

# THE SALVATION ARMY AUSTRALIA MAGIC LANTERN SLIDE COLLECTION

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A remarkable collection of magic lantern slides and related documents at the Salvation Army Australia Museum in Melbourne has just been inscribed into the UNESCO Australia Memory of the World Register. Founded in the year 2000, the Register is one of more than 60 UNESCO Memory of the World Registers worldwide, including an International Register. According to UNESCO, "inscription on the Register publicly affirms the significance of the documentary heritage, makes it better known and allows for greater access to it, thereby facilitating research, education, entertainment, and preservation over time". This magic lantern slide collection now joins 95 other collections of documentary heritage inscribed into the Australian Register, all available on the committee's website at [amw.org.au](http://amw.org.au).

The inscription recognises that the Salvation Army's Limelight Department created distinctively Australian magic lantern slides. Most were hand-coloured life model photographic glass slides, where elaborately costumed actors drawn from the ranks of the Army zealously enacted biblical and historical scenes against painted backdrops. When they were projected for audiences around Australia and overseas, they were accompanied by live music, group singing and a scripted narration. Their purpose was to save souls and change lives.

Remarkably, about a third of the slides have survived. The bulk of these, some 357 slides, are preserved in the Salvation Army Australia Museum, in the very building in which they were created. There, their unique significance is enhanced by the architecture of the restored Limelight Studios, as well as the Museum's other rich collections of historical documents and artefacts, and the ongoing contemporary social work of the Salvation Army.

These still vivid artefacts from this brief period of local multimedia production were pivotal to profound changes in public entertainment in Australia, leading to the audio-visual technologies and mass spectacles we experience today.

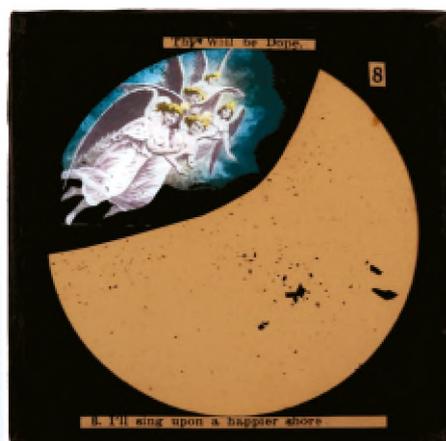
The Salvation Army used magic lantern slides in their work from the early 1890s. Initially, they mostly used life model slides imported from the UK, and the remains of their lending library of 6,000 of these commercially produced slides were included in the nomination. The rest of the Museum puts this lending library into a significantly local context. For instance, it holds a set illustrating the song 'No Tears in Heaven', complete with an angel effect slide. The Army magazine *The Young Soldier* contains an illustration of this effect being produced on the screen for an audience in Melbourne in 1898, accompanied by a singer, violinist and pianist.

Members of the Limelight Department on tour in the 1900s (Salvation Army Australia Museum)



Then, from the late 1890s, three people – Cornelia Booth, Herbert Booth and Joseph Perry – began to work closely together to produce their own slides and cinematographic films from a dedicated 'Limelight Department'. Cornelia Booth was an important figure in the Army as a singer, composer (she wrote 'No Tears in Heaven'), planner, producer and strategist. Herbert Booth, son of Army founder William Booth and Commandant of the Australasian Territory, was a talented performer, composer and musician. Magic lanternist Perry, who had already been producing slides for the Army since 1891, had a similarly wide portfolio of skills, a similarly far-sighted vision to synthesise multimedia technologies, and a similar capacity to handle what were, for the time, mega-productions.

An industrially organised and businesslike Limelight Department, linking technologies of the modern era to the age-old task of saving souls and reforming behaviour, was their vision. They had the extraordinary foresight to recognise the significance of what had been happening for some time with the genre of evangelical, temperance and story life model lantern slides produced by big UK manufacturers, along with the grassroots 'miracle' or 'mystery' play traditions of Europe and the Americas, and the expanding technologies of mass audience presentation, such as limelight and biennial and triennial lanterns. Their innovation was to take previous genres – the sermon, the brass band concert, the temperance lecture, the miracle or mystery play – and combine them with emerging technologies such as the cinematograph and the gramophone. They called it a 'triple alliance', but the lantern slide remained core to their productions, until the Limelight Department was closed down by a new Army commandant in 1908.



"A limelight scene in the senior musical festival illustrating Mrs Booth's beautiful song 'No Tears in Heaven'" (above left) and the angel effect slide used with the song (above right), as documented in *The Young Soldier*, 16 April 1898, p. 6 (right) (Salvation Army Australia Museum)



Some readers may be aware of *Soldiers of the Cross* (1900), the Limelight Department's biggest production, which combined over a 100 Australian-made lantern slides and short sections of (now lost) cinematographic film into an epic lecture. Some slides from that production are in this collection, but it also preserves other extremely significant Australian slides. These include three hand-coloured slides from the series *Social Salvation* (1898) which could almost be described as 'proto documentary' as they record the Salvation Army's work amongst Australia's poor.

The slides differ widely in quality – a result of the volunteer, collective evangelical context in which they were produced. But the



'His Eyes Were Opened' (above left) and a detail (above right) from *Blind Man of Siloam* (1904), a series of 24 hand-coloured magic lantern slides made by the Salvation Army Limelight Department, Melbourne (Salvation Army Australia Museum)



'A Frail Bridge' from 'Escape Mother and Child' (above left) and 'Breaking down the Prison Door' from 'Polthinus' (above right), both from *The Cross* series (c.1908), a series of 131 slides (74 hand coloured and 57 uncoloured) of which 100 were originally created by the Salvation Army Limelight Department, Melbourne (Salvation Army Australia Museum)

However, they did not always rely on full-scale painted backdrops. In other sets, such as *The Raising of Lazarus* (1904) (see p. 7), the actors have been photographed in a studio, printed, cut out, then collaged onto a hand-drawn background, to be re-copied and coloured. Other sets, such as 12 hand-coloured magic lantern slides from 1902 called *The Syro-Phoenician Woman*, are elaborately costumed and richly coloured. By 1908 some slides, such as 'Escape, Mother and Child', from *The Cross* series, are made not in the studio but out on location in Victoria, as a Roman soldier, with sword drawn, stalks a Christian mother and child fleeing towards a frail bridge.

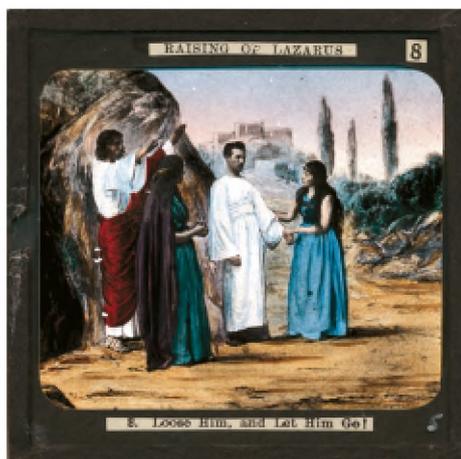
The Booths and Perry began their collaboration at a pivotal moment in Australian history. In January 1901 the Limelight Department itself was commissioned to film the proclamation of the new Commonwealth of Australia, formed from its former colonies. It was therefore fundamentally connected to that key period after the economic depression and drought of the 1890s when federation gave settler Australians an enhanced sense of national identity. The Limelight Department also exemplified the emerging global geopolitics of the 20th century. It was linked to its parent body in the UK but was also part of an international Salvation Army network covering some 33 countries.

Although international in vision, the collection itself is powerfully local. Each slide is a direct window back to a particular Australian, passionately producing a rich multimedia document for a cause they believed in.

'On the Way Home Again' (right) and details (below left and right) from *Syro-Phoenician Woman* (1902), a series of 12 hand-coloured magic lantern slides made by the Salvation Army Limelight Department with actors drawn from the ranks of the Salvation Army (Salvation Army Australia Museum)

Limelight Department also took a wide variety of approaches to how the slides could be produced most effectively for their evangelical purposes. They didn't mind re-purposing existing slides. But others, such as a set of 24 hand-coloured slides made in 1904, tells the story of *The Blind Man of Siloam* beautifully and carefully. The Pool of Siloam is painted on a backdrop that folds forward along the floor of the studio. In a tight sequence, after meeting Jesus, the blind man is led forward by a boy and kneels at the pool to bathe his eyes. When his vision is restored, he lifts his arms in a glad 'hallelujah' to the sky.





*'Loose Him, and Let Him Go!' from Raising of Lazarus (2004), a series of eight hand-coloured magic lantern slides made by the Salvation Army Limelight Department, Melbourne (Salvation Army Australia Museum)*

headquarters at 69 Bourke Street, Melbourne is an extremely significant place. On the lower floors it still serves its clients and conducts religious services, as it has done for over a century. The upper floor houses the Museum, which in 2011 employed a heritage architect who professionally restored the Limelight Department's studios, preserving important details such as the painted sign 'COLORING STUDIO' above the doorway into a room where, from 1897, Salvation Army women coloured lantern slides under a large skylight. The collection is also embedded in closely associated material culture and document collections also held and displayed by the Museum. These include journals, magazines, and pamphlets; a huge but well-cared-for collection of objects, apparatus, and cinematic and magic lantern ephemera; scrapbooks, letters and reports; and snapshot photographs and portraits. These have been painstakingly collected in Melbourne from other parts of Australia by the Museum's director, Lindsay Cox.

As the UNESCO inscription in the Memory of the World Register recognised, so much is captured on those 3¼ inch (83 mm) squares of glass. We can look through the sometimes garish hand colouring, beyond the obviously painted scenes, past the sometimes fake beards, into the real faces of real Australians doing something they profoundly believed in. Looking closely at any one of the slides in this collection gives us a remarkable window into the development of contemporary Australia. We see the beginnings of the multimedia entertainment industry. We experience the creative expression of everyday Australians just 'doing it themselves' and not waiting for it to be imported from elsewhere. We can look closely into the very faces of ordinary Australians captured right in the middle of the act of personal creativity, collective belief, and the desire for social change.

[www.amw.org.au/register/listings/salvation-army-limelight-department-magic-lantern-slides-collection](http://www.amw.org.au/register/listings/salvation-army-limelight-department-magic-lantern-slides-collection)  
[www.facebook.com/SalvosMuseums](https://www.facebook.com/SalvosMuseums)

Ordinary members of the Army became actors for the cause who, in the tradition of the miracle or mystery play, would be witnessed by diverse audiences around Australia and internationally. Other members of the Army became costume and set designers, scene painters, and so on. Yet this was not 'amateur'. Through the organisational focus of the Limelight Department they were on the cutting edge of technology and culture with a wide reach. For several years in the 1900s the Limelight Department's travelling 'Biorama' companies projected slide sequences and short cinematographic films accompanied by music and scripted narration in both small halls and large theatres across Australia and New Zealand. They represent a period when Bible stories were well known and widely consumed as part of broader popular culture. This can be seen, for instance, in the importance of biblical stories as content for early cinema.

Women held significant and powerful roles within the Army. The work of women was integral to the Limelight Department in the production, manufacture, colouring and distribution of slides and films. Women were central narrative figures in many of the biblical stories that were recreated, and through the research of the Museum, which remains fully embedded in the Army as a whole, we now know the names of some of the Australian women who played major roles in the slide sets. These were everyday Australian women performing for Perry's camera because of their personal commitment to the Salvation Army.

One of the extraordinary features of the collection now in the Memory of the World Register is that it is kept and displayed in the very building in which it was created. The Salvation Army



*Martyn Jolly and Barry Gittins receiving the certificate of inscription into the UNESCO Australia Memory of the World Register, from Roxanne Missingham, former Librarian of the Australian National University, 27 March 2025*