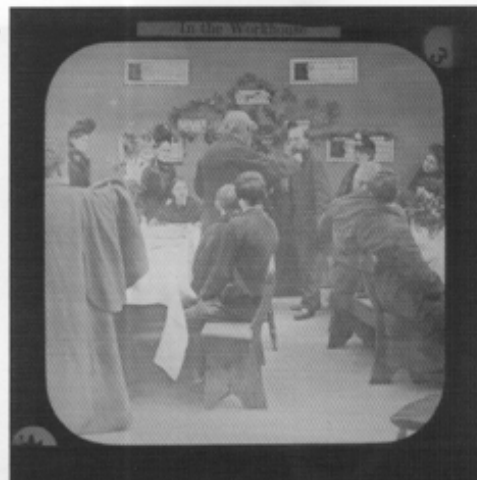


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1. IN THE WORKHOUSE. Life Model Slides, Bamforth, Holmfirth 1890, slide 3.

CHRISTMAS DAY IN THE WORKHOUSE FROM BALLAD TO FILM VIA THE MAGIC LANTERN

Lydia Jakobs

'IT IS CHRISTMAS DAY IN THE WORKHOUSE' is probably one of the best-known opening lines of English poetry and still recognised widely more than 130 years after the ballad was published. Although today, most people outside the magic lantern world would be surprised to learn that the original version is a scathing condemnation of the Victorian welfare system and not a humorous tale of workhouse inmates telling their master specifically where to put his plum pudding. George R. Sims's ballad tells the story of an elderly pauper who refuses his Christmas dinner at the workhouse and blames the 'guardians and their ladies' for his wife's death by starvation on the previous Christmas Eve. The pauper's critique is not limited to the workhouse staff who denied him out-relief (food or goods given to those not willing to enter the workhouse and live there) but directed especially at the well-to-do ratepayers of the parish who are attacked for their complacency:

Do you think I will take your bounty,
And let you smile and think
You're doing a noble action
With the parish's meat and drink?
Where is my wife, you traitors —
The poor old wife you slew?
Yes, by the God above us,
My Nance was killed by you!

Sims, *Christmas*, p. 11.

The fact that the ballad was entirely fictional, the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act expressly allowing workhouse guardians to provide temporary relief in cases of 'sudden and urgent necessity', did little to diminish the ballad's success as a recitation piece that was adapted both as a magic lantern slide series and a film.²

THE BALLAD

'In the Workhouse, Christmas Day' was originally published under Sims's *nom de plume* Dagonet on 23 December 1877 in the radical weekly newspaper *The Referee*. It was the second of what were to become the enormously popular Dagonet

Ballads (the first being 'Told to the Missionary') and was included with minor corrections in the first collection of Sims's poems in March 1879. Although it is frequently described as a sentimental piece of little importance today, Sims himself most likely considered it a political poem and claimed that for some time it was 'denounced as a mischievous attempt to set the paupers against their betters'.³ The trade unionist Frederick Rogers, according to an article published on his death in November 1915, used to say, 'that poem did grand work for old-age pensions'.⁴ He also claimed to have been the first of many public reciters of Sims's words. Another was Sims himself, who in 1880 recited his own words at a Radical Club in Whitechapel during a public lecture on 'The Poetical Side of Poverty'.⁵ Unlike the title suggests, it seems Sims mainly spoke about politics, relaying 'the origin of the poor laws, and their effects at the present time' and discussing the unintended side effects of the 1875 Artisans' Dwellings Act.⁶ He concluded his 'eloquent lecture, which was continually applauded' with recitations of two of his ballads. In 1890, a columnist for the *Western Times* gave his slightly different version of the event:

[A]lthough he succeeded in reciting (with the assistance of a prompter) two of his own pieces, 'Christmas Day in the Workhouse' and 'Billy's Rose', with considerable effect, yet the lecture itself, which was a very brief affair, was somewhat a failure. This was, I believe, the first, last, and only occasion on which Mr Sims publicly trod the boards.

(29 December 1890, p. 3)

Regardless of whether or not that was true, other reciters soon took to the stage and 'Christmas Day in the Workhouse' became a favourite for reciters of all ages and sexes at events ranging from elocutionary competitions to political events to music hall programmes. Possibly the most colourful reciter was a Miss Bertie Brandon who first appeared as a 'male impersonator' in music halls across the country in the late 1880s and whose recitation of 'In the Workhouse' — presumably in costume — apparently 'brings down the house'.⁷

NOTES

1. This and all subsequent quotes from 'In the Workhouse, Christmas Day' are taken from George R. Sims. *The Dagonet Ballads*. London: E. J. Francis, 1879, p. 8–15.
2. Cf. Norman Longmate. *The Workhouse*. London: Temple Smith, 1974, p. 225 and see <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/poorlaws/1834act.shtml> [16.08.2014] for the full text of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act.
3. George R. Sims. *My Life: Sixty Years' Recollections of Bohemian London*. London: Eveleigh Nash, 1917, p. 181.
4. 'A Friend of the Poor'. *Birmingham Gazette*, 18. November 1915, p. 4.
5. This was where, according to his autobiography, Sims met the young Arthur B. Moss who became his guide during the research visits in London slums conducted with Frederick Barnard for his articles on 'How the Poor Live' (cf. Sims, *My Life*, p. 135–6).
6. 'Poverty'. *Surrey Mirror*, 15. May 1880, p. 5.
7. *The Era*, 02. October 1886, p. 16.

THE LIFE MODEL SLIDE SET

In July of 1890, four photographs for a Life Model slide set produced by Bamforth and based on Sims's ballad were registered at the Stationer's Hall, London. The records comprise three of the four different settings that were used during production. It was unnecessary to register all nine photographs of the set since the individual slides shot in front of the same background look fairly similar as far as the positions and number of persons and items are concerned. 'In the workhouse' was produced entirely inside the Bamforth studio in Holmfirth and according to LUCERNA, James Bamforth, who painted all the backdrops himself, also posed as the pauper John.⁸ The first four slides show the 'cold bare walls' of the workhouse interior adorned with 'garlands of green and holly' (Sims, *Christmas*, p. 9) as the inmates are eating their Christmas dinner. When the slides are being projected, the third slide is repeated as the final image (Fig. 1) at the conclusion of John's retelling of the previous year's events, thereby establishing a frame narrative for his monologue. The 'flashback' is told in five slides using three different settings: the 'crazy garret' (Sims, *Christmas*, p. 14) where John's starving wife Nancy lies in bed and two scenes of John alone on the snowy London streets and at the workhouse gate with snowflakes on the glass slide added during the colouring process (Fig. 2).⁹ That last backdrop was apparently easily recognisable as a workhouse gate to audiences at the time and was also used in two other adaptations of Sims's

ballads photographed in the same year that featured the deterring workhouse, 'The Land of Gold' and 'The Street Tumblers'. 'In the workhouse' is a fairly conventional Bamforth Life Model series in terms of characters and settings and largely 'stays true' to the source text. However, one interesting difference should be noted. Before the protagonist starts telling his story and the scene switches from the inside of the workhouse to its front gate, he is shown raising his arm against another man, presumably the workhouse master (Fig. 3). Sims however describes the scene as follows:

I care not a curse for the guardians,
And I won't be dragged away.
Just let me have the fit out
It's only on Christmas Day
That the black past comes to goad me,
and prey on my burning brain;
I'll tell you the rest in a whisper,
I swear I won't shout again.

Keep your hands off me, curse you!
Hear me right out to the end.

(Sims, *Christmas*, p. 10)



2. IN THE WORKHOUSE. Life Model Slides, Bamforth, Holmfirth 1890, slide 4.



3. IN THE WORKHOUSE. Life Model Slides, Bamforth, 1890, slide 5 (copyright is with LUCERNA: The Magic Lantern Web Resource. slides.uni-trier.de)

The pauper seems rather more submissive in his version which might be explained by the fact that both 'a curse for the guardians' and especially a blow would have been harshly sanctioned under workhouse regulations.¹⁰ In a way this depiction discredits the old man, who is clearly established by Sims as a 'deserving poor' character impoverished through no fault of his own. The synopsis in the 1905 Riley Brothers catalogue for prospective clients follows in this vein and interprets John's monologue as the musings of a madman: 'Reminds him of Christmas Eve 12 months ago, when his Nancy lay dying for bread and they spurned him from the gate – The thought had goaded him to madness.'¹¹

By the 1890/91 lantern season the series was appearing in the catalogues of the lantern departments for two temperance organisations, the Band of Hope Union UK as well as the Church of England Temperance Society (CETS). *The Southland Times*, New Zealand, reports on a Band of Hope 'temperance gathering' in 1900 where 'In the workhouse' was recited 'illustrated by limelight views' following remarks on the evils of alcoholism.¹²

THE FILMS

By the 1880s projections of magic lantern slides were often used to illustrate and enhance live performances by professional reciters. The elocutionist Captain Evatt Acklom introduced his novelty 'illustrated dramatic recitals' at London's Steinway Hall in October of 1883 with

'a series of three recitals, illustrated with dissolving views, representing the different pieces given', interspersed with musical contributions by different vocalists.¹³ By February 1884, his repertoire included pictorial realisations of 'How the Poor Live' and 'The Lifeboat' by George R. Sims. The practice of combining spoken words with projected images was thus well established by the time reciters 'discovered' moving pictures, and in some cases film projectors simply replaced magic lanterns. The well-known reciter Eric Williams seems to have been a pioneer of these 'speaking pictures' and bought the film rights to Sims's 'The Lifeboat' in 1914. Williams's films were especially produced for his recitations and featured the reciter himself in the leading roles. As the films were being projected, Williams would recite the words to attentive audiences in theatres and cinemas, lip-synching to his filmic alter ego.¹⁴ A similar concept was used by the American Novelty Poem-o-graph Company of Cleveland, Ohio, who in 1913 purchased 'the world's rights' to a film version of 'In the workhouse, Christmas Day' to be accompanied by a dramatic recitation. This 'human-voice talking picture' called 'Christmas Day in the Workhouse' 'met with great success wherever it has been shown', which was apparently mostly in the Midwest of the United States.¹⁵

8. See record 'In the workhouse' on Lucerna. The Magic Lantern Web Resource. <http://slides.uni-trier.de/set/index.php?id=3000606> [17.08.2014].

9. While I have not seen the original slide – something that members might be able to help me with? – the same painted background was used for another Bamforth adaptation of a Sims ballad, 'The land of gold', in the same year. Here the workhouse slide does not show any snowflakes.

10. Cf. David Green, 'Pauper Protests: Power and Resistance in Early

Nineteenth-Century London Workhouses'. *Social History*. Vol. 31, No. 2 (May 2006): p. 140–1.

11. Cf. 'IN THE WORKHOUSE'. Catalogue of optical lantern slides. Riley Bros. Ltd.: Bradford, 1905, p. 59.

12. *Southland Times*, 11. October 1900, p. 2.

13. See *London Magnet*, 5. November 1883, p. 2. and *The Musical World*, 10. November 1883, p. 710 as well as an advertisement appearing in the *Morning Post*, 18. February 1884, p. 1.

"I care not a curse for the guardians,
And I won't be dragged away,
Just let me have the fit out,
It's only on Christmas Day
That the black past comes to goad me,
And prey on my burning brain;
I'll tell you the rest in a whisper:-
I swear I won't shout again."

4. CHRISTMAS DAY IN THE WORKHOUSE. G.B. Samuelson, GB 1914.

Unfortunately, it seems neither of these films survived so it is impossible to tell if they also followed the pictorial conventions of magic lantern slides used for recitations. This is certainly true for a British film version of 'In the workhouse' that was produced by G. B. Samuelson in 1914 in time for the Christmas season and of which the British Film Institute holds several copies.¹⁴ The director, George Pearson, gives this decidedly unenthusiastic description of its production in his autobiography: 'We set to work, but halfway through were asked to sandwich in a short film Samuelson had promised the film-renters, *Xmas Day in the Workhouse*, based on a ballad by George R. Sims. [...] We made it in three days, and hoping for the best, took up the threads of the French film again.'¹⁵

Despite this rather hurried production the one-reel film starring resident Samuelson actor Fred Paul was reviewed favourably in the trade press. The *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* stated: 'The poem is well-compressed into the picture, which, though like its subject, unrelievedly mournful, should have a topical value during the coming weeks.'¹⁶ Although they expressed hopes that 'the practice of filming popular poems, which is now enjoying a mild vogue, will not be carried too far', because in their opinion the images alone were not able to suitably convey the meaning without projecting the verses on the screen. This is the technique utilised in the Samuelson film where during its 14 minutes a total of 76 out of the poems' 168 verses are shown in 18 inter-titles (Fig. 4). Another review in *The Bioscope* also refers to the specific difficulties of adapting poetry but admits that 'the lines are well and aptly inserted without becoming in any way tedious', which suggests that in this case no spoken words accompanied the projected image.¹⁷ Perhaps the most striking visual feature of 'Christmas Day in the Workhouse' is a short scene set in the poor home of the old couple, in which Nancy fantasises about their home in Devon during a fever



5. CHRISTMAS DAY IN THE WORKHOUSE. G.B. Samuelson, GB 1914 (screenshots taken from DVD *Lichtspiele und Soziale Frage: Screening the Poor 1888–1914*, Munich: Film & Kunst, 2011)

dream. This is realised through a superimposition of two images in the style of magic lantern dream sequences with the additional effect of movement (Fig 5).¹⁸ The Bamforth slide series 'In the workhouse' does not use this type of effect to illustrate Nancy's dream. However, 'The land of gold' (1890) shows a woman sitting on a bench on one slide and on a second blackened slide in the upper left corner, a smaller image of her sitting on the same bench, this time with her missing children reaching out to her, which is meant to be superimposed on the screen during projection.

The *Kinematograph* suggests that the Samuelson film version was a faithful adaptation of Sims's ballad, which is mostly true; however, one important difference should be noted. After the protagonist finishes his monologue and the final verses of the poem flash on the screen, he falls to the floor, dead, and is quickly covered with a fur coat. Compared to the words of the ballad, this is certainly a more satisfying narrative resolution for the audience and could almost be considered a happy ending, the review stating 'Finally, overcome by his memories and his woes, the pauper himself collapses on the floor, his spirit joining her he had loved so well.' While Sims's poem ends on a bitter note that denies the audience an easy return to their own complacency: 'And when you recount their blessings / In your smug parochial way, / Say what you did for me, too, / Only last Christmas Day' (Sims, *Christmas*, p. 15). One might conclude that almost 40 years after its introduction as a political poem, 'In the workhouse, Christmas Day' had become the dramatic and sentimental Christmas tearjerker it is remembered as nowadays.

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14. See Stephen Bottomore, 'Eric Williams: Speaking to Pictures', Julie Brown, Annette Davison (eds), *The sounds of the silents in Britain*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 55–71.

15. See 'Purchase Poem Rights', *The Billboard*, 23. August 1913, p. 15 and *The Motion Picture News*, Vol. IX No. 5 (7. February 1914): p. 28.

16. Both the 1914 Samuelson film and the Bamforth lantern slide set 'In the workhouse' are included on the DVD *Lichtspiele und Soziale Frage: Screening the Poor 1888–1914*. Munich: Film & Kunst, 2011 from which the screenshots for this article were taken.

17. George Pearson, *Flashback: The autobiography of a British filmmaker*.

London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957, p. 46.

18. This and all following quotes from 'A Mixed Program. At a composite trade show'. *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*. Vol. 16 No. 393 (5. November 1914): p. 55.

19. 'The Pick of the Programmes. What we think of them'. *The Bioscope*, 12. November 1914, p. 665.

20. See also Caroline Henkes, 'Early Christmas Films in the Tradition of the Magic Lantern', Richard Crangle, Ludwig Vogl-Bienek (eds) *Screen Culture and the Social Question, 1880–1914*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013, p. 97–110.