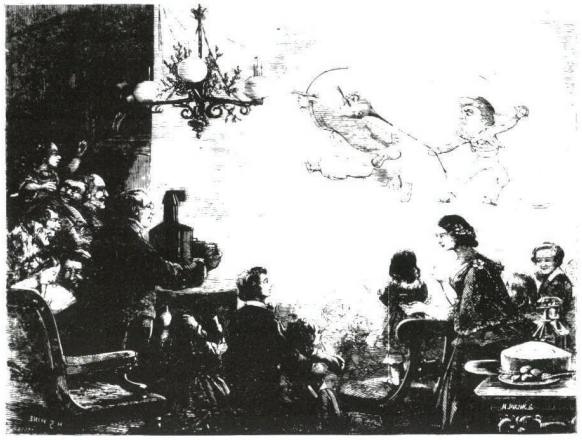
MAGIC LANTERN SHOWS YESTERDAY AND TODAY

The illustration *The Magic Lantern* by H. G. Hine, which was originally published in *The Illustrated London News* of 25 December 1858, will be familiar to members of this society as it is to be found regularly at our auctions and in the print dealers' folios. I believe, however, that the same cannot be said for the text which originally accompanied and enhanced it – now generally separated from the illustration and overlooked or discarded.

This text, reprinted below, provides a fascinating combination of documentary information with some of the chatty soliloquising which was typical of the showmen of the period. While rather self-opinionated, and perhaps somewhat contentious in its technical detail, it represents a rare attempt to record the flavour of these regular Christmas entertainments for families of the later Victorian period – including preparations for the show and some details of its visual content.

As always with prints and ephemera of the period, such a tantalising glimpse of a lantern show makes one wish to be able to discover more. For example, which slides, I always wonder, preceded and followed the one illustrated? Here, unusually, we are fortunate that, through the text which accompanies the print, we are able to discover more about the structure and content of the Victorian lantern programme it illustrates.

Mike Simkin



SCENES IN A MAGIC LANTERN

J. S. COYNE

h! Jack's alive! Oh!—Ha! ha! ha!—Ha! ha! ha!—What fun!—He has got hold of the Chinaman by his pigtail!—Ha! ha! ha! ha!—Ho! ho! ho! ho! ho! And a chorus of joyous laughter burst from fifty young spectators, dimly visible in the almost total darkness of the room in which that elderly spectacled gentleman who styles himself Professor of Natural Philosophy is exhibiting the wonders of his magic lantern, and practically proving that the best philosophy is that which makes us merry and wise at the same time. Professor Smiley is a great man amongst the scholastic institutions of the metropolitan suburbs. From Tulse-hill and Camberwell to Hackney, and all the way round by Hornsey, Highgate, Hampstead and St. John's-wood, to Brompton, Chelsea, and Hammersmith, and across the river to Putney, his celebrity is unparalleled. The young ladies of Mrs. Twittenham's establishment at Camden-town are in ecstasies when that excellent lady announces the possibility of the Professor being induced, by a subsidy of sixpence a head, to bring his wonderful magic lantern, with dissolving views, on a certain evening. Even the boys of Mr. Stickjaw's academy at Clapton do not object to put themselves on a short allowance of toffy and hardbake for a week to have a jolly lark with the droll caricatures that the Professor exhibits for their especial entertainment. But it is only when a merry Christmas party of both sexes are assembled under some hospitable roof, and Professor Smiley and his lantern are specially engaged for the evening, that the merits of this popular instrument can be properly appreciated.

No sooner is tea over than the young people, who are in a state of high fermentation, commence operations by clearing away the tables and arranging chairs and rout-seats in parallel rows, like the stalls and pit-benches in a theatre. This done, a small square table covered with green cloth is placed at one end of the room, and a table-cloth of snowy whiteness hung against the opposite wall, so as to face the spectators.

The preparations being completed fully half an hour before the time at which the Professor is expected to arrive, the old gentleman who stands in patriarchal relationship to about five-and-twenty of the company entertains them with his juvenile recollections of the "Gallantee Show" — the "degenerate predecessor" (as a popular Irish orator used to say in one of his fine bursts of eloquence) of the modern magic lantern, which he stoutly maintains is neither so clever nor so humorous in its presentments as the old Dutch toy at whose drolleries he laughed in his childhood. He thinks nothing of the beautiful dissolving views at the Polytechnic, because he knows it is all a trick; but he loves to expatiate upon the wonderful effects of the Phantasmagoria which he remembers having seen about the beginning of the present century, and describes somewhat in the following intelligible style:—

"Mm—I remember I was home for the holidays—mm—m—m—m—mm—in—a—I can't now think of the year—but there was snow on the ground—and—m—m—the weather being cold, the man who drove the hackney-coach—wore a red nose and a cocked hat—m—m—which caused my father to say—m—m—m—m—I can't call to mind—exactly what he said—but—I remember my mother boxed my ears—for rubbing my dirty shoes on her tabby silk gown—and—m—m--m—when we came there—we paid two shillings—m—m—and got into a dark room—which was very awful—especially the skeletons—and spectres—and—m—m—the thunder and lightning—m—and the death's-head—which grinned at me so horribly—that I fell a screaming—m—m—m—and was taken out in strong convulsions—with the wife of a pork-butcher on Tower-hill—who, being of a delicate constitution—m—m—went mad—and raved of ribs of pork—from the fright, and—m—m—m—never was taken to any public amusement again—till I returned to school."

The old gentleman has just ended his thrilling narrative, when the little Professor glides into the room like one of the figures in his own slides. He is a mild-looking man in black, with scanty fair hair and weak eyes, which obliges him to wear large silver-mounted spectacles, and gives him an inquisitive air as he scans the company and makes his formal salutations to the master and mistress of the house. He is followed by a servant bearing his magic lantern in a black box, the sight of which excites in the younger children feelings of mingled awe and curiosity that effectually subdues any indiscreet tendency to merriment amongst them. Meanwhile the Professor has taken his post behind the green-covered table, and is busily engaged preparing his apparatus—trimming his lamp and arranging his boxes of slides, while the company take their seats. By design or accident Young Craddock has got close to Julia Harrington, and so anxious is he to explain to her the scientific principles of the magic lantern, and the use of the concave mirror and plane-convex lens, that on one occasion during the representation, when a total eclipse of some duration was followed by a sudden illumination, his face was discovered in such close proximity to hers that Miss Pepper, an elderly virgin of "fifty years complete," who sat next to them, was dreadfully scandalised, and sniffed emphatically several times through her peaked nose to express her great indignation. For my own part, I incline to the opinion that it was an optical illusion, which, though calculated to surprise and amuse the beholders, might be easily explained by purely natural causes.

But hush! the Professor has completed his mysterious preparations; the lights are extinguished, and, after a few preliminary flickers and false starts, a broad disc of light falls on the white surface of the cloth on the opposite wall. The hum of approval swells into a burst of applause, when, with a jerk, a jolly Jack Tar appears on the scene taking a tender farewell of his sweetheart previous to embarking for the "Eastren Hingees and parts beyond the sea," in H.M.S. *Tremendous*, which we see floating gallantly over the deep blue waves in the distance. This touching opening of the pictorial epic is followed by a poetical view of the Isle of Wight by moonlight—the Needles are visible, bearing N.N.W. by compass, and the *Tremendous*, with her studding-sails and spanker-booms all set, appears gradually melting away, like a penny ice in the Dog-days, to the well-known air of "Then farewell, my trim-built-wherry," supplied by a musical-box which the Professor has artfully introduced as a novel and unexpected effect. The succeeding tableau is calculated to create the deepest sympathy in every bosom. A storm rages, the good ship is seen tossed on the mountain billows, lightnings flash, and dismal thunder (elicited by a confederate from a teatray) makes the hearts of the sympathising children shudder; thick clouds overspread the scene, and the spectators are left in doubt and darkness, while the musical-box interprets "The Bay of Biscay" in truly artistic style. "What has become of poor Jack?" is the whispered inquiry round the room. "Is he gone down with the ship?" Not a bit of it. Hooray! There he is! He has escaped and landed in the Flowery Land where the British Lion is making small change of the Celestials. Our friend Jack, anxious to possess a real live Chinaman, has made fast to Commissioner Yeh's pigtail, by which he means to tow him alongside, to the appropriate music of "Yo, heave ho!" Again the scene is changed, and the nautical drama concludes with the Sailor's Hornpipe, danced at Portsmouth by Jack and his sweetheart, amidst the tumultuous applause and acclamations of the spectators.

The exhibitor has not, however, exhausted his pictorial stores, though, I fear, I may have the patience of my readers; so, leaving to their imagination to fill up the long series of comical and curious figures which the Professor has still to show, I take my leave, and wish them good night.