

## Ralph Hyde, 1939-2015



Life is fragile. We have recently learned how painfully true this saying is: Ralph Hyde is gone. It is still hard to believe it, but Ralph passed away in London on June 2, 2015. The worlds of panoramians and early visual culture researchers and collectors have lost one of their most loved, outstanding and enthusiastic masters. Ralph left us suddenly, in full command of his enormous knowledge and very special skills, and head full of projects to come. There is no-one to take his place; personalities like him do not appear any longer. What we have are many precious memories, and of course Ralph's published works, which will shine a bright light to the distant future.

As a modest man Ralph rarely spoke about himself or his achievements. Writing an obituary is therefore not an easy task. Hopefully I will be apologized for beginning with my own reminiscences of him. I first met Ralph in 1995, when I contacted him for a special reason: I wanted to interview him about panoramas for "Archaeology of the Moving Image," a television series I was preparing for the Finnish television. I was inspired by *Panoromania!*, the seminal book Ralph had created for the eponymous, groundbreaking exhibition he curated for London's Barbican Art Gallery (1988-1989).

Sadly, I missed Ralph's exhibition, but experienced *Sehsucht* (Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, Germany, 1993), another formative panorama exhibition, for which Ralph acted as a consultant. I eagerly read the learned essay on moving panoramas he contributed to the catalogue. Our first meeting at the Guildhall Library, where Ralph worked, was eye-opening. I felt welcome into the world panoramaniacs, and a close relationship developed. Ralph inspired me to study the history of the moving panorama, which finally led to my book *Illusions in Motion* (2013). During its long gestation, he sent me countless comments and pieces of information and read my huge manuscript, broadening my perspectives and helping me to avoid many embarrassing mistakes.

Our friendship and working relationship continued until the very end. During the final months of his life Ralph read my manuscript on cosmoramas and, as usual, gave expert advice. He also promised to send me material from his huge archives for my book-in-progress on mechanical theaters. Although he hardly revealed it, Ralph was proud about his brand new book, *Paper Peepshows*. Having seen huge amounts of research material from the Jacqueline and Jonathan Gestetner collection piled up in his apartment, I remember silently wondering if the colossal task could ever be finished. Ralph did it, and in a magnificent way.

Ralph was not only one of the most trustworthy, friendly, hard working and intelligent people I have known. He had a wonderful British sense of humor, and an almost boyish enthusiasm for the many things he was working on. I did not notice any signs of what was coming. Neither did others. On the very same day when he passed away at his home, Ralph had been visiting the Gestetners to prepare for a presentation at the Courtauld Institute's conference on "Scrolls." I had sent him an email, asking if he could meet me for dinner the coming Sunday, as I was going to travel to England to continue my research. I did not get a reply. In his final message Ralph wrote about his intention to update his last will, asking for my opinion about where to leave his notes and documents, so perhaps he was sensing the inevitable.

Ralph was born in Uxbridge, Middlesex in west London on March 25, 1939, on the eve of the great war. His father was Douglas Hyde, who came from Colwyn Bay in North Wales, and whose first language was Welsh. He became a well-known journalist and political campaigner. Due to the London bombings, Ralph's mother Gladys (born Jones) and his two young sons, Ralph and Jeffrey, were evacuated to Wrington in Somerset, where they stayed with Douglas' parents, who ran a bakery there. During the war Douglas left Gladys for another woman, leaving her to take care of the two sons under the roof of relations who had been looking forward to a quiet retirement.

According to his daughter Jeannette, Ralph lived in these circumstances in Wrigton until he was 15. He came to London to study librarianship and got a position at the Marylebone Library, where he met his future wife Ruth. According to Jeannette, Ruth "used to deliberately bring her 'taking out' books to the 'returns' section where Ralph was stationed to stamp the books, so she could make eyes at him, till he asked her out."

Ralph's FLA thesis, "Printed Maps of London: 1851-1900," was approved for the Fellowship of Library Association with a mark of distinction in 1971 and published in book form as *Printed Maps of Victorian London, 1851-1900* a few years later (Folkestone: Dawsons, 1975). Ralph got a position at the Guildhall Library, the eminent institution that specializes in the history of London, working there for over a quarter of a century as Keeper of Prints & Maps, and becoming the foremost authority on the field. He lectured and wrote on London images, early town plans and prospects, publishing, among others, *Printed Maps of Victorian London, 1851-1900*, *London As It Might Have Been* (with Felix Barker; London: John Murray 1982, reprinted 1995), *Getting London in Perspective* (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1983), and *The Streets of London, 1880-1928: Evocative Watercolours by H.E. Tidmarsh* (Colchester: Red Scorpion in association with Guildhall Library, 1993).

Ralph prepared yet other publications for the London Topographical Society (for which he was a member), including its all-time bestseller *The Rhinebeck Panorama of London* (1981), *The A to Z of Victorian London* (1987), *Ward Maps of the City of London* (1999), *London Displayed: Headpieces from the Stationers' Almanacks* (2010) and *The A to Z to Charles II's London 1682* (with Peter Barber, 2013). He also acted as an advisor and consultant to the Motco Image Database ([www.motco.com](http://www.motco.com)), supplying commentaries for historical London maps and panoramic views, such as Richard Horwood's map of London 1799 (2006), Christopher and John Greenwood's map of London c. 1830 (2005), and Grand Panorama of London from the Thames 1845 and 1849 (2000).

Ralph's interest in panoramas as a medium was a natural outgrowth of his work with maps and prospects. As Scott Wilcox, the Deputy Director for Collections at Yale Center for British Art and one of the many people Ralph inspired, reminisces, "by the time I met him, which would have been in 1975, he already had a reputation as THE person who knew about panoramas." At the time there was little public information available about them (Stephan Oettermann's seminal *Das Panorama* was published in German in 1981). Following *The Rhinebeck Panorama of London* (1981), Ralph published a work on the *The*

*Regent's Park Colosseum* the following year (London: Arthur Ackermann, 1982), and then curated two exhibitions on panorama-related subjects, *Gilded Scenes* and *Shining Prospects* (Yale Center for British Art, 1985) and *Panoromania!* (Barbican Art Gallery, 1988-1989), both accompanied by substantial books/catalogues.

Ralph's other publications on panoramas and related subjects are too numerous to be listed here in full. They include *London from the Roof of the Albion Mills: A Facsimile of Robert and Henry Aston Barker's Panorama of 1792-3* (Guildhall Library in association with the London Topographical Society, 1988), *A Prospect of Britain: The Town Panoramas of Samuel and Nathaniel Buck* (London: Pavilion, 1994), and many articles published in the *Print Quarterly*, in collected volumes on panoramas, and elsewhere. Several texts were first read as papers at the International Panorama Conferences.

Ralph was a member of several scholarly associations, including The International Panorama & Diorama Society, whose newsletter he edited between 1989 and 1991. The society was founded in 1984 by Brian Polden to bring together panorama enthusiasts from all over the world. Its interests included not only panoramas and dioramas but also related subjects such as peepshows, optical toys, photography, magic lanterns, and restoration techniques. It was a forerunner of the International Panorama Council which had its start in 1992, just one year after the society had run out of business. Unlike the IPC, the society did not organise annual conferences. It was mainly through its newsletter that news and information were being communicated to the members.

When Ralph retired from the Guildhall Library in 1999 - for him it was a 'semi-retirement' - he began working with the major collectors Jacqueline and Jonathan Gestetner, cataloguing their vast holdings of panoramas and optical toys, and developing books based on them. As Jonathan Gestetner recalls, he first met Ralph in the beginning of the 1980s when he was preparing *London As It Might Have Been* with Felix Barker. Outstanding items from the Gestetner collection were included in the *Panoromania!* exhibition, and in later years its treasure trove provided Ralph many exciting scholarly challenges. One of the results was the pioneering article "Myrioramas, Endless Landscapes: The Story of a Craze," *Print Quarterly*, Vol. XXI, No. 4, (December 2004).

There was more to come. According to Gestetner, when he suggested for Ralph the idea of producing a book about their huge collection of folding paper peepshows, a little known topic, he was not very keen. However, Ralph soon became passionately interested in them. "It was a subject which he 'attacked' with

his customary intellectual rigour." (Gestetner) After years of work, the massive, handsomely designed volume *Paper Peepshows: The Jacqueline and Jonathan Gestetner Collection* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 2015) was published in early 2015. With *Panoromania!*, Ralph considered it his main achievement, a conviction the universal praise it has already received has confirmed. Ralph's final masterwork will be a glorious part of his legacy.

Ralph was preceded in death by his wife Ruth, who passed away nearly a decade ago. He is survived by three children and seven grandchildren.

- Erkki Huhtamo