
BOOK REVIEWS

THE MAGIC LANTERN AT WORK: WITNESSING, PERSUADING, EXPERIENCING AND CONNECTING

Martyn Jolly and Elisa deCourcy (eds)

Routledge, New York and London, 2020
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Books of essays arising from academic conferences can sometimes seem a bit scattered, with an almost random selection of contributions included 'because they were there' and no clear sight of a real or imagined theme to the proceedings. Happily this isn't one of those: although based on papers given at the 2018 *Magic Lantern in Australia and the World* conference of the 'Heritage in the Limelight' project, it's been imaginatively edited and structured to keep its theme (the clue's in the title) clear and easy to follow. Not unlike our own *Realms of Light* (2005), it draws together a wide range of subjects and links them by a common thread, namely some of the ways in which lantern projection was used to enhance those subjects at various periods and in various cultures.

There are 11 contributions, several of them by MLS members, and they're all well-written, thoughtful and original. Martyn Jolly's opening piece gives a lightning tour of lantern history, running from Huygens to PowerPoint, but makes this nicely-expressed point:

"The pioneers are important, the technological innovations are crucial, the intricate apparatuses are fascinating, but now our attention is directed to the ongoing life of the lantern after its novelty had withdrawn into ubiquity."

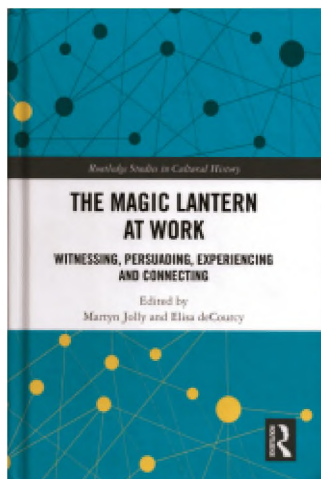
In other words: what did people actually use the lantern for as well as its

always-present 'wow' factor? The other ten chapters (it would be unfair to pick out individual favourites: they're all good) provide a wide range of answers, touching on subjects as diverse as use in creative art, fairground spectacle, scientific lecturing, missionary propaganda, astronomical and medical teaching, women's suffrage, reportage of genocide, and several accounts of the work of individual professional lecturers.

This diversity illustrates both the strength of the lantern as a subject for research, and also one of its problems: as a technique of communication, lantern projection touches on just about any subject you care to think of, but that makes it probably too vast a subject to study as a whole. So we have to make do with case studies, spotlights on small aspects which may not have any obvious connection to each other apart from their use of the projected image. In this environment the collection-of-essays book comes into its own, but with one major possible

pitfall: done badly it looks like a heap of disconnected 'bits'; done well, it brings together strands and lets the reader start weaving them together. The second of those is what *The Magic Lantern at Work* manages to do rather nicely.

There's only one thing wrong with this book, and if you've read the publication details at the top of this review it's obvious: the retail price makes the paper copy unaffordable, and the e-book isn't much more accessible for mortals with other bills to pay. Obviously the pricing is aimed at institutional libraries, which is where big academic publishers like Routledge imagine their market to be – but I suspect even the wealthiest institutions have squeezed their library budgets until they can barely be seen, and *one hundred and twenty pounds* for 11 short essays on a 'niche' subject is going to take some persuading. This isn't the fault of the editors or contributors, and it feels awkward to imply that interesting work like that in this volume isn't worth the financial outlay.



But pricing access in this way does a disservice to the people creating good new research, shutting their work away from a wider readership. Most people with an interest in the lantern would find something enlightening in this well-thought book, and it's a shame that to read it

you probably have to contact the individual authors and ask them nicely for a copy of their chapter – which negates the point of 'collecting' the essays in the first place.

Richard Crangle
