



AN OCCASIONAL LANTERNIST: ESTELLE THOMSON (1894-1953)

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A rather cursory examination of the *Lucerna* database of people known to be involved with the magic lantern, especially pre-WW2, shows that women were vastly outnumbered by men. While some women were listed as 'occasional lanternists' most seem to be either subjects of lantern slides, photographed to illustrate stories, colourers of slides or writers of poems, hymns and stories that were used as slide subjects.

An earlier issue of *The Magic Lantern* (No. 16, September 2018) concentrated on women lanternists in celebration of the centenary of (some) women getting the vote in the United Kingdom in 1918. To these women I now add one more whose involvement with the lantern fits several of the aforementioned categories.

Estelle Comrie-Smith was born in Glasgow, Scotland, c.1894, the daughter of George Comrie-Smith, photographer and artist, and Ethel, née Thomson, also an artist. Both were keen naturalists and holidayed in the

Scottish Highlands and the Lake District of Cumbria, north-west England. Estelle became a teacher of physical culture and eurhythmics until her marriage to her second cousin Aubrey in 1917.¹

Aubrey Frederick von Stieglitz was a descendant of Baron Heinrich Ludwig von Stieglitz who had emigrated from Saxony to Ireland in the late 1700s, some of his grandsons emigrating to Tasmania in the mid-1800s.² Aubrey was second generation Australian born and enlisted in the Australian Infantry Forces during the First World War,



Banksia collina – Hill banksia



Grevillia robusta – Silky oak



Quinine berry



Brisbane boronia



Pale vanilla lily

being awarded the Military Medal in 1917. At around this time he changed his surname, reverting to his mother's maiden name, Thomson,³ probably because of the very strong anti-German feeling in Australia at the time and the discrimination against anyone who sounded in any way German. Estelle and Aubrey shared a common great grandfather.

Settling in Queensland after the War, Estelle was fascinated by the Australian wildflowers growing there. She was unable to find anything much in the way of publications on these and began sketching the plants, producing an illustrated book on the subject in 1929.⁴

From here she ran a weekly 'Wildflowers' column in the *Brisbane Courier*, followed by a column 'Nature's Way' in the *Telegraph* until about 1950. She also lectured at schools and Women's Clubs, often using hand-coloured lantern slides of her drawings.⁵

In an article about Estelle, a Queensland paper wrote the following: "Her gift for drawing has been a great asset to her, for she has been able to make her own illustrations. She has several hundred pen and ink drawings of wildflowers, and sets of these have been exhibited at the 'Wildflower Show' in Albert Hall. In addition to her black and white work, Mrs Thomson has painted other specimens on tiny black boards, slightly bigger than post-cards, doing the flowers first in plain white, and then tinting them in their delicate colours."⁶

The State Library of Queensland holds, and has digitised, 18 of Estelle's slides.⁷ The illustrations here are from these magic lantern slides. Whether these were the complete set she used is unknown and no lecture notes have been found. One of the Library conservators has examined the slides on my behalf and it would appear that photographs of Estelle's pen and ink drawings



Tecoma australis

were printed on the slides and then hand coloured by Estelle. While many of the slide illustrations are of the same drawings used in her newspaper columns, there are a few that are a different version.

While Estelle was a prolific writer, artist and lecturer on wild flowers I can only find a few references to her use of slides during her lifetime. Whether this is because of a lack of mention in the brief newspaper reports or because she preferred to use her drawings, as is reported in some cases – and therefore fits the description of 'occasional lanternist' – is not known. What is known and is appreciated today is that her work on native Queensland plants played a great part in the knowledge and appreciation of the flora of northern Australia.

Estelle was also involved in various clubs, often as president or secretary, including the Lyceum Club, Brisbane Women's Club, Queensland Naturalists Club⁸ and the 1st Australian Anti-Tank

Regiment Welfare Club, raising funds for soldiers in the Regiment.⁹ During this busy life she also bore and raised four children.

REFERENCES

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8. Estelle Thomson obituary, *Brisbane Telegraph*, 7 September 1953, p.14
9. *The Telegraph* [Brisbane], 23 April 1940 p.10