**Blavatsky, Helena Petrovna (‘HPB’) (1831-1891)**

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (HPB to her inner circle) claimed that from childhood she possessed the gift of clairvoyance. She used this well-publicised fact to her advantage in 1875, when she founded the Theosophical Society in New York, with her life/business partner Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907).

On the subject of her own life, Blavatsky was by turns vague, contradictory or mendacious. Even her closest associates and acolytes present varying accounts of her personal story; she was possibly bigamously married up to four times—though it is clear she was married once to Mr Blavatsky, as she carried his name throughout her life. It is clear that she was well-travelled, spending the majority of her adult life crossing from one continent to the next. The exact details of her life in each of the places she called home—London, New York, Cairo, Madras—are, however, absent. She was also fond of telling people she was ten or twelve years older than her actual age. These discrepancies leant themselves to the carefully-cultivated air of mystery in which she sought to shroud herself.

Blavatsky had an interest in Spiritualism, the burgeoning practise of séances and spirit contact that was extremely popular in both Britain and the United States during the mid- to late-nineteenth century. In 1873 Blavatsky travelled to Vermont, USA, to visit with the Eddy Brothers, who were alleged to be powerful Spiritualist mediums. There, she met Olcott, and together they devised the tenets of Theosophy.

Theosophy, she explains in *Isis Unveiled* (1877)*,* comes from the Greek words for ‘divine’ (*theos*) and ‘wisdom’ (*sophia*). She writes that her ideas had been divinely inspired, and were not hers alone. The Mahatmas, a group of learned men living in seclusion in Nepal, were responsible for transmitting these teachings to her, via the astral plane (that is, telepathically). Blavatsky’s writings were inspired by not only these Mahatmas, but elements of Buddhism, Hindusim, Kabbalah and alchemical practices of the middle ages. Shortly after the publication of *Isis*, she returned to London and set up the British Theosophical Society.

Theosophy was popular, but it did not, as she had hoped, unseat Spiritualism as the demi-occult practice *du jour* in the late-nineteenth century, despite the involvement of such high-profile figures such as Annie Besant and W.B. Yeats. Even after her death, she was still a subject of great interest, notably in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, where she appears as ‘Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante… the wisest woman in Europe’ (1930:13).

In 1880 she relocated from London to India, where she set up several Theosophical houses. Despite the move away from the prying eyes of the British popular press, accusations of fraud against her mounted. The well-respected Society for Psychical Research investigated her Theosophical allegations of astral projection and teleportation in 1884 and 1885, concluding that the majority of her claims were false. The most damning case against her came from Emma Coulomb, her own housekeeper, who detailed exactly how Blavatsky perpetrated her frauds, including mocking up an ‘astrally projected’ human head out of a pig’s bladder.

Blavatsky died in 1891, with the majority of the British press believing her to be fraudulent. Regardless of the accusations, she contributed greatly to raising interest in the fields of Spiritualism and Occultism. The Golden Dawn, Aleister Crowley’s occult organisation could not have existed without the influence of Blavatsky and Theosophy.

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