

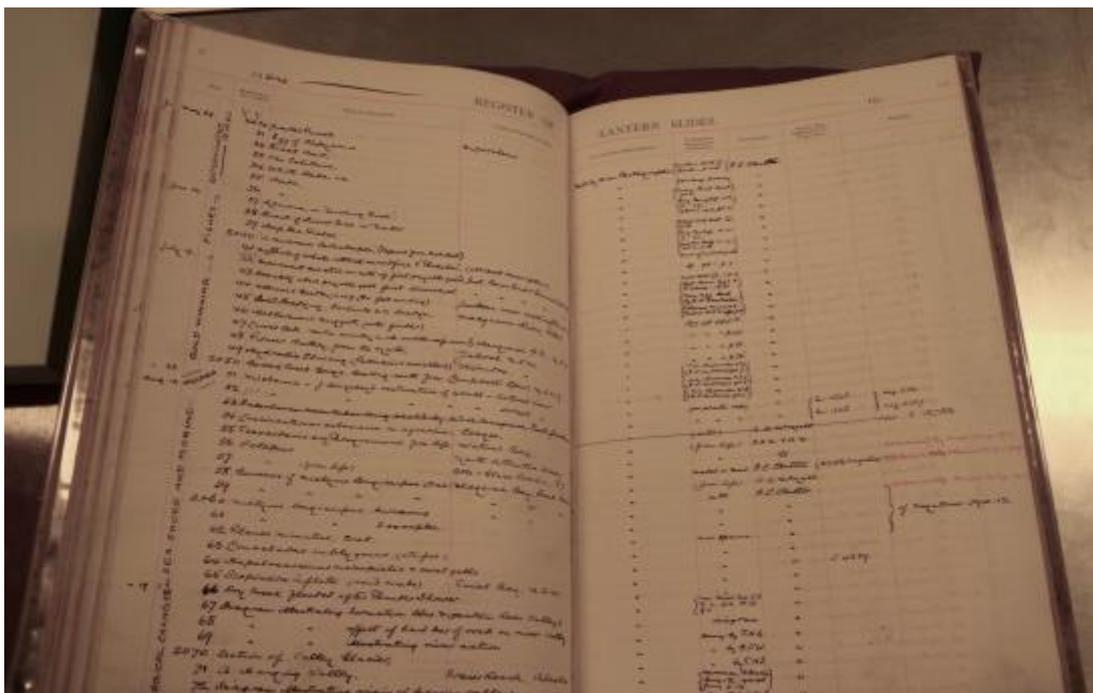
# Boa Constrictors Before Dinner on a Wednesday: Science in the Limelight at the Australian Museum



Purpose-built lantern slide cabinets, Australian Museum, Sydney.

The Australian Museum in Sydney is the country's first museum and is celebrating 190 years of collecting and exhibiting in 2017. At the end of July, the project's Research Fellow, Elisa deCourcy, was lucky enough to get a preview of the Australian Museum's 20,000 plus lantern slide collection with Vanessa Finney, Head, Archives, Rare Books and Library Collections. The slides are housed in the stores of the institution, many in lovely hardwood filing cabinets, watched over by resplendent taxidermied birds in glass vitrines. There is a palpable sense of the past about this archive. Photographic lantern slide lectures commenced in the museum's Halstrom Theatre in 1910, coinciding with the education mandate it was given by the government. For the next five decades, members of the public came to the museum on weeknights and weekends to hear about topics ranging from ['Australian Petrels' \(14 August 1919\)](#) to [Camouflage](#) (largely based on Australia's unique snake species – 22 November 1933). You can get a sense of just how frequent and diverse these lectures were by going to Trove's digital newspaper database and typing in 'Australian Museum' and 'lantern slide lecture'. Your search results will show over 400 advertisements for the first half of the twentieth century, some for a week's worth of lectures.

Backing up this public evidence of pioneering science communication is a three-volume ledger of all its lantern slides, grouped according to the lecture to which they belonged, and recording the guest or staff speaker. Designed to inform the public about particularly specialised aspects of scientific enquiry, this collection doubles to uniquely document early twentieth century practices of microscopy photography and curation, fieldwork, and preservation.



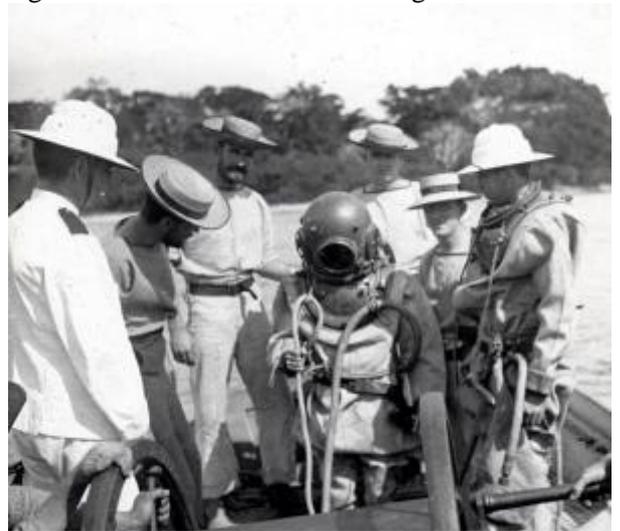
Ledger of lantern slide holdings, listed according to lecture. Note the lecture topics marked in block letters down the left-hand column. Australian Museum, Sydney.

The museum opened its own photography department in 1864. As Australian writer Kathleen Davidson argues in her recent book *Photography, Natural History and the Nineteenth Century Museum* (2017), photography was central to re-packaging professional scientific pursuits for a popular audience, in the museum context, from late nineteenth century. Australian Museum scientists doubled as photographers on fieldwork trips, shooting the process of in situ observation and collection. Being in the early twentieth century, their images were translated into lantern slides either in house or by local commercial slide manufactures. In the first slide below, dated at 1921, we can see two naturalists scrutinising life on the mangrove foreshore, perhaps choosing specimens for collection, perhaps debating the soil consistency. They are in turn being documented by the unseen accompanying expedition photographer. Slides within the Australian Museum’s collection also depicted internal museum practices in areas physically sealed off from public access. The second slide below shows a boa constrictor coiled on bench in the preliminary stages of taxidermy. Finally, in microbiology lantern slide lectures the public were presented with projections of cuttings and seed pods — some taken from microscopy views and others shot from textbook diagrams — to get an intimate perspective the intense scrutiny specimens were placed under during the cataloguing and classify process. Like today’s behind-the-scene’s tours, the lantern slide lectures created a kind of panoptic access of the museum’s dynamic functionings positioning the lecture’s attendees as the privileged observers to ‘back-of-house’ processes of collection, study and curation.



**Top left:** ‘Naturalists at work’, Walter Lewis Ltd. Stratfield, 1921. AMs164\_vv1298; **Top right:** ‘Mr G.C. Clutton with Boa’, AMs164\_vv1042; **Bottom centre: NB: this slide has been cropped around the image rather than the frame.** ‘Calcareous Sponge from Port Jackson’, AMs164\_vv9  
 Images courtesy of, Australian Museum Archives.

This is a significant slide collection for chronicling both localised Australian empirical scientific investigation as well as fieldwork being undertaken by Australians in the Asia Pacific region. The Museum holds the negatives of over 1000 images taken by professional photographer and film maker, Frank Hurley on his three consecutive expeditions to the Torres Strait, Dutch New Guinea and Papua in the 1920s. These expeditions formed the basis for his documentary film *Pearls and Savages* (1921, recut in 1926). However, he was additionally accompanied on his early 1920s trip by Museum staff who were employed to collect cultural artefacts and examples of native flora and fauna. Many of his images were in-turn also made into slides along with those of accompanying scientists. The lantern slide to the right shows the museum's field naturalist and ichthyologist, Allan Riverstone McCulloch (1885-1925) who accompanied Hurley in 1921-3. He had joined the museum as a youth volunteer in 1901 and rose to being one of the museum eminent scientists in his short life. He had travelled throughout the Pacific in the 20s and 30s and was frequently [called upon to give expert commentary on strange fish encounters](#) in the Sydney region. He was also a regular lantern slide lecturer in Halstrom Hall. McCulloch is the figure in the middle of the slide, kitted out with what now seems quite antiquated (and precariously heavy) scuba diving equipment and breathing tubes.



'Mr A R McCulloch in Diving Dress', from Hurley Torres Strait - Papua expedition. NB: This slide has been cropped around the image rather than the frame. Image courtesy of the Australian Museum Archive.

With only a small proportion of their lantern slides collection digitised, the Australian Museum is a trove of underutilised treasures from the popular and professional scientific facet of magic lantern heritage. It is a gateway into the expeditions of notable Australian's and a conduit for viewing early twentieth century museum practices.



Head, Archives rare Books and Library Collections, Vanessa Finney in the Australian Museum's lantern slide store

### Further Reading

Kathleen Davidson, *Photography, Natural History and the Nineteenth-Century Museum*, London, Routledge, 2017.  
 G.P. Walsh, 'McCulloch, Allan Riverstone (1885-1925)' in *The Australia Dictionary of Biography*, available online at: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mcculloch-allan-riverstone-7330> Accessed, 8 August 2017.  
 'Frank Hurley Photography Collection', *Australian Museum*, available online at: <https://australianmuseum.net.au/frank-hurley-photographs>