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PHOTO-DRAMA OF CREATION

THE MOST ambitious - and the most effective - means of propaganda ever devised by the Bible Students was the public presentation of what was termed the "Photo-Drama of Creation". The Photo-Drama was an assemblage of moving pictures and optical lantern slides accompanied by a spoken commentary on gramophone records, illustrative of the history of the world from its beginning in the distant recesses of geological time, through human history and onward to the end of the Millennium and the consummation of the Divine Plan for man. Interspersed with the sequences of "talking slides" were short runs of silent films in colour depicting Bible incidents from the time of Abraham to scenes from the life of Christ and the Apostles. The entire presentation occupied eight hours continuous display; this was divided into four presentations of two hours each, usually at weekly intervals at any one venue.

Two factors rendered the Photo-Drama of absorbing public interest. One was the fact of the films being in colour, at a time when even black and white films were relatively new and colour photography had not been invented. The art of imposing successive pictures on a moving film to produce the illusion of movement had been invented by Edison only so recently as 1892 and it was early in the present century before public "cinematograph theatres" began to open. These Photo-Drama films were the first colour films ever to be seen and they were regarded at the time as sensational. They were in fact produced by hand colouring, frame by frame, a colossal task involving the treatment of nearly a quarter million individual pictures each measuring only one and a quarter inches by one inch - the work must have been done under magnifying glasses. The second

factor was the employment of "talking" coloured slides. These were the orthodox three-inch square glass optical lantern slides of the times, specially made for the purpose; others were photographed from existing scientific data as for instance the series depicting the evolution of the earth from its original formless state through geologic ages to the appearance of man. Special slides were made describing the early events of Genesis such as the story of the Garden of Eden, the Flood, the Tower of Babel, and so on. Use was made in some cases of the availability of existing commercially available slides of later Bible stories but these had to be heavily supplemented by ones specially made to meet the requirements of the series, including the final parts covering the expected events of the end of the Age and onward into the glories of the Millennium. There were just under fifteen hundred of these slides altogether. Each of the four presentations comprised twenty-four gramophone speech recordings descriptive of and synchronised with the associated groups of slides. At appropriate intervals there appeared a short film which covered a particular Bible story or theme for about twenty minutes accompanied by appropriate musical pieces on the gramophone (musical accompaniments to silent films were normal in those days and talking films had not been invented).

The "mechanics" of the operation were quite complicated. There had to be an optical lantern with its operator for the slides, focussed on the screen. Secondly, a cine-projector for the films, with its own operator, similarly focussed. Down below, at the foot of the screen, two gramophones, each having its own operator, working alternately to ensure continuous speech consistent with the removing and replacing of records (which at that time could only run for a few minutes each). This, incidentally, did not always work as planned. At the commencement of each showing there was a short film of the Pastor himself, coming into a curtained studio, introducing the Photo-Drama, with a few words from the gramophone, descriptive of the aims and objects of the enterprise, and with a gracious gesture of farewell leaving the studio and passing out of sight. On at least one occasion, and according to reports, on several others, a short hiatus in the gramophone reproduction due to some slight operating fault caused the Pastor to bid farewell and

leave the studio whilst his speech continued for a minute or so thereafter, which tended to spoil the desired effect.

The novelty of this, the first talking film ever seen on either side of the Atlantic, outweighed this small demerit, and the audiences were suitably impressed. But what with operators and ushers there had to be quite a team with each set of the Photo-Drama equipment, and there were in the UK sufficient sets to allow for five simultaneous showings in different towns. Twenty British brethren gave up their normal occupations to travel from town to town with the equipment to set up, operate and dismantle it. These twenty were trained in its use by American brethren who came over for the purpose. In succession to this, brethren from Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland and France spent a while in England to be similarly trained by their English counterparts in anticipation of the later exhibition of the Photo-Drama in those countries.

The project was hailed by Press and public as the most ambitious pictorial presentation of the Bible story ever attempted. Part 1 commenced with an account of the development of the earth from chaos, the "six days of Creation", culminating in the coming of man and the Eden story, Noah and the Flood, and on to the time of Abraham. Part 2 continued the story to the time of Moses and the Exodus, thence to the Israelite monarchy, David and Solomon, and to the Babylonian Captivity. Part 3 dealt with the coming of Christ at his First Advent, the events of his life, his death and resurrection. Part 4 concluded the story by depicting history from Pentecost and the Early Church throughout the last two thousand years, to the present, with foreviews of the expected disordered state of the world during this present century, which have proved startlingly accurate in the light of current events, merging finally into a series of representations of scenes in the Millennium which have yet to be vindicated by reality in coming days. The one criticism which could now be levelled at these final pictures is that representations of human skill such as buildings, cars, aeroplanes, and the like, taken from the finest examples of such known in 1913 and put forward as the acme of man's inventive genius, to be characteristic of the Millennium, would now,

seventy years later, be considered decidedly out of date. But the principle remained and at the time these pictures of postulated Millennial conditions often drew audible expressions of admiration or wonder from the audiences.

An ambitious publicity campaign was mounted, carried out by hundreds of active brethren. Descriptive literature was distributed door to door in the first place giving dates and times of imminent local presentations. Nearly thirty millions of these leaflets were distributed and since the population of the United Kingdom was only a little over forty millions at the time it follows that virtually every adult in the country must have seen one. Advertisements in newspapers and popular journals, placards on advertising hoardings, showcards in shop windows, every conceivable means of making the project publicly known was brought into play, and this without doubt contributed in major degree to the enormous public interest. Each person who attended was given, upon leaving, a memento "scenario", a twenty-four page folder which reproduced all the spoken dialogue of the particular presentation and a selection of thirty or so of the pictures appertaining thereto. Later on the complete four parts of this scenario were published in bound volume form; in addition sets of coloured postcards of many of the pictures were made available and by these means memories of the Photo-Drama were kept alive for many years afterwards.

The net outcome of the enterprise, which continued in this country from June 1914 to late 1915, was that close to two million people attended the exhibitions and about one in thirty followed up their interest with enquiries which kept the local classes busy for a long time afterwards.

The first public exhibition of the Photo-Drama was staged in London on Sunday, June 14, 1914, at the Princes Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, London. The building was packed and the audience was rewarded by the sight of Pastor Russell on the stage personally to introduce the Photo-Drama to this country. On Sunday, June 21 it commenced to be shown in Glasgow at St Andrews Hall. There then ensued a run of five weeks at the London Opera House, where continuous afternoon and evening showings resulted in packed houses with hundreds turned away. From then until the end of the year a hundred cities and

towns in Great Britain and Ireland were visited by the Photo-Drama, the five teams with their equipment working "flat out", as the saying goes. The original expectation had been that by the end of that year the effort would have achieved its object and be coming to its close, but the public clamour increased rather than decreased. A re-appraisal of the situation resulted in Henry Shearn of the London headquarters being appointed "superintendent of Photo-Drama" to exploit and fulfil the needs of this constantly expanding interest.

The immediate outcome of this was the organisation of another London exhibition involving seven days at the Royal Albert Hall and another seven days at the London Opera House. Both, as before, experienced full houses; forty-two thousand Londoners attended. Following this the Photo-Drama went on a further tour in the provinces and was shown in another two hundred towns with a total attendance of six hundred thousand. With two exhibitions a day in London this implies an average of 1500 at each showing in London and between 300 and 1500 in the provinces varying according to size of town.

The cost must have been considerable. The films were professionally made by one of the then major film companies to scripts furnished by Brother Russell so that the Biblical presentations were as accurate as Bible Students could make them - unlike, regrettably, many modern film versions of Bible stories - (perhaps one minor slip occurred in the choice of headgear for the patriarch Abraham, which was immediately dubbed and known for years afterwards as "Abraham's tea-cosy"). This involved professional actors, actresses, and film sets, many of which had to be out-door scenes. And the hand colouring of the resultant films added appreciably to the cost.

So this quite remarkable evangelistic effort came to an end so far as the UK was concerned. The country had now been more than a year at war and conditions were getting difficult. The Zeppelin raids over London deterred people from going out at night and their assembling in large halls was beginning to be officially discouraged. But all in all, it was a remarkable achievement, not least in the light of the sheer human

endeavour exerted by the many who laboured incessantly in all kinds of ways to make the project a success.

Thirty years afterwards there was an attempt to revive it in this country, using copies made from some of the old films and slides which had survived. But the old magic had gone; the pictures which were considered so wonderful in 1914 had now been superseded by the march of modern invention. Colour photography and sound films had been developed; it was not possible to reach the new generations as it had been with their forebears. The Photo-Drama was an essential and very potent factor in the work of what Bible Students called the Harvest of the Age. It played a great part in the reaping of that Harvest, but after that the inexorable march of events passed into the first post-war period in which nothing was the same, nor ever would be again. The nature of the "Harvest message" as it was frequently called, was to change, and change drastically. But the Photo-Drama of Creation was never forgotten.



Introducing the Photo-Drama



**From the film
"The Trial of Stephen"**



Carboniferous Era



The Age of Reptiles



Garden of Eden



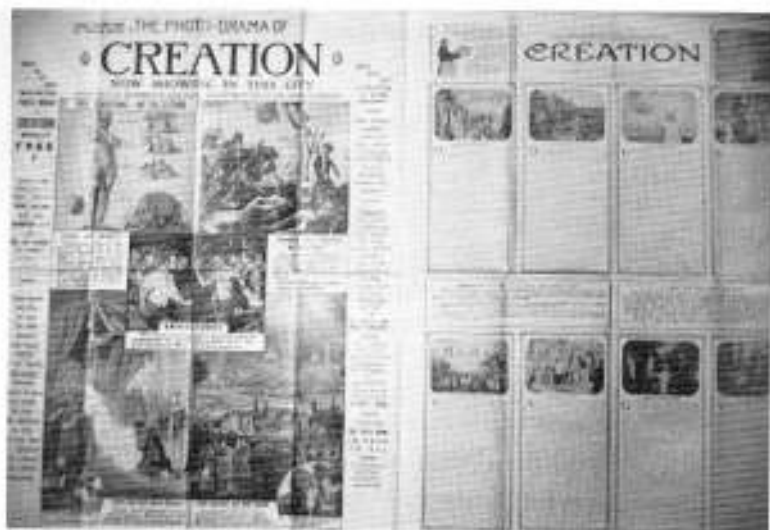
The Flood



Baptism of Jesus



Gethsemane



4-page 16" x 20" folders distributed to advertise the Photo-Drama.



12" x 16" window card exhibited in shop windows to announce local exhibition