

EMILY MIDORIKAWA: A MOST UNLIKELY VICTORIAN CELEBRITY; GEORGINA WELDON

A talk given by Emily Midorikawa on 14 March 2024 at Senate House Library

A transcript:

My most recent book is *Out of the Shadow, Six Visionary Victorian Women in Search of a Public Voice* of which Georgina Weldon is one.

Who was Georgina Weldon? Well, she was a 19th century Bloomsbury woman who I believe deserves to be much, much better known. She was a talented musical performer, a skilled orator, she was a social campaigner and she was someone who believed that she had the power to contact the dead. All of these different facets of her personality came together in creating the public figure she became post-1878 when her life changed forever.

I will talk much more about that transformation in a moment. This is not going to be a cradle to grave account of Weldon's life. It couldn't be. She had a really, really packed life with all sorts of really fascinating twists and turns. I go into them more in my book but I do want to really give you a taste of some of the most significant moments in her life. I think to do that it would be worth just taking a bit of a step back in time to the time when she was born, the world that she grew up in, to see who she was prior to 1878.

Georgina Weldon was born into a minor aristocratic family, the Thomases, later known as the Trehernes. She was brought up in a high society circle. She was educated, I think, to quite a typical standard for a lady of her class of those days, educated largely by governesses in the home with much, much more attention paid to the accomplishments than rigorous academic study. This focus on the accomplishments, that in itself was fairly rigorous. By the time Weldon was a young woman, she was known as something of a beauty, a very sort of vivacious personality and someone who had a great deal of musical talent. She would often entertain people in a drawing room setting, so with her musical prowess, but particularly her beautiful singing voice. She was much admired because of this voice and just for being quite a lively sort of personality. Being of quite an independent spirit, she didn't just content herself with that kind of society. She moved in more Bohemian circles as well. She was a regular at the little Holland House salons that were frequented by the likes of Tennyson, Trollope, Rossetti and also the artist George Frederic

Watts. I think we have an example of his work here. [shows image]

This is actually a double portrait of Georgina as she was known then by George Frederic Watts. It's Georgina on both sides of the picture so she appears both as the speaker or singer, and the listener, who's being quite overcome by what she's hearing. It's obviously quite a sensuous portrait and I think you might be able to get a sense from this that Watts was quite infatuated with Georgina himself. In some of the excellent letters that survived, he calls her my little Bambina, for instance, so that may also have fed into the way that he portrayed her in this picture. Her parents had high hopes that she would make a good marriage in the parlance of the day, and her father had actually stipulated that he did not want to accept a man who had anything less than £10,000 per annum. Any fans of Jane Austen might remember that this was the exact amount associated with Mr Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. I believe that's set some time earlier but even by the late 1850s, £10,000 a year was a lot of money. It was going to put most men out of the running for this position as Georgina's future husband. Unfortunately for her father, Georgina had other plans. She fell in love with someone called William Henry Weldon, but he was better known as Harry. He was a lieutenant in the 18th Hussars, and he had nothing like the £10,000 a year that her parents wanted. What he did have was dashing good looks and an apparent willingness to give Georgina an unusual level of freedom for a woman of that day.

Georgina had become quite interested in pursuing her singing, not just in drawing room society, but also perhaps on the professional stage to a limited extent perhaps. She wanted to make more of her singing voice, and initially at least during the period of their courtship, Harry was quite encouraging of this. I think this would have appealed to Georgina as well. But parents were not keen on Harry. He did not have the £10,000 a year. He'd also quite enjoyed himself in the early years of his army career and racked up quite heavy debts so he also was probably debt-ridden, so not really a good prospective match. The couple were banned from seeing each other but they kept on their relationship in secret, meeting in secret, exchanging letters in secret and in 1860 they tied the knot in secret. As I'm sure you can imagine, this is not really the kind of secret that one can keep for very long. So, Georgina's father was unhappy about this to the extent that he said he was withdrawing all financial support. And as Georgina put it so colourfully in her personal writings, 'The dirty old Gov cut me off within 24 hours.' Now she and Harry were left on quite a limited income. You might think at this stage Harry would have encouraged this career that Georgina had talked about pursuing but actually this was the moment

when he went back on his word. He said, no, actually now you're married to me, that needs to be your main focus. I think because she was so in love with Harry, initially she seemed to go along with this, but as the marriage went on and their relationship became more strained, this refusal started to fester a great deal more.

In the late 1860s, Harry's fortunes improved a bit. He came into some money and then he was able to move him and his wife away from the relatively modest accommodation they'd been in to Tavistock House in Bloomsbury. Tavistock House doesn't exist anymore but it was on Tavistock Square so only a short walk away from where we are now. There's an artist's impression of it here. [shows image] The reason we have this was that it was a former house of Charles Dickens. There were many things about this house that appealed to Georgina. Firstly, she said it had the atmosphere of a country retreat but the fact that it had been owned by Dickens also meant there being some adaptations made to the house that were very appealing to Georgina. For instance, he'd installed an amateur theatre. Dickens, I'm sure many of us know here, was a keen amateur actor. He staged theatricals there with Wilkie Collins amongst others. Clearly this appealed to her and she made good use of this space.

One of the things she did at this venue was set up a school, a school for students who wanted to learn music. Here again, I think we get a sense of Georgina's unconventional nature. One might think that she would have wanted to school young women of a similar social class to her but what she actually did was she took on orphans or children who were not literally orphans but perhaps came from very, very poor backgrounds, where the family didn't have enough there to look after them, took them into her home, schooled them up as musical students, and then took them out around the surrounding area to London concert halls and sometimes into private homes and displayed their talents. They would go out and do these shows for her. The way she spoke about it was they would eventually come out of this education with a skill that they could use for life and they could make money from this. Clearly, by going and doing these concerts they were also generating money for her. She very much presented this as a charitable exercise, plough it back into the school, help more children. I think there may have been various different motivations for this but this was something she was doing at Tavistock House. She was very committed to it, very passionate about it.

Harry was not really very keen on the school. He was living in a house that was

full of children, children who were not necessarily from backgrounds where they'd been taught to behave in a very refined manner. He complained about the noise, children running all over the place. I think in a way Georgina encouraged some of this noise because she went in for quite a lot of fairly modern teaching methods. Noticing that her children often enjoyed shouting and running about, she designated a period every day when they could just let off steam and just scream as loud as they wanted. This was obviously not popular with her husband. It was also something that was not particularly popular with the neighbours in the surrounding area. Georgina would, whether they were in earshot of the shouting, I don't know, but something people even further away would have been aware of was the fact that when they went out to concerts and displays, Georgina would literally, I guess, cart the children around in what she referred to as a van, but obviously it's like a horse-drawn van in those days. It was emblazoned with the words '*Mrs Weldon's Musical Evenings*' and people thought this van was just not in keeping with the neighbourhood. It was described as horrible and also insane looking which was something that would come back to haunt Georgina later in life.

Just to put this school into context. It sort of fits in with much of Georgina's other behaviour. She was seen as a very unconventional person. Some of this behaviour that was seen as so unconventional, so odd in her day, may not strike us as so 'out there' now. Just to give you some examples, she got quite interested in vegetarianism and gave that a go. She liked to wear her hair shorter than average and she explored wearing rational dress, clothing that didn't follow the sort of restrictive rules of corsets and being very kind of buttoned up which was the fashion of the day. As I say, many of these things may now not strike us as being so odd, but about this time she also became interested in spirit communication.

I think this might be a good moment really have a think about 19th century spirit communication and the form that might take. Clearly for generations, maybe time immemorial, people have believed in spirits, ghosts, the possibility of an afterlife. But in the 19th century a number of these beliefs started to be associated together and many of the practices that went along with these beliefs started to be grouped together in the public mind in a movement that was known as Modern Spiritualism. This is a movement that was popular on both sides of the Atlantic. People will debate this, but the starting point is usually traced as 1848 in the United States and actually traced to a particular family. There's a family of young women, the Fox sisters, Kate, who was really just a girl at the time, Maggie, who was in her mid-teens and then Leah who

was quite a bit older. And they became famous first within their immediate local community then the wider region, eventually the United States and then beyond. And they were famous for their powers, or supposed powers depending on how you saw this, and there was a great deal of debate right from the start, their powers to contact the dead. And how they managed to do this, or purported to be able to do it, would be they would be at a seance, which could either be a very small gathering, perhaps what most of us think of a seance, a few people in a darkened room sitting around a table, or it could be a huge concert or theatrical venue, people packed in all watching what these young women were doing. But they would summon the spirits, and spirits would make [makes quick knocks] knocking sounds so everyone there would know the spirits were there. Really only the Fox sisters could hear what the spirits were saying, and what the knocks meant. And they did this sometimes by asking a question, you know give two knocks, for yes, one knock no, that kind of thing. Sometimes it was more complicated, they had this alphabet board by which names could be spelled out and sometimes they would just interpret by other means as well. So, they became very popular and also kind of notorious because, as I say, right from the beginning many people thought this was just all-out trickery. There was a kind of a debate but I think that debate in a way kind of galvanized their opinion because people loved to read about them even if they were very kind of against what they were doing. I think also the technology at the time really allowed their fame to spread in a way that wouldn't have been possible in earlier generations. I'm talking about things like the telegraph machine, the speed at which newspapers could be transported around the country. All of these things helped their story to grow very, very quickly.

In a way you can really see them as a phenomenon of their time. So, by the time that Georgina was living at Tavistock House, things have moved on a bit from the Fox Sisters' day. Spiritualism remained popular, more and more mediums, as you might expect, had come on the scene partly, I think, encouraged by the success of the Fox Sisters. And audiences, I think, were no longer satisfied to just turn up at a seance and hear some knocking sounds. Often they wanted more. They wanted something a bit more spectacular. By this stage, you had mediums such as Emma Harding Britten, who was known as Emma Hardinge at this stage. [shows image] So it's maybe not quite as clear as it could be, but hopefully everyone can see. Emma Hardinge is in the foreground. She's another one that I wrote about in my book. She was a British medium who emigrated to the US, found fame there and then fame back in Britain as well when she returned. In this picture, you can see she's in the

foreground and there is a spirit in the background. I think now we can look at this, and many of us may be a bit sceptical about this photograph, perhaps. I think what we have to remember though, this was very new technology at the time. It feels like a current observation, people often knock on the door. They have all sorts of thoughts, I won't get too derailed on this but a lot of images they see reproduced in respected publications. Interestingly, for William Mumler, the man who took this photograph, spirit photography was really his speciality. He took a number of famous pictures of this kind and Hardinge was a very famous woman in this context at the time. His most famous picture though, was of Mary Todd Lincoln the widow by that stage of Abraham Lincoln, and he got a photo of her where Abraham Lincoln, who'd died some time before, appears in the background. A quick Google search will allow you to see that image. You can make up your own mind about that.

So, at the stage where this is happening, Georgina is going to seances. As I say, the mediums working at seances, some of them are indulging in things like spirit photography, but they're also, for instance, one of these mediums whose seances we know that Weldon went to was Agnes Duffy, who was actually a relatively local medium. She lived around these parts, and her speciality was materialising for instance fruit and flowers out of the air, so you could turn up and you could see almost like a magic show, I suppose, these sorts of things. This kind of performance if you like, would really appeal to some of Georgina's character. I've already said she had a sort of background in music. She was a keen performer herself, so it was a kind of milieu that she might well have felt quite comfortable in. She also definitely believed that these were serious experiments in contacting the dead. She wasn't there to scoff. She very much believed in what these mediums were doing. She was not someone who led seances herself, she was just an active participant, but by the early 1870s, she was attending seances regularly and she was also experimenting with contacting the spirits within her own home. Again, this was something that Harry was not very keen on, and in 1875 he moved out of Tavistock House, although he did continue to support Georgina financially. Unbeknown to her, he was also seriously pursuing a relationship with another woman by that stage, so that will have been another factor, I'm sure, in his eagerness to depart. I'll come back now to Georgina's story and 1878 the time when her life changed forever.

On 14th November that year, she was still living in Tavistock House, she was still running her musical school, but on this particular date, the students were not present at her house. There's kind of a convoluted reason for this that I

won't go into now. The important thing for our purposes is that the students were away in France with a trusted friend of hers meaning that Georgina was in the house on her own, accompanied by a small staff of servants. That morning, Georgina was at Tavistock House and the doorbell went and two men were shown in. Georgina didn't know these men but she welcomed them into her house. They introduced themselves as Mr Stewart and Mr Shell. They said they'd seen some advertisements about Georgina's musical school, and they were interested in placing some students with her. They'd seen these advertisements in the spiritualist press and they said we are also spiritualists. So that put Georgina at ease. Even though she didn't know the men, she was happy to talk to them and they asked her questions about the educational curriculum that she offered. But then quickly the conversation moved on to her personal beliefs and, believing that she was with fellow spiritualists, she talked quite a bit about things that she believed. She talked, for instance, about witnessing showers of falling stars fairly recently and she said she thought this was a good omen. The men chatted with Georgina for a while and then they went away and Georgina got on with her day. At about half past eight that evening though, two different men came to the house. They said they had been sent by the men who came earlier that day and they engaged her in more conversation about the school that she was running. And again, the conversation quickly turned to her spiritualist beliefs. And again, she was quite comfortable, so she told them about going to Mrs Guppy's seances, and she told them, for instance, about the fact that Agnes Guppy had materialized a rabbit at one of her seances, which had been given to Georgina as a gift. She'd taken it away, and then four or five months later it had disappeared as mysteriously as it had come and this had really convinced her that Mrs Guppy was a wonderful medium.

Anyway, the men went away, but after they'd gone, possibly having had two strange visits in one day, Georgina started to feel quite anxious and she confided to her servant that she suddenly felt as if she were in some kind of horrible trap. Another couple of hours pass and Georgina doesn't really settle and then the door goes again. This time, there is a man there, another man that she hadn't met and two rather sturdy looking women. They had been sent by one of the first two gentlemen that came that morning, the one who had given his name as Mr Stewart. His real name was Lyttleton Stewart Forbes Winslow. He was a medical doctor and the owner of two 'lunatic asylums', in words of the day. Georgina didn't know this at the time but he had been sent there by her husband, Harry, her estranged husband, with the idea that he would quickly assess her as insane and have her put away in an asylum. What

makes it worse is that Harry had actually talked to Georgina's blood family about this before and they had been quite encouraging. They said she was quite odd, and something like this should have been done long ago really. With the aid of her servants, Georgina manages to prevent the new man and the two women, who are obviously nurses from the asylum, from entering the house. She understandably spends a very fitful night, she can't sleep very well, and she begins the next day by writing letters to all sorts of people who might come to her aid because by now she hasn't quite twigged what's happening but she realises she's in danger in some way.

Then a bit later that morning, the trio from the previous night, the ones that have come very late at night, at a quarter to ten I think it was, come back to the house, and this time they have a warrant with them. It's a warrant that says that they are able to take her into one of their asylums. With the aid of her servants, a local spiritualist who has had her own past run-ins with the asylum system, and between the group of them, they manage to stall this group who've come to the house to take her. They summon the police. The police come to the house. They are actually not that helpful. The police officers, they're just not really sure whose side they should be on. Georgina is telling them, these people are trespassing on my property, but then on the other hand, the group have this warrant with them and they're saying, we are here to take this woman away for the asylum. The police just don't really know what to do. They say that the trio from the asylum have to go but they don't take any action against them. This is obviously very, very unsatisfactory for Georgina, who's still worried about, clearly, more people from the asylum coming back. So, at this stage, she decides to go on the run and this is a wise decision because, predictably, more groups just keep coming back to take her, but luckily by this stage, she's gone.

She goes on the run for seven days, and she stays in a series of homes of sympathetic friends who manage to keep her out of public view. At the end of the seven days she quickly gets herself seen by two doctors who certify her as completely sane. But now she's in the position where she has to look at this overwhelming evidence that Harry, her husband, in association with other people, has tried to have her put away in an asylum. Even though things have been quite strained with Harry for quite a long time, it takes Georgina a long time to admit that this could really have happened and initially, when she sees his name, because his name was on the warrant as someone who could be a witness to her unsound mind, she thinks it's actually a fake, but eventually she realises, 'No, this has happened.'

Then she tries to see what legal redress she might have to this situation she's been put into and she discovers really not very much. She does eventually manage to get a case before a local magistrate, who's quite sympathetic to her. He says it's wrong that something like this could happen in your own home but the law as it stands will not really allow Georgina to take any action against either her husband or any of the men that she thinks have been involved in this plot against her. I think part of the problem was that, as the law stood at the time, a married woman could only really bring legal action with the support of her husband and of course it's highly unlikely that Harry is going to give his support to legal action that's going to implicate himself. So, Georgina's left in this troubling situation. She decides that if she cannot win in a court of law, she will try to win in the court of public opinion. To that end she starts to give speeches at public venues and people pay to come and hear her speak and she talks about her own story but also frames it within a wider context, the urgent need for reform to the lunacy laws of Britain. She writes pieces for publications, she grants interviews. This is sometimes in the spiritualist press, and of course the spiritualist press are by and large extremely sympathetic to her because, well one they see her as one of their own, and the very fact that her spiritualism has been the thing that's been really singled out to mark her out as insane, clearly, that strikes fear into the hearts of many other spiritualists of the day. So, they're sympathetic. But also in the mainstream press, non-spiritualist publications, she's quite a colourful, entertaining, interesting character. She gets a lot of sympathy there as well.

She makes good use of the theatrical space at Tavistock House. She starts to give lectures in her own home. She has a lecture she gives many times *How I Escaped the Mad Doctors* which is later published as a pamphlet, and it actually makes for really, really good reading. Georgina knew how to tell a story. She kind of draws on the conventions of sensation fiction of the time to really present herself as this, obviously she is a woman who has had a great wrong done to her, but a very, very, very innocent figure with these sorts of dastardly villains in the background who are out to get her. Other things that Georgina did to drum up publicity, she hired sandwich board men, people, you know who wear a placard on the front and the back of their body, sandwich board men to parade up and down outside Dr Winslow's asylum and his offices with these accusatory slogans all over them, which I'm sure was a major annoyance to him. She also, for instance, finds an aeronaut who's going to be going up in a hot air balloon and gets him to scatter leaflets about her case all over the English South Coast. She has lots and lots of different ideas for

drumming up publicity and by doing this she keeps herself in the public eye until 1882, the year of the passing of the Married Women's Property Act of that year which removes the need for a husband to support a married woman's right to take legal action. So, with that obstacle removed, Georgina sets out to bring legal action against everyone that she believes has colluded against her, of course including her husband and the doctor.

She represents herself in court in her appearances, something that's a real novelty at the time, a woman speaking in public in this sort of guise. She's quite an entertaining speaker. Sometimes she wins her legal action, sometimes she has a whole string of legal actions, sometimes she wins, sometimes she doesn't. But in every case she generates a lot of publicity, a lot of public sympathy. You have lots and lots of press interest, you have members of the public cramming to find space in the galleries. If they can't get in, they're hanging around in the streets, just hoping to catch a glimpse of Georgina.

I've got another slide here. [shows image] So, this is Georgina, the Portia of the Law Courts as she began to be known. And I guess here again we get a sense that she did understand about presenting an image to the public. Obviously, they wouldn't have talked about personal branding in those days, but she frequently appears in this particular outfit with the black head covering, the black outfit. She becomes a very recognisable figure. She also, I should just say, introduces humour and laughter into many of her court appearances, which I think is sometimes more appreciated by some judges than others. Again, it's a favourite with the press. And clearly her campaigning did have, I think, a vengeful side. Maybe we feel that was deserved, but clearly she was out to get people who she felt who could be colluding against her. Obviously, the sandwich board thing is like a good example of that. But she really did the great job of keeping this issue of the need for lunacy law reform in the public eye. Just by being such a well-known, such a recognisable personality, this cause is also very, very much in the papers throughout this period. Just to give you a sense of how famous she's become, this is her from 1887. [shows image'] And I'll just read in case anyone can't see it at the back. Mrs Weldon writes, 'I am 50 today, but thanks to Pears soap, my complexion is only 17.'

So that's also a tip for you to take that away, for your complexion, use Pears soap. So, in 1890 the Lunacy Act of that year changes the law. It means that what happened to Georgina would be very, very hard to happen again. Now a person can only be put away in an asylum with a legal certificate signed by a magistrate. Also importantly, this certificate can only last for one year, which

means that after one year to keep you in an asylum, you have to be recertified. There can be no more people languishing, forgotten in asylums for years and years and years. And certainly no more someone just coming around to the house and making a quick assessment and then just trying to cart you off that very evening.

With the passing of this act and the change in public taste and I guess a lessening interest in the spiritual world as much as anything, Georgina eventually started to fade from public view. She would crop up from time to time in the press really for the rest of her life but she's no longer the huge celebrity that she had been in Victorian times. But she continued her belief in the spirits right into her old age, and we know that she made many attempts to contact figures from her past and also famous historical figures like Louis XVII of France.

This has been a bit of a whistle-stop tour of Georgina's life. Like I say, I do write more about her in my book, *Out of the Shadows*.

Emily Midorikawa

Please view the images referred to in *Out of the Shadows*.

Much of Emily's early research for *Out of the Shadows* was completed in the Special Collection Section of Senate House Library particularly drawing on the materials of the Harry Price Library of Magical Literature. An accompanying display in the Library showed items of interest.

Read Emily Midorikawa's tribute to Weldon: [Georgina Weldon 1837 - 1914 - Pascal Theatre Company \(pascal-theatre.com\)](http://pascal-theatre.com)