

Travelling in the national interest: parliamentarians and penguins at the National Archives of Australia



Cheryl Jackson at the National Archives of Australia with a travel box of slides. Photo credit: Martyn Jolly.

In November 2017 Martyn Jolly and Elisa deCourcy were generously welcomed to the National Archives of Australia to speak with Cheryl Jackson, Assistant Director of Preservation Services and Projects, Caroline Webber, Director of Public Programs, Anne-Marie Conde, Senior Curator, and Anne McLean, Director of Reference Services, about their eclectic collection of lantern slides. Our discussions focussed on slides from the second decade of the twentieth century. We saw sets ranging from that compiled from a British Parliamentary Tour of Australia in 1913 to a set made from amateur and professional photographs taken on Douglas Mawson's 1910-14 Antarctic expedition.

The National Archives of Australia describes itself as a 'living collection' and repository of the 'nation's memory'. It holds, preserves and exhibits government records that relate to extraordinary events in Australia's history as well as items that reflect the lives of everyday citizens. The Archive incorporates a significant collection of lantern slides, mainly pertaining to travel, exploration, diplomacy and missionary work undertaken by Australians or, indeed, chronicling high-profile visitors to Australia. So, naturally, when a British delegation of parliamentarians visited Australia in 1913, their extensive tour and survey local industry and institutions was preserved and projected in lantern slide format.

The British Parliamentary delegation, responsible for legislating on Commonwealth and imperial affairs, arrived on the east coast of Australia in August 1913. As the lantern slide to the right shows, they divided into smaller sub-delegations to travel to rural and urban hubs of industry and agriculture. Press reports indicate a mixed and ambivalent reaction to the delegations. Coverage about the sub-committee visit to the Lithgow Iron Works appeared on page 5 of the [Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners Advocate](#) only after an extensive commentary on the chants of 'Australia for Australians' that met a parallel delegation's reception in metropolitan Sydney. In a period where the White Australia Policy dominated local protectionist politics, the delegation was given the unequivocal message that inter-imperial migration from places beyond the British metropole was 'undesirable'.



'Map of routes travelled', British Parliamentary Association 1913 Tour of Empire, NAA, Series A13773.

This had been proposed as one of their chief talking-points for Commonwealth policy and legislation.

Nevertheless, the slides documenting the tour are much less attuned to rambunctious xenophobia. They show top-hatted British parliamentarians striding purposefully across train tracks at the Lithgow Iron Works. The Work's chimney stacks emitting dark, dense smoke — a pictorialist photographer's dream backdrop — almost completely masking the hillside vegetation along the skyline. The lantern slide is a freeze-frame of rural productivity in a pre-WWI period. A sub-delegation's inspection of the irrigation and dam scheme at Burrinjunk, New South Wales, was reported upon as far afield as the [Queensland Times](#). Lord Emmott, perhaps the coated gentleman in the centre of the bottom-right slide, was quoted as describing the scheme as a 'wonderful experiment'. The wheelbarrow in the centre foreground of the frame, and the cascading un-retained dam wall, provide an indication of the early phase of the initiative which would not be completed until fifteen years later in 1928. It is difficult to deduce the contribution made by the delegation or the impact resulting from their visit. The outbreak of war a year later halted many of the schemes and businesses the committees visited as productivity was re-directed toward war industries. Yet, the lantern slides document what was an exceptionally vast tour by British representatives in the early years of the country's federation.



'Lithgow Iron Works, N.S. Wales', *British Parliamentary Association 1913 Tour of Empire*, NAA, Series A13773.



'Burrinjunk, N.S. Wales', *British Parliamentary Association 1913 Tour of Empire*, NAA, Series A13773.

While the British Parliamentary delegations were touring local industries in 1913, the Australian Douglas Mawson was coming to the end of his extended South Pole expedition. The NAA holds a set of slides crafted from photographs exposed on the Australasian Antarctic Expedition's 1910-14 eastern and western survey of the ice continent. Images, such as that of that of the Adelie penguin and chick below, were taken by the expedition's official photographer James Francis (Frank) Hurley. Unattributed snapshots, documenting the party's progression through extreme conditions and collection of specimens have also been integrated into the lantern slide set. This set documents one the most significant Australia-led exploratory journeys of the early twentieth century. Its team comprised largely of Australian and New Zealand geologists, scientists and surveyors. The data gathered would earn Mawson a knighthood and

establish Australia as one of the key nations involved in charting the Antarctic wilderness.



L-R: 'Mawson Antarctic Expedition: Close-up of Adele Penguin and baby chick amongst rocks', lantern slide, c. Autumn 1912, NAA, series M584; 'Mawson Antarctic Expedition: Alfred James Hodgemen (cartographer, sketch artist) in partially completed transit house, AAE', lantern slide, c.1911, NAA, series M584.

The Mawson slides show the characteristic remit of lantern slide media, which borrowed and re-purposed images produced in other forms (many of Hurley's photographs are held as glass plate negatives in the State Library of New South Wales) to provide a mobility for and wider dissemination of the significant stories they told.