

# The Magic Lantern

## THE CHILDREN IN THE WOOD

Robin Palmer

At this time of year many in the UK might spot a poster advertising a seasonal production of the popular pantomime *Babes in the Wood*. Modern productions tell a story of two children taken into the woods by two robbers on the orders of their wicked uncle but saved by Robin Hood and Maid Marian. All ends happily with the wicked uncle unmasked and the children's fortune restored. The original folklore tale from East Anglia, said to be true, is far more tragic. The first known

publication was in 1595 by Thomas Millington of Norwich as an anonymous broadside ballad under the title *The Children in the*

*Wood, or The Norfolk Gentleman's Last Will and Testament* (Figs 1 and 2). The events were said to have happened at Watton and nearby Wayland Wood, about 20 miles west of Norwich. Griston Hall, the uncle's home, still stands today and the children are said still to haunt Wayland Wood. There are other places that claim to be the origin – 'Blackbury Wood' appears in another early publication. The author of the 1595 ballad states that the story was old by then but they did not believe it was connected with King Richard III and the disappearance of the Princes in the Tower in the 1480s.

The synopsis of the story in the first published version states: "the Norfolk gent, his will and testament, and how he committed the keeping of his children to his own brother who dealt most wickedly with them and how God plagued him for it." The story had a tragic ending for the children who perished in the woods but the uncle too suffered. The story became widely known and reproduced in many publications. A



2. Woodcuts from the version of the ballad published in 1595

### *The Children in the Wood.* OR, THE Norfolk Gentleman's Last Will and Testament.

"I can by no means give an epitome with this title better than that first written on the murder of King Edward V. and his brother in the tower, King Henry VIII. whose defendants have ever since looked the papers, and a good need not have had recourse to fiction to have recorded his story. He might perhaps have named the prince, and had it been shortly after his reign, it would have been a suspicion to the sovereign. The blunder King Richard appeared, the more the nation thought themselves obliged to their great deity for showing. They have but one plea then left, which is, This Old Ballad may perhaps have been wrote in the reign of Richard; but I can assure them, from the little knowledge I have of Old Songs, That it was not more of a hundred years after his death; and I am apt to think, the poor had some private story in them, and no judgment, I dare assure.



1. The title and introduction to the 'ballade' published by Thomas Middleton in 1595

ballad version printed in Newcastle in 1740 began with the following summary:

"The NORFOLK GENTLEMAN's last will and testament: who, on his death bed, committed the keeping of his two children (a Boy and a Girl) to his own brother, who did most wickedly cause them to be destroyed, that so he might possess himself of the children's estate, but by the just Judgment of God, the murder was found out, himself, and all that he had were destroyed from off the face of the earth."

The diarist Samuel Pepys had a book version in his collection, printed in 1670 at Bow Churchyard – now in the Magdalene College collection, Cambridge University. Gradually the reference to the last will and testament disappeared – for example, in an 1802 version published in London and York with the title *Tragical History of the Children in the Wood* – and eventually the title itself became, more commonly, *The Babes in the Wood*. Both a picture book by Randolph Caldecott published in 1879 (Fig. 3) and a children's book in the May Bells Series published in New York in 1900 have this last title.



3. The Randolph Caldecott picture book version published in 1879 by Frederick Warne & Co.

The story first appeared on stage as an opera by Samuel Arnold (rumoured to be the son of George II's daughter Princess Amelia) at the Haymarket Theatre, London, in 1793. The children survived in this version and rather curiously were restored to their parents who were supposedly dead by this time. Other versions around this time retained the tragic ending including *The Delightful Play of the Children in the Wood* of 1809 printed by Howard and Evan in London, and the first pantomime version, *Harlequin and Cock Robin: or, The Babes in the Wood*, produced at Drury Lane in 1827. Again in a version at the Haymarket Theatre in 1856 the children perished. The character of Robin Hood was introduced in an 1867 production and he saved the children.

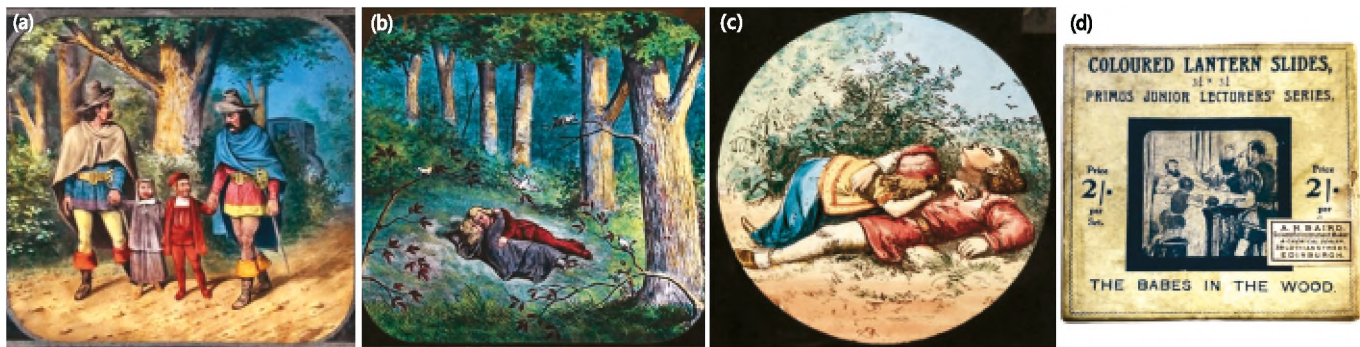
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4. Commercial magic lantern slide sets of the story: (a) and (b) The robbers take the children into the wood and the children being covered by leaves by the birds (Newton & Co.); (c) The children fall asleep (York & Son); (d) The Primus Junior Lecturers' Series (W. Butcher & Sons)

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However an 1874 pantomime at Covent Garden returned to the original ending and also included the death of the wicked uncle.

While generally played by juveniles or actors who can pass as such, the children have been played by comedians – and in the 1897 production at Drury Lane, Dan Leno and Herbert Campbell took these roles. Dan Leno had in fact played the wicked Baroness in an earlier production at Drury Lane in 1888 with the all-encompassing title *Babes in the Wood and Robin Hood and his Merry Men and Harlequin who killed Cock Robin*.

The first film version appeared in 1917 (a Fox Film 36-minute 'short' in the USA) and in 1932 Walt Disney produced an animated version – both had a happy ending for the children. Both also 'borrowed' from the fairytale of Hansel and Gretel with a witch's house appearing in the wood. Modern versions continue with the happy ending and the wicked uncle unmasked.

What about magic lantern slides? Before 1900 there were at least three mass-produced magic lantern sets available with the title *Children in the Wood*. The *Lucerna* database lists those by York & Sons (first produced in or before 1888), Newton & Co. (in or before 1888) and Alfred Pumphrey (in or before 1891). Soon after Theobald & Co. produced a set (in or before 1903) and later W. Butcher & Sons produced their *Babes in the Wood* (1909-10). See Fig. 4 for examples. The MLS Readings Library has three or four versions, all different in some aspect of the story.

## THE WILKIE SLIDES

The handpainted slides by Edmund H. Wilkie, the lantern lecturer and slide maker associated with the Royal Polytechnic Institution, are



5. Two of the Wilkie slides with description and signature. No. 2 'The Merchant making his will' (left) and No. 6 'The Villains fight' (right)

different and unique – his personal set – and I believe probably pre-date the commercial sets, being painted prior to 1881 when the Royal Polytechnic Institution closed. Generally Wilkie included "late of the Royal Polytechnic Institution" on his slides after this and that is missing here. Each slide is 3¼ inches square in a wooden frame with a brief handwritten description, is personally signed by Wilkie and individually numbered from '1' to '9' (see Figs 5 and 6). The complete set has two additional slides – a curtain and a flame/smoke effect slide. Curiously Wilkie chose not to illustrate the abandoned children dying and being covered with leaves by the robins. Perhaps he believed this was too horrific for his audience. However he included an extra scene (slide 8), not in the original 1595 ballad, of the 'good' surviving villain in prison going mad, presumably having confessed his crime and implicated the wicked uncle (Fig. 6). While the set is not an exact match due to Wilkie's interpretation, the other slides fit the original ballad reasonably well. These are the handwritten descriptions:

(curtain slide)

1. Merchant departing in the morning
  2. The merchant making his will
  3. Death of the merchant. Children confided to the uncle
  4. Departure of the villains with the children
  5. Riding to the forest
  6. The villains fight
  7. Departure of the surviving villain
  8. The surviving villain goes mad
  9. Destruction of the wicked uncle's farm
- Effect to fire scene [flame/smoke effect slide]

It is worth summarising the story, including the missing scene, before looking at the slides, reproduced overleaf. There was a rich merchant



6. Wilkie's additional scene, slide No. 8 'The surviving villain goes mad' (top) and an enlargement of its description (bottom)





*Curtain slide*



*Slide 1. Merchant departing in the morning*



*Slide 2. The merchant making his will*

and his wife with two children – a son and daughter. The parents died and the children, and their fortune, were put into the care of their uncle. He hired two villains (the 'ruffians', or 'good' and 'bad' robbers) to murder the children deep in the woods in order to gain their inheritance. One villain relented and fought the other, killing his murderous companion. The children were abandoned by the surviving villain, who told them he was going to fetch food, and left to their fate deep in the woods. In some versions they were looked after by guardian fairies and ate berries to survive. However they fell asleep in each other's arms and sadly died. Robin redbreasts found them and the birds covered them with leaves as a shroud (this is based on the superstition that any robin, upon finding the corpse of a dead person, would cover the remains with leaves or moss). The wrath of God fell on the uncle. His conscience and his house were haunted by fiends from hell. His barns were set on fire, his goods were consumed, the land was made barren and his livestock died in the fields. His two sons died on a voyage to Portugal. Finally, seven years later, the uncle died in debtor's prison in wanton misery with all his lands mortgaged.

The full words of the 1595 ballad can be found at [www.literarynorfolk.co.uk/Norfolk/Poems/babes\\_in\\_the\\_wood.htm](http://www.literarynorfolk.co.uk/Norfolk/Poems/babes_in_the_wood.htm) and in an image of the 1740 edition at [hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll3/id/5572/](http://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll3/id/5572/).



*Slide 3. Death of the merchant. Children confided to the uncle*



*Slide 4. Departure of the villains with the children*



*Slide 5. Riding to the forest*



*Slide 6. The villains fight*



*Slide 7. Departure of the surviving villain*



*Slide 8. The surviving villain goes mad*



*Slide 9. Destruction of the wicked uncle's farm, with flame/smoke effect slide above*