

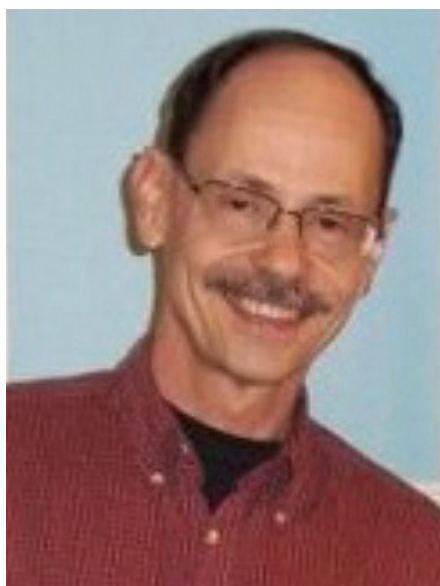
adelma von vay



Paul Johnson

GHOST LAND: EMMA HARDINGE BRITTEN'S FICTIONAL PORTRAYAL OF ARISTOCRATIC SPIRITUALISTS IN THE EARLY THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

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Ghost Land, first published in book form in America in 1876, is a product of the early Theosophical Society. Its author Emma Hardinge Britten was an English Spiritualist historian who fictionalized aristocratic European acquaintances in the characters of her novel. The forthcoming new edition will review several historical prototypes for the novel's narrator Chevalier Louis de B---, including two new discoveries as well as four previous suggestions. One of these, Prince Emil Wittgenstein, was the cousin of Adelma Von Vay and like her a prominent Spiritualist Theosophist. In this presentation K. Paul Johnson will describe the quest for Chevalier Louis and the mystery surrounding the death of Wittgenstein.

Adelma von Vay is mentioned several times in *Nineteenth Century Miracles*, which became the basis for most summaries about von Vay that we read in later English language texts. *Nineteenth Century Miracles*, published in 1884, discusses the Vays by name; Emma Hardinge Britten's previous book *Ghost Land*, published in 1876, includes elements of Adelma's cousin and husband in the character of its pseudonymous narrator, Chevalier Louis de B---.

The conclusion that *Ghost Land* was predominantly written by Emma herself is inescapable in light of bibliographic evidence, and her authorship of its companion volume *Art Magic*. Britten first alleges that the manuscript was in German, which she had translated by an Americanized German, and a few pages later writes that *Ghost Land* and *Art Magic* were both written in French and English. In the 1876

manuscript Louis is the son of a Hungarian nobleman and his Italian wife, but in the 1872 sketches his father is English and his mother Austrian. Such inconsistencies suggest that Louis is an invention of his alleged editor, but if Louis is primarily Emma Hardinge Britten, the sole author of *Art Magic* and *Ghost Land*, the question remains of Chevalier Louis de B--- as a character related to figures in her past and present social networks. Britten lacked the imagination to invent Louis from whole cloth. She was widely traveled, well-read in the literature, and an opportunist. She therefore must have assembled Louis from piece-parts: but whose?

Ghost Land claims to be a series of autobiographical sketches rather than a novel. The appeal to occult authority based on experience is combined with a refusal by the author to identify himself. Passages that seem more plausibly to be autobiographical cannot all be descriptive of the same individual. Many of the words of Chevalier Louis can be explained as those of Emma Hardinge Britten making her points through a convenient fictional spokesperson. But many passages seem to reflect personal experience, and to the extent that *Ghost Land* is autobiographical, it reveals a remarkable life story of an explorer into unseen worlds from early adolescence. *Ghost Land's* descriptions of adolescent mediums being used in the experiments of occult lodges in the 1830s and 40s is grounded in Britten's own life experience.

The first suggestion of a Louis other than Britten came in the December 7, 1876 *Spiritual Scientist*, in which editor Gerry Brown's review of *Ghost Land* included opening remarks suggesting "It is a singular coincidence that the circumstances therein narrated should correspond so closely to the historical facts concerning the Prince Salm-Salm, a person who has visited this country, is well known in England, and a profound occultist. If he is numbered among Mrs. Britten's friends we name him as the author of '*Ghost Land*' and '*Art Magic*.'"¹ Felix Constantin Alexander Nepomuk, Prince de Salm-Salm (1828-1870) was a Prussian military officer who studied at a military school in Berlin before serving successively in the Prussian, Austrian, and United States armies. While in the United States he married a Vermonter, Agnes Joy, who accompanied him on the Civil War battlefields. After the war they returned to his estate in Germany. He was killed in battle in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian war. Nepomuk's career in the Prussian military and later association with Austria fits some elements of Louis's persona, but there is no evidence that he was an occultist. He could not have collaborated in the writing of *Ghost Land* because he died in 1870. His American wife Agnes had a connection to Cuba, and a recorded interest in Spiritualism, both of which are relevant to Louis.

The second suggested male prototype for Louis came from G. R. S. Mead, prominent Theosophist and secretary to Blavatsky in her London years, who was quoted by A. E. Waite that Louis was the "inner life" of novelist Edward Bulwer Lytton (1803-1873). His obsession with occultism and Rosicrucian lore is most apparent in *Zanoni* (1842) and *A Strange Story* (1870), and Britten named him first among the members of what she called the Orphic Circle. His interest in practical occult experimentation was unrivaled in Victorian England, which lends credibility to Britten's late-in-life revelation of his name.

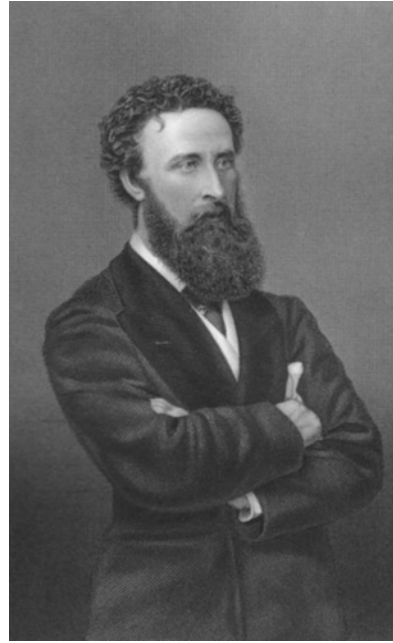
In *Old Diary Leaves*, begun in 1895 while Emma was still alive, Olcott wrote of *Art Magic*, "the book does contain passages worthy of Bulwer-Lytton; in fact, one would say they were written by him..."² Stylistically, *Ghost Land* echoes Bulwer-Lytton more than any other novelist.

¹ "Ghost Land," *Spiritual Scientist*, December 6, 1876, p.145.

² Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, Vol 1, p. 187.



Felix Constantin Alexander Nepomuk,
Prince de Salm-Salm (1828 -1870)



Edward Bulwer Lytton
(1803-1873)

The three candidates for Louis suggested within Emma's lifetime were augmented by only one addition in the twentieth century. In the 1970 edition of *Modern American Spiritualism*, editor E. J. Dingwall proposed the Baron de Palm as the prototype for Louis. Joseph Henry Louis de Palm (1809-1876) is mentioned in *Nineteenth Century Miracles* as a "distinguished supporter of the movement in Germany."³ After recounting a 1861 human levitation in a Vienna church in *Nineteenth Century Miracles*, Britten adds "This remarkable occurrence was also testified of by the late Baron de Palm, who was present on the occasion, and himself related it to the author."⁴

Dingwall concludes "that both *Art Magic* and *Ghost Land* may have been the work of Baron Joseph Henry Louis de Palm, a very odd character with pronounced Theosophical and occult interests, whose funeral Mrs. Britten attended in 1876, and over whose body she pronounced an oration calling him 'friend and companion' ..." Palm's chief claim to historical significance is as first corpse cremated in the United States. Dingwall suggests that "the Baron concealed his gifts with a view of preventing others from knowing what he was compiling under Mrs. Britten's editorship."⁵ Dingwall cites the rumor of Louis as a Civil War veteran, which first appeared in the *Spiritual Scientist*, as evidence in support of the Palm hypothesis. This article called Louis, or rather his prototype "a well-known, distinguished Hungarian Noble and recluse, who served bravely through the late American War..."⁶

De Palm was Bavarian and not a combatant, arriving in America during the Civil War. Hungarian nobility (but not Civil War service) was however represented in Spiritualist and Theosophical circles in the form of Baron Odon Vay de Vaya and his wife Adelma. The Hungarian aspect of Chevalier Louis

³ "Ghost Land," *Spiritual Scientist*, December 6, 1876, p.145.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 33.

⁵ *Modern American Spiritualism*, introduction by Dingwall, p. xvi.

⁶ *Spiritual Scientist*, 12/7/1876, p. 154.



Joseph Henry Louis de Palm
(1809-1876)



Ernest de Bunsen
(1810-1903)

appears to be borrowed from the Vays; no other Austrian or Hungarian acquaintance appears in Britten's nonfiction. Unnoticed by Dingwall but important to consider is that Louis is one of the names de Palm used in America (changed from the original Ludwig), making him the only suggested prototype with whom the name can be linked.

Another three decades elapsed before Robert Mathiesen proposed Ernest de Bunsen (1810-1903) as Louis in a 2001 monograph ... Bunsen was born in Germany but lived mainly in England. Author of several works of Biblical history in English and German, Bunsen was son of a better-known religious scholar, Christian de Bunsen. The greatest problem with Bunsen as prototype for Louis is the same as that of Salm-Salm: zero evidence of contact with Britten or any of her close associates ...

Allowing for contemporary evidence that he was a young man of means, who traveled extensively and was associated closely with Cuba in the 1870s, we might find a source for the sensational material in *Ghost Land* in a young man, known to be a novelist since his teens, and growing up in an occult-saturated household with which Britten was very familiar: namely, the Duc de Medina Pomar, child of Marie, Countess of Caithness. The greatest evidence of a nonfiction basis for Louis is found in the remarkable physical resemblance of the Duc to the alleged portrait of Louis, and the way that portrait is discussed in correspondence with his mother by Britten. Marie was heiress to Cuban sugar plantations, and thereby possessed of vast wealth based on slave labor.

The argument for the Duc as model for Louis rests on the fact that Britten knew him and his mother very well in the early 1870s and 1880s. Britten's only recorded trip to Europe, in the early 1880s, was an extended stay in Paris with Lady Caithness. Pomar and Caithness were in the United States just at the time "Louis de B---" was said to be. Pomar's stylistics (likely those of his mother) are consistent with those in *Ghost Land*. Most intriguingly, the Duc de Pomar bears a likeness to the only image we have of "Louis de B---." The Countess of Caithness provided Olcott with a copy of Britten's letter about the Louis portrait and its origin, in which she writes to the Countess, "I knew it only represented our poor sufferer as he then was, not as he generally appears, still he entreated me to send it as it was for his Madonna (emphasis original) -- as he calls you -- because he had made such a great exertion to have it taken, and only for you."⁷



Duc de Medina Pomar



Portrait of "Louis de B---."



Countess of Caithness

The Russian content of *Ghost Land* might reflect Britten's correspondence with Prince Emil Wittgenstein. The prince is described by Britten as "late aide de camp, and trusted friend to the Emperor Alexander II" who in "a private letter to Mrs. Hardinge Britten, dated 1876," wrote: "The Emperor and most of his household ... are not only Spiritualists in belief, but they would be partisans of the faith, did circumstances permit ... although Spiritualism is known and believed in, alike by peer and peasant, it must be believed in against authority, -- and be assured, my friend, it has a warm place in the hearts of thousands who dare not openly avow their convictions." She continues, "from similar friendly communications from Prince Emil Wittgenstein, the author learned that the late Emperor of Russia possessed the most complete library of Spiritual works that the literature of many nations could supply. This noble gentleman was one of the earliest subscribers to a work translated and edited by the author, entitled '*Art Magic*,' and in an autograph letter addressed to the writer of that work, he declared, "that he esteemed it as his most sacred authority, and carried it everywhere with him."⁸ Born in Darmstadt, Wittgenstein had served Prince Alexander of Hesse in the Caucasus from 1845 through 1847 and then fought in Denmark, but returned to the Caucasus in service to Russia as aide-de-camp to Prince Vorontzov, Viceroy. There he remained until 1862 when he became Attache to Grand Duke Konstantin in Warsaw. Wittgenstein was part of the Emperor's suite during the 1877-78 war with Turkey.⁹ He had been personally acquainted with Blavatsky in their youth, and had renewed correspondence with her during the same years he was writing to Britten.

Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) had been deeply involved in occult circles during his time at Oxford in the early 1840s -- the same circles in which Emma was moving at the time, in which the central figure was Bulwer-Lytton. By 1860 he had become the most celebrated British explorer of the mid-19th century. Burton first met Helena Blavatsky in Cairo in 1853 as he was preparing for his great trip to Mecca; this at least is the claim made by Albert Rawson in a colorful memoir written on the occasion of Burton's death. In his youth, Burton was a soldier renowned for his mastery of languages,

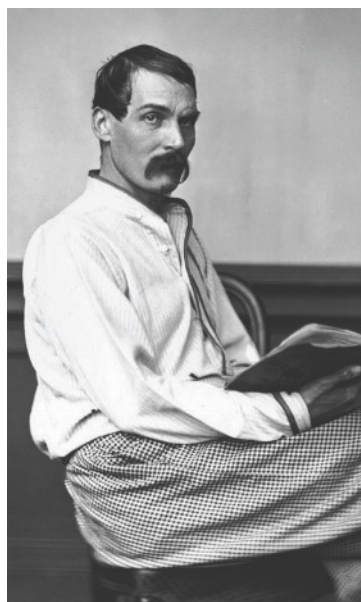
⁷ *Old Diary Leaves*, I:200.

⁸ *Nineteenth Century Miracles*, p. 351.

⁹ *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, I:534.



Prince Emil Wittgenstein
(1824 - 1878)



Sir Richard Francis Burton
(1821-1890)

29 according to one count. In the 1850s his expeditions to Mecca and the source of the Nile produced popular books about his adventures, and he continued to produce vivid travel narratives for the rest of his life, while a British diplomat serving in Asia, Africa, South America, and Europe. More relevantly to Chevalier Louis, Burton was a lifelong enthusiast of astrology and occult lore. Burton, like Emil Wittgenstein, was an honorary founding member of the British Spiritualist Association in 1873, and joined the Theosophical Society later in the decade. Both had provided testimony to the 1869 London Dialectical Society, which also recorded Lady Caithness and Bulwer-Lytton as witnesses. While there is no evidence of collaboration between Britten and Burton, Blavatsky's connection with the explorer was documented by one of her closest associates.

Ghost Land appears to consist of three authorial voices each with a different relationship to Emma. Louis in Part One is a continental male version of Emma and the narrative rests on her own extensive experience in the occult milieu. Some of the personal details were modeled on Pomar, but Britten loses control of her narrative by sometimes forgetting whether she is herself or Louis. Louis in Part Two has matured into a much more masculine character, whose adventures and traits reflect those of Richard Francis Burton. Blavatsky, however, is clearly implicated in the character of a dangerous sorceress who attempts to seduce Louis and later becomes involved with a new sect in India. Among the settings of *Ghost Land*, India and Russia stand out as places of which Britten had no personal, and little general, knowledge. Blavatsky must figure among the influences on the depiction of both countries, since she was in very regular contact with Britten during the simultaneous writing of *Ghost Land* and her *Isis Unveiled*. Blavatsky appears in Part Two of Volume One of *Ghost Land* disguised however not as Louis but as Madame Helene Laval, an evil occult seductress.

In review, we have considered two male Louis candidates nominated in the nineteenth century, Salm-Salm and Bulwer-Lytton, and two proposed more recently, Palm and Bunsen. None of these four had the documented association with Britten found with two additional names proposed here, Pomar and Wittgenstein. We find seven Louis prototypes, but one author of *Ghost Land*. Traits of European aristo-

cratic Spiritualists involved with the early Theosophical Society are found reflected in *Ghost Land* in a scrambled fashion. The common thread linking Palm, Wittgenstein, Caithness, and Pomar as influences on *Ghost Land* is that they were all Spiritualist European nobility who were active in the origins of the Theosophical Society, and common acquaintances of Britten and Blavatsky. Burton, if not a nobleman, was a diplomat acquainted with both Britten and Blavatsky, and all three had some early involvement with Bulwer-Lytton. Louis and his adventures partake of most and perhaps all these Britten colleagues. Yet the person among all these individuals who was in daily contact with Britten during the writing of *Ghost Land* was Helena Blavatsky who probably had as great an influence on the Chevalier's creation as any of the male prototypes.