

“SEE THAT HE HAS PLENTY OF ROOM FOR HIS LANTERN”

The career of Thomas Nobles

Nicholas Hiley

I recently bought this photograph of a magic lanternist with his lantern, because it struck me as unusual. It had been printed up as a postcard, and on the back, in an elderly hand, someone had written “Tommy Nobles and his Magic Lantern”, adding the enthusiastic note “We loved this man to come to entertain at Band of Hope or Sunday School.” The lanternist and his Russian-iron lantern looked very ordinary, and far removed from the usual evening-dressed performers posing with their brass and mahogany biunials and triunials. But a little research revealed that Tommy Nobles was just as remarkable as his rivals with their starched collars, and much closer in spirit to the original tradition of itinerant magic lanternists.

Thomas Nobles was born in Kettering on 24 August 1847, but when he was still a baby his parents moved the 16 miles south to Northampton, where he lived for the rest of his life.¹ His father Samuel was a bootmaker, but he died in 1854 when his son was only six, meaning that Tommy had to start work in the shoe industry before he was seven, since his “was a very poor household, and though his mother married again, the family were always on the border line of necessity.”² He never went to day school, and, after becoming apprenticed to a bootmaker,³ had to get his education in the Sunday Schools that existed for working children. Later, while himself working as a bootmaker, Nobles became an infant teacher at the Baptist School in Northampton, and worked as a Sunday School teacher for the rest of his life.⁴

As a child Nobles had joined the temperance Band of Hope, and he seems to have begun giving magic lantern shows for that organisation in 1881, when he would have been 34.⁵ In 1894 he was elected as one of the Lantern Secretaries of the Northampton Temperance and Band of Hope Union, and shortly afterwards became its principal lanternist,⁶ the local papers carrying regular reports of meetings at which “Mr T. Nobles manipulated the lantern.” By 1900 he was having to compete with the cinematograph at big Band of Hope events,⁷ but remained undeterred. “Some people,” he recalled, “warned me that the Cinema would cut me out, but I have been astonished to find that my lantern has been more popular than ever, and wherever I go children run to me and say, ‘When are you coming to our school again?’”⁸

The key to Nobles’ continuing popularity was probably that he served those small rural communities where cinema was unprofitable. In 1901-02 he gave 80 magic lantern shows for the Northampton Temperance and Band of Hope Union, at a range of small venues,⁹ and by 1908-09 this had risen to 130 shows, in delivering which he “walked 400 miles and travelled by train and tram-car 301 miles.”¹⁰ These lantern shows sometimes contained a political element, for, like his father, Nobles was a passionate supporter of the Liberals, and idolised William Gladstone. In 1909, a year of great political debate, he projected both *The Life of Gladstone* and *The Benefits of Free Trade*, and, although naturally “unassuming and modest”, spoke passionately about his childhood in the ‘Hungry Forties’, and stressed the need for continued support of Free Trade and “political freedom.”¹¹

In 1910-11 Nobles gave another 138 shows for the Union,¹² often using a hundred or more slides, presumably both bought and hired.¹³ The local press reports give an insight into the type of shows he provided, after he had finished his day’s work as a “Boot Maker & Repairer.”¹⁴ In March 1910, in the Baptist Chapel at Farthingstone, 12 miles from Northampton, he projected *The Two Golden Lilies* (Bamforth) as part of a service, then added *A Trip to the Paris Exhibition, 1900* (York).¹⁵ At the December 1910 General Election, which the Liberals won, he helped project the poll results onto a screen in the Northampton Market Square, as they came in by telephone from the Press Association.¹⁶ In January 1911, at the Congregational Chapel in Flore, nine miles from Northampton, he gave a show consisting of *A Tour Through London*, *Flowers of Our Garden*, *Pets of Our Home*, *Views of the Isle of Wight*, and *The Doctor’s Fee*.¹⁷ In April 1911 his show at the Baptist Chapel in Brafield, four miles outside Northampton, consisted of *A Trip Through Australia*, *A Visit to the Falls of Niagara* (Riley), and *A Peep Behind the Scenes* (Bamforth).¹⁸



Around Northampton there was said to be “scarcely a village which does not know him and his lantern lectures.”¹⁹ Noble’s shows were often advertised with no more than “a scrap of paper in a little cottage window” but it was still noted that often, when the day came, he “trudged across the village green carrying his own lantern apparatus to the joyous welcome of happy little ones, and in the small chapel or schoolroom ... filled the role of lecturer and lanternist combined.”²⁰ These shows were enormously popular with children, and his appeal seems to have come from the rapport he had developed through his long experience as a Sunday School teacher. In April 1912 he returned to the Brafield Baptist Chapel, this time showing *A Tour Through London*, a “pathetic narrative” entitled *Mother* (York), slides of children, flowers, and fruit, and more illustrated hymns.²¹ In February 1913 his show at Hackleton Chapel, six miles outside Northampton, included *The Children’s Letter to God*, *Adam’s Fall*, *Paddy and His Pig*, and *Mother*, plus illustrated hymns.²² In August 1913 his Sunday School show for the Providence Chapel in Northampton consisted of *The Torn Bible*, *Sweep and Whitewasher* (Butcher), “a number of flower studies”, and several illustrated hymns.²³

By now Nobles’ popularity was such that a public appeal for a testimonial raised more than £60 and in December 1913 the presentation was made by the local Liberal MP before a large audience including two children from every Band of Hope and Sunday School to which he had given shows. As well as money, Nobles received a gold watch and chain, and an illuminated address bound in leather, commemorating his work of “more than 32 years as lanternist and

lecturer", during which he had travelled thousands of miles by road and rail to the "obscurest places". The Secretary of the Northamptonshire Sunday School Union bore witness to the great popularity of these rural shows: "If Mr Nobles went to any village in the wilds of Northamptonshire, the whole village would turn out as soon as they had learnt that he and his lantern had arrived." In a sympathetic gesture, the Mayoress also presented his wife Mariah with a divan couch, in recognition of the "long weary nights" that she spent at home waiting for her husband to return.²⁴

Nobles continued the old tradition of itinerant lanternist well into the twentieth century. He always carried his own equipment, recalling that "I walked all my journeys with my luggage on my back", until advancing age finally forced him to use a handcart.²⁵ The village chapels where he gave his shows would not have had gas or electricity, and Nobles could not have carried the cylinders necessary for limelight, so many of his shows must have used oil illumination. He preferred to save these small venues the cost of transport "by walking home ... even in winter time" and one supporter noted "I have seen him pushing a truck heavily laden with lantern kit and the next Sunday he has been preaching in a neighbouring pulpit with much acceptance to those who have heard him. There are many men who can preach, but hardly one of them but what would be real hurt if they were even seen pushing a truck".²⁶ In March 1919, when aged 72, Nobles still chose to walk the five miles to Rothersford in rain and snow with his lantern on his back, then give his show and walk home again, although "for about 40 yards each way [he] had to wade through flood water."²⁷

In 1920-21 Nobles was still fit enough to give 134 lantern lectures around Northampton for the Band of Hope Union,²⁸ although by now, aged 74, he would have been entertaining the children and grandchildren of his original village audiences. However, in January 1924, following "a severe illness a few years ago and two recent accidents",²⁹ he reluctantly announced his retirement after 30 years as the Union's lanternist.³⁰ A thousand people contributed an average of three shillings each to a retirement fund, and in February 1924 the Mayor of Northampton presented Nobles with a cheque for £151, plus a framed photograph of himself and his lantern. This photograph had been taken by Henry Cooper, a local photographer, who also issued it as the postcard shown here, and produced a second framed print to

hang in the Band of Hope Office. In reply, "Mr Nobles said though he had given up all his official work he did not intend to give up everything": "If he and his lantern were needed they would be ready."³¹

Nobles certainly did not stop giving shows, and in 1931

celebrated 50 years as a Band of Hope lanternist, having addressed 103 meetings in the previous year, apparently showing slides at most of them. Nobles considered this 'a fair average', suggesting that in his years with the Band of Hope he could have given as many as 5,000 lantern performances, drawing on what was now a collection of at least a thousand slides.³² In March 1933 the annual Council meeting of what was now the Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire Temperance and Band of Hope Union heard that in the previous year Nobles, now 85, had managed to give 30 lantern shows.³³ But his health was poor and he died a month later, on 13 April 1933, bequeathing his slides to the Northampton Sunday School Union.³⁴ It was the end of a remarkable career as a lanternist, and Nobles left behind many people who, along with the owner of this postcard, could recall "in our childhood days, the thrill of excitement that Mr Nobles and his lantern gave to us".³⁵ It was said that the organiser of one of Nobles' shows had once remarked that "he was sure Tom Nobles would have a good place in Heaven", to which his wife Mariah replied "See that he has plenty of room for his lantern, or I am sure he will not be happy."³⁶

REFERENCES

- 1851 Census entry for 4 Edmund's Square, Northampton; 'The Children's Man', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 4 April 1913, p.3, col.3
- 'The Children's Friend', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 23 February 1924, p.3, col.1
- Ibid.
- 'The Children's Friend', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 23 February 1924, p.3, col.2
- 'Northampton and Roundabout / Tommy Nobles', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 23 March 1931, p.2, col.6
- 'Northampton Temperance and Band of Hope Union', *Northampton Daily Reporter*, 5 September 1894, p.4 col.2; 'Northampton Temperance and Band of Hope Union', *Northampton Mercury*, 20 October 1899, p.7 col.6
- 'Northampton Band of Hope Bazaar', *Northampton Daily Reporter*, 17 November 1900, p.3 col.2
- 'The Children's Friend', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 23 February 1924, p.3, col.2
- 'Northampton Band of Hope Union', *Northampton Daily Reporter*, 27 October 1902, p.3, col.4
- 'Country News', *Northampton Mercury*, 12 November 1909, p.8, col.1
- 'Farthingstone', *Northampton Mercury*, 2 April 1909, p.8, col.6; 'Fifty Years Ago', *Northampton Mercury*, 10 December 1909, p.3, col.4; 'Mr. Tom Nobles', *Northampton Mercury*, 12 December 1913, p.5, col.2
- 'Temperance Union', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 20 November 1911, p.3, col.3
- 'Harleston', *Northampton Mercury*, 23 March 1906, p.5, col.7; 'Band of Hope Meetings', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 23 October 1915, p.5, col.4; 'Town and District', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 3 March 1916, p.7, col.1
- 1911 Census entry for 18 Palmerston Road, Northampton
- 'Farthingstone', *Northampton Mercury*, 4 March 1910, p.8, col.4
- 'Beating the Record', *Northampton Mercury*, 16 December 1910, p.9, col.6
- 'Flore', *Northampton Mercury*, 27 January 1911, p.9, col.6
- 'Brafield', *Northampton Mercury*, 21 April 1911, p.9, col.3
- 'Northampton and Roundabout / Mr. T. Nobles', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 24 August 1927, p.2, col.6
- 'One of the True Nobles' (letter from C.M. Purvis), *Northampton Daily Echo*, 25 August 1930, p.3, col.2
- 'Brafield', *Northampton Mercury*, 5 April 1912, p.7, col.1
- 'Hackleton', *Northampton Mercury*, 7 February 1913, p.10, col.1
- 'Town and District / Lantern Service', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 27 August 1913, p.4, col.3
- 'The Children's Man', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 4 April 1913, p.3, col.3; 'Mr. Thomas Nobles', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 10 December 1913, p.3, cols.1-2
- 'The Children's Friend', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 23 February 1924, p.3, col.2
- 'Mr. Tom Nobles' (letter from Charles Battle), *Northampton Daily Echo*, 6 December 1913, p.4, col.2
- 'Country Notes', *Northampton Mercury*, 28 March 1919, p.4 col.1
- 'Band of Hope Union', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 7 November 1921, p.5, col.4
- 'The Children's Friend', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 23 February 1924, p.3, col.1
- 'Mr. T. Nobles' Retirement', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 12 January 1924, p.8, col.2
- 'Mr. T. Nobles', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 25 February 1924, p.3, col.3; 'Mr. T. Nobles', *Northampton Daily Echo*, p.8, col.2
- 'Tommy Nobles', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 23 March 1931, p.2, col.6; 'Tommy Nobles', *Northampton Mercury & Herald*, 27 March 1931, p.5, col.4; 'Declining Attendance at Sunday Schools', *Northampton Mercury & Herald*, 2 February 1934, p.13, col.3
- 'Appeal to Youth Movements', *Northampton Mercury & Herald*, 17 March 1933, p.4, col.5
- 'Supreme Work of Life', *Northampton Mercury & Herald*, 21 April 1933, p.3; 'Declining Attendance at Sunday Schools', *Northampton Mercury & Herald*, 2 February 1934, p.13, col.3
- 'Readers' Views / The Nobles Testimonial', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 14 January 1924, p.6, col.5
- 'The Children's Man', *Northampton Daily Echo*, 4 April 1913, p.3, col.3

