

The Magic Lantern

SALVATION AND THE SILVER SCREEN

Lindsay Cox

The story of The Salvation Army's Limelight Department reveals both an amazing use of up-to-the-minute technology and insight into what would attract people to hear the gospel.

A Christian woman, with a babe in her arms, was being pursued by Roman soldiers. The path lay across a series of wooden planks forming a narrow bridge. A comrade in the faith on the near side encourages her to cross, and receives her with a ready grasp and presses her on in hurried flight. A soldier, who had outstripped his confederates, reached the plank and dashed across, forgetting to take into account the spring of the board under his weight and rapid movement. He suddenly loses his balance, and is seen flying through the air, and drops with a great splash in the stream. The tension of the audience thereat gave way to manifested gladness at the escape and the discomfiture of the poor woman's pursuer.¹

The stunned and shocked audience broke their breathless silence with applause and cheers as graphic moving images and brilliantly coloured magic lantern slides filled the huge screen in front of them. The scene was in fact the world's first 'film-blooper', for the catapulting of the soldier had not been scripted and refilming the scene proved too costly.

The audience was watching *Soldiers of the Cross*, which premiered on 13 September 1900 in Melbourne's Town Hall to an audience of over 2,000. Melbournians were enthralled by this limelight lecture,

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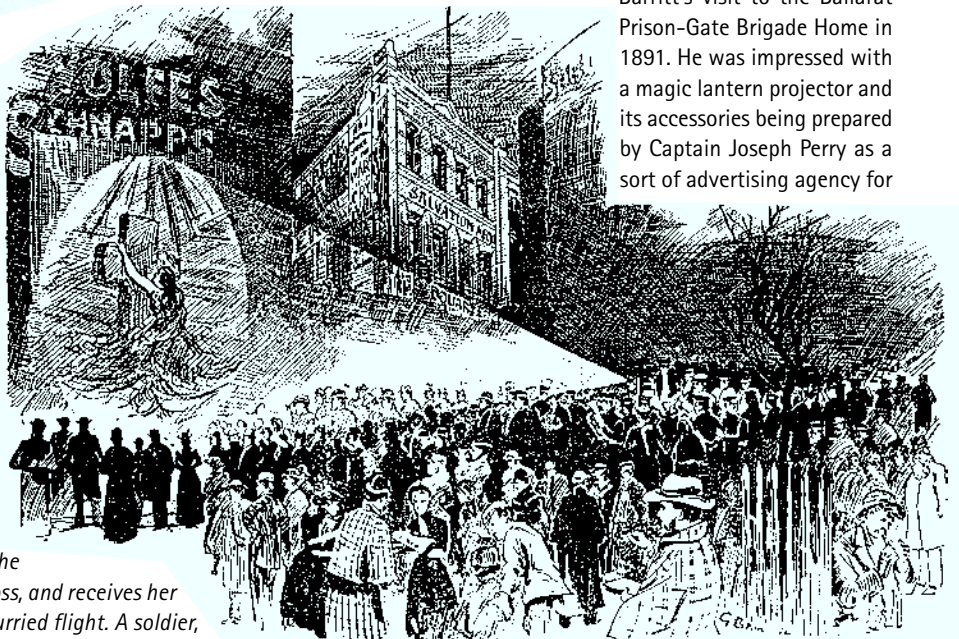
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which has been extravagantly claimed as the first story film produced anywhere in the world² or even the world's first feature film.³ However, by the accepted definition, *Soldiers of the Cross* was not a feature film but a two-and-a-half-hour multi-media event consisting of an ingenious mix of sixteen 90-second motion picture segments, over 200 magic lantern slides, music from Mozart's masses by an orchestra and choir and rousing oratory by Herbert Booth.⁴

Soldiers of the Cross was an extraordinary achievement for its time, a startling, stirring and often brutal portrayal of the sufferings of the early Christian martyrs. The film segments of *Soldiers of the Cross* are amongst the earliest use of motion picture film for narrative drama and are certainly the first Australasian use of costumed actors performing on elaborate studio sets.⁵

The story of how The Salvation Army in Melbourne came to be the leading pioneer motion picture producer began with Major Frank Barritt's visit to the Ballarat Prison-Gate Brigade Home in 1891. He was impressed with a magic lantern projector and its accessories being prepared by Captain Joseph Perry as a sort of advertising agency for



Line Drawing from *The War Cry* of a magic lantern show by the Limelight Department in Little Collins Street, Melbourne. The National Headquarters in Little Bourne Street is shown in background. (ASH)

exhibition in the city of Ballarat every Saturday night.⁶ Almost immediately upon his return to Melbourne, Barritt ordered Perry and his magic lantern to territorial headquarters. As head of the Special Efforts Department, Barritt had quickly grasped the propaganda potential of Perry's limelight projector for advertising the forthcoming visit of General William Booth to Australasia in September 1891.

The ensuing magic lantern advertising campaign was so successful that the ever-opportunistic Commissioner Thomas Coombs deemed it advantageous to create a Limelight Brigade, headed by Barritt and staffed by competent photographer and projectionist, Joseph Perry. On Boxing Night 1891 the Limelight Brigade premiered at South Melbourne with a lantern show consisting of some sixty lantern slides largely based on William Booth's book, *In Darkest England and the Way Out*.⁷ The Limelight Brigade followed this up early in the New Year by heading north, touring towns along Australia's east coast. A photographic studio and Limelight Brigade office was set up at The Salvation Army's Australasian Headquarters,

NOTES

1. *War Cry*, (Australia) 18 May 1901, p. 9.
2. Brian Adams in 'First Flickers' in *Inflight*, Qantas Airways Ltd, 1999.
3. Eric Reade, *Australian Silent Films*, Melbourne, Lansdowne Press, 1970, p.16.
4. *The Age*, (Melbourne), 14 September 1900, p. 7.
5. Chris Long, 'Australia's First Films' in *Cinema Papers*, 1999, p. 82.
6. *Full Salvation*, 1 September 1894, p. 294.
7. Research by Chris Long, March 1991, AST (Australia Southern Territory Heritage Centre) Archives, Box R5.29.

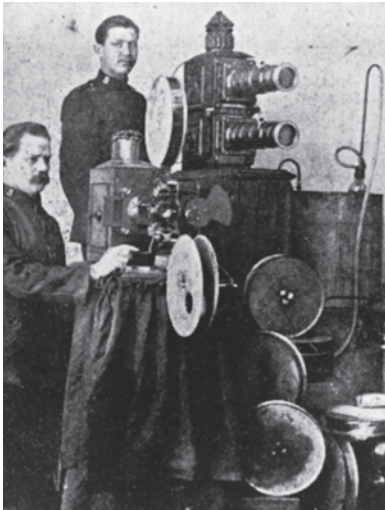
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SALVATION AND THE SILVER SCREEN (continued from page 1)

185 Little Collins Street, Melbourne – probably in an adjoining building leased in 1891.⁸ In 1893 Perry took charge of operations after Barritt was appointed Divisional Officer, Tasmania.

When 69 Bourke Street was purchased for the new Australasian headquarters in October 1894, the attic roof was raised, a photographic studio installed and the Limelight Brigade took residence. It was in this attic studio, which operated commercially as The Salvation Army Studio, that Perry produced his first narrative lantern slide set. Entitled 'Daughter of Ishmael', the story was based on a popular Salvation Army booklet that ran to fifteen reprints. It was the story of Mary O'Donohue, sentenced to life imprisonment for murder whilst in a drunken rage. Released into The Salvation Army's care after fourteen years she found salvation and spent the rest of her days assisting young fallen women to a better way of life.

By 1895 the Limelight Brigade had progressed to having a biennial projector and over 600 glass slides. The monthly publication *Full Salvation* reported: 'Amongst his slides the Captain now has, besides his wonderful pictures of the crucifixion of Christ, such things as "Daughter of Ishmael", "Are the Colours Safe?", "In Darkest England", "Neddy's Care", "The Match Girl" ... slides of Australian and English scenery, portraits of Corps groups ... the whole collection probably forming the finest owned by any travelling show in the colonies.'⁹ By that time, the Limelight Brigade, under newly promoted Adjutant Perry, had visited nearly every corps in Australia and New Zealand, travelling 46,000 kms by train, ship, coach, cart and horseback. Five hundred and twenty two limelight exhibitions had been conducted with 469 souls registered as saved and the impressive amount of £1784 raised for The Salvation Army's work.¹⁰



Adjutant Cook and Lieutenant Bennett with a biennial lantern and film projector, and associated gas-producing plant, c. 1900. (ASH)

The limelight lantern shows were spectacular as the twin lenses of the biennial lantern fitted with various clever mechanical contrivances allowed the projected images to fade, blend and articulate movement. 'You would be gazing intently at a street girl's red jacket, until all at once you would discover that it was a Salvationist's Guernsey. You would just be taking in that fact when a glance would show you that what you took for a Guernsey was a fire, the pantaloons of an actor, the side of a house, a red Maria, a red flannel petticoat, the leg of a horse. These transformations are very edifying and keep up the interest grandly!'¹¹ The biennial projector was destroyed in a fire while on tour in New Zealand in 1896 and was replaced by a magnificent triennial projector, which allowed for even greater lantern transformations. Joseph Perry firmly believed the limelight shows had a definite spiritual role. He commented, 'I find that where we do not get souls on Sunday night it is where we lack the praying force. There are few places I have visited for Sunday where I have not been able to record souls in my reports.'¹²

In September 1896 Commandant Herbert Booth succeeded Commissioner Coombs as commander of the Australasian Territory. Herbert, youngest son of William and Catherine Booth was astute, talented and entrepreneurial. 'The new Commandant was alive to the advantages of being first on the ground in any new project, and when the first kinematographe was shown in Melbourne, he sent for Adjutant Perry, to make enquiries concerning it...'¹³

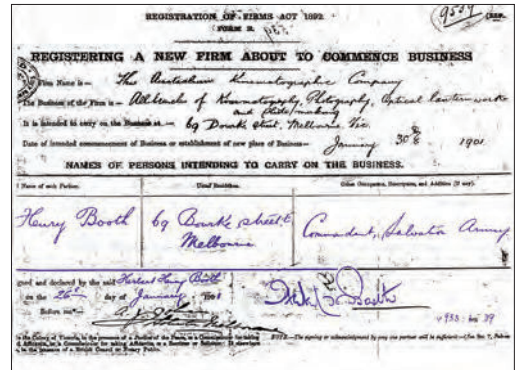
Commandant Booth's interest resulted in the purchase of a Watson's Motorgraphe in February 1897. A few weeks later at the Melbourne City Temple, a private screening of some French-made travelogue films was given to headquarters officers.¹⁴ In April 1897 the Limelight Department screened these films at Albany Corps in Western Australia, continuing the tour on to Perth, Geraldton and Coolgardie Corps before returning to Melbourne in June.¹⁵

A Wrench Cinematographe was added to the Limelight Brigade's inventory in August 1897. Upon viewing the innocuous street scenes and everyday urban occurrences filmed by the Limelight Department cameras, Herbert Booth asked: 'Why cannot we get our own films of salvation and social subjects?'¹⁶ Adjutant Perry responded with a film in February 1898 entitled *Wood-chopping at the Metropole*. Commandant Herbert Booth recorded: 'I determined to enlarge and so widen the influence and scope of the limelight. I therefore created a Department...'¹⁷ The newly named Limelight Department was headed by Joseph Perry, now Staff-Captain and staffed by three equipment operators. Commandant Booth's 1898 report to his father put the

The Dutton Biorama band in festival uniforms, c. 1902. Joseph Perry is seated in the front with Adjutant Cook on his right. Seated either side of them are Joseph Perry's two sons, Orrie and Stan. (ASH)



Formal photograph of camera operators in khaki uniforms with still and motion cameras from the Biorama Department, c. 1906. Brigadier Joseph Perry can be seen seated in the front. Others in the group include Alf Delevante, C. Knight and Orrie Perry, son of Joseph Perry (seated left). (from Canterbury Times, New Zealand)



Four weeks after the Federation of Australia the Australian Kinematographic Company was registered, coming into effect on 30 January 1901. This formalised The Salvation Army as the first motion picture film company in Australia. Herbert Booth's name and signature can be clearly seen on the bottom of the document. (ASH)

8. Notes by Colonel Percival Dale, AST Box R5, Folder 39

9. *Full Salvation*, 1 September 1894, p. 295.

10. *Ibid*, p. 295.

11. *War Cry*, 1891 in Research by Mervyn Smyth, October 2000, AST Archives Box R6, Folder R3.

12. *Full Salvation*, 1 September 1894, p. 295.

13. *The Victory*, September 1901, p. 440.

14. Chris Long, 'Australia's First Films' in *Cinema Papers*, 1997/98, p. 37.

15. Chris Long, 1997/98, p. 37.

16. *The Victory*, September 1901, p. 440.

17. Report to the General, Herbert Booth, 1898, AST Archives D156111.



a) Glass magic lantern slide used by the Limelight Department depicting the raising of Lazarus.



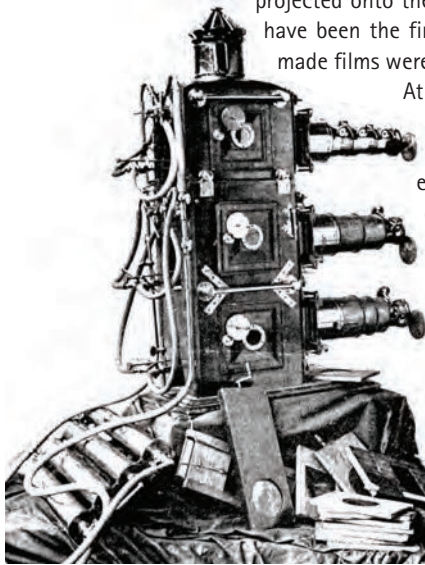
b) Syra-Phoenician Woman, part of several narrative slide sets produced in 1904 by the Limelight Department.



c) Massacre of Bishop Stephen in the Catacombs – thirty two of these Life Model slides were produced by the Limelight Department and used in part of a film and slide presentation.

department's stock-in-trade as three motion picture camera-cum-projectors and three lantern slide projectors plus nine gramophones.¹⁸ He continued: 'I had erected at the rear of THQ a very commodious and well-lighted studio for the production of life model slides, these being connected with and explanatory of the Army's Christ-like mission, socially and spiritually.'¹⁹

In May 1898 a programme was given in the Melbourne City Temple combining the recently acquired Lumière Cinématographe with lantern-projector and gramophone under the banner of *The Triple Alliance*. Scenes from the *Great Congress March* in Melbourne and Sydney, social work activities and officer-cadets in training were projected onto the large screen temporarily erected behind the platform.²⁰ This appears to have been the first important public occasion on which The Salvation Army's own locally made films were exhibited.²¹



The Limelight Department's triennial lantern projector, purchased following a fire which destroyed the biennial projector during a tour of New Zealand.

Glass lantern slides from the series Social Salvation. a) A graveside scene



b) Slide produced by Joseph Perry c. 1898. Taken in the back streets of Melbourne, shows The Salvation Army conducting an open-air meeting.



c) Slide from the series The Scottish Covenantors. This series was the last film made by the Limelight Dept. (ASH)



At that time Herbert Booth's wife, Cornelia wrote her social lecture. When produced by the Limelight Department it contained 120 coloured lantern slides depicting The Salvation Army's slum work. Its success led Herbert Booth to expand it and produce the Limelight Department's first major production, *The Commandant's Social Lecture*. This film and lantern slide presentation was added to so that in time it became known as *Social Salvation* and is acknowledged as containing Australia's first use of narrative film in a two-hour screening involving 2,000 feet of film, 200 lantern-slides and stirring oratory by Commandant Booth.

The next significant public film screening by the Limelight Department occurred on 30 December 1899 at Collingwood Corps. The advertised programme contained the *Passion Play* films produced by Lumière in 1898 under the title of *La Vie et la Passion de Jésus-Christ*. Historian Chris Long wrote in 1994: 'It would be an understatement to say that these films influenced *Soldiers of the Cross*, because "Christ's Entry into Jerusalem," "The Betrayal," and "The Crucifixion" were used as the new lecture's opening film illustration.'²²

The world was much less sophisticated in the year 1900. Instantaneous global communications, modern mass media and incredible computer graphics and enhancements were nearly 100 years away. *Soldiers of the Cross* impacted its audiences in a way not readily understood by today's audiences, so used to special effects and extreme violence on television and film. In fact, so stark and graphic were the images of *Soldiers of the Cross* that members of the audiences are said to have fainted.²³

Soldiers of the Cross married seventeen black-and-white motion picture scenes (limited by the Lumière Cinématographe's 90-second film capacity) and 220 hand-coloured lantern slides. Herbert Booth wrote: 'In some of them are as many as 50 characters at once. I have not been able to discover any such slides in the world.'²⁴ Historian Eric Reade wrote: 'Perry covered huge crowd scenes with the dexterity of a seasoned producer. He was De Mille before his time.'²⁵ The cast of 150 officers and cadets acted on large film sets at the Murrumbidgee Girls' Home with painted backdrops supported by the tennis court fencing. Smaller sets were erected in the Life Model Studio at 69 Bourke Street. Some scenes were shot on location; for example the River Tiber looks distinctly like the Richmond Baths. *Soldiers of the Cross* is certainly the best known of Salvation Army productions but while it is an important pioneering production, it is arguably not the most significant.

Soldiers of the Cross was followed by the Limelight Department's first lengthy 'all-film' production, which was also the last major use of the Lumière Cinématographe with its limited film capacity. On 1 January 1901 three Salvation Army cameramen atop specially located camera plat-

forms filmed the dignitaries, politicians and guests at the head of 10,000 local and visiting British Empire troops in procession to Centennial Park, Sydney. This commission from the New South Wales government was more than 30 minutes long and five times the length of any earlier Australian film. Historian Chris Long wrote: "'The Inauguration of the Australian Commonwealth" was a continuous film presentation – longer, more important in content, more widely shown, and more lasting in its effect on our production industry.'²⁶

Four weeks after federation the Australian



Frank Ford in cap with Biorama instead of The Salvation Army. The uniform was a khaki festival uniform, with green facings. (Courtesy of Joyce Liddell)



Joseph Perry with a Biorama Band in special Biorama uniform and Biorama cap. Seated beside him is his wife, Julia, and on the floor are his sons Stan and Orrie. (ASH)



Early War Cry photograph showing Adjutant Joseph Perry with some of the photographic equipment from the Limelight Department. (ASH)

distinctive khaki uniforms, the larger companies such as the Silver Biorama and the Electric Biorama had their own touring brass bands and orchestra.

Biorama companies, ranging in size from a single operator with lantern projector through to full-size companies, with band or orchestra, songster group and cameramen/projectionists and equipment, would tour for up to six weeks at a time. The Salvation

Kinematographic Company was registered, coming into effect on 30 January 1901 and formalising The Salvation Army as the first motion picture film company in Australia. Its stated business was Kinematography, Photography, Optical Lantern Work and Slide making.²⁷ The commercial arm of the Limelight Department was poised to accept government and public commissions and contracts. To meet the anticipated demand, Warwick Bioscopes, with up to ten times the capacity of the Lumière, interchangeable lenses and the ability to pan, replaced the Cinématographes. In 1903 a Gaumont Bioscope was added to the inventory and in 1905 a Chrono Bioscope.

Technological advances replaced the highly combustible limelight system with the electric carbon-arc. However, the Limelight Department retained its name rather than becoming the 'Carbon-Arc Department'. The Biorama's massive portable motor generator provided electricity and introduced electric light for the first time in many small towns. Production and contractual successes enabled the Limelight Department to open offices in every Australian state and both islands of New Zealand.

The longest and most complex screen presentation made in Australia up to that time was screened by the Limelight Department in August 1902. It used over twice the amount of film of any previous productions. Screening for over two hours, the pioneer documentary *Under Southern Skies* traced the history of Australia from exploration to federation in 200 lantern slides and 6,000 feet of film.²⁸ More than 300 short films were eventually produced and exhibited by the Limelight Department. Some of them were combined with slides into further multi-media presentations such as a lengthier remake of *Soldiers of the Cross*, entitled *Heroes of the Cross*, and the Limelight Department's final film production, *The Scottish Covenanters*. The lantern slides produced remained important for the Limelight studios, both for use in conjunction with film and also in their own right as narrative slide shows.

The Limelight Department's greatest film achievements were between 1901 and 1905 when they produced nearly 80 per cent of all Australian-made films.²⁹ Across Australia and New Zealand and even in England, the Limelight Department's diverse subjects included filming The Salvation Army's evangelical and social work, urban and rural scenes, footage of Aborigines and Maori, the departure of Australian troops for the Boer War, the 1904 International Congress in London, the visit of the US Great White Fleet, the first 'bush-ranging' drama and the first nature documentary in Australia, filming birds on the Bass Strait Islands.

To tour Australasia with these productions a Biorama Company was raised in October 1901.³⁰ Its personnel were Major and Mrs Joseph Perry, Lieutenant Mira Whiteman and experienced camera and projector operators Captains Sidney Cook and John Brodie. On tour, the two women officers scouted ahead of the main party who were laden down with bulky equipment. The women prepared the local Salvation Army hall or another suitable venue for their arrival and organised the collection of money. By 1903 six touring companies were operating, including the original Biorama Company, the New Biorama Company and the Bioscope Company. These were followed by the raising of touring groups with such names as the United Biorama Company, the Electric, the Silver, the Triumph, the Austral, the South Australian and the New Zealand Biorama companies. Clad in

Army was well served with halls scattered across Australia and New Zealand in which to screen Limelight Department productions, with church and public halls also being used. After touring a number of country towns and showing their repertoire of lantern slides and motion picture film, the Biorama companies would often backtrack and revisit each town, repeating their repertoire but this time enhanced by local films shot during the original visit and processed with their unique travelling processing plant.

In 1901 the monthly publication *The Victory* wrote: 'The employment of some of the latest scientific inventions forms an interesting chapter in the history of progress recorded by the Salvation Army...³¹ The magic power of light that can transpose by these instantaneous flashes of light pictures upon the film, and by the brilliancy of artificial light reproduce them magnified upon a screen, is the creation of God, and it can only honour Him, and glorify His own handiwork, to utilize this invention for the salvation and blessing of mankind.'³²

Eight years later the light suddenly went out! In September 1909 Commissioner James Hay assumed command of the Australasian Territory and virtually overnight the Limelight Department was shut down. By 1910 Australia's first film studio had ceased production and the Biorama companies disbanded. The equipment of Australia's first permanent and most prolific film production unit was sold off and its film productions destroyed, seemingly in an attempt to eradicate all trace of the Limelight Department's existence. Commissioner Hay wrote: 'It should be noted that the cinema, as conducted by the Army, had led to a weakness and a lightness incompatible with true Salvationism, and was completely ended by me.'³³

Thus ended a never-to-be-repeated chapter in Salvation Army history that recorded historical events, provided entertainment, raised funds and presented the gospel to thousands of people in Australia and New Zealand.

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Thanks to John Hyett. For further information see <http://salvos.org.au/keepingitalive/>

18. Herbert Booth's 1898 report states six gramophones (Edison) and three graphophones (Columbia).

19. *Report to the General*, Herbert Booth, 1898, AST Archives D156111.

20. *War Cry*, (Melbourne), 21 May 1898, p. 2.

21. Notes by Colonel Percival Dale, AST Archives Box R5, Folder 39.

22. Chris Long and Clive Sowry, *Milestone and Myth*, 1994, p. 5, AST Archives Box R5, Folder 34.

23. *War Cry*, (Australia), 25 December 1958, p. 7.

24. *War Cry*, (Melbourne), 18 August 1900, p. 9.

25. Eric Reade, 1970, p. 18.

26. Chris Long, 'Australia's First Films: Federation' in *Cinema Papers*, 1995, p. 101.

27. Registration of Firms act 1892, Form B, v933 box 39, PROV.

28. Chris Long, 1995, p. 38.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. *The Victory*, September 1901, p. 440.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 443.

33. James Hay, *Aggressive Salvationism*, Melbourne, Salvation Army Press, 1951, p. 63.