

# EXAMPLES OF THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT IN MAGIC LANTERN SLIDES

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As is known from previous articles I have written for *TML*, I learned a great deal from the way Mervyn Heard told stories using 'strange' slides.<sup>1</sup> In a performance, many slides with no obvious connection are more useful than you initially think!

At the US & Canada MLS Convention in New Orleans in 2016, Adrian Kok and I gave a performance and talk with our Dickens Theatre. We didn't have much time to look at the auction offerings. I had, however, seen a set of slides with a ghost story, namely *A True Story of the Old Coaching Days* (1882). A horror story – 'not suitable for the Dickens Theatre' was my first thought. After all, I was looking for slides with stories by Dickens and slides I could use in my Christmas magic lantern interlude at the theatre.

The desire to buy slides with Christmas themes and lots of snow was strong. In the *Old Coaching Days* set, there was not much snow to be seen. Maybe I could show one or two slides from the set. This 'true story' is a set by York & Son, 10 slides, 1882-1888 – slide 1 shows Frederick York himself next to the coach.<sup>2</sup>

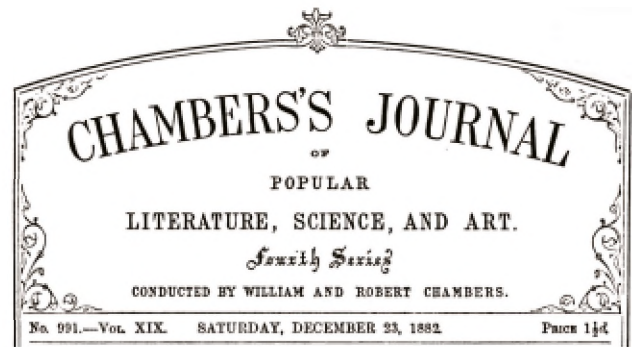
On the last day of the Convention, to our great surprise, we found we had won the Award 'for the Convention's best original scholarship on the magic lantern or related issues.' And right after that came the auction.

To pitch the set of *The Old Coaching Days*, they showed a picture of a broken-down coach in the snow. I hesitated – buying a whole set for that one slide? My brief hesitation was long enough for Jeremy Brooker to raise his hand and buy the set. The feeling of regret came immediately because I now had an idea about how I could use the slide.

After the auction, we spoke to Jeremy. He understood my regret and generously offered to resell the set to Adrian and me. I always remember that gesture gratefully because I use some of the slides every year when I talk about people on their way to family and friends at Christmas time.

We had experienced that loyalty among Society members before. Long ago, the second time Adrian and I attended an MLS meeting, a Society member in the market room beckoned us. He had saved a box of slides for us, *Shooting Experiences* from Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers*. He was keen to sell this set to us because: "I am sure you will use the slides and then this story will be shown again." He offered us the slides for a very good price – so kind of him.

Annet Duller and Martin Vliegenthart also often alerted us to new online offerings that could be of interest to our theatre. Gwen Sebus looked for material at fairs she visited in England and bought us a



## A TRUE STORY OF THE OLD COACHING-DAYS.

MANY years ago, when a journey from Edinburgh to London was a matter of days instead of hours, I started to make it, for the first time in my life, in the stagecoach which I shall call the *Royal William*. I was travelling alone, inasmuch as I knew none of the other passengers; but the guard had been 'tipped' to look after me, and he did that as well and for as long as he could. It was about ten days before Christmas. I was going to pay my first visit to London, having left school 'for good' some months before. The prospect of the journey had been scarcely less delightful than that of London itself, and tedious

*Masthead (above) of Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Art and (left) the beginning of the Old Coaching Days story*

Charles Dickens *carte de visite*, selected slides from her own collection and gave us her cookie dishes with pictures of Dickens characters on them.

The continued interest in our theatre work from many English MLS members, especially Mary Ann and George Auckland, was a great encouragement to us. They all did what Dickens hoped to achieve with his famous *A Christmas Carol* – to grant another person something they need and bring pleasure.

Through announcements of Dickens's public reading tours in the newspapers of the time, it is known that he performed *A Christmas Carol* in autumn, winter, spring and even in summer. The story of Scrooge and the upheaval in his life gave a boost to Christmas spirit, compassion, and the celebration of Christmas. Dickens advocated a year-round Christmas spirit.

Jeremy Brooker, that October in New Orleans, was generous enough to grant us that set after all. As a result, every December, audiences cry compassionately 'ooh' when they see passengers standing in the dark next to the broken-down coach, and then cheer up because the story ends well after all.

In the original story *A True Story of the Old Coaching Days*, the female protagonist endured so much that she grew white hair overnight. The story appeared in *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Art*.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the author's name was not given but I suspect the story, in the first person singular, was written by a woman.

The storyline will be familiar to lanternists. Travellers during the coaching era are stranded following heavy snowfall. The group is given shelter on Christmas Eve in a remote country house where



*A True Story of the Old Coaching Days, (York & Son) slides 1, 2 and 3*



the guests play the usual games. Due to lack of sleeping places, a young woman is accommodated in an outhouse. She asks the host to lock the door from the outside. A few moments later she hears strange noises and there appears to be a man with rattling chains present. All night she hides in fear. After some hours there is banging on the locked door. When the host collects her in the morning, her hair has turned white. The intruder, a real man, had escaped from a mental institution – but now the nurses know where to find him!<sup>4</sup>

Slide 6 of the 10-slide set was missing. However, as a dramatist, that seems right to me because when a man crawls out from under a bed while the terrified woman sits on it, that gives away too much information too soon for a horror story!

With a nod to Mervyn Heard's story-telling method, I use three of the *Old Coaching Days* slides in my interlude with the following text:

"Ladies and gentlemen, at Christmas time people go travelling by coach [slide 1] to visit family and friends. As I am sure you yourself have experienced when travelling by coach, a long journey does not always go to plan [slide 2] but the destination is in sight! And helped by the light of the coachman's lamp, this family arrives at their grandparents' house. There [slide 3], with Grandpa and Grandma, they can once again enjoy their Christmas Eve tradition with those fun games, and like every

year, the grandparents tell them ... yes, about the old days: [*Laughter from the audience. Then using slides from other sets that I leave to the reader's imagination:*]

- [Slide of children] when, aged 7, they played together as neighbourhood children and later discovered that they were
- [Slide of young couple], at 17, in love with each other and that they
- [Slide of older couple], at 70, were still together and in love.
- [Slide of Christmas roses] This of course calls for red Christmas roses."

To my surprise, the audience started applauding at the slide with the Christmas roses. These slides clearly evoked romantic feelings.

*These slides feature in Else, Adrian and the Dutch Dickens Theatre's Christmas magic lantern interlude, as seen in the 2024 MLS online Christmas meeting (available via [www.magiclantern.org.uk/events](http://www.magiclantern.org.uk/events)).*

#### REFERENCES

1. 'What's in a name?', *TML*, No. 37, December 2023, p. 1
2. See Lucerna ([lucerna.exeter.ac.uk/readings](http://lucerna.exeter.ac.uk/readings)), item 3004506
3. *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Art*, No. 991, Vol. XIX, Saturday, 23 December 1882, p. 811 (founded by William and Robert Chambers)
4. MLS Readings Library, [www.magiclantern.org.uk/readings](http://www.magiclantern.org.uk/readings), item 90829