CASE FOR SUPPORT

GEOGRAPHICAL PROJECTIONS: LANTERN SLIDES, SCIENCE AND POPULAR GEOGRAPHY, 1860-1960

The Partnership

The University of Exeter Geography Discipline has a excellent, long-standing relationship with the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) (RGS-IBG). Professor Ryan and Dr Naylor have both made extensive use of the RGS-IBG archive in previous research projects, including the photographic and manuscript collections. Professor Ryan has undertaken published research on RGS-IBG photographic collections, including lantern slides. Dr Naylor currently holds a (unrelated) collaborative doctoral studentship with the RGS-IBG investigating visual cultures of the polar regions. This proposed partnership has evolved from discussion for over a year between Professor Ryan, Dr Naylor and the RGS-IBG’s Dr Catherine Souch about the Society’s significant and extensive, but little-studied, collection of lantern slides. This new collaboration will help the RGS-IBG to achieve its strategic goals of enhancing access to its archives; supporting and facilitating new interpretations of materials held in the collections; and sharing the results of new geographical scholarship and projects in which it is involved.

This collaboration will have a number of benefits for the University of Exeter. It will allow Professor Ryan and Dr Naylor to combine their research expertise in the study of the historical geographies of science, technology and visual culture to both support the supervision of the PhD student and develop new lines of academic enquiry. It will also provide them with an opportunity to develop and deepen links with the RGS-IBG and other relevant institutions. The project will enhance knowledge transfer, building links between the University and non-university organisations involved in geographical scholarship and education. The studentship will enrich the postgraduate community in Geography at Exeter and enhance the research environment within Human Geography and cognate disciplines. At an institutional level, the project will contribute to the University’s goal to train postgraduate students, improving their employability as well as producing highly competent researchers.

The collaboration also has a number of benefits for the RGS-IBG. It will provide them with an opportunity to understand and appreciate the contents of its only-recently catalogued collection of lantern slides. It will open up the RGS-IBG’s unique lantern slide collection to a range of wider audiences for whom the institution caters, including its members; users of its archive and library.
(actual visitors and online users); the wider scholarly community; and the public at large. The project will allow the RGS-IBG’s team of archivists and librarians to place their work and collections in an academic context, encouraging and enhancing critical and innovative research that would otherwise be beyond the capacity of the institution. Members of the RGS-IBG will also be able to exchange knowledge and understanding with the students and staff at the University of Exeter, enhancing the capabilities of all.

The Project
This project focuses on the RGS-IBG collection of glass lantern slides (estimated to be around 20,000 individual slides) that were amassed in the period 1860-1960. The slides are mostly of photographs but also include images of maps, paintings and text. Many were made to accompany evening lectures given at the Society, which were subsequently published in the Society’s Proceedings or the Geographical Journal. The lantern slides are a significant element of the RGS’s visual archive collections and an important record of how the Society incorporated new visual technologies in its central mission to ‘advance geographical science and improve geographical knowledge’. The RGS-IBG has recently undertaken a preliminary survey of the entire collection and has put resources towards cleaning, cataloguing and conserving the slides. However, there has to date been no detailed, critical research on this significant archive collection and its scope and significance is little known outside the archive, even to the Society’s own members. This project sets out to address this lacunae and in so doing bring this important collection to wider audiences and to contribute to a range of current academic debates.

Aims and Objectives
- Examine the lantern slide collection at the RGS-IBG in order to tell new and more complex histories of knowledge-making and the constitution of diverse knowledge communities.
- Locate the uses of lantern slides within the wider contexts of science, commerce and entertainment during the period 1860-1960.
- Focus scholarly and wider attention on an extensive but under-utilised research collection.
- Develop innovative methods for the analysis of lantern slides as material artifacts, rather than simply as images.
Research Questions

- What information do the RGS-IBG’s lantern slides contain? What sorts of geographical information were they deemed good at conveying? How did they construct narratives about their geographical subjects? How did the technology shape the contents of the slides?
- What roles did lantern slides play in the formation of evidence and knowledge, particularly in geographical circles? How did lantern slides circulate within geographical networks of knowledge-sharing and exchange, and did this have any bearing on how organizations, individuals and technologies were connected?
- How did lantern slides contribute to the constitution of authority by their makers and users? What place did they occupy within geographical circles as both a tool for ‘men of science’ and as a device of showmen, and how did their multiple markets compromise their value?
- Who were the real and potential audiences for the RGS-IBG’s lantern slides and how did shows shape their viewing subjects? How did technologies and locations employed to show lantern slides affect audiences’ attitudes, perceptions and expectations, whether at the RGS headquarters or elsewhere? How did different audiences respond to lantern slide performances? How did such responses evolve over time?
- Who produced the lantern slides and where? What place did lantern slides occupy within the commercial optical industry and how did that change over the period in question?
- What connections existed between lantern slide practices and other traditions of projection and entertainment used by geographical researchers and educators?

Research Context

In recent years a small but growing body of scholarship, including work by historians of early cinema, art historians, historians of technology and visual culture (as well as amateur enthusiasts and collectors of lantern slides and projection technology) has begun to coalesce around an ‘intermedial’ field of ‘lantern studies’ (Crangle, Heard, and Van Dooren 2005; Humphries 1989; Leighton 1984; Lyons and Plunkett 2007; Robinson 2001; Stafford 1998). While many lantern slides made and displayed in the period 1860-1960 were broadly geographical in their scope and subject matter (notably those of landscape, architecture, monuments and travel), little detailed historical research has been undertaken on geographical lantern slide collections, such as those amassed by Victorian geographical societies (Ryan 1997). This project’s foci (listed above) will contribute not only to a developing field of ‘lantern studies’ but to important wider debates.
surrounding the changing status of visual imagery – particularly photography – and the role of visual technology in the making and disseminating of different kinds of geographical knowledge and science (Schwartz and Ryan 2003).

As noted under ‘Academic Beneficiaries’, this research will also offer major insights for scholars working across a range of other fields, including: history of technology; historical and cultural geography; history and sociology of science; and cultural history. In recent years historians of geography, science and technology, have begun to examine how nineteenth-century science operated in the public gaze – notably though exhibitions, lectures and museums – and how visual practices and technologies were central to the making and display of scientific knowledge (Bellon 2007; Lightman 2007; Naylor 2002; Secord 2002). By considering the popular and influential lantern slide technology, this research project will add significantly to such work, as well as that which charts the evolving debates about how far professional and amateur scientists trusted the visual evidence of photographs (Tucker 2006). Research into the deployment of lantern slides to promote geographical knowledge will provide insight into how authority in science was produced, circulated and located spatially (Livingstone 2008; Naylor, 2005; Shapin 2010).

**Proposed Methodology**

The methodology will centre on archival and collections-based research. In order to address the research questions set out above the student will employ both visual and textual analysis of lantern slides. However, this project will investigate the lantern slides as three-dimensional objects rather than merely two-dimensional ‘texts’. Drawing on approaches developed by scholars of material culture (Attfield 2000), photography (Edwards and Hart 2004), and geographical image-making practices (della Dora 2009) the research will pay full attention to how the distinctive material properties of lantern slides, and projection equipment, shaped their uses and cultural currencies. The student will therefore engage in a sustained, long-term analysis of collections at the RGS-IBG. Historical investigation of RGS correspondence, manuscripts and journals will be conducted in order to relate particular slides to lectures and publications, and to trace correspondence between authors, slide manufacturers and publishers. The project will also survey reports on lantern slide lectures in the RGS *Proceedings* and *Journal* as well as in contemporary newspapers in order to chart the practice and reception of lantern slide performances.

The project will involve research at other institutions, which will entail both archival and remote, online access to images and records. Related institutions to be consulted for relevant historical material include: the Geographical Association lantern slide collection (University of Sheffield); the
British Library; the V&A; Royal Commonwealth Society Collection (University of Cambridge); Bodleian Library, Oxford; Foreign and Commonwealth Office Library; the National Media Museum, Bradford; Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford; Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge.

**Timescales**

**Year 1**

- Research training provided by the University of Exeter through the Effective Researcher Development Programme
- Initial visits to RGS-IBG and associative induction sessions
- Initial survey of lantern slide collections and of related archive collections, both in RGS-IBG and in other institutions
- Literature reviews of areas relevant to research topic, to include surveys of histories, historical geographies and sociologies of science and technology; histories of visual culture; visual methods and archival research and analysis
- MPhil-PhD upgrade in May 2012.

**Year 2**

- Research on the RGS-IBG collection. This will be arranged both in terms of extended periods at the Society scheduled at key points, and ongoing research through remote online access (where possible) throughout the year. This will allow for sufficient time required to both identify and select relevant materials and to reflect critically on their significance for the research topic
- Further visits to related collections in the UK (Oxford, Cambridge, London and Bradford) in order to contextualise photographic materials found at the RGS-IBG
- Conference paper in Postgraduates in Historical Geography session at RGS-IBG Annual Conference, to consolidate and clarify research so far.

**Year 3**

- Drafting of thesis chapters
- Presentation in RGS-IBG ‘Be Inspired’ series of talks, where users of the collections speak to a general audience of 60-70 people about their work
- Development of displays at RGS-IBG
• Prepare an article for the RGS-IBG’s *Geographical Magazine* on the lantern slide collection
• Submission of completed thesis.

**Plans for Dissemination**

Key knowledge transfer will occur within the RGS-IBG-Exeter partnership, facilitated by regular reports, presentations and meetings with the supervisor team. Research findings will be disseminated to academic audiences through University seminars, conference presentations and the PhD thesis itself. Specialist interest groups will be reached through dissemination via the Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain ([http://www.magiclantern.org.uk](http://www.magiclantern.org.uk)). Even wider public dissemination will occur through RGS-IBG website, education programmes and talks, promotional literature and a small exhibition on the research outcomes (online and in situ at the RGS-IBG).

**Expected Outcomes**

Expected outcomes of this partnership will include a completed doctoral study of lantern slides, science and popular geography, which will be disseminated to and so in turn benefit research communities in historical geography, history and visual culture studies. There will be significant intellectual benefits to the student, the academic supervisors and to the University of Exeter’s postgraduate community. The collaboration will further develop the relationship between Exeter Geography and the RGS-IBG. It will enhance knowledge and digital information on the RGS-IBG lantern slide collection and, through reports, presentations, guest lectures and displays, will facilitate knowledge transfer. Lastly, the collaboration will foster further joint funding bids for a large scale exhibition and catalogue on geographical lantern slides.

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