

ISSN 1059-1249

The Magic Lantern Gazette

Volume 23, Number 2 Summer 2011



The Magic Lantern Society of
the United States and Canada

www.magiclanternsociety.org



Nostalgia, Sentiment, and Cynicism in Images of “After the Ball”

Esther Morgan-Ellis
294 Humphrey St., Apt. 1
New Haven, CT 06511-3935
emellis@gmail.com

Few songs were better known in the first two or three decades of the 20th century than Charles K. Harris's “After the Ball.” This song, published in 1892 by Harris's own company, quickly reached sales of \$25,000 a week and sold more than 2 million copies of sheet music in only a few years. Surpassing all previous sales records for a popular song, “After the Ball” demonstrated the potential interest and income that a popular song might generate and spawned a slew of music publishing firms all seeking to make it big with a hit.¹

Despite its cutting edge success and role in establishing the modern popular song industry, “After the Ball” was a backwards-looking work of nostalgia from its inception. The text concerns an old man explaining to a young girl (his niece) why it is that he never married or had children. The bulk of the verse is given over to the old man's nostalgic recollections of the fateful night when a misunderstanding at the ball—he saw his sweetheart kissing another man, who, unbeknownst to the narrator, was only her brother—separated him from his one true love, who has since died without the chance for explanation and reconciliation. The tone of the lyrics is mournful and mired in the past. The protagonist clearly never moved on from this tragedy of youth, and lives now in a state of constant nostalgia.

Of course, nostalgia is not an unambiguous term that may be tossed around lightly. In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym provides varied perspectives on nostalgia in an attempt to elucidate what has proved to be an ethereal notion. “At first glance,” Boym writes, “nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythm of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.” This definition of nostalgia is roughly my own: the longing for a home, real, imagined, or metaphorical, that exists (or is imagined to exist) in a distant place or time. Boym observes, “[Nostalgia] is not necessarily opposed to modernity and individual responsibility. Rather it is coeval with modernity itself. Nostalgia and progress are like Jekyll and Hyde: alter egos.”² The sing-alongs which I am going to discuss exhibit this coexistence of modern and nostalgic elements, each of which depends on the other for



Lantern slide of the sheet music for “After the Ball,” used as a title slide for a series of live-model slides illustrating the song.

meaning.

In the United States, the late nineteenth century was a period of social change driven by an accelerating population shift from the country to the city. Eric H. Monkkonen reports “a steady increase in the percentage of the total population in large cities from 1840 to 1930,” a growth resulting from the abandonment of farming for industrial pursuits.³ Music historian Charles Hamm notes “a shift from a largely rural society to one dominated more and more by urban centers, and the emergence of new problems for individuals and American

Magic Lantern Society member **Esther Morgan-Ellis** is a doctoral student at Yale University, studying the history and culture of illustrated song slides.

society in this new city life.”⁴ This geographical shift resulted in changing social structures and values,⁵ producing in city-dwellers the simultaneous tendencies to embrace the modernity of city life on the one hand, and to reflect back on the idyllic ways—real or imagined—of country living on the other.⁶ A number of music scholars, with Nicholas Tawa at the fore, have studied many of these modern and antimodern sentiments in the lyrics of popular song in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁷ I will seek to extract them from the theater sing-alongs developed around “After the Ball.”

Around 1911, “After the Ball” was made into an illustrated song, a prominent genre of the early movie theater. The illustrated song is dependent on the projection of a series of glass lantern slides designed to accompany a particular composition. Such illustrated song slides were distributed widely among “nickelodeon” movie theaters. They appeared first in the mid-1890s and ceased to be produced and used during World War I. The beautifully colored slides presented a pleasing contrast with the black and white films that were exhibited. In the presentation of an illustrated song, a singer or vocal ensemble employed by the theater would perform two or more verses and choruses while the appropriate slides—usually featuring colorized photographs of male and female models—were projected onto the movie screen, typically at the rate of four per verse and three per chorus. For the final chorus, the audience would be invited to join in for several iterations. In this manner theatergoers became familiar with the song, perhaps even purchasing the sheet music on the way out.



Second lantern slide in the live-model set to illustrate the song “After the Ball.” The verse begins: “A little maiden climbed an old man’s knee. Begged for a story ‘Do uncle please.....’”



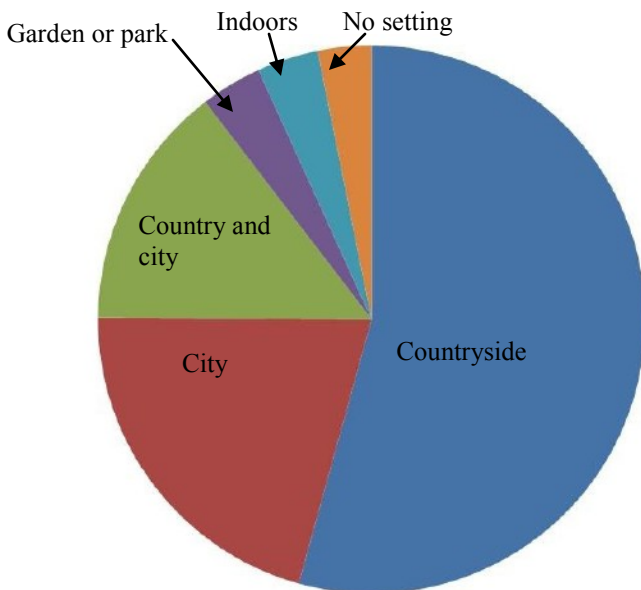
Third slide in the series: “Why are you single, why live alone? Have you no babies, have you no home?”



Fourth slide in the series: “I had a sweetheart, years, years ago; where she is now, Pet, you soon will know.”

Slides continue in color on p. 23 and back cover.

The slides designed to accompany “After the Ball” were produced by the Levi Co. of New York around 1911. While these images are obviously rich in implication, my interest is in the contrast between indoors (or city) and outdoors (or country), seasons, the framing of images, and nostalgia. My focus on these elements stems from my experience working with illustrated song slides during a visit to the Marnan Collection. Of the 221 illustrated songs that I examined and photographed during my visit, 120 were set in the countryside (represented by woods, dirt lanes, or the country village) and eight were set in a garden or park, a space possibly located within the city but free from the street scenes characteristic of city life. Forty-six were located directly in the city, with an additional eight set indoors with no identification of city or country surroundings. Thirty-two featured both country and city scenes, almost always portraying a conflict between the two. A final seven have no clear setting. The countryside is by far the preferred setting for an illustrated song, implying that the nickelodeon sing-along was a center for nostalgic longing for the universal American “home.” The city is a permissible setting only when invoked directly by textual content. The conflict between city and country life was a common focus for popular song at the turn of the century, and it seems that the creators of illustrated songs were well attuned to this theme. I will explore the conflict between city and country in the illustrated song slides designed to accompany “After the Ball”—a division that manifests itself most immediately in the contrast between indoor and outdoor settings.



Settings for 221 illustrated songs in the Marnan Collection of song slides.

Most of the slides for “After the Ball” are set indoors. While they certainly could be the interiors of country homes, they do not meet the standard of “country” that I intend—that is, rural and outdoors. The ball itself is a social affair that suggests urban sensibilities and aspirations, no matter where it is actually taking place. Four slides, however, stand out against the backdrop of constant indoor scenes. These slides—numbers 4, 6, 18, and 21—are all concerned with nostalgic recollections of the dead sweetheart.

In slide #4, the sweetheart is seated indoors in a chair, but the image is framed with cherries and suspended about a lush outdoor scene including a river, trees, and a distant cottage. Why this background? At first sighting it seems incongruous and randomly chosen, but through the course of the slides memories of the sweetheart are consistently associated with the outdoors while the other characters and events remain locked inside. This first image of the sweetheart is set in the full bloom of summer, and her youth is identified with the lush forest of the countryside. The image is framed because the memory of the sweetheart is framed in the mind of the narrator. She is being recalled from the past as she was as a young girl. The frame itself seems to be a sheet of paper—possibly a reference to the letter that informed the narrator of his true love's faithfulness. While this lush outdoor scene foreshadows an extended association between the sweetheart and a country summer, it should be noted that the sweetheart appears indoors as long as she is a character in the story, such as in the scenes that take place at the ball and the chorus slides in which she is shown parallel to the protagonist.

In slide #6, in which the dead sweetheart is recalled, we see two interlocking hearts, one containing the narrator and child, and the other containing the sweetheart. Again, a frame is employed, set against a background of summery leaves and flowers. This time the framing device serves both to connect the narrator to his sweetheart and to keep them inexorably separated. The narrator and his niece are indoors, in the same setting as other slides. A radiator in the background suggests that it might be winter. Indeed, the narrator is in the winter of his life, while the sweetheart is perpetually represented as a young girl. In her frame, the sweetheart is sitting on the grass in a rich summer atmosphere, bright with sun. The memory of her remains verdant and youthful. The theme of indoors versus outdoors is maintained, this time with a direct contrast between narrator/indoors and sweetheart/outdoors. The background of leaves and flowers may suggest the dominant force of her spirit in the narrators consciousness.

In slide #18, the narrator is now within a frame, reading the letter about his beloved's innocence, while the sweetheart looks down from the unframed realm above (perhaps heaven). The frame itself is a sheet of paper, as we saw in

slide #4, reflecting the letter that, too late, revealed the sweetheart's faithfulness to the narrator. While she is not explicitly outdoors, as there is no background to the slide, she's holding a parasol—a clear sign that she is still in her sunny outdoor realm, while the narrator and events of the story are still trapped inside. The narrator is portrayed on a smaller scale than ever, claustrophobically enclosed in the devastating letter, while she is larger and free in an open space, the grand post-death arena of heaven. The agency of perception has been reversed—the sweetheart perceives the narrator instead of being perceived by him as a nostalgic recollection.

In slide #21 (also shown on the front cover), a rather peculiar example of the art reminiscent of pressed flowers and Victorian scrapbooking technique, the sweetheart is shown beneath a giant sprig of holly against a background of pansies. While it is impossible to say where she is, it is easy to argue that the outdoor theme is being maintained. The sweetheart still appears vernal and young, and the backdrop of flowers is summery to the last. Now the frame is lifting her up and out of the picture, as if she were ascending to heaven.

Slides # 7, 8, 13, and 14 also hint at the dichotomy between indoors and outdoors. These four images accompany the first two renditions of the chorus, and in each the character is placed next to a window, sometimes gazing out of it. The window, a portal to—or frame of—the outdoors and the nostalgia that it invokes, seems to represent longing and loss, two nostalgic sentiments that overwhelm the heartbroken lovers. As I hope to have demonstrated, the contrast between indoors and outdoors—and by extension city and country—plays a central role in telling the nostalgic story of “After the Ball.”

While illustrated songs began to disappear in 1914, movie theater sing-alongs made a big comeback in the mid-1920s and continued to flourish for another decade. These sing-alongs, unlike the illustrated song, often featured older tunes from the 19th and early 20th centuries, and it is certain that “After the Ball” was programmed countless times. The community sings, as they were known, used slides with lyrics on them so that the audience could participate on verse and chorus, unlike the pictorial slides we have seen so far.



Sing-along slide of “After the Ball” from 1934. Maman collection, courtesy of Margaret Bergh.

The slide shown on this page is the only example of an “After the Ball” sing-along slide that I have found, also from the Maman Collection. This dates from 1934. The slide features only the chorus, and there were never any other slides for the verses. Those have been excised as they fade from memory, a nostalgic action that leaves only the catchy and emblematic chorus for the audience to recall and sing. Nostalgic memory often simplifies and strips away—in this case, the story of the song itself.

The illustration is in the style of the gilded age, recalling the era of the song's composition. The nostalgia in this image is for the gilded age, the time of the glamorous ball itself. While the scene could certainly be from a ball of the appropriate era, it is not explicitly a scene from the song. The unidentifiable characters seem happy enough, unlike those actually developed by Charles K. Harris. Even with the verses stripped away, “After the Ball” is clearly not a joyful number. The illustrators seem to have devised their own story about what happened at the ball, ignoring the hints dropped by Harris in his chorus about aching hearts and vanished hopes. This is a nostalgia that ignores the pain and suffering of the past while idolizing the glamour of attending a late 19th century ball.

Not all sing-alongs were based on lantern slide images. In 1924, the Fleischer brothers, Max and Dave, began producing sing-along cartoons to be exhibited in theaters along with other short subject films. While there are several tales about how the *Song Car-Tune* series came to exist, Max Fleischer's own son, Richard, credits Charles K. Harris with the idea that seeded the animated sing-alongs. He reports that everyone loved the illustrated song portion of a movie program except for Harris: “It bothered him that the musicians who accompanied the slides set the tempo, sometimes too fast, sometimes too slow, depending on their mood. Audiences would frequently get out of synch with the lyrics when the projectionist was too early or too late with the next slide.” It was then Max who saw the solution to this annoyance and devised the bouncing ball.⁸ A slightly different course of events is presented by Leslie Carbage, who writes, “When Charles K. Harris, the famous song writer, came to the studio and asked whether an audience could be made to sing along with a cartoon, the “Ko-Ko Song Car-Tune” series, featuring the bouncing ball, was born.”⁹ The Fleischer version of “After the Ball,” dating from 1929, belongs to their second series of sing-along cartoons, the *Screen Songs* of 1929-1938, which followed the *Song Car-Tunes* of 1924-27. Both relied on the bouncing ball to show the audience which word to sing during the sing-along portion of the cartoon, and there is extensive evidence of these cartoons being used with great success in movie theaters of the time. “After the Ball” can be accessed online through YouTube.¹⁰

Screen Songs grouped within a year or so tend to exhibit the same format. The cartoons surrounding "After the Ball" all open with a short cartoon, after which a verbal lead into the sing along (chorus only) is followed by a combined cartoon/sing-along segment and a concluding segment in which the words themselves become animated, transforming into the items or sentiments they depict. None of these cartoons are serious for even a moment. While "After the Ball" does not completely undermine this model, some significant changes are made through the introduction of nostalgic elements.

The cartoon betrays a constant tension between modern elements and nostalgic yearning. The film itself is a representative of modernity, boasting newly developed sound technology, up-to-date cartoon humor, and a place in the modern cinema. At the same time, nostalgia is projected within this manifestation of urban modernity, with humor as the mediating agent between the old and the new. The title screen announces the song as "Chas. K. Harris' Immortal Song After the Ball," a treatment never before seen in a *Screen Song*. It is evident from the start that this cartoon is going to be something special, for so elevated a song demands unique treatment. The opening title is accompanied by the tune "Auld Lang Syne," a nostalgic song recalling past friendships, just as "After the Ball" nostalgically recalls a lost love. "Auld Lang Syne" functions as a portal of nostalgia through which the viewer enters the cartoon, setting the mood for recollection of a distant, yet desired, past.

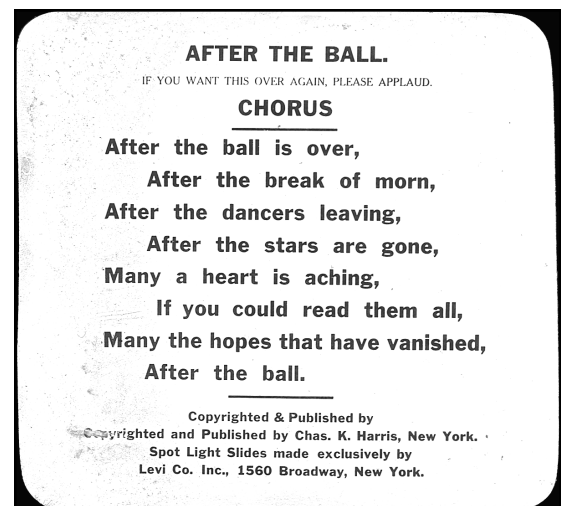
The cartoon opens with a hand sketching a portrait of the composer while a voice delivers the following Speech about Harris: "Folks, back in 1892 a young man, Charles K. Harris, composed the words and music of After the Ball. The melody made a sensation, and it was played and sung in every language, in every corner of the globe. Here is a portrait of the composer as he looked in the good old days." No other *Screen Song* contains such reverent treatment of a composer, delivered in this case in deeply nostalgic terms. Take for example the concluding phrase—a pointed recollection of the lost past as a time to be desired over the present. The composer is portrayed as a young man, even though in 1929 he was still alive and active. This is how "he looked in the good old days," the nostalgic past in which everything was better (especially the music). The success of the song is also clearly exaggerated into the realm of nostalgic yearning—we cannot possibly be expected to believe that it was sung in literally every language, as the narrator claims.

The next scene is again unique, if less sentimental, turning now to the animated comedic tradition of the 1920s. It portrays Harris and his dog composing "After the Ball" together, a sort of humorous genesis tale that departs markedly from the hero worship of the opening segment. Peeling wallpaper betrays the composer's low status before the song he is writing brings fortune and fame.

In the sing-along proper that follows, note the humorous cartoons at the bottom of the screen: a horse and buggy (a nostalgic image of the past), someone getting "kicked" out of a building, and a fellow with a sore bum. These have a clear root in the sing-along slides of the 1920s and 30s, most of which were humorous and many of which featured cartoons. The cartoon images in "After the Ball" are not strictly related to the story, but do demonstrate the forceable ejection of an individual, a story of pain within humor. Perhaps the eviction of the cartoon figure parallels the eviction of the narrator from a past which he cannot recapture?

The next segment is rather strange, and certainly unprecedented: the dog calls on the audience to "listen," blowing out a lamp so that the theater falls into a reverent darkness. For the final chorus, recorded voices enter, so it is possible that the audience was indeed meant to listen, not to sing, although this is only speculation. The final chorus consists of the transforming words that any regular viewer would have come to expect as an invariable Fleischer specialty, but the end of the cartoon is downright shocking. The dog protagonist returns home drunk (presumably after the ball), is kicked down the stairs by his wife, and gets carted away by the dog catchers! Following the deeply reverent opening, this treatment of the song seems far more unexpected and cynical than similar treatments in other *Screen Songs*.

The extraordinary variety in treatments that "After the Ball" was able to inspire betrays the transforming attitudes towards sentiment and nostalgia that characterized the early part of the century. The roughly contemporaneous organist slide and Fleischer cartoon offer two differing views of the song from the same generation. Far from being problematic, however, these artifacts simply reveal the range of perspectives on nostalgic texts to be found in the 1920s and '30s.



Notes and References

1. Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), p. 285.
2. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xvi.
3. Eric H. Monkkonen, "Urbanization," In: *Encyclopedia of American Social History*, Mary Kupiec Cayton, Elliott J. Gorn, Peter W. Williams, eds. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), p. 563.
4. Hamm, *Yesterdays* (see note 1), p. 307.
5. In his discussion of popular song lyric between 1890 and 1910, Nicholas Tawa notes that "the onset of predominantly urban living had not only social and economic but also psychological significance" [Nicholas Tawa, *The Way To Tin Pan Alley* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990), p. 138], concluding in another passage that "along with the gradual conversion of American society from a rural, agricultural, and homogeneous populace to an urban, industrial, and variable one had come a redirection of cultural expression" (p. 120).
6. Svetlana Boym proposes the coequality of nostalgia and modernity (Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* [see note 2], xvi), while Micaela di Leonardo describes the noble savage and "its nasty savage twin, proof of Western modernity's superiority" [Micaela di Leonardo, *Exotics at Home* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 3].
7. See Nicholas Tawa, *A Music for the Millions* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1984); *Sweet Songs for Gentle Americans* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1980); *The Way to Tin Pan Alley* [see note 5]; Ulf Lindberg, 2003, "Popular modernism?," *Popular Music* 22:283-298; and Charles Lindsay, 1928, "The Nomenclature of the Popular Song," *American Speech* 3:369-374.
8. Richard Fleischer, *Out of the Inkwell* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), pp. 36-7.
9. Leslie Carbag, *The Fleischer Story* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1988), p. 32.
10. "After The Ball—1929 Screen Song Cartoon," YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7B_sUKjKbw (accessed June 21, 2010).



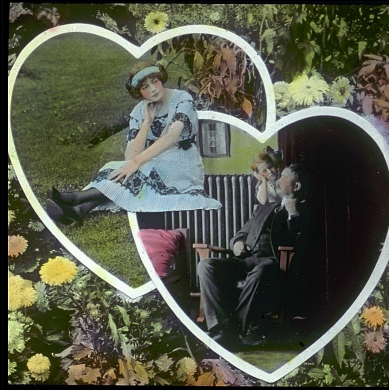
Michael C. Lawlor (1948-2011)

Our society has lost one of its most active members and a close friend to our Canadian and Pacific Northwest members. Michael Lawlor of Vancouver, British Columbia, passed away on October 6, 2011. Michael was a fixture at recent Magic Lantern Society conventions, often presenting lectures using Canadian Pacific Railroad lantern slides while dressed in his period black coat, a kind of modern-day John L. Stoddard. One of his lectures, which later became an article in *The Magic Lantern Gazette*, used the slides and original lecture script of Surrick Lincoln, a Canadian photographer, to recreate an early 20th century travelogue across Canada. Michael also contributed an article on methods for scanning lantern slides. In addition to giving lantern slide shows, he used digital copies of photographic lantern slides to create large art prints that brought new life to these old slides while revealing the beauty of hand-tinted photographs.

Michael Lawlor was born on December 29, 1948 in Dublin, Ireland. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design and studied at the Banff School of Fine Arts. He devoted his life to his art, writing, and supporting other artists. He wrote or co-authored many books, exhibition catalogs, and magazine articles in the fields of art and photography. He was a member of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and worked on many films as a scene and set painter, among other jobs. He will be greatly missed by his friends in The Magic Lantern Society of the United States and Canada and the many audience members who attended his lantern slide lectures and gallery showings in various venues around Vancouver and the Pacific Northwest. For more about Michael's life and career, visit his webpage (<http://www.mclawlor.ca>).



List to the story, I'll tell it all,
I believed her faithless, after the ball"



After the ball is over,
After the break of morn,



After the dancers' leaving,
After the stars are gone:

Slides from the Marnan Collection,
courtesy of Margaret Bergh



Many a heart is aching,
If you could read them all:



"Bright lights were flashing in the grand ballroom,
Softly the music, playing sweet tunes,



There came my sweetheart, my love, my own,
"I wish some water: leave me alone!"



When I returned, dear, there stood a man,
Kissing my sweetheart, as lovers can.



Down fell the glass, pet, broken, that's all,
Just as my heart was, after the ball."



After the ball is over,
After the break of morn,



14

After the dancers' leaving,
After the stars are gone;



15

Many a heart is aching,
If you could read them all;
Many the hopes that have vanished
After the ball.



16

"Long years have passed child, I've never wed,
True to my lost love, though she is dead,



17

She tried to tell me, tried to explain,
I would not listen, pleadings were vain,



18

One day a letter came, from that man
He was her brother the letter ran.



19

That's why I'm lonely, no home at all,
I broke her heart, pet, after the ball."



20

After the ball is over,
After the break of morn,



21

After the dancers' leaving,
After the stars are gone;



22

Many a heart is aching,
If you could read them all;
Many the hopes that have vanished
After the ball.