



William Mathew Hodgkins was baptised in Liverpool, Lancashire, England, on 23 September 1833. He was born in the heart of the city's dockside slums, the first child of a brushmaker, William Hodgkins, and his wife, Jane Grocott or Grocock. His sister Jane was born in 1835. Another sister died in infancy.

For a while Hodgkins's father seems to have prospered. By 1837 he had moved across the Mersey to a better address, but in the depression of the 1840s he apparently abandoned his business for work in an inland factory. Consequently, the young William Mathew Hodgkins went to school in a small Derbyshire village called Staveley, and his exercise book in penmanship survives from that time. Its combination of a practical skill with an aesthetic interest seems to prefigure the principal concerns of his adult life: the law and art.

There is a gap in the record from 1845 until about 1852 when Hodgkins's father reappears in business in Birmingham and William Mathew surfaces in London. He was a clerk there in the time and circumstances of David Copperfield, but Hodgkins's special interest in art distinguishes him from the Dickensian prototype. He lived for a while at Holborn and worked at the patent office and for Waterlow and Sons, the famous printers of stamps and banknotes. By June of 1855 he was off to Paris where he assisted a certain Captain Denny 'in a literary work of some magnitude' at Versailles. About 1857 he returned to London where he spent time looking at J. M. W. Turner's works and at others at Hampton Court and the National Gallery. In 1859 he worked at the National Portrait Gallery.

Sometime between 1856 and 1858 Hodgkins's family emigrated to Melbourne, Australia. He followed them late in 1859 sailing on the *White Star*, whose ship's surgeon was Thomas Morland Hocken. He arrived in Melbourne in 1860 and was probably living in Dunedin, New Zealand, by April 1862. Presumably he was attracted there by the Otago goldrush.

In Dunedin Hodgkins established himself as an ornamental writer but was soon working for Gillies and Richmond, presumably as a law clerk. When he joined a Masonic lodge he was described as a law stationer and in 1863 he became an articled clerk. Through a fellow lodge member he met Rachel Owen Parker, the daughter of a coroner at Sydney. The couple were married in St Paul's Church, Dunedin, on 19 September 1865; they were to have four sons and two daughters. Hodgkins was admitted to the Otago Bar in 1868, and the pattern of his changing addresses at this time shows upward social mobility.

It is unclear when Hodgkins started painting but the oldest known work is from 1862. His association with George O'Brien may have been important to his development. He did not exhibit at the New Zealand Exhibition of 1865 in Dunedin but did take charge of its photographic department. He organised a fine arts exhibition in 1869 with the specific aim of starting a permanent art gallery. That failed, but in 1875 he founded what soon became the Otago Art Society. After resisting several of his plans to form a gallery the society started to collect pictures under his presidency in 1881, and in 1882 it was finally persuaded to start a 'national collection of works of art'. It seems Hodgkins had in mind something like the collections he had known in Paris and London. A further resolution in October 1884 effectively founded the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, the first such institution in New Zealand.

At this period Hodgkins's career as a lawyer went into decline. In 1884 he moved out of his house in Royal Terrace to a rented cottage in Ravensbourne, an out-of-town suburb. Although he became mayor of West Harbour he had to resign in 1888 when he was declared bankrupt. He struggled out of these difficulties and the family moved back to town and into a large rented house. Hodgkins now became involved in organising the art department of the New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition of 1889–90. In 1889 he proposed that the government start a national gallery that would have works in each of the country's main centres. Nothing came of this but instead the Dunedin gallery was assisted with more works, a new building and a new society of supporters.

Hodgkins's own painting had progressed steadily. He was now an accomplished landscape painter in the Turneresque romantic manner; the most notable feature of his work is its handling of colour. The 1890s saw the arrival of new styles brought by Girolamo Nerli, Petrus van der Velden and J. M. Nairn. Hodgkins generously welcomed these newcomers, and with Nerli sojourning in Dunedin the twin circles of painters for a while made the city the foremost centre of art in New Zealand.

Hodgkins died at Dunedin on 9 February 1898; and is buried in Dunedin's Northern Cemetery. His wife survived him by 28 years. He left his family in straitened circumstances but with a fund of goodwill from a community that gratefully remembered a cheerful, persevering, ambitious man. They had good cause. He had published the first considered statement of any length on New Zealand art, had founded the art society and the gallery, and had left behind a body of works the best of which are among the best of their kind in New Zealand. His daughters, Isabel and (more notably) Frances, inherited his artistic talent.

William Mathew Hodgkins's achievements look even more impressive almost 100 years after his death than they did to his contemporaries. His paintings have gained in stature, the Dunedin gallery has grown remarkably, and in recent years his younger daughter's reputation has grown again. He has turned out to be one of New Zealand's more influential artistic figures of the nineteenth century.

Prepared by the Historic cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand
(www.cemeteries.org.nz) with information taken from: Peter Entwisle. 'Hodgkins, William
Mathew - Biography', from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the
Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 1-Sep-10
URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/2h42/1>