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## "Noah's Beasts Were the Stars": Arthur Melbourne Cooper's Noah's Ark (1909)

### **Abstract**

More than one hundred years ago, a now largely forgotten pioneer of the British cinema, Arthur Melbourne Cooper, shot and exhibited *Noah's Ark* (Alpha, 1909), the world's first cinematic depiction of Noah, his ark and the deluge from which it delivered him. This study highlights this remarkable film's anticipation of later animated biblical pictures and seeks to contextualize the film's production and exhibition within both Melbourne Cooper's *oeuvre*, and within British religious and visual culture of the late Victorian period.

### **Author Notes**

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If the recent return of the biblical flood to cinema screens courtesy of both Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014) and the animated feature *Two by Two* (2015) suggests that contemporary filmmakers find the story of the deluvian patriarch fascinating, they are by no means the first to have done so. Indeed, at the end of the "silent era," no less a Hollywood luminary than *Casablanca*-director Michael Curtiz would invest a considerable amount of his time and Warner Brothers' money in his own *Noah's Ark* (1928), a film whose extraordinary flood scene was eventually swamped by both an excess of biblical spectacle and the addition of a modern melodrama set in World War I (Shepherd, 2013: 259-290).

To find the earliest substantial cinematic interest in the biblical figure of Noah and his famous flood, however, requires us to attend to a still earlier era and the rather improbable location of Great Britain.<sup>1</sup> When compared with countries like France and America, Great Britain's contribution to the emergence of the Bible in moving pictures at the cinema's advent was minimal at best. However, while British Gaumont's *The Good Samaritan* and *Moses in the Bullrushes* (both 1903) appear to have long since perished (Shepherd, 2014: 38), at least one other biblical film produced in Britain in the first decade of the twentieth century has been preserved for posterity: Arthur Melbourne Cooper's *Noah's Ark* (1909). While *Noah's Ark* reflects Cooper's pioneering work as a stop-motion animator, it also has much to tell us about how, why and for whom Cooper's biblical vision was created.

### **Cinematic Dreams of Toyland**

A photographer and the son of a photographer, Arthur Melbourne Cooper discovered the world of moving pictures thanks to an apprenticeship with Birt Acres, the developer of England's

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<sup>1</sup> For the earliest cinematic depiction of Noah, in a Passion play filmed in Bohemia in 1897 see Shepherd 2013:18-36.

first 35mm cinematographic camera.<sup>2</sup> Precisely when Cooper began to take a more active role in producing and directing films is very difficult to determine, as amply demonstrated by recent scholarly disagreements over the attribution of certain films to Cooper or G.A. Smith (See. e.g. Bottomore, 2002) Whether or not Cooper was responsible in whole or in part for stop motion films such as *Dolly's Toys* (1901) or *A Boy's Dream* (1903), they are illuminating nevertheless for they contain various elements which would eventually appear in *Noah's Ark*. In *Dolly's Toys*, for instance, an initial live action scene of a young girl falling asleep with her doll is followed by a dream in which the doll comes to life. In *A Boy's Dream* (1903) the girl is replaced with a boy in whose dream a variety of toys (rather than a single doll) emerge from their toy box to offer a circus performance. Similarly, whether Cooper was responsible for the creative direction or production of *The Enchanted Toymaker* the following year (1904) or merely the camera work, the film's anticipation of Cooper's *Noah's Ark* is clear from its description in Paul's catalogue,

‘A busy toy maker is confronted by a good fairy, who causes the toys to take life. The Noah's Ark enlarges and the animals majestically enter. The man locks them in and sets a toy soldier on guard. The latter fires his gun to the shopman's bewilderment. An excellent picture for children. Code word Ark, length 190 feet.’ (Paul, 1904:44)

Here the dream sequence is absent and the fantastical facilitated instead by a fairy, while the box of toys in *A Boy's Dream* is now replaced with a toy Ark which the toys “majestically enter”—with all the biblical resonance that that such a phrase entails. The fact that both the fairy and the ark reappear in *The Fairy Godmother* (1906) may suggest that the catalogues have

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<sup>2</sup> This summary of Melbourne-Cooper's career prior to *Noah's Ark* is significantly indebted to the material collected by De Vries and Mul, 2009, though not all the films which they attribute to Cooper can be safely assumed to have been made by him.

confused it with films which preceded or followed it, but if the descriptions are accurate the appearance of the fairy coincides with the nursemaid falling asleep having tucked up the children in bed. Thus, rather than being a dream, the coming to life of the toys, who now disembark the Ark, is presented as a waking reality for the children (De Vries and Mul, 2009). Filmed in 1907, Cooper's most famous animation, *A Dream of Toyland*, abandons the Ark, but restores the stop-motion sequence to the dream of a child, and, most significantly reflects Cooper's interest in developing his animated toys as characters. The dream sequence is set in a busy London street filled with toy vehicles of various sorts (rickshaws, cars, prams and even a donkey cart) and a variety of characters including golliwogs, dutch dolls, policemen and of course toy animals including dogs, geese, horses, a monkey in a peaked cap and a polar bear, who arrives on the scene as the conductor of a Royal mail motor bus (Fig.1) and gets into a fight with a golliwog policeman. The bear later returns on a steam mobile, nearly running over the monkey after the latter has stopped the bear and shown him his backside. When the monkey mounts a wooden horse to give chase, the bear knocks both monkey and horse over with his steam-mobile.



**Figure 1: *A Dream of Toyland* (Melbourne Cooper, 1907)**

Various elements of the films described above anticipate the action and approach in Cooper's *Noah's Ark*, prints of which are held in the East Anglian Film Archive and the British Film Institute. As in *A Dream of Toyland*, the stop-motion sequence involving the toys is introduced in *Noah's Ark* with a live action scene, which in this case, involves a young girl who plays with her toy ark and its many animals, before tiring and drifting off to sleep to dream of Noah's Ark. The very beginning of this live action sequence is lost along with the closing, live action scene,<sup>3</sup> in which, according to the Butcher and Sons catalogue description in 1911, the young girl... '... awakens to find her box of Noah's Ark beside her, and rubbing her eyes realizes it was only a dream.' (Butcher and Sons, 1911:199). What remains is described by the synopsis offered by De Vries and Mul (2009: 382-5):

SCENE 1a. Live-action, medium shot, exterior, 27 seconds. A garden scene, with shrubs and trees in the background. At the left a face of a young woman with a grand flowery hat who is talking to a very young girl of approx.. 18 months old at the right. In the middle of the scene a little playhouse with a slanting roof, two tiny windows at the left, four on the right side. It represents a Noah's Ark. The toddler plays with little animals belonging to the ark. She is lively, lifts the roof with her head. There is a jump-cut in the shot.

SCENE 1b. Live action, medium shot, 11 sec. A so-called Dutch chair has been put in view with a white blanket on the elbow-rest on which the toddler now rests its head. She lifts her hand and then closes her eyes.

SCENE 2. Animation. Close-up of a table-top set representing a long shot, 52 sec. The set may possibly be some four or five feet wide and perhaps four feet deep. There is a little boat with a house or shed built on the deck and a gangway with seven steps down to a grassy foreground. The backdrop shows a painted scenery of mountains and a kind of temple with pillars. The door of the house on the

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<sup>3</sup> Such is often the case with films from this era, which were cut into and out of other reels of film by early exhibitors.

ark opens, and a figure in a biblical costume appears. He descends from the gangway onto the grass. A white and a grey mouse appear, who ascend the gangway into the ark.

SCENE 3. Animation. Close-up of a table-top set representing a long shot, 1.36 min in. Camera is lowered a little, mountains and temple painted on the backdrop are in a better view. Noah puts a signpost in the grass. From the right an elephant approaches. It enters the ark via the gangway. A pair of giraffes do the same and poodles, zebras, lions, geese, hyenas, deers and polar bears follow. The same with birds and two white pigeons who settle on the roof, walking up and down. They later settle on top of the open door. A giraffe looks out of the window, and an elephant teases him. A polar bear next to the open door interferes. A second bear pulls him overboard back on land and then pulls him with him on the gangway into the ark, The first bear keeps the door open for all animals to enter. A second elephant appears and enters the ark, which sometimes rolls on the water. Finally, when all the animals and Noah's family are inside, Noah removes the signpost, takes it at first with him, but then throws it down the gangway in the water. The white pigeons go inside, one of them settles in the open window when Noah closes the door.

SCENE 4a. Live-action. Close-up of a table-top set representing a long shot, 1.06 min. The rain is pouring down. Water is flowing through the grass. There is lightning. The ark is rolling heavily. The gangway is still out. The water is rising.

SCENE 4b. live-action. Close-up of a table-top set representing a medium shot. 14 sec. Different scene, no backdrops, white background. Only the ark is there. It is completely cast off in the water and floating on the waves from left to right.

SCENE 5a. Animation. Close-up of a table-top set representing a medium shot, 7 sec. The ark is now at rest. A white pigeon flies from an open window of the ark.

SCENE 5b. Animation. Close-up of a table-top set representing a medium shot, 13 sec. There are some branches with leaves sticking out of the quiet surface of the water. The pigeon plucks a short 'olive branch' from it and flies back.

SCENE 5c. Animation. Close up of a table-top set representing a medium shot, 17 sec. The pigeon arrives back at the ark, settles in the open window. Noah comes outside, the pigeon flies down to him, and Noah takes the olive branch. The water is falling. Mountains appear in the background.

SCENE 6. Live-action. Close up of a table-top set representing a medium shot, 47 sec. There are more and higher mountains in the background. The water is falling and the ark is apparently stuck. A rainbow can be seen in the sky. There is some grass visible at the bottom of the screen.

SCENE 7. Animation. Close-up of a table-top set representing a long shot, 1.30 min. Point of view is low, we are looking up to the ark, suggesting it is high on a mountain side. The ark is now settled on solid dry, rocky ground. There is a mountain in the background. A tiny piece of shadow of the ark can be seen on the backdrop at the right. The ark is here a little out of focus. Noah walks there. He picks up the gangway which was tucked away at the bow. He shoves it to its place, tries to put it straight, goes inside and comes back with an elephant that picks up the gangway and puts the end of it steady on a rock on the mountain-side. He disembarks, picks up the heavy rock to secure the end of the gangway. He walks away and waits for its partner. Then the two giraffes come outside, followed by the second elephant. The elephants greet each other exuberantly. All the other animals now come outside, the camels, the monkeys, and the tigers. We can just see the geese settling themselves on the banisters of the ark.

Cut to black.

### **Play things and Picture books: A Noah's Ark for children**

While Cooper's use of a child in the opening live action sequence (Fig. 2) was a tried and true way of appealing to early cinema-goers, both young and old, it is quite clear from Cooper's use of toy animals that *Noah's Ark* was produced with juvenile audiences in mind.<sup>4</sup> Commercially produced toy Arks and animals made of wood began appearing in growing quantities in England (Fig. 3) from the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Brown, 1996:11).

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<sup>4</sup> According to Fescourt, 1959:83, Gaumont's famed filmmaker, Louis Feuillade, told one director: '...if you want to sell a film, hire a child or a dog...'





**Figure 2: A child plays with a toy Noah's Ark and animals (*Noah's Ark*, Alpha 1909)**



**Figure 3: Toy Noah's Ark and animals (late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> c.)**

They were evidently still in demand in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century if Caleb Plummer, the toymaker in Charles Dickens' novella *The Cricket on the Hearth* may be trusted:

“There's rather a run on Noah's Arks at present. I could have wished to improve upon the Family, but I don't see how it's to be done at the price. It would be a satisfaction to one's mind, to make it clearer which was Shems and Hams, and which was Wives. Flies ain't on that scale neither, as compared with elephants you know!” (Dickens, 1846:32)

Indeed, just such arks feature prominently in Dickens' description of Plummer's room:

“There were Noah's Arks, in which the Birds and Beasts were an uncommonly tight fit, I assure you; though they could be crammed in, anyhow, at the roof, and rattled and shaken into the smallest compass. By a bold poetical licence, most of these Noah's Arks had knockers on the doors; inconsistent appendages, perhaps, as suggestive of morning callers and a Postman, yet a pleasant finish to the outside of the building.” (Dickens, 1846:59)

If the inspiration for Dickens' fictional toy merchants Gruff and Tackleton was the Holborn toy store which his daughter Mamie recalls visiting with her father at Christmas time as a child (Dickens, 1896:26) then it was almost certainly the store founded by William Hamley in London at number 231 High Holborn in 1760.<sup>5</sup> The name of the store: “Noah's Ark”,

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<sup>5</sup> Though it is not impossible that the inspiration for the character of Tackleton was W.H. Cremer who had toy shops in Regent Street and Westminster (so Brown, 1996:33).

naturally. By the early twentieth century, this very shop, Hamleys, as it had come to be known, had moved to Regent Street and served as a primary source of toys for Arthur Melbourne-Cooper, whose need for poseable toys sometimes required their modification or manufacture at the store.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to toy stores and play-rooms, children at the turn of the twentieth century might also have expected to encounter Noah's Ark in the pages of the family bibles, but also in illustrated books written specifically for younger readers. Indeed, between 1830 and 1909, more than 30 illustrated versions of the Noah story were produced for children (separately or as part of larger works) with the majority of these being published in the two decades prior to the release of Cooper's film.<sup>7</sup> Thus, if Cooper's own filmography constitutes one interpretive context for *Noah's Ark*, the popularity of the Ark and its animals in children's culture in England at the turn of the twentieth century both as a toy and as a subject in children's literature constitutes a second, and equally important critical context in which to understand the film.

Predictably, those producing children's bibles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were drawn to particular aspects of the Noah tradition at the expense of others. While Catholic versions felt no compunction to abandon even episodes like Noah's post-rainbow drunken nakedness, such incidents had largely been excluded from English Protestant children's bibles already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (See Bottigheimer, 1996:103-115). Emma England's study of the representation of the destruction of humanity in children's versions of the Noah tradition presents a more complex picture (England, 2012). While many versions do not reference the destruction of humanity at all, others contain what England terms an allusory visual reference. Indeed, if the background of the initial scenes of Cooper's *Noah's Ark*, does contain (as it appears to) a

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<sup>6</sup> According to Cooper himself (in correspondence with John Grisdale) the toy cats which feature in *The Cats' Cup Final* were "...bought from Hamleys in London" (De Vries and Mul, 2009: 166) while the puppets for *Cinderella* (1912) were specially modified or manufactured for him by the shop (De Vries and Mul, 178) as apparently was the flea for *Professor Bunkum's Performing Flea* (1907) (De Vries and Mul, 2009: 336).

<sup>7</sup> This data is drawn (with gratitude) from the database compiled by Emma England in her doctoral work on representations of the Noah story in children's literature.

columned building, then the reference is very slight indeed. In fact, if as England suggests, the wider narrative context is determinative in the case of such slight allusions, then we may conclude that in Cooper's film, the destructiveness of the flood is functionally eliminated and along with it, any sense of God's involvement in proceedings either for better (in redemptive terms) or for worse (in destructive ones) (England, 2012: 217-18).

In the case of some adaptations of Noah for children produced between 1890 and 1909, the number of illustrations accompanying the text was very limited, with selection determined by a variety of theological, narrational or even practical considerations. In one instance from 1892, the illustration is limited to the ark floating on the water (Gen. 7:17-18) and the destruction of humanity and the non-human world (Wilson, 1892). In other versions, a visualisation of the ark floating on the water is accompanied not by an image of destruction, but of the dove's journey as a symbol of salvation (Gen. 8:10-11).<sup>8</sup> In at least two instances, the picturing of the dove is accompanied not by the floating ark at all, but rather by images of both the sacrificial altar (Gen. 8:20) where Noah expresses his gratitude and the rainbow (9:12-17) as a symbol of God's future forbearance.<sup>9</sup>

The same year as Cooper's *Noah's Ark* appeared, another printed version of the story for children again focused its visual attention on the end of the narrative, depicting the ark on the mountain, the altar and the sacrifice and the rainbow.<sup>10</sup> While Charles Bell's *The Story of the Promise* (1901) does include God's initial announcement of the flood, such is the attraction of the happy ending (both salvific and promissory) that the remainder of its illustrations are devoted to amongst others, the picturing of the altar and the rainbow.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>See for instance, *Heroes of the Bible*, 1903; Yates, 1893; Foster, 1896.

<sup>9</sup> See Wheedon, 1902; *From Adam to Moses: Bible Tales for Little Children*, 1895 and also *The Bible ABC*, 1892, which includes only a depiction of the altar alongside additional images portraying non-biblical duties and roles of Noah and his family.

<sup>10</sup> *My Very First Little Bible Book*, 1909.

<sup>11</sup> Bell, 1901 also includes a depiction of the destruction of sinful humanity.

Proof that the picturing of Noah's altar—as the implicit or explicit means of an animal's destruction—was not felt to be incompatible with the depiction of the animals saved by the Ark is offered by another version which, in fact, limits its illustration to precisely the scenes of the altar and the animals disembarking (Wheedon, 1901). This is, however, very much the exception and the appearance of the animals is a function of the fascination with the disembarkation as a whole including that of Noah and his family (Kerr, 1898). In keeping with the general preference for illustrating the end of the episode, versions focusing their illustrative energies on the animals' entering the ark are relatively few and far between (Tuck, 1895). Indeed, if depictions of the animals were less ubiquitous than one might have expected in the illustration of the Noah tradition for children in the decades before and after the turn of the century, there are nevertheless at least a couple of examples which prove particularly instructive in relation to Cooper's *Ark*.

### **From Pages to Moving Pictures: Dearmer, Smith and Cooper's Noah's Ark**

As its title suggests, Mabel Dearmer's *A Noah's Ark Geography: A True Account Of The Travels And Adventures Of Kit, Jum-Jum, And The Cockyolly Bird*, published by Macmillan in both London and New York in 1900 is not a conventional adaptation of the biblical narrative at all. It is instead a book in which the main character, a young boy called Kit, who tires of his governess's geography lesson, goes on an imaginary journey around the world, meeting along the way a host of people and animals from distant lands. Accompanying him on his fantastical trip are his toys, including first and foremost the animals of his wooden Noah's Ark and especially a recurring Dearmer character, the Cockyolly Bird. Like Cooper's film made some 9 years later, the dream sequence finally gives way to a return to the "reality" of the geography lesson in which Kit goes on to impress his governess with his newly acquired geographical knowledge.

Beyond the obvious relevance of a child's imaginings of a toy world come to life, embedded within a real life situation, Dearmer's book also revolves around the Ark and its toys and of course, no less strikingly, offers a clear example of the character development of the Ark's animals. Indeed, Dearmer's animals are fully-fledged characters in their own right, helping to carry the story with their dialogue and action with the result that in the words of the *Spectator's* review of the book on the 15<sup>th</sup> of December, 1900, "...story and pictures are pure fun." But if Dearmer's book offers both a structural analogy to Cooper's combination of live-action and Ark- infused dream sequence, it also furnished Cooper with a particular visual cue.



**Figures 4 and 5: Mabel Dearmer's *A Noah's Ark Geography: A True Account Of The Travels And Adventures Of Kit, Jum-Jum, And The Cockyolly Bird* (Macmillan, 1900) and the doves on the ridgepole in Cooper's *Noah's Ark* (Alpha, 1909).**

On the cover of Dearmer's book published in 1900 two white doves perch in perpetuity atop the ridgepole of an Ark (Fig. 4) whose square windows and general construction resemble the one which appears in Cooper's *Noah's Ark*. It seems too much of a coincidence that in Cooper's film, precisely two white doves also appear on the ridgepole of his Ark (Fig. 5) and then undoubtedly to the wonderment of early viewers, suddenly come to life in Cooper's stop motion film, walking the length of the pole and then down the roof itself to perch on the door.

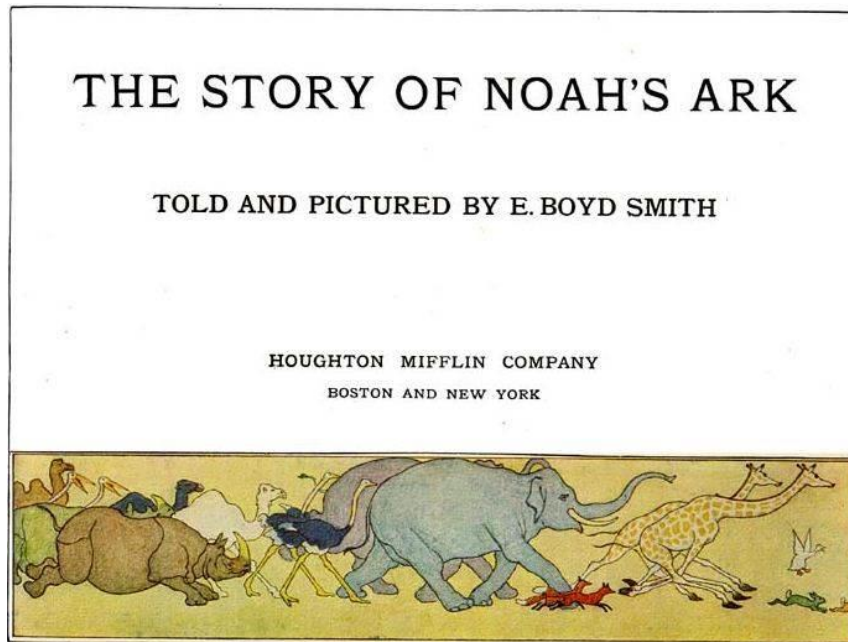
Yet if Dearmer's book offers a structural analogy and a visual cue for Cooper, there was another book which exercised an arguably greater influence on his *Noah's Ark*.

Subsequently celebrated as one of the first American picture books (Bader, 1976), E. Boyd Smith's *The Story of Noah's Ark* (Fig. 6) was published in 1905 in New York by Houghton Mifflin and in London by Archibald Constable, who featured it at the top of its full-page advertisement in the annual 'Illustrated Christmas' issue of the *Publishers' Circular* in December of 1905 in the following terms:

We have all read the story of Noah's Ark, but few of us have stopped to picture to ourselves what actually happened at the preparatory 'round up' of the animals. This Mr. E Boyd Smith has done in his amusing picture-book. Noah's experiences were exasperating and funny in the last degree (vide) Mr. Boyd Smith. What with strikes among the ark-builders, the disbelief of his people, and the hopeless difficulty of preventing the cats from catching the mice and dogs from chasing the cats! The brief text, dry and solemn only serves to increase the fun, which will be as readily appreciated by a man of fifty as a child of ten.

Smith's book provides a far fuller picturing of the Noah narrative than others of the time and indeed more full even than Cooper's film. While Smith's book thus both pictures and describes the initial commissioning of Noah and the construction of the Ark and details the mishaps and miseries of shipboard life, the correspondence with the basic narrative structure of Cooper's film is clear and exceptional amongst the illustrated versions of Noah's Ark published before and after the turn of the century. As in Smith's book, so too in Cooper's film, the beasts were the stars, with the loading and unloading of the animals very much the focus of the action. Though it was, as we've seen, not always the case, the dove features prominently in both Smith's book and Cooper's film and in both, any reference to the complication of the

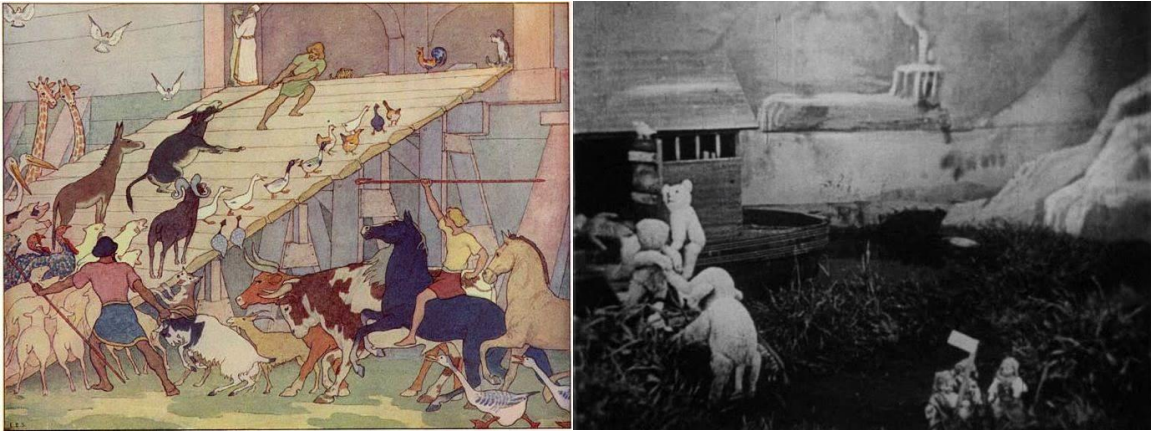
altar or sacrifice of animals is excluded in favour of the rainbow with its visual and symbolic appeal. To such a unique agreement of sequence and structure between the Smith's book and Cooper's film, may be added the particular treatment of the animals.



**Figure 6: E. Boyd Smith's *The Story of Noah's Ark* (Houghton Mifflin/Constable, 1905)**

Unlike Dearmer, Smith does not afford his animals any actual dialogue, instead allowing the accompanying text to develop the characterisation which is reflected to varying degrees in the illustrations. Such an approach was eminently suited for adaptation to the silent cinema of Cooper's time, with sound synchronization still primitive and expensive and dialogue intertitles yet to be developed to any great degree. Smith's animals are, despite Noah's exhortations, humorously reticent about entering the ark (Fig. 7), until the latter drives his domestic animals onboard to set an example.





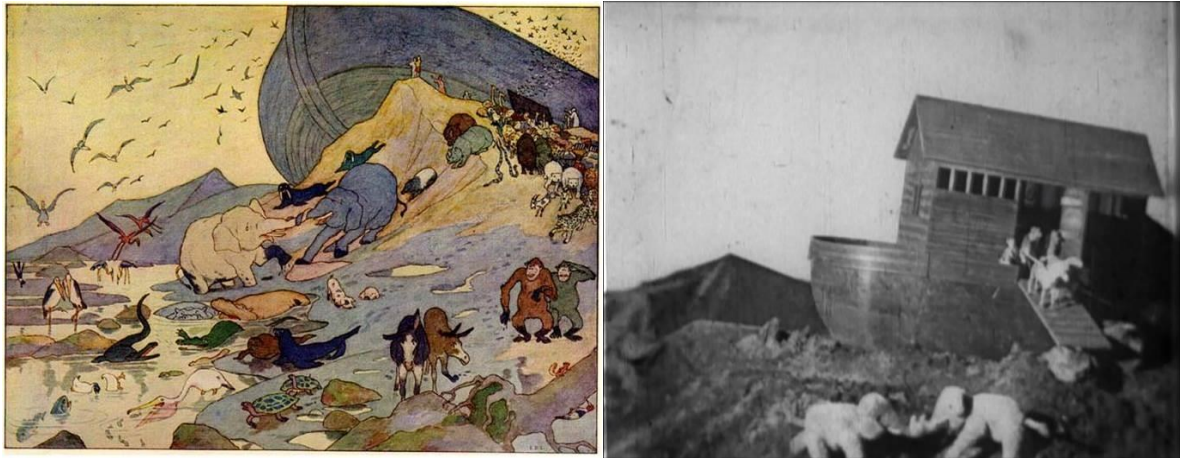
**Figures 7 and 8: A reluctant donkey pulled up the gangway in Smith's *The Story of Noah's Ark* (Houghton Mifflin/Constable, 1905) and a polar bear pulling an equally reluctant elephant by the trunk in Cooper's *Noah's Ark* (Alpha, 1909)**

Fearing they might then be left behind, Smith's remaining animals rush forward to board, bringing their interspecies quarrels with them into the Ark. Midway through the voyage, such tensions eventually boil over culminating in Smith's illustration of an unseemly shipboard brawl amongst the animals. Such reticence and rough-housing recalls the polar bear's rough treatment of Cooper's elephant who is also slow to enter the ark ([Fig. 8] see Scene 3 above). Still more suggestive of Cooper's acquaintance with Smith's book are unexpected visual parallels, including the giraffes tendency, as in Cooper's film, to poke their heads and long necks out of the Ark's windows and the peculiar prominence of polar bears in both Cooper's film and Smith's book (Figs. 9, 10, 11) where in the brawl aboard the Ark, the bear's gaping maw, teeth bared ferociously is particularly prominent in the lower left corner of the illustration (Fig. 12).



**Figures 9, 10, 11 and 12: The prominence of polar bears (pls 6, 9, 7, 20) in Smith's *The Story of Noah's Ark* (Houghton Mifflin/Constable, 1905)**

What removes all doubt, however, that Cooper knew and used Smith's book, is the latter's antepenultimate plate which is dominated by a depiction of two disembarked elephants (Fig. 13) whose trunks are unmistakably intertwined, finding the mud "to their liking" (according to Smith's description) and preferable in any case to the ship. That Cooper's frolicking elephants also decide to intertwine their trunks at the very same narrative moment his film (Fig. 14) in celebration of their own exit from the Ark, can hardly be a coincidence, particularly when one considers the jaunty angle of Cooper's ark, the mountainscape and other similarities of composition.



**Figures 13 and 14: Disembarking elephants with trunks intertwined in Smith's *The Story of Noah's Ark* (Houghton Mifflin/Constable, 1905) and Cooper's *Noah's Ark* (Alpha, 1909)**

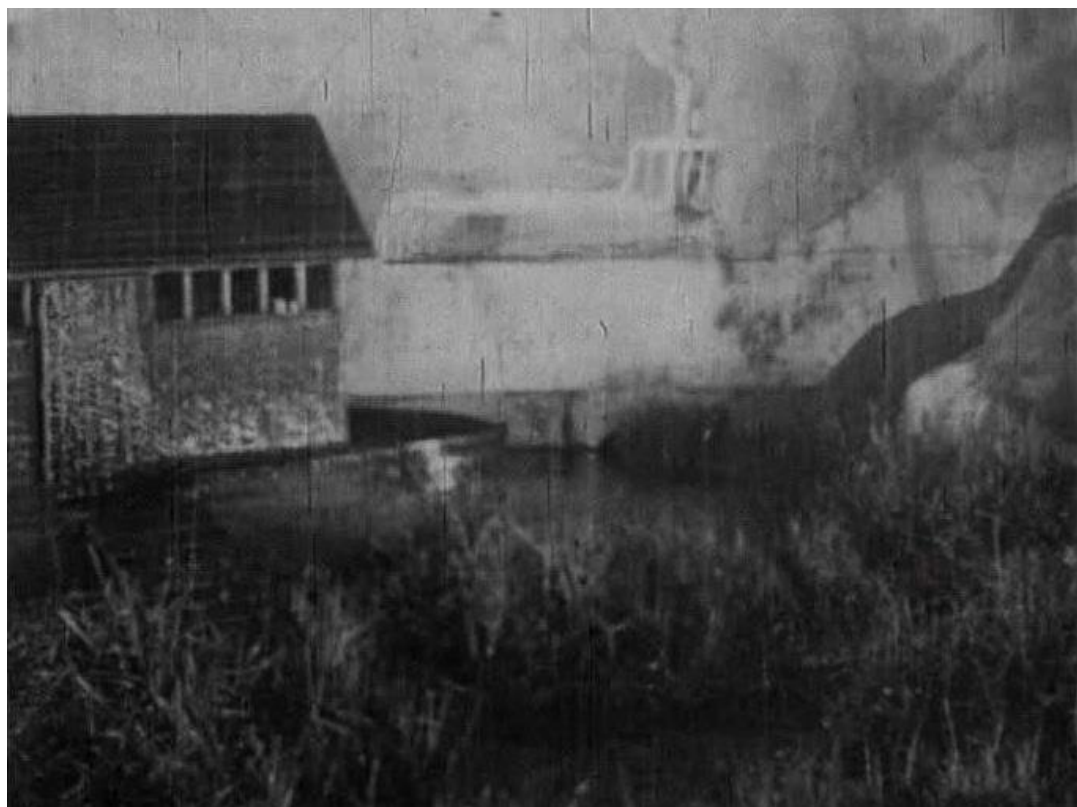
Yet if Cooper evidently drew spiritual and visual inspiration from Smith, the differences between the picture book and moving pictures are also significant, if perhaps inevitable. Cooper does admittedly offer his own subtle narrative elaborations in the shenanigans of the animals already described and in Noah's posting of a sign to direct them toward the Ark and eventual discarding of it after some deliberation. But Cooper's eschewal of intertitles leaves his film ill-equipped to develop the tensions between the animals explored with some subtlety and sophistication in the pages of Smith's picture book. Moreover, there can be little doubt that Cooper's film is best understood within the frame of reference of Gunning and Gaudreault's so-called "Cinema of attractions"—that approach to early film-making which relied on the mounting of a sequence of scenes whose appeal to the audience lay less in the story it developed than in the visual spectacle being offered.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Tom Gunning, 1990 and for a re-evaluation of the concepts associated with the "cinema of attractions" see Wanda Strauven, 2007.

## **Noah's Ark as Early Cinematic Spectacle**

Indeed, in narrative terms, Cooper's stop-motion Ark sequence is entirely decontextualized, offering no verbal or visual clue as to where this boat or the stream of toy animals come from or what the significance of the rainbow might be. Given the currency of the Ark and the Noah narrative in English children's culture in the first decade of the twentieth century, Cooper evidently—and probably quite safely—assumed the audience's familiarity with the story, which in turn allowed him the freedom to focus on doing what Smith's picturebook could not: namely, bring the familiar pictures of the flood and Noah's ark and animals to life. Indeed, it is hardly surprising that Cooper's camera lingers at length on the wonders of Noah's animals, given Cooper's talent for the stop-motion animation of toys—a talent which had been well-honed in producing his previous films.

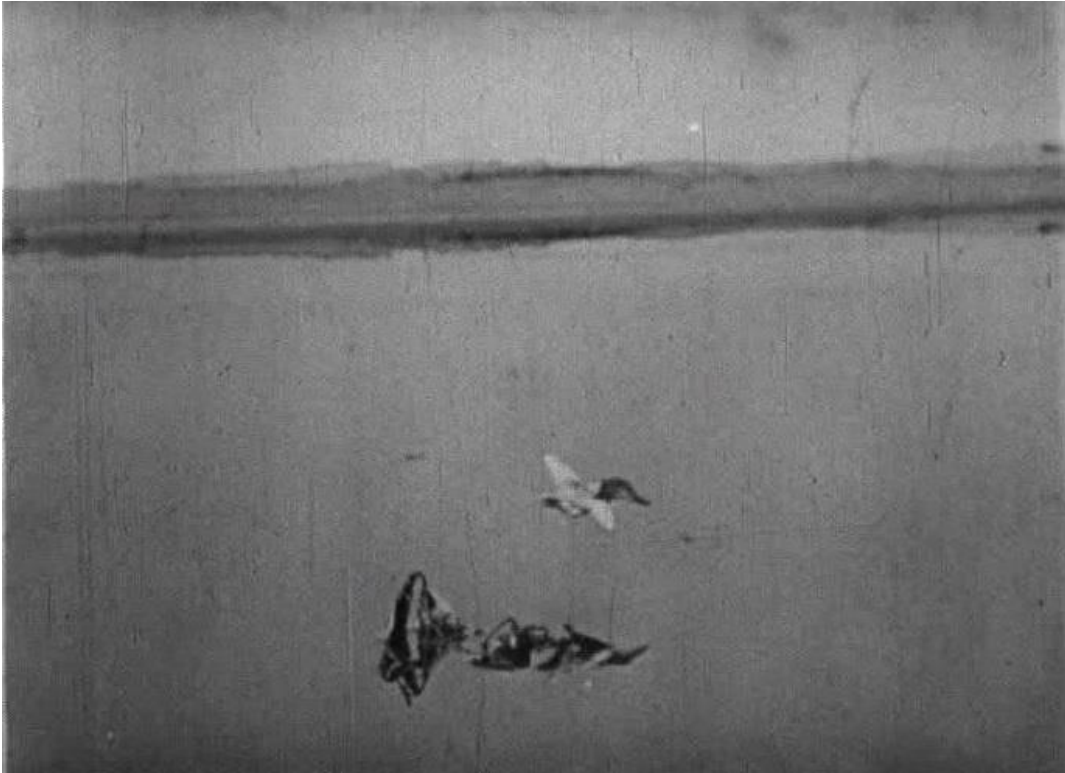
Yet the visual spectacle of Cooper's film is not limited to his toy animals. Once they are safely boarded, the Ark is lashed with 'real' rain (Fig. 15), courtesy the hose whose shadow is visible on the background along with the arm of whoever was holding it—whether Cooper or one of his crew. Like all spectacular storms, Cooper's boasts an abundance of lightning (Fig. 16), with frames either scratched or marked to yield the optical effect (DeVries and Mul, 2009: 394).



**Figure 15: Cooper's flood (*Noah's Ark*, Alpha, 1909)**



**Figure 16: Lightning (*Noah's Ark*, Alpha, 1909)**



**Figure 17: The flight of the dove (*Noah's Ark*, Alpha, 1909)**

Before the amazed eyes of the audience, the bubbling floodwaters rise and the Ark itself begins to float and before the waters recede, there is the remarkably life-like flight of the dove (Fig. 17), facilitated by Cooper after much trial and error thanks to his wife Kate's contribution of a strand of her long blond hair (DeVries and Mul, 2009:390, 394-5).

By 1909, the transition to an increasingly narrativized cinema was already well underway on both sides of the Atlantic (see Keil, 2001), yet Cooper's focus on spectacle at the expense of story in *Noah's Ark* is understandable given the prevalence of this same approach and the fascination with the spectacle of the miraculous in live action biblical films in the first decade of the cinema (Shepherd, 2013). Likewise, while Cooper's actual shooting distance was short (because his puppet set was so small), he replicates the "long shot" which early biblical films employed to imitate theatrical staging and maximize the spectacle of the tableaux (Shepherd, 2013). Yet, in the context of the later development of the live action biblical film in the silent period, Cooper's *Ark* is in other ways a quite remarkable creature. On one hand,

Cooper's animation of the biblical tradition with the physical humour and playfulness which was characteristic of his work, is, to my knowledge, unprecedented in a biblical genre whose sacred subjects normally required the utmost seriousness.

Of course, Cooper's use of toys and infusion of fun confirms and is explained by his desire to appeal to both adult and juvenile viewers, the latter of whom constituted a very significant audience in the early decades of the cinema. This desire also accounts in part for Cooper's introduction of the biblical sequence as the dream of a child. Yet if the surrealism of the biblical sequence as a childhood dream might in some ways be seen to license the infusion of the biblical tradition with what is fun and fantastical, such an interpretation is immediately complicated by the "reality" of the dream. Unlike the toy ark with which the child plays in "real life," the Ark of her dreams is of course, by comparison quite real. Its door (rather than the toy ark's roof) opens to admit animals and when the waters rise, the Ark really floats. Unlike the wooden toy animals which require the child's hands to move them and even then give no impression of real movement, the animals of the girl's dream not only move, but they run, walk and even wrestle. And when the rainbow eventually appears, it does so in the girl's dream, not with a turn of the picture book page, but quite magically, out of thin air, just as rainbows "really" do.

While Cooper's *Noah's Ark* was unique amongst early biblical films in its use of stop-motion photography and toys, its interest in the spectacle of the Bible at the expense of its story was by no means unique. Indeed, from the turn of the twentieth century, filmmakers on both sides of the Atlantic had been mining the biblical tradition for subjects which might showcase the new medium's capacity to make the wonders of the Bible come miraculously to life before the eyes of astonished audiences, and at the same time to legitimate the cinema as a means of not merely entertainment, but also education and indeed edification.

## **Saving the cinema? Cooper's Ark and the film industry in Britain**

In Britain, as in America, various churches and Christian parachurch organisations had embraced the emerging medium of film in the early years of the century as a means of connecting with new and especially young audiences.<sup>13</sup> Foremost among these groups was the Salvation Army, who from 1897 to 1906 produced seventy four of its own films and rented commercial productions before eventually purchasing 321 such films for showing in its halls (Rapp, 1997: 161). It's not clear whether this number included any of Cooper's many pictures, but it would not have been surprising if they had, not least because Cooper's family had Salvation Army connections.<sup>14</sup> Both of his elder step-brothers from his father's first marriage had joined the Salvation Army, with the eldest of the two preferring service as an Army officer to taking on the family photography studio as his father had planned.<sup>15</sup> As the first son of his father's second marriage, Arthur became his father's intended successor in the photography business, assisting in the darkroom, before going to work for Birt Acres. As a child, Cooper had offered magic lantern shows for pocket money, giving them free to Sunday Schools at Christmas time (De Vries and Mul, 2009: 40).

Judging from the prominence of toys and children in his filmography, Cooper's interest in producing entertainments for younger audiences evidently followed him into his career in moving pictures—a useful quality given the importance of juvenile audiences in the early cinema. Not only were children available at a time of day when most adults were still at work, children were smaller, making it easier to squeeze more of them into each screening (Staples, 1997). Yet, Britain's fledgling cinema industry was itself not immune from criticism. In addition to calls for measures to reduce the risk of fire—which rose to a clamour following the tragic death of 16 children at a show in Barnsley in January 1908 (Staples, 1997: 4-5),—others

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<sup>13</sup> For the relationship between the Church and the early cinema in America see Lindvall, 2001 and 2011.

<sup>14</sup> The discussion found in Rapp, 1997: 175 is inconclusive on this point.

<sup>15</sup> For a fuller discussion of Cooper's early days, see De Vries and Mul, 2009: 47-54.



were at the same time, lamenting the unhealthy content of moving pictures and their contribution to the delinquency of the younger generation (Smith, 2005:22). The dwindling use of films by the Army from 1908, suggests the possibility that the Salvationists were caught up in and persuaded by the outcry against the cinema in the wider culture.<sup>16</sup> In February of the following year (1909), Walter Reynolds, the chief architect of a newly devised *Cinematograph Act*, made it clear that industry regulation would extend beyond health and safety to include the content of films shown (Reynolds, 1909). What's more, before the Act had even come into effect at the beginning of 1910, it was already clear that the London County Council would further exploit it to limit the showing of moving pictures on Sunday to non-commercial exhibitions (Smith, 2005: 24).

It may well be a simple coincidence that it was in this same year that Arthur Melbourne Cooper produced his one and only animation of a biblical subject, *Noah's Ark*. Yet, it can hardly be doubted that Cooper's *Ark* would have been more easily sold to non-commercial exhibitors for use on Sunday than many others. Such a subject would have been all the more apropos given that the Ark and its animals were so popular with late Victorian children in part because they were one of the few toys which could be played with on a Sunday.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, if the appearance of Cooper's *Ark* in the early months of 1909 was merely a coincidence, it was a remarkable one, for it is doubtful that there was ever a more opportune time in the history of British cinema for the creation of a children's film in which "Noah's beasts were the stars".

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<sup>16</sup> So suggests Rapp, 1997:179, though evidence for this is not as plentiful as might be hoped.

<sup>17</sup> See Mitchell, 1996:252 and Brown, 1996: 54, who cites a sister's recollection of the Ark as her brother's Sunday toy. Cooper's film (and the appearance of the young girl) provides anecdotal support for the suggestion of Gorham, 2012:18 that the Noah's Ark was a Sunday toy for children of both sexes.

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