

The Salvation Army, lantern slide heritage and The Blind Man of Siloam series

Elisa deCourcy spoke with the Salvation Army's chief archivist, Lindsay Cox about the Limelight Department and the Army's rich history of magic lantern productions.

Few organisations have been more involved in the early days of the magic lantern phenomenon in Australia than the Salvation Army. Climbing the newly refurbished staircase inside the Army's headquarters at 69 Bourke Street, Melbourne you would be forgiven for thinking you were simply ascending through the various levels of their administrative and philanthropic centre. But after rounding the banister at level four and a short walk down the corridor you enter the wooden rafters of the building's street-facing attic: the original Limelight Studio. Largely untouched from the 1890s, this space houses the shell of a lantern slide colouring workshop. Here slides were hand-painted for performances put on for congregation members and the general public between the early 1890s and 1909. During this period the Army had a dedicated Limelight Brigade who took their uniquely-crafted lantern slide sets on tours around the country, including Lindsay's favourite, 'The Blind Man of Siloam'.

EdeC: *Can you tell me a little about why the Army got so heavily involved with lantern slides?*

LC: Joseph Perry (1864-1943) first gave lantern slide performances at Ballarat in 1890, where he was responsible for the Prison Gate Brigade home, for discharged men. He was a self-taught lanternist, using the outer wall of local buildings for his evening projections in an effort to raise money for the home. One of his shows was seen by an officer from the Australian Salvation Army headquarters who conceived of recruiting Perry to advertise the General, or global head of the Salvationists, William Booth's 1891 visit to Australia. Perry's performances proved very popular, and went beyond simply promoting the 1891 visit. By 1895 Perry had visited nearly every Salvation Army corps, or congregation, in Australia and New Zealand, putting on 522 limelight shows and raising around £1700 for the Army's work. The enthusiasm for Perry's shows prompted the Army to create the Limelight Department, headed by Perry and based in Bourke St, Melbourne. This group crafted their own lantern slides to be shown by the itinerant Limelight Brigade.



Lindsay Cox in the Salvation Army's Heritage Museum with the old Coloring Studio in the background. Image supplied.

EdeC: *We know from the preliminary research done by our team and the work of curators that many of the slides shown in Australia in the late nineteenth century were mass-produced multiples often — but not exclusively — of sets originating in Britain. This makes the Limelight Department's endeavours quite unique. Can you speak more about their process in crafting lantern slides?*

LC: In 1897 Herbert Booth, Australiasian leader of the Salvation

Army commissioned a Life Model Studio to be built at the back of 69 Bourke Street. Now, the slides produced by the Army weren't drawn caricatures or lithographs but photographs of live models acting out scenes, hence the name. The Life Model Studio was lit from a southerly aspect and Salvation Army officers and soldiers were the actors.

The photographs would have been developed as a positive transparency onto the glass slide, which was then bought up to this attic space, where the Coloring [sic] Studio was, to be tinted with variously pigmented dyes. While each slide was carefully hand-painted, the spectrum of monochrome from light-dark left by the photograph provided the image with texture and dimension. Although multiple sets would have been made of each story, each slide is coloured by hand.

What I find most interesting is how individual slides, which originally belonged to one set or story, were recycled to be used in other productions. For example, slides from a Salvation Army series set entitled, 'The Martyrdom of Bishop Stephen' were purchased after the Limelight Studio closed in 1909, and sold



Blind Man of Siloam slide. Salvation Army Heritage Centre, image reproduced with permission

by a commercial distributor as in their own, 'The Cross Series'. One way I've used to identify Perry slides is by looking for the familiar faces of his 'actors' across various slide sets, considering so many of his slides use are life models.

EdeC: *Can you tell us a bit more about your favourite set, 'The Blind Man of Siloam'?*

LC: Sure, essentially what I like about this set is how it exhibits the craftsmanship of Perry's limelight enterprise.

For background, 'The Blind Man of Siloam' is a biblical story, John 9:1-11, where Jesus cures a blind man by telling him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. The man rejoicing in his restored vision travels to the temple where the Pharisees and Sadducees chastise him for claiming to be cured by

the Saviour. If you look at each slide in the set you can see how life models have been positioned against a backdrop purposely designed to appear three-dimensional. The sheet has the pool's outer wall intersecting at an almost right-angle with the remainder of the pool's side wall. Moreover, the blind man drinks from the 'pool' as painted on a section of the sheet that drapes down onto the floor. Perry and the Limelight department paid very close attention to affect, thinking carefully how to maximise a sense of realism from slide to projected image.

Most of the Perry slides that remained in the building after the Limelight Department closed in 1909 were discarded or destroyed when this site was renovated in the 1970s. The original Limelight Department slides I've got here now have been donated from personal collections or are from other Salvation Army State archives. They were usually sent out with travelling lanternists across the country. We also know that performances were put on in the main auditorium on level one of no.69 Bourke Street

from the ticket stubs which were found there in the cracks of the wooden floors when the building was being renovated. The Salvation Army was great at recording and advertising their works. Their weekly periodical, War Cry often included sketches of lantern slides produced by the Limelight Department and recounted of shows given across the country.

[The Salvation Army History and Heritage Centre](#) is open to the public. You can go up to the attic and, read about the Limelight Department and the slides which were made in this cavernous space above the hub of Bourke Street.