

BITS AND PIECES

SANTA CLAUS IN THE PULPIT



Our cover illustration is from a story entitled 'Santa Claus in the Pulpit' by the American author and Congregationalist pastor Washington Gladden (1836–1918). This was published in 1887 in *St Nicholas Magazine* (Vol. 15 No. 2, December 1887, pp.111–117) and reprinted in 1890 in a collection entitled *Santa Claus on a Lark and Other Christmas Stories*. Leaving aside the dubious technical accuracy of the illustrator's impression of Santa's lantern, the story gives a revealing

view of the way in which entertainment and sermonising could easily dissolve into one another, and the way the lantern was seen by people inclined to use it in that way. Santa describes his offerings thus:

And now I'm going to show you on this screen some samples of different kinds of presents. I have pictures of them here, a funny kind of pictures, as you will see. Do you know how I got the pictures? Well, I have one of those little detective cameras – did you ever see one? – that will take your portrait a great deal quicker than you can pronounce the first syllable of Jack Robinson. It is a little box with a hole in it, and a slide, that is worked with a spring, covering the hole. You point the nozzle of it at anybody, or anything, and touch the spring with your thumb, and, click! you have it – the ripple of the water, the flying feet of the racer, the gesture of the talker, the puff of steam from the locomotive, the unfinished bark of the dog. I've been about with this detective, collecting my samples of presents, and now I'm going to exhibit them to you here by means of my Grand Stereoscopic Moral Tester, an instrument that brings out

the good or the bad in anything and sets it before your eyes as plain as day. You will first see on the screen the thing itself, just as it looks to ordinary eyesight; then I shall turn on my aeonian light through my ethical lens, and you will see how the same thing looks when one knows all about it, where it came from, and why it was given, and how it was received.

Santa's show consists of views of gifts which dissolve to show a contrasting view of the conditions or story behind them: an expensive necklace bought by a rich man with money gained by exploiting poor workers; a basket of fruit given for selfish reasons, which is revealed as 'all decayed and withered' when Santa lets the 'true light strike it'; or in contrast a simple picture frame made with love by a boy for his mother. The moral of the piece is that 'nothing is really beautiful, for a Christmas present, that does not prove a personal affection, and a readiness to express it with painstaking labor and self-denial'.

The role of moralising preacher is perhaps not one that we would associate with Santa Claus today, but in the late 1880s it was very much of its time. Perhaps more interesting are the assumptions made about the lantern and instantaneous photography (Santa has clearly kept up with the work of Messrs Muybridge, Marey and Anschütz in this area!). The combination of the two to give the 'true light' makes it possible to show the hidden nature of things, to get behind the surface appearance and see the underlying moral truth (and this was some years before the X-ray of 1896 brought new life to this idea). Santa Claus has the technology to reveal the truth about our lives – so 'you'd better be good, for goodness' sake!'

Richard Crangle

with thanks to *Mervyn Heard* and *Lester Smith*

SOR JUANA'S DREAM

Wendy Bird has traced a poetic reference to the lantern from 1692 (or perhaps earlier) which is remarkable in several ways. This is from the work of Sor Juana, a Jesuit nun who lived in Mexico City, who has been described as 'the greatest poet the American continent produced in the seventeenth century'.

Juana Inés Ramírez was born into a poor family in rural Mexico (then known as Nueva España) in 1648. At an early age she went to live with her aunt in Mexico City, where she began to acquire an education and learned to read Latin. In 1664, aged 16, she was presented at the court of the Spanish Viceroy of Mexico and entered the service of his wife; she was noted at court for her beauty and prodigious learning. Four years later she entered the Convent of San Jerónimo, where she was able to pursue a life of scholarship, studying music, philosophy and science, and writing poetry and plays. She took the name of Sor Juana de la Cruz ('Sister Juana of the Cross').

Sor Juana was well versed in the scientific literature of her time, and is regarded as a disciple of Kircher. In the 1690s she came under pressure from the Church authorities to give up her studies, and she was finally forced to sell her library (of 4,000 volumes) and scientific instruments a year before her premature death in a plague epidemic on 17 April 1695. She is seen today as a pioneer of the rights of women to equal status and learning, and her works have been studied and admired by feminist scholars and others. A number of websites are devoted to her life and work, and anthologies in English are still in print.

Among Sor Juana's major works is a long philosophical poem entitled *Sueño* ('The Dream'), which was first published in Seville, Spain, in 1692. *Sueño* describes awakening from a long spectacular dream, in which there are numerous learned metaphors for the night. This relates to one of Sor Juana's recurring themes, that of 'reading' the world like a book to try to understand its phenomena. Even while asleep, the poem argues, the mind is still working to read and understand the universe. Towards the end is a passage which compares the after-images of the dream with a magic lantern projection:

*And from the brain, now empty [or vacated],
the phantoms fled
and – as if formed from light vapour*

*were converted into simple smoke, into air
their shapes dissolving away
Just as the magic lantern
represents various make-believe
figures as if painted onto a white wall,
formed no less from shadow
than from light, and in flickering gleams
the competent [scientists] in the background,
preserving a learned perspective,
with grave surety
the result of various successful [or worthy] experiments,
the fugitive shadow,
that fades away into the light,
forms make-believe shapes,
looking real from all angles,
when they are no more than superficial.*

(translated from the Spanish by Wendy Bird)

It is debatable whether Sor Juana was familiar with the magic lantern herself. She was no stranger to the world of science, and if examples of the instrument had reached Mexico by the early 1690s it is quite possible that she could have seen its effects. However this reference does not make Sor Juana the 'first female lanternist', nor prove that she had actually seen the instrument in use – she could have based her brief account on a description conveyed by letter or in the widespread Jesuit scientific literature of the time. And yet, because of the poem's delicate description of the lantern's effects, managing to evoke both supernatural and scientific contexts, it is tempting to imagine that Sor Juana was describing a visual experience in which she had herself taken part.

Whether or not that is the case, this passing mention has some other significances. Unless anyone can contradict this, it seems possible that this is the earliest known reference to the magic lantern by a female writer, and (perhaps more significantly) it may also be the earliest reference written in the New World. And finally, does anyone know of an earlier use of the lantern as a literary metaphor, or an earlier reference in verse?

Wendy Bird / Richard Crangle