

FREDERICK H. EVANS, LANTERNIST

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During the magic lantern era, advice about how to organise and run lantern shows was quite often published in manuals and in periodicals. Most of it follows predictable lines but occasionally one comes across something a little more unusual, and below we reprint one of those exceptions by the celebrated photographer, Frederick H. Evans (1853-1943). I found this article in a volume of *The Amateur Photographer* for 1903: this volume does not yet seem to have been digitised, nor, as far as I can tell, has the article ever been reprinted.

F.H. Evans is a name familiar to most photographic historians – less so in magic lantern circles. He started out as a bookseller and then took up photography, turning professional by the 1890s. Evans was elected to the 'Linked Ring', a body dedicated to photography as art, and his work was much admired, including by such great figures as George Bernard Shaw and Aubrey Beardsley. He took some fine portraits during his career (including of the aforementioned), but his real forte was architectural photography and he became renowned for his images of great houses, churches and cathedrals, often printed using the platinum process.

Less well known is that FHE – as he often signed himself – also printed and presented his photographs as lantern slides. Indeed, compared to paper, Evans thought transparencies had a "more potent, more magic power of suggestion".¹ The first lantern presentation by him that I have found was announced for 14 May 1886 at University College, London, on the subject of microphotographs,² and in the following year, 1887, he received a medal for his micro images from the soon-to-be Royal Photographic Society.³ It is reckoned that he made over 1,000 lantern slides in the first two decades of his career but apparently he ceased his lantern slide making in 1902 due to failing eyesight.⁴

As we shall see below, he was extremely demanding as to the arrangements and conditions of his lantern shows. Such 'fussiness' is perhaps not surprising given that he was renowned for his perfectionism as a photographer. It is worth examining this aspect of his personality as photographer before reading the account below because evidently there was some method in his perfectionism/madness.

Evans stated that he was inspired by Turner's small architectural drawings, especially by the sense of size, light and atmosphere that they managed to convey. However, when he wished to depict cathedrals through photography, he initially despaired as to how to achieve such effects with mere lens and light, and then:

"After awhile [sic] I took heart a little, for, seeing that my subjects did not call for colour in their rendering; that the chief things needed were extreme care and taste in composition (in the placing of the camera for point of view); faultless drawing (in the sense of correct choice of lens, height, etc., of it and camera); adequate treatment of the fine detail such subjects abound in; and an exhaustive study of the conditions, making for the best effects of light and shade and atmosphere; it seemed to me that cathedral-pictures were well within the camera's special field of work when properly directed, and that with much judgment and more patience photography might some day achieve something that should be at least on the same road as these tiny masterpieces of Turner."⁵

Evans concentrates on the need for care and technique, and I suggest that these factors might be more significant in his greatness as a photographer than wider influences from art or spiritualism that some historians have discussed.⁶ We should remember how laborious and complicated photography was in those days before phone-cams and even before 35mm SLRs. The cameras that Evans took to cathedrals all over Britain and France were large and heavy, and required unwieldy wooden tripods. His negative stock was orthochromatic so it didn't mimic the perception of human eyesight in registering colours and Evans made it even harder for himself by insisting that his negatives should not need adjusting (retouching, dodging, burning-in, etc.) when printed onto platinum paper or lantern slides. So in taking his pictures, all conditions – especially of natural light – would have to be perfect. One historian writes:



1. *Portrait of Frederick H. Evans, c.1901, platinum print* (Wikimedia Commons; Metropolitan Museum of Art)

"Evans is known to have taken infinite pains over his photographs. The story is told by George Bernard Shaw of his visit to Ely Cathedral, where for a fortnight he never set up his camera but simply studied the light. Then, one Saturday, he decided the light was right, and insisted that the nave be cleared of the chairs that had been neatly set out for Sunday's services. When the verger refused, Evans went over his head to the Dean. He also got a gas fitter to take down various lights that offended him."⁷

This passage comes from a book by Marcus Binney which is actually about Evans' photographs of French châteaux rather than his better known cathedral images. In researching the present introduction during the Covid pandemic I was limited in my access to books and did not manage to see some of the standard works on Evans.⁸ The Binney volume was the one book on FHE that I did manage to obtain on loan, and it proved a happy choice, in that the author, like Evans, suggests that technique wedded to conviction may lead to art. A preference for diagonals was one part of the Evans technique and distinctive framing was another.

"What stands out most strongly is Evans's sheer passion for architecture. His overriding desire was to communicate the power and the beauty of fine buildings. The châteaux fill his pictures; he rarely stood back and framed them with trees or a garden or parkland setting. Instead he used whatever lens or viewpoint would take him closest, not minding if the tops of chimneys, dormers or towers disappeared out of the top of the picture. Basically, Evans wanted his exteriors to overwhelm the viewer. In some respects, Evans was like a modern day art editor, who 'crops' into a picture (often to the horror of the photographer) to make the image stronger. The difference is that Evans did his 'cropping' on the negative itself ..."⁹

If FHE was idiosyncratic and painstaking in his photography he was, as mentioned, equally so in his lantern presentations.



2. Winchester Cathedral, south aisle of presbytery. Frederick H. Evans, stated as c.1883, but probably later (Lantern slide: J. Paul Getty Museum)

In his 1903 article he expresses some of these opinions, and because it is written in somewhat convoluted Victorian style, I will offer a few words of summary. Evans begins by describing various regrettable practices in preparing for a lantern show, including the poor positioning of screen, lecturer and chairman, and incompetence or infelicity in slide changing. The latter is one of his bugbears and he especially abhors 'push-through' slide changers, where images are seen swiping on and off the screen. Evans then details how things 'should be' positioned for lantern screenings; he recommends a surprisingly small screen size, and indeed suggests hiding that diminutive (but perfect) screen with curtains until the performance begins! Furthermore, the equipment should be warmed up during cold weather, the lantern perfectly focussed, etc. He also discourses on the qualities of various illuminants, stating that the electric arc light is "the worst of all". His final paragraph describes an unconventional practice that modern lanternists might consider trying out. Read on ...

NOTES

1. Kara Fiedorek, 'Varieties of Photographic Experience: Frederick H. Evans and the Lantern Slide', *British Art Studies*, Issue 1, November 2015, p.19 (online at www.britishtarstudies.ac.uk)
2. 'To-morrow', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 May 1886, p.5. There is also an 1889 report of a Mr F.H. Evans (who may not be the same one) giving an exhibition of 'dissolving views with lime-light effect' to a Sunday school in Southampton (thanks to *Lucerna* for this), and further references come up in the online British Newspaper Archive to Evans presenting lantern lectures in the mid-1890s.
3. See entry about Evans on the *LuminousLint* website, www.luminouslint.com/app/photographer/Frederick_Henry_Evans/A/
4. See Fiedorek, p.19
5. Frederick H. Evans, 'Camera-work in cathedral architecture', *Camera Work* no.4, October 1903, p.17. This is the so-called 'Evans number' of the famed American art photography periodical.
6. Mark B. Pohlard, 'William Morris, photography, and Frederick H. Evans', *History of Photography*, v.22, no.1, 1998, pp.52-59; Fiedorek, *op. cit.*, discusses the influence of Swedenborg on FHE, an interesting connection given that so many MLS meetings have taken place at the Swedenborg Society in London.
7. Marcus Binney, *The Châteaux of France*, Mitchell Beazley, London, 1994, p.7. The source of this verger anecdote is unclear.
8. Beaumont Newhall, *Frederick H. Evans... Aperture*, New York, 1973; Anne Hammond (ed.) *Frederick H. Evans: Selected texts and bibliography*, Clio, Oxford, 1992; Larry J. Schaaf, *Frederick H. Evans – a logical perfection*, Kraus, New York, 2008; Anne M. Lyden, *The photographs of Frederick H. Evans*, Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2010
9. Binney, pp.11-12

THE EXHIBITING OF LANTERN SLIDES

by Frederick H. Evans

The Amateur Photographer, 5 March 1903 (vol. 37, no. 961, pp. 192-194)¹

It often occurs to me how curious it is that so interesting an evening as a lantern exhibition might be, is almost always precisely the reverse, productive only of boredom and eye and head ache. To show a lantern-slide perfectly seems to be next door to being as difficult as making it. Let me enumerate a few of the ordinary conditions supposed to be necessary, and that are accepted as normal instead of abnormal, and then I will give my own idea of what a lantern show should be, and what I find quite easy to carry out in practice when I indulge myself or my friends in this form of entertainment.

SCREEN.—Too large, or with too large an image on it, rendering it difficult for the audience to grasp the full picture in one glance of the eye. Too high up, so that the front part of the audience have their necks on the strain all the time, and go away with an 'Academy' headache.² Screen too low down, so that all the audience from the second row backwards see the top two-thirds only of the pictures, and the careful attempts at composition the artist slide-maker has slaved over are completely unrealised by his foregrounds being always all but invisible. Audience too near the screen, and this, even if the screen is at the right height for them, is as bad as having it too high up, as it prevents them from grasping the composition with one glance of the eye, and necessitates the eyes wandering over the screen and piecing its parts together as best they can.

SLIDE-CHANGING.—This is usually the 'push-through' enormity; one's eyes comfortably (perhaps) dwell on a picture, and are then suddenly jerked to one side as the slide is changed. There is usually the further diversion of seeing it stick, and a pencil or a finger-tip, enormously magnified, appears on the screen frantically struggling with the sticking slide; this also occasionally fails, and the whole carrier has to be removed, flooding the room and one's eyes with light and annoying one with the coloured fringes of light on the screen from the condenser's edges now unmasked. There is also the means of asking for the slide to be changed. The lanternist is perhaps talking to a friend and does not hear the "Next, please," of the lecturer; this develops into, "NEXT, please," and then, "Will you kindly change the slide, if you please?" These are some of the disguised swearings an irate lecturer passes over the heads of the amused audience.

BAD POSITION OF THE LECTURER.—He is always placed next to the screen, where he cannot see the audience effectively, as the room is only lit by the screen; and the attention of the audience should not be on the lecturer in this case, but on the picture he is talking about. The lecturer should always be by the side of the lantern; he can there properly control the changing of the slides and the focussing, and can see the slides he is describing to absolute perfection, as that is the ideal place in the room for seeing the pictures from.

BAD POSITION OF CHAIRMAN and those who are looked to for the talking after the lecture.—They can rarely say anything critically valuable, as they have seen nothing in critical condition, so they are limited to the perfunctory "Mr. Blank's slides have been, we are sure, an immense treat to us all," etc., etc.

Now all these things are easily remedied with a little artistic foresight and a good deal of strong will (obstinacy) on the part of the arranger towards the people of the hall, compelling them to alter and rearrange chairs, screen, lantern, etc., to one's satisfaction, regardless of the usual overtures, "Well, Mr. Blank had his lantern there, and I'm sure nobody complained!" No, if only the audience *would* occasionally complain, when they cannot see properly, things might get altered; but the great British Public is so patient and tolerant that it permits almost anything, and merely remarks, "Oh, well, he did his best, I suppose." One of my own most successful shows would have been a disastrous failure but for my own — obstinacy. It was to a gathering of artists and architects, and I was specially anxious to please them with my work, and the club was of such artistic repute, and the lanternist engaged was from such a good house, that I did not bother to get to

the place till late, and then I found all the conditions fatal to anything like artistic enjoyment; but though it was only a quarter of an hour before the opening time, I had the screen taken down and put in another place, the lantern shifted, chairs rearranged, etc., and the result was that everybody, even those I had had to order about so, was full of praise for a most enjoyable evening.

The following conditions should be tried for: The screen need not be over 6 ft. for even a large hall; for a private room, or small hall, 2 ft. to 4 ft. 6 in. is ample. When do we expect paper pictures larger than two feet square? And though more people look at the screen enlargement than when one shows paper prints, a small picture is more easily grasped, seen as a whole; and it is also kinder to those of the audience who have to sit at the sides of a room, as they can, when it is small, see *all* the picture, as well as those who are more in direct line of its centre.

The screen should be absolutely creaseless, and perfectly white and opaque. It should also be covered up till just the moment of showing the first slide, by a pair of curtains hung so that at the pulling of a string they will drape from the centre outwards, as do the curtains of the stage at the theatre. It is inartistic to have the blank white mass of the screen staring at one all the time the audience is assembling; an elegantly draped curtain should cover it; then, at a given signal, the room is darkened, and the curtains are gathered up, and at the same instant the lanternist uncaps his lens and in place of the curtains the first picture is seen. Of course, this presupposes the very necessary [*sic*] condition that all centering of light to condenser, settling size of image, etc., is done before the audience gain admission. It is an intolerable thing to have one's eyes tired out at the beginning by the struggle of the lanternist with his lime, etc. If the light is electricity, then let it be as noiseless as possible, and let its coughing and spluttering be done, if possible, *between* the slides; it is so heartbreaking to see, when one's very best slide comes on, that this is the precise moment when the lime needs turning round, or the carbons require to be readjusted; your proud picture is spluttered out of all recognition, and by the time the light has settled down to sanity again, the interest in the picture has been so destroyed or weakened that it passes without a hand³ most likely. The lanternist should always cap his lens and readjust his lime, etc., between slides, never while a slide is in view on the screen.

This brings us to the method of slide-changing. When will the abominable 'push-through' die its desired death? Nothing more destructive to artistic enjoyment, or more tiring to the eye, has ever been devised. Personally, I always use the curtain-slide; a dark curtain is rolled down over the picture, neither too fast nor too slow, the slide is changed instantly the screen is quite darkened, and the curtain as instantly begun to roll up; deftly done there is but the rolling up and down of the curtain for the audience to be conscious of, and that period of darkness is just sufficient to afford the necessary rest to the eye, to relieve it of the image just seen, and prepare it for the new picture. I have many times questioned my audience, at home or at friends' houses, if they had experienced any of the usual retinal fatigue or the headache so common at lantern shows; and, to their own surprise, the thought had not once occurred to them, only had they been conscious of pleasure, with freedom from all tire. Of course I need not do more than mention, with bated breath, that antiquated terror, the dissolving apparatus; it is to such crude devices as that and the push-through changer that the impatience with, and the dislike of, lantern slides may be attributed with those photographers one would most enlist into the select circle of those who endeavour to become perfect slide makers.

Another point towards the success of a lantern show is to have both lantern and slides thoroughly warmed before commencing exhibiting. Cold slides, or a cold condenser, mean dulled pictures, with disagreeable condensing of the moisture visible on the screen. I well remember going some distance to a photographic society to show a set of slides, and, to my dismay, the lanternist only proceeded to unearth his lantern from some dismal cupboard during the reading of the minutes, etc. As it was a winter's evening, I knew what to expect; all my slides for the best part of the time, were apparently on ground-glass; when that modified, the clouds of moisture evaporating in different portions of the slides on the screen were equally disastrous. Time did not permit us to wait till lantern and slides reached a proper temperature, so all I could console myself with, was the moral, avoid *this* society in future!



3. Steps to the Chapter House, Wells Cathedral, 1893. Inscribed F.H. Evans '93. A decade after this image was taken, Evans photographed these steps from a slightly different angle: the 1903 platinum print, entitled 'A Sea of Steps', is one of his most celebrated images. (Lantern slide: University of New Hampshire)

It is almost always impossible to give one's exhibition in a hall with a raised floor.⁴ I suppose it will only be in the social millennium we look for – or for our posterity – that we may expect all halls to be built with a graduated floor, so that each person shall see easily over the heads of those in front; if the matinee hat should survive, and worry posterity as it does us, it would be a less evil then with a properly graded floor. But much can be done by a careful arranging of chairs, and, in a private exhibition, a wise limiting of the audience.

I have said nothing as to lantern, or objective, or illuminant; the simpler the lantern the better, but a cardinal point in its construction, and one too often neglected, is that no waste light be allowed to escape; an asbestos cloth should be provided to cover up any such leakage – no light should reach the eyes of the audience except from the screen. A good test for this condition is to observe the colour of the portion of the screen outside the picture; it should be quite dark, black; but is usually anything from a pale grey to



4. In the Garden, Kelmscott Manor, 1896. Inscribed F.H.E. (Lantern slide: J. Paul Getty Museum)

a dull white, showing that a great waste of light is going on, and most probably annoying and tiring someone's eyes to the complete loss of interest in the pictures. The object-glass, the lens, must be good enough to cover the slide with perfect sharpness from edge to edge. A good plan is for the lanternist to have a pair of low-power opera-glasses to test the definition on the screen by; it is so absurd to have some critically-eyed member of the audience saying at intervals, "Sharpen up, please." Sometimes it happens that the carrier is not quite parallel to the condenser, and the edges of the slide on one side or other are therefore out of focus till the carrier is righted.

As to illuminant, oil is smelly, though it is a nice rich light, very soft and comfortable to the eyes. Acetylene is an admirable light, penetrative and yet rich and agreeable to the eyes, but it also is smelly. The electric light, the arc, is the worst of all; it is far too hard and brilliant, and the perpetual spluttering and dislocation of the image on the screen is exceedingly uncomfortable to the eyes, and quite destructive of any artistic enjoyment. The mixed jet is the easiest of all perhaps, though it usually sins by being used in far too strong a fashion; the aim usually seems to be to get as much light as possible; whereas the least light that can be used, the better for the eyes and the more enjoyable the pictures, during a long exhibition. It is not amount of light that should be aimed at, but the character of it – quiet, soft, steady, and uniform; things not difficult of attainment if only the lanternist can be brought to believe in them.

If any of my readers have not tried the following, they will find it a pleasant variant in showing slides to a small company. Let the screen be as white and opaque as possible, get as large an image as convenient, then turn the audience with their backs to the screen and let them view the pictures reflected in a large mirror at the other end of the room. Distances must be adjusted so as to get as large a reflection as possible; but the gain in perspective, in reality, in verisimilitude, is extraordinary. The illusion of the scene being actual and real is most perfect. It is not that abnormal sort of actuality that the stereoscope suggests, the over-actual, exaggerated reality that one at once suspects and feels to be bogus and sham; but it is an apparent transference of the plane image of the opaque screen to the actuality of the original; the smallness of the scale does not affect it harmfully, only renders it the more fairy like and delightful.

NOTES

1. I have not edited this article apart from correcting one or two printer's typos. Placing of quotation marks is as original.
2. An 'Academy headache' was said to be an ocular headache due to visiting exhibitions. According to Eric Partridge the phrase was in use between around 1880 and 1914; it is mentioned by art critic John Ruskin, and even described by an eminent doctor. (Eric Partridge, *Slang: To-day and yesterday*, 1933, pp.115, 350; Harry Campbell, *Headache and other morbid cephalic sensations*, 1894, p.81)
3. 'Without a hand' is understood to mean without any applause.
4. Evans means a raked floor, inclined down toward the screen.