Maskelyne & Cooke: the early years

presented by

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This is a modified script of a talk which I gave at the European Magic History Congress in Hamburg on 31 August 2013.

The story I have to tell you involves two pairs of entertainers: Maskelyne & Cooke and the Davenport Brothers. Maskelyne & Cooke were magicians who came from Cheltenham in England; the Davenport Brothers were fake spiritualists who came from the United States. I’ll start by introducing the Davenport Brothers.

They came to London in 1864 and caused an enormous amount of public interest. Initially they gave public and private séances in London, but they soon began to appear in the provinces. Many entertainers jumped on the Davenport Brothers bandwagon, and Maskelyne & Cooke were among them.

This poster illustrates a Davenport Brothers seance. The brothers were tied up in their cabinet – as we see here. The three doors were closed and strange things began to happen – hands appeared at the hole in the centre door, bells rang inside the cabinet, a tambourine rattled. The centre door opened suddenly and objects came flying out. Each time the side doors were opened, the two brothers were found securely tied up – as if nothing had happened. A public séance might last two hours, so in effect it was a full-evening show.

This poster was published in Charles & Regina Reynolds’ book, 100 Years of Magic Posters. Like many magic posters, it’s misleading. The Davenport Brothers’ manifestations took place when the doors were shut, not when they were open.

That’s the Davenport Brothers. I’ll introduce Maskelyne & Cooke now.
This cartoon appeared in the *Entr’acte* in 1874. The man with the knife is J N Maskelyne and the head belongs to George Cooke. It’s their decapitation trick.

When this cartoon was published, Maskelyne & Cooke had been presenting magic shows in London for just over a year. Their theatre was at the Egyptian Hall on Piccadilly, in the fashionable West End of London. They stayed at the Egyptian Hall for another 31 years.

This photograph of the Egyptian Hall was taken in 1903 or 1904, shortly before J N Maskelyne moved his theatre to St George’s Hall. We know the date because there’s a poster (outlined in red) advertising “Mr Maskelyne’s sensational romance, *The Philosopher’s Stone*”. Maskelyne & Cooke liked to present magic in the form of short plays and *The Philosopher’s Stone* was one of them.

The Egyptian Hall was a high class entertainment complex. Maskelyne & Cooke’s theatre was on the first floor.

J N Maskelyne & George Cooke both started life in Cheltenham, which was then a spa town. They weren’t wealthy people by any means. George Cooke, it’s said, “was as poor a lad as any in the town, with no relative but his mother” [W E Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom* (Hutchinson, London, 1903) p137].
Maskelyne’s family had enough money to give him a good education and have him trained as a watchmaker. By 1861 he’d set up shop on this street here (Rotunda Terrace), in the spa district of Cheltenham. His shop still survives. Nowadays it’s a pharmacy and there’s a plaque on the wall to the right of the door. “J N Maskelyne, illusionist and watchmaker, lived and worked here.”

Much of my information about Maskelyne & Cooke’s early life in Cheltenham comes from Sue Rowbotham. She’s a local historian and her research has been very helpful to me.

The Davenport Brothers came to Cheltenham in March 1865 and J N Maskelyne went to an afternoon séance at the Town Hall (the performance was reported in Cheltenham Journal, Sat 11 Mar 1865, p5). During the performance a curtain fell from a window and Maskelyne saw something he wasn’t meant to see. He went away, got a cabinet built, and set to work to replicate the Davenport Brothers’ performance. He enlisted the help of his friend, George Cooke.

Maskelyne & Cooke gave their first public performance in June 1865 (reported in the Cheltenham Examiner, 21 Jun 1865, p8). It was in the open air, on a platform in Jessop’s Aviary Gardens. The performance was a Davenport Brothers séance, plus some extra items. Among the extras was Maskelyne’s box escape, which in later years was the subject of a famous court case. In this first performance, Maskelyne & Cooke’s finale was a rope escape. We’re told that it took twenty minutes to tie them up, and fifteen minutes for them to escape. Not, I suspect, good entertainment.
More shows followed in Cheltenham and this advertisement, from the Cheltenham Looker-on, is dated 26 August 1865. Maskelyne & Cooke now had a pianist, and there was a new item in the programme: a transformation scene entitled Le Dame et la Gorille (The Lady and the Gorilla).

The plot of The Lady and the Gorilla was simple. Maskelyne and Cooke were tied up in their cabinet. Shortly afterwards they came out, costumed as a lady and a gorilla. The gorilla was tied up in a barrel and the lady in a box. Barrel and box were put in the cabinet; after a short interval Maskelyne and Cooke came out, dressed in their ordinary clothes.

Over the next few years The Lady and the Gorilla gradually evolved into Maskelyne & Cooke’s best-known magical play, Will, the Witch and the Watch.

This report appeared in a newspaper called The Orchestra on 2 September 1865. Translated into modern English, it says that the Davenport Brothers’ séances were boring, but Maskelyne & Cooke’s show was entertaining. It adds that their transformation scene, The Lady and the Gorilla, was particularly funny.

After only a short time on the stage, Maskelyne & Cooke had found that they could make people laugh.
By the beginning of 1866 they’d turned professional. For the next seven years or so they toured the British provinces, gaining experience as performers and gradually improving their show. I’ve been using the British Newspaper Archive to investigate this seven-year apprenticeship.

By the spring of 1866 Maskelyne & Cooke had acquired a manager, J Francis Collins. He was with them for about a year and at one time the show was known as Maskelyne, Cooke and Collins. So he must have been important to Maskelyne & Cooke’s early career, but all I know about him is his address: 21 Castle Street, Bristol.

Under Collins’ management, the Maskelyne & Cooke show included a much elaborated version of *The Lady and the Gorilla*. There were now two cabinets, one of which represented the Gorilla’s den. The Gorilla chased the Lady into the den and various vanishings and reappearances took place.

This photograph belongs to The Magic Circle Archive and it puzzled me for a long time. In fact it illustrates the *Lady and the Gorilla*, as performed in 1866 and later. At the beginning of this item, Maskelyne and Cooke were locked in these stocks and lifted into one of the cabinets. The doors were shut. Soon afterwards the two performers came out as the Lady and the Gorilla.

George Cooke – on the left – is said to have been a short, slim man. It’s clear from the photograph that Maskelyne and Cooke were both very supple.

In the spring of 1869 Maskelyne & Cooke had a four-week season in Liverpool. While they were there they met this gentleman here, William Morton, and he became their manager. This photograph is the frontispiece to Morton’s autobiography, which he wrote when he was in his nineties. When he met Maskelyne & Cooke in Liverpool he was a relatively young man of 31. He stayed with them for many years. If you have one of the early Egyptian Hall programmes, you’ll find William Morton’s name on the front.
By Morton’s account, Maskelyne & Cooke were doing rather badly in Liverpool. In fact they were struggling against stiff competition.

Frederick Maccabe was in the middle of a six-month season in Liverpool, with a very successful show entitled *Begone Dull Care*. Maccabe was an actor, musician and ventriloquist, and a polished performer. He’d already had a season at the Egyptian Hall in London. Maskelyne & Cooke didn’t have his experience and it must have shown.

Charles Dickens was on his farewell tour and he gave four performances in Liverpool while Maskelyne & Cooke were there. Dickens was immensely popular and his fans had to pay very high ticket prices in order to see him. His farewell tour must have been a disaster for all competing entertainments, including Maskelyne & Cooke’s.

It’s no wonder Maskelyne & Cooke did badly in Liverpool – but they came out of the experience with William Morton as their manager. It was under his management that they established themselves in London.

The following January Maskelyne & Cooke were asked to do a show at Berkeley Castle in honour of a visit by the Prince of Wales – Queen Victoria’s eldest son. The plan was to have a day of hunting and two days of shooting, with an entertainment by M&C on the evening of the second day. The programme for M&C’s show was printed on silk.

Unfortunately it all went wrong. At the very last minute the Prince of Wales sent word that he couldn’t come because he had a bad cold. There was a houseful of guests at Berkeley Castle, and Maskelyne & Cooke’s show went ahead. But because the Prince wasn’t there, they couldn’t call themselves Royal Illusionists – or could they?
They did, of course. This is a poster that they used after the Berkeley Castle show - it’s on display in Davenport’s Magic Kingdom. Near the top are the words “Maskelyne and Cooke, the Royal Illusionists.”

The Berkeley Castle performance is mentioned at the top of the poster: “Special patron: His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, by whose gracious command the entertainment was given at Berkeley Castle, Jan 20th 1870.”

This is very clever. It says that they were asked to appear before the Prince of Wales – which is true – but it doesn’t say that he was actually present at the performance – so it doesn’t tell a lie.
This represents one of the people who helped Maskelyne & Cooke on their way. I don’t know his name. He was a solicitor by profession and a Quaker by religion. Quakers lived quiet, godly lives and didn’t go to the theatre, so this man was likely to disapprove of theatrical entertainments like Maskelyne & Cooke’s. Nevertheless, he owned a hall in a northern town where Maskelyne & Cooke performed for a week.

William Morton’s book tells us that it was summertime and business was bad—so bad that he couldn’t pay the rent of the hall. He didn’t expect much sympathy from its Quaker owner. But he went to see him anyway and explained the problem. He offered to leave the piano behind as security for the unpaid rent.

He needn’t have worried. The Quaker hadn’t seen Maskelyne & Cooke’s show, but he’d heard about their anti-spiritualist activities and thoroughly approved of them. He was happy to accept whatever rent Morton could pay.

Morton said that this generous act turned bad luck into good. By the next post he received a letter from the manager of the Crystal Palace, offering a protracted engagement. It was this engagement which led to Maskelyne & Cooke establishing themselves in the West End of London.

The Crystal Palace was a vast entertainment complex. It was originally built in central London to house the 1851 Great Exhibition. After the exhibition was over, the Crystal Palace was dismantled and rebuilt at Sydenham in South London. This lithograph was published in 1854.

Maskelyne & Cooke had a very short engagement at the Crystal Palace in 1869, soon after they met William Morton. Their second, longer engagement started on Monday 3 March 1873.
This is the Crystal Palace programme for the Wednesday of that week. Maskelyne & Cooke’s entertainment was sandwiched between an organ recital at 1 o’clock and a band concert at 4.30.

The first item in their show was “An Exposition of Spiritualists’ Manifestations, a la Home”. The main feature of this anti-spiritualist sketch was the levitation of Elizabeth Maskelyne – J N’s wife.

By this time the Davenport Brothers had gone back to America. Maskelyne & Cooke’s current target was Daniel Dunglas Home, the society medium.

This is the levitation of Elizabeth Maskelyne, as depicted on Maskelyne & Cooke’s posters. The usual artist’s license applies.

In most levitations the person rises in a reclining position. Mrs Maskelyne’s levitation seems to have been in an upright position. We’re told that she rose three or four feet in the air, on a fully-lit stage. It must have been impressive. [See reports in *The Graphic*, 15 Mar 1873, p243, the *Standard*, Thu 3 Apr 1873, p3, col 6, and *The Times*, 5 May 1873, p9, col E – all quoted in a Maskelyne & Cooke brochure].

The second item in Maskelyne & Cooke’s Crystal Palace show was J N Maskelyne in Chinese Plate Dancing – his plate-spinning speciality.
This photograph is carefully posed, with the plates propped up, but it gives the general idea. Most of the plate dancing took place on the table on the left.

I’ll quote a description from one of M&C’s brochures:

Mr Maskelyne keeps six dessert plates spinning … They waltz, they galop, they dance quadrilles; and one plate is … taken, spinning, down an inclined plane only four inches wide, then up a spiral, whence it is spun back again, safe and sound, to the table. [A gallop is a type of dance.]

So, only one plate went up and down the spiral – not three, as this photograph suggests.

Maskelyne presented the plate-spinning many times over the years. It was a juggling feat, not a magic trick.

The next item was a magical play entitled Bodkin. Bodkin was a bear played by George Cooke. The core of this play was a drawing room performance which included comedy by George Cooke in his bear’s costume and magic by J N Maskelyne. After Bodkin there was a five-minute interval.
The main item in the second half of the Crystal Palace show was the best-known of Maskelyne & Cooke’s magical plays, *Will, the Witch and the Watch*. It included Maskelyne’s box escape, first seen in Cheltenham in 1865.

After the Crystal Palace, Maskelyne & Cooke took bookings at other London venues, then on 26 May 1873 they opened at the Egyptian Hall. This is the poster for their opening show. It was the same programme that they gave at the Crystal Palace, with the addition of a midget tenor named Henry Collard.

At the bottom of this poster, *The Mystic Freaks of Gyges* was a fancy name for *Will, the Witch and the Watch*.

So, Maskelyne & Cooke had made it to the Egyptian Hall. They stayed there for 32 years – a remarkable achievement by two fine entertainers.

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