

THE MAGIC LANTERN

Leongatha and District, 1914-18

John Hyett

The heyday of the magic lantern was during the last part of the 19th century with the development of better, brighter lighting systems and before the advent of the new-fangled moving pictures or films. However the lantern as a means of illustrating lectures or as entertainment continued at least into the 1980s, when my father used a lantern to illustrate his classes at the Council of Adult Education. The digitisation of local newspapers by the National Library of Australia (NLA) allows us to examine and record the presence of lantern shows and lectures in a small Australian township over a period of time following the introduction of moving pictures.¹

Leongatha is a relatively small town (population c.5,700 in 2019) servicing an agricultural area in South Gippsland in Victoria, Australia. It is the administrative centre for the local government area and during the period under study this was the Shire of Woorayl. The area around Leongatha was one of the last sections of South Gippsland to be settled by Europeans. The first land sale within the township took place in 1889 with the railway coming through in 1891. Early population figures for the township are hard to come by. In the 1901 census the population was listed as 681 and this had grown to 1,510 by the time of the census in 1921. The *Great Southern Star* newspaper was established in 1890 and served the community up to March 2020.²

A search of the *Great Southern Star* for the years 1914 to 1918 inclusive (the period over which the newspaper has been digitised by the NLA as part of the 100th anniversary of WW1), shows that about 43 lantern shows, lectures or illustrated talks were presented in the Leongatha district during that period. This period includes the seven months prior to the declaration of war and almost two months following the Armistice, as well as the duration of the war. This equates to about one show every six weeks during this five-year period.

While some of these lantern events were single shows or lectures, others were repeated at various venues around the district, some as many as seven times. Some lecturers were local, others from Melbourne and some from as far afield as the Pacific Islands, China, Africa and England. The topics were varied, including religious sermons, the demon drink, travel scenes, university extension lectures, the war, recruitment campaigns, local sports, mission work in Australia and overseas, agriculture, scenery and scouting. Few of the slide sets can be identified and most probably do not exist today – gone the way of many historic slides, dumped or destroyed in the name of progress as the new media developed.

About half the lectures were presented by clergymen, either local or visiting, with several more presented by missionaries or evangelical groups. Two were presented by travelling moving picture companies as part of their shows, four by the Department of Agriculture, six as part of the war effort – one to raise funds and awareness for the bush nursing hospital movement and one as part of the University of Melbourne Extension Lectures.

The format of a magic lantern lecture would vary according to the presenter, the topic and the expected audience. We can probably assume that the presentations by the local and visiting clergymen, being aimed at family groups, would have contained some children's slides and some amusing and entertaining slides as well as the main topic of the evening. Other presenters, such as those from the Department of Agriculture demonstrating the 'Principles of Manuring' and 'Poultry Farming', would probably not deviate from the subject matter at all.

In an article of this length it is impossible to describe all 43 of the lantern shows so I shall make some brief comments on the more interesting shows and presenters.

Not all lectures were successful. In September 1914 one on the 'Principles of Manuring and Values of Artificial Manures' was abandoned when the venue was unable to be blacked out and only two farmers attended. Another lecture in June 1918 on the 'Dairying Industry' ran into problems when the lecturer's lantern went missing on the railway trip from Melbourne.

The earliest use of lantern slides in a show for the year 1914 appears to be a showing of *The Holy City* as part of a presentation by the Wilmott Picture Company on 2 February 1914. The following moving pictures were advertised: *Back to the Primitive* ('Thrilling Animal Picture'), *The Black Witch* ('Beautifully colored Mystic Picture'), *A Brave Girl's Sacrifice* ('War Picture'), and 'a full programme of Scenic, Dramatic, Comic and Cowboy films'. The evening would include songs by the lady baritone, Miss Ettie Wilmott.³ It was reported that she had sung to accompany slides of *The Holy City*.⁴ The Wilmott Picture Company travelled around much of south-east Australia, and a glowing report of Ettie's singing appeared in a Hobart (Tasmania) paper in May that year:

"The lady with the male voice, Miss Ettie Wilmott, drew a crowded house at the King's Theatre last night and was recalled time after time; it was only after promising to render something special this evening that she was allowed to leave the stage. Miss Wilmott is, without a doubt, a marvel. She stands alone as a woman with a male voice, yet with the sweetness of a woman's, and the eulogies that fell from the lips of the vast audience were as frequent as the falling leaves in autumn."⁵

In 1913 the Mechanic's Institute, on the advice of the local Agricultural High School principal, arranged for a series of lectures through the University of Melbourne Extension Board. During 1914 three lectures were delivered, 'The Poetry of Burns', 'Australian History' and an illustrated lecture 'Black, Yellow and White Races' presented by Professor Richard Berry, Head of Anatomy at Melbourne University.

"The final lecture of the series, under the auspices of the Leongatha Mechanics Institute, was held in the hall on Wednesday evening last, but was not as well attended as it should have been. The president of the Institute (Mr Ed. Begg) introduced the lecturer, Professor Berry, who took for his subject, 'Black, Yellow and White Races'. The Rev. H.J. Harvey had charge of the lantern, and as the types of men and women were shown upon the canvas, they were fully explained by the professor, who had studied the subject for six years. The chimpanzee, baboon and other species of the ape tribe were exhibited by lantern slides to show the similarity of the blacks with the former animals. The lecturer, however, not being a believer in the theory advanced by Darwin. Maps of the different countries were produced, and the habits of the race of people inhabiting them lucidly placed before the audience by the speaker. A vote of thanks was accorded to Professor Berry at close of the lecture upon the motion of the Revs E.H. Nye and H.J. Harvey. The latter gentleman also receiving special thanks for manipulating the lantern, which added greatly to the enjoyment of the lecture."⁶

At the time Professor Berry was a leading light in the long-since totally discredited eugenics movement in Australia, advocating such repugnant views as the forced sterilization of slum dwellers, homosexuals, alcoholics, prostitutes, as well as those with small heads and low IQs. The Aboriginal population was also seen to fall within this group. In 1934, after he had returned to England, he would argue that to eliminate mental deficiency would require the sterilisation of 25 per cent of the population. At the same time he also advocated the "kindly euthanasia" of the unfit.⁷

In August 1914 the Rev. Walter A. Dark, vicar of St Bartholomew's, Sheffield, England from 1911-24, presented a lantern lecture illustrating



From left to right:

Professor Richard Berry

Tom Skeyhill

Ivor Birtwistle

his recent visit to Cairo and Egypt. This was his first visit back to Australia since leaving for England some 23 years earlier. He was staying with his brother in Leongatha.⁸ Another brother was also living in the district at the time.

Sister Greer, Superintending Nurse 1913-1921 of the Bush Nursing Association, gave four lectures in the district – Grassy Spur, Dumbalk, Dollar and Meeniyan – in February 1915, on 'Bush Nursing Works and Incidents', illustrative of the work in their 21 centres and showing organising work in many other centres then being formed. She illustrated the lectures with a series of slides from her own photographs. One slide appeared to catch everyone's attention, even getting a mention in the *British Journal of Nursing*, that of four children boating on the Snowy River using a half pumpkin shell as their boat.⁹

The same month Miss Ada Nisbet, a missionary working in China, gave an illustrated lecture to raise funds for the 'Birds Nest' orphanage for unwanted girl children in Kutien, China. Miss Nisbet had been working in China for many years and was on leave in Australia in 1895 when the Flower Mountain Mission where she was stationed was attacked by members of a Chinese movement, the Vegetarians, and most of the missionaries killed including two Australians.¹⁰

In July 1915 a lecture, 'A Patriotic Evening', exhibited 50 slides of 'Our Men in Egypt' – soldiers from the district who had enlisted at that time as well as photographs sent home by the soldiers from Egypt and Gallipoli. The lantern operator was Mr C. (Charley) Edney who was 17 years old. His older brother had enlisted about a week before the lecture and was killed in action in France a year later. Charley went on to be a motor mechanic, having his own garage and car dealership. The business still exists today but is no longer owned by the family. This evening raised £15 9s. 9d. for the Woorayl War Fund, a smaller than expected amount due to the high cost of preparing the lantern slides. The presentation was repeated in May 1916 at Berry's Creek by the Rev. Harvey with Charles Aberdeen manipulating the lantern. Mr Aberdeen showed some very good slides of his own making after the patriotic slides: "The waterfall at Mt Eccles was particularly good."

Signaller Tom Skeyhill presented an illustrated lecture on 'The Australians at Anzac' in April 1916. He had enlisted in September 1914, been present at the landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 and was subsequently blinded by a Turkish shell on 8 May. He toured Australia, lecturing and raising money for the Red Cross until his discharge from the army in September 1916 after which he moved to America and lectured there. He regained his sight in 1918 following osteopathic treatment, dying in a plane crash in 1932.¹¹ Advertising his lecture at Leongatha the *Great Southern Star* reprinted a review from the Melbourne Press. His lecture took over an hour and a half as he related his experiences from the time he witnessed the horrors of the war "when out of the grey mist of the morning a torpedo boat came alongside the troopship with her decks strewn with wounded soldiers: rifles, bayonets &c., lying about in confusion on the decks, and her

funnels riddled with shot" up until he lost his sight on a charge against the Turks less than two weeks later. He described the fine work of the stretcher bearers, the brilliant bayonet charges, and the heroism and fortitude of wounded Australians. He told some amusing stories and recited some of the poetry he had written in the trenches.¹²

The final lantern lecture identified for the 1914-1918 period at Leongatha was a series of seven lectures at various small townships in the district raising funds for the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Beginning on Monday 25 November, lectures were held up to the Saturday night with a 'Special Afternoon Celebration' at the Leongatha Recreation Reserve on the Sunday. The final lantern lecture was held on Monday 2 December at Leongatha.¹³ The funds raised by the lecture, 'The Trail of the Red Triangle', and the celebration aimed to replace massive losses the YMCA had suffered during the last German offensive of the war, but they would be directed to the war effort and none would go into the general funding of the YMCA.¹⁴ The red triangle was the symbol used by the YMCA to identify their huts and canteens on the battlefields. The lecture was presented by Mr Ivor Birtwistle late of the 22nd Battalion AIF (Australian Imperial Force). A journalist at the start of the war, he had tried to enlist very early but was originally rejected because of his height (he was 5ft 2ins and the original criterion was 5ft 6ins). He was wounded at Gallipoli, spending nine weeks in hospital in December 1915 with septic legs from wounds and was again wounded in France in July 1916. Here he was blown 10ft by a shell and buried unconscious for several hours. Diagnosed with shell shock he suffered from "intermittent headaches, slight giddiness, fairly constant tremors, disturbed sleep, dreams and general nervousness, preventing walking and even standing. Symptoms recurring with sudden noises."¹⁵ He was finally discharged from the AIF in June 1917 with 'nervous debility and shock'.

NOTES

1. Many researchers will be familiar with Trove, the NLA's excellent free online resource, trove.nla.gov.au
2. Most of the history of Leongatha here is from: John Murphy, *No Parallel*, Hargreen Publishing Company, North Melbourne, 1988
3. *Great Southern Star*, 30 January 1914
4. *South Gippsland Shire Echo*, 6 February 1914, p.2
5. *Daily Post* (Hobart), 7 May 1914, p.8
6. *Great Southern Star*, 19 October 1914, p.2
7. R.L. Jones, 'Eugenics in Australia: the secret of Melbourne's elite', theconversation.com/eugenics-in-australia-the-secret-of-melbournes-elite-3350
8. *Great Southern Star*, 18 August 1914, p.2
9. For a slightly longer article on Sister Greer see 'Just a Normal Day's Work', *The Magic Lantern*, no.16, September 2018
10. I.H. Welch, *The Flower Mountain Murders*, pp. 58, 175-76, openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/7273
11. 'Skeyhill, Thomas John (Tom) (1895-1932)', adb.anu.edu.au/biography/skeyhill-thomas-john-tom-8444
12. *Great Southern Star*, 11 April 1916, p.2
13. *Great Southern Star*, 12 November 1918, p.3
14. *Great Southern Star*, 3 December 1918, p.2
15. National Archives of Australia, digitised army record