

The Magic Lantern

'WHAT'S IN A NAME?'

Else Flim

Many MLS members, including myself and Adrian Kok from the Dutch Dickens Theatre, were lucky enough to see a performance by the late Mervyn Heard. As a novice lanternist, I tried to sit close to his lantern so I could observe him and learn. As a novelist and playwright, I admired the way that, famously, he could turn few random slides into a story and a great show.

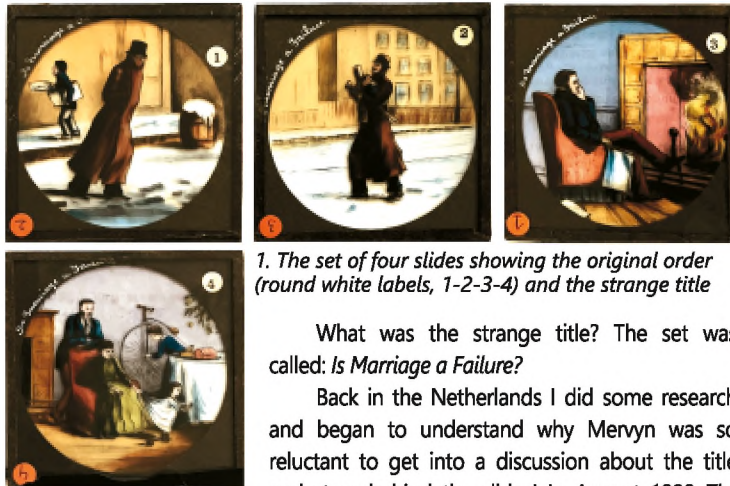
At his last MLS Convention in 2017, I visited Mervyn's table in the market room and told him how grateful I was for his lessons. Among the slides he was selling, I saw one set with a strange title (Fig. 1). There were two slides there that I could use at our theatre during my Christmas magic lantern interlude before Dickens (played by Adrian) begins his performance of *A Christmas Carol*. But those other two slides – a serious-looking man sitting at the hearth (slide 1) and probably the same man walking alone down the street (slide 3) – what could I do with those?

I found the title hard to understand and Mervyn offered no explanation, but he saw my doubts about buying the set. His advice was: "Take a tour of the room and come up with your own story." When I returned, he nodded and said with complete confidence: "You've found yourself a story." We bought the set.

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1. The set of four slides showing the original order (round white labels, 1-2-3-4) and the strange title

What was the strange title? The set was called: *Is Marriage a Failure?*

Back in the Netherlands I did some research and began to understand why Mervyn was so reluctant to get into a discussion about the title and story behind the slides! In August 1888 *The Westminster Review*, a quarterly publication well known for radical political and social commentary, published an article entitled 'Marriage' by the feminist novelist and campaigner for women's rights Mona Caird (1854-1932) (Fig. 2). In the article Caird criticised the institution of marriage as a "vexatious failure" for limiting and subordinating women. This led, in response, to an open debate in *The Daily Telegraph* under the title 'Is Marriage a Failure?'

Mona Caird also contributed to the newspaper, clarifying her views. She did not believe there was any question – it was a failure. She argued that marriage should not be associated with concepts of duty or sacrifice, but be a contract freely entered into by equals, and be dissolvable at the will of the parties.¹

The newspaper received a staggering 27,000 letters in response, both for and against Caird's views – but mainly the latter. The series ran for weeks and only finished when *The Daily Telegraph* called a halt and refused to publish any more. Other publications picked up the theme, such as the 'tabloid' weekly *Illustrated Police News*² ('as a rule' a failure) and even adverts in the USA (Fig. 3).

As a result of this uproar, the author and her concept of the 'New Woman' became well known. Caird wrote seven novels, several short stories, various essays and a travel book. However, Mona Caird herself was in fact married. In 1877, she married James Alexander Henryson-Caird who owned a large estate, Cassencary, at Creetown near Dumfries in south-west Scotland. It appears that, while they had a fairly good relationship, James and their son Alister James spent most of their time on the estate while Mona spent hers in London or abroad. It was a marriage 'at a distance'.³

Not surprisingly, Mona Caird campaigned strongly on a number of other issues, including supporting votes for women and the right to use birth control, and against vivisection and eugenics. She believed the human race would evolve only through freedom and recognising individual rights. Sadly, detailed research has been frustrated by the fact that Caird's grandson sold off and



2. Mona Caird. 1894 engraving based on a photograph by H.S. Mendelssohn



3. A magazine advert for pianos

(continued on page 3)

Music, slides showing carol singers, and these words: "They sing to earn some money so they can turn a sober meal into a Christmas dinner. Or to buy presents. In this dark winter season, people want to empathise with each other, to make each other happy."



"Some are mulling over which presents ...

(continued from page 1)

dispersed the library at her Scottish home. So it is no wonder Mervyn avoided my questions about the origin of the title and the slides – far too complex over a market stall transaction, especially for someone from another country!

The set was almost certainly produced soon after the furore caused by the article in 1888 and is designed to counteract any assertion that marriage is a failure. The maker's name is not on the slides, but there is, in handwriting, "special permission Waterbury Co." This is unlikely to be the well-known button or watch company in the USA so further research is needed. The captions on the slides are badly damaged but slide 2 (see Fig. 1) has the words "The father of a family ca...", slide 3 "Bachelor..." and slide 4 "Father and... Christmas morn..." The obvious explanation is that slides 1 and 3 show the loneliness of a bachelor life, having rejected marriage, compared to the joy of a family man in slides 2 and 4, especially at Christmas time.

Now I wanted to use all four slides but without spoiling the cosy Christmas atmosphere for our audience. So I rearranged the slides and created a new story about Christmas shopping to go with Mervyn's 'end of year set'. This appears during my interlude, with the wording shown in the introduction and image captions here.

REFERENCES

1. Lisa Surridge, 'Mona Caird', *Oxford Bibliographies*, oxfordbibliographies.com, 2013
2. 'Is Marriage a Failure? As a Rule – Yes!', *The Illustrated Police News*, 4 April 1891
3. Andrzej Diniejko, 'Mona Caird: the Priestess of the Late Victorian New Woman's Revolt', *The Victorian Web*, victorianweb.org, 2019



they will buy and others ...



come home with full arms and can hardly wait



for the unwrapping to begin!"