arranged for a few issues of the *OMLJ* to be reprinted and offered to Society members, but it was a small selection (about six issues) that represented a somewhat random sample.

But now the entire run of issues is available in PDF format on a DVD-ROM, produced by PhotoResearch, who have included additional details of the individuals and companies mentioned in the Journals. However this DVD offers so much more than just copies of the 160 issues. The content, including all the advertisements, is listed and can be browsed issue by issue or searched for individual entries. This makes the disk an extremely important resource for anyone interested in the magic lantern, its history, its role in nineteenth-century photography and the part it played in the development of moving pictures.

The listings include over 2,200 content items under different headings; approximately 600 people who contributed to the Journal, with basic biographical details where known; and over 400 companies and other organisations that appeared as advertisers, with links to the facsimiles of their advertisements. There is also a powerful search function, allowing you to search for any particular word or term – it requires the user to understand the Adobe Reader search function but this is easily mastered.

This compilation offers something for everyone in abundance. In a typical issue (volume 6 number 76, September 1895) there are articles on 'How to try the new gas' (acetylene), 'A visit to York and Son', 'Lighting for Tableau Vivants', 'Screens', 'New apparatus', 'Notes and Queries', 'Substitutes for limes for oxy-hydrogen light', 'How to purchase a lantern', 'New patents' and more. There are also over 60 advertisements, complete with some fabulous illustrations.



For the collector or active lanternist there are wide-ranging articles about the practice and practicalities of lantern lecturing. The adverts are also an extensive 'catalogue' of items produced during the 14-year run of *OMLJ*. For the lantern historian there are long-running discussions of late nineteenth-century opinions on the history of the lantern and its recent developments, a unique insight from many people who we know today as major figures who contributed to the development of the lantern into the late Victorian popular entertainment it achieved. For the social or media historian there are endless snippets of lantern news, lecturing news and how the lantern was used with the general public.

It is easy to lose yourself for hours, jumping from article to article, advert to advert, exploring all the information you never knew and discovering new items and pieces of equipment or reading first-hand accounts of something you may have seen or heard about. One can start off on some serious line of investigation, only to allow oneself to be 'slightly diverted' and discover that enjoyable hours have passed without actually making any real progress at all.

I am hard pressed to think of another publication on the magic lantern that offers so much for so many different types of reader. Perhaps the *Encyclopaedia of the Magic Lantern* comes close, but it is, of necessity, our current view of past events. The *OMLJ* was written at the time the magic lantern/optical projector/stereopticon was at its peak, and the contents are of that time. Written by people intimately involved with the lantern and lantern practice, who were not writing for posterity but for contemporaries, it is full of news, advice, suggestions and articles of general interest reflecting the hands-on experience of its creators.

This is not a publication about which I can really find anything to fault or criticise. Any errors, omissions or lack of coverage are the responsibility of authors and editors now long gone, and if something is missing it is because they felt it wasn't important or of current interest. If I had to find a drawback it would be that the single DVD in its standard case disguises the volume of material available here: as it represents 160 issues of the original Journal it therefore replaces a few feet of books occupying shelf space. If you possessed the original publication you would appreciate the amount of information (and pleasure) on your bookshelf. This DVD requires you to open the files to make the same assessment. However, modern technology not only makes it more accessible (you can carry it with you easily) but now it is fully searchable it is much easier to make full use of the contents, something the original publishers could never have conceived.

If you buy anything with the intention of improving your enjoyment of the magic lantern, it should be this DVD. I believe it is the most important contribution to lantern history published in a long time.