

# The Magic Lantern

## EVERYDAY HEROES

### Lantern slides and the evolution of the Victorian hero

Trevor Beattie

Ozzy Osborne famously said "I was never much of a fighter. Better a live coward than a dead hero". Whilst Ozzy may have summarised the modern attitude to heroes, he couldn't be further away from the Victorian view of them. This article examines the Victorian image of the hero as depicted through lantern slides, describing how it gave way to a very different mindset in the Edwardian age.

The archetypal Victorian heroic narrative features in a multitude of lantern readings. A good example is the life model set of 1891 from York & Son that accompanies the recitation by W.A. Eaton titled *The Fireman's Wedding*. An elderly bystander vividly describes to the crowd gathered at a fireman's wedding how the groom rescued his future wife from a burning building. This is the traditional Victorian story of heroism: danger faced bravely, troubles overcome, general acclaim and a swift reward. Here the fireman gets his

girl, but sometimes the reward is monetary, a medal – or in heaven. There are no shades of grey, no ambiguity and no hesitation. Heroism is the primrose path to fame, praise and popularity.

There are many different types of Victorian hero in lantern slides. I suppose the most obvious category is the military hero. Fig. 1 shows Piper McKay rallying the Highlanders at the battle of Magersfontein in the Boer War in 1899. It comes from a set called *Britons and Boers* that was an early example of documentary reporting, with slides added as the war progressed. In fact Magersfontein was a crushing defeat for the Highlanders who were marched up to the Boer trenches in a tight column overnight and then spent the day tied down by gunfire in the scorching sun before retreating with heavy losses. Piper McKay did indeed try to rally them, for which he was given a medal, but he failed and was wounded.<sup>1</sup>

The heavy gloss that the Victorians painted over the horrors of war made it a rich topic for my next category – comic heroes. Fig. 2 is the final slide from the comic monologue *How Bill Adams Won the Battle of Waterloo*, illustrated by a wonderful set of slides from about 1890.



2. How Bill Adams Won the Battle of Waterloo, c.1890

Another obvious category is explorer heroes. In Fig. 3 Stanley is meeting Livingstone in 1871. Stanley swore he uttered the words, "Dr Livingstone, I presume" but the page about that moment was torn out of his journal. It is possible that he thought the quotation up later and the page went missing in an act of sabotage, either by him or by a farsighted collector. By the time he returned from Africa the greeting was famous and the hero had been created.

Dead heroes receive a lot of attention on lantern slides. Many life model series end with the hero's death and I've illustrated the category with a slide of the state funeral of the Duke of Wellington in 1852 (Fig. 4). Wellington, like Nelson who died 47 years before him, is one of the Victorian era's favourite dead heroes. In fact they are buried next to each other in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral in London.

Victorian heroes were not exclusively male – indeed there are female heroes across most categories. There are many candidates here, including Grace Darling and Florence Nightingale, but I have chosen Bessie swinging on the bell to prevent it ringing to signal the execution of her lover in *Curfew Must not Ring Tonight* (Fig. 5).

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1. Piper McKay from *Britons and Boers*, c.1900



3. Stanley meeting Livingstone, Riley Brothers, 1899

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4. State funeral of the Duke of Wellington, The Record Reign of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, York & Son, 1897



5. Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight, York & Son, 1888



6. The New Kingdom, Bamforth & Co., 1897

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The Victorians did not expect all of their heroes to be grand, rich or military. In fact another major category is lowly, impoverished heroes. To illustrate this I've chosen a slide from Bamforth & Co.'s set *The New Kingdom* (Fig. 6), a song of 1885 in which a poverty-stricken waif comforts another as she dies. There is no better illustration that the Victorians occupied a different world from us than its grim final verse:

"One night when the snow was falling, he came for the old sweet tale;  
But her voice began to falter, her face grew wan and pale;  
One kiss on the gold crowned forehead and he knew the stranger had come;  
To show her the beautiful pathway, that leads to the kingdom called home."

To understand properly the Victorian concept of the hero we have to remember that this was a popular song.

There are many other examples of child heroes in life model sets. In Fig. 7 we see a slide from *The Little Hero*, a recitation by Robert Craven in which a young stowaway, when discovered and threatened with death, kneels down to pray and is forgiven and adopted by the ship's Mate. Whilst the child is undoubtedly heroic this has always seemed to me to be primarily a tale about the cruelty of seafarers.

Fig. 8 shows Bamforth & Co.'s depiction of Nell, the hero of George R. Sims' *Billy's Rose* of 1879. She is lying dead in the snow clutching the rose she has miraculously gathered for her dying brother. Nell exemplifies my last four categories, being a dead, female, lowly, child hero. There is a good case for saying that this powerful but bleak set epitomises the life-mode genre.

At the other end of the social scale there are royal heroes. Fig. 9 depicts the beheading of Mary, Queen of Scots from the York & Son set of the same name from 1885. There is a Pythonesque unreality about it. Life models were a domestic medium, not a good way of depicting epic historical events.

My final category is railway heroes. In Fig. 10 Fireman Blacklock is jumping between speeding locomotives to bring a runaway train back under control in the Revd David Macrae's *The Railway Chase* of 1893. But Blacklock fails – which immediately qualifies him for the dead category as well. The final sentences of this well-written reading are further evidence that the Victorians saw no need for a happy ending:

"the huge carriages of both trains came on like successive explosions and, leaping madly over one another, piled themselves up into a hideous quivering mountain of agony and death. Some, toppling over, rolled aside into the darkness; and a thousand shrieks rang wildly up into the shuddering air of night".<sup>2</sup>

"A hideous quivering mountain of agony and death" certainly puts Netflix's *Stranger Things* into perspective!

I've outlined ten categories of hero and I'm sure you can think of many more. There is, however, one feature they all have in common. They are all individuals. One man, woman or child facing out the odds, alone. There is no sense of collective, group or communal action. The Victorian hero acts alone – and often dies alone.

I'd like to suggest that one man signalled a change to this prevailing Victorian 'groupthink' about heroes – George Cole Boroughs. He was born in Tewkesbury in 1857 and qualified as a company secretary. In 1881 he married Laura Neustadt who was born in Collinsville, Illinois, and



7. The Little Hero, Bamforth & Co., 1892



8. Billy's Rose, Bamforth & Co., 1898



9. Mary Queen of Scots, York & Son, 1885





10. Blacklock in The Railway Chase, York & Son, 1893



11. A Polish Hero, York & Son, 1900



12. Title slide for Everyday Heroes, York & Son

they lived in Battersea where he became a poet as well as a prosperous man of business. They had three sons and a daughter. In 1911 they emigrated to Canada and he died in Napa, California in 1928 at the age of 71.

These are the bare outlines of his life but there is one thing we know for certain about George Boroughs. He was a terrible poet. His first collection of 1893 was called *Vision Voices* and the reviewer from the *North Eastern Daily Gazette* was damning in his faint praise. He focuses on the beautiful binding before pronouncing: "if his poems are not works of genius they always display a cultured taste and a loyalty to true nobility. Though they may not be irradiated by the light that never was on sea or land, they are inspiring and elevating."<sup>3</sup> The whole tone of the review is that the poems may be rubbish but the subject matter is noble.

It was Boroughs' second volume that generated two lantern sets from York & Son. The book was called *A Polish Hero* and Fig. 11 shows a slide from the set of the same name from about 1900. It tells of members of the Polish nobility whose sled is pursued by wolves. Their servant gives himself up as a victim to the pack to allow his mistress and her daughter to escape. You can judge the quality of the reading from the following extract:

"He stood in the snow track behind them,  
He folded his arms on his breast,  
But he was alone and unaided,  
The wolves a too numerous host".

The servant is a traditional Victorian hero, an individual against the pack, qualifying as lowly – and then dead. But it is the other lantern slide reading by Boroughs that I want to focus on.

This is called *Everyday Heroes* (Fig. 12) and it marks a major shift at the turn of the century from the hero as individual to the Edwardian idea of heroic groups, classes, nations and professions. Boroughs starts by describing the traditional heroic model, then declares:

"But the world will, some day, find  
Heroes of a nobler kind.  
Humbler heroes far, yet they  
Greater, in a better way,  
Are than victors who count gain  
By the number of the slain."

He then defines his own categories of hero as collectives – firemen, lifeboatmen, miners, doctors, nurses and railway workers. His perspective on the work of a fireman is very different from Eaton's in the *Fireman's Wedding*:

"And should his life be sacrificed – well then,  
His work is done – let's hope he'll live again.

He may be knighted in that other sphere,  
Much smaller heroes dukedoms get down here."

The final stanza praises:

"The humble drudge, whose daily round of toil  
Is all he knows of life. As some great coil  
It binds him in, till, like a bark bound tree,  
There is no room for his humanity.  
But self, and wife, and children must be fed,  
And days and nights of labour lead to bread.  
And so he toils, and toils, and toils – and then  
Goes to the poorhouse when three score and ten.  
The living out of such a joyless life  
Strains courage more than battle's din and strife."<sup>4</sup>

This set, produced at the very end of the Victorian era, is unlike anything that has come before. It is less a lantern slide reading than a manifesto. Its focus shifts from the heroic individual to groups working within society. The chief concern is with the struggling poor of both sexes. Some of it is truly radical, for instance: "He may be knighted in that other sphere, /Much smaller heroes dukedoms get down here".

Boroughs' recitation marks a realignment from Victorian individual heroes to the stronger Edwardian sense of the collective and the obligations of society, marked by subsequent sets such as *Our Firemen* and *Our Lifeboatmen* (both W. Butcher & Sons, 1901). It presages the arrival of the Liberal government in 1905 to 1915 which crafted the 'People's Budget' and introduced a great deal of social legislation, including old age pensions and unemployment insurance.

These are big claims for a small poet but I think they are justified. The heroes we choose say a lot about us and it is right to look at popular culture for signals of wider changes in society. Lantern slides were a beacon, both reflecting and projecting the nation's concerns. *Everyday Heroes* was a clear sign that radical social change was on its way.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Piper McKay had a fascinating military career. He joined the Seaforth Highlanders in 1896 and took part in the Diamond Jubilee procession in 1897. After recovering from the wounds sustained at Magersfontein he was involved in many of the key battles of the Boer War. He and 13 others were in a camp ambushed by the Boers who killed 11 of them, with only Mackay and two comrades being taken prisoner. He escaped the next day and returned to his unit. During the First World War he joined the 2nd Volunteer Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders and was finally discharged in 1919, 23 years after first joining the Army.
2. The complete text can be found in the MLS Readings Library
3. *North Eastern Daily Gazette*, Thursday 1 June 1893
4. The complete poem can be found in the MLS Readings Library