

Rouse Hill House and Generations of Lantern Slide Performances



Dr Scott Hill with Rouse Hill House's antique magic lantern. Photo credit Martyn Jolly.

Curator Dr Scott Hill knows scores of fascinating stories about the extraordinary collection of [Rouse Hill House and Farm](#), one of the properties of Sydney Living Museums that is located between Parramatta and the towns of Windsor and Richmond in Sydney's North-west. But for Research Fellow Elisa deCourcy and Lead CI Martyn Jolly, one of the most exciting of his stories was the one about Dr John Buchanan Rouse Terry [b.1944], one of the sixth generation of the family to have lived at the house. As a boy in the 1950s he would take out the house's antique magic lantern to give his grandmother Nina [1875-1968] a performance in the house's School Room, using a bed sheet as a screen and a light bulb suspended inside the lantern. The show featured the wicked nineteenth-century children's story 'Pussy's Road to Ruin', and no doubt Nina loved the memories it brought back of her own childhood at Rouse Hill. Later, as a young man in the 1960s, John was inspired by his experience of the magic lantern to experiment with projections. He took a modern slide projector down into the cellar of the house and projected modern slides he had made with layers of collaged cellophane onto shapes covered with a mosaic of broken mirror to fill

the dark room with psychedelic colour.

Visiting Rouse Hill with Scott Hill, we were immediately able to see why the House and its in-situ collection had been a magnet for contemporary artists such as [Anne Ferran](#) and [Robyn Stacey](#). Like everything else in the House, the magic lantern with its collection of mechanical and panoramic slides has been wonderfully preserved, and their loving use by an actual family is immediate and evocative.

The Rouse Hill lantern is a 'phantasmagoria' lantern, one of the first type of magic lanterns which were mass-produced in the 1850s and 1860s. Although aimed at the home market its design skeuomorphically retained aspects of the Gothic phantasmagoria shows of the late eighteenth century. The lantern's tall and bent chimney was designed to vent fumes while excluding all unwanted light from escaping into the room; wire handles were supposed to remain relatively cool so the lantern could be moved around as it projected its images; and black-rimmed 'stops' around the objective lens dealt with the chromatic aberration produced at the edges of the



uncorrected lenses.

A phantasmagoria lantern very similar to the one at Rouse Hill was advertised extensively in the late 1860s in the *Illustrated Sydney News* by the mail-order firm George Richardson and Co. Cashed up Sydney-siders could peruse the firm’s illustrated catalogue of telescopes, opera glasses, model steam engines and magic lanterns which was held at the stationers Gordon and Gotch and, after making a bankers draft to the firm in Liverpool, wait for the eventual delivery of their “Elegant, Useful and Instructive Present” to Australia. The company’s newspaper advertisement illustrated a phantasmagoria lantern, which along with “one dozen slides, 14 inches long, mounted in mahogany frames, containing 50 views illustrating fairy tales painted in a very superior manner” could be ordered for five pounds five shillings. (A month’s salary for a probationary teacher. The Bill Douglas Collection at the University of Exeter also holds similar lantern, item number 69004.)

However the lantern and slides at Rouse Hill were not made by Richardson and Co. of Liverpool but by Newton and Co. of Fleet Street, London, one of the biggest retailers of optical equipment in the British Empire. The Rouse family most probably purchased them directly from Newton and Co.’s Fleet Street shop during their Grand Tour of Europe, which they undertook from March 1868 to Christmas time 1869. As they returned to Australia, stowed in the hold of the [clipper Sobraon](#) were not only their souvenirs of classical Europe in the form of a large portfolio of magnificent Italian views by the photographer Robert Macpherson, and copies of Italian old masters including Fra Angelico and Carlo Dulci bought from the studio of Louis Pisani in Florence, but also the latest entertainment from modern Europe in the form of the spectacle promised by magic lantern technology.

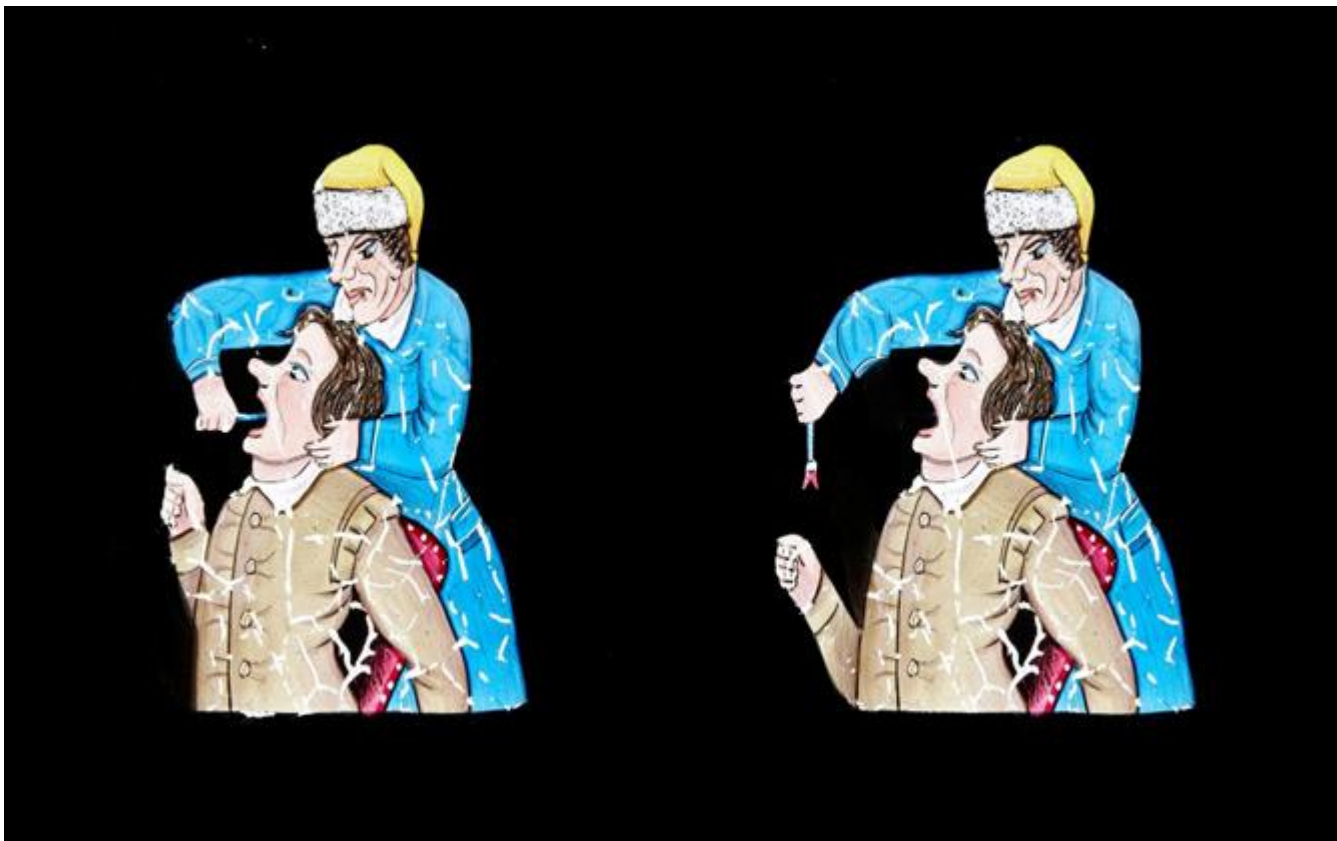
MAGIC LANTERNS.		
	1. Magic Lantern, with 1½in. Condensing Lens, Brass Adjusting Tube, Lamp and Reflector, one dozen Comic Slides 6 inches long, containing 36 subjects	0 7 6
	2. Ditto ditto, with 1½in. Lens, &c., and one dozen Comic Slides, 8 in. long, containing 45 subjects	0 12 0
	3. Ditto ditto, with 2½in. Lens, &c., and 12 Slides, mounted in mahogany frames, containing 48 subjects	0 18 6
	4. Ditto ditto, with 2½in. Lens, and 12 Slides, mounted in mahogany frames, 10 inches long, containing 50 subjects	1 7 6
	5. Ditto ditto, 3in. Lens, and 12 Slides, mounted in mahogany frames, 12 inches long, containing 50 subjects	1 15 0
	6. Superior ditto ditto, with 3in. Lens, Solar Lamp, Reflector, Glass and Mandril, Plano Convex Lens in Adjusting Tube, and 12 Slides, 13 inches long, mounted in mahogany frames, containing 50 subjects	12 6
	7. Phantasmagoria Lantern, of the best construction, fitted with pair of 3in. Condensing Lenses, mounted in brass cell, pair of Focussing Lenses in brass sliding tube, Solar Lamp with Reflector, Glass and Mandril, and 12 Slides, 14 inches long, mounted in mahogany frames, containing 50 subjects	3 15 0
	8. Ditto ditto, of highest quality, fitted with pair of 3½in. Condensing Lenses, mounted in brass cell, pair of Focussing Lenses in brass tube, superior Solar Fountain Lamp, Reflector, Glass and Mandril, and one dozen Slides, 14 inches long, mounted in mahogany frames, containing 50 views illustrating fairy tales, painted in a very superior manner	5 5 0

Advertisement, *Sydney Illustrated News*, 31 October 1868, p. 14.

After their return from Europe Edwin Stephen Rouse [1849-1931], the grandson of the founder of Rouse Hill, adopted the role of the [country squire of the Rouse Hill estate](#), holding [events](#) for the district that featured plays, songs, recitations, fancy dress, and tableaux vivant. The Newton and Co. phantasmagoria would have fitted in very well with this conception of a significant family with significant holdings consolidating the empire. It joined the other technologies the family embraced: a magnificent table-top stereoscope along with a considerable collection of stereographic views, the Metrostyle Themodist Pianola along with its pianola rolls, the Philco shortwave radio, and eventually electricity to power lights and a television.

The lantern is still housed in its original box, and the optics including the three and three-quarter inch bi-planar-convex condenser lens assembly and the multi-element petzval objective lens are undamaged. The only thing missing is the lamp assembly which would have held a cotton wick fed by sperm whale oil into which powdered camphor had been dissolved to produce, as the instructions glued on the inside of the lid promise, “an intensely bright light without any smoke”. Three sets of panoramic slides are in perfect condition: 'Pussy’s Road To Ruin'; or do as you are bid, with which John Terry delighted his grandmother in the 1960s, was based on the popular moralizing children’s book by Madame de Chatelain, published in

1840. Another set illustrates the comic story of John Gilpin carried away by a runaway horse on the eve of his wedding. A third set illustrates 'The Tiger and the a Tub'. More information about these stories can be found on the Lucerna Magic Lantern Web Resource, and the illustrations of these slides can found at [this important resource](#). The Rouses splashed out on other slides in London, including a magnificent chromatrope (although sadly its rack and pinion mechanism is now a bit crunchy) as well as a rack and pinion slide in which circles of fish swim around an underwater garden of shells and coral. Their memories of their grand tour are directly evoked in two hand painted slides, of the 14th century campanile of the Duomo in Florence, and the Atlas Mountains of North Africa. Like so many others in the nineteenth century the Rouses loved their comic slipping slides, and the number of broken slides in the collection suggests generations of enthusiastic Rouse children. Amongst the survivors however a gory tooth extraction and a dangerous barber's shave with a cut-throat razor still work perfectly.



This magic lantern and its slides demonstrates that in the nineteenth century life at the Rouse Hill estate, although hours from Sydney and months from Europe, was nonetheless a life fully immersed in global culture and new technology, a life of media consumption, as well as cultural production.
