

## BOOK REPORT:

### ***THE THEOSOPHICAL MOVEMENT 1875-1925* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1925)**

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To the lay reader this segment of history will read much like a novel, guaranteed to rouse the reader's anger almost to violence, or his compassion for our heroine almost to tears. There are stormy moments, heart-aches, brutal injustices borne by its heroes and heroines, vindications, triumphs.

To the historian here is as accurate a record as one is likely to procure, for the writers were careful to furnish sound documentation for all they presented. It is obvious that its authors were not seeking any self-glorification for their work here, for they have not so much as attached their names to it.

To the serious student of Theosophy this book ought to be required reading. It is something more than a history. It is a guide to discrimination, the fine line of which can lead the student forward or backwards. He may learn the lessons from those who did not recognize the subtle pitfalls and failed, dragging entire groups with them, causing untold 'damage. But in spite of these set-backs, Theosophy has filtered into all departments of life around the world and made a profounder impression than almost any movement in history. It has profoundly affected science and theology, sociology, general progress, either directly or indirectly

*The Theosophical Movement* is a most remarkable story centering around perhaps one of the most remarkable women in history, yet the book's purpose is something more than to recite a narrative. There are serious errors and injustices to be corrected and the entire record to be set straight. Popular belief has been led into false channels. But even more than this is the effort of the Lodge to preserve the true teachings.

The story, briefly, is this: the Theosophical Society was founded in New York City in 1875 by Mme. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, recently arrived from Europe presumably for this purpose, and Col. Henry Steele Olcott, a man with excellent organizational abilities that were needed for the movement. Mme. Blavatsky, the "Messenger of the Masters," attracted wide attention by her most remarkable occult powers and gained an entering wedge and a hearing through spiritualism which she shortly denounced. For this she was later persecuted by the Spiritualists.

Shortly after founding the Society she wrote *Isis Unveiled*, a remarkable work of tremendous scholarship and with quotations from thousands of sources, the work being the more remarkable considering her rather unscholarly life and the small handful of books at her disposal and her slight acquaintanceship with the English language. Col. Olcott worked untiringly at her side, editing (as others likewise helped on later works), resulting in a certain amount of garbled information, quotation marks in the wrong place and certain loss of continuity. For such errors

her enemies labeled her a plagiarist and showered her with criticisms. Yet the work stands today as one of major importance.

The Society flourished, and branches sprang up around the world. In 1879 the founders sailed for India and established world headquarters there. Then troubles began. The Coulombs, Christian missionaries who were at first attracted to Mme. Blavatsky and her amazing phenomena, soon broke with her and while she was absent, rigged her offices with devices to make all her production of phenomena appear fraudulent, and then invited the Society for Psychical Research to come look. They splashed their “expose” around the world, with the result that echoes of “charlatan” are still heard today. It was a deep blow to the movement and left Mme. Blavatsky at the edge of death. Worse, those on whom she counted for support, deserted. Then there came internal strife personality clashes, selfish interest and power plays that threatened for a while to split the organization. And finally, from the *New York Sun* came a most slanderous attack on Mme. Blavatsky, charging fraud, immoralities and reviving every accusation that had ever been hurled at her. This time hero-worker, William Q. Judge, stood beside her, and instead of trying to avoid law suits as did her companions in the Coulomb case, he took it upon himself to take the case to court; The *Sun* was not able to make a single charge stick, for she was innocent on every count, but before the suit could come to trial Mme. Blavatsky was dead, a broken woman. The trial was automatically terminated with her death and the whole matter could have been dropped, yet the *Sun*, finally realizing it had been duped and had made a gross error against an innocent woman, paid her tribute by publishing a complete refutation of all the charges against her, completely vindicating her. Though ailing in body most of the time, Mme. Blavatsky (or H.P.B., as she came to be called) worked untiringly in the cause of Theosophy. Though surrounded constantly by enemies, critics and accusers, her teachings were sound. It is inconceivable that anyone who could write so tremendously valuable a tome as her *Secret Doctrine*, or as beautifully inspired a work as her *Voice of the Silence*, could be guilty of fraud. Rather, she was hailed by many as an Avatar. It was not intended that this great movement should die with its founder. William Q. Judge she had appointed as her sole agent for the American Sector and the Esoteric teachings, and Mrs. Annie Besant was to be Chief Secretary of the Inner Group and Recorder of the Teachings. As Recorder she took it upon herself to make over 40,000 changes in the “Third and Revised Edition” of the *Secret Doctrine*:

ranging from trivialities through important alterations to deliberate suppression of all paragraphs in the Original Edition of two volumes which showed unmistakably. What the genuine Third Volume (already, with the Fourth . . . completed by H.P.B. before her death), consisted of the utter disappearance without a trace . . . of the *genuine* Third and Fourth Volumes of the *Secret Doctrine* remains to this day an unrevealed mystery.

Mrs. Besant substituted a spurious “Third Volume” consisting of “a hodgepodge of rejected manuscripts, ‘literary remains’, private papers originally issued to the E. S. T. during the lifetime of H.P.B., and largely *rejected manuscript of the first volume of the Original Edition.*” Further, besides declaring this material falsely as the Third Volume, she broke a solemn pledge as a member of the Esoteric School, and corrupted the manuscripts of this volume “by more than 1200 alterations, perversions, suppressions and substitutions of text.”

Col. Olcott, although he proved to be an able administrator of the Society, was somewhat a victim of his ego. Coupled with this was his great interest in phenomena rather than in the philosophy, a quality apt to blind one to truth and wisdom. He resented the continued adoration of the membership for H.P.B. and finally tried fighting it by writing his "Old Diary Leaves," in which he presented her with what he considered human foibles much as anyone else. Actually his belittlement of her was partially because of his inability to comprehend her greatness. Only Judge adhered faithfully to the line and moved on several occasions to defend H.P.B. and her teachings. But the rift between the American and European branches widened and Mrs. Besant, at first in harmony with Judge, soon began to dispute his successorship, declaring herself to be H.P.B.'s successor. Her head, too, was easily turned, by one Chakravarti, a Brahmin posing as a great admirer of hers but actually an enemy of the movement and bent on destroying it. To their side was drawn Col. Olcott and some others, who together brought charges of fraud against Judge and demanded his resignation. The American Sector, however, stood solidly behind him. They withdrew from the parent society and elected Judge as head for life of their new group. Charges meanwhile were dismissed against Judge but the damage had been done, and Judge died shortly thereafter, in 1896.

In both Europe and America Mrs. Besant's group flourished and grew in popularity, but unfortunately the teachings veered farther and farther from those of its founder, Mme. Blavatsky. Together with a clairvoyant of dubious character, C. W. Leadbeater, they wrote profusely, ignoring the warnings earlier given out by the Masters. Their Esoteric Section became "a hall of Occultism" and a "factory for the manufacture of initiates," the very thing the true Mahatmas had so insistently denounced.

Lacking the prestige attached to Col. Olcott as President-Founder, the ability and reputation of Mrs. Besant and the original name of the "Theosophical Society," and finally the loss of their leader, William Q. Judge, the American group did not flourish. Although H. P. B. could rightfully have no "successors," once again the question of "successorship" arose. Judge's mantle fell to Mrs. Katherine Tingley under circumstances which later caused considerable doubt among the membership. With disillusionment began gradual disintegration until from a society of over 6000 members only a few hundred remained.

There were several offshoots of the Society, those from Mrs. Tingley's group including the "Theosophical Society in America," the "Theosophical Society of New York," and the "Temple of the People." There were other groups too, most of which became dormant after a few years. Each had its own publication too. Among the various groups in America today adhering to the Judge line, the largest is the United Lodge of Theosophists, founded in 1909 in Los Angeles by Robert Crosbie. Their literary organ, the magazine *Theosophy* is a "reincarnation of Mr. Judge's *The Path*."

There were also offshoots of the Besant group, notably Dr. Rudolph Steiner's "Anthroposophical Society," C.R.S. Mead's "Quest Society," and Max Heindel's "Rosicrucian" society, (A.M.O.R.C.). Scores more of "occult, fraternal, mystical, and new thought" groups have sprung up, of assorted appeals and purposes. "

Has the Theosophical Movement of our times been a failure?” asks the author. The answer is complex. Some of the Wise Ones have wondered if the teachings were not given out prematurely. Yet Mme. Blavatsky accomplished that which she came to do, to present a message to the world. As with the mission of Krishna, Buddha and Jesus, so too is it possible that in time this one will degenerate, but “under the Law of Cycles, it is certain that its zenith is yet to come,” says the author. Mr. Judge has stated both H.P.B.’s aim and mission to the world at large thus:

Her aim was to elevate the race. Her method was to deal with the mind of the century as she found it, by trying to lead it on step by step; to found a society whose efforts however small itself might be would inject into the thought of the day the ideas, the doctrines, the nomenclature of the Wisdom-Religion, so that when the next century will have seen its seventy-fifth year the new messenger coming again into the world would find the Society still at work, the ideas sown broadcast, the nomenclature ready to give expression and body to the immutable truth.