

Why Take Blavatsky Seriously?

Scholars have not heretofore taken Blavatsky seriously, because it is generally accepted that she was proven to be a fraud. There was therefore no reason or need to evaluate her writings. However, in 1986 the century-old report which was primarily responsible for branding her a fraud was itself put in serious doubt. This original report of Richard Hodgson, published by the Society for Psychical Research, London, in December 1885, has now been examined by Dr. Vernon Harrison. His study is also published by the Society for Psychical Research, in their *Journal* for April 1986, almost exactly one hundred years later. Dr. Harrison opens by referring to Hodgson's conclusion that Blavatsky was an "impostor," noting that it "has been quoted in book after book, encyclopaedia after encyclopaedia, without hint that it might be wrong." He continues:¹

For years Hodgson has been presented as an example of a perfect psychical researcher, and his report a model of what a report on psychical research should be. I shall show that, on the contrary, the Hodgson Report is a highly partisan document forfeiting all claim to scientific impartiality.

After showing this, he states in his conclusion:²

As detailed examination of this Report proceeds, one becomes more and more aware that, whereas Hodgson was prepared to use any evidence, however trivial or questionable, to implicate HPB, he ignored all evidence that could be used in her favour. His report is riddled with slanted statements, conjecture advanced as fact or probable fact, uncorroborated testimony of unnamed witnesses, selection of evidence and downright falsity.

It is this Report on which virtually all modern assessments of Blavatsky, other than those of her supporters, are ultimately based.

Besides the evidence against the century-old assessment of Blavatsky as a fraud that this new study provides, there exists some very weighty evidence for her integrity that I believe has been unduly neglected, even by her supporters. This is the testimony of Gnostic scholar George R. S. Mead, who was Blavatsky's private secretary for the last three years of her life. The neglect of this evidence by Blavatsky's supporters can perhaps be explained by the fact that Mead left the Theosophical Society "in utter disgust" in 1909, but this fact would for outside investigators give his testimony all the more weight. He wrote that when he came to work for her:³

She handed over to me the charge of all her keys, of her MSS., her writing desk and the nests of drawers in which she kept her most private papers; not only this, but she further, on the plea of being left in peace for her writing, absolutely refused to be bothered with her letters, and made me take over her voluminous correspondence, and that too without opening it first herself.

He goes on to say that,

it convinced me wholly and surely that whatever else H.P.B. may have been, she was not a cheat or trickster—she had nothing to hide; for a woman who, according to the main hypothesis of the S.P.R. Report, had confederates all over the world and lived the life of a scheming adventuress, would have been not only incredibly foolhardy, but positively mad to have let all her private correspondence pass into the hands of a third party, and that, too, without even previously opening it herself.

This, by the way, counters not only the Society for Psychical Research Report by Hodgson, but also the hypotheses of an elaborate scheme of deception put forward by K. Paul Johnson, which have now received some attention in academic circles.⁴

The above was written by Mead in 1904, while he was still a member of the Theosophical Society. But he repeated it practically verbatim in 1926, long after he had left the Theosophical Society in 1909:⁵

I joined the Society in 1884, immediately on coming down from Cambridge. In 1889 I gave up my profession of teaching, and went to work with Yelena Petrovna Blavatskaia (generally known as Mme. Blavatsky). For the last three years of her life I was her private secretary, and in the closest intimacy with her. . . . Whatever else Yelena Petrovna was . . . , H. P. Blavatsky was not, within my experience at any rate, the vulgar trickster and charlatan of hostile popular legend. . . . When I first went to her to work permanently, I was a young man of whom she practically knew nothing, . . . Nevertheless, with childlike confidence, and with one of those large and eccentric gestures of hers, she handed over to me at once the keys of her desk and bookcases and tossed over, unopened, her voluminous correspondence, bidding me answer it as best I might (and ‘be d—d’), as she wanted all her time for writing her articles and books. It was all very foolish and imprudent; but at any rate it was assuredly not the act of one who was popularly supposed to be carrying on an elaborate fraud with numerous confederates.

Yet by this time Mead had long since come to disagree with Blavatsky’s teachings, having founded his own “Quest Society” in 1909, so had nothing to gain by repeating this. He continues: “This does not mean to say that I approve otherwise of her and her ways by any means. I retain a great personal affection for her bohemian and racy personality; but much she wrote I know to be very inaccurate, to say the least of it; while her whole outlook on life was that of an ‘occultist’—a view I now hold most firmly to be fundamentally false.” Mead’s firsthand and disinterested testimony is weighty evidence for Blavatsky’s integrity, whatever one may think of her teachings.

The agnostic writer William Stewart Ross put it more strongly:⁶ “‘Impostor’ indeed! She was almost the only mortal I have ever met who was *not* an impostor.”

While we believe that any unbiased investigation will confirm Blavatsky’s integrity, our concern is with the material she brought out in her writings, which must stand or fall on its own merits. We have said this much only to show that the neglect of her writings by scholars due to fraud charges is, after all,

unwarranted. My evaluation of the originality of the teachings from the secret “Book of Dzyan,” the basis of her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, may be found in the article, “*The Secret Doctrine: Original Genesis and the Wisdom Tradition*.” Certain scholars of last century, such as F. Max Müller to whom we are indebted for the first Sanskrit edition of the *Rg-veda* and Sāyaṇa’s commentary, held the opinion that the stanzas from Blavatsky’s secret books were taken from known Sanskrit and Pali works.⁷ Yet from then until now, no one has been able to trace a single stanza from the “Book of Dzyan” in any known work, and some of us have been trying for many years to do just that.

Notes

1. Vernon Harrison, “J’Accuse: An Examination of the Hodgson Report of 1885,” *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, London, vol. 53, no. 803, April 1986, pp. 286-310; quotation cited from p. 287. This article has recently been reprinted along with new material in: Vernon Harrison, *H. P. Blavatsky and the SPR: An Examination of the Hodgson Report of 1885*, Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1997.

2. Vernon Harrison, “J’Accuse,” p. 309. Dr. Harrison in the opening of his 1997 book comments further on this earlier statement of his: “If this seem hyperbole, I reply that now that I have had the opportunity of re-reading the Hodgson Report in the light of the hard evidence that still remains to us (i.e., the Mahatma Letters preserved in the British Library), the Hodgson Report is even worse than I had thought.”

3. G. R. S. Mead, “Concerning H.P.B. (Stray Thoughts on Theosophy),” *Adyar Pamphlets*, no. 111, Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1920, pp. 8-10; reprinted from *The Theosophical Review*, vol. XXXIV, April 1904, pp. 130-144.

4. These hypotheses of an elaborate scheme of deception on the part of Blavatsky are found in K. Paul Johnson’s three books: *In Search of the Masters*, privately published, 1990; *The Masters Revealed*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994; *Initiates of Theosophical Masters*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995. For a carefully

researched and well-reasoned critique of these books, see: Daniel H. Caldwell, *K. Paul Johnson's House of Cards? A Critical Examination of Johnson's Thesis on the Theosophical Masters Morya and Koot Hoomi*, privately published, P.O. Box 1844, Tucson, Arizona 85702, November 1996 [this now available at: www.blavatskyarchives.com/johnson.htm, along with K. Paul Johnson's also well-reasoned response].

[Additional note, June, 2011: In the original note, and in the sentence that it goes with, I had used the phrase "conspiracy theories," which I have now changed to "hypotheses of an elaborate scheme of deception." It has come to my attention that the phrase "conspiracy theory" today usually has derogatory connotations, and may be "used in a pejorative sense to automatically dismiss claims that are deemed ridiculous, misconceived, paranoid, unfounded, outlandish or irrational" (Wikipedia). None of these are at all what I intended. I meant by it nothing more than hypotheses of conspiracy in the sense of an elaborate scheme of deception. These hypotheses, per se, are no more or less valid than any other hypotheses, including those that take the form of the beliefs usually accepted by most Theosophists. My point was that Mead's testimony would be evidence against the hypotheses of an elaborate scheme of deception on the part of Blavatsky. There was no intention to denigrate the valuable research conducted by K. Paul Johnson and made available in his books. His premise, that the Theosophical Masters can be identified with living men who were well known in India, is closer to what Blavatsky had taught about them than the idea of "Ascended Masters" that developed later. Blavatsky had always insisted that her teachers were living men.]

5. G. R. S. Mead, "The Quest'—Old and New: Retrospect and Prospect," *The Quest*, London, vol. XVII, no. 3, April, 1926, pp. 289-291. I am indebted to Jerry Hejka-Ekins for a copy of this article.

6. William Stewart Ross ("Saladin"), *Agnostic Journal and Eclectic Review*, May 16, 1891; reprinted as "How an Agnostic Saw Her," *Lucifer*, June 1891, pp. 311-16; cited in Sylvia Cranston, *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Movement*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1993, p. xvii.

7. See: G. R. S. Mead, "Concerning H.P.B. (Stray Thoughts on Theosophy)," *Adyar Pamphlets*, no. 111, pp. 14-16; this material is also cited in Sylvia Cranston, *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Movement*, p. 384-85.

[The foregoing article was written by David Reigle and published as the Introduction to *Blavatsky's Secret Books: Twenty Years' Research*, by David Reigle and Nancy Reigle, San Diego: Wizards Bookshelf, 1999, pp. 1-5. This online edition is published by Eastern Tradition Research Institute, copyright 2004. An alteration was made on p. 2, and to the corresponding note 4, in June, 2011, and an addition was made to that note.]