

Ethel the Bankrupt Portrait Painter

A Genealogical Detective Story

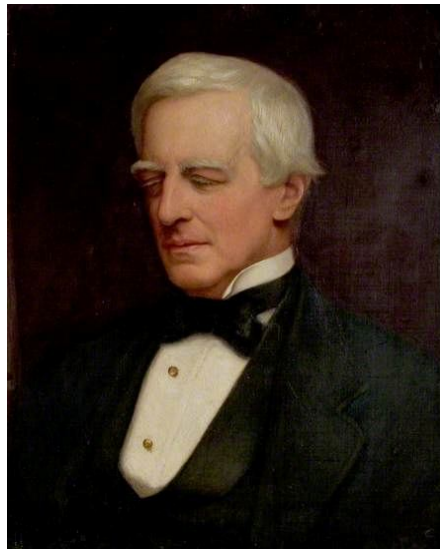
While wool-gathering in the PRO I came across the Bankruptcy files in the Board of Trade archive. They are indexed, which is a honeytrap for the genealogist. I picked on BT226/14, which told a fascinating and juicy story about a lady portraitist in financial straits over a hundred years ago. I was able to pull together a very varied set of resources to find myself a previously totally unknown relative. It was also quite enthralling to discover, not for the first time, just how much one can find out about the character and history of someone who has been gone from us a very long time.

The lady in question was Ethel Mortlock. According to the PRO file, her clientèle of sitters included members of the aristocracy and European nobility and included, by her account, the Shah of Persia (1900) and the 'Chinese Ambassador', Li Hung Chang (who was actually the Chinese Viceroy), à propos which sitting the *Sketch* published an illustrated interview with Ethel in August 1896. Ethel was thought pretty grand by the American papers who reported that Chang had to go to her studio for sittings in 1896 rather than she wait upon him. He brought her a roll of silk and a white jade palette as presents. Li Hung Chang was a pretty big cheese; his wife had two thousand servants waiting on her. The Chatham, NY, Courier reported that Ethel had painted every Ambassador who had come to London.

These last clients, allegedly by failing to pay the £1000 charged for their portraits, landed Ethel in trouble. They were, of course, conveniently unavailable to the bankruptcy commissioners so this sob-story could not be checked. Strapped for cash she was caught out when the executors of a racehorse owner called Edward Overall Bleakley found, in his effects, IOUs for hundreds of pounds (Bleakley had bequeathed his own portrait by Ethel to Manchester Infirmary [*Daily News*, 1.8.98]). Ethel went to court, claiming that these were offset by painting commissions, but the court found against her and she was told to pay up. Now saddled with legal costs, she was caught again when Captain Noel Hoare, her man of business, died and it was found that he had mortgaged to Hoare's Bank, without her knowledge (she said), three properties in Sloane Street that she had been building. She tried to buy back one of these but lost a £500 deposit when she could not complete, making a bad situation rather worse. Bleakley's executors now broke her and her examination in bankruptcy in 1901 can be read in the PRO as above. Her troubles were attributed to extravagance and betting - the Bleakley IOUs were assumed to be in fact gambling debts and the creditors now included all sorts of tradesmen and the Hotel Cecil where Ethel was then living, presumably in some style. She did not help herself by claiming an income of £250 p.a. when individual commissions were on her own account at the £1000 mark as above, meaning that the Chinese and Persian portraits alone would have occupied her last eight years and she would have obtained these prestigious commissions at the age of 18 (she gave her age as 26). Faced by the raised eyebrows of her superiors in mental arithmetic Ethel then upped her declared usual income to a still rather modest £800. She claimed to keep no sort of cash book, accounts, or any memoranda. Proceedings closed with Ethel declared bankrupt and a number of people out of pocket; the settlement was at 7/6 in the pound. Ethel went back to her easel. Some financial aspects seem never to have been sorted out; funds in Chancery relating to her, Hoare and Bleakley were still being recorded in the *London Gazette* every few years at least up to 1938; maybe the

potential legal costs of recovery outweighed the likely gains.

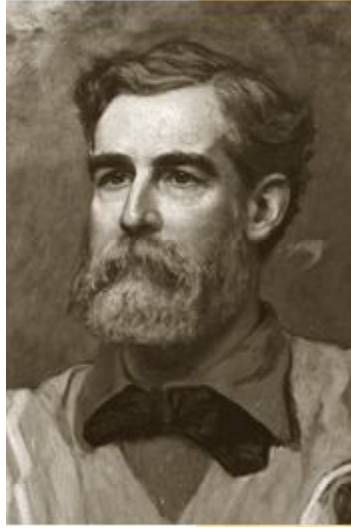
So who was she? She claimed to be born in Cambridge; she appears never to have married. The 1881 census had not heard of her - she may have been in the United States at that time. However, standard works about Victorian painters, such as the Antique Collectors' Club *Dictionary of British Artists* (Johnson & Greutzner, 1976) and their *Dictionary of Victorian Painters* (C Wood, 2nd edition, 1978) tell us that she was a pupil of Sir William Orchardson (who came to London in 1863) and that by 1904 she had exhibited 29 works at the Royal Academy. I have listed these, usually prestigious, sitters, who included Don Carlos (Duke of Madrid), the Duchess of Wellington and the Earl of Ashburnham, as a footnote to this article. They cannot have been by any means her whole output; surely not all her clients would have agreed to being hung in public nor perhaps to spare the work they had paid for from their own and their families' walls. There may also have been works submitted to the R.A. which did not appeal to the Hanging Committee, such as her 1885 portrait of Colonel Burnaby. But to get in year after year bespeaks considerable ability; she was clearly competent with her brush if not at accountancy.



Robert Lowe, 1st Viscount Sherbrooke by Ethel Mortlock, 1878, from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/the-right-honourable-robert-lowe-18111892-viscount-sherbro47033>

Her portrait of the albino-complexioned Robert Lowe, 1st (and only) Viscount Sherbrooke, held by Nottingham Castle Museum, was executed in 1878 when Ethel was later said to have been only 16 - evidence of a remarkable talent if this were true, particularly as the painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy and in 1880 at the Walker gallery in Liverpool [see the *Liverpool Mercury*, 5.10.1880]. Sherbrooke himself left the painting to his wife and then to the Council of the University of London but there was some dispute over this legacy [*Pall Mall Gazette*, 6.10.92].

Not only did she achieve exhibition at the R.A., sometimes her work was singled out for comment by *The Times*. A monochrome portrait by Ethel of George Earl Church, a celebrated explorer of South America, (now held by Brown University in New England) and her portrait of Don Carlos were described in 1883 as 'strong portraits'.



George Earl Church, monochrome, oil on canvas, 125.7 x 74.9 cm, undated. Held by Brown University.
[from http://www.brown.edu/Facilities/University_Library/libs/hay/collections/church.html]

In 1888 her portrayals of William C Endicott, the US Secretary for War and of Colonel Coxon were described as ‘good likenesses painted with much power’ and were exhibited following a ‘prolonged visit to the United States’ [*Glasgow Herald*, 26.3.88]. Works not shown by the RA include an 1887 portrait of Mary Endicott (later Mrs Joseph Chamberlain) that can now be seen in the Glen Magna Farms mansion in Maine (this titbit emerged serendipitously from googling on the internet).

The Church and Endicott works suggest that Ethel may have spent her American time seeking clients in New England. Her commissions also included a portrait of the Irish-American rancher John Adair (d.1885), which work is now in the Panhandle-Plains Museum in Canyon, Texas, and has a note on its back of her name and gives her address as 122 Sloane Street.



Mary Endicott by Ethel Mortlock [from <http://www.glenmagnafarms.org/gm/drawingroom.html>]

The timing of the various portraits of Americans rather suggests more than one visit to the US; but one also has to take in to account the possibility of sketches being brought home and worked up into portraits without the sitter. One catch is that mostly we have no idea what the sitters really looked like, Ethel's reputation for accuracy rests on the accuracy of her reputation and Royal Academy standing.



Arthur Wellesley, 2nd Duke of Wellington, by Ethel Mortlock (Gloversville public library, contributed by Barbara Madonna)

A portrait of the 2nd Duke hangs in Gloversville public library NY, probably commissioned by his friend, the library's founder Elder Levi Parsons. A date on the frame says 1885; the Duke died in 1884; I wonder if it may have been painted in the US from a photograph.



Elder Levi Parsons by Ethel Mortlock (Gloversville public library, contributed by Barbara Madonna)

Also not recorded in the Royal Academy list, but mentioned in *A Dictionary of Portrait Painters Up To 1920* is a portrait of the (2nd or 3rd?) Duke of Wellington which is believed to be one of the

earliest portraits of a sitter smoking a cigarette, which hangs in Stratfield Saye.



HH Abu Bakar, Sultan of Johore, by Ethel Mortlock ca. 1891 <http://www.royalark.net/Malaysia/johor14.htm>

Another exotic sitter had been the Sultan of Johore, who had visited England in 1891.



Lady Godiva by Ethel Mortlock [from <http://www.artcult.com/nn8.htm>]

As a 21st century price guide, her rather crestfallen 'Lady Godiva' was on offer on the internet for \$5,000 - \$20,000. She could paint horses, too. However at auction in 2005 this work went unsold.



Edward S. Mostyn Pryce by Ethel Mortlock, 1892, from www.artnet.com/artist/622576/ethel-mortlock.htmlmortlock.html

A portrait of Edward S. Mostyn Pryce in a panelled interior, three-quarter length, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 inches, not in her RA list, fetched £550 in 2007; the catalogue states (tantalisingly!) that 'family records show the artist was paid £130 for this picture on October 7th, 1892'.



Martha Davis by Ethel Mortlock, 1892, from the catalogue of Clars Auction gallery, Oakland 2007

That her 1904 oil of Martha Davis fetched only \$120 when sold in 2005 (and \$30, unframed, in 2007) reflects want of glamour in the sitter as well as the fact that Ethel was clearly having an off day.



Baroness von Schork by Ethel Mortlock, ?1900s, from www.artnet.com/artist/622576/ethel-mortlock.html

Ethel's artistic and social stars usually shone more brightly in the Edwardian high noon of Society, for instance in a portrait of Baroness von Schork (sold in New York in 1993 for \$1300), and were at apogee when the Prince of Wales sat (or rather stood) for her in 1926.

This last work, which can be dated roughly from the appearance of the Prince, gives the lie (see also below) to the statement too often repeated on the internet that she died in 1904. It is painted on board and is a rather odd elongated shape; why, I don't know.

Genealogically, however, Ethel turned out to be a tantalisingly elusive bird. I determined to try and paint a word picture of her.

The 1901 census did have an entry for her, differentiating her by age (31) and occupation from my immediate suspect, Ethel Hope Mortlock, daughter of Charles Anthony Mortlock of the Mortlock family of china and glass merchants, who was born in Caxton, Cambridgeshire in 1876. However there was no GRO birth record for a suitable Ethel for 1870 nor for many years either side of that. Now a chance to spend some time slumped over a hot computer availed itself, and I signed up for a fortnight's free trial of Ancestry.com's UK databases. This produced an entry in the 1891 census and there she was, living in London at a fashionable address, unmarried and head of a household consisting of her and her younger brother John (23) and sister Paula (18), who turned out to be a female equivalent of a *deus ex machina*.

Ethel had, in her artistic way, knocked at least five years off her age both for those investigating her bankruptcy and for the 1901 census taker, for in 1891 she gave her age as 26 implying a birth date in 1864 or early 1865. She could hardly offer less or her brother and sister would not have fitted in convincingly. However she had achieved a Royal Academy hanging in 1878, by which time, in order to obtain the associated commission, she must have well completed her studies. This must push her date of birth back to the late 1850s - still without any trace in the GRO births indexes. Her game is given away by a passenger list which shows her arriving in New York from Bremen in January 1887 and which gives her year of birth as 1853. 13.5.1887 the *District of*

Columbia Critic-Record reported Ethel on her way to New York to paint Queen Espiolani (whoever she was) before that lady sailed for England. 7.6.1887 the *New York Herald* reported Ethel 'back from New York' to Washington where she had spent a few months 'with her brother'. Ethel's brother John was described as having 'private means' which, for him to live in Sloane Street, would surely have been substantial. So, also considering the likely cost of Ethel's top-flight artistic pupillage, whatever family she came from must have been pretty well off.

The Royal Academy Exhibitors list allows Ethel's addresses to be traced, at least in part. In 1878 she was in Thistle Grove, SW10 which runs off the Brompton Road towards Chelsea. By 1884 she was at 122, Sloane Street, where she was at home to the census taker seven years later. By 1900 she had moved into the Cecil Hotel off Sloane Square and, her hotel bill presumably unpaid, moved the next year to 46a, Pall Mall. In fact in December 1887 the *Blackburn Standard* reported that she was 'not in America' but in Sloane Street, 'working hard .. for the 1888 Exhibition'.



Sir Walter Lowry Buller by Ethel Mortlock, 1904 (a better reproduction can be seen at: <http://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/imagepopup.aspx?width=640&height=640&irn=83284&mode=zoom&title=Portrait+of+Sir+Walter+Buller&ack=>)

Another portrait by Ethel was of Sir Walter Lowry Buller, the celebrated New Zealand ornithologist which is now in the NZ Museum in Wellington



Brigadier General Mackenzie-Stuart by Ethel Mortlock ca.1917

Ethel clearly continued working through the Great War as evidenced by her portrait of Brigadier General Mackenzie-Stuart in which he is wearing the War Medal but not the Victory Medal. Her hand is as firm as ever (she also painted his brother).



Edward, Prince of Wales by Ethel Mortlock, 1926, from www.artnet.com/artist/622576/ethel-mortlock.html

The last work of hers that I have been able to discover (that of the Prince of Wales) seems to date to 1926.

A correspondent had long since sent me a third-hand copy of a letter written in 1935 by Frederick Percy Finch Rawlins, born in 1865 and a great-grandson, by Frederick Cheetham Mortlock's daughter Sarah, of one of my four-greats grandfathers, John Mortlock the Cambridge banker and long-time mayor and sometime MP for that town. Rawlins had written that when he was a child his father had to go to Bristol to place in school some Misses Mortlock from Jamaica. These were, plausibly, offspring of various irregular liaisons of the descendants of one of Frederick Cheetham's sons, Frederick William, who was a great chum of his Rawlins cousin to whose family (Rawlins junior relates) he regularly despatched guavas and other exotic goodies. I suspected this line of descent because a legitimate descendant of Frederick William had told me that Frederick William had married late (in about 1870, when he would have been aged 58) after siring various children out of wedlock. This correspondent, a grandson of one of the four legitimate children fathered by the ageing Frederick William before his death in 1878, had met one of these 'cousins' in Jamaica, where Frederick William had been 'buried' in the Jamaica Customs for many years. However what the family recorded as a burial was actually quite a lively existence. Frederick William was also a planter with a large estate near Montego Bay and clearly, from other remarks by this correspondent, well off. The details of his will which were given to me, albeit second-hand, suggested that his informal dependents had been financially provided for separately from his willed estate which divided his plantation between his four legitimate children. This fitted with another entry from 1891 which produced his wife, as a widow; Irish mother-in-law; and two sons and a daughter - all this last three born in Jamaica - living in Chiswick. The location fitted my being told that the younger of these sons (my informant's grandfather) had attended St Paul's School. There were now rather more bits of this genealogical jigsaw on the table the right way up than on the carpet face down.

Back to Rawlins' letter. Rawlins continued that some years 'before' (i.e. before 1935) there was living in London a Miss Mortlock who painted miniatures, who was said to come from the West Indies. Ethel having obfuscated (to put it mildly) with her creditors and adjusted her age to suit her image, it would be unsurprising if she felt it would help her credibility to come from Cambridge rather than from Jamaica. Might she have justified this little fib to herself by her original family being indeed Cambridge Mortlocks? That would make her my second cousin three times removed. No chance I would give up the hunt now!

Paula then reappeared as Paula Marie L Mortlock, getting married in 1897. I felt emboldened to splash out on a copy of her marriage lines. She married - fashionably and not inexpensively I should think - in St James', Westminster to the medical student son of a doctor.

The 'L' stood for 'Lane'. I have yet to penetrate the significance of this.

Paula gave her father's identity as William Henry Frederick Mortlock, gentleman, deceased. Her father had died while she was young, and although financially provided for she would hardly have been brought up in his marital home; so exact knowledge of his forenames and their order might well elude her. As it is, although his siblings' baptisms are all recorded in the parish register of St Edward's, Cambridge, Frederick William's is not, so the record I have, from anecdotal sources, could well be the one in error; his father had brothers William and Henry who could both have been eponymous. I rest my case. Ethel was a lost, but unacknowledged, member of the Mortlock

banking family. I had acquired a new relation - three, in fact, including John and Paula.

As an aside, the Mortlocks descended from Frederick Cheetham Mortlock include a number of rather wild eccentrics. I put this down to his wife, Sarah Finch, who had a quality which came out in various ways in several of her descendants - a conviction that they were right and everyone else was wrong or at least being unreasonable (it was as if she was one of those people who seem to have been born with no brakes). This was certainly the case with John Frederick Mortlock who ended up being transported to Australia in 1843, for the attempted murder of his uncle (in front of a witness!).

Ethel's rather detached attitude to inconvenient facts seems to make her a candidate for two Mortlock tales from Ireland. On 1.11.1889 *Freeman's Journal* of Dublin reported on a Miss Mortlock living at Coolkerragh near Londonderry who was being sued for allegedly not handing over a statue of the Earl of Bristol after someone had paid 30s for it at auction. *Freeman's* was back on 20.9.98 with a 'Miss Mortlock, a London lady' who was fined 5s for not paying for her ferocious looking bulldog, Grimshaw, to accompany her on the ferry at Londonderry. After studying Ethel's late history these stories have her shadow right across them.

As a final twist, a member of the (unrelated, although they believed and indeed one of them published to the contrary) family of the William Mortlock who was Chapel Clerk of Emmanuel College, Cambridge - and, confusingly, a contemporary of the William who was Frederick Cheetham's brother - told me that one Willie Mortlock, adopted son of Charles William Clifford Rix Mortlock of the Chapel Clerk family, always maintained that he, Willie, had an 'aunt' who painted and who had exhibited at the Royal Academy. Willie was allegedly born in Blackpool in April 1892 but to whom, or why there, is not the subject of any available record. Ethel was certainly no stranger to the North; she had exhibited in Manchester City Art Gallery and in the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool. Equally I can see that registering a birth would have seemed an unnecessary piece of bureaucracy to a free spirit like her, let alone an embarrassment. I incline to the idea that Willie's 'aunt' was actually his mother, and that Richard Parker Mortlock (above), a useful man of business, may have helped with the associated arrangements.

Ethel's eventual fate is as obscure as her birth; the reference books' statement that she died in 1928 are not supported by the GRO, nor did she leave an English will; perhaps she died abroad, somewhere like France which was cheaper, and famously hospitable to artists; or, as above, in Ireland? On 15.6.1912 she is recorded as arriving in England from Buenos Aires aboard RMS *Araguaya*; she is thus probably the anonymous female Mortlock who went out to BA in 1911. So somehow she was surviving and had enough money to get about. In a way I'm happy never to know what this cousin of mine looked like; I can picture her as that tantalisingly saucy lady artist Marie-Louise Vigée le Brun whose self-portrait hangs in Ickworth, right in the heart of 'Mortlock Country'. Some letters of Ethel's written between 1917 & 1919 are in the Bliss archive at Harvard [HUGFP 76.8 Box 32], but therefore beyond the reach of an amateur armchair genealogist in England. The final mention that I have found so far points to her still painting portraits, very successfully, in 1926 (as above).

See also:

www.findartinfo.com/search/showitem~price~763486~name~A_Portrait_Of_Miss_Martha_Davis.asp, 3.10.2006

www.artnet.de/artist/622576/ethel-mortlock.html, 3.10.2006, re the Prince of Wales. NB internet references like this can be fugitive.

Harvard University, papers of Robert Wood BLISS, diplomat and collector of pre-Columbian art; 1914-17 HUGFP 76.8, Box 32

New York Times, 2.9.1896 and <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&d=CHP18961014.2.18>

re the Li Hung Chang portrait.

American Art World Vol XVIII No.37 July 17 1920

© RJH Griffiths, Havant 2000-14
griffithsrobert at hotmail.com

This is an updated version of my article in the September 2006 issue of Family Tree Magazine.

The full list of portraits which Ethel exhibited at the Royal Academy is as follows:

- 1878 Rt Hon Robert Lowe MP [& see *Times*, 4.5.1878]
- 1879 Robert Watson Esq.
- 1880 HE the Baron de Penedo, Brazilian Minister
- 1882 Sir George Balfour KCB MP; Captain Alexander Etholen, Royal Indian Marine
- 1883 HRH Don Carlos, Duke of Madrid; Col. GE Church, South American explorer
- 1884 Lewis Vyvian Lloyd Esq., Grenadier Guards; Captain C Noel Hoare RN (see text)
- 1885 Violet & Daisy, twin daughters of Capt. Eyre Crabbe, Grenadier Guards
- 1886 Sir Edward James Reed KCB MP (commissioned by the Royal Engineers) [*Daily News* 21.1.86]
- 1886 CD Willard Esq.
- 1887 Hon. Algernon G Tollemache; The Earl of Ashburnham; Norman Lampson Esq.
- 1888 Hon. William C Endicott, US Secretary for War 1885-9; Colonel Coxon
- 1889 Gen. Viscount Wolseley KP GCB etc.(also exhib. York Corporation Art Gallery 1893)
- 1892 The Duchess of Wellington; Sir John Farnaby Leonard Bt.
- 1893 EO Bleakley Esq. (see text)
- 1895 George Cookson Esq.; Mrs George Cookson
- 1896 Mrs Gladys Bond
- 1899 Mrs Doris Green
- 1900 Joyce, daughter of Hanson Dodwell Esq.
- 1901 James Crossman Esq.
- 1903 Lady Storey
- 1904 Sir Walter Lowry Buller KCMG FRS, ornithologist

also (not exhibited):

- 1883 Abraham Hayward
- 1885? The 2nd Duke of Wellington *
- 1885 Colonel Frederick Gustavus Burnaby
- 1887 Queen Espiolani (?)
- 1887 John George 'Jack' Adair (see <http://www.pagegangster.com/p/duhhk/95/>)
- 1888? Admiral Sir Edward Inglefield and 'several American senators' [*Blackburn Standard*]
- 1891? HH Abu Bakar, Sultan of Johor
- 1892 Edward S. Mostyn Pryce
- 1893 Colonel Cuthbert Larking (exhib. York Corporation Art Gallery)
- *Elder Levi Parsons, first Supreme Court Judge of San Francisco (and friend of the 2nd D o W above)
- 1896 Li Hung Chang
- 1897 John Russell (Kent agriculturalist)
- 1900 The Shah of Persia * on exhibition at Gloversville library, NY
- 1904 Miss Martha Davis (My thanks to Barabara Madonna for sending me copies of these)
- 1900s Baroness von Schork
- ca 1915-18 Brigadier General Donald Mackenzie-Stuart late R Scots Fusiliers
- 1917 Mrs Robert W Bliss
- 1920 William Conover (posthumously for his mother)
- 1920s Major General Sir Andrew Stuart late RE
- 1925 Dr Mary McKibben Harper of Chicago, painted in London , exhib. Paris Salon
[*Berkeley Daily Gazette*, 19.5.1926]
- 1926 HRH Edward Prince of Wales

Undated so far:

- Marshal Joffre
- The Prince du Croy
- Baron Pichon