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Do
the Eyes
Have It?

Excelsior Tours

Drive-through Stereo

Excelsior Stereoscopic Tours of Burnley

by Dr. David Barber

Stereo cards branded “Excelsior Stereoscopic Tours” feature in private collections and museum holdings around the world.¹ Some examples include the name “M.E. Wright, Publisher” and state his copyright, whilst others also include street addresses in the English mill town of Burnley, Lancashire. Who was M.E. Wright, and how did his Excelsior cards become so popular and widely circulated? This article showcases new research intended to generate the sharing of further information about this under-studied publisher.

I first came across Wright’s name whilst researching the origins in England of the stereoscopic photography company Underwood & Underwood (U&U) for my 2021 PhD thesis.² In October 1890, a

U&U team arrived in Liverpool from New York. Their mission was to set up a new office to facilitate the stereoscopic photography company’s expansion into Europe.³ Led by co-founder Bert Underwood (1862-1943) accompanied by his wife Susie (1867-1946), their party included three U&U salesmen.⁴ One was Milford E. Wright.

Born in 1861 in Perry, Ohio, on the shores of Lake Erie, Milford Elsworth Wright was one of nine children (see Figure 1). The 1880 U.S. Census recorded him living in Perry with other siblings including his twin sister, Mildred, and working as a farm labourer.⁵ The exact details of how Wright became involved in stereography remain unclear. If he was looking for regular employment and travel opportunities, U&U’s business model would have proved attractive. Pioneered in the United States, the company employed canvassers/agents to sell its stereo cards and viewers door-to-door, state-to-state. This modus operandi matches Wright’s U.S. passport application lodged shortly after his arrival in Liverpool. In it, he stated his inten-

tion to return to America “within 18 months” and that his purpose was “travelling.”⁶

Another of the U&U salesmen on that Liverpool voyage, JLD Chandler, later provided a testimonial about his activities for the company between 1891 and 1893.⁷ Chandler described two sales trips, one to Palestine and Egypt and another through Belgium, Switzerland, Ger-

Fig. 1. Milford E. Wright with his twin sister Mildred c. 1870s. (Courtesy of Edward Wright)



Fig. 2. Milford E. Wright in Highland dress. Cabinet card c. early 1890s. (Courtesy of Edward Wright)





Fig. 3. Wrights Stereoscopic Tours card featuring the Wright family, Perry, Ohio. Undated.
(Courtesy of Edward Wright)

many, Italy, and France. Earnings, he estimated, were upwards of 50 U.S. dollars a month once travel and living expenses were accounted for. Initially at least, Milford E. Wright concentrated on the British market. Within a few months of arriving in Liverpool, he was 200 miles further south in Wales boarding with a family in Cardiff.⁸ Details of Wright's travels have proved difficult to track during this nomadic period of his life. One clue, pointing to time spent in Scotland, comes from a cabinet

card produced by a photographer in Dundee. In it, Wright is portrayed wearing Highland dress (see Figure 2). Passenger records show that Wright returned to America at various points.⁹ It was perhaps during one of these trips that he stereographed members of his wider family outside their home-
stead in Perry, Ohio (see Figure 3). Branded "Wright's Stereoscopic Tours," it suggests he had begun

stereographing and creating his own cards for sale.

The next tangible development in Wright's view business saw the adoption of "Excelsior Stereoscopic Tours" as a brand. These cards retained the same typeface and subsequently added a printed title under the right-hand stereo half. A typical example is "Ivy Bridge, Jesmond Dene, Newcastle-on-Tyne" in the north-east of England (see Figure 4). Stereoscopically, it is notable for its use of reflection, captured in a pool of water in the

Fig. 4. Excelsior Stereoscopic Tours, "Ivy Bridge, Jesmond Dene, Newcastle-on-Tyne." Undated. (Author's collection)



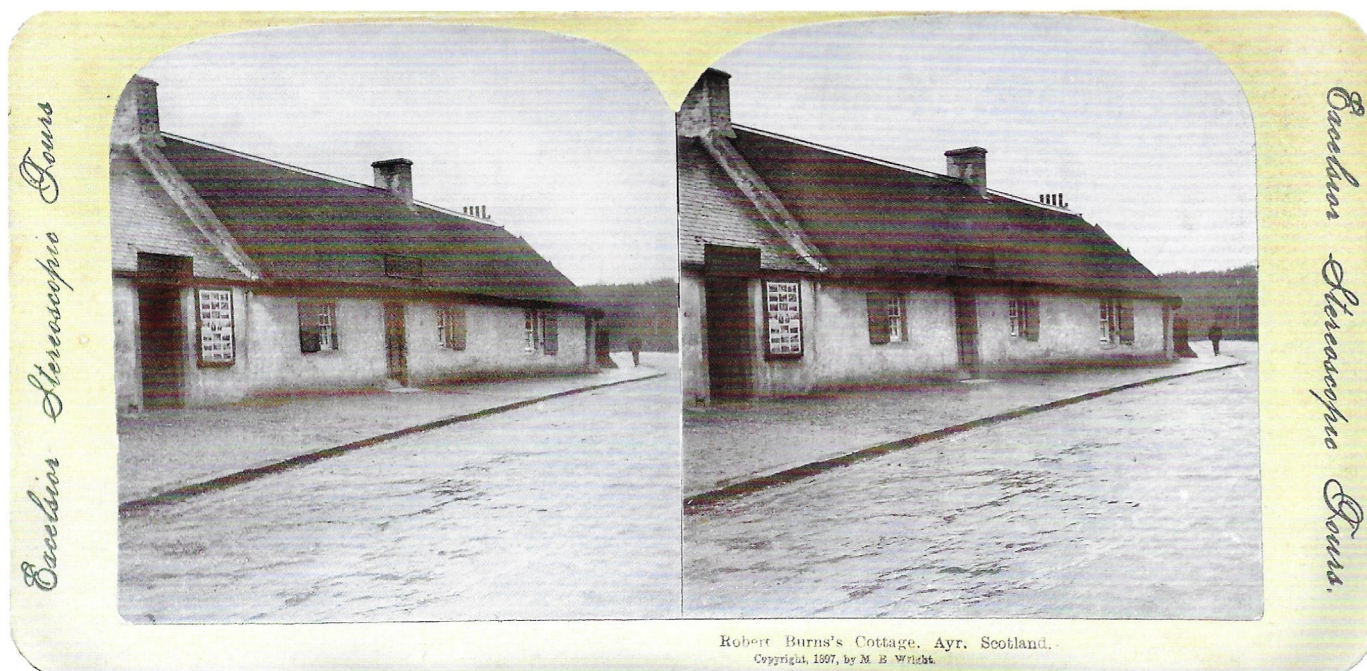


Fig. 5. Excelsior Stereoscopic Tours, "Robert Burns's Cottage, Ayr, Scotland." © 1897 by M.E. Wright. (Author's collection)

foreground. This further enhances the 3D effect of a man standing on a bridge within a lush and multi-layered landscape. Whether this is an example of Wright's own stereography is not known, but as a publisher, he clearly had an eye for effective composition. In due course, Wright began stating his own copyright on Excelsior cards, implying that he was the photographer. For example, "Robert Burns's Cottage, Ayr, Scotland" was marked "copyright 1897, by M. E. Wright" (see Figure 5). Taken on a wet day,

the puddles on the street in front of the cottage enhance the stereoscopic effect.

As to where Wright and Excelsior operated, by the late-1890s, he had settled in the Lancashire mill town of Burnley, twenty miles north of Manchester. The reason for this choice may have been photographic. In Burnley, Wright was able to take over the Towneley Studio, a previously established photographic business located in Hollingreave

Road. This address features on numerous Excelsior cards. In 1900, Wright advertised this studio for sale though whether the sale went ahead is not recorded.¹⁰ Operating without such a studio though seems unlikely given the number of stereos Excelsior issued. By 1901, the England Census recorded Wright's "profession or occupation" as "publisher of stereo views." It also stated he was an "employer" suggesting a workforce of indeterminate size for producing and selling his products.¹¹

Fig. 6. Excelsior Stereoscopic Tours, "Coming Through the Rye." © by M.E. Wright. (Author's collection)



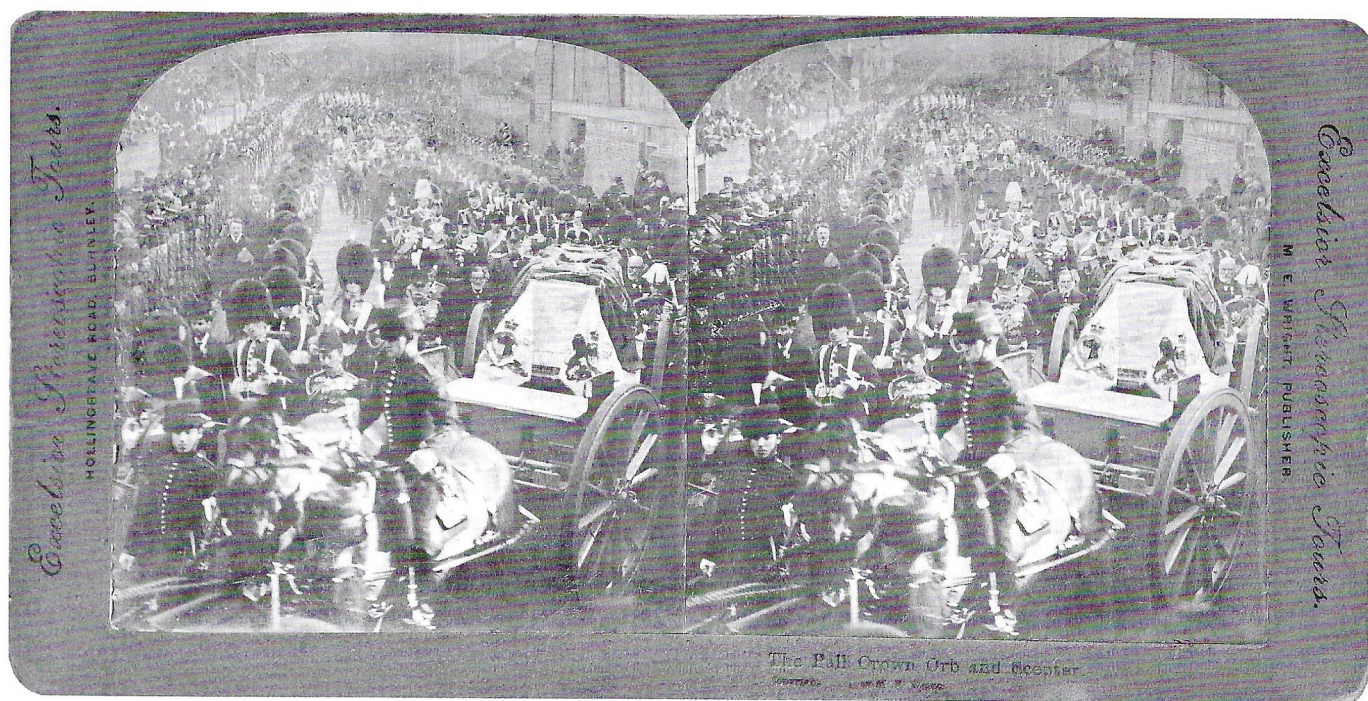


Fig. 7. Excelsior Stereoscopic Tours, "The Pall, Crown Orb and Scepter." © by M.E. Wright.
(Author's collection)

After 1900, Excelsior stereos appeared on gray-colored cards (rather than cream or beige) of a type like those produced by U&U, the Keystone View Company, and others. As a former U&U salesman, Wright would have been familiar with that company's extensive catalogue. For Excelsior, he regularly reworked familiar titles and subjects by producing his own versions. Typical is "Coming Through the Rye," seen in Figure 6 with the Hollingreave Road address, in-

spired by a line taken from Robert Burns' famous poem.

In January 1901, a royal stereo opportunity occurred when Queen Victoria died. Wright was one of the many photographers who covered her funeral procession through Windsor to St. George's Chapel. Stereographed from a prime position, Excelsior's cards were published as a set (see Figure 7). The following year, the cor-

onation of Queen Victoria's son Bertie as King Edward VII offered a further commercial opportunity. It is noteworthy that cards issued by Excelsior mirrored those credited to U&U, who hired what Bert Underwood later described as "my corps of cameramen" to cover the processional route (see Figure 8).¹² Given a relationship with U&U dating back to at least 1890, it is possible that Wright may have been one of these cameramen.

Fig 8. Underwood & Underwood, "King Edward VII and his gracious Queen passing down Whitehall to Westminster Abbey to be crowned, London, Eng." © 1902. (Author's collection)





Fig. 9. Underwood & Underwood, "Edward VII, King and Emperor, with Royal Family and distinguished Officers, honoring Indian guests, Buckingham Palace, Eng." ©1902. (Author's collection)

Both U&U (see Figure 9) and Excelsior (see Figure 10) published views of another coronation event, one featuring Indian and Colonial Troops being presented to the King at Buckingham Palace. However, the latter's cards did not cite copyright. One explanation may be that Wright was principally working for U&U during both the coronation procession and the festivities surrounding it. The camera position used in both U&U's and Excelsior's stereos (Figures 9 & 10) appears to be the same, suggesting wider/

tighter angles were employed to provide a variety of shots.

Other evidence to support this argument comes from surviving extracts of Bert Underwood's unpublished memoir. These confirm that the U&U co-founder was in London that summer overseeing its coronation series.¹³ As a result, the idea that Wright was still working for U&U and collaborating with his old boss from Liverpool days seems plausible. Wright may have

arranged with his former employer to publish any negatives surplus-to-requirement using his Excelsior imprint. If correct, this scenario runs counter to suggestions about Excelsior that Wright may have used others' negatives without permission. If, on occasion, he did so, he may not have been alone in the competitive world of stereo publication at the turn of the 20th century.

In July 1901, Wright, by now aged 40, had married

27-year-old Isabella (Bella) Davidson from Alloa, Scotland at St. Mark's Church, Regent's Park, London.¹⁴ The couple returned to Burnley and began married life together. In contrast to stereo companies whose cards promoted a worldwide network of offices, Excelsior's featured a succession of street addresses in Burnley used by Wright. These included 139 Dall Street, 3 Brooklands Road, and latterly 134 Hollingreave Road where Milford and Bella lived from 1904 with their fast-growing family. In time, it featured three sons and a daughter. If still in his ownership, Wright's Towneley Studio was just across the road at 113a.¹⁵

With a growing family to support, Wright again went on the road. According to his 1904 U.S. passport application, his stated occupation was "publisher" and his purpose "travelling," adding: "I sell goods made by H.S. Walbridge & Co. of Bennington, Vermont."¹⁶ The goods in question were stereoscopes. Presumably, these were used to demonstrate his Excelsior cards. Regular overseas trips taken by Wright go some way towards explaining the variety of countries and locations featured by Excelsior, but it is unlikely that he alone could have physically visited all the

Fig. 10. Excelsior Stereoscopic Tours (left half), "Review of Indian and Colonial Troops by H.M. The King, Buckingham Palace." (Author's collection)





Fig. 11. Excelsior Stereoscopic Tours, "Courtyard Chums, Berne, Switzerland." © M.E. Wright. (Author's collection)

places represented. Other stereographers might have been employed by him or their negatives were purchased or secured to fill a gap in the tours that Excelsior offered (see Figure 11).

As to how and where Wright manufactured his stereos, Excelsior cards have, in general, aged remarkably well, suggesting the use of quality materials. It is fair to say that some Excelsior examples appear prone to fading and the legibility of the printed titles is variable. But evidence collected for this

article suggests Excelsior was more of a cottage industry when compared with the mass production techniques employed by the major players like U&U and Keystone View Company. Quality might also have been compromised in a drive to sell Excelsior stereos at a price that its customers were willing to pay and to undercut the major players in the market.

The highpoint of Wright's stereoscopic photography career came in

1906. According to press reports, he captured the aftermath of an assassination attempt on King Alfonso XIII and Queen Victoria of Spain on their wedding day in Madrid. A bomb concealed in a bouquet of flowers was thrown at the couple's carriage by an anarchist positioned at an upper-storey window. Exploding in mid-air, the bomb caused the deaths of more than 20 by-standers as well as horses taking part in the wedding procession.

In the immediate aftermath of the explosion, Wright took a

Fig. 12. Excelsior Stereoscopic Tours, "State Coach and mules to carry away the horse. Calle Mayor, Madrid." © M.E. Wright. (Author's collection)



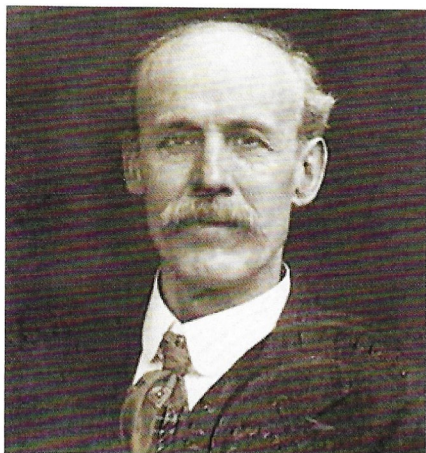


Fig. 13. Milford E. Wright's U.S. passport photo, February 1915.

sequence of graphic stereo images at the scene. These included the body of one of the horses lying in a pool of blood. In another from the sequence, the horse's body was visible through the legs of mules in the foreground (see Figure 12). Despite its explicit nature, the "dead horse" image was reproduced in the leading London illustrated paper *The Graphic* by one of its special artists.¹⁷ The full-page illustration was accompanied by the credit "photographed by the Excelsior Stereoscopic Tours Company, Burnley."

Another image from the wedding parade prior to the bomb going off also appeared, again reproduced by a *Graphic* artist, but was incorrectly credited to another company. A correction duly appeared in the following week's edition.¹⁸ This success may again have been informed by U&U who serviced the illustrated press with news images "taken from stereograph/s" from as early as 1897.¹⁹

As to Milford E. Wright's later life and career, public records and local newspaper reports provide a few clues. By 1911 when the next England Census was taken, Wright was still living at 134 Hollingreave Road, Burnley. He and his wife now had four children under the age of 10. This time, he recorded his occupation as "photographer" and "employer," suggesting that Excelsior Stereoscopic Tours might still have been in business.

In February 1915 and aged 53, he applied for a new passport at the U.S. Embassy in London. Again, he recorded his occupation as "pho-

tographer" and among his personal characteristics, he recorded his height as 5 foot 8 inches with hazel eyes and grey tinged hair (see Figure 13). An official noted on his form: "Applicant has identified himself many times at this embassy and has received several passports issued to him here."²⁰ Given the First World War was underway, his stated purpose of "France, photography; England, residence" raises the possibility that he was involved in stereographing the hostilities in some capacity, though research for this article has failed to identify any such Excelsior cards bearing Wright's copyright.

In December 1918, when Milford reportedly died from the effects of flu and acute bronchitis, the *Burnley Express and Advertiser* headlined its article "Expert Photographer. Death of Mr. Wright." It reported that "he had travelled to many remote places in the world in search of subjects of interest to photograph, and his collection of stereoscopic views and lantern slides is a very remarkable one."²¹ According to this obituary, he was also "very enthusiastic in the intensive system of poultry keeping and was one of the most successful eggs producers by this system known in the district." This aspect of his life harked back to his days as a farm labourer in Ohio.

The legacy of Excelsior Stereoscopic Tours of Burnley, Lancashire is evident in many of the stereos featured in this article. Milford E. Wright's pioneering role with U&U as it established its expanding business in England in 1890, his presence at royal events involving Queen Victoria and King Edward VII, and the ubiquity of Excelsior cards today on auction sites like eBay suggest that his contribution as a stereographer and publisher is ripe for re-evaluation and further exploration.

If you have any further information about Milford E. Wright or have Excelsior Stereoscopic Tours cards in your collection, the author can be contacted at davidbarber@btinternet.com.

Thanks to Milford E. Wright's family, notably his grandson John

Milford Wright and great-grandson Edward Wright, for additional information and photographs.

Notes

1. Excelsior Stereoscopic Tours cards feature in collections such as the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/80629/lord-my-shepherd and The Museum of New Zealand, Wellington collections.tepapa.govt.nz/agent/28236 (accessed April 2023).
2. David Barber, *Another Dimension: Stereoscopic Photography and the Press*, c. 1896-1911, PhD thesis, Durham University (2021) etheses.dur.ac.uk/13987/
3. An U&U office at 19 Oxford Street (since demolished) in Liverpool's Mount Pleasant district also doubled as Bert and Susie Underwood's home between April 1891 and August 1893. Their first child, Elmer Roy Underwood (1891-1984), a future U&U vice-president, was born there on May 8, 1891.
4. See passport nos. 455-458, US Consulate, Liverpool, issued November/December 1890.
5. 1880 U.S. Census, Perry, Lake, Ohio, schedule 1, p.6.
6. Passport no. 458, U.S. Consulate, Liverpool, issued December 2, 1890.
7. Wilson's Photographic Magazine, vol. 31, no. 445, January 1894, p. 112.
8. Wales Census, 30 Lowdown Square, Cardiff, schedule 65, p. 13. Wright's "profession or occupation" was recorded as "sailor" though this may have been a mishearing of the term "salesman."
9. For example, passenger record, Cephalonia, Liverpool to Boston, August 22, 1895. My Ancestry.
10. "Sales by Private Treaty," *Burnley Express and Advertiser*, September 5, 1900, p.1.
11. 1901 England Census, 139 Dall Street, Burnley, schedule 173, p. 28.
12. David Barber, "Underwood & Underwood: shaping the public's view of the 1902 Coronation," *The PhotoHistorian* (No. 195, Spring 2023), pp. 21-27.
13. Ibid.
14. "Marriages," *Alloa Advertiser*, July 6, 1901, page unknown.
15. See footnote 10.
16. Milford E. Wright, passport no. 1675, U.S. Embassy, London, February 27, 1904.
17. "The Dastardly Outrage in Madrid," *The Graphic*, June 9, 1906, p. 750.
18. *The Graphic*, June 16, 1906, p. 798.
19. See footnote 2.
20. Milford E. Wright, Emergency passport application no. 4915, U.S. Embassy, London, February 16, 1915.
21. "Expert Photographer. Death of Mr. Wright," *Burnley Express and Advertiser*, December 4, 1918, p. 6. 📷

