



The New York Public Library  
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

**Harry Mountford and Lottie Briscoe papers**

1871-1950 [bulk 1906-1935]

\*T-Mss 2012-037

Compiled by Brynn White, CUNY Queens College, 2014, 2013

## Summary

**Creator:** Mountford, Harry

**Title:** Harry Mountford and Lottie Briscoe papers

**Date:** 1871-1950 [bulk 1906-1935]

**Size:** 4.23 linear feet (9 boxes)

**Source:** Gift of Nathan Hodas.

**Abstract:** The Harry Mountford and Lottie Briscoe papers (1871-1950) document the careers and personal lives of performer, writer, and labor rights advocate Harry Mountford and his wife Lottie Briscoe, an early film and stage actress. The bulk of the collection concerns Mountford's union activity with the White Rats, Variety Artists' Federation, and Associated Actors and Artistes of America. The collection contains meeting minutes, union publications and handouts, press clippings, scripts, booking contracts, personal correspondence and keepsakes, theater ephemera, and photographic materials.

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**Processing note:** Compiled by Brynn White, CUNY Queens College, 2014, 2013 Processing consisted of foldering and arranging of materials.

## Creator History

Journalist, playwright, actor, vaudevillian, and labor activist Harry Mountford (1871-1950) was born James Henry Walsh in Dublin, Ireland. He served under the British Army in the Boer War and in 1906 helped found the London-based Variety Artists' Federation (VAF) for performers' rights. After his refusal to arbitrate during the Music Hall War of 1907, he was expelled from VAF and immigrated to New York City to pursue his vaudeville career with wife Maud Walsh. That year, Mountford was hired as the executive secretary to the White Rats, an organization of vaudeville performers which advocated for

improved conditions and higher wages from booking agencies and theatre manager associations.

Under Mountford's leadership and recruitment, the White Rats became an established national labor union. During his tenure he launched the publication of the organization's newspaper *The Player*, lobbied successfully for a Congressional commission regulation bill, and formed an arbitration board to settle disputes between performers and managers. In 1910 he sought and won a charter from the American Federation of Labor (AFL) which merged the White Rats and the Actors' International Union (AIU) into the White Rats Actors' Union of America (WRAU). In retaliation, theatre managers formed the Vaudeville Managers' Protective Association (VPMA) and launched an aggressive slander campaign on Mountford in *Variety* and other publications.

Mountford resigned from the WRAU in 1911 and served on the editorial staff of *Vanity Fair*, but was re-appointed in 1915 and continued to clash against theater owners and their newly created company union National Vaudeville Artists (NVA). Preferential bookings of NVA members and unsuccessful strikes across the country left WRAU members blacklisted and the organization on the verge of collapse. In the face of fund misappropriation charges, Mountford resigned again. Following service in World War I, Mountford became the international executive and secretary of the Associated Actors and Artistes of America, known as the Four A's, and chartered under the Actors' Equity Association. The organization was later renamed the American Artistes Federation.

In 1919, the Federal Trade Commission investigated the vaudeville industry for violations of antitrust law but ultimately denounced the evidence, including Mountford's testimony, as insufficient. In his late career, Mountford worked as a booking agent in New York City.

Mountford married Lottie Briscoe (1883-1950), a former child actress and popular musical comedy star, in 1921. A member of the Associated Actresses of America (AAA), the women's branch of the White Rats, Briscoe had become one of the first legitimate theatre actresses to star in early motion pictures but retired from the stage and screen in 1916. Briscoe occasionally appeared in theatre and film productions, vaudeville sketches, charity benefits, and radio programs, but poor health confined her to her home for the last fifteen years of her life. Briscoe and Mountford both died in 1950.

## **Custodial History**

The papers of Mountford and Briscoe were bequeathed to their appointed estate executor Charles L. Kahn upon their deaths in 1950. The collection was later donated to The New York Public Library by Nathan Hodas.

## **Scope and Content Note**

The Harry Mountford and Lottie Briscoe papers (1887-1950) document the careers and personal lives of performer, writer, and labor rights advocate Harry Mountford and his wife Lottie Briscoe, an early film and stage actress.

The bulk of the collection concerns Mountford's union activism in England and the United States with the White Rats, Variety Artistes' Federation, Associated Actors and Artistes of America, and American Artistes Federation. These files hold organizational bylaws, charters, handouts, publications, and meeting minutes; press clippings; legal records and research; and membership cards, flyers, and other ephemera. There is correspondence between Mountford, union officers, the press, and other relevant parties disclosing libel charges, failed initiatives, resignations, and other tensions and allegations

amongst the labor and company unions. A 1910 commemorative award presented to the White Rats by Brother Harry Thomson, a 1920-1921 scrapbook of labor dispute headlines, and a "Who's Who" directory of vaudeville acts are also present.

The scripts files contain drafts, typescripts, and scenario outlines of Mountford's writing for stage, radio, and film. Interspersed is related correspondence with collaborators and employers, research and production notes, sheet music, booking agreements, and copyright applications. Full-length works written by Mountford present are *The Cats and the Kitten*, *The Death Ray* (also known as *The Vultures*), *As the Doughboys Talk*, and an adaptation of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* as well as a series of "Ms. Schultz & Mr. Meyers" radio sketches, which starred Briscoe. A booking contracts file features annotated client agreements and properties overseen by Mountford in his late career as a booking agent.

The majority of Mountford's personal correspondence is with daughter Lily Walsh and stepson Sydal Whittaker, both children from prior marriages. Briscoe's chief correspondent is her sister, actress Olive Helen Rauch. There are further letters between husband and wife, and other family members and friends. The personal correspondence files of Briscoe also contain greeting cards, horoscope readings, health and housekeeping notes, charity work documentation, travel souvenirs, and acting career clippings and keepsakes.

The collection holds several address books and a datebook belonging to Briscoe, as well as manuscripts of her published articles on motion picture and dramatic acting, which originally appeared in national trade and fan magazines.

The photograph files consist of publicity portraits of Briscoe, Mountford, and fellow performers as well as candid shots of the couple, friends, and family members.

The theater ephemera files hold an assortment of programs, flyers, publications, and monologue booklets related to Mountford and Briscoe's performing careers. Also present are a box of Mountford's shirt collars, a coat brush, and bookmark.

The financial and legal files contain the couple's birth, death, and wedding certificates, final wills, a joint passport, receipts, checkbooks, share certificates, and life insurance records. Documentation of the proceedings for the Mountford-Briscoe estate, overseen by executor Charles L. Kahn, is included, as is that of vaudeville star Elmer Ellsworth McFadden (stage name: Edward Esmonde) and wife Mary Louise Esmonde McFadden, for whom Mountford was executor.

**Arrangement:** This collection is arranged alphabetically by subject or format.

## **Key Terms**

### **Occupations**

Actors

Labor unionists

### **Subjects**

Actors -- Labor unions

Performing arts -- History -- 20th century

Vaudeville -- History -- 20th century

**Genre/Physical Characteristic**

Clippings

Photographs

Printed ephemera

Scripts

**Names**

Briscoe, Lottie, -1950

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