

# The Magic Lantern



1. The book (top) and inside pages showing Wilkie's library label (bottom left), and signature with Royal Polytechnic Institution connection (bottom middle). Inside, the last Royal Polytechnic programme (right)

## EDMUND HENRY WILKIE

### A voyage of discovery

Martin Gilbert

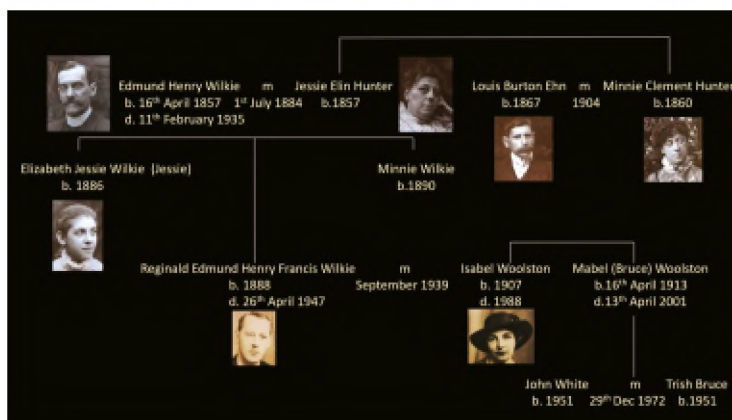
In April 1988 an incredible lantern slide collection, surrounded by myth and legend, was auctioned off at Sotheby's in London. This had been allegedly found in a garden shed at 70 Dyne Road, Kilburn – the property of the late Mr Edmund Wilkie. Fortunately the whole collection was purchased by MLS member Robin Palmer and, as a result, many other members have enjoyed seeing the wonderful slides and sequences from this important acquisition over the years, performed at our quarterly meetings and also as part of convention programmes. However, there was no mention of Edmund Wilkie in the 1988 auction catalogue description.

This is where I joined the story. In early 2019 a leather-bound book entitled *Polytechnic Papers* surfaced on a well-known online auction platform. Only a few pages were photographed for the sale but clearly visible was Edmund Wilkie's library label applied to the inside of the cover and dated 13 May 1889. This was the date, presumably, when all the papers were bound together. It was also signed (Fig. 1).

I managed to purchase the book late on a Saturday night and contacted the seller direct. During the phone call I arranged to collect my purchase the following morning. Did they know the book's history? "Yes" – Edmund Wilkie had been a relative

they replied. I was speechless – until I managed to ask "Do you have anything else?" Again, "Yes".

The following morning I met John and Trish White and I spent a few memorable hours with them listening to the stories and memories they had of the Wilkie family. Obviously, they had not met Edmund Wilkie themselves, but I hope you find the story they had to tell and the discoveries they revealed as fascinating as I did. Fortunately they agreed to write down their memories for us all to share. It transpired that Trish White's aunt, Isabel, was married to Reginald (Reg) Wilkie, Edmund Wilkie's only son (Fig. 2).



2. The Wilkie family tree

Reg and Isabel married in September 1939 after obtaining a special wartime licence. There was an age difference of 18 years and apparently eyebrows were raised at the time. They lived at 70 Dyne Road – the family home of Edmund Wilkie, which is important to the story (Fig. 3). The family believe that Reg inherited the house from Edmund Wilkie or possibly bought out his two sisters. We will probably never know. There was a will but at present the family cannot locate it. Trish White's recollections:

"When Reg died the house passed to Isabel. Isabel and Reg didn't have any children. Neither did Minnie or Jessie [Reg's sisters] [...] Minnie married but died young, Jessie never married, and Isabel inherited her estate. I was

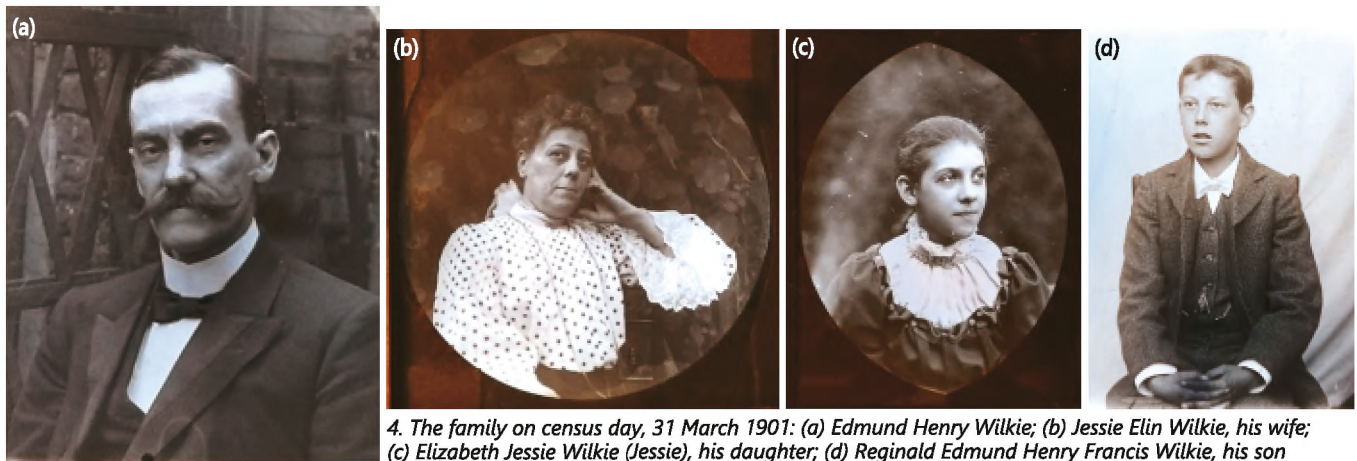


3. 70 Dyne Road, Kilburn. Taken in 1987

#### CONTENTS

Number 36 – September 2023

1. Edmund Henry Wilkie: A voyage of discovery *Martin Gilbert*
2. MLS Notice Board
5. Through the Looking Glass *Pippa Stacey*
6. How the Magic Lantern (Basically) Saved Our Drama Group *James Burgess*
8. Societal Science and Macabre Magic: The lantern performances of George R. Tweedie *Eleonora Paklons*
10. From the Chair *Richard Feltham*
11. The Art of Shadows *Mike Smith*
12. New Lanternists are Most Welcome! Mitsue Ikeda's magic lantern event in Yao *Yoriko Iwata*
13. A Little European Magic 'The Four Seasons'
14. All at Sea *Mary Ann Auckland*
15. Summer Meeting of the MLS *Mary Ann Auckland*



4. The family on census day, 31 March 1901: (a) Edmund Henry Wilkie; (b) Jessie Elin Wilkie, his wife; (c) Elizabeth Jessie Wilkie (Jessie), his daughter; (d) Reginald Edmund Henry Francis Wilkie, his son

(continued from page 1)

Isabel's niece and goddaughter and when she died in 1988, I inherited the house and most of the contents. It seemed that Isabel never fully got over Reg's death. She never really moved on – keeping her dress style and hair exactly the same because 'that was what Reg liked'. She always talked about him as if he was still alive. Whether this was why the house remained unchanged, as a sort of memorial, or lack of funds, we don't know, although I think the house was still much as it had been in Edmund's time.

"From 1956 I spent a large part of the summer holidays staying with Isabel and my grandmother who had moved in with Isabel. I don't remember any changes being made to the house over these years. Isabel had little income in this period. She was a dressmaker and still had customers. There were various students who lodged in the house [...] occupying the top floor and we all ate together.

"As a child I found the house fascinating. To me then it seemed huge – so many rooms and all full of interesting and unusual items. All the pictures on the walls, [...] huge canvasses in ornate gilt frames but even then the subjects were difficult to make out due to the dirt, etc. There were display cases full of small items which I spent ages peering at. I don't think the cases were ever unlocked. [...] Large clocks in most rooms, some under glass domes, and a chiming clock in the dining room. I think most of these were still working at this time. I visited again in 1965 [...] and everything was unchanged. By now Isabel and one tenant were the only people living in the house.

"In early 1987 Isabel fell down the stairs and broke her pelvis. My mother [Mabel] went to stay and [...] was quite shocked at the state of the house. She instigated the selling and clearing of some items. It became apparent that Isabel was by now unable to look after herself and later in 1987 we found a care home in Sheffield and moved her up here."

Some earlier visitors to Wilkie's house had already described it in a report in the *Optical Magic Lantern Journal* of April 1894:

*We recently had, by the courtesy of Mr E. Wilkie, a grand treat—in a word, he invited us to spend an evening with him at his home—and we sat for some hours looking over and admiring a number of the old slides which had created such a sensation at the time when they were publicly exhibited. Before looking at the slides we inspected the lanterns that were used in the exhibition, sketches of which appeared in our issue*



5. The dining table and chairs in 1987

for November last. Pile after pile of the slides were conveyed to the table at which we were seated, and after we were forced to stop by reason of the lateness of the hour, we were informed that what we had seen was only a portion of his immense stock.

The dining table and chairs may be the ones still there in 1987 (Fig. 5). John White's recollections of this period:

"During this time Mabel arranged a visit from Sotheby's (David Battie being one of the visitors – Mabel was very impressed!) and they took and sold several items including some of the larger paintings believed to have been painted by Edmund. None of these were considered to be particularly valuable. I subsequently got involved in helping to clear the house. The house was in a poor state of repair and it was decided to have it re-roofed due to severe leaking. Whilst the scaffolding was in place the house was burgled but little was taken due to the internal door locks. The tenant – Miss Bowker – was still living on the first floor at this time paying only a nominal rent.

"It was difficult to be sure in many cases whether the contents belonged to Edmund. Some could be identified from his will – others were by assumption from their age and/or because of our belief that Edmund was a collector.

"Of the house contents, some were brought here – jewellery, glassware, ivories (Japanese *Netsuke*, etc.) and some lantern slides. Most of these were later sold. There were a lot of books (in poor condition due to the cold and damp, and infested with silverfish). These were mostly in the dining room which was in the basement looking out onto the garden. Some of the books had been written by previous generations of Wilkies – I think one was a vet. [...] Due to their condition they were mainly disposed of. A lot of fairly ordinary pottery and some furniture were sold from the house to a friend of the Sotheby's driver.

"A rough wooden box containing approximately 200 lantern slides – the sort with wooden surrounds and some with mechanisms – and a Thornton Pickard camera went to Sotheby's. I didn't find any magic lanterns and Trish has no memory of any so I don't know what happened to these.

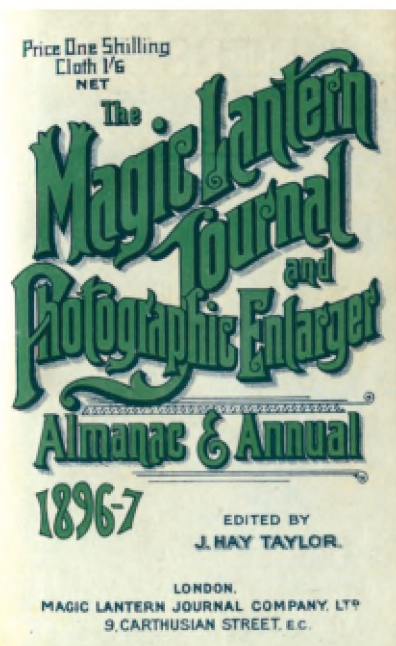
"At some point Miss Bowker moved out. [...] There was a further burglary when fireplaces were removed – the house was fairly empty by this time. Then some squatters gained access and took up residence. It was a long and expensive process to have them evicted. The house was put up for sale and we accepted an offer from a builder rather than risk further problems with squatters, etc."

#### THE CENSUS OF 1901

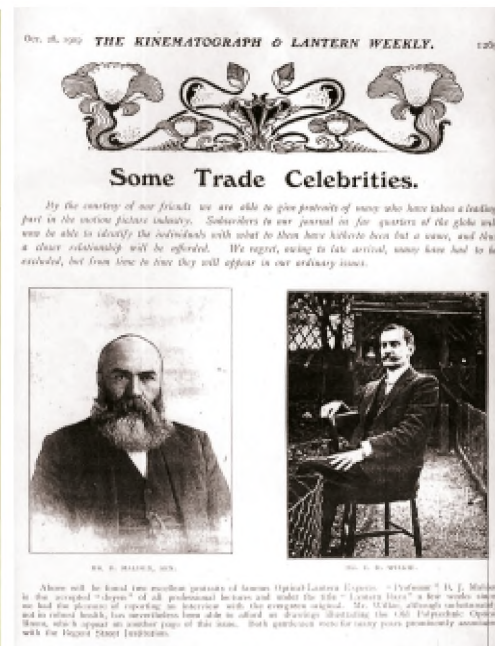
We know that Edmund Wilkie was meticulous at documenting items of importance so no doubt the 1901 Census provides an accurate glimpse of the household. On the day of the Census, 31 March 1901, Edmund



6. Poster from 1877



7. Title page of the presentation Annual



8. The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly with a well-known photograph of Wilkie

appears as head of the household at 114 Maygrove Road, along with his wife Jessie Elin, both aged 43. Edmund was listed as a 'Dealer in Scientific Instruments' working from home. All three children were also entered, Elizabeth Jessie Wilkie (Jessie) b. 1886, Reginald Edmund Henry Francis Wilkie b. 1888 and Minnie Wilkie b. 1890. Three other people were present on that day – Jane E. Hunter (Edmund's mother-in-law), Minnie Clement Hunter (Edmund's sister-in-law) and Louis Burton Ehn, presumably a lodger. Louis Ehn and Minnie Hunter later married in 1904.

Apart from the family's personal memories, I also acquired some Wilkie items. Up to now there have probably been only two known photographs of Edmund Wilkie – I believe the one in Fig. 4, not one of the two (see Fig. 8), may have been taken on the day of the Census, along with those of his wife Jessie Elin, daughter and son.

### EDMUND WILKIE TIMELINE

The following is a timeline of Edmund Wilkie's life compiled from sources including the *Lucerna* web database:

- 1857** Edmund Henry Wilkie is born in Bethnal Green, London, on 16 April 1857.
- 1871** Census record (2 April 1871) shows him resident at 201 Tottenham Court Road, London, listed as a 'Scholar'.
- 1873** Wilkie starts at the Royal Polytechnic Institution at the age of 15. He already had an interest in lanterns but wanted to learn about painting slides and thus became an apprentice under the eye of Mr W.R. Hill, himself a highly skilled and prolific painter of lantern slides.
- 1877** At the age of 19 Edmund Wilkie is employed at the Royal Polytechnic Institute. A later report in *The Optical Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger* (September 1897): "In his earlier stages Mr Wilkie's apparatus and views gradually improved in quality and numbers, until at seventeen years of age he made his debut as a public lecturer, and meeting with considerable success was soon attached to the staff of lecturers of the Polytechnic. Applications were frequently made to the Institution for the loan of first class lectures and lecturers; and to meet this demand the travelling branch was instituted, the dioramic department being filled by Mr B.J. Malden and Mr E.H. Wilkie. Other lecturers on the list also used dissolving views, but did not make them a speciality. Mr Wilkie received a number of engagements through this medium right up to the close of the Institution in 1881."

The poster in Fig. 6 is from the first year of Wilkie's employment at the Polytechnic (1877) and probably advertises his first lecture with the travelling branch.

**1881** Between 1881 and 1884 Edmund Wilkie lived at 4 Pemberton Terrace, Islington, London. In the 1881 Census, taken on 3 April 1881, his occupation is recorded as 'Clerk'. On 29 November 1881 Wilkie shows his own version of the Polytechnic sensation *Lurline* using the title *Recollections of Rheinland* (now in Robin Palmer's Collection) at Kilburn Town Hall. This date was between the initial closure of the Institution and its temporary



9. Reginald and Isabel Wilkie, married in 1939

reprieve. The following year, after it had closed, he gave another version *The Rhine and Its Legends* "with grand dissolving views and dioramic effects" at the Egyptian Hall in London.

- 1884** On 1 July 1884 he marries Jessie Elin Hunter at St John's Church Holloway, London. His occupation is again shown as 'Clerk'.
- 1885** Between 1885 and 1912 he is resident at 114 Maygrove Road, West Hampstead, London.
- 1889** *The Polytechnic Papers* (Fig. 1) are put together by Wilkie on 13 May 1889, perhaps as a legacy for his son, born the year before.
- 1891** The 1891 Census record (5 April 1891) shows Wilkie's occupation as 'Living on his own means'.
- 1895** He invests in property and by 1895 owns a run of five properties in the road including his own house.
- 1896** Edmund is presented with a leather-bound copy of *The Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger Almanac & Annual 1896-7* by the editor J. Hay Taylor (Fig. 7). In the diary section of this publication Wilkie has entered a meeting with Mr W.R. Hill on 1 September 1896.
- 1909** Wilkie appears in *The Kinematograph & Lantern Weekly* (28 October 1909) in an article on 'Some Trade Celebrities' (Fig. 8).
- 1911** In the Census of 1911 (2 April 1911) Wilkie's occupation is given as 'Private Means'
- 1914** From 1914 until his death in 1935, Wilkie resides at 70 Dyne Road, Brondesbury, London.



**1935** Edmund Wilkie died on 11 February 1935, leaving his wife Jessie Elin Wilkie, and also 70 Dyne Road, Brondesbury, London, with the remainder of his collection and personal effects. He left an estate of £9,190 0s. 8d. (worth about £625,000 today) to his son Reginald Edmund Francis Wilkie (Company Director) .

**1939** Reginald and Isabel Wilkie married in September 1939. When Reginald died on 26 April 1947 he left his estate to his wife and his eldest sister Jessie who was probably living with them. His younger sister Minnie did marry but died young.

**WORKS BY WILKIE**

Among the items I acquired were two original watercolour paintings by Edmund Wilkie. One bore a striking resemblance to a magic lantern slide in my collection (Fig. 10). Also shown from the collection are one of Wilkie's dissolving views (Fig. 11) and the most exquisite 'Transit of Venus' slide with original box and original drawings by Wilkie.

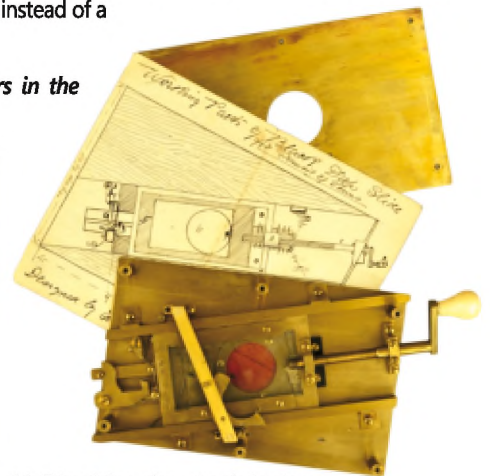
*Painted by Edmund W. Wilkie*



10. The watercolour by Wilkie (top) with label on the back and the magic lantern slide with similar features

Inside *Polytechnic Papers* were five programmes from the last days of the Royal Polytechnic Institution. These covered the last three weeks before the initial closure on 10 September 1881. Over the Christmas period the Polytechnic was given a reprieve, and the collection contained four extremely rare programmes from those four weeks (see Fig. 1). It finally closed its doors on 16 January 1882 with a final evening programme. First there was a final performance of the automaton 'Blondin' at 8.40 pm (in the Great Hall), a final descent of the 'Diving Bell' at 8.45 pm for a fee of 6d. (in the large tank), a 15-minute interval for refreshments at 9 pm, and for first and last time in the history of the Institution the programme concluded at 9.15 pm with a vocal and instrumental concert in the large theatre, instead of a lantern performance.

*There will be more of Wilkie's wonders in the next issue of TML*



11. Dissolving view magic lantern slides by Edmund Wilkie (left)

12. Wilkie's 'Transit of Venus' slide with original drawing (above)