

THE EVANION COLLECTION

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In 1895 the British Museum's Department of Printed Books acquired a collection of ephemeral material relating to the 19th-century entertainment world and contemporary life in general. It was purchased from a man who had been a moderately successful conjuror and ventriloquist but now in his old age had fallen into distressed circumstances, Henry Evans Evanion.¹

Amongst researchers into conjuring history and memorabilia, Evanion's collection has today attained legendary status; in its breadth of scope and the sheer richness of its material it is probably unique. In the nineteenth century, however, it was not fashionable to collect printed ephemera, and although this collection was known to a small circle of like-minded acquaintances in the later years of the century, it was only after Evanion's famous association with Harry Houdini that his importance as a collector of conjuring ephemera became widely known. The collection was given considerable publicity by Houdini after Evanion's death in 1905.

Evanion, whose real name was Henry Evans, was born in Kennington, South London, probably in 1832. His father was connected with the entertainment world: he spent much of his career purveying refreshments in Vauxhall Gardens, had associations with various other London pleasure gardens, and was for a time landlord of the Black Prince public house in Prince's Road, Kennington Cross.

Evanion was already attracted to conjuring as a boy, sometimes with dramatic consequences. His nephew, Robert Evans, recalls an occasion on which he staged a performance at the Black Prince which very nearly set fire to the building and the pigeons which his father kept there.² By the time he was 17 he had embarked on his professional career. During the early years, it seems, he had quite a struggle to make a living. He travelled extensively in Great Britain in company with another ventriloquist, Newman, and his family. By 1857 Evanion's bills usually bore the name Evan Ion, soon combined into Evanion: he apparently adopted this as his legal surname, possibly in the 1860s.

Evanion continued to undertake performances until a few months before his death, in 1905³, but the heyday of his career was in the 1860s and 1870s. One sign that he had 'arrived' was his placing of advertisements in *The Times* of London. He began performing before such eminent persons as the Bishop of Winchester, the Lady Mayoress of London and, eventually, the royal family. An idea of the flavour of his performances (which might feature ventriloquism as well as conjuring and were overlaid with humour) can be obtained from the bills and posters to be found in his collection. He appeared at various public places of entertainment in London, including the Crystal Palace, Sydenham, where he had several notable runs in the late 1870s. He continued to travel widely in Great Britain, and even went to France, where his performances included an appearance before royalty at the Tuileries.⁴ He also performed for children's homes, literary societies, and other local associations.

He advertised in *The Times* well into the 1890s and carried on an active correspondence with proprietors of exhibition halls and places of entertainment both in London and the provinces, as material in the Theatre Arts Library of the University of Texas indicates.⁵ Meanwhile his wife, Mary, was running a confectioner's shop on his behalf in the 1870s and 1880s, from their home at 221 Kennington Road. This must have provided a welcome additional income.

By the 1890s, however, when he had reached his 60s, Evanion's career as a conjuror was in decline. Before Lloyd George introduced old age pensions in the early 20th century, life was a constant, anxious battle to survive for older people who lacked independent means. Evanion and his wife spent their final years in poky flats; as Robert Evans wrote to Houdini shortly after Evanion's death: 'For years past the old couple have had nothing but the Workhouse confronting them.'⁶

Evanion's interest in conjuring history and in collecting ephemera appears, like his professional interest, to have started early in life. Much of the material he acquired first, which seems to have consisted exclusively of conjurors' playbills, may have come from his father and grandfather, both of whom, according to his biographer, were also collectors.⁷ The collection now in the British Library, however, does not contain many items earlier than 1800, although there are a fair number of items dating from the first half of the 19th century. Evanion himself came to be interested in almost any Victorian paper ephemera, dating principally from the early 1870s onwards, judging from the material in the British Library collection.

Since Evanion was a frequent reader in the British Museum Reading Room, it is not surprising that he should have thought of selling part of his collection to the Department of Printed Books when he was short of money. The Department bought thousands of items from him in two separate transactions on 5 July and 3 October 1895. Correspondence relating to this can be found in the letters files of the archives of the British Library and also amongst the Evanion manuscripts in the Theatre Arts Library of the University of Texas.⁸ Though Evanion corresponded with the Keeper of Printed Books, Dr Richard Garnett, in connection with the sale, he received less than £20 for his collection; the matter would have had to have been referred to a Trustees' meeting if the Department had considered paying him £20 or over. In the annual reports of the British Museum Trustees, notable acquisitions are always mentioned. It is an indication of the lack of importance accorded to the collection at the time that it did not appear in the list appended to the report for 1895 of items considered of note on grounds either of significance or value. It is in the succeeding 90 years that research into the history of conjuring has flourished, and it is also only fairly recently that the library world has seriously turned its attention to the value of collections of ephemera and the problems of maintaining them.

Evanion had, of course, been collecting ephemera for years, but he had also devoted a considerable amount of time to researching his interest in the British Museum Reading Room and making contacts with fellow enthusiasts (of both a business and purely informal nature) long before he met Houdini. In 1904, when Harry Houdini, 'The Handcuff King', was undertaking a tour of Britain, Evanion, noting from a local news interview that he had an interest in conjuring history, wrote informing him that he himself had 'A very first class *collection of Bills – Cuts* and other items relating to Legerdemain and Conjuring over a period of nearly Two Hundred Years ... the sub jcts [sic] are unique.'⁹ As a result of this

letter, a meeting between Evanion and Houdini took place, which first led to Evanion showing Houdini his entire collection, and then to their collaboration. Houdini was thrilled to be confronted with such a wealth of fascinating material. As he later recorded:

'In [Evanion's] trembling hands lay priceless treasures for which I had sought in vain – original programmes and bills of Robert-Houdin, Phillippe, Anderson, Breslaw, Pinetti, Katterfelto, Boaz ...'.¹⁰ He promptly persuaded Evanion to become, in effect, his research assistant, but after little more than a year, on 17 June 1905, Evanion died.

Evanion was a reader in the British Museum by the time he was in his 30s. According to Houdini in *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin* (London, 1909), because Evanion was interested in the history of conjuring '[F]or fifty years he spent every spare hour at the British Museum collecting data bearing on his marvellous collection'.¹¹ Houdini must have quickly detected Evanion's ability as a researcher and very soon the latter was working almost full time for him. There were also many letters and frequent meetings between the two enthusiasts in which they discussed conjuring history and other subjects of interest to Houdini. Evanion became involved principally in research at the British Museum and combing bookshops for Houdini's planned history of conjuring – later published as *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin*. In one letter to Houdini, he confided that he had at one time aspired to write a history of conjuring himself: 'I made an attempt to write up the subject over 20 years ago but the research and want of material was my drawback then.'¹²

Evanion followed up many conjuring personalities in his research. He tried to find portraits of individuals such as Richard Neve, Katterfelto, and Breslaw but was not always successful. He occasionally made tracings of portraits, but Houdini persuaded him to try to obtain photographs. Evanion duly reported: '[T]he Librarian tells me that I must *find* the Photographer and he must go to the Museum and take the subject – also I have to write to the Director of the B.M. for the Permission to have the Subject copied – I will write at once to him.'¹³ Biographical research leads to the conclusion that Houdini took advantage of Evanion in their association. It is even possible that the pressure of work laid upon Evanion hastened his death. He parted with many of the finest items in his collection to Houdini, at a price which may have been less than fair. It is true that Houdini paid a large part of Evanion's funeral expenses (he was in the habit of endowing funds for the upkeep of the graves of conjurors) and gave financial help to his widow, Mary. However, Evanion's research work, and that of his nephew, Robert Evans, who later also worked for Houdini, are evident not only in *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin* but also in Houdini's *Miracle Mongers and their Methods* (New York, 1920), and Houdini does not officially acknowledge their help.

During the course of his association with Evanion, Harry Houdini gradually acquired from him a number of the finest and rarest conjuring items in his collection; these have now found their way into the Mesmore Kendall Collection housed in the Theatre Arts Library of the Harry Ransom Humanities Center at the University of Texas. Houdini's payment for these purchases (however ungenerous this may have been), and also for his employment of Evanion as research assistant, are likely to have given him greater financial security in the final year of his life.

Evanion's contacts and his activities as an informal dealer in ephemera, however, antedated his association with Houdini. It is likely that he was originally forced to sell material from his collection for financial reasons – although he may not have done this before the 1890s. It is known that he sold at least one group of posters and playbills to Frederick Kornmann,¹⁴ an entertainer who used a dissolving lantern for his effects and who later owned a second-hand bookshop, specialising largely in conjuring. Another customer was J. N. Maskelyne, who at the end of Evanion's life apparently held part of his collection on loan as security because he had lent him four pounds.¹⁵ Arthur Margery, another bookshop owner, was also a customer, and items from Evanion's collection passed from him into the collection of Jimmy Findlay.¹⁶

That part of Evanion's collection which the British Library now possesses falls into two groups. The first consists of ephemera relating not only to conjurors but also to many other aspects of the Victorian entertainment world. The second consists of miscellaneous ephemera of all kinds bearing on Victorian everyday life.

The ephemera relating to the entertainment world consists of posters, bills in a wide variety of dimensions, programmes, and admission tickets. The items range in date from the late 18th century to 1895 and are mainly English, although there are a number from France, principally from Paris, and a few items from the USA, Holland, Italy, and Ireland. Some of the posters have very fine chromolithograph or engraved illustrations. In addition, grand spectacular tableaux such as Hamilton's Excursions, scenes from plays, circus performances, and notable conjuring feats lent themselves well to pictorial treatment. The great era of chromolithograph posters began in the 1870s. There are some notable examples of coloured engraved bills in the collection dating from the 1850s and 1860s. Earlier bills have engraved black and white illustrations – for example, those announcing the first occasion on which a giraffe was exhibited in Great Britain and those showing the elaborate tableaux presented with accompanying illuminations and fireworks at the Royal Surrey Zoological Gardens in the late 1830s and early 1840s. Amongst the earliest of the bills are those, bearing dates between 1800 and 1820, which advertise lessons in elocution and lectures on astronomy in which the use of an orrery was demonstrated to the public.

Most aspects of the Victorian entertainment world are covered by the collection: circuses and menageries (such as Barnum's and Wombwell's); tableaux and exhibitions (such as Imre Kiralfy's 'Venice in London' and Tanaker Buhicrosan's 'Japanese Village'); fairs (Hull Fair, Nottingham Fair, the World Fair at the Agricultural Hall, Islington, the Paris Gingerbread Fair); panoramas and related shows (such as Hamilton's 'Excursions Round the World'); pleasure gardens in London, Harrogate, and various seaside resorts (there is a particularly fine collection for the Royal Surrey Zoological Gardens at Walworth, near Kennington); and the theatre and music hall. Amongst the theatre material are coloured posters for plays by Jerome K. Jerome, J. M. Barrie, and for some of Gilbert and Sullivan's operas, and there are a number of posters and bills advertising music hall artistes.

The collection relating to Victorian everyday life contains a wide range of miscellaneous ephemera: train timetables, catalogues of different shops, trade cards, tobacco wrappers and shop paper bags with printed advertisements, prospectuses, and notices, Christmas cards, racing fixture cards, bills advertising various businesses. These date chiefly from the late 1860s to 1895, and are

mainly English, although there are also a number of items from the USA and Canada – for instance, a Canadian advertisement for Massey-Ferguson agricultural machinery. Some of the ephemera have attractive chromolithograph illustrations. The trade catalogues usually have engraved illustrations in the same colour as the text. A wide range of goods is covered, from clothing to household stoves and portable fountains for table decorations. Advertisements of particular interest are those for early refrigerators and compact oil-burning cooking stoves.

The collection, now fully catalogued, is of enormous value for anyone undertaking research into Victorian social life and the entertainment world; and the large number of trade catalogues with illustrations is also of interest to students of the history of design.

¹ Throughout this article I am greatly indebted to James Hagy, *Early English Conjuring Collectors: James Savren and Henry Evanion* (Ohio, 1985).

² Manuscript of Robert Evans, 'Evanion and Juvenile Theatricals', 1917. University of Texas.

³ Letter of Evanion to Houdini, 27 January 1905. University of Texas.

⁴ Undated playbill, Henry Evans Evanion. University of Texas.

⁵ e.g. Letter of the Managing Director, London Exhibitions, to Henry Evans Evanion, 29 April 1897. University of Texas.

⁶ Letter of Robert Evans to Harry Houdini, n.d. (c. late June 1905). University of Texas.

⁷ H. R. Evans, 'Adventures in Magic', *Sphinx*, xix (July 1920), p. 142.

⁸ Draft of letter of Evanion to Dr R. Garnett, 24 March 1894. University of Texas.

⁹ Letter of Evanion to Houdini, 1904. University of Texas.

¹⁰ Harry Houdini, *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin* (London, 1909), p. 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹² Letter of Evanion to Houdini, 28 July 1904. University of Texas.

¹³ Letter of Evanion to Houdini, 13 May 1904. University of Texas.

¹⁴ Allan Jamieson, 'My friend Arthur Margery', *Magicol*, NS, no. 56 (August 1980), p. 7.

¹⁵ Letters of Mary Evanion to Harry Houdini, 16 May and 5 June 1905. University of Texas.

¹⁶ Hagy, *op. cit.*, p. 62.