

‘Tasmania’s Wonderful West’, the photographic slide show and environmental activism at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston



In December 2018 lead CI Martyn Jolly and Research Fellow Elisa deCourcy visited Launceston’s Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, where Collections and Research manager Christine Hansen, History Curator Jon Addison and Collection Officers Ross Smith and Katrina Ross, introduced us to their extensive magic lantern slide collection.

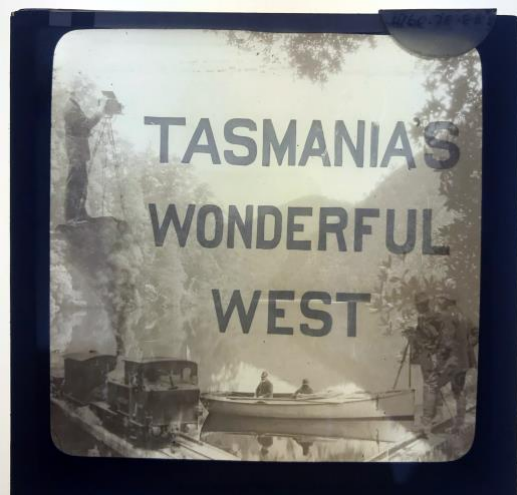
The collection, of several thousand slides, is a very substantial one. It is strong in its educational slide collections because the Museum had a close association with the Launceston Technical College, located just next door. And it is continually being added to as QVMAG acquires more slides, as well as the technical apparatus, the magic lanterns, with which they were originally shown.

QVMAG’s Jon Addison and Katrina Ross looking through some of the collection.

But the QVMAG collection is internationally significant for another reason: it documents a long continuity of vibrant and politically important lecturing and audio-visual projection practice about Australia’s environment. Going back to the nineteenth century, Tasmania, with its extensive wilderness areas and its history of political fights over the conservation of those areas, has been the prime generator not only of Australia’s tradition of nation-defining landscape photography, but also of Australia’s nationwide green consciousness.

For instance, most Australians would immediately recognise the iconic photograph *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend*, 1981, by Peter Dombrovskis (1945-1996), and many would have been taught of the pivotal role it played in the federal election of 1983, and the campaign to save the Franklin River. At that time Dombrovskis was exhibiting around Australia slides of the Franklin, along with slides by his mentor Olegas Truchanas (1923-1972), in audio-visual shows produced by the photographer and environmental campaigner Ralph Hope-Johnstone (1917-1989). A decade earlier, in 1972, Hope-Johnstone had been presenting Olegas Truchanas’s shows ‘Winter’ and ‘Pedder’ around Tasmania. These shows were accompanied by an eight-track taped sound track incorporating commentary, the romantic music of Frederick Delius, and a pulse track to advance the slide carousels. The small, modestly produced, advertising posters for these important audio-visual events are preserved both in the Truchanas Collection at QVMAG and amongst the Bob Brown collection in the National Museum of Australia, Canberra.

The QVMAG has now accepted a major gift from the Truchanas family of over two and a half thousand items, which will shortly be available on line. Earlier, for their important 2013-14 exhibition *Into the Wild: Wilderness Photography in Tasmania*¹ the museum collected from the Pedder Restoration Committee Hope-Johnstone’s original 35mm slide projectors, automatic slide changers, and rotating dissolvers and displayed some of these with a digital recreation of the ‘Pedder’ presentation. Martyn and Elisa were delighted to learn from Jon that the technology was fundamentally similar to that used to ‘dissolve’ magic lantern views in the nineteenth century, it



The opening slide montage to H J King's magic lantern show, 'Tasmania's Wonderful West', c1920-30s

had just been made automatic by the 1970s.

Jon Addison and the QVMAG team realised that the Dombrovskis and Truchanas audio-visual shows were part of a long line of slide shows presenting Tasmania's wilderness, so they worked with QVMAG's collection of photographic plates, scripts and publications in other Tasmanian archives, to digitally reconstruct magic lantern shows from the first half of the twentieth century by J W Beattie (1859-1930) and Herbert John (H J) King (1892-1973).

J W Beattie's production and use of magic lantern slides popularized his adopted home. He produced and sold thousands of slides to promote Tasmania — the 'dark tourism' around its grim convict past as well as its scenic beauty. He also produced his own shows, and in 1908 even presented magic lantern shows as part of a campaign to protect the banks of the Gordon River from tree felling², and in 1914 to prevent BHP from mining the cliffs for smelting flux.

However the work of H J King is less well known. He was one of a group of amateur photographers, motorists, bushwalkers and proto-environmentalists associated with the Northern Tasmania Camera Club, and the Tasmanian Field Naturalists Society. Others included Alfred Harold Masters (1875-1951), Stephen Spurling III (1876-1962), Charles Anthony Hart (1873-1953), and Florence Perrin (1884-1952). Florence Perrin's husband, George, was a member of the Camera Club, but Florence was excluded from the all-male group. However she still became a highly accomplished photographer, as well as being a pioneer mountaineer, botanist, painter and writer.



L- R: A slide of the Camera Club Field Day, Quamby Estate, November 9th, 1898; A glass transparency for a stereoscope viewer c1918. H.J. King features on the right holding a stereoscopic camera.

The lantern slide collection of QVMAG is therefore extremely important because it documents a virtually unbroken lineage of projection practice, when Tasmanians — amateur and professional — came together to show each other images of Tasmania's natural beauty. For them the intimate sharing of images on the screen became not only personal, social, and aesthetic experiences, but ultimately political experiences as well. The collective experiences preserved at QVMAG were to have profound national, and even international ramifications.

¹ Curated by Damien Quilliam and Jon Addison, with catalogue essays by Nic Haygarth and Deb Malor.

² See: Jon Addison, 'John Watt Beattie and the Presentation of Convict History', *Historicising Heritage and Emotions: The Affective Histories of Blood, Stone and Land*, Routledge, forthcoming; Nic Haygarth, *Booming Tasmania: How the Anson Brothers/Beattie photographic studio sold the island and itself 1880-1901*; and Tim Bonyhady, 'The Artist as Activist', *Periphery* 26, February 1996.