

# HOW TO READ A READING

Richard Crangle

## A SHORT HISTORY OF THE HUMBLE SLIDE READING

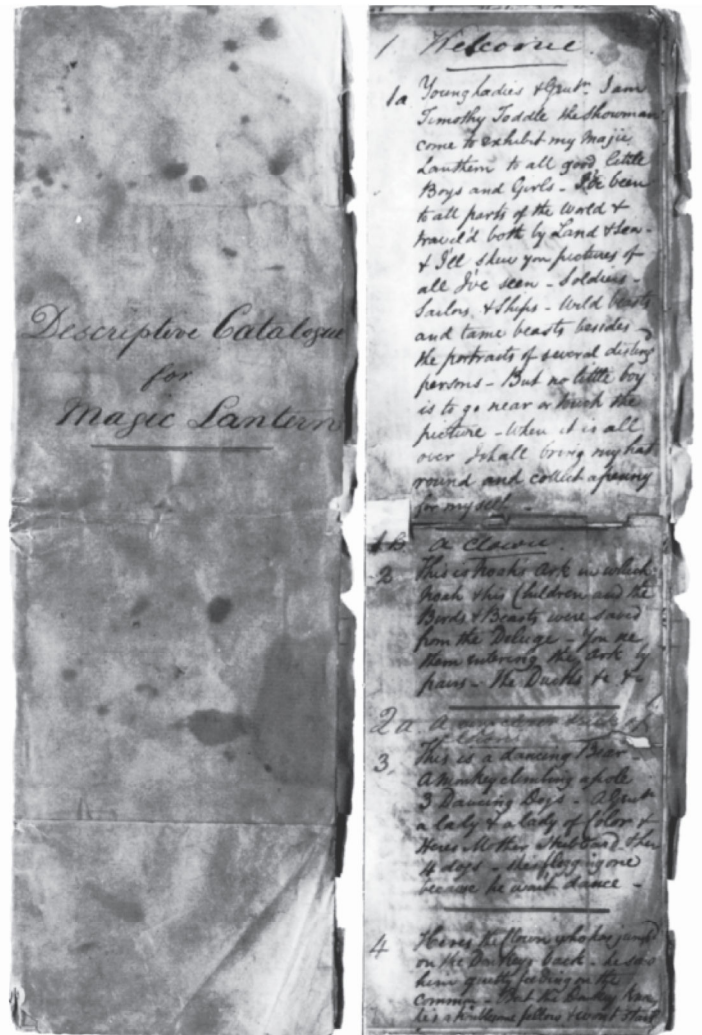
There must always have been additional text to accompany slides, whether they were shown for entertainment, education or other types of moral improvement. At the simplest level this additional text would just have been an improvised oral narrative, and the first 'readings' for slides were probably nothing more than handwritten notes to remind the showperson of his or her 'routine' or 'patter'. Even if such artefacts were common in the first place they are now very rare indeed, since each reading would have been practically unique – the notes would probably have been thrown away in any case, as a showperson developed the routine from show to show and year to year. One rare surviving example is the set of notes by one 'Timothy Toddle' (his very name suggests an itinerant showman) in the Society's collection, described and reproduced in *Magic Images* (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The Timothy Toddle script, though, is an outline for a whole show rather than a text for a single set of slides, which is perhaps how we would more usually understand the term 'reading' today. Perhaps in that respect it represents a typical approach to accompanying text from the days before 'lantern shows' became 'lantern lectures': while shows were still more fluid and less fact-based than they became in the later nineteenth century, their 'script' would have depended heavily on improvisation in any case.

The idea of formally publishing a text of the story or lecture to go with a set of slides originated at around the same time as the practice of publishing mass-produced slides began to take hold in the 1820s. So the practice of publishing readings always lay at the heart of the commercial slide trade: the basic idea of selling or hiring slides to amateurs was always that anyone could purchase or hire the knowledge and equipment to produce a show in just the same way as the 'person of the art' who had been practising the trade for years.

Among the earliest examples of this commercial reading publication, if not the first, were Philip Carpenter's book *Elements of Zoology*, published in 1823 as 'a companion to the new copper-plate sliders', and his *Companion to the Magic Lantern*, which appeared later the same year.<sup>2</sup> These illustrate one approach to reading publication, in which the slides and the reading were clearly produced at the same time and always intended to go with each other. There were two other approaches, both much in evidence as the nineteenth century wore on. Firstly, a slide set might be produced to 'illustrate' an existing popular story – sometimes a new pamphlet or reprint of the story would be published, but quite often slide suppliers would adapt or abridge an existing book and mark it for slides, rather than going to the expense of producing a separate publication. Secondly, a reading might be produced specifically to suit an existing set of images – there is some evidence of this in some of the comic verses published in Bamforth's *Short Lantern Readings* series, which seem clearly to have been written to fit a set of pictures, probably chromolithographic slide sets imported from Germany.<sup>3</sup>

From Carpenter's publication in 1823 until some time in the 1930s, readings were produced in just about every imaginable shape and format, and to accompany every type of subject. It's not easy to give a simple overall picture of such a diverse field, but to judge from the contents of the Magic Lantern Society's Slide Readings Library, the five most common types of publication were:

- Single-sheet leaflets packed in the box with a set of slides (particularly for children's slides like the *Primus Junior Lecturer* sets).
- Specifically-published paper-covered booklets, mostly about 8 inches (20cm) by 5 inches (13cm), containing a lecture, story or recitation, and typically of about sixteen or twenty pages. These



1. Timothy Toddle's 'Descriptive Catalogue for Magic Lantern', c. 1840s.

were mainly published by the slide producer to accompany a specific set and most probably released at the same time as the set itself. York & Son, for one, often combined two or three unrelated titles in a single booklet.

- Compilation books. Some of these were produced by the slide manufacturer, like the 300-page book *Readings in Prose and Verse with Supplementary Lecture Book Containing Lectures and Readings for the Magic Lantern*, covering the complete range of twelve-slide transfer sets produced by Theobald & Co. Others were published by a slide dealer, such as Alfred Pumphrey of Birmingham, covering their whole retail range of slides by different producers, and containing tens or even hundreds of separate slide titles. Several of the large slide producers (Bamforth, York, Tyler et al.) published regular series of compilations – Bamforth's *Short Lantern Readings* series ran to at least 36 issues, with one or two appearing each new lantern season between the late 1880s and around 1910.
- Books or pamphlets published independently of the slide set but adapted to it (usually by writing in slide numbers, deleting text, or

## NOTES

1. See 'A Magic Lantern Entertainment by Timothy Toddle', in Dennis Crompton, David Henry and Stephen Herbert (eds), *Magic Images: The Art of Hand-Painted and Photographic Lantern Slides* (London: Magic Lantern Society, 1990), 47–53, where the text of this 'reading' is reproduced in full.
2. Philip Carpenter, *Elements of Zoology: ... Intended for the Use of Young Persons, and as a Companion to the New Copper-Plate Sliders* (London: 1823), and *A Companion to the Magic Lantern: Part II, Containing a Description of the Subjects ...* (London: 1823). See also David Henry,

'Carpenter & Westley', *NMLJ*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (February 1984), 8–9.

3. For example, the comic verses by Robert Craven, nearly 150 of which were published by Bamforth in their *Short Lantern Readings* series between 1887 and 1896, tend to read as a sequential description of what can be seen in each slide, rather than poems written independently from the imagination. Nothing further is known of Craven or his work; he was presumably commissioned by Bamforth to produce verses to suit sets of pictures bought-in from elsewhere.



removing pages). Many Service of Song readings were adapted in this way, by adding handwritten slide numbers to a pamphlet published by one of the religious music publishers. In the most extreme cases, slide hirers like Riley Brothers would simply dismantle a book, staple the relevant pages into one of their own paper covers, and hire it out as a reading. Copyright law was different then!

- Handwritten or typed copies of other texts, produced by the slide owner or hirer. Some of these were clearly copied from another published source, but occasionally they presented an original or adapted version of the story written by the slide owner.

Few readings carried dates of publication – but often circumstantial details, like dates mentioned in the text or known issue dates of the related slide sets, allow us to make intelligent guesses at the dating of particular publications. So my current estimate is that, apart from the small number of earlier publications by Carpenter & Westley and others, published readings as we recognise them today probably began to appear in the early 1870s. The earliest clearly dateable item in the Slide Readings Library is a large compilation of readings published by Milliken and Lawley of London in 1871.<sup>4</sup> A number of similar compilation books from other dealers can be dated to the early years of the 1870s, and certainly by 1875 the practice of slide dealers publishing their own books of readings seems to have become pretty well established.

The reason they did this is perhaps obvious: the practice coincided with the growth in production of oil-lit lanterns for home use, and the reading was part of the 'home entertainment package' that a dealer would supply to a middle-class father: a lantern, some slides to show the family, and readings to allow him to appear like a professional showman or lecturer. Well, perhaps *almost* like a professional – there are plenty of suggestions that the quality of a performance delivered by just reading from the pamphlet was variable, like the set of 'Hints to Amateur Lecturers' which appeared inside the front of most readings published by York & Son. It appears that 'the trade' did not always have the greatest faith in the abilities of its customers.

At the other end of the historical spectrum, it is hard to say exactly when the practice of publishing readings finally died out. It was certainly drastically reduced, like the commercial production of slide sets in general, by the First World War. However, there are later examples: single-sheet readings continued to appear in the Primus boxes until the 1930s; the Ensign *Mickey Mouse* sets of the same decade had little accompanying booklets; and there were certainly series of religious titles published by Newton & Co. throughout the 1920s and possibly later. But the heyday of commercial publication of readings, like that of the slide manufacturing trade, lay in the decades between 1880 and the First World War, and after 1914 there were few firms publishing regularly.

## THE SLIDE READINGS LIBRARY

To modern collectors and showpeople, readings have always been rather a problem. Over the years, many slide sets became separated from the readings that may have accompanied them. The readings themselves were always cheaply printed on low-quality paper, and were simply not durable items, so that although slides might have had a slim chance of survival, their accompanying texts had an even less rosy outlook. This means that a modern collector who finds a slide set is, in many cases, none the wiser as to what it is about, and unless one chooses to write one's own story or recitation (which, of course, a number of people have done very successfully) it is difficult to show the slides in anything like the way in which they were originally intended.

There was an early attempt at compilation of a library of slide readings for use by Magic Lantern Society members in the late 1970s. This was in the form of a 'union catalogue' of readings held in individual collections, with the idea that circulation of the catalogue would allow members to request copies from their owners. Some work was done in assembling the catalogue, and copies of it still exist, but the scheme does not seem to have survived for very long

or expanded in its scope beyond a few enthusiastic contributors. The problem has always been that, by their very nature, private collections are private, and those of MLS members are dispersed widely around the world, and in spite of the generosity of many individuals in sharing copies of their readings there has been no way of knowing easily what might be available or how to get hold of it.

The idea of a central MLS collection of readings arose several times over the years, and came up again at the 1995 Society AGM as a question from the floor (I believe from Andrew Gill). It was met with the response that it would be a nice idea, but was probably too large and difficult a project to organise. Later that day I accosted Mike Smith in the bar of the Architectural Association and begged to differ. At the time I was working on Bill Douglas and Peter Jewell's collection, which I estimated at 50,000 items, and so the prospect of setting up a little collection of a few thousand readings didn't seem too daunting.

So I wrote a proposal for the Society committee, and they agreed, and the Slide Readings Library began to creep into existence. The idea was to keep things as simple, quick and flexible as possible – it seemed that the best way of doing this in the short term was to photocopy the original readings, and then distribute photocopies of those master copies. Certainly there were other options, like scanning the readings electronically to create a digital archive (a subject I shall return to shortly), but at the time the most important goal was to get a noticeable number of readings available as quickly as possible, so that something seemed to be happening.

In this, Mike Smith was more than generous, lending the whole of his collection of readings for copying. Along with several smaller contributions, this meant that by the end of 1996 it was possible to publish a listing of the Library stock, which contained no fewer than 875 titles. Through the continuing generosity of Society members, the Library has continued to grow steadily – nearly 50 individuals or institutions have so far allowed their readings to be included. In several recent years the Library's stock of readings has increased by roughly 10 per cent per year, and it now stands at just below 2,400. This is now almost certainly the largest collection of these texts in the world.

The reading copies themselves were stored in plastic sleeves in ring binders, identified by serial number in the order the copies

2. The Slide Readings Library: (possibly) 'the world's largest collection of readings stored in a single spare bedroom'.



4. In this case the book happens to include a clear reference to a date of issue, but there is also circumstantial evidence in its contents, including readings for slides on the Siege of Paris and the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1).



were added to the Library (Fig. 2). In the short term the important thing was to keep the process of supplying copies as simple and low-tech as possible: when an order for copies was received, the required master copies were found by number, photocopied, and returned to the ring binders, while the copies were parcelled up and taken to the post office. The finances were deliberately kept simple, too: a flat rate of 10p per sheet, with a minimum order of £3.00, including copying and postage to any part of the world. This structure has proved more than equal to the costs and organisation of the Library over the nine years of its existence.

But in the meantime, the costs of scanning have come down, and the amount of information that can be stored on the average computer has increased massively compared with 1995. So in the course of 2001, I bought myself a scanner and set to work. The 500 or so most recently added titles have been directly scanned, and so exist only as electronic copies. I have also set to the task of working through the earlier readings as time allows, with the result that over two-thirds of the titles have now been scanned. The motive for this was originally conservation: photocopies do not last forever, and in any case such a large collection as this is now irreplaceable, so it was important to find some way of 'backing it up'. But in the longer term, a scanned library opens up other possibilities for making the readings available – they can still be printed and supplied as paper copies, but it should also be possible to supply electronic copies on CD-ROM or whatever technology replaces that medium.

The other technological development in recent years has been to put the catalogue of readings on the Society web pages. As the Library grew, producing a paper catalogue for every member became less and less economic – the last time it was printed in 1999 it cost something like £800 to produce a 32-page booklet, and it would now run to 54 pages, even in the limited format of number, title, number of pages and slide maker which was circulated then.

From the start, the readings have been catalogued in a database to help with managing the collection, and with a bit of elementary programming work it has been possible to make this database produce web pages following the same format as the previous printed lists. However, the database also recorded rather more detail about each reading than had been published in the printed listings – details like authors, publishers, printers, dates of publication, language, and so on. In 2004 it was finally possible to get some more of this data into the web catalogue: it wouldn't be viable for the Society to produce this on paper, but the web opens up lots of possibilities for extra information in this way.

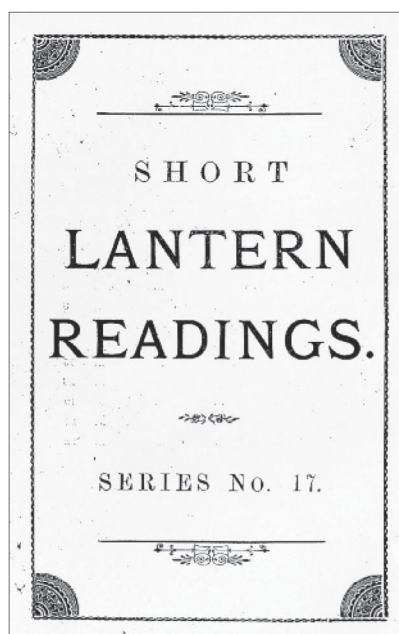
It has to be said that within that total of 2,400 titles there is a small proportion of duplication, and a smaller proportion of texts that may not have been slide readings at all, though they were identified as such in the collections of the Society members who lent them for copying. There is also a certain amount of double-counting: if a reading is a compilation of several titles, the Library usually includes both the whole compilation and all the individual titles from it as separate items – that way we have a record of the original format, but there is no need to order the whole compilation to get a copy of just one title from it.

The duplication arises mainly because of different printings of the same title – while that may appear a bit strange at times (there are ten *Robinson Crusoes*, including a French version, and eight *Jessica's First Prayers*, which is enough for anyone) I decided to include duplicates in this way because it may help to give a history of an individual text. For all I know, there may be someone working on a special study of *Jessica's First Prayer* (!), in which case such a number of different versions would be a valuable resource. Including texts which aren't obviously marked as slide readings works in much the same way: they may not be marked as readings, but we don't *know* they weren't slide readings, and we don't know that they're not the last surviving copy of a very rare text which someone somewhere is looking for. So the Library's basic collecting policy is 'everything goes in'. Apart from its importance for the study and use of lantern slides, the Readings Library is also now a significant research resource for areas like the history of the temperance movement, the history of evangelism, the history of education, and so on. I don't want to do that work myself, but somebody, somewhere, one day, may well want to.

Working with a collection like this begins to give an idea (and it

may never be more than an idea) of an answer to an impossible, but frequently asked, question: how many readings were there and how many still exist? It's impossible to give an exact answer: it depends what 'counts' as a reading (do all the books that were made into slide sets but never published as separate readings count? do different editions and printings count as separate items? what about languages other than English? and so on). However, after nine years of working with lists of slides and lists of readings, my guesses are that there were perhaps seven or eight thousand readings or equivalent texts published at one time or another in the UK, and it's likely that less than half of them are still in existence.

So we might expect to find a few hundred more titles to add to the Slide Readings Library, and beyond that point, expansion of the Library – or at least, expansion of the English part of it – might be expected to slow down. However, there is one important area not yet represented properly in the Library, namely readings in languages other than English. At the time of writing the Library stock consists of 2,305 titles in English, 50 in German, 21 in Dutch, 13 in French, 2 in Italian and 1 in Romanian. It would be surprising if many more titles came to light in Romanian (though they would be welcome!), but the rich traditions of the lantern in the other European countries – and, of course, in the United States and other parts of the English-speaking world – ought to mean that there are still many readings to find. Our Society is an international one, and the history of the lantern has always been an international one, and the Slide Readings Library should reflect that more completely than it does at the moment.



3. Short Lantern Readings Series No. 17 (Bamforth, c.1893). Slide Readings Library item 90240, with detail of cover decoration.

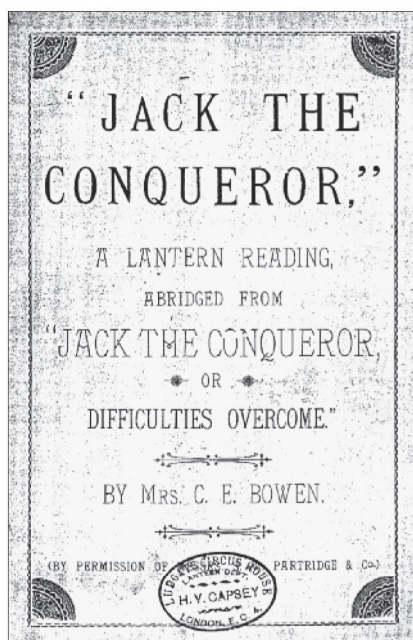


### READINGS AS A RESEARCH TOOL

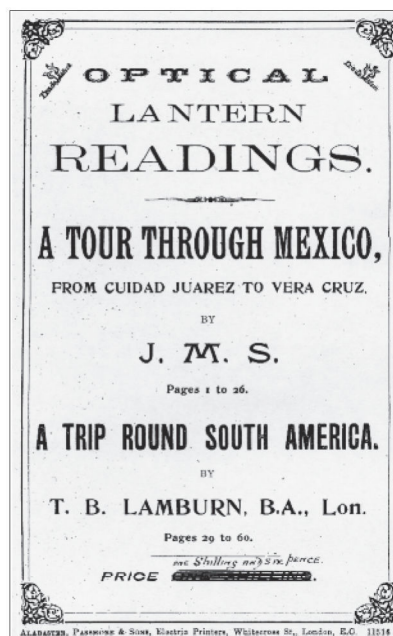
Careful examination of the details of a reading can help us to glean more information about the lantern slide business in general. My own interest and research is tending more and more towards an attempt to work out what I've sometimes called 'the big map' of the slide trade – some attempt at listing what was produced by whom, where and when. Without some of that knowledge, we can't really understand the slides, lanterns and readings in their original contexts, because we don't know exactly what those contexts were.

Relatively few readings have printed publication details, in the way that 'proper' books usually have the name of the publisher, their address, a date of publication, and so on. This may partly be because the readings were not seen as publications in their own right – their main reason for existence was as an accessory to a slide set, which was the main object of interest for the people buying and selling it. But the lack of details may also have been because the publishers of readings were often wholesalers who allowed their products to be sold-on by retailers and others under their own labels. Bamforth, for one, never identified themselves on their readings, though a careful examination can turn up some clues to help identification. For example, the reading compilation *Short Lantern Readings Series No.17* (Fig. 3) was definitely published





4. C.E. Bowen, *Jack the Conqueror* (Bamforth, c.1893). SRL item 91695, with detail of cover decoration.



5. *A Tour Through Mexico* (York & Son, n.d.), SRL item 90000, and detail of 'snake' trademark.

by Bamforth – all the compilations in this series are listed clearly in the Bamforth catalogue, and all the slide titles they contain are by Bamforth.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the reading *Jack the Conqueror* (Fig. 4) has no publisher's markings, but since its cover decoration is identical to the *Short Lantern Readings* cover, it is reasonable to assume that they were both produced by the same publisher – or, at least, by the same printer, although Bamforth readings give no credit to the printer either. We might also conclude that they were printed at around the same time – c.1893 – since these cover decorations vary from issue to issue of the *Short Lantern Readings* series, and this is borne out by the positions of the relevant slide sets in the Bamforth and Riley catalogues.

York & Son, unlike Bamforth, proudly stamped their identity on the cover of their readings – at least they did on those published after they adopted their familiar 'snake' device as a trademark in 1890 (Fig. 5). So any reading with a snake on the cover must have been published in 1890 or later – though one has to be careful, because often York readings are marked as 'Second Edition', 'Third Edition' and so on, and a trademarked copy may well be a later reprint of a reading that was first published before 1890. Other reliable indicators of a York publication are the regular inclusion of 'Hints to Amateur Lecturers' in the front pages and the firm's habit of marking the slide changing points in the reading with '[B]', although a few other publishers also adopted this latter practice.

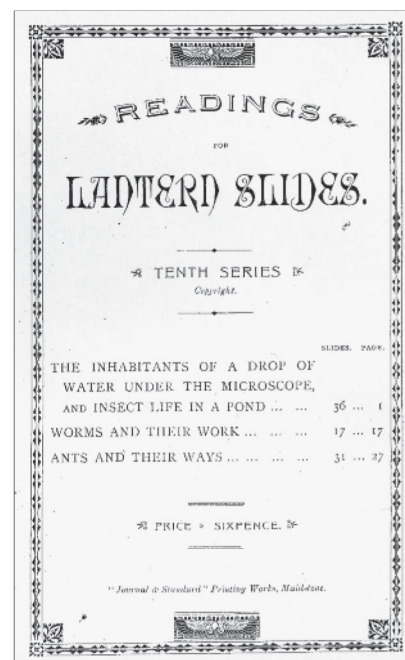
York readings usually credit the firm that printed them, and this may give us another way into understanding the history of their publications. With a few exceptions, most York readings were printed by either J. Tamblyn of Ladbroke Grove, west London, or by Alabaster, Passmore & Sons of various addresses in the Hatton Garden or Barbican area of central London. It is not yet clear which of these printers first had dealings with York, or whether they overlapped (although that seems a little unlikely). But Tamblyn's premises are very close to York's address in Notting Hill Gate, and Alabaster Passmore operated not far from Fleet Street, where Newton & Co. (who took over the York business in the early 1910s) were based. So one possible conclusion might be that the York readings printed by Tamblyn are earlier, while York were still independent, and the Alabaster Passmore ones were printed after the takeover by Newton – in which case a lot of the surviving readings are slightly newer than we might imagine. To complicate matters further, Alabaster Passmore traded from at least two

different addresses – Fann Street and Whitecross Street – and on some examples gave their address as 'London and Maidstone'.

Of course it should not take too much work with London street directories to work out which years which company spent at which address, and that would help to confirm some dates for slide sets; for the time being that remains 'work not in progress'. There are certainly other ways of dating York slide sets – catalogue entries, advertisements and (especially) the Stationer's Hall copyright records now in the British Public Record Office give a more precise view – but in spite of David Henry's sterling work on the subject we still don't know everything about York's working practices or company history, and the ways they published readings may have things to tell us in conjunction with other data.<sup>6</sup> Alabaster Passmore, incidentally, were still in business in Maidstone, Kent, in the 1960s, printing (among other things) cinema posters.

In any case, there are plenty of other slide manufacturers for whom we don't have the same kind of supporting information as we do for York, and the detail contained in readings can offer some useful evidence, circumstantial though it may be. For instance, a number of the publishers of reading pamphlets (York, Riley, G.W. Wilson and several others as yet unidentified) included lists advertising other slide titles by the same maker. These would generally appear in the endpapers or on the back cover of the reading pamphlet – in York's case there were usually three pages of titles in tiny print, while Wilson included a separately-printed catalogue leaflet pasted inside the back cover.

This information, in itself not particularly exciting reading, comes into its own when used in combination with other fragments. For example, one early addition to the Slide Readings Library was an unidentified compilation pamphlet containing items with the wonderful titles *The Inhabitants of a Drop of Water*, *Worms and Their Work* and *Ants and Their Ways* and



6. *Readings for Lantern Slides: Tenth Series* (Walter Tylor, c.1893), SRL item 90816.

5. The cumulative Bamforth catalogue *Detailed Catalogue of Photographic Lantern Slides, Life Models &c.* (Holmfirth, Yorkshire: James Bamforth, c.1908) is in the collection of Kirklees Cultural Services, with a copy held in the MLS Library. The series of 36 issues of *Short Lantern Readings* compilations is listed in its front pages, and can be dated by reference to the slide titles it contains, which in turn can be dated by reference to the pattern of yearly additions to the catalogue.

6. See David Henry, 'York & Son' Parts 1 and 2, NMLJ, Vol. 3 No. 1 (February 1984), 12–17 and Vol. 3 No. 2 (December 1984), 13–18.





7. Entry in Riley Brothers' slide hire catalogue for Tyler slide set.

Their Ways (Fig. 6) The readings themselves are rather dull lecture texts and don't entirely live up to the semi-exotic promise of their titles. But, from a reading detective's point of view, their most interesting feature is that they were published as the tenth series of somebody's regular publication entitled Readings for Lantern Slides.

All these titles also appear in Riley Brothers' catalogue of slides for hire (Fig. 7) where, following Riley's system of allocating code letters to slide producers, they are credited to make 'N'.<sup>7</sup> So I dutifully marked them in the Slide Readings Library catalogue as by 'Maker N', in the vague hope that some day I might find out who that was. No other identification appears on the reading, though the printer is credited as the Journal & Standard Printing Works of Maidstone, Kent – I assume this is a coincidence, but I wonder why Maidstone was such a centre for the printing of slide readings?

The inside cover of the compilation of worm and ant readings carries a list of other compilation titles in the same series (Fig. 8), with lists of the slide sets for each one, and this allowed me to identify quite a number of other readings and slide sets as also having been produced by 'Maker N'. All that was needed, then, was to be able to connect just one of those slide sets to an identifiable maker. So a couple of years later it was a pleasant surprise, while copying readings for the Library from another member's extensive collection, to come upon another compilation reading (Fig. 9) which describes itself clearly as Series Two of *Walter Tyler's Readings for Lantern Slides*. The content of this booklet matches exactly with that of Series Two of the 'Maker N' list.

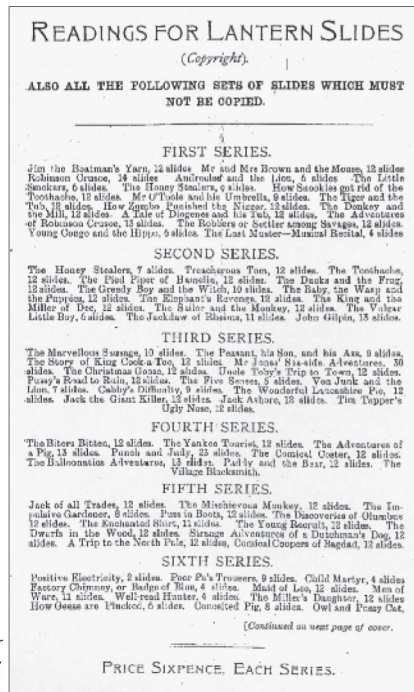
Therefore, 'Maker N' was beyond reasonable doubt Walter Tyler of Waterloo, London, and I could identify everything in the Maker N list, and everything else in the Riley catalogue marked as produced by Maker N, as most likely to have been produced by Tyler. Also, assuming that the issues of *Readings for Lantern Slides* were produced in numerical order, by cross-referring them to their position in the Riley catalogue (where the slide sets were numbered in chronological order) it will be possible to begin

7. Catalogue of Optical Lantern Slides Published by Riley Brothers (Bradford, Yorkshire: Riley Brothers, n.d. [1905]), 125. I am most grateful to John Finney and John Jones for allowing me access to copies of this wonderful source of information.

making some estimates of the years in which Walter Tyler's slide sets were produced.

There is still a long way to go in exploring all the information of this kind buried in the Society's Readings Library – 'Maker E' is the next major puzzle, to say nothing of the rest of the alphabet. The task of cross-referring the Library to all the information contained in slide makers' and hirers' catalogues, not to mention present-day slide collections and other resources, is a potentially endless one. But as a research source for this kind of detective work, the Slide Readings Library is a dream come true. So I should finish by expressing a researcher's thanks to the Magic Lantern Society for taking the opportunity to assemble this unique collection, to everyone who has been so generous in providing copies for the Library, and to everyone who has supported it over the past nine years by ordering copies and thus paying for more copies to be made. The Readings Library is definitely greater than the sum of its 2,400 parts!

**Richard CRANGLE** is Editor of the *New Magic Lantern Journal* and a committee member of the Magic Lantern Society. This article is based on a talk given at the Society meeting in Girona, Spain, in May 2002



8. Slide set listing on inside cover of Readings for Lantern Slides: Tenth Series.

9. Walter Tyler's Readings for Lantern Slides: Second Series (Walter Tyler, c.1891), SRL item 91569.

