

# The Magic Lantern

## ARCTIC ENTERTAINMENT

Mary Ann Auckland

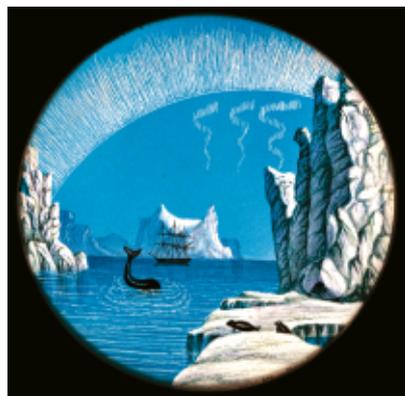
During the winter of 1850-51, a Royal Navy expedition of four ships – two sailing barques, HMS *Resolute* (Capt. Horatio Austin, the leader) and HMS *Assistance* (Capt. Erasmus Ommanney, my three-times-great uncle), and two smaller steamers HMS *Pioneer* (Lt Sherard Osborn) and HMS *Intrepid* (Lt Bertie Carter) – were frozen in the ice near Griffith Island in Barrow Strait, the Canadian Arctic. The larger ships had 60 men and the smaller ones 30, making a total of 180 men to keep occupied during the long cold, dark winter.

They were in search of the doomed Franklin expedition that had left England in May 1845 to pinpoint magnetic north and find the fabled north-west passage. Only local Inuit people had seen it since July 1845 when in Baffin Bay off Greenland. There were no fewer than 16 expeditions searching in the region that winter. On 23 August Capt. Ommanney found the first traces on Cape Riley, but the main Franklin story was not unlocked until an 1859 expedition by Leopold McClintock (first lieutenant on HMS *Assistance* in 1850) and Franklin's two ships were eventually found in 2014 and 2016.

The Austin expedition was particularly noteworthy for how well they understood the value of entertainment. Clements Markham, a young midshipman in HMS *Assistance* and by 1893 President of the Royal Geographical Society, later commented: "to Captain Austin is due the praise of having organised those admirable arrangements for winter quarters which secured the bodily and mental health of officers and men." The company was known as 'the Austin Happy Family'. Lt. Osborn, in his journal, listed the winter occupations: "A theatre, a casino and a saloon, two Arctic newspapers, one of them an illustrated one, evening-schools, and instructive lectures gave no one an excuse for being idle [...] and, with wonderful ingenuity, a fancy dress ball."



The magic lantern also featured. Capt. Ommanney recorded in his journal that on 22 November Capt. Austin came to dinner and "evening amusement was magic lantern." The playbill for 28 February 1851 at the Royal Arctic Theatre on board HMS *Assistance* (Capt. Ommanney, theatre manager) includes 'Grand phantasmagorical Magical Figures'. His entry for 4 March, describing the next show, recorded: "Magic lantern was afterwards shown by Mr Krabbé whose comic powers of description produced roars of laughter." The lanternist, Frederick Krabbé, was second master of HMS *Assistance*, and of Danish descent. He was clearly talented as he went on a later expedition as "conductor of the conjuring and phantasmagorical entertainments."



A show on 17 January at the Royal Intrepid Saloon (on board HMS *Intrepid*), advertised in the *Illustrated Arctic News (IAN)* as 'the celebrated Gallantic show of Moving Figures!', was reviewed in the *Aurora Borealis*, the other newspaper: "the great attraction of the evening was without doubt the 'gallantee' show, consisting of various scenes taken from our outward-bound voyage." While we cannot be sure this was a magic lantern show there were certainly enough talented artists on board to make slides, including George F. MacDougall, the artist for the *IAN*, Walter May who became a full-time watercolourist and Lt W.H. Browne whose sketches were used for the Leicester Square Arctic panorama. Perhaps an early version of some of the slides shown here?

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Slides from author's collection – sailing ship (top) by W.C. Hughes, ships near volcano by Newton & Co., no other maker named