

Walter Wilkinson

June Emerson

It was in the summer of 1926 that Walter Wilkinson decided to take to the roads with his Peep Show. He designed, carved and painted the puppets himself, devised the entertainment and also made a collapsible stage. He loaded everything on to a small hand-cart made out of margarine boxes, and adding a tent, a book to read and a few other necessities, he set off to take his Peep Show through the villages of the West Country to see if he could earn his living. The villagers liked his show, but they were poor and the pennies were few, so he began to think that perhaps the idea was a failure. As he pushed his cart dismally through the village of Georgeham a chance meeting resulted in his first official booking to perform at a local fête, so it was in a merry mood that he camped that evening in a field near the Burrows with a celebratory supper of bread, cheese and cider.

Presently a man in a cycle and side-car drew up on the road behind me and called out: 'Here you are, old man. I saw your wonderful show in the village and was sorry I could not stop to the end.'

He held out some coppers for which I presented the bag readily enough.

'It's quite the best thing of its kind I've ever seen; a great improvement on Punch and Judy. Where did you get it from? Did you make it yourself?'

I invited him to come up on the bank and help me with the quart of cider, but he had not time for that, and I had to tell him the story of the Peep Show as he stood in the road.

'Well,' he said at the end, 'I envy you. I wish I had the courage and the ability to live like that. It's a jolly fine way to live. You are like George Borrow, and I hope some day you will write us some books as interesting as his. What a good time you must have — how I envy you.'

This passage made me wonder: Was the style of speech of the man with the cycle and side-car familiar? Did I recognise his enthusiasm for something good and original? Would many people round Georgeham know the works of George Borrow? Was it . . . ?

Walter Wilkinson, from these humble beginnings, wheeled his Peep Show all over England and Scotland and later travelled to America. He never lost his gentle humour and fresh innocent charm, and the many books he wrote, at the suggestion of the stranger in Devon, paint a clear picture of country life at that time, and were much admired by Priestley, Bennett, Lawrence and many others.

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The Peep Show by Walter Wilkinson. Published: Geoffrey Bles, 1927.

Other books by W.W.:

Vagabonds and Puppets, Puppets in Yorkshire, A Sussex Peep-Show, Puppets into Scotland, Puppets through Lancashire, Puppets in America, all published by Geoffrey Bles, 2 Manchester Square, London.