

LOUIS WAIN'S FELINE LANTERN SHOW

DAVID ROBINSON



The proud Pussies



Waiting anxiously

THE MAGIC LANTERN

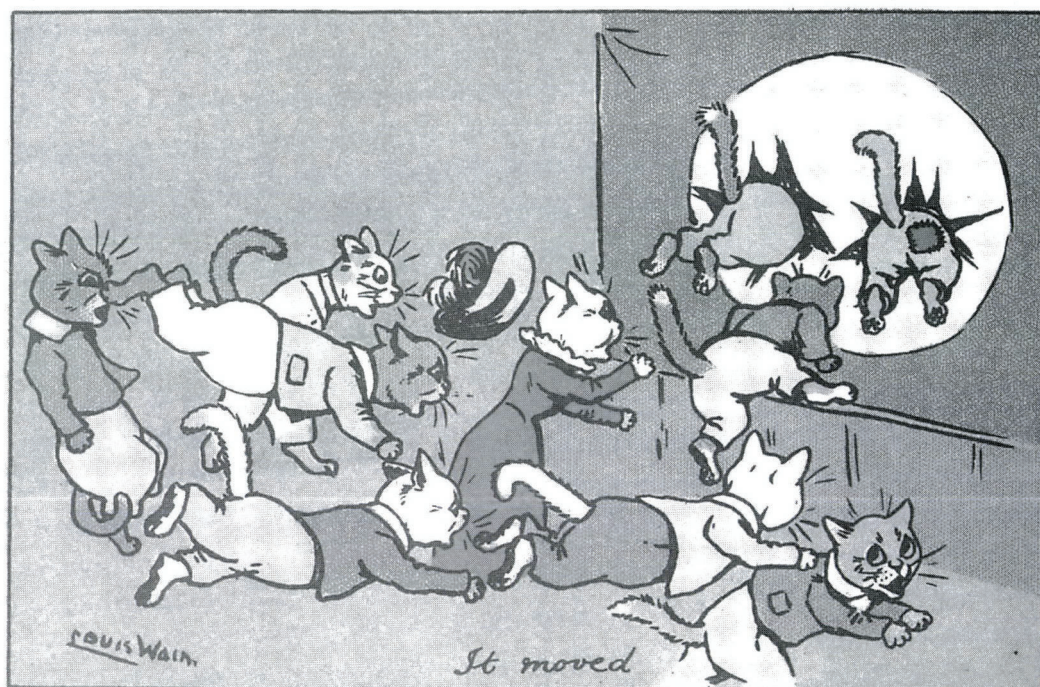
The accompanying set of drawings is a forgotten work by the great cat illustrator Louis Wain (1860-1939). It appeared in an obscure and undated children's book, *Happy Days. Stories and Pictures for Little Folk*, published by Blackies sometime around the early 1920s. The costumes of the female cats however suggest that the drawings date from much earlier – probably around 1900 – and may have lingered in the publisher's files for years. This would be quite likely, given the circumstances of Wain's unhappy life.

He was born in London, the son of a French mother and a Staffordshire man

employed as an 'embroiderer'. Torn between art and music, he studied at the West London School of Art from 1877 to 1880, and taught there in 1881-2. He became an illustrator for the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* and for the *Illustrated London News*, and from 1907 to 1910 worked for the *New York American*. Exceptionally prolific – he could turn out 600 finished drawings a year – Wain invariably sold his pictures outright, retaining no rights in them. Wain's pictures of cats in human clothes and situations enjoyed tremendous popularity in the last years of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th.



This is too much!



We must go for them!

ENTERTAINMENT

By the First World War however he was out of fashion and virtually forgotten. Having lost his money in an unwise speculation during his American period, Wain found himself in acute poverty. In other respects too his life had not been happy: his young wife had died after only two years of marriage. Finally the strain proved too much, and Wain suffered acute mental disturbance. In 1923 he was certified and committed as a lunatic. Some years later he was rescued from a pauper hospital and placed in Bethlehem Hospital. Here he was given drawing materials, and the beautiful but disturbing images he drew of crazed-

eyed and fantastically coloured cats of geometric structure have since become a source of study for psychiatric researchers.

A particular fascination of these four pictures of 'The Magic Lantern Entertainment' is that they appear to come from the period when moving pictures were still regarded as a novel accessory – an unusually elaborate form of mechanical slide – for the magic lantern showman.