



The Malle [sic] Scrub series

Lead CI, Martyn Jolly travelled to the State Library of Victoria to examine *The Malle (sic) Scrub, a true story of three children who were lost in the Australian bush* series with Research Librarian, Susan Long.

Few stories gripped the popular colonial imagination more than that of the ‘Duff Children’, Jane and Isaac Cooper and their younger brother Frank Duff, who got themselves lost in the Victorian bush in 1864. After nine days they were rescued on the brink of death when Aboriginal trackers led search parties to them. Besides being widely reported in the press, their miraculous rescue was also illustrated by S T Gill, Nicholas Chevalier, Samuel Calvert, and William Strutt. Their survival led to the erection of plaques and monuments, and also spawned stories that persisted well into the twentieth, and even the twenty-first, centuries. One version, *Lost in the Bush*, was read by every child in Victorian public schools between the 1930s and 1960s; in 1973 a film of the incident was made; and in 2006 the photographer Polixeni Papapetrou based a photograph from her series *Haunted Country* on their plight. But perhaps the most ambiguous example of this popular re-imagining is a set of twenty-four magic lantern slides, *The Malle (sic) Scrub, a true story of three children who were lost in the Australian bush*, illustrated by Life Models, made by Bamforth & Co in the UK sometime after 1887. In 2011 the State Library of Victoria purchased a set of these slides at auction in the UK, and made them available for viewing [online](#). Bamforth & Co was a semi-industrial producer of ‘life model’ lantern slides based in West Yorkshire. James Bamforth photographed models acting out scenes, sometimes against painted backdrops, which were then hand tinted and packaged for international distribution. A synchronized poem to be read out as the twenty-four ‘Mallee Scrub’ slides were projected was also published by Bamforth at about the same time. The SLV has made the verses of this text available online to accompany the slides, while a PDF of the original booklet is available through the [Lucerna Magic Lantern Web Resource](#).

Examining the slides with SLV librarian Susan Long reveals intriguing details about this early multimedia. The story was over twenty years old before Bamforth produced it, nonetheless, as in the earlier engravings, the story's basis in fact is emphasized. An introduction to the reading announced: 'the principal incidents in this story are faithfully narrated from an account published in the "Melbourne Argus."' But the story told from the lantern slides is almost entirely recuperated into a genre of British religious instruction. The children's names are changed to Jennie, Johnny and Frankie, and they look and sound like Northern English villagers, not colonial kids; while their home is a cottage, not a slab hut. The crucial role played by Aboriginal trackers is entirely excised, instead a guardian angel guides the father to the children, in response to their nightly prayers to Jesus. The religious interpretation of the events is entirely consistent with the familiar cast of morally symbolic characters Bamforth marketed for moral improvement and religious instruction. (However, in another set recorded in Lucerna, A Sister's Love, made by the English magic lantern slide manufacturer Newton and Co. in 1912, the Aboriginal trackers seem to have been restored to their rightful role, however this set has not yet been found.)



Research Librarian, Susan Long holding up one of the Malle [sic] Scrub series at the State Library of Victoria

The slides are intricately tinted in olive and russet tones, perhaps to make West Yorkshire look like the Australian bush. But 'Jennie's' frock is heavily coloured a strong red, and this persistent visual trope returns the viewer to one oft-repeated detail from the original story, as Jane Cooper kept her brothers warm with her dress every night. Under a magnifying glass other details reveal themselves. In the first ten or so slides the young girl carries flowers she has picked, tinted with a tiny blush of pink, but discards them in the later slides to signify their desperation. That sharp-eyed librarian, Susan Long, also pointed out the change in the direction of the gazes of the models as the slide set progresses. In the earlier slides of the series, as the children wander deeper into the bush, they look straight at us through the camera — they are models demonstrating a visual parable, rather than actors acting out a story. However in the final eight or so slides,

as the children are rescued and returned to their mother, all of the models begin to interact, looking at each other rather than the camera in a way we recognise from subsequent acting before the camera in cinema.

The engravings published in the illustrated press focused on either the climatic moment of the dramatic rescue, or the maternal action of Jane covering her brothers with her dress at night. But the narrative sequence of the slides is much more complex. There is 'parallel editing' as, after sixteen slides of the children stoically sticking together in the the bush, we suddenly cut back to the father arriving home and

being told by his wife that they are missing, after which it only takes him another four slides to find them — with the help of the Lord of course. There is also rhetorical repetition built into the set. Slide fourteen, of the children kneeling in prayer, is singled out to be repeated to complete the narrative, as the reader reading aloud from the supplied text concludes the presentation with:

Dear children, when you go to bed,
You fold your hands in prayer,
And place yourselves, as Jennie did
In God's almighty care.
Then you may sleep secure and still,
And never need despair,
Guard and protect He surely will
A child that kneels in prayer.

