

Harry Houdin

“The Great Polynational Mimic”

Tom Interval

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San Diego

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the name of one magician has captured the public’s imagination more than any other: Harry Houdini.

But this booklet isn’t about him.

Instead, this short work will explore the life and career of a virtually unknown entertainer who was born decades before the legendary escape artist and whose name was almost identical: Harry Houdin, a magical, musical jack of all trades known in the 1860s as “The Great Polynational Mimic.”

Who is this Houdin? And what is a “Polynational Mimic”? I’ll answer these questions in a moment. First, a little background.

The man you’re about to meet had an exceedingly short career and didn’t leave much of a historical trail. In fact, I came upon his name purely by accident. As a longtime Houdini enthusiast (that’s Houdini, with an “i”), I’ve done lots of reading and research on the man and even created a website about him. In early 2012, a question occurred to me: Did anyone else possess the name Harry Houdini before our self-liberating hero escaped from his mother’s womb in 1874?

It was a long shot, but I double-checked my magic library and searched several online newspaper databases. I came up empty, with the exception of Harry Houdin—a name I initially thought was a typo. Of course, that typo turned out to be a real man. And the more I read about him, the more I came to appreciate just how versatile a performing artist he was.

With that realization, I thought others might want to read about him, too, so I decided to write a short blog, which quickly transformed into an article, then ultimately into this booklet. To my knowledge, no one has written about Houdin, probably because they haven't heard of him or because there are countless other obscure magicians whose lives could be considered more interesting. But even the moderately engaging super-unknowns have their stories. Such is the case with Harry Houdin.

Houdin, born Martin Harry Dignam in 1830, possibly in Roscommon, Ireland,¹ claimed to be the nephew of Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, a pioneering French conjurer of the 19th century. Although a doubtful claim, Houdin forged a solid reputation with the name, touring Australia and New Zealand between 1860 and 1863 with a one-man variety act featuring everything from drawing-room magic to international impersonations done to song and dance (the "Polynational Mimic" part of the show).



*Harry Houdin
Polynational Entertainer No.
1863*

Harry Houdin in 1863, age 33

Drawing-Room Magic

Houdin devoted the first part of his act to magic, which included a variety of card tricks, the restoration of a burned handkerchief, and the production of plumes, a large ball, and other objects from a hat. But the pièce de résistance was the Inexhaustible Bottle trick, popularized in

previous years by Scottish magician John Henry Anderson and Houdin's supposed uncle, Robert-Houdin.

In this trick, Houdin poured from one bottle any drinks requested by audience members—rum, brandy, wine, even milk. “As a magician, Mr. Houdin is perhaps superior to any person who has ever before appeared before a Wellington audience,” wrote one reviewer. “The ‘Inexhaustible Bottle’ was truly worthy of its title.”²

The “Celebrated Gun Trick”

The bottle trick, still performed to this day, is a great one. However, Houdin supposedly performed an even more spectacular illusion at the Royal Victoria Theatre in Bathurst, New South Wales, Australia: the “celebrated GUN TRICK,” which he listed in a local newspaper ad promoting an upcoming show.³ Although there was no description to go along with the trick's title, the ad probably referred to the infamous bullet-catch illusion, in which an audience member fires a gun at the performer, who catches the bullet in his hand or between his teeth. Back then, as is the case today, only a handful of magicians featured the bullet catch, whose origin dates back to the 16th century.

But did Houdin really perform the feat?

While poring over more than 170 news articles, reviews, and ads published in the course of his three-year tour, I saw only two brief mentions of the “gun trick”: in the ad previously cited and in a short paragraph in a newspaper announcing the same show at the Royal Victoria Theatre. But even the latter barely mentioned the illusion, emphasizing, instead, the bottle trick: “He will give his first display this evening, and in addition to the celebrated gun trick, will introduce his wonderful bottle to the immediate notice of the audience, having promised to allow them to examine it after all have been served with part of its contents.”⁴

The following year, another reviewer observed that the “[m]ost noticeable amongst [Houdin's magic tricks] was the inexhaustible bottle...”⁵ Considering the strong effect the gun trick had (and has) on audiences, it certainly would have been more “noticeable” than the bottle trick and earned at least an honorable mention, let alone the praise it likely would have deserved.

So it seems Houdin probably did not perform the bullet catch unless he did it on earlier tours, of which I can find no records. Perhaps he planned on doing the trick, then ultimately decided against it because of its inherent risks. Or maybe he performed another kind of “celebrated gun trick” that didn’t inspire a review.

Musical Mimicry

The magic portion of Houdin’s act was just a warm-up compared to parts two and three, which offered “Polynational Entertainment,” as he called it. During these parts of the show, Houdin, who sometimes advertised himself as “The Greatest Mimic of the Age,” revealed his incredible versatility as an actor, comedian, singer, dancer, and musician, mimicking the dialect and mannerisms of 11 fictional characters representing England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, France, Switzerland, China, and the United States—all while rapidly changing costumes to suit the different cultures and personalities.

“We wondered how he would appear in his first character,” wrote a reviewer about Houdin’s performance at the Oatlands Hotel in Tasmania, Australia, “he looking to be a hearty old man explaining the circumstances under which he would bring the various characters to the notice of the audience. We had certainly not long to wonder or to wait, for suddenly, and before almost anyone knew he had done speaking, he made his appearance in the character of a Swiss girl, endeavoring in the most characteristic and winning manner to persuade the people ‘to buy a broom.’”⁶

Colorful characters, such as the “hearty old man” (Old Father Time) and Swiss broom girl previously cited, were popular with his audiences and earned him several positive reviews like this one: “He is evidently an actor of versatile genius, and throws his whole soul into the different characters he performs.”⁷

Houdin concluded his act with “Brother Bones,” a black character who presented “Root Hog, or Die; or the Negro’s Delight,” in which he played several instruments, including the guitar, tin whistle, piano, and concertina. “In the negro entertainment, Mr. Houdin exhibits the same high talent and ability [as he did earlier in the act], and gets about the stage in dance and song with amazing alacrity,”⁸ wrote one reviewer.

Of course, like any performer, Houdin received some reviews that weren't so complimentary: "Sam Slick, the original Yankee pedlar, would have been better appreciated if Mr. Houdin articulated his words more distinctly. Rapidity of utterance, combined with clearness, is not the forte of Mr. Houdin—and consequently most of the points in this character were entirely lost."⁹

Wrote another reviewer: "He next appears as a 'jolly tar' then as 'Molly Muldroon,' which character, however, we did not like, and would recommend its being reserved for only occasional use."¹⁰ And one reviewer had this advice for Houdin: "We would suggest as an improvement, the using for half an hour before the next performance of a tuning hammer on the pianoforte. Last night the unfortunate instrument uttered sounds sufficiently doleful to disturb the spirit of the late Mr Broadwood, whose name we noticed was affixed to the instrument."¹¹

Although Houdin performed solo, he worked with other musicians, such as T. White, identified in some newspapers as a pianist and Houdin's music director. White played the piano during intermissions and accompanied Houdin as he sang and danced. Other accompanists included a Mr. Meyers, Miss F. Rooke, and Mr. Chandos.

New Advertisements.

ENTERTAINMENT EXTRAORDINARY!

at the
ODD-FELLOWS' HALL,
on
SATURDAY, MONDAY, TUESDAY, & THURSDAY
next, 6th, 8th, 9th, and 11th June.

HARRY HOUDIN,
the
GREAT POLYNATIONAL MIMIC
(Nephew to the celebrated RONNEY HOUDIN),
in his extraordinary delineations of NATIONAL
CHARACTERISTICS!

PART I.

Mr. H. M. HOUDIN, in his much-admired POLY-
NATIONAL ENTERTAINMENT.

Introductory Lecture Mr. HOUDIN.
Drawing-room Magic Tricks, including
the Inexhaustible Bottle Mr. HOUDIN.

An Interval of Ten Minutes.

PART II.

Mr. H. M. HOUDIN'S POLYNATIONAL MIMIC
ENTERTAINMENT, in Two Parts.

The Entertainment has been written, and the Music
arranged, expressly for Mr. HOUDIN; and in it he
appears in the Costumes of the various Countries,
Sings in their Languages, and Imitates their Man-
ners, Dances, Vocal and Instrumental Music, &c.,
making his Changes of Costume, &c., in an incredi-
bly short space of time, and to the astonishment
and admiration of every person. His identity de-
fies the strictest scrutiny.

Old Father Time (a great Polyn-
national Lover), Song—"Let us be
happy together" H. M. HOUDIN.

Mademoiselle Schwingenbubler (a
Swiss Broom Girl), Song—"Buy
a Broom" H. M. HOUDIN.

Tim Fum (a Chinese Professional
Singer) H. M. HOUDIN.

John Bowling (a real specimen of
the Jolly Tar, who can ring a
good Song, and dance a Horn-
pipe), Song—"A Life on the
Ocean Wave" H. M. HOUDIN.

Molly Muldroom (Sweetheart to John
and Sister to Paddy Muldroom, a
wonderful Songster, and a very
graceful Dancer, with several
Songs) H. M. HOUDIN.

Monsieur Baudin (a Teacher of the
Torpacheyren Art), Song—"Mur-
cellaise Hymn," in French H. M. HOUDIN.

Sam Slick (the original Yankee Pad-
lar) H. M. HOUDIN.

An Interval of Ten Minutes.

Mr. H. HOUDIN will appear in the Third Part of
his POLYNATIONAL ENTERTAINMENT.

PART III.

Susan Brown (an English House-
maid), with Song—"That Young
Man from the Country" H. M. HOUDIN.

Larry Doolin (Dublin Car Driver),
with Song—"Hungry Army" H. M. HOUDIN.

Paddy Muldroom (an Irish Turf-
man), with Song—"Black Turf" H. M. HOUDIN.

To conclude with

BROTHER BONES!

in which Mr. HOUDIN will appear in
Root Hog, on Dix; on THE NEGRO'S DELIGHT.
And give various Solos on the Guitar, Tin
Whistle, Piano, and Concertina,
and the

AMERICAN BREAKDOWN, by H. M. HOUDIN.

ADMISSION:—Reserved Seats, 5s.; Back Seats, 3s.
Doors open at half-past Seven; to commence at
Eight o'clock.

T. W. JACKSON,
Agent.

Dance Challenges

Every now and then, Houdin would accept challenges from local residents to dance with him onstage after his act. The winner, determined by a panel of judges, received a monetary prize.

For example, in June 1863, a man named Alex Mitchell challenged Houdin to the Ghillie Callum (also spelled, Gillie Callum), a Scottish solo sword dance in which each contestant, in full costume, had to skillfully bob around two crossed broadswords without touching them. Mitchell went first, performing perfectly. However, Houdin “proceeded with too much confidence, and very shortly struck the swords twice, whereupon the umpires decided in favor of Mitchell,”¹² who won £50 for his efforts.

Houdin staged at least some of these challenges to promote his upcoming performances. In one instance, Houdin convinced a man under false pretenses to dance against him for a prize of £20. The man was Corporal John Casey, who agreed to the charade because Houdin told him the performance would benefit the Brisbane School of Arts in Queensland, Australia, where the challenge would take place. On the day of the performance, Casey learned from Houdin’s billsticker that the show was not actually a benefit, so he told him to tell Houdin he wouldn’t show up.

That evening, Houdin performed up to the moment the contest was supposed to begin, then told a disappointed audience Casey was too inebriated to participate. After the local paper reported this, an infuriated Casey wrote a published letter to the paper’s editor explaining his side of the story. “[H]e goes on performing until the audience grew impatient for the dance, and he then excuses himself by trying to throw the blame on me by uttering a downright falsehood.”¹³

A couple of years before the previous two challenges took place, a man named Kirk supposedly challenged Houdin to dance three separate “movements” for a prize of £10.¹⁴ I found no further mentions of this particular challenge.

Life, Interrupted

During his tour, Houdin sustained at least a few injuries in different ways. Fortunately, none of them ended up being more than brief interruptions.

In June 1861, he was thrown from his horse and injured seriously enough to incur “heavy medical and other expenses.”¹⁵ Evidently, he was well enough to perform a week later at the Prince of Wales Theatre in Bathurst, New South Wales, Australia.

About 16 months later, during a performance at the Theatre Royal in Hobart, Tasmania, Australia, he sprained his left ankle and fell.¹⁶ This might have set him back for a while because his next definitively recorded performance didn’t occur for another 19 days. There were a couple of planned performances in between, but I couldn’t find any records to confirm they actually took place.

The following year, on August 9, 1863, Houdin was a passenger in a boat transporting several people from the Lady Bird steamboat to the New Plymouth, New Zealand, shore. Rough waters caused the vessel to capsize, killing one passenger.¹⁷ Although Houdin was rescued along with the other survivors, it’s not clear whether or not he was injured. If he was, the injuries weren’t serious enough to prevent him from performing five days later at Brunswick Hall in Auckland. Houdin performed at least 12 more shows through the remainder of August until mid September.

Retirement from Show Business

Records of Houdin performing after September 19, 1863, don’t seem to exist, so it’s possible he retired from show business altogether. Although one report claimed Houdin wanted to move to Gaynduh, Queensland, Australia, to teach dancing, singing, and instrumental music,¹⁸ I found no evidence to support that.

However, sometime between 1863 and 1864, Houdin and his wife, Martha, who accompanied him on various schooners during the tour,¹⁹ settled in New Plymouth, Taranaki, New Zealand, on upper Brougham St. in a home worth about £1,150 (appraised in 1870, about a year after Houdin’s death).²⁰ We know very little about Mrs. Houdin, a native of Wales, except that she married a man named Richard Rundle a couple years after Houdin died and that she lived to the age of 95. There are no records to indicate whether or not the Houdins had children.

During his time in New Plymouth, Houdin, in his mid 30s, possibly worked as a barber and photographer, as indicated in some newspaper clippings.

For instance, a local barber advertising in the *Taranaki Herald* in February 1864 mentioned Houdin: "Zechariah Thomas, Hair-Cutter, (Lately with Mr. Houdin.) Respectfully informs the inhabitants of Taranaki that he will open his new premises...where he trusts to meet with a continuance of the patronage he enjoyed at Mr. Houdin's as the first Professional Hair-Cutter who has established himself in Taranaki." The dateline at the bottom of the ad reads, "Brougham-street, Jan. 29, 1864."²¹ Brougham is, of course, the street Houdin lived on. So did Houdin operate a barber shop right out of his home?

Or how about a photography business? According to research done by the Hay Historical Society, an 1860 edition of the *Pastoral Times* referred to a Harry Houdin as "a photographer and vocalist by profession."²² Additionally, in November 1864, the *Taranaki Herald* reported a record-breaking "aggregate tonnage of shipping in the roadstead" and "hope[d] that Mr. Hoby or Mr. Houdin exercised their vocation as photographers while [their] roadstead presented such a gay scene..." And more than four years later, Houdin was listed as a photographer in the Taranaki Commercial and Professional Directory. While it was possible another man named Houdin practiced photography in the Taranaki region, the odds are against it, especially considering his unique name and the fact that the photographer cited in the *Pastoral Times* was also a vocalist. So it seems Houdin was a professional or semiprofessional photographer both before and after he toured Australia and New Zealand.

A "Confirmed Lunatic"

Sometime in the first half of 1865, Houdin was in the hospital for reasons unknown. Shortly after his release, the following report appeared in the May 20 edition of the *Taranaki Herald*: "Dr. Wodsworth, 70th Regiment, Principal Medical Officer here has called our attention to the fact that Mr. Houdin, the photographer (who has been recently discharged from Hospital), is a confirmed lunatic and not safe to be at large. It is to be hoped that the proper authorities will find an asylum for the unfortunate man at once. Contributions for the relief of Mrs. Houdin, who is left destitute, will be received by Dr. Wodsworth, or Mr. Middleton, at Yems and Co.'s Mart."²³

Was Houdin really a “lunatic,” as the good doctor claimed, or simply the victim of a society quick to label someone they thought was a threat? If Houdin did exhibit behavior that seemed to threaten the safety of those around him, there might have been a good reason for it.

According to Houdin’s obituary, published four years after Wodsworth labeled him insane, he was paralyzed for the last “three or four years” of his life—“an almost helpless mortal.”²⁴ Perhaps Houdin’s erratic behavior occurred shortly after he was paralyzed. Although I couldn’t find additional information regarding his paralysis, including its cause, when or where it happened, or exactly which parts of his body it affected, one thing is clear: Houdin would have been devastated by it, especially considering he was a dancer.

In any event, if he was institutionalized for any period of time, he was probably released by September 6 the following year since he attended a civil hearing that day asking for more time to pay taxes owed to the local treasurer.²⁵ Unless, of course, a worker from an asylum accompanied him. Indeed, it’s possible he was institutionalized until the day he died.

Death of a “Successful Mimic”

Houdin died on June 19, 1869, at the age of 39, in New Plymouth, where he and his wife lived for five or six years. Various obituaries written about him were brief and virtually identical, surprising considering the good reputation he earned less than a decade earlier. One obit, only two sentences that referred to the late performer as “a successful mimic,” even got his real surname wrong, claiming it was Dougan instead of Dignam.²⁶ Houdin is buried in Te Henui Cemetery in New Plymouth; his wife, who died in 1920, is buried in the same plot.

Dignam Dug Up

Houdin’s real last name, Dignam, is a variation of Donegan, an Irish surname that may derive from the Ó Duibhgeannáin clan. (Is it a coincidence that singing and acting are in the genes of some noted, more modern, Dignams, including Arthur, Basil, Christy, and Mark?) If Houdin’s claim about being Robert-Houdin’s nephew were true, his surname would have come from

Josèphe Cécile Houdin, the Frenchman's first wife, from whom Robert-Houdin took the last part of his name. Nonetheless, Houdin evidently was his legal name at the time because newspaper accounts show he used it in court on more than one occasion (in one civil case, he owed the local treasurer almost £20 in taxes).²⁷

Other "Polynational" Entertainers

Houdin seemed to be the only person presenting "polynational entertainment" during the time he toured Australia and New Zealand. However, in 1866, a few years after Houdin stopped performing, another man billed himself "The Great Polynational Mimic": Valentine Vousden (a.k.a., Val Vose), an Irish actor, composer, mimic, and ventriloquist. Vousden originally toured in Dublin and London and made his first (and possibly only) appearance in the United States at Clinton Hall (later the Astor Opera House) in New York City.²⁸

Vousden, a "blithe, frolicking, witty actor,"²⁹ who wrote a song titled "The Irish Jaunting Car," eventually spiraled into poverty and tried to kill himself in 1886 by jumping into the harbor at Kingstown (now called Dún Laoghaire) in Dublin. Little did he know he would live for another 21 years; he died in 1907 in Bexhill, East Sussex, England.

Vousden's son followed in his father's footsteps, establishing himself as the "Irish society entertainer," touring with an act that included mimicry, comic monologs, and ventriloquism. Wrote one reviewer in 1905: "His humour is so quaint, clear and clean that there is not a sane soul in any audience unsusceptible of being tickled by it."³⁰

In 1871, only two years after Houdin died, a husband-and-wife team advertised their act in New Zealand: "Collins' Polynational Entertainment, consisting of all the newest and most sensational Songs, Dances, and funniest Farces of the day."³¹ Seven years later, a man referred to in Australian papers as "Mons. Houdin" didn't call himself a "polynational entertainer" but claimed to be a nephew of Robert-Houdin, just as Harry Houdin did.

Conclusion

Harry Houdin was clearly a talented, versatile performer whose magic and colorful “polynational entertainment” genuinely pleased the majority of his audiences. While he didn’t make a name for himself outside of Australia and New Zealand, his work, like that of so many unknown or forgotten variety artists, planted smiles on the faces of people eager to escape the bland reality of day-to-day life in a time before the benumbing luxuries of television, film, and social media.



Brisbane School of Arts, Queensland, Australia, ca. 1877

Houdin’s Tour Chronology

The following tour information is based on accounts published in newspapers of the time, so there could be some missing dates and venues or other discrepancies. If you have any corrections, additions, or deletions, please [contact me](#) with supporting documentation.

Pre-1860

Reported to have performed in London³²

1860

Shakespeare Concert Hall

Sydney, Australia

Nov. 19 (Mon.)

Temperance Hall

Pitt St., Sydney, Australia

Dec. 26–28 (Wed.–Fri.)

1861

Temperance Hall

Pitt St., Sydney, Australia

Jan. 1 (Tue.)

Prince of Wales Theatre

Bathurst, New South Wales, Australia

June 24 (Mon.)

July 6, 15 (Sat., Mon.)

Royal Victoria Theatre

Durham St.

Bathurst, New South Wales, Australia

July 20, 24, 25, 27 (Sat., Wed., Thurs., Sat.)

Olympic Theatre

Maitland, New South Wales, Australia

Sept. 14 (Sat.)

1862

Unknown Venue

Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

Week of Monday, April 21 (date unknown)

Ipswich School of Arts

Ipswich, Queensland, Australia,

May 23 (Fri.)

Brisbane School of Arts

Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

May 30–31 (Fri.–Sat.)

June 2, 7, 23 (Mon., Sat., Mon.)

Gayndah School of Arts

Gayndah, Queensland, Australia

Aug. 23, 28 (Sat., Thurs.)

A New Schoolhouse

Name of schoolhouse unknown

Rockhampton, Queensland, Australia

Sept. 26 (Fri.)

Hall of the School of Arts

Ipswich, Queensland, Australia

Oct. 13–14 (Mon.–Tue.)

Brisbane School of Arts

Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

Oct. 20, 23–24 (Mon., Thurs.–Fri.)

Mechanics' Institute

Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

Between Oct. 27 and Nov. 1 (date unknown)

Theatre Royal

Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

Nov. 18–19, 24 (Tue.–Wed., Mon.)

Unknown Venue

Performance planned; may not have occurred

Westbury, Tasmania, Australia

Before Dec. 10 (date unknown)

Unknown Venue

Performance planned; may not have occurred

Deloraine, Tasmania, Australia

Before Dec. 10 (date unknown)

Oatlands Hotel

Large room

Oatlands, Tasmania, Australia

Dec. 13 (Sat.)

Del Sarte's Rooms

Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

Dec. 22–23 (Mon.–Tue.)

1863

Court House

Richmond, Tasmania, Australia

Jan. 1 (Thurs.)

Theatre Royal

Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

Jan. 13 (Tue.)

Court House

Richmond, Tasmania, Australia

Jan. 14 (Wed.)

Blue Bell Inn

Assembly Rooms

Sorell, Tasmania, Australia

Jan. 15 (Thurs.)

Unknown Venue

Port Chalmers, Dunedin, New Zealand

Feb. 2–3 (Mon.–Tue.)

Masonic Hall

Princes St.

Dunedin, Otago Region, New Zealand

Feb. 9–10 (Mon.–Tue.)

Mechanics' Institute

Invercargill, New Zealand

Feb. 18, 20 (Wed., Fri.)

Mar. 5–7, 9–11, 13–14, 17 (Thurs.–Sat., Mon.–Wed., Fri.–Sat., Tue.)

Unknown Venue

Invercargill, New Zealand

Probably late March (date unknown)

Unknown Venue

Port Chalmers, Dunedin, New Zealand

March 30 (Mon.)

Town Hall

Lyttelton, New Zealand

April 4, 6 (Sat., Mon.)

Town Hall

Christchurch, New Zealand

April 8–10, 16 (Wed.–Fri., Thurs.)

Town Hall

Lyttelton, New Zealand

April 24 (Fri.)

Odd Fellows' Hall

Wellington, New Zealand

May 1, 4, 6, 8–9 (Fri., Mon., Wed., Fri.–Sat.)

Unknown Venue

Ball and supper on Queen Victoria's birthday

Port Chalmers, Dunedin, New Zealand

May 24 (Sun.)

Odd Fellows' Hall

Wellington, New Zealand

June 6, 8–9, 11 (Sat., Mon.–Tue., Thurs.)

Church Steps

Name of church unknown

For Royal Wedding Fete

Trafalgar St.

Nelson, New Zealand

June 19 (Fri.)

Schoolhouse

Name of schoolhouse unknown

Richmond, New Zealand

June 20 (Sat.)

Odd Fellows' Hall

Wellington, New Zealand

June 22 (Mon.)

Masonic Hall

Taranaki, New Zealand

July 22, 25 (Wed., Sat.)

Brunswick Hall

Auckland, New Zealand

Aug. 14–15, 22, 24, 27, 28–29 (Fri.–Sat., Sat., Mon., Thurs., Fri.–Sat.)

Camp St. John

During New Zealand Wars

Drury, New Zealand

Circa Sept. 3 (Thurs.)

Brunswick Hall

Auckland, New Zealand

Sept. 5, 12, 14 (Sat., Sat., Mon.)

Camp St. John

During New Zealand Wars

Drury, New Zealand

Sept. 19 (Sat.)



Odd Fellows' Hall, Wellington, New Zealand, ca. 1860s

Credits**Thanks**

Thanks to Mike Gooch, information services officer at Puke Ariki in New Plymouth, New Zealand, for digging up local records revealing Houdin's real name, birth year, death date, burial location, wife's name, and more. Mike's time and insight were extremely valuable.

Photos

Portrait of Harry Houdin

Harry Houdin, Polynational Entertainer, 1863 (Call No. P1/779)

Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

<http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/item/itemDetailPaged.aspx?itemID=888434>

Brisbane School of Arts

North Brisbane School of Arts Building, ca. 1877

State Library of Queensland

<http://www.slq.qld.gov.au>

Odd Fellows' Hall

Odd Fellows' hall, corner of Lambton Quay and Grey Street, Wellington, ca. 1860s

Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand

<http://mp.natlib.govt.nz/detail/?id=6894>

Online Archives

Papers Past

<http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz>

Trove, National Library of Australia

<http://trove.nla.gov.au>

Google News Archives

<http://news.google.com/archivesearch>

Hay Historical Society

<http://users.tpg.com.au/hayhist>

Old Fulton NY Post Cards

<http://www.fultonhistory.com>

Notes

1. While we don't yet know the exact date of Houdin's birth, we can assume he was born Martin Harry Dignam in 1830 or thereabout, as his wife Martha Rundle's epitaph seems to indicate: "Sacred to the memory of MARTIN HARRY DIGNAM who died June 19th 1869 aged 39 years." As for Houdin's birthplace, 1851 England Census records indicate that a 20-year-old Martin Dignam, a prisoner at the House of Correction and County Gaol in Kirkdale, Lancashire, was born in Loughlin, Roscommon, Ireland. The census records are not conclusive evidence, but they might refer to our Dignam since he was a 21-year-old Irishman in 1851. (Epitaph transcript and census records kindly provided by Mike Gooch, information services officer at Puke Ariki in New Plymouth, New Zealand.)

2. "Mr. Harry Houdin," *Nelson Examiner and New Zealand Chronicle*, June 6, 1863, p. 3, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz>.

3. *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, July 24, 1861, p. 3, <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

4. "Royal Victoria Theatre," *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, July 20, 1861, p. 2, <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

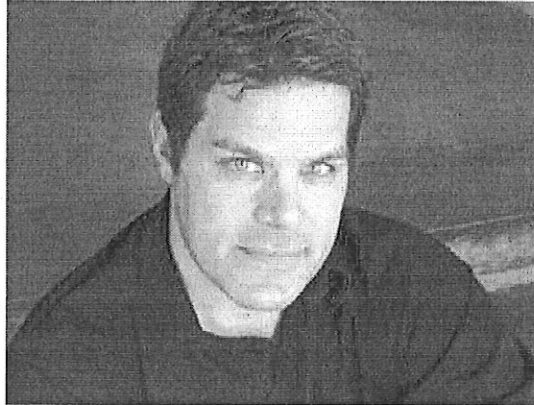
5. "Theatre Royal," *Launceston Examiner*, November 20, 1862, p. 5, <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

6. "Houdin, the Polynational Mimic at Oatlands," *The Mercury*, December 17, 1862, p. 5, <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

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San Diego magician Tom Interval

About the Author

Magician Tom Interval, owner of San Diego-based Interval Magic, provides world-class magic entertainment and training to private and corporate clients locally and throughout the United States.

A member of the Academy of Magical Arts (AMA), International Brotherhood of Magicians (IBM), and Society of American Magicians (SAM), Interval has captivated tens of thousands of people at numerous venues, including Busch Gardens theme park in Williamsburg, Virginia, where he portrayed a medieval conjurer, complete with a period costume and British accent. During his time at Busch, he also trained employees of the magic shop and promoted the park on several local TV talk shows along the East Coast.

Interval, who has a BA in professional writing, has published articles in international magic journals and local newspapers and magazines in his hometown of Pittsburgh. A major fan of the legendary Harry Houdini, Interval also conceived and created the website, Houdini Museum, and is now working on several other magic-related writing and website projects. To learn more, please visit <http://www.intervalmagic.com>.

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