

**Revising Mathiesen:  
Updating Richard Mathiesen's Work  
On Emma Harding Britten**

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Richard Mathiesen's path-breaking monograph on EHB's life, *The Unseen Worlds Of Emma Hardinge Britten: Some Chapters In The History Of Western Occultism*, stands as the only significant biographical investigation of EHB, after James Robertson's *Noble Pioneer*.

Mathiesen's article was the first to deal with the various hints, inconsistencies and gaps in the versions of EHB's life we have at our disposal, and to attempt to make sense of those various narratives, taking Emma's assertions at face value. And it remains the most thorough discussion of her life and work available today.

Eight or so years on from its publication, it is necessary in the light of evidence to revise some of Mathiesen's hypotheses and assertions about EHB, largely because -- in the intervening period -- masses of historical material perhaps not readily accessible to Mathiesen have become available and permit us to arrive at different conclusions than did Mathiesen, who did not have access to this same material.

This essay summarizes what we now know -- with certainty or high probability -- about EHB that we did not know, at the time Mathiesen wrote, in 2001.

### **EHB's Parentage**

Largely due to the availability of significant genealogical data sets, online, we are now in a position to identify Emma's parents -- and Emma's prenatal chronology if you will -- with greater certainty than in 2001.

Ann Sophia Broomfield, EHB's mother, was most probably the child of Richard Broomfield and Ann Broomfield, and was born on 18 January 1792.

She had a sister, Frances, who married a John Jackson, after whom Ebenezer and Ann Sophia's first child, Frances, was named, and with whom EHB's sister Margaret went to live after Ebenezer Floyd's death in 1834, and the family's dissolution.

Richard and Ann Broomfield may have been, originally, from Liverpool (suggesting, in combination with their residence in Rochester, that the Broomfields like the Floyds were involved in a marine industry), or Ann Sophia may have been born in Liverpool and christened in Rochester, as Ann Sophia listed her birthplace in the 1871 UK census as “Liverpool.”

Ann Sophia and Ebenezer Floyd were married on 9 December 1819, by banns (suggesting either an issue, or an affluence the Floyds did not have), when Ann was almost certainly already pregnant with Frances Ann Floyd, who was christened on 20 August 1819 (suggesting a possible birth date as much as a month earlier, or the christening of a sick-unto-death newborn). It is possible that EHB never knew she had an older sister.

### **EHB’s Early Life**

We can confirm most of Mathiesen’s knowledge of Emma’s birth, with the exception of the conclusion, often drawn by readers of Mathiesen’s work, that Emma was born in a slum. Bethnal Green in the 1820s was not yet the slum it would become in the 1830s, and was only just beginning to be absorbed into the “Metropolis”. Ebenezer Floyd was almost certainly as he himself advertised at the time of Emma’s christening -- a schoolmaster -- at Bethnal Green, though we do not know at which of several possible schools operating in the area at the time.

The detailed christening records of Thomas and Margaret are similarly available to us, as are on-the-ground records in Bristol, which permit us to cite the Floyd family, in the early 1830s, in a very specific area of Bristol, and to find Ebenezer Floyd working as an “apothecary” (a licensing improbability -- likely an apothecary’s assistant or unlicensed medical botanist) in Bristol up until his death in 1834.

We can also now locate and review the census records that permit us to find Emma and Ann Sophia in London in Lambeth in the 1840s (possibly) and Tufton Street, Westminster, in the 1850s (certainly), in increasingly up-scale economic conditions (as Emma’s career as an actress develops), and the maritime records of Thomas Floyd’s enlistment, service and death -- all of which align pretty exactly Emma’s stories about Thomas and her life in “Westminster” in the 1850s.

Because Mathiesen did not have access to James Robertson’s *Noble Pioneer*, he did not have the pointer to Thomas Welsh that emerges in Robertson’s text - namely, that Thomas Welsh was Emma’s “singing master,” and that therefore it is a virtual certainty that Emma was articulated to Welsh (by Ann Sophia, who was the only person legally able to do so), probably for a standard term of five or seven years.

Because Mathiesen lacked this piece of information, he would also have been unable to unearth the connection to Pierre Erard (through Welsh), or to make sense of Emma’s other dark hints about her life in Paris and London before 1855.

Similarly, as the records of Covent Garden, Sadler's Wells, the Princess's, the Adelphi and other London venues become increasingly available, it is clear that Emma was a full-time working actress from 1842 to 1854, including her claimed "seven years": at the Adelphi.

Mathiesen's suggestion -- taken, I believe, from Lewis Spence -- that Emma wrote music and musical criticism under the name Ernest Reinhold appears to be accurate: we have some evidence of musical compositions of the same shape (if not identical in substance) published under "Ernest Reinhold" and "Emma Harding".<sup>1</sup>

Mathiesen also did not have access to the records of the Wallack Company, and therefore could not have known that Emma did -- as she claims -- do Shakespeare in Paris, and was rescued from a failed venture there by James Wallack, who offered Emma a short term contract as a bit player (along with other actresses whom Wallack was importing to New York).

Thus, Mathiesen's reconstruction of Emma's life from the death of her father, to her arrival in the United States, can no longer be considered chronologically accurate, particularly when we take into account the lack of any documentary evidence for -- and much evidence against -- a putative marriage to a Hardinge in the 1830s. Emma's life from the death of her father until her arrival in the US is, in broad outlines at least, well-understood, and as far as the documentary record is concerned, it is the life of a working musician and actress, supporting a mother (and after 1850, employing a servant).

Mathiesen's rich suggestions about the Orphic Circle, and Emma's involvement with figures he names, are I believe largely accurate, as I discuss below.

### **EHB's Asserted Marriage To E. Hardinge**

Mathiesen's assertion that Emma's second (after Floyd) surname, Hardinge, was likely the result of a marriage to one Dr. E Hardinge, a medical botanist and mesmerist, **turns out to be incorrect**, in two respects:

- for EHB, there was no "first marriage" prior to her marriage to William Britten (whom she may in fact have known since childhood)

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<sup>1</sup> I am arranging to have the Court and its predecessor magazine searched for "Ernest Reinhold" at time of writing. I have every expectations that we will find Ernest Reinhold in its pages. At that point, we can take on the question of why Emma chose the pseudonym "Ernest Reinhold" (the real-life ER was a Kantian and the author of a *Manual of the History of Philosophy* (1830)); like her choice of Emma Harding (echoing the name of a J. A. Froude novel's character) the choice of "Ernest Reinhold" was not an act of ex nihilo creation.

- EHB had no relationship whatsoever with Alfred E. Hardinge, the likely “Dr. E. Hardinge” mentioned by Podmore and Mathiesen, who was a medical botanist and mesmerist (caught in the 1851 census) with a wife and children, also living in Westminster, but not close to Emma on Tufton Street.

Mathiesen apparently based his assertion on an incorrect assertion of Frank Podmore’s (in *Modern Spiritualism*) that EHB was Dr. E. Hardinge’s wife -- an assertion Podmore does not evidence, and apparently made based on the ‘identity’ of the name.

Since we now know that EHB was “Miss Emma Harding” (no e) as a stage actress until 1855, that she and Ann Sophia came to the US as Mrs. and Miss Harding (no e), and that **as late as 1866 EHB was still using Miss Emma Harding (no e)** as her public ‘stage name’ in England, the hypothesis of a marriage to a Hardinge in the 1830s or 1840s is now contradicted by the documentary evidence, and only useful if we wish to treat Emma’s assertion of a first marriage -- made publicly in the 1860s and 1870s, including at the time of her marriage to William Britten -- as fact. There is no need to do so, other than to avoid labelling EHB a prevaricator, but as we have other instances of Emma, prevaricating, in the documentary record, the pattern is clear in any case.

Emma was not married prior to her marriage to William Britten, in a legal or mystical sense. EHB adopted the “Mrs. Emma Hardinge” as a crafted feint to (a) underpin her claim to middle-class or better status, and (b) to cover the fact that she was an unmarried woman and former stage actress, traveling alone in dangerous areas among pious and censorious people. She subsequently adopted the non-specific story of an early marriage (the details of which she changed over the course of her life) and subsequent widowhood to underpin this faux “Mrs.”

Certainly EHB was not married at 13, or 15, and stood in no legal relationship to any male Hardinge.

### **Emma’s Transition To Trance Speaker**

Mathiesen’s discussion of Emma’s transition from actress to trance speaker takes into account all the occupations EHB tried, save the music school she attempted to found. This piece of detail -- particularly when backed by the broad and insistent advertising EHB did for this school -- is important, as it tends to make Emma’s transition from acting into spiritualism less smooth and natural than she implies in the *Autobiography*. This is not a small matter, as there is a reading of EHB’s life that shows her, consistently and

repeatedly, trying to leave the Spiritualism arena, and to practice the trades she knew<sup>2</sup>, returning to Spiritualism only when her efforts at more secular employment fail.

### Emma's Later Life

Mathiesen suggests that EHB leaves the US in 1881, and never returns.

In fact, she leaves the US in 1881 under a cloud (after being contradicted, during a trance lecture, by one of the subjects of her lecture, who happens to be in her audience) and she does return to the US, in 1884, for the camp meeting season, remaining some six months in the US.

This final "transition" in 1884 is significant, as her reception in the US in 1884 did much to convince EHB, I believe, that her future lay in England, or in quiet seclusion.

### Identification of Orphic Circle members

I believe that Mathiesen's identification of members of the Orphic Circle is substantially correct. Specifically, there is strong evidence to link:

- Varley
- Frederick Hockley
- Philip Henry Stanhope
- Bulwer-Lytton
- RJ Morrison
- Richard F. Burton

together in an occult network that Emma may have chosen to call the Orphic Circle in her work (that term was not used by the circle itself). For more information, see my *Hypotheses on the Orphic Circle* and the accompanying social network diagrams.

It is another matter to prove -- and perhaps an impossible matter to prove -- that Emma was a clairvoyant subject for this group.

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<sup>2</sup> The trades Emma knew, by 1856, were: acting, the teaching of music, the editing of magazines, and the building and running of a particular kind of philanthropic institution. The second she learned under the tutelage of Welsh; the third she learned at the *Court Gazette*, as well as (I believe) from her association with E. L. Blanchard, W. H. Harrison and others; the fourth, I would argue, she learned from her involvement with Charles Dickens, who -- as we know -- was actively organizing, promoting, managing (and feeding off) Burdett-Coutts' Urania House project, which was focused (as Emma's philanthropic organizational attempt in the 1860s would be) on providing a home for women who had 'lost their female virtue' and who were 'resorting to the streets for the means of life.' Acting was something Emma "fell into" given the open boundary between musical performance, light opera and popular theatre, and her career as a "serviceable" utility player in an ensemble speaks for itself. Emma's other trades -- trance speaking and galvanic medicine -- she learned substantially from Elizabeth J. French, in New York, in the 1850s.

Whether Emma was intimately involved with the Master of Lindsay, as Mathiesen suggests, to the point of using him as a model or source for Cavendish Dudley in *Ghost Land*, remains to be demonstrated, but there is ample historical evidence to place EHB and the Master of Lindsay together after Emma's return to England in 1865.

Similarly, though it is unlikely that EHB and Frederick Hockley were -- as Mathiesen suggests -- "friends" of any sort, it seems possible that Emma was a clairvoyante subject<sup>3</sup> for Hockley, as she probably was for others, including quite probably Chauncey Hare Townshend. I believe it was Townshend who may in fact have "discovered" Emma (as he was closely connected to Thomas Welsh and to French artistic and musical circles) and who was the means by which Emma was introduced into the Gore House circle around Lady Blessington (and the means therefore by which EHB came to know Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli, and Bulwer-Lytton).<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, there appears to be no evidence whatsoever to support Mathiesen's assertion -- based largely, I think, on a similarity of textual content -- that Ernest de Bunsen, the antiquarian and scholar, was the original of Louis de B\_\_\_\_\_.

There is evidence to suggest that the von Bunsen family had a spiritual circle (much as described, interestingly enough, in the Cavendish Dudley portions of *Ghost Land*).

However, De Bunsen's chronology -- such as we can extract it from the life and letters of his father and mother, and other documentary trace evidence -- does not align in any way with Emma's assertions about Louis de B\_\_\_\_\_ 's trips to the United States (or Bengal, or India, or Cuba, or France, or China). And some details of de Bunsen's life -- the death of his eldest son, the death of his mother, and the death of his son-in-law -- tend to mitigate against Mathiesen's own litmus-test chronological requirements that de Bunsen be in the US at defined times. I can find no evidence whatsoever that Ernest de Bunsen traveled to the US, alone or with one of his brothers; that he traveled to the Indian subcontinent; that he spent any time in Cuba or China whatsoever; that as a young man he bore any resemblance to the famous drawing of Louis de B\_\_\_\_\_ discussed by Olcott in periodicals or in his *Old Diary Leaves*; or that he was in any way involved in occult studies.

The similarity between de Bunsen's published book-length texts and some of the content of *Art Magic* is undeniable, but the same thematic similarities exist between Art

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<sup>3</sup> As late as a piece in *The Two Worlds* in December of 1890, EHB is claiming in public that her first experience with Modern Spiritualism in New York shattered her until-then solid Anglican faith. The claim that she was a clairvoyante subject for the Orphic Circle is made posthumously, in her Autobiography, which also lets the faith-shattering-encounter claim stand. That EHB would not have outed herself, in her lifetime, is consistent with what "One Who Knows" (or Sirius) tells us about the rules of the Orphic Circle.

<sup>4</sup> Townshend's *Facts In Mesmerism* is I think under-rated in terms of its influence on its contemporaries, as is Townshend himself. And, as Townshend knew Alexis Didier and his handler J.B. Marcillet, it's hard for me not to make the connection between Didier and Marcillet, on the one hand, and Louis de B\_\_\_\_\_ and Von Marx on the other.

Magic and any number of published authors' works, dating back to the US-based Paineite freethinkers in New York in the 1820s.

And, when we consider the cavalier fashion in which Emma treats "the author of *Art Magic*" after 1884 -- in the pages of *The Two Worlds*, where "the author of *Art Magic*" becomes "Sirius", who then becomes a mouthpiece for EHB; and in the pages of *The Unseen Universe*, where an ersatz second volume of *Ghost Land* is produced (new material, after the first volume had been recycled three times), it is easy to conclude, Occam-fashion, that while there may well have been an original of Louis de B\_\_\_\_\_, the authorship of *Art Magic* and *Ghost Land* belongs to EHB herself.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Early Theosophical Society**

All of the evidence found to date tends to support Deveney's conclusion (approved by Matthiesen) that the "first" Theosophical Society was in fact oriented toward practical occultism, that HPB's interest in EHB stemmed from HPB's belief (perhaps mistaken) that EHB **had** deep knowledge of practical occultism, and that its failure to produce any concrete results in that area led to its dissolution, and (at least in part) to an increasingly wide rift between EHB and HPB<sup>6</sup>, which culminated in open warfare between EHB and the (second) Theosophical Society, in the pages of *The Two Worlds*, *The Path*, *Lucifer* and elsewhere, in the later 1880s.

### **EHB And Mary Baker Eddy**

Mathiesen raises the question of whether EHB and Mary Baker Eddy knew one another, and if so what influence EHB had on Christian Science. We know now, from the pages of *The Two Worlds*, that EHB was extremely critical of Christian Science, but made no claim in public to know Ms. Eddy. Given her life-long penchant for name-dropping<sup>7</sup>, had EHB personal acquaintance with the founder of Christian Science, I feel certain she would have used that to her rhetorical advantage.

### **The House 'Rose Cross' and Delanco, NJ**

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<sup>5</sup> The process of recovering the "lost" footnotes and citations for *Art Magic* has begun, and thus far I have been unable to find a single source for *Art Magic* that is not a native English language source. Several of the sources, including the source used by the Author of *Art Magic* (TAOAM) to allege time spent in China, are beneath the threshold of scholarly use.

<sup>6</sup> It's worth speculating on what would have happened when EHB and HPB -- both having the expectation that the other was a well-practiced occultist -- found that neither were -- that both were, essentially, book-learned and fraudulent.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Emma chooses *The Two Worlds* as the forum in which to admit (my choice of words) her relationship with Charles Dickens and allege (also my choice of words) a relationship with Thomas Carlyle.

Mathiesen's suggestion that Emma's stay, at a house called Rose Cross, prior to her 1863 trip to California, is of significance for understanding her life continues to tantalize, and what research has been done in this area tends to confirm (a) Emma's story about being stalked while there and (b) Mathiesen's sense that this period of Emma's life is significant in ways we do not understand<sup>8</sup>. At present, my hypothesis is that the house existed as named, that it was owned by a Pancoast or another prominent Philadelphia spiritualist family, and the area may in fact have been a haven for summering well-to-do Spiritualists.

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<sup>8</sup> This period of Emma's life, and her involvement with a Philadelphia-based circle of occultists, may prove to be the connective tissue between the EHB of 1860 (already facile with the anthropological critique of Christianity, and familiar with Freemasonry, as her *Six Lectures* indicate) and the EHB of 1864 -- able to, in trance (?), conduct the rituals of the first three degrees of Freemasonry, before an assembled lodge, to the members' satisfaction and astonishment. I have no evidence, at this point, to link her to Seth Pancoast at this period of her life, but members of the Pancoast family did live in Delanco in the 1860s.