

Conjuring Canberra forth: one magic lantern show at a time



Figure 1: Mildenhall, William James (Jack). Site of Parliament House marked in lime [1923?]. From a collection of 453 glass lantern slides held at the National Library of Australia. Retrieved February 24, 2019, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-141425890>.

This favourite slide seems to ask the question ‘How do you take a photograph of a building that does not yet exist?’ A sprinkling of lime dust prompts us to picture Australia’s provisional Parliament House rising from the bare earth.

Shane Breynard, Director at Canberra Museum and Gallery, and a commencing ANU doctoral candidate in History, recently viewed an important collection of 453 magic lantern slides held in the National Library of Australia.

An extensive and compelling photographic archive created by William James (Jack) Mildenhall between 1921 and 1935 records the early development and community of the national capital. The archive is made up of over 7700 black and white glass plate negatives and is held at the National Archives of Australia.¹

Smaller selections of images from this archive can be found in at least three separate collections of glass magic lantern slides.²

In a collection of 453 slides held at the National Library of Australia, Mildenhall’s images appear alongside the work of other photographers, as well as slides that reproduce maps, drawings and cinema advertisements. This collection includes slides showing Australia’s 1901 Federation celebrations in Sydney, and Canberra’s official naming ceremony in 1913. There are also slides which show the Murray River, a ‘laughing’ chimpanzee and a drawing of the ‘sheep-maggot fly and its parasite’. A number of these slides, which do not appear to be Mildenhall’s images, bear the same caption: the ‘first inhabitants of the ACT’. In reality, these slides appear to show Aboriginal people from areas well outside the region (Figure 2).

Alongside many black-and-white slides, some of the slides in this collection are delicately hand-coloured, and others in full photographic colour.



Figure 2. Mildenhall, William James (Jack), First inhabitants of the ACT. 1927[?] From a collection of 453 glass lantern slides held at the National Library of Australia. Retrieved February 24, 2019, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-141441642>.

This surprisingly misleading slide purports to show the ‘First inhabitants of the ACT’. However, it seems unlikely that the people pictured, convincingly spear fishing in a mangrove-fringed estuary, would have had any significant connection to the Canberra valley at all.

The larger archive of Mildenhall’s work evidently fulfils a set of prescribed government requirements, variously evidentiary, technical, political and promotional. But the three smaller collections of glass lantern slides each have the character of a working projectionist’s image bank. They are made up of those Mildenhall images that are most evocative and given to incorporation into a projectionist’s changing narrative. Martyn Jolly observes that all lantern presentations were, ‘...changed from night to night depending on circumstance, and evolved and mutated as new elements were added and others retired.’³ We can imagine the slide selection that illustrated a projectionist’s ‘Canberra lecture’ being revised again and again, as the story was ‘improved’ and audience needs differed.

In the context of these three slide collections Mildenhall’s images are decoupled from the administrative context in which they were conceived. Their evidentiary power is traded for a more evocative power as they achieve a second life in the stories of the projectionist.



Figure 3. Mildenhall, William James (Jack). Molonglo River, Acton, 1920. From a collection of 453 glass lantern slides held at the National Library of Australia. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-141422441>.

This restorative slide may have illustrated a story at least one projectionist told: that the Molonglo River’s Weeping Willows were propagated from cuttings taken from Napoleon’s tomb on the Island of Saint Helena.⁴

Although my investigation of the use of these slides is at an early stage, there is evidence that at least some of them were included in presentations by Harry L Dawson in Sydney, Australia in 1927 and in Palmerston North, New Zealand in 1932.⁵

Dawson was a Methodist missionary described as a ‘racy and fluent speaker’ with ‘the art and the material to kindle an audience’.⁶ He delivered evangelical lectures in Eastern Australia between at least 1916

and 1948, except for five years he spent touring New Zealand from 1930. Dawson's lectures covered a diversity of topics including 'The Dark Side of Sydney' (1916), 'World Wonders' (1935), 'What of The Empire?' (1943), 'Russian Relations with Britain and Australia' (1948), 'Perils of Palestine' (1948), 'The World's Worst Disaster' (1954) and 'The Unseen World' (1954).

On 22 May 1927, Empire Sunday, Dawson delivered an illustrated lecture entitled 'Canberra: The City Beautiful' at the Lyceum Theatre, Sydney. Five days later, The Canberra Times published an extended text from Dawson's lecture.⁷

In his lecture Dawson tells his own 'glorious' history of the Canberra valley and the growing capital, recounting a series of prophetic insights from early residents, and contemporary advocates, in evidence of the site's predestined glory.

Dawson describes the Canberra valley prior to the 18th century as an 'abundant paradise' in which 'black people hunted and thrive'. He then speaks of a phase of pioneers who, he tells his audience, sought '...the star of strong intent, a handful of heroes scattered to conquer a continent.' Then he reveals that a Member of Parliament recently confided in him that, 'it would seem as if nature has especially endowed her to be a capital city.'

Dawson casts Canberra's present as a 'model city' in a narrative framework and language that would have been familiar to his largely Methodist audience. His narrative history of Canberra proceeds from a distant idyllic past through a period of struggle, guided by faith in a majestic future, to a glorious destination, where even the highest aspiration seems certain of fulfillment.

What better means existed to ignite an audience with such a miraculous story than a magic lantern show?

Dawson's presentation not only drips with attributed stories that magnify the beauty of the Canberra valley and the glorious destiny that awaited it. He also dwells on its historical connection with greatness, reminding his audience that the Molonglo River's weeping willows had been grown from cuttings taken from Napoleon's tomb on the island of Saint Helena.

While it is uncertain whether the specific slides referenced here were used in Dawson's presentations, it is easy to imagine his use of a similar selection.

The adventure of viewing these three Mildenhall glass slides collections through the lens of Dawson's narratives provides an opportunity to reimagine the Canberra-fervour which would have been ignited in their audience. I look forward to further investigation of these collections, and the projection of their contents. They promise additional insight into how stories of Australia's developing capital were grafted into already familiar and powerful narratives. They also promise an understanding of how such story-making processes fostered a 'shared imagining' of the future capital and the community it would serve.

Dawson's magic lantern presentations are essentially productive in nature. They use prophetic stories from Canberra's past as foundations on which to build a story of the city's glorious future. His history is mostly one of adding things, rather than of taking things away. However, several of Mildenhall's magic lantern slides remind us that building a functional new city is not just about making things appear. It is also, necessarily, about making certain other things disappear.

The frenzied work of augmenting an inadequate sewerage system to accommodate the arrival of parliamentarians and their staff in Canberra in 1927, is an example. As the new capital's buildings, bridges and roads spread out across the surface of the Canberra valley, its water and sewerage infrastructure tentacled deep under the surface and into the surrounding landscape.

The wholesale extraction of fresh water from and injection of human waste into the surrounding ecosystems of the new capital was a story less glorious perhaps than the one told by Dawson. From this perspective it could be seen as the beginning of a slow environmental degradation of the Canberra valley which continues in many respects to this day.



Figures 4 and 5. Left: Construction of sewerage tunnel under the Molonglo River, with Parliament House and West Block Offices, Canberra in May 1927 and other contemporary scenes of Canberra. Left: Construction of sewerage tunnel under the Molonglo River, with Parliament House and West Block Offices, Canberra in the distance. Right: Party inspecting water pipes in tunnel. Images courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. [NAA: A3348, 16 and 18](#)

These revealing slides document the construction of subterranean tunnels for the transport of fresh water to and sewerage from the growing national capital.

Thinking about how these glass lantern slides have and might have been used to project the story of the emerging capital into an already familiar narrative challenges our history-making. Canberra's contemporary urban identity is evidently still subject to complex processes of story-telling today.

¹ Mildenhall undertook government-commissioned work in Canberra from 1921 and was official government photographer from 1926 to 1935. Most of the work Mildenhall produced over this period is included in the photographic archive referred to at the National Archives of Australia, NAA: A3560 – Mildenhall collection of glass plate negatives.

² The following three collections of glass lantern slides reproduce selected Mildenhall images. Collection of 453 slides – National Library of Australia. Mildenhall collection of photographs of Canberra Retrieved, Glass Lantern Slides. February 24, 2019, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-141420488> ; Collection of 86 slides – National Library of Australia. 1913-1935 Coloured lantern slides of early Canberra Retrieved February 26, 2019, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-133545764>; Collection of 50 slides - National Archives of Australia. NAA: A3348 Glass Lantern Slides of the 1927 Opening of Federal Parliament and other contemporary Canberra scenes 1947. https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/SeriesDetail.aspx?series_no=A3348&singleRecord=T

³ Jolly, M. 2013. *Soldiers of the Cross: Time, narrative and affect*. Early Popular Visual Culture, 11:4, 293-311, DOI: 10.1080/17460654.2013.838517

⁴ A CAPITAL CITY (1927, May 24). The Canberra Times (ACT : 1926 - 1995), p. 1. Retrieved February 27, 2019, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article1213514>.

⁵ A CAPITAL CITY (1927, May 24). The Canberra Times (ACT : 1926 - 1995), p. 1. Retrieved February 27, 2019, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article1213514>. ; Manawatu Standard, Manawatu Standard, Volume LIII, Issue 17, 17 December 1932 <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/MS19321217.2.19>

⁶ Otago Daily Times, Issue 22522, 16 March 1935 <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ODT19350316.2.8> ; Horowhenua Chronicle, 7 April 1933 <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/HC19330407.2.39>

⁷ CANBERRA, THE CITY BEAUTIFUL (1927, May 27). The Canberra Times (ACT : 1926 - 1995), p. 4. Retrieved February 25, 2019, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article1213595>