

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/2

Sharon DeBartolo Carmack © 2021

The Victorian Séance Comes to England

"MRS. HAYDEN WAS SOMETHING OF A FRAUD," the tour guide said with a smirk.

"No she wasn't."

I swear, the words were meant to be a stage whisper to my husband, but they somehow projected into the room. With all eyes upon me, I added, "I'm Maria Hayden's biographer, and she wasn't a fraud."

I discovered something about being a biographer in that moment. A biographer will counter any falsehood about her subject as fiercely as a defense attorney.



We hadn't planned on visiting Knebworth House during our brief time in England. I didn't know the house still existed and was open to the public. As we made our way along the M11 from London to Cambridge, I saw the exit sign announcing Knebworth House, 66 kilometers. I turned to my husband and said, "That's where Maria conducted her first séance for Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton in 1852. We have to go there." I'd been working on her biography for the past three years.

Sir Edward, owner of Knebworth House, is perhaps best known today for the opening line, "It was a dark and stormy night" and the oft-quoted, "The pen is mightier than the sword." A highly regarded and prolific writer in his day, whose book sales rivaled his friend Charles Dickens, Lytton published two dozen best-selling novels, nine plays, fifteen volumes of poetry, and four volumes of essays.

After we settled into our B&B in Cambridge, I opened my laptop and Googled the house, only to discover it was off season and closed—except on the weekends starting in May. We were there over a weekend in May. Was it coincidence? Serendipity? Or a nudge from beyond?

Think what you will about mediums who claim to communicate with the dead. I'm not here to convince you one way or the other. You either believe in life after death or you don't. You either believe that the spirits of the dead can communicate with us or you don't. What I am here to tell you is that the historical evidence, viewed with an open mind and through the lens of objectivity, is convincing: Maria B. Hayden, the first American medium to bring Spiritualism to the U.K., was not a fraud, and her clients—the upper classes of English society—were not credulous fools. Her séances rattled the likes of Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton and Charles Dickens.



Our tour group of a dozen crammed into an upstairs loft of Sir Edward's study, admiring his long cherry-wood pipes on display, glass encased letters from Dickens with Lytton's suggestion for a better ending to *Great Expectations*, two skulls excavated from Pompeii, and books on witchcraft and the occult. Then we gazed at Sir Edward's crystal ball sitting in another glass case. The gray-haired tour guide in his tweed jacket and well-rehearsed script said that Maria Hayden was the "resident medi-

um." I knew that wasn't true. She had spent only one night there, and she did not use a crystal ball. Were my fellow tourists envisioning an olive-skinned, black-haired gypsy lady in a sequenced-trimmed black gown wearing bangle bracelets, several strands of beads encircling her neck, and large earrings dangling from her lobes? There was no known photograph of Maria. When I eventually obtained one from a descendant, that description couldn't have been further from the truth. She looked like any average, everyday Victorian female, a young woman who was born in Nova Scotia, Canada, and descended from a long line of English forebears from North Yorkshire. Yet I held my tongue on the tour—until the accusation of fraud. The tour guide went silent when I corrected him, then he nervously shuttled us into another room.



The not quite twenty-eight-year-old Maria B. Hayden and her thirty-two-year-old husband, William R. Hayden, of Boston, traveled on a rainy afternoon in October 1852 by the Great Northern Railway to Welwyn, a small town about twenty-two miles from London. Lytton sent a carriage for them that took them the remaining six miles to Knebworth. By the time they reached their destination, evening began to fall. William wrote in his memoir, "Seven Years with the Spirits," serialized in *Banner of Light* between May 21 and December 5, 1857, on the "rich landscape which was spread out before me, as far as the eye could reach. On all sides lay the green fields, with here a little cottage, and there a stately mansion—the whole presenting a delightful picture of English scenery.

"The carriage suddenly turned from the main road into a private way," William continued, "which wound its course serpentine[ly] [*sic*], overhung by thick branches and the foliage of trees for a short distance, and then opened into a clear space, and stopped quickly at the portal of the ancient dwelling of the Lyttons."

Our experience approaching Knebworth wasn't much different, except we traveled in a 2019 Mercedes, a vehicle much larger and more expensive than the compact we had reserved. Long story. On the Knebworth estate this day, signs pointed the way to the gardens, a dinosaur trail, an adventure playground, and to the house.

William commented on the "battlements of a castle," no doubt referring to the turrets, gargoyles, and gothic architecture Lytton added after he inherited the place in 1843. "On entering, we were ushered through the passage-way to the great hall, which was hung round with the implements of 'grim visaged war,' massive and impenetrable coats of steel armor, which looked as though they had once belonged to a race of giants. Axes and shields which Goliath [*sic*] might not have been ashamed to do battle with—ponderous swords, bows and arrows, banners, pictures of old warriors and nobles long since sleeping in the chambers of death, and mouldering in the dust of ages." They were all still there 167 years later, exactly as William had described.

When the Haydens reached Knebworth and were directed to the library, Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton extended his hand to William, who gladly grasped it. Lytton said, "Welcome to Knebworth." William described Lytton as "lightly built, and not in the least of the beef-eating character;

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he possess a remarkably strong, nervous, sanguine temperament, features of a Grecian mould, blue eyes, which when he is animated, sparkle with the fire of genius. He is free and cordial in his manners, but not of many words."

Lytton had heard about the "American rappers" visiting England and invited Maria and William to visit. Maria became a medium in 1850, two years after the Fox Sisters heard rappings on the walls of their home in Hydesville, New York, which sparked the Spiritualist movement. Seated in the Lytton library by the fireplace and surrounded by hundreds of volumes in dark-wood bookcases, the Haydens and Sir Edward talked of his books, the one he had just completed called *My Novel*, and his celebrated play, *Lady of Lyons*, which was staged in both America and England.

The first of Lytton's many séances with Maria, and her first professional séance in England, occurred later that evening, likely in the banqueting hall, on October 27, 1852, the Haydens' second wedding anniversary. William wrote that the séance at Knebworth was "only partially successful, but sufficiently so to convince Sir Edward...."

Lytton "promised to use his influence in our behalf, a promise which he fulfilled on numerous occasions," frequently calling on Maria at their residence in London to "continue his investigations." Lytton also invited the Haydens to his house in London several times. At one party, many of those attending were members of Parliament, and William heard Lytton "express his opinion freely, in regard to the phenomena." He also presented Maria with a set of his novels.

Sir Edward's son, Robert, wrote,

On a subsequent occasion, having received very unsatisfactory & absurd answers to several questions, he [Sir Edward] made some querulous & impatient observation derogatory to the character of the spirits (questioning, too, I believe, their existence as spirits) just as he was leaving the room: when suddenly the Table (near which no person was standing) of its own accord, as one says, sprang at him like a dog. The Medium [Maria B. Hayden] was no less astonished than himself— & suggested that "the spirits" were angry with his language about them." "Then" said he laughing, "they'd better spring at me again, I think!" And immediately the Table flew at him, knocked him against the wall, and pinned him there so close, that, as it was a large table, he was in danger of being crusht [*sic*]; after three or four minutes, the table moved slowly back (with a sort of revolving orbit-like movement) to the original position! (Lytton to Browning)



Lytton wrote to his son, Robert, about 1853, concerning Maria's séances:

I have had the American rappers and Media with the spirit world, as they call themselves, here. It is very curious, and if there be a trick, it is hard to conceive it. There are distinct raps given to a table which they sit, and by rapping at the letters of the alphabet which the supposed spirits select, they hold distinct dialogues, you merely thinking or writing your questions on slips of paper which you hold concealed in your hand... (Bulwer-Lytton 2: 42-43).



In another letter that same year, Lytton wrote to his son:

I have been interested in the spirit manifestations. They are astounding, but the wonder is that they go so far and no farther. To judge by them, even the highest departed spirits seem to have made no visible progress—to be as uncertain and contradictory as ourselves or more so—still with answers at times that take away one's breath with wonder.... Emily [Lytton's daughter, who had died 1848] comes often, generally most incoherent, as when, poor thing, she died, but I asked her the last name she thought of, and she answered Carl Ritter. No Medium can know that, and the question was only put in thought.... (Bulwer-Lytton 2: 43).



Lytton's son, Robert, also wrote in a letter to his friend, poet Robert Browning on July 19, 1854, a detailed account of his father's séance with Maria. That section spanned seventeen of the letter's thirty-one pages:

My dear Browning,....

Now I have collected all possible "Spirit news" for Mrs Browning—but have heard so much I don[']t know what to tell her—My father's own experiences are certainly very remarkable. He tells me that when he first went to Mrs Hadyn's [sic] after having witnessed the usual phenomena there, & not being at all satisfied with these, he demanded some further proof of abnormal Agency. Mrs H. asked him to suggest one which he w^d consider satisfactory—and he suggested that a large & heavy lamp which stood upon the table should be shaken backwards & forwards, without the table itself being moved, & without any imposition of hands upon either the lamp or the table. Mrs H objected that this was hardly a fair thing to ask as it was wholly [sic] without the range of all previous phenomena within her experience; but while she was y[e]t speaking—the lamp began to be agitated & rock heavily & slowly to & fro. Encreasing rapidly [sic] in its over-poise on either side, until there seemed imminent danger of its being thrown down & broken, when it gradually righted itself again, & remained motionless—Startled, but not altogether satisfied that this phenomenon was not the result of some mechanical arrangement; he demanded a yet more convincing proof of super human, or supernatural, causes.



Mrs H. had brought out (with American hospitality) it seems, two bottles of wine, which were standing on the sideboard. My Father demanded that the wine should be shaken in the bottles, without the bottles being moved, & as before, without any communication from the Medium: when, instantaneously, the wine began to be agitated within the Decanters, which remained motionless, and, as tho' there were a tide in the bottles[,] the wine heaved violently up & down against the sides of the glass, until it touched the neck of the bottles, when it slowly subsided, & returned to its original level—All this time no person was standing near the bottles, or even in their part of the room.... (Lytton to Browning).



Robert Lytton mentioned Browning's wife in his letter. Elizabeth Barrett Browning also had an interest in Spiritualism. Although she did not appear to have had any direct contact with Maria Hayden, she had heard of her and wrote,

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possibly to her friend Fanny Haworth, "I understand the system of American rapping spirits considerably better now" (Porter 40).

Dickens, too, had a fascination with the occult, and he, like Lytton, owned several books on the subject, many of them acquired and read before 1850. Dickens loved a good ghost tale, as did his readers. He penned more than two dozen ghost stories, some book-length, such as *A Christmas Carol*, some short stories, and some ghost tales woven into larger novels, including *The Pickwick Papers*, *Bleak House*, and *Nicholas Nickleby*.

Like all skeptics, Dickens wanted proof of the afterlife. Yet, when he heard about the American medium, Maria B. Hayden, instead of seeing for himself, he sent two reporters to investigate. Henry Morley and William Henry Wills wrote a scathing account, "The Ghost of the Cock Lane Ghost," published November 20, 1852, in the weekly *Household Words* edited by Dickens. Morley and Wills, both on staff of *Household Words*, had gone to the Haydens' residence for a séance at the direction of Dickens on November 1, 1852, using the names Brown and Thompson.

Maria used a method of mediumship that she introduced to England: the sitter would pass a pencil over a printed alphabet (an early day Ouija board), then the person or a scribe wrote down the letter when a rap sounded. Words, then sentences, spelled out the message. No one held hands, and the séance wasn't conducted in the dark or at night. Some thought Maria read people's faces and made the raps by cracking her toes, hitting her shoe against the table leg, or she had an accomplice. But oftentimes her back was turned from the sitter, her eyes were shielded from seeing the alphabet, or she read a book or newspaper during the séance. Toe cracking was easily ruled out; a podiatrist told me it's physically impossible to crack one's toes consistently for two to three hours straight, the length of time each séance lasted. Additionally, people watched Maria's feet. As for an accomplice making the sounds, she often held séances in other people's homes without her husband present, where she didn't know anyone in the room. (Carmack 6-8).

(In 1855, Dr. Robert Hare, chair of chemistry at University of Pennsylvania Medical School, would eliminate the controversy over raps when he had Maria use a device he invented called a "Spiritoscope." It wasn't reliant on sounds. Using a screen, Hare cut off Maria's vision from a spinning disc containing letters of the alphabet and numbers. She rested her hands on the table, and the spirit vibrations operated through her hands to trigger the device, indicating the letters. He had unparalleled success with this method (Carmack 211-21).)

In London, the spirit world chose Thompson (Morley), indicated by raps, with whom they wanted to communicate first. "Mother" was spelled out with this message, "Dear son, I am well pleased to see you. I watch over you and God blesses you." But when Thompson asked for his mother's Christian name, things went awry. The spirit first gave the name "Timok." Wrong. Then "Eunice." Also wrong. More wrong answers ensued, including a communication from Brown's (Wills) mother, who was still alive and well, and that Brown would marry and have 136 children ([Morley and Wills]).

William Hayden explained these issues in his memoir, writing that

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"Mrs. Hayden was in feeble health, suffering from the effects of thirty-four days' sea-sickness, from which she had not, and did not fully recover, for some months." A letter penned by Rev. James E. Smith on 29 December 1852 to Lady Lytton corroborated this: "Poor Mrs. Hayden, the medium in London,...has been very ill, having had a miscarriage, caused by sea-sickness, so that she has not been able to go out" (Smith 371).

Why Dickens did not attend any séances with Maria and judge for himself is curious. Even when D. D. Home, another American medium known for levitation, came to England in 1855, Dickens refused to see him despite repeated invitations to attend one of Home's séances. Dickens detested Home, even though he never met him. Dickens explained in a letter to Mrs. Lynn Linton, England's first woman journalist and a Spiritualist:

*Gad's Hill Place, Higham by Rochester, Kent,
Sunday, 16th September, 1860*

My dear Mrs. Linton,

...I hold personal inquiry on my part into these proceedings to be out of the question for two reasons. Firstly, because the conditions under which such inquiries take place—as I know in the recent case of two friends of mine, with whom I discussed them—are preposterously wanting in the commonest securities against deceit or mistake. Secondly, because the people lie so very hard, both concerning what did take place and what impression it made at the time of the inquirer.

Mr. Hume, or Home (I rather think he has gone by both names) I take the liberty of regarding as an impostor. If he appeared on his own behalf in any controversy with me, I should take the liberty of letting him know publicly why. But be assured that if he were demonstrated a humbug in every microscopic cell of his skin and globule of his blood, the disciples would still believe and worship....

*Believe me ever faithfully your true friend,
Charles Dickens (Layard 166-67)*

This raises the question: If "people lie so very hard, both concerning what did take place and what impression it made at the time of the inquirer," why didn't Dickens go to Maria's or Home's séances to see for himself? Did he fear he'd be proven wrong? And if he became convinced, would that tarnish the reputation he had so deliberately built for himself as anti-Spiritualist?

Even his close friend Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton tried to persuade him to attend the séances. They didn't always agree on subjects, but when it came to spirit communication, they adamantly disagreed. Dickens wrote to Rev. James White on March 7, 1854, "It really is inexplicable to me that a man of [Lytton's] calibre can be run away with" such fraudsters (Storey, Tillotson, and Easson, eds., 285-86).

William wrote that Sir Edward wasn't an "infatuated believer in the spirit phenomena; far from it, and I will do him the justice to say, in this connection, that he does not entertain any very exalted idea of the manifestations. Totally unlike, however, some would-be literary giants [Dickens]; Sir Edward is a man possessing an elevated mind, and simply desired that those connected with the phenomena should have a fair hear-

ing—that the subject should be thoroughly and candidly investigated, and the result given to the world.”

Other friends also tried to persuade Dickens to investigate the spirit phenomena for himself, but he outright refused. “Afraid of the truth, of course,” wrote Elizabeth Barrett Browning to her friend Fanny in 1860, “having so deeply committed himself to the negatives.... Dickens, too, who is so fond of ghost-stories, as long as they are impossible...” (Kenyon II: 395).

William also wrote in his memoir that the reason Dickens never visited, as told to him “by two of [Dickens’] professed friends in a private conversation, was, ‘that he was too soft and credulous, and would believe in the rappings.’”

Despite Dickens and a few other vocal critics, Maria B. Hayden’s year-long success in England was supported not only by Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, but also social reformer Robert Owen, poet and author Catherine Crowe, editor of *Chambers Journal* Robert Chambers, professor of mathematics at University College Augustus De Morgan and his wife Sophia, members of Parliament, numerous dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies, marquees and marchioness, surgeons and physicians, and men of letters and science. They put her through test after test, and walked away convinced she was no fraud and that the dead can communicate. Several London reporters also spoke highly of Maria: “With respect to Mrs. Hayden herself, most unquestionably that lady performs her ministrations with ease, grace, and good humor.” “Of Mrs. Hayden we wish to speak with every respect. Her manners are very good, and her conduct perfectly open and above-board.” “Mrs. Hayden is far from being a cheat and impostor. In her character of medium she is a most extraordinary person, and as a woman she is remarkably intelligent and pleasing” (Carmack 171).

So I ask you: Could all these educated and respected people have been duped by this humble American woman?



Postscript: Once Maria returned to America in late 1853, she continued to gain a reputation for honesty and integrity in her mediumship. She also became a healer, so respected that physicians recommended their difficult cases to her. In her forties, she attended the Eclectic Medical College of the City of New York and was one of only three women in the first class who graduated in 1867. She earned her M.D. degree with honors, was highly regarded by her male colleagues, and practiced medicine for the rest of her life until her death in 1883.

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