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## Cover picture:

Cartoon by Michael Cummings, first published in the London *Daily Express*, 23 April 1956. This is an unusual satirical reference to the magic lantern: the context is the establishment of the Premium Bond prize draw, a new and controversial way of boosting national savings, in the 1956 Budget speech by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Harold Macmillan (1894–1986). The gigantic and lavish 'cinema' of the football pools companies, enticing punters with (at the time) a vast cash prize, is contrasted with the little old-fashioned 'magic lantern show' hut of Macmillan's scheme. In spite of Cummings' misgivings and the flashy competition, the Premium Bond system, rather like the magic lantern, is still alive and well nearly half a century later! Reproduced from a copy in the Centre for the Study of Cartoons and Caricature, University of Kent at Canterbury, by kind permission of Express Newspapers.

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## ON THE WAY BACK FROM THE WILDERNESS

*Richard Crangle*

**OUR COVER ILLUSTRATION** for this issue gives a good, if possibly slightly depressing, indication of the way in which the magic lantern was regarded during what might be called its years in the wilderness – that is, the less-well-illuminated period *after* the end of its widespread use as an instrument of entertainment and delight, and *before* the re-ignition of interest in it by collectors. The exact boundaries of this period are hard to mark specifically – perhaps some spread of time very roughly between the 1920s and the 1970s – but in any case are less important than the characteristics of the period itself.

If Cummings' cartoon is an accurate view of the lantern as seen in the 1950s (and similar contemporary references are not so hard to come by), it's clear that he uses the lantern to stand for something slightly comical and above all old-fashioned, not relevant to the moment at hand. This might be said to be a view which is still current, at least outside the group of specialists such as ourselves who 'know better'. In that view, the lantern is a medium which cannot compete with the seductive novelties of the modern world, and looks a bit ridiculous if it dares to try.

Perhaps all media go through a kind of progression: first the seductive novelty; then the more or less indispensable part of everyday life; then yesterday's news as another novelty finds the spotlight; then a joke or a plaything for the children; then the wilderness; then forgotten. The alternative to that final step of being completely forgotten and joining the ranks of what are sometimes unkindly called 'Dead Media' would be some kind of resurrection. This only seems to happen in special or fortunate cases, but it may be what has happened to the lantern in the years since Cummings drew his cartoon.

Resurrection is a good thing, but there is always a risk of resurrection as an antique: an attractive, though rather quaint, old thing which allows us to project (pun intended) our image of how our ancestors lived and what they believed, but which is dead, is 'just the past'. Getting back from the wilderness, in other words, is not easy: it takes love and hard work to bring a medium back to life, to use it and demonstrate it to new audiences, to investigate its past and present the history in an imaginative and entertaining way. It seems to me that this is something that we – the community of lantern and slide collectors and scholars – have achieved, in our small way, in retrieving the lantern from the attic of forgetfulness over the past forty or so years. But in doing so we're not going back, we're progressing forward. By learning more about the past of 'our' medium, we are (a bit paradoxically) moving it away from that past and towards a future in which it is better understood and regarded.

This issue of our Journal demonstrates once again something of the variety of approaches and subjects that is available to us on the way back from the wilderness. There are many fascinating individuals in the history of the lantern whose stories deserve to be as well told and researched as Debi Harlan and Megan Price's investigation into the life of Henry Underhill for our leading article. There are accounts of the contributions made by the lantern to 'other' areas of history, including the role it and other technical devices played in scientific education, as described imaginatively by Günther Holzhey, and the lantern's influence on the development of theatrical spectacle, as revisited by David Robinson. Lester Smith's excursion to investigate a little-known English camera obscura reminds us that the lantern never existed in isolation, but was one of a wide and sometimes bewildering range of optical devices which (to a greater or lesser extent) tried to present artificial, but realistic, views of the world. They all followed a similar historical progression – some with happier outcomes than the lantern, some not – and all influenced each other.

Another indicator of our progress back from the wilderness is the amount of scholarly work being done in fields which touch on our subject. Three recent publications are reviewed in this issue, and there could have been more if space had permitted. It does seem, at the present time, that almost each month brings the publication of another book or CD-ROM making at least passing reference to the magic lantern, even if not covering it as a main subject. Some of the sidelights these works throw on a medium we think we understand are true revelations. Long may this state of affairs continue: we ain't out of the wilderness yet!

The next issue of *NMLJ* is scheduled to appear in Winter 2003. Contributions – of all types, lengths, shapes, forms and flavours – will, as ever, be welcomed with open arms. Please send material to the Editorial address at the bottom of the Contents column. The editorial deadline for Volume 9 Number 5 will be **1 September 2003**.