

The Magic Lantern

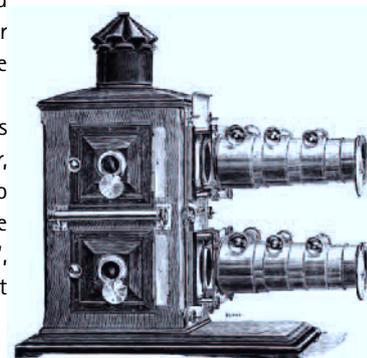
WILLIAM STEWART AND THE MAGIC LANTERN MISSION

Nicholas Hiley

In March 2015 I came across a biunial at a local auction in England (Fig. 1). A little research established that it was made by John Wrench and Son, and also provided a date, as the telescopic 'triple rack' front had been patented by Alfred Wrench in October 1887, and this design first appeared in catalogues in the following year.¹

Made from mahogany and rosewood, brass and Russian iron, measuring 26 inches tall and 30 inches long, this was an impressive limelight lantern, designed not only to be functional but also to create an impact on an audience. This was reflected in its price, which was over £54 in 1888, and remained at that level for twenty years.² Whoever originally owned this biunial clearly had ambitions as a lanternist, for the rear gas taps were chosen to permit future upgrading to a triunial.³

When I bought the lantern I was surprised to find a note from the seller, saying that it had originally belonged 'to my great grandfather who started the magic lantern mission in Bristol in 1885', adding that their grandmother and great



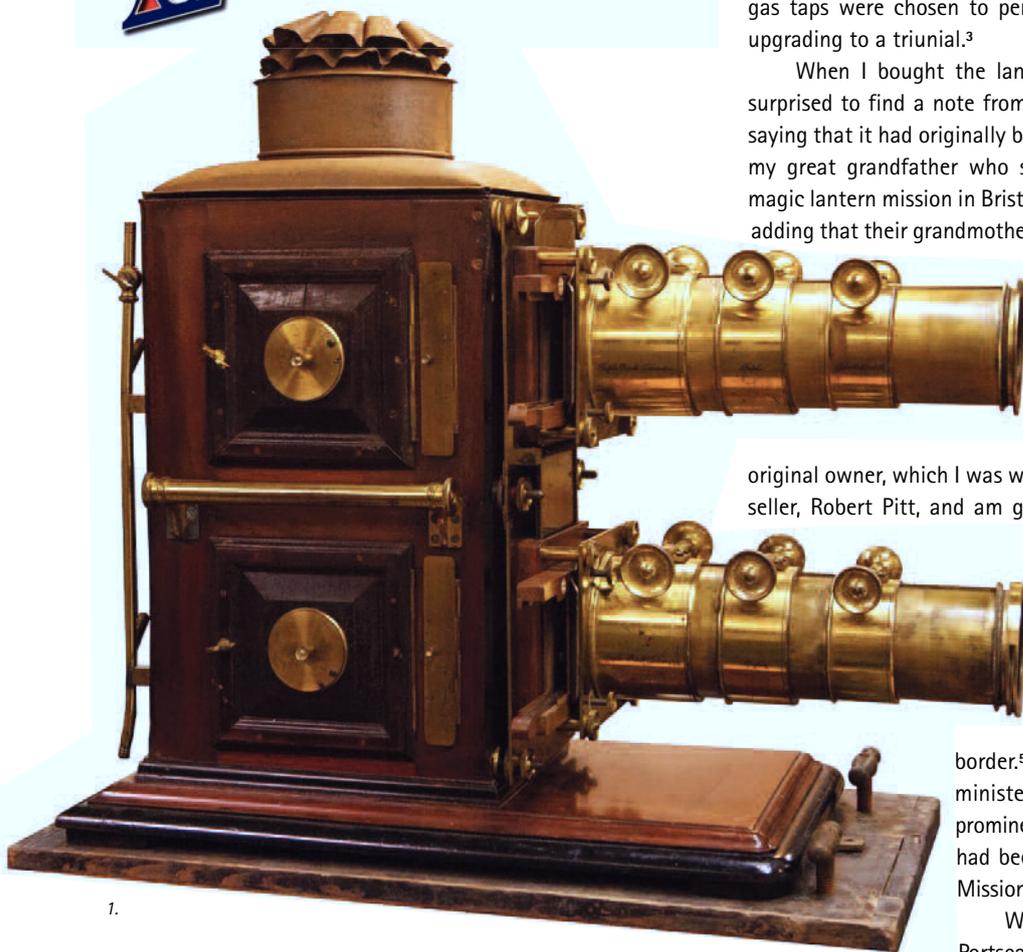
206.—The Triple Rack (WHOLESALE FIRM).

2. An illustration from 1888⁴

aunts 'played piano and operated the lantern'. Moreover, the family still had papers and cuttings relating to the original owner, which I was welcome to see. I immediately contacted the seller, Robert Pitt, and am grateful for his support in researching the history of this lantern.

The original owner was William Stewart, a dedicated lanternist who deserves to be reinstated in the history of the magic lantern. Stewart was born in 1854 in the manse house in Norham, in Northumberland, right on the Scottish border.⁵ His father was a Scottish Presbyterian minister, and his English mother came from a prominent family of Baptist preachers, one of whom had been instrumental in establishing the Baptist Missionary Society.⁶

When Stewart was four the family moved to Portsea, where his father oversaw the building of Portsmouth's new Presbyterian Church.⁷ As a teenager Stewart went into



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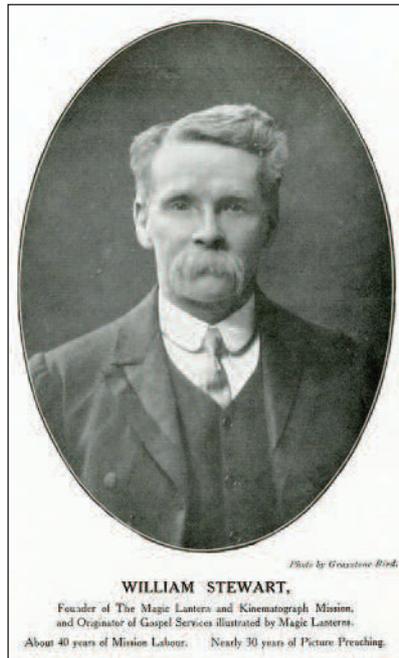
1. Walter D. Welford and Henry Sturmeijer *The 'Indispensable' Handbook to the Optical Lantern* (Iliffe & Son, London, 1888), pp.94–5, 162. See also the *Wrench Illustrated Catalogue of Magic, Dissolving View & Optical Lanterns...Season 1888-9* on Henc de Roo's website luikerwaal.com.
2. Welford and Sturmeijer *The 'Indispensable' Handbook*, pp.94–5: *The 'Wrench' Illustrated Catalogue 1908-9* (John Wrench & Son, London, 1908), p.95.
3. This style of gas supply can be seen on the triunial version, an example of which survives in the Cinémathèque Française (inventory no.AP-98-2000): Welford and Sturmeijer *The 'Indispensable' Handbook*, p.123.
4. Welford and Sturmeijer *The 'Indispensable' Handbook*, pp.94–5.
5. *Western Daily Press*, 7 March 1914, p.11 col.4, 'Death of Mr William Stewart / Founder of the Lantern Mission'.
6. Stewart album, f.92, cutting 'Notes by a Rambler', *Bristol Evening News*, 1 December 1906.
7. *Post Office Directory of Northumberland and Durham* (Kelly and Co., London, 1858), p.196: *History, Gazetteer, and Directory of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight* (William White, Sheffield, 1859), p.273: 1861 census entry for 5 Eton Villa, Wish Lane, Portsea.

(continued on page 3)

banking, and when his father died in 1870 he was working at the Southsea branch of the National Provincial Bank, and doing missionary work for the temperance Blue Ribbon Army in his spare time.⁸

Stewart became a keen lanternist. He seems to have had a pair of lanterns with paraffin burners,⁹ and in March 1877 he projected the 'dissolving views' for a Service of Song at the Presbyterian Church, entitled *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The accompanist at the piano was the eighteen-year old Hannah McDonald, and they clearly worked well together, for two years later they were married.¹⁰ They lived together in Portsea, where, in his spare time from the National Provincial Bank, Stewart remained closely involved with the temperance movement.¹¹ He acted as an 'honorary missionary' of the Blue Ribbon Union, and in 1880 became secretary of the newly formed Portsmouth Presbyterian Teetotal Association.¹²

Stewart remained passionate about the magic lantern and in 1885, by his own account, he formed the 'Magic Lantern Mission' in Portsea.¹³ Stewart was described as 'a man of broad religious views and sympathies', and the MLM was deliberately non-sectarian.¹⁴ Its aim was to use the magic lantern to bring the gospel to the working classes, for, as Stewart later acknowledged, he had been impressed 'by the way in which agricultural labourers whiled away their time

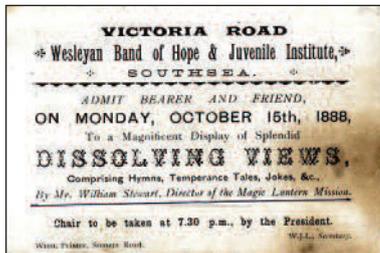


who did not attend church or chapel.¹⁹ As his later publicity declared, he had been 'the pioneer in using the Magic Lantern for preaching the Gospel, and that on the Sabbath day; also the first to hold [a] series of Sunday Evening Services for the People, with Lantern illustrations.'²⁰ Stewart recalled facing criticism 'in regard to the propriety of showing pictures at Gospel services', but he was careful to hold his missions at different times from church services, so as not to conflict. As the number of conversions increased, so did his confidence.²¹

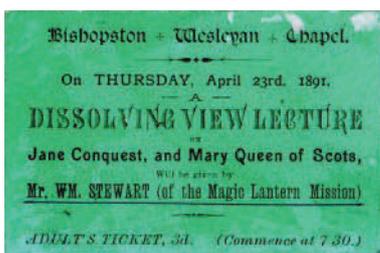
Stewart was still attempting to run the MLM on his bank clerk's wages, and by November 1888, with a wife and three children to support, he had gone as far as he could. Acknowledging that the MLM was now beyond his 'financial grasp', he appealed for help to buy new slides.²² However, in the following month Stewart took what must have been a

better-paid job at the Bristol branch of the National Provincial Bank, and moved his family across country. He also took the MLM, recalling that he reached Bristol on 21 December 1888, and gave his first lantern lecture only five days later.²³

Once again Stewart took no salary for this lantern work, which was carried out 'after a hard day's work at the bank counter'.²⁵ In Bristol, a colleague recalled, he would 'rush away after business hours, to conduct Lantern Gospel Mission Services in the village Churches'.²⁶ On 23 April 1891, for example, the MLM gave a dissolving view entertainment to a large audience at the Bishopston Wesleyan Band of Hope. According to the local paper, 'Mr Stewart delighted the audience with his racy and sketchy style, and his graphic description of the various views shown on the screen by Mrs Stewart'.²⁷ They showed *Jane Conquest* and *Mary Queen of Scots* to an audience of about 250, and, as the Stewarts gave their services free, the lecture, minus the cost of printing tickets, etc', raised just over £1 for the church.²⁸



4. Complimentary ticket for one of Stewart's lantern shows in Southsea¹⁶



5. One of the printed tickets for Stewart's 23 April 1891 show²⁴



6. Stewart album, handbill for the 6 March 1892 show

- Hampshire Advertiser, 14 December 1870, p.2 col.2, 'Births, Marriages, and Deaths': Stewart album, f.84, cutting 'The Lantern and the Gospel', *The Christian*, 6 November 1902; f.92, cutting 'Notes by a Rambler', *Bristol Evening News*, 1 December 1906.
- Stewart album, f.95, cutting 'Notes by a Rambler', *Bristol Evening News*, 13 February 1909.
- Stewart album, poster headed 'English Presbyterian Church', 1877.
- Stewart album, f.84, cutting 'The Lantern and the Gospel', *The Christian*, 6 November 1902.
- Stewart album, f.40, cutting headed 'Presbyterian Teetotal Association' from *Hampshire Post*, c.1880; f.71, cutting 'The Magic Lantern Mission', *The Presbyterian*, 1 September 1893; 1881 census for Holsworthy House, Margate Road, Portsea.
- Stewart album, f.67, cutting 'Magic Lantern Mission', *Bristol Mercury*, 7 November 1893; f.71, cutting 'The Magic Lantern Mission', *The Presbyterian*, 1 September 1893. No independent evidence has been found for the Mission's foundation in 1885, but Stewart was calling himself 'Director of the Magic Lantern Mission' by 1888: Stewart album, f.51, attached ticket.
- 'Magic Lantern Mission', *Western Daily Press*, 18 March 1892, 6/37; 'Death of Mr William Stewart / Founder of the Lantern Mission', March 1914, 11/4.
- Stewart album, f.71, cutting 'The Magic Lantern Mission', *The Presbyterian*, 1 September 1893; f.82, cutting 'Magic Lantern Mission', *The Presbyterian*, 14 June 1900.
- Stewart album, f.51, attached ticket; unnumbered page, 'Band of Hope Meeting', *Evening News* [Bristol], 16 October 1888.
- Stewart album, cutting 'The Magic Lantern Mission', *The Christian*, 31 August 1893.
- 'Passiontide Services with Magic Lantern, etc', *Church Times*, 26 March 1886, 235/1-3.
- Stewart album, f.75, cutting from *Western Daily Press*, 2 March 1899.
- Stewart album, publicity card for 'The Magic Lantern Mission', c.1891.
- Stewart album, f.84, cutting 'The Lantern and the Gospel', *The Christian*, 6 November 1902; f.95, cutting 'Notes by a Rambler', *Bristol Evening News*, 13 February 1909.
- Stewart album, unnumbered sheet, 'The Magic-Lantern Mission', *The Christian*, 2 November 1888.
- Stewart album, cutting 'The Magic Lantern Mission', *The Christian*, 31 August 1893; f.79, cutting 'Local Notes', *Western Daily Press*, 20 September 1899; f.92, cutting 'Notes by a Rambler', *Bristol Evening News*, 1 December 1906.
- Stewart album, f.51, attached ticket.
- 'Death of Mr William Stewart / Founder of the Lantern Mission', *Western Daily Press*, 7 March 1914, 11/4.
- Stewart album, loose cutting of J.J. Abington "'In Memoriam" - Mr Wm. Stewart', *Bristol Baptist Itinerant Society's Monthly*, April 1914.
- 'Bishopston Wesleyan Band of Hope', *Western Daily Press*, 25 April 1891, 3/6.
- Stewart album, f.70, cutting 'Bishopston Band of Hope', *Bristol King Street Circuit Messenger*, May 1891.

The MLM seems now to have been using a double lantern with gas burners,²⁹ and it was increasingly associated with big events, such as the month-long mission which it mounted in March 1892 at the Rose Street Wesleyan Chapel. This began on Sunday 6 March 1892, with a 'Magic Lantern Gospel Service' at which Stewart presented *The Life of Joseph*, the lantern being operated by his wife 'with her usual ability and skill'.³⁰ The following Sunday they returned for a similar show based around the Service of Song *The Two Ways*.³¹

For the show on Sunday 21 March 1892 it seems that Stewart adopted a novel approach, and before the start:

Mr Stewart, assisted by Mr W.H. Bridgman (MLM secretary), promenaded the streets in the vicinity of the chapel with their lanterns, throwing pictures on the walls of available places, giving one and all a very cordial invitation, which, to judge by the audience, was generally accepted.

This time they showed the Life Model service of song *Poor Mike: The Story of a Waif*, with Stewart reading, his wife operating the lantern, and the People's Bethel Mission Choir singing. Stewart also gave 'one of his Dickens's entertainments, beautifully illustrated'.³² On Sunday 27 March 1892 the MLM gave its final show, before which the Wellington Road Mission Band paraded the streets. The Chapel was packed to overflowing when Stewart presented *The Prodigal Son*, projected by Hannah and Bridgman. The Mission Band also performed, and Hannah played the organ.³³

This scale of operations put a strain on Stewart's finances. For one winter, the cost of running the MLM rose to more than £60.³⁴ Many of those attracted to its shows were poor, and Stewart acknowledged that, because of this, none of its missions could cover their expenses from admissions or collections alone.³⁵ He realised that the organisation needed to be wider, and on 16 March 1892 an inter-denominational meeting of interested parties took place at Short's Coffee Tavern, High Street, Bristol, and elected an organising committee for the following year. The new President was the Dean of Bristol.³⁶

The MLM had a new lease of life, and in September 1893 it announced its intention of raising money to extend its operations.³⁸ It also invested in a new biunial, and in October 1893 the first references appear to this new 'powerful limelight lantern'.³⁹ It was said to be 'an exceptionally good one',⁴⁰ and it was clearly the biunial that Stewart would use for the rest of his career, and which his family would keep for a century after his death. The problem was that, before embarking on any new schemes, the MLM had to pay for this new biunial through a series of fundraising events.

On 17 October 1893 the MLM thus planned to use its 'new and powerful patent Oxy-Hydro Lantern' (Fig. 8) in the first of a series of fundraising 'Popular Lectures' at the YMCA Hall in Bristol, with admission of 6d and 1s. However, the lecture had to be cancelled through illness, and the cost of tickets and publicity meant that the MLM lost heavily.⁴¹ The second 'Popular Entertainment' was scheduled for 6 November 1893, when Stewart projected seventy-five slides for a lecture on 'Stirring Naval Yarns' at the Victoria Rooms. Seats were 1s, 2s, and 3s, but this event also failed to raise money. A third fundraising lecture then brought only 11d, leaving the MLM still £40 in debt. Stewart issued 'an urgent circular appeal for help',⁴² and on 25 January 1894 he gave one of his own lectures on Scotland at the Broadmead Baptist Chapel Schools, 'in aid of the fund for the payment of the cost of the lantern'.⁴³

Despite its high cost, the new limelight biunial did allow the MLM to give new types of show, including a series of Sunday-night 'open-air lantern Gospel services'.⁴⁴ On 30 August 1894 the MLM was thus engaged to give an open-air Temperance lecture 'upon the great ash heap in Mina Road', Bristol. It was well attended, for a crowd gathered as soon as Stewart began to erect his 'large screen'. He showed Temperance slides 'resented to the Mission by Messrs J.S. Fry and Sons', and the projected images, for which he provided 'racy and pungent' comments, were said to be

about eighteen feet square.⁴⁵ On 13 September 1894 Stewart again used 'the large and powerful lanterns of the society' to give an open-air lecture in St Andrew's Park,⁴⁶ where the hour-and-a-half show included 'Scottish and Irish lake scenery, readings from Dickens, the life of Mary Queen of Scots, Fry's cocoa versus beer, a set of funny dogs, &c'. Those attending were asked to contribute a penny each towards the MLM funds.⁴⁷

The new lantern enabled the Stewarts to extend the work of the MLM, to include not only



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7. Tickets for Stewart's lectures c.1893³⁷



9. Ticket for one of Stewart's shows. Stewart album, f.67

29. Stewart album, f.95, cutting 'Notes by a Rambler', *Bristol Evening News*, 13 February 1909.
30. 'Rose Street Wesleyan Chapel', *Western Daily Press*, 9 March 1892, 6/7; Stewart album, f.70, cutting 'Rose Street Wesleyan Chapel', *Bristol Mercury*, 9 March 1892.
31. Stewart album, handbill for a 'Magic Lantern Gospel Service'; f.64, cutting 'Rose Street Wesleyan Chapel', *Western Daily Press*, 16 March 1892.
32. Rose Street Wesleyan Chapel', *Bristol Mercury*, 28 March 1892, 6/4.
33. Stewart album, unnumbered page with cutting 'Rose Street Wesleyan Chapel', *Bristol Mercury*, 31 March 1892.
34. Stewart album, f.84, cutting 'The Lantern and the Gospel', *The Christian*, 6 November 1902.
35. Stewart album, f.90, cutting 'The Magic Lantern Mission', *The Christian*, 4 January 1906; f.92, cutting 'Notes by a Rambler', *Bristol Evening News*, 1 December 1906.
36. 'Magic Lantern Mission', *Western Daily Press*, 18 March 1892, 6/3.
37. Stewart album, unnumbered page with tickets pasted in.
38. Stewart album, f.71, cutting 'The Magic Lantern Mission', *The Presbyterian*, 1 September 1893.
39. *Western Daily Press*, 14 October 1893, p.6 col.1 [unheaded para]; 'The Magic Lantern Mission', *Western Daily Press*, 28 October 1893, 4/1; 'Lecture on Vaccination', 31 January 1894, 5/6.
40. 'Death of Mr William Stewart / Founder of the Lantern Mission', *Western Daily Press*, 7 March 1914, 11/4.
41. Stewart album, ff.66-7, various cuttings.
42. Stewart album, f.71, cutting 'The Magic Lantern Mission', *The Bristol Christian Leader*, 15 January 1894.
43. 'Magic Lantern Mission', *Western Daily Press*, 25 January 1894, 5/7.
44. Stewart album, f.72, cutting 'News in Brief', *Bristol Christian Leader*, 15 November 1894.
45. Stewart album, f.64, cutting 'The Magic Lantern Mission', *Bristol Mercury*, 4 September 1894; f.65, cutting 'The Magic Lantern Mission', *Western Daily Press*, 1 September 1894; f.83, cutting from *Bristol Mercury*, 1 November 1900.
46. Stewart album, f. 65, cutting 'Magic Lantern Mission', *Western Daily Press*, 15 September 1894.
47. Stewart album, f.66, undated cutting 'Magic Lantern Mission', *Bristol Mercury*.

Sunday open-air shows and lectures – called 'dioramas' – in the YMCA Hall, (Fig. 9) but also weekday meetings in Bristol and the surrounding villages.⁴⁸ These village lantern shows involved a lot of work, but the proceeds were still small. In 1895, for example, William and Hannah gave a show to more than fifty children at a Sunday School treat in Filton, outside Bristol. According to the organisers:

Mr and Mrs Stewart came over and gave an entertainment, and we spent a most enjoyable evening. It was exceedingly kind of them to come to little Filton, free of charge, and walk back to Bristol between nine and ten at night, rather than shorten the programme and go by train. We charged 2d to outsiders, and took 2s 7½ d at the door; that paid for fetching and returning the lantern.⁴⁹

In June 1895 the Mission was still £15 in debt,⁵⁰ and transferred its headquarters from the YMCA Hall to the Chelsea Road Mission Hall, Lower Easton. This building was rather dilapidated, so in March 1899 the MLM announced that it would raise £3,000 by gift and subscription for 'a new hall ... the first building erected in the world for holding Lantern Gospel services'.⁵¹ This was a bold ambition, but sadly the outbreak of the Boer War, at the start of the following lantern season in October 1899, produced many competing appeals for money, and the Mission's campaign failed. One mailing to a thousand known philanthropists thus cost £4 3s 4d in stamps alone, but raised just 14s.⁵² The MLM appealed for £600 or £700 to continue its work,⁵³ and in October 1900 again moved its operations, to the Vestry Hall, Pennywell Road.⁵⁴

The MLM advertised for '50 Sopranos, Altos, Tenors, and Basses' to make up a Magic Lantern Voluntary Mission Choir,⁵⁵ but the biennial, operated by Hannah and her children William, Janet, and Winnie, remained the basis of the MLM's work.⁵⁶ In September 1905 Stewart publicly thanked 'our lantern manipulators and operators who for more than twenty years, in all sorts of weather, in all kinds of places, by summer and winter, in the open air, in churches, chapels, halls, schools, sheds, and in barns, have done valiant service for their King, and have helped to win many souls for their hire'.⁵⁷

But lantern shows were now facing a new challenge from moving pictures, and for the 1906 season the MLM invested in a film projector. Stewart believed that they also needed 6,000 feet of film,⁵⁸ which at 6d a foot would cost £150, but he argued that 'the pictures are such a valuable asset in connection with the services that ... the heavy expenditure is justified'.⁵⁹ The mission promptly changed its name to the 'Magic Lantern and Kinematograph Mission',⁶⁰ and engaged a 'kine-electrician' and two 'kinematographists', one of them Stewart's son William.⁶¹ Stewart even considered making his own films, as he was critical of modern details in the religious films then available.⁶²

On 15 February 1909 the MLKM was booked to give a film and lantern show at the Tyndale Chapel, Redland, on behalf of the Baptist Zenana Mission. It seems that Stewart was now largely

showing films, as the programme was to include:

The Life of a Chick – Rescued by the Army – Vanity Fair – For Daddy's Sake – Mail Steamer Leaving Larne for Stranraer – Swimming the English Channel – The Somnambulist – A Rough Sea in Cornwall – Christ's Native Nazareth – The Ten Virgins – The Good Samaritan – The March of Bluejackets (Devonport) – HM the King's Racing Yacht (Portsmouth) – Attack by the Gordon Highlanders – HMS Ophir leaving Portsmouth Harbour – March of the New South Wales Lancers, Etc. – HM Fleet at Portsmouth Dockyard – Highland Brigade at Balmoral (March Past) – Towing a Submarine into Portsmouth Docks – A Good Story – Old Grannie and her Cot – Two Rustics at an Entertainment – Bluejackets of HMS Victory at Play – That Wonderful Hat.⁶³

The show must have seemed outdated, for some of these films were seven or eight years old. Stewart added 'a few words of explanation' to the pictures,⁶⁴ which may indicate that his skills as a lecturer were less relevant to the new age of moving pictures.

In January 1910 things got worse, when the new safety regulations under the Cinematograph Act obliged the MLKM to junk its existing film stock and invest £80 in non-flammable film. A new fundraising campaign followed, although even then it was said that the Mission did not have 'sufficient stock for its requirements'. The MLKM also had difficulties travelling outside Bristol with its film and lantern show, because different local authorities interpreted the terms of the new Act differently.⁶⁵



11. Stewart saving a sinner – photograph by Owen Graystone Bird, apparently from a slide set made for the MLM

Stewart began to look elsewhere for audiences. He had often been invited to help with overseas missions, and, as he approached retirement, he 'hoped ... to tour some of the colonies with his lantern'.⁶⁶ However, in January 1913 Stewart fell seriously ill with cancer. He left his job at the bank, but, although in pain, continued to give regular gospel lantern shows until April 1913, when he underwent an operation. This proved unsuccessful, and on 5 March 1914, after a long illness, Stewart died at home in Redland, Bristol.⁶⁷ The MLKM, it seems, died with him. The slides were dispersed, the films disposed of, and Stewart's 'powerful patent Oxy-Hydro Lantern' went into storage for a hundred years.

48. Stewart album, f.73, 'The Magic Lantern Mission', *The Presbyterian*, 6 June 1895.

49. Stewart album, f.72, cutting headed 'Filton', publication unknown, c.1895.

50. Stewart album, f.73, 'The Magic Lantern Mission', *The Presbyterian*, 6 June 1895.

51. Stewart album, f.75, cutting from *Western Daily Press*, 2 March 1899.

52. Stewart album, f.92, cutting 'Notes by a Rambler', *Bristol Evening News*, 1 December 1906.

53. Stewart album, f.83, cutting from *The Churchwoman*, 22 June 1900.

54. Stewart album, f.83, cutting from *Bristol Mercury*, 1 November 1900.

55. Stewart album, f.83, advert 'MUSICAL – Engagement & Tuition', *Western Daily Press*, 2 October 1900, and cutting 'The Magic Lantern Mission', *Western Daily Press*, 29 October 1900.

56. 'The Magic Lantern Mission', *Western Daily Press*, 30 September 1905, 9/4.

57. *Ibid.*

58. Stewart album, f.93, cutting 'The Lantern Mission', *The Christian*, 10 October 1907.

59. Stewart album, f.92, cutting 'Notes by a Rambler', *Bristol Evening News*, 1 December 1906.

60. Stewart album, f.94, cuttings 'Local Notes', *Western Daily Press*, 15 October 1907, and

20 October 1908.

61. *Western Daily Press*, 7 March 1914, p.11 col.4, 'Death of Mr William Stewart / Founder of the Lantern Mission'.

62. Stewart album, f.95, cutting 'Notes by a Rambler', *Bristol Evening News*, 13 February 1909.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Stewart album, f.96, cutting 'Lecture at Tyndale', *Western Daily Press*, 17 February 1909.

65. 'Magic Lantern Mission', *Western Daily Press*, 14 October 1910, 5/7; Stewart album, loose unidentified cutting, c.1911, headed 'Lantern and Kinematograph Mission'.

66. Stewart album, f.92, cutting 'Notes by a Rambler', *Bristol Evening News*, 1 December 1906; 'Death of Mr William Stewart / Founder of the Lantern Mission', *Western Daily Press*, 7 March 1914, 11/4.

67. *Magic Lantern and Kinematograph Mission: The Annual Report from 30th June 1912 to 30th June 1913* (MLKM, Bristol, 1913), pp.9–10: 'Deaths', *Western Daily Press*, 9 March 1914, 12/5; 'Funeral of Mr William Stewart', *Western Daily Press*, 11 March 1914, 7/5; Stewart album, loose cutting of J.J. Abington "In Memoriam" – Mr Wm. Stewart', *Bristol Baptist Itinerant Society's Monthly*, April 1914. Hannah died in Bristol in 1938.