

# SOCIETAL SCIENCE AND MACABRE MAGIC

## The lantern performances of George R. Tweedie

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As summer is drawing to a close and autumn is approaching, the timing could not be more perfect for brewing a pot of tea and cosying up with some ghostly tales. At the recent European Magic History Conference 2023 in Ghent, Belgium, I did just that by discussing the slide sets *Gossip about ghosts* and *Gossip about fairies* compiled by George R. Tweedie. Since its shadowy beginnings (after decades of research we are still not entirely sure that Dutch scientist Christiaan Huygens was the inventor), the magic lantern's history has always been closely intertwined with magic and the macabre. Huygens himself envisioned his invention fit for projecting frolicking skeletons engaging in a *danse macabre* (Fig. 1).

Despite the use of other descriptors such as optical lantern, limelight views, illustrated lecture, etc., the lantern would always remain true to its name and retain its association with magic. I could remind you of the lantern's role in the phantasmagoria spectacles of the early nineteenth century and the special role these performances assigned to supernatural creatures. After the mass executions during the French Revolution, lanternists resurrected victims of the guillotine to frighten the lucky survivors. The close relationship between the lantern as an instrument of wonder, both on a scientific level with its constantly evolving technology and on a magical level, would continue further into the nineteenth century when the lantern became a veritable 'mass medium'.

Fascinated by the magical creatures that the lantern has conjured up throughout the centuries, I searched for terms such as 'magic', 'skeleton', 'witchcraft', 'ghost' in the *Lucerna* web resource and was immediately drawn in by the slides from *Gossip about ghosts* by George R. Tweedie<sup>2</sup>, which proved a perfect match for a conference on magic history. After studying the extant slides (from images kindly provided by Richard Crangle) and the digitised readings, I embarked on an extensive search of the British Newspaper Archive, looking for anything and everything I could find about George R. Tweedie. This newspaper quest proved very successful as Tweedie was a true 'jack-of-all-trades' who was not afraid to engage in the public sphere.

Born in 1857 in Fulham, London, he was trained as an analytical chemist at Berners College of Experimental Science. In the 1870s, he became an instructor at the famed Royal Polytechnic Institution in London. This would prove important for his career as a lecturer as his former occupation was often mentioned in newspaper announcements. He became a professional lecturer in the 1880s, illustrating his talks with chemical experiments and diagrams. From the 1890s onwards, he

started seriously including the lantern in his performances and he also joined the National Society of Lanternists. He even became a true lantern enthusiast, serving as lanternist on lectures by other speakers,

"manipulating the oxy-hydrogen lime-light with a great amount of skill, and portraying upon the sheet the various scenes with great clearness"<sup>3</sup>. He was even criticised in the press for being overambitious in combining the roles of lecturer and lanternist: "We think it would have been an improvement if the lecturer had obtained the services of an assistant to exhibit the views, as speaking to the backs of a large proportion of the audience is a slight drawback"<sup>4</sup>.

Inspired by his scientific education and training, Tweedie gave many lectures on the 'history of a lump of coal', chemistry of tea and alcohol, narcotics and stimulants, and water and fire in his early career. He also invited people into his own laboratory in Brixton Hill and was willing to deliver courses in schools and colleges on moderate terms.<sup>5</sup> Not only did he lecture on these subjects but also published articles in scientific journals such as *Chemical News and Journal of Industrial Science*, *The Builder* and even in the French *Le Moniteur scientifique du Docteur Quesneville*. Apart from science popularisation, one of his other goals, particularly when lecturing about alcohol as a poison instead of a foodstuff, was to spread the teachings of the temperance movement.

Tweedie himself was a "man of high principle, teetotaler and non-smoker" as his son Maurice George Tweedie described him in his obituary.<sup>6</sup> Naturally, as alluded to above, subjects inspired by temperance also provided fodder for his lectures. He also wrote prize-winning essays for the cause, lectured on behalf of Christian organisations supporting it, such as the Sunday School, and was a member of the Band of Hope.<sup>7</sup> This temperate zeal clearly ran in the family as his father was one of the founders of the National Temperance League.<sup>8</sup> Tweedie also combined his dual passion for chemistry and temperance in the lecture series 'Chemical chats with the children' that he gave for the Band of Hope.<sup>9</sup> He gave many lectures on behalf of charities such as the British Orphan Asylum, the unemployed navvies on the Aviemore Line and the Armenian Relief Fund.



1. Christiaan Huygens' sketches of 1659



2. Title slide for *Gossip about Ghosts* (courtesy of *Lucerna*, item 5028613)



3. Title slide for *Gossip about Fairies* (courtesy of *Lucerna*, item 5076912)



4. Slide 6 'A Turnip-head Bogey' from *Gossip about Ghosts* (courtesy of *Lucerna*, item 5028618)





5. Slide 27 'Tom Thumb and the Giant' from *Gossip about Fairies* (courtesy of Lucerna, item 5076938)



6. Slide 50 'The Phantom Ship' from *Gossip about Ghosts* (courtesy of Lucerna, item 5028662)



7. Slide 55 'Fairies' Good Night' from *Gossip about Fairies* (courtesy of Lucerna, item 5076966)

He was not only a well-known voice in public debate but also a political activist for over 30 years. After acting as a Liberal election agent for South Buckinghamshire for 17 years, he decided to join the Unionist cause, which provoked great outrage in the newspapers with headlines such as "Liberal agent's revolt 'worst and most corrupt government of modern times'".<sup>10</sup> In his limited spare time, he was a nature and photography enthusiast and his book *Hampshire's Glorious Wilderness* (1925)<sup>11</sup> – on which he also gave several lectures – was well received in the press. In 1913 the *South Bucks Standard* described him, and rightly so, as "an old and experienced lantern lecturer on political, literary and scientific subjects", who "visited in the course of his career as lecturer nearly all the principal towns in Great Britain and Ireland" (30 October 1913). Finally, as can be expected from such a character, he also wrote a memoir titled *Yesterday: Retrospect and Ruminations* published in 1932.<sup>12</sup>

But apart from all these time-consuming activities, he was also interested in the supernatural, leading him to join the Folklore Society and the Society for Psychical Research and – to arrive at today's topic – to give lectures on ghosts and fairies. He was thus not only known for his lectures combining temperance and chemistry but also for lectures combining science and magic. As his obituary describes aptly: "Tweedie was for many years a lecturer on popular chemistry, witchcraft and folklore".<sup>13</sup> Tweedie was not just an *en passant* lecturer on these topics, the newspapers describe him as "having for a number of years past made a deep study of things pertaining to witchcraft and ghost lore", consequently making him "a great authority on the subject".<sup>14</sup> He was particularly known and cherished for his rare and quaint collection of antique woodcuts and engravings. Lionel A. Weatherly, who uses some of Tweedie's historical illustrations for his chapter on 'Ghosts' in his publication *The Supernatural?* (1891), describes Tweedie's collection as "undoubtedly the most valuable one of prints, engravings, etc., dealing with witchcraft and ghost-lore that at present exists", adding that these illustrations are responsible for "making his lectures on these subjects always so interesting and popular".<sup>15</sup> And they were popular indeed, especially with women if we can believe the press.<sup>16</sup> His performance on fairies is described as "the popular lecture upon this subject given in most of the large towns of England, by the well-known lecturer Mr Geo. R. Tweedie, F.C.S., and Member of the Folklore Society. Nothing can be said which will give a better idea of the field over which the popular lecturer travels in describing these stories than the list appended".<sup>17</sup>

The 1890s were the heyday of Tweedie's lantern lecturing career and *Gossip about fairies* (1893) and *Gossip about ghosts* (1894) were also released in this decade. Not only most of the slides but also the readings have been preserved in *Lucerna* and the MLS Library. As is often the case, however, the exact content of his own lectures is not an

exact match with these commercially produced sets.<sup>18</sup> Witchcraft, for instance, is rather a sub-theme in the published text but features prominently in the newspaper announcements and reviews, with his lecture's topic most often being referred to as "witchcraft and ghostlore". Similarly, newspaper articles occasionally mention 70 limelight views instead of 55 or 50 respectively.<sup>19</sup> The views themselves are described as "chiefly of a grotesque character".<sup>20</sup>

Tweedie himself was clearly not a believer in supernatural occurrences. One newspaper review mentions that the "lecturer endeavoured to show that ghosts were only imaginations of a weak mind"<sup>21</sup> yet he was seriously occupied by and interested in these topics as shown above. Indeed, both the Folklore Society and the Society for Psychical Research are basically scientifically-minded societies investigating supposed supernatural (historical) figures and events in earnest.

A brief reflection on the title of these lectures is needed as well. The term 'gossip' implies a light-hearted conversation on an often dubious subject. As Tweedie says himself in *Gossip about fairies*, talking about all the details of the spirit world "would take us too long and convert our gossip into a tedious lecture", clearly stressing the proposed entertainment goal of his performance.<sup>22</sup> The term was regularly used in conjunction with supernatural creatures in the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup>

Regarding the performance context of these 'gossips', the performance about ghosts was included, for example, in an evening of entertainment at a congregational church where it was described as "quite startling"<sup>24</sup> and was also delivered in the Finsbury Park Congregational Lecture Hall.<sup>25</sup> During the same period, Tweedie also delivered the lecture under the auspices of the Gloucester Literary and Scientific Association.<sup>26</sup> The performance about fairies is not mentioned separately in the newspapers, so I could not find information about its performance context. Tweedie also lectured on other magic-themed subjects such as 'Fortune Telling and Fortune Tellers'.<sup>27</sup> Both religious and scientific institutions were thus interested in Tweedie's light-hearted, yet exhaustive, gossips about supernatural beings.

This brief discussion of a performer and his popular magic lantern performances at the end of the nineteenth century shows that the magic lantern clearly retained its supernatural, magical origins and associations throughout its long history. Indeed, the immense popularity of Tweedie's lectures showcases the *fin-de-siècle's* dual fascination with magic and science, so masterfully combined in Tweedie's performances and character. To finish on the words of a newspaper reviewer's account of Tweedie's ghost show:

"These shady and midnight visitors the lecturer put down to imagination and mental depression, but nevertheless, some of the



anecdotes related of things which have happened in this country during the last fifty years, and which he stated were authenticated, were of such a marvellous and supernatural character that many people present must have gone away not quite convinced that ghosts do not flit about the earth even in the nineteenth century<sup>28</sup>

This article is based on work-in-progress for the second chapter of my PhD on the representation of fantastical worlds in magic lantern slides. I hope it nevertheless proved an enjoyable read. I would be very grateful for any feedback or additional information on or related to the topics discussed here.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. *Lucerna* Magic Lantern Web Resource, [lucerna.exeter.ac.uk](http://lucerna.exeter.ac.uk), item 3000997
3. *Isle of Thanet Gazette*, 14 April 1888, p. 8
4. *Isle of Thanet Gazette*, 14 April 1888; *Isle of Wight County Press*, 16 October 1886
5. *South London Press*, 12 April 1879, p. 7

6. 'George Richard Tweedie, 1857-1937', *Journal of the Chemical Society*, Royal Society of Chemistry, 1938, pp. 164-165
7. *The Temperance Movement And Its Workers*, Vol. 4, 1892, p. 68; *The Temperance Speaker's Companion*, United Kingdom Band of Hope Union, 1885, pp. 3 and 52
8. *Kentish Express*, 1 April 1932, p. 12
9. *The National Temperance Mirror*, 1883, p. 2
10. *Birmingham Daily Post*, 11 February 1914, p. 8
11. George R. Tweedie, *Hampshire's Glorious Wilderness: Some rambles and reflections in and about the New Forest*, The Homeland Association, London, 1925
12. George R. Tweedie, *Yesterday: Retrospect and Ruminations*, Arthur H. Stockwell Ltd, Ludgate Hill, London, 1932
13. 'George Richard Tweedie, 1857-1937', *Journal of the Chemical Society*, Royal Society of Chemistry, 1938, pp. 164-165
14. *Gloucester Citizen*, 2 December 1891, p. 4
15. Lionel A. Weatherly (and J. N. Maskelyne), *The Supernatural?*, J.W. Arrowsmith, Bristol, 1891, p.xiii
16. *Gloucester Citizen*, 2 December 1891, p. 4
17. *Catalogue of optical lantern slides*, Riley Brothers, Bradford, 1905, p. 113
18. These two lectures are not the only ones Tweedie wrote and circulated commercially. There is also 'The Vicar of Wakefield' (*Lucerna* item 4005038) and in the newspapers he is also credited for 'Fashions, fancies, and follies of days gone by', 'Shoulder to shoulder: a plea for imperial unity', 'National defence by sea and land and air' and 'Light from our lantern on the political topics of the day, the failure of free trade'.
19. *Cambria Daily Leader*, 21 December 1891, p. 3
20. *Hampshire Advertiser*, 4 November 1891, p. 4
21. *Hornsey and Finsbury Park Journal*, 4 March 1893, p. 5
22. *Lucerna* Magic Lantern Web Resource, item 4003767, p.11
23. Examples include: 'A Fire-Side Gossip about Ghosts and Fairies', *The Dublin University Magazine: A Literary and Political Journal*, Vol. 62, 1863, p. 691; "A Gossip about Ghosts", *The Astrologer and Oracle of Destiny: A Repository of the Wonderful in Nature and the Curious in Art*, 1845, p. 6
24. *Hucknall Morning Star and Advertiser*, 27 December 1895, p. 5
25. *Hornsey and Finsbury Park Journal*, 4 March 1893, p. 5
26. *Gloucester Citizen*, 2 December 1891, p. 4
27. *Harborne Herald*, 12 December 1891, p. 4
28. *Gloucester Citizen*, 2 December 1891, p. 4