

## A PROGENY OF MONSTERS

The Frankenstein School of “Creative” Biography-and Its Mythical Madame Blavatskys

By

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I began the creation of a human being.... Ah, who shall conceive my secret toil, as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave? ---as I collected bones from charnel houses and disturbed, with profane fingers, tremendous secrets? And then, collecting the instruments of life around me, I contrived to infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing... But now that I am finished, the beauty of the dream has vanished. Lo, I behold the wretch---the miserable monster whom I have created -- - a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived!

---Dr Victor –Frankenstein  
(With apologies to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley)

Less than one year from now, theosophists and other devotees of the Occult will, we presume, appropriately celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of their Aquarian-Age Avatar, the fabulous and controversial Madame Blavatsky who, to quote biographer Campbell, “abandoned the comforts of the Russian nobility, but... gained immortality as the greatest magus of her age.” As if so important an occasion demands a boosting-up of incredulity, hostile critics have been busy, in their own quaint manner, preparing reinforcement for skeptics and scoffers. Just as C.E. Bechofer-Roberts fashioned what his publisher, on releasing *The Mysterious Madame* coincidentally with the 1931 Blavatsky centenary, called “the first impartial” and “first fully documented biography of her,” so now we are assured one of these latest biographies is neither “accusatory” or “focused on the negative”, nor one of defensive “bias” involving “refusal to confront the issues”---but the first offering of “a third approach” (by Campbell); and the other,

by Ms Marion Meade, boasts to be the first in “revealing... the real story of Madame Blavatsky,” until now “hidden behind the respectable curtain of Theosophist exegesis.” Well now, let us see what the buyer, beguiled by these claims, receives in return for \$12.95 or \$19.95---facts or fiction, firsthand historical record or made-over myth collected at third-or-fourth-hand. Do we get lifelike portraits, or patchwork caricatures trotted out as “the real... Madame Blavatsky”? With what manner of form and tissue---and from whence derived?---have our industrious biographers fleshed-out the bare bones of unchallenged knowledge concerning this “Sphinx of the Nineteenth Century”?

The accepted facts, simple enough for any encyclopedia sketch, are but the beginning: H.P. Blavatsky, born Helena Petrovna de Hahn, grand-daughter of a Russian princess, began life as a child-medium (automatist). After years spent in worldwide pursuit of the mysteries of Magick and the secrets of Asiatic Occultism, she helped found the Theosophical Society in 1875 at New York. Later, from her pen came Isis Unveiled: “A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology” (1877; two volumes totaling 1,379 pages), and, in 1888, The Secret Doctrine: “The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy” (1,567 pages in two volumes). Regarded earlier in Europe as a “medium” for mental and physical “psychic phenomena,” Mme Blavatsky, in America and later in India, was surrounded by wonders. strange voices and apparitions attended her coming and going; at her command, objects “materialized” or “multiplied.” Unlike the séance phenomena of spirit-mediums, these occurred without “circle” and in full light, conforming to her will and intent. At her Headquarters in India, at Adyar near Madras, a Shrine or cabinet was provided for exchanging communications with her mysterious “Teachers” (said to be living Adepts or Mahatmas, residing beyond the

distant Himalayas and elsewhere), and letters of inquiry put therein vanished instantly or were returned counter-inscribed in Mahatmic hand.

In 1884, leaders of the two-year-old Society for Psychical Research---plagued then, as now, by “the demand of critics that evidence should be got which can be repeated at will”---showed interest in the claims for Madame Blavatsky. An investigating Committee was appointed by the S.P.R. Council---which itself included more than one Theosophist. A Preliminary Report conceded the existence of a prima facie case for at least some of these claims; but, before rendering a final verdict, prudence compelled the Committee to send an agent to India for direct interrogation of as many witnesses as possible and for on-the-spot investigation. Meanwhile---during the visit of Madame Blavatsky and Col. Henry Olcott (President of her Society) to Europe and England, where they were questioned by members of the S.P.R. Committee---, scandal had broken into the open at Adyar. A Mon. and Mme Coulomb, handymen and housekeeper at the Headquarters, had been expelled on a variety of uncontested charges, including theft, attempted extortion and slander; and, after a lapse of months, the wife had contacted to supply local Christian missionaries with several dozen letters ostensibly in Madame Blavatsky’s handwriting, soon to become notorious as “the Blavatsky-Coulomb correspondence.” If genuine, some few of the letters and parts of others clearly implicated Madame Blavatsky---though no one else---to produce in secretly conspiring with the Coulomb pair to produce “occult phenomena” by fraudulent means, employing for trickery the Shrine and other contrivances (some of which, were subsequently found, others not). This Coulomb-missionary exposé was first published in The Christian College Magazine of Madras, September and October 1884, afterwards (with additional “letters”) amplified in a Pamphlet written and published by Mme Coulomb that November. Together with the S.P.R. Committee’s final Report of December 1885, and

Dr Richard Hodgson's 1893 rejoinder to defenses subsequently made for Madame Blavatsky, these five indicated documents comprise the basic fund of evidence (of whatever nature) upholding the claims that she was a lying charlatan and her "occult phenomena" a hoax. In its final verdict, the Committee (including F.W.H. Myers, Edmund Gurney, Frank Podmore) branded Madame Blavatsky "one of the most accomplished, ingenious and interesting imposters in history."

In reaching its "conclusions," this Committee accepted as proven only two positive accusations against Madame Blavatsky, both being founded on the belief of its members that they could not have been deceived by forgery in their examination of samples of the "Blavatsky-Coulomb correspondence" brought by Hodgson to England for their inspection. Even more dependent upon the Coulomb evidence, Hodgson, after spending some three months in India as the Committee's agent, compiled and prepared the bulk of its published Report, much of it given to his argument---though not one accepted into the Committee's own "conclusions"---that "Mahatma letters", received through the Adyer Shrine and in other mysterious ways, had been surreptitiously "written in a feigned hand" by Madame Blavatsky and those whom he took to be her secret confederates.

This was the first notable "exposé" in modern Parapsychology, and its effect upon the subsequent course of Psychical Research can hardly be exaggerated. Yet, even among skeptics, questions still persisted, as when, in 1902, Mr. Podmore (whom Ms Meade quotes only when it suits her purpose) named Madame Blavatsky with D.D. Home, greatest of the spirit-mediums, and wondered whether these two might have possessed "some power" capable of causing witnesses to "see visions and dream dreams."

Hence, if there is one common agreement among biographers of the life of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (“H.P.B.,” for short), it is that her career merits attention and study chiefly for two things: her Occult Teachings (embodied principally in Isis Unveiled and The Secret Doctrine and in the published volume of Mahatma letters now in care of the Select Manuscripts Department of the British Museum, whether or not these be attributed to her), and her Occult Phenomena (no matter how it may be thought these mysterious manifestations related in part to her seldom-seen Adept-“Brothers”). These two areas, each in turn, are divided between claims and counterclaims contested by authorities or self-appointed authorities, pro and con. Skeptical critics value such attention as an eye-opener to better comprehension of human credulity, illustrating the dangers of brain-destroying superstition; while the apologists, instead, see such study as promoting new and valuable insight into little-understood mysteries of Man and Nature.

It is not denied that Madame Blavatsky’s Teachings, these books and writings, laid the original groundwork for what is best in modern Occultism (that, in our own time, is enjoying what some have termed its “explosion” or “renaissance”), for its philosophic, ethical and scientific principles---however much her ideas and her “Theosophy” have suffered unacknowledged misappropriation and discreditable transformation at the hands of others since her death. Thus, after research which included “interviews with over 300 mystics,” journalist John Godwin (certainly no apologist for H.P.B.) reported in his Occult America (Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1972), “It is hard to overestimate Madame Blavatsky’s influence on the American metaphysical scene. Portions of her teachings have been incorporated into virtually every Occult group extant---though mostly without giving her a credit line. Over and over again I have listened to cult leaders expounding the Blavatsky gospel to their flock---as their own uniquely original discoveries or rather revelations.”

Madame Blavatsky's Occult Phenomena, including both the mental and physical manifestations, ran the gamut from clairvoyance telepathy and precognition to "apports" and "materializing" apparitions---all of which, unlike the familiar stock-in-trade of Spiritualist mediums, could be witnessed without séance, sitter-circle, cabinet or darkness. (It is in adult life, noteworthy that in adult life, she never professed to put inquirers into communication with their deceased relatives, friends or acquaintances.) As the Dr Nandor Fodor, a Parapsychologist of note, observes---despite his general acceptance of the Hodgson verdict on H.P.B.---in his monumental Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science, "The general character of Mme. Blavatsky's phenomena is of a different order than from those of the spiritualist medium.... Whereas there is a limit to the phenomena of every spiritualist medium Mme. Blavatsky apparently knew none. From the materialization of grapes for the thirsty Olcott in New York to the duplication of precious stones in India, or the creation of toys for children out of nothingness, she undertook almost any magical task and successfully performed it to the stupefaction of her coterie." Even today, the case of Madame Blavatsky remains the most celebrated in the annals of Psychical Research---and the only example of a self-professed Occultist demonstrating Magick before members of a Committee of recognized Parapsychologists (Gurney and Myers and also Sir William Barrett, initiating-founder of the same, prestigious, London-based S.P.R.).

Manifestly pretentious and, at once, impressive, bearing all the outward signs of studious scholarship, Ms Meade's book is certainly the largest biography of H.P.B. ever published, crammed cover-to-cover with an enormous recitation of anecdotal narrative. To believe its author, it "would not have been written without the inspiration and encouragement of William Targ," the publisher, who believed "that H.P.B.'s story deserved to be told one more time." Dr Bruce Campbell's study, on the other hand, offers no pretence of being an entertaining "story,"

but, from first to last, reads suspiciously like an open invitation from a would-be Guru offering unmasked guidance to organized theosophy, its leadership and following. His expressed “intention” is “to use the tools of the scholar to understand and to lay a foundation for the improvement of the tradition expressed in the Theosophical movement.” By “reformulating” its “basic ideas” in accommodation with “science and the modern world in general,” Campbell sees it gaining for itself “greater respect and credibility” with the public. To accomplish this questionable feat, the good Doctor---himself, “for several years a member of... a theosophically related meditation group” and also a Ph.D. who “has taught religion at Indiana University and at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he is currently affiliated with the Institute of Religious Studies”---opines that the Blavatsky following, suffering from “a lack of professional intellectuals,” requires to be guided “intellectually by the theologian.”

(Perhaps this review---not simply a review of the two books under notice, but also of the sources and methodology they employ---will shed some light on just what it is that guides “the theologian” and “professional intellectuals” in their approach to Madame Blavatsky and the controversies surrounding her.) Bypassing the side-issues of entertainment by a “story... to be told” and of theological striving for “respect and credibility,” for any reader in search of fruitful extension of knowledge and understanding of Madame Blavatsky and her claims, these two books---like any of their kind---can only be judged fairly by the degree to which they can be found honestly, accurately and comprehensively reporting the whole range of publicly available evidence, both pro and con, centering upon the twin bedrock basics of H.P.B.’s teachings and phenomena. What do they say on these?