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MADAME BLAVATSKY UNVEILED?

A new discussion of the most famous investigation of
The Society for Psychical Research.

Leslie Price

Theosophical History Centre
London

THE AUTHOR

Leslie Price is Editor of "Theosophical History" and Secretary of the Theosophical History Centre. He is a member of the Library Committee of the Society for Psychical Research.

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MADAME BLAVATSKY UNVEILED?

Leslie Price

Introduction

This paper was first presented on 12 April 1983, within the regular S.P.R. public lecture programme. It was subsequently made available in draft in both the parapsychological and theosophical communities, and I am grateful for the many comments received. Apart from numerous small changes, the published version lacks some paragraphs from S.P.R. documents that have since been published in full in "Theosophical History", a new journal about which details appear inside the back cover. For permission to quote the material that remains, I am indebted to the S.P.R. The views expressed here should not be taken as representing any organisation.

Many persons have assisted in the preparation of this paper, but special thanks are extended to Miss Eleanor O'Keeffe, Secretary S.P.R. and her staff; Miss Lilian Storey, Librarian of the Theosophical Society in England and her colleagues; and Miss Margaret Brice-Smith, whose assistance was vital. The Editor of the S.P.R. Dr John Beloff has also been extremely helpful, although I eventually decided to let the new Theosophical History Centre issue the paper separately, rather than seek publication (subject to final refereeing) through S.P.R. periodicals.

I am pleased to report that to some extent this paper has already become outdated. The Tibetan side of Madame Blavatsky has been explored at length by Miss Jean Overton Fuller in a new biography that should be published in 1987. I have briefly discussed it also in a paper "Theosophy as a problem for psychical research" presented at the Rome conference of the Parapsychology Foundation in 1985 "Parapsychology, Philosophy and Religious Concepts", whose Proceedings will soon appear in New York. Moreover the research of David Reigle "The Books of Kiu-te or Tibetan Buddhist Tantras - a preliminary analysis" (San Diego, Wizards Bookshelf, 1983) has taken scholarly discussion of H.P.B.'s sources to a new height.

An epoch-making event, likely to occur in Spring 1986, is the publication in the "Journal" of the S.P.R. of Dr. Vernon Harrison's re-examination of the handwriting and paper evidence of the 1885 Report. Dr. Harrison, who was formally chief scientist at De La Rue, and therefore professionally interested in forgery, had found grave irregularities in the handling and interpretation of the evidence by the S.P.R. and its then advisers. His paper, which I have been permitted to read, makes a powerful criticism.

I am aware that some Theosophists find discussion of the 1885 Report distressing. (Psychical researchers tend to see it as one of their triumphs.) I am inclined to agree though with the observation of John Cooper ("Theosophy in Australia" Dec. 1985) that "the publication of the Hodgson Report is critical to the history of the Theosophical Movement. It is the barrier to a more general acceptance of the Theosophy that Madame Blavatsky taught. In a sense it is the keypoint to the general acceptance of Theosophy to the world outside the Theosophical Movement, just as the Judge Case, which also centred on letters from the Mahatmas, is the keypoint to the divisions within the Theosophical Movement. (p.77) Of the many writers who continue to take the 1885 report uncritically, one may note with particular regret Janet Oppenheim's "The Other World; Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England" New York, C.U.P. 1985), though she is to be congratulated on having unearthed Myers's Certificate of fellowship of the Theosophical Society.

Michael Gomes, in his 3-part article "The Coulomb Case 1984", which appeared in "The Theosophist" Dec. 1984-Feb. 1985, has pulled together in a valuable survey some of the events and arguments of a century about these matters. He wrote there "Perhaps the greatest contribution in this field is being made by Walter A. Carrithers, Jr. of Fresno, California." (p. 182) It is indeed to Mr. Carrithers, the S.P.R. member who kept this case alive through many lean years, and who is still unearthing new data, that I offer this paper.

LESLIE PRICE

Madame Blavatsky Unveiled

Although the S.P.R. has published many investigations in the century since 1882, probably none is better known (by repute, if not actually read) than the (final) report of the Committee appointed to investigate phenomena connected with the Theosophical Society, which appeared in "Proceedings" S.P.R. 3 201-400, December 1885. It should be distinguished from a preliminary report circulated privately to S.P.R. members in December 1884. The final report is generally known as the Hodgson report because Richard Hodgson (1855-1905) collated much of it after a visit to Theosophical headquarters at Adyar, Madras India. However his colleagues on the Committee - Gurney, Myers, Podmore, the Sidgwicks, and J.H. Stack - did not endorse all his arguments, notably his own conclusion.

"... I cannot profess myself, after my personal experiences of Madame Blavatsky, to feel much doubt that her real object has been the furtherance of Russian interests." (p. 317)

Madame Blavatsky, the co-founder of the T.S. (as I shall henceforth call it) was born in 1831. In "Spiritual Magazine" April 1872 she was reported to be directing a Spiritualist society in Cairo, Egypt and after her arrival in New York in 1873 reports of paranormal phenomena around her began to appear regularly in the Spiritualist papers. She was corresponding secretary of the T.S., founded in New York in 1875, of which Col. Henry Olcott was president until his death in 1907. The two chief founders left the U.S.A. for India in 1878 via London, and transferred T.S. headquarters first to Bombay and in 1882 to Adyar. It was during a visit by the founders to Europe in May 1884 that the S.P.R. Committee was formed. The S.P.R. itself was only two years old, and the personnel of Spiritualism, Theosophy and Psychical Research were not then as polarised as they later became.

Thus C.C. Massey, for example, first president in 1878 of the British Theosophical Society, who had been in New York at the formation of the T.S., was in 1882 an S.P.R. founder and Council Member. Stainton Moses, who constituted an informal triangle with Massey and Olcott, was also an S.P.R. founder, editor of "Light" for a time and first president of the London Spiritualist Alliance. F.W.H. Myers, whose role in psychical research I need not emphasise, was elected a T.S. member on 3 June 1883 at a meeting at Mr. Massey's rooms (Sinnett 1922). The full extent of Myers's Theosophical involvement is not generally realised. He was the English F.T.S. (fellow of the T.S.) who contributed "Some Enquiries Suggested by Mr. Sinnett's "Esoteric Buddhism" " which were answered at length in "The Theosophist" (De Zirkoff 1950). Myers was the chief instigator of the S.P.R. investigation into Theosophical phenomena (ibid p.264).

Whether it was necessary or desirable for the close relation of the three movements to be severed by resignations, as happened by 1887, may be argued by historians. But a consequence has been that the various parties who have an interest in H.P.B. (as I shall hereafter call Blavatsky) have been remiss at times in not paying enough attention to each other's published evidence. On this occasion I shall not attempt to survey more than a fraction of the aspects of the case, and my emphasis will be on material that is unpublished or little known. It is inevitable therefore that I shall omit testimonies in defence of H.P.B. and witnesses against her, and evidence about others of the numerous major players in the story. A recent defender of H.P.B. has written "The study of the case of Madame Blavatsky is probably the most complex task in history, and the pursuit of information exceedingly tortuous" (Endersby 1969 p.14). Certainly errors about this complicated saga can be found in both hostile and sympathetic works, so I would counsel you to believe nothing about H.P.B., whatever the source, until you have checked it, including my own account!

The 1885 report

The definitive unveiling of H.P.B., as I have said, was the publication of the S.P.R. report of December 1885, though its conclusions had been known in outline to Theosophists and S.P.R. members for many months. In 1894 Richard Hodgson wrote a reply to some Theosophical criticisms of the 1885 report entitled "The Defence of the Theosophists" (Proc. S.P.R. IX 125-159) in which he recalled his visit to India.

"Madame Blavatsky's attitude to myself as expressed at the time, was as characteristic as her subsequent vituperation. With her keen insight into human nature, she was well aware that whatever prepossessions I had at the outset of my investigation were distinctly in her favour, and in the last interview which I had with herself and Colonel Olcott, she declared that the Brotherhood (that is the Masters, or Mahatmas or Adepts behind the T. S. and the phenomena -LP) was unwilling that the world should at this time believe in their existence, that I had in fact been practically guided by the Brothers themselves, that she knew I had done the most possible for her sake, that there was no alternative but for me to reach the conclusion which I had reached, that it was partly the result of her own bad Karma, that she deserved the fate which had overtaken her, but that some day in the far distant future I might come to believe that after all she was innocent. With me personally, face to face, she was courageous unto the last." (p. 135)

The debate about the 1885 report has continued for a century, and I suggest that it is timely for S.P.R. members to look again at what was significant history for us, but which is always present to Theosophists. It is an instructive exercise on the S.P.R. side to follow the desultory debate about the case in the volumes of the "Journal" and "Proceedings". A hostile biography was reviewed (Ephesian 1931), but sympathetic ones (such as Kingsland 1928) were not. A book alleging she faked letters from the Mahatmas was reviewed (Hare 1936), but not the Theosophical replies (such as Hastings 1937). Amusingly, there is a circular about Beatrice Hastings' projected series in defence of H.P.B., and one of the copies in the

S.P.R. archives has a handwritten note to watch the situation in view of the anti-S.P.R. tone; but the two published volumes themselves do not seem to have been acquired. Some other important Theosophical critiques of the 1885 report, such as Jinarajadasa 1934, are not in the S.P.R. archives or library.

The S.P.R. attitude improved after the retirement of Mr. Salter. So far as I am aware he was the last S.P.R. officer to give currency to the "Russian agent" theory. In his contribution to the series "Our Pioneers" he wrote of Richard Hodgson's report with general approval but added,

"A more serious criticism may be levelled at Hodgson's attempt to explain Mme. Blavatsky's motives. He considered it more than possible that her object in going to India was to spread disaffection towards British rule. It was a time of acute Russo-British tension in Asia, and some of the words and writings of Mme. Blavatsky and her associates lent colour to Hodgson's suspicion. His weakness lay in assuming that in the character which he attributed to her of impostor and unofficial Russian agent she could not also have been a prophetess. This over-simple psychological judgement is the counterpart of her followers who, finding comfort in her doctrines, indignantly repudiate any suggestion that their prophetess could have used fraud to promote them."

(Salter 1960 p. 33) (See also J.S.P.R. Nov. 1936 p. 295-6)

Although the conclusions of the 1885 committee were theirs alone and not the S.P.R.'s, which has no collective view, the S.P.R. did share the responsibility (with some people to be identified below) because the S.P.R. could have decided not to publish its committee's final report pending further investigation, or it could have restricted circulation to members. Moreover the S.P.R. was the instigator of the publication in 1895 of a partial translation from the Russian, of V.S. Solovyoff's "A Modern Priestess of Isis" (London, Longmans Green) which gave a very unprepossessing sketch of H.P.B., with further evidence of fraud, though the author's account taxed the belief even of his translator at times.

In his prefatory note, Professor Sidgwick, whose initial sympathy for H.P.B. had turned to scorn (Sidgwick 1906) spoke of her as "a charlatan - a question already judged and decided". He observed, less dogmatically "whether the Theosophical Society is likely to last much longer, I am not in a position to say; but even if it were to expire next year, its twenty years" existence would be a phenomenon of some interest for the historian of European society in the nineteenth century; and it is not likely that any book will be written throwing more light on its origin than "A Modern Priestess of Isis".

In fact such a book appeared in that very year, 1895, the first volume of Henry Olcott's "Old Diary Leaves", to which I shall return later. Neither this nor its five later volumes were reviewed in S.P.R. publications. The T.S. did last much longer. I suspect that it has never had less than twice as many members in England than the S.P.R. and today there are another 20,000 T.S. members worldwide. Whether the S.P.R. is likely to last much longer, I am not in a position to say, but certainly nearly all the writings of those who assailed H.P.B. in her lifetime are out of print, whereas all her books are in print, and through the publication of the Collected Writings, they are today available more accurately, conveniently and comprehensively than ever before, even in her lifetime. One sentence however she never wrote, though it appears on p.253 of Solovyoff: "Here, you see, is my trouble, tomorrow there will be nothing to eat. Something quite out of the way must be invented". This supposed explanation of the T.S. is the author's purported summary of an H.P.B. letter he has quoted. It is not, in my view, a fair summary - quite the contrary, but its value to the student is that authors prejudiced against H.P.B., or too reliant on secondary sources, quote it as her very words, which even Solovyoff does not claim. (Thurston 1931, usually the most balanced of writers, does so p.426, as does Meade 1980 p.143.)

Testimony deleted from 1885 report

Henry Sidgwick, so hostile in 1895, had been involved in the decision not to publish evidence of H.P.B.'s powers personally witnessed by members of the 1885 Committee. Testimony to the phenomenon of the "bell sound" was deleted from the proof of the preliminary report, and it is the merest chance that it survived long enough to be found in 1960 by Walter A. Carrithers Jr., when the S.P.R. supplied to him and to other Theosophical parties microfilm of surviving archival material on the 1885 investigation (Carrithers 1962). Two of the witnesses were Myers and Gurney, and Myers in his testimony asserted that the sound was different from that produced by the conjuring trick "Is your watch a repeater?". Nevertheless in the final report Hodgson quoted the former officer of the T.S., Madame Coulomb (who had supplied incriminating letters to "Christian College Magazine"), as saying that the bell sounds were produced "by use of a small musical box, constructed on the same principle as the machine employed in connection with the trick known under the name "Is your watch a repeater?" " (p.263 see whole passage). (Now published in "Theosophical History" April 1985.)

The relevance of the omitted testimony cannot be doubted. The decision not to publish appears to have owed much to Herbert Stack, a little-known member of the Committee, with whom ironically Olcott had engaged in informal psychic experimentation while in London (O.D.L. Vol.3). It may be that Stack was humouring Olcott, for Stack emerges as the "hard man" of the Committee in a memorandum he sent Sidgwick after reading the draft of the preliminary report.

This memorandum, which appears as an appendix to this paper, seems to me to be of some significance in the history of psychic research, since it may have been the first time that an S.P.R. Committee decided not to publish eyewitness testimony to a phenomenon produced by the person being investigated. Possibly

H.P.B. produced other phenomena which were witnessed but not reported by the Committee. Certainly the decision not to publish this one, even to S.P.R. members, had been taken before Hodgson arrived in India. Had they published this one, instead of concealing it, Hodgson in turn might have witnessed more in India. Mr. Stack wrote:

"That Mr. Myers, Mr. Gurney and Mr. Thurstan (note spelling-LP) heard two tinkles of a bell in Madame Blavatsky's presence is clear - but surely this is a very small fact to be so elaborately and solemnly recorded. The phenomenon is parallel with the unaccountable raps heard in the presence of a medium. Nobody can say that such things are by themselves proofs of anything supernatural; the possibility of fraud or confederacy is always present, unless we insist on tests which Madame B. would certainly not submit to."

And Professor Sidgwick wrote, "Agreed. Omit bell".

It is clear from Stack's covering letter to Professor Sidgwick that not everyone shared his scepticism, "I tried to convert Myers and Gurney yesterday: I am afraid my arguments had not much effect: they are still under the spell of Madame Blavatsky" writes Stack. Evidently they recovered sufficiently to agree to the deletion of the bell testimony. The existence of that testimony was disclosed to J.S.P.R. readers by Mr. Carrithers (writing under his pseudonym Adlai Waterman) in a letter published in December 1969 (45-p.196). It has never appeared in full anywhere until published in T.H. April 1985.

Richard Hodgson

In October 1884 therefore, the Committee was divided. Myers and Gurney were sympathetic to H.P.B., and so at first was Hodgson. Albert J. Edmunds, later of Philadelphia but then of England, recalled in J.A.S.P.R. 1912 p.443,

"Parenthetically I may say here that during this visit from Hodgson (who had come to our town to investigate a case of mind-reading for the S.P.R.) he told me of his approaching expedition to India. He was in high spirits, and quite hopeful of confirming for

Madame Blavatsky her alleged occult powers. Indeed he had brought in his bag Sinnett's "Occult World", on purpose to make me read it. He knew that I had read "Esoteric Buddhism" (this was long before my Pali studies, which began in 1895); and he was determined that I should have the "facts" whereon the philosophy was based. I can therefore testify that he did not go to India expecting fraud, as some have imagined. Far otherwise. His attitude was entirely judicial, but his secret inclination was to find proof of psychical powers. I first met Hodgson at Sunderland in 1883, when he was an extension lecturer for the Universities of Cambridge and Durham. I remember his saying at one of the lectures that we ought to regard nothing as impossible. As he was deeply imbued with Herbert Spencer, this remark was significant of revolt"

Another Committee member, Podmore, an ex-Spiritualist turned sceptical, held a senior position in the Post Office, and an attempt was made by the Committee to use his staff to trace a registered letter sent to H.P.B. from India. (See Hodgson Report p. 390)

This is apparent from a note in the S.P.R. archives, which has evidently been passed successively to G.P.O. staff. By the time the preliminary report was issued, the Committee had no doubt that there had been some fraud by persons connected with the T.S. Either the ex-staff members, the Coulombs, were lying, or H.P.B. was. Various doubts were discreetly expressed in that report, and this greatly annoyed H.P.B. when she read it. It reached India while Hodgson was there. The issue of "preliminary reports" is a dangerous procedure in psychical research - they may well please no one, and prejudice the investigation of delicate subjects.

Hodgson arrived in Madras on 18 December three days before H.P.B. returned there from Europe. It is necessary to emphasise that they were in regular contact until 25 March, the day before Hodgson left for Europe, because some Theosophical critics of Hodgson have doubted this. Alice Leighton Cleather, for example, an otherwise acute critic of the Theosophical scene and an old pupil of H.P.B. wrote to "The

Occult Review" (XXXVIII 1923 112-3), in response to an article I shall shortly quote.

"Will you allow me to point out that when Mr. Hodgson was at Adyar, Madame Blavatsky was on a brief visit to Europe with Colonel Olcott; and that he never, to the best of my knowledge, ever even saw her?"

Mrs. Cleather wrote from the Himalayas, a good address from a Theosophical point of view, but her preconceptions led her to damage her own case. Theosophists have focused on Hodgson because he was the agent sent to India by the S.P.R. Committee, and he uncovered a good deal, but even if Hodgson had never existed, the S.P.R. Committee was turning against H.P.B. by late 1884, and there were to be developments of other contacts, such as conversations between Myers and Solovyoff, that were to strengthen the disbelief. The influence of C.C. Massey too was great. He resigned his membership in 1884 of the T.S. partly because he had learned that H.P.B. had caused a letter to be delivered to him, as he believed, by pretended supernatural agency. As this story is often retold, it may be worth quoting from Massey's letter to Sidgwick (6 November 1884).

"And I will tell you privately, what no one else knows, (I think) that I have not got either the "Brother's" letter, or Mme. Blavatsky's to me, of that period. I have not let this be known because Mme. B's knowledge of it might have encouraged Mme. B. to make assertions (?-LP) or denial of facts, which as it is, she has not ventured upon. And I could not have disproved anything she chose to say, probably."

Attempts are still being made by Theosophists to explain the Massey letter incident (e.g. Endersby p.266). The explanations did not eventually convince Sinnett (Sinnett p.70), but all the same it is a pity that it was not disclosed that some of Massey's documentation was missing. H.P.B. was, in effect, asked to explain a Mahatmic letter that no longer existed. Incidentally it is clear, despite what he

says above, that Massey did manage to find one letter dating from that time (1879), which is quoted in the 1885 report (p.397). Anyone interested in what the Master K.H. had to say about this will find his comments in Humphreys and Benjamin (1962 p.411-3). In view of H.P.B.'s charge of forgery of part of the incriminating letter, it is not irrelevant that the letter was supplied to Massey by the estranged husband of Mrs. Billing, who had cause to dislike H.P.B. Massey's letters have now been published in T.H. July 1985.

The Hodgson Report

Let us now consider the main part of Hodgson's report. Dr. R.H. Thouless, in J.S.P.R. September 1968 (reviewing Mr. Waterman's critique of Hodgson entitled "Obituary" T.P.H. 1963) comments (p.344),

"Richard Hodgson has sometimes been regarded as a perfect psychical researcher, and his report on phenomena connected with Theosophy as a model of what a report in psychical research should be. I do not myself share this opinion. Certainly this report shows some of Hodgson's merits as investigator. The investigations showed painstaking care, and the report presents a powerfully argued case. It seems, however, to lack the impartiality sometimes claimed for it. He may, as he says, have been favourable to occultism and to the claims of Mme. Blavatsky when the investigation was started' (p. 208), but, by the time he wrote the Report, his hostility to Mme. Blavatsky and his contempt for the 'native' and other witnesses on her side was apparent. This hostility reaches its climax in the irrelevant and apparently unfounded suggestion that Mme. Blavatsky was a Russian political agent (p. 314-7). It was I think characteristic of Hodgson that he decided early in an investigation what was the truth of the matter and then tended to present the evidence in a way which supported the truth, tending to over-emphasise the part of the evidence favourable to his conclusion and to under-emphasise the part of the evidence which made difficulties for it. His conclusions may well have been right, but his tendency to over-state his case makes him vulnerable to criticism."

May I briefly mention some of these criticisms. It has been believed, even by some senior Theosophists, that the letters supposedly written by H.P.B. to Mme Coulomb, giving instructions for faking certain phenomena, were written by H.P.B. - Sinnett eventually so concluded, although Theosophists are well aware of Sinnett's rivalry with H.P.B. The matter is still today in need of further study. Mr. Netherclift, one of the handwriting experts used by Hodgson, was involved in two other cases where his identifications were disputed (Jinarajadasa 1934), though Hodgson in his 1894 paper ignores this, as well as an instructive and famous case of that era in which Charles Parnell the Irish statesman was accused of writing to foment violence in Ireland. A forger confessed to having produced that writing by tracing some words from a genuine Parnell writing. "The Times" had published the forgeries after obtaining the opinion of Inglis, a handwriting expert (Jinarajadasa and Endersby think Netherclift was the expert, but I am not aware that he was involved in the case), and the costs of the case, which became part of the deliberations of a Parliamentary Commission, financially crippled "The Times" in that generation.

Apart from the primitive state of graphology at that time, it is noted by Dr. Thouless in the review cited above that Hodgson made several mistakes procedurally in the way he tested the handwriting; for example, he did not send to the experts any of Mme Coulomb's handwriting for comparison. In 1964, on behalf of Victor Endersby, Paul Kirk of the University of California Criminological Department re-examined some of the Blavatsky material and concluded (for example) that neither she nor Damodar (her chief confederate in letter forging according to Hodgson) were the authors of a certain letter written by K.H. As for the Coulomb letters, their present location is obscure. Professor Chari of Madras does not think they are in Christian College, Madras anymore, which is housed in different buildings. There are none in

the S.P.R. that I have so far located. Possibly Hodgson took some to America. Perhaps some were retained by the editor of "Christian College Magazine", George Patterson, who twice retired to England. Some were sent to Dr. Elliott Coues in the U.S.A. for use by him in an attack on H.P.B. Mr. Carrithers believes that they were eventually destroyed by Coues' heirs. The latest biographers of Coues (Cutright and Brodhead) do not elucidate this, but enquiries continue. Some letters went to Emmette Coleman of San Francisco, who was always supposed to be writing a book exposing H.P.B., but who had produced only articles by the time of the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, the fire of which destroyed his library (Farquhar p.223). It is even possible that Mme Coulomb who retained ownership even after extracts had appeared in C.C. Magazine, did keep some wherever she eventually went. In short, the Coulomb letters have disappeared, and it is desirable that they be found so that the best resources of analysis today can be applied to them. Meanwhile, Mr. Carrithers, the man who discovered the deleted "bell" testimony in the S.P.R. preliminary report, has informed the S.P.R. that he has discovered, in print, before and after versions of a Coulomb letter that offer proof of her textual alterations. We await more details.

In 1937, Beatrice Hastings made an examination of the published text of the Coulomb letters and concluded that she had interpolated some genuine H.P.B. letters. Mme Coulomb's name appeared on a pamphlet giving her story and the letters (Coulomb 1884). Of this Mr. Hastings says,

"Her pages are made up of stories that were known and arch-known, many of them long since published in the "Theosophist" and in "Hints on Esoteric Theosophy" and "The Occult World". To these stories, she tries to fit an explanation giving herself and her spouse a conspiratorial importance in these phenomena about which they had never been told more than any other outside witness. Several outstanding phenomena, to which she fitted an "explanation"

after Hodgson arrived in India to investigate for the S.P.R. are not so much as mentioned in her pamphlet." (p. 23)

The implication is that Mme Coulomb invented the explanations for Hodgson. I know of no psychical research journal that has printed any reply to Mrs. Hastings, or to her earlier volume which argued that the Mahatma letters contain passages altogether beyond H.P.B. but perhaps my colleagues can help.

Christian College Magazine

It is only fair to point out that the "Christian College Magazine" (November 1884), in reflecting on reactions to its exposure, made exactly the opposite point to Mrs. Hastings about the Coulombs.

"All forgeries may be said to show a tendency to grow. But the Coulomb documents do not. We have the same papers at our disposal to-day that we had when we undertook the investigation. And yet the Coulombs have had the temptations such as no forger could resist. We were naturally anxious in an exposure of Madame Blavatsky to take up such phenomena as had obtained the widest publicity, (such for example as the Simla cup,) and asked for illustrative documents. What more easy than for the Coulombs to say - "You shall have them soon. They are somewhere, but we cannot lay our hands on them now"? But nothing of the kind happened. To all such enquiries, we received but one answer. They had nothing. Verbal explanations they offered in plenty, but the inevitable document of the forger was never promised." (p. 306).

Some words of defence of the magazine itself may also be of interest. Although they are usually thought of as Free Scottish Presbyterians, Christian College was in fact ecumenical and even (for its time) liberal in its religious approach, and the editor of the magazine, George Patterson, was a Wesleyan Methodist. The same editorial says,

"Whether we had sufficient evidence to justify our proceedings, the public will have an opportunity of judging presently."

(This is a reference not merely to further extracts from letters that follow but also the libel

case that H.P.B. planned to bring. The behaviour of Hodgson and others at that time was always conducted with this background, that the letters could be legal exhibits. Similarly, the Theosophists did not at first disclose all their evidence in defence of H.P.B.)

"But this much at least we can say for ourselves. While other periodicals, our most violent critics included, have in the past paraded their unbelief in Theosophy and contempt for Theosophists without any justification but their own unerring intuitions, we have always treated the cause and its adherents with genuine respect. It is neither with Theosophy nor with Theosophists that we have any quarrel even now. We fully recognise the right of the Theosophical Society to cultivate its chosen field. We recognize that something like what it proposes with regard to the ancient literature and religions of India is an absolute necessity at the present time. We believe that, just as the speculative principles of the Society are older than Madame Blavatsky, so they will live long after she is dead. We will go even farther and say that there are great possibilities before the Society, and that the one thing necessary to its real welfare is its complete separation from false phenomena and lying wonders. In bringing forward, as we have done, proofs that Madame Blavatsky's Mahatmas are a myth and her phenomena but feats of jugglery, we claim to be doing a greater service to earnest and thoughtful Theosophists than to anyone else." (p. 303)

That, at least, however mistaken in its final sentence, is very far from the image of "the missionaries" as they survive in popular Theosophical demonology. Mr. Patterson seems to have something in common with Mr. G.R.S. Mead (see below).

One other may be called to say that Madame Blavatsky was the author of the Mahatma letters; and that is one of the junior Mahatmas, D.K., who was to achieve prominence when he wrote through Alice Bailey. In a late treatise of Mrs. Bailey, we read (Bailey 1960 p.342),

"The Master K.H., in one of the few (the very few) paragraphs in "The Mahatma Letters" which are genuine and not simply the work of H.P.B., gave a hint to aspirants..."

H.P.B.'s statement

The Hare brothers (1936) had already concluded the same, except that they dismissed the Mahatmas totally. Hodgson too had thought that H.P.B. was the main author of the Mahatmic material. That she wrote some of it is undoubted. In "The Theosophist" August 1931, centenary of her birth, were published, not for the first time, extracts from a letter by H.P.B. to two German Theosophists in which she explained that disciples - chelas - were permitted to use a form of writing adopted for the T.S. to express what the Masters intended. (This was in January 1886, just after the S.P.R. report.) H.P.B. said that she had on occasion done three things,

1) used Master's name when I thought my authority would go for naught, and when I sincerely believed (sic -LP) acting agreeably to Master's intentions,* and for the good of the cause."

(to this she added a footnote)

*Found myself several times mistaken and now I am punished for it with daily and hourly crucifixion. Pick up stones, Theosophists, pick them up brothers and kind sisters, and stone me to death with them for trying to make you happy with one word of the Masters!"

She continues her list; of what she might be reproached with,

2) of having concealed that which the laws and regulations of my pledges did not permit me so far to reveal.

3) PERHAPS - (again for the same reason) of having insisted that such and such a note was from Master written in his own handwriting, all the time thinking, JESUITICALLY, I confess "Well, it is written by His order and in his handwriting after all, why shall I go and explain to those who do not (sic -LP) cannot understand the truth, and perhaps only make matters worse."

She adds,

"Two or three times, perhaps more, letters were precipitated in my presence, by Chelas who could not speak English, and who took ideas and expressions out of my head. The phenomena in truth

and solemn reality were greater at those times than (sic) ever. Yet they often appeared the most suspicious, and I had to hold my tongue, to see suspicion creeping into the minds of those I loved best and respected, unable to justify myself or to say one word. What I suffered Master only knew. Think only (a case with Solovyoff at Elberfeld) I sick in my bed; a letter of his, an old letter received in London and torn by me, rematerialized in my own sight, I looking at the thing. Fife(sic-LP) or six lines in the russian language, in Mahatma K.H.'s handwriting in blue, the words taken from my head, the letter old and crumpled travelling slowly alone (even I could not see the astral hand of the Chela performing the operation) - across the bedroom, then slipping into and among Solovyoff's papers who was writing in the little drawing room, correcting my manuscripts - Olcott standing closely by him and having just handled the papers looking over them with Solovyoff. The latter finding it, and like a flash I see in his head in Russian the thought "The old impostor" (meaning Olcott) must have put it there!" and such things by the hundreds."

Returning to H.P.B.'s letter, I draw attention to her use of the phrase "for the good of the Cause". In the preliminary report of the S.P.R., there is mention of the problem of those in ecclesiastical history who believed that "The end justifies the means" (p.7). Of course H.P.B. was wrong when she believed she was helping the cause by these practices, as perhaps she recognised when she told Hodgson that it was her karma to be denounced. Mr. Sinnett went further in his posthumous accusations, charging that she had employed the Coulombs to counterfeit the "phenomenal" appearance of a letter to him, and that he had concluded, by the mid-1880s, that she sometimes wrote Mahatmic letters herself, or altered what came through from the Mahatmas, to express her personal prejudices. Many Theosophists would deny this - they have the measure of Sinnett! - but they would also deny some of what H.P.B. admitted in her letter just quoted, if it were not too late.

Mediumship?

If H.P.B. sometimes behaved like this, how can it be explained? It does not make her an impostor. Sinnett suggested that she at times became possessed by an evil spirit, which tried to discredit her (p.68). His book was reviewed by Ralph Shirley, the editor in "The Occult Review" (XXXVII 1923) who made some remarks worth consideration.

"Mr. Hodgson, having satisfied himself of fraud in certain specific instances, put down all the phenomena that occurred in connection with H.P.B. to the same cause. All those who knew her well were perfectly aware that this sweeping condemnation was absolutely unjustified, and it was perhaps as natural for those who were familiar with the genuine phenomena which had occurred in her presence to maintain that everything she had done was equally above board as it was for the other side to declare that all was equally fraudulent. The fact is, Madame Blavatsky's composite nature contained, along with great mental powers and marvellous intuitions, many of the elements of that mischievousness which we are accustomed to associate with naughty children, and it was, I cannot help thinking physically impossible for her at times to resist the temptation of playing upon the credulity of her audience. The temptation was all the greater when this audience lent itself by its ready gullibility to this species of child's-play. Beyond this there were the inevitable conditions incident to a supremely mediumistic temperament. Mediums have been frequently accused of fraud, not without conclusive evidence, when it is morally certain that their actions were entirely outside their own control, and that they were not aware of what they themselves were doing." (p. 205)

Mr. Shirley returns this point later;

"It was many years after this when the Society for Psychical Research came to learn, in the case of Eusapia Palladino, that even consistent trickery may go hand in hand with occult phenomena which will stand the most rigid investigation, and found themselves compelled to recant in Eusapia's favour an earlier adverse decision. But in the case of Madame Blavatsky a far more complex character and a far more remarkable personality had to be dealt with and neither Mr. Hodgson nor probably any others members of the Society

in question were equal to tackling so profound a psychological problem."

[Note: The S.P.R. had, and still has, no collective view of Eusapia or any other medium - L.P.]

And a final quote,

"The whole problem of these phenomena is a problem of mediumship. Madame Blavatsky undoubtedly possessed the qualities of a medium to an extraordinary degree, and the phenomena that took place in her presence, and which to some extent at least she controlled, were the result of her psycho-physical constitution." (p. 206)

Actually H.P.B.'s phenomena differed from those of mediums, not only in her partial control of the energies around her, but also in that she did not give evidence of survival. In saying there is a mediumistic side to H.P.B., we must not fall into reductionism. She was more than a medium. This is well brought out in testimony by her last private secretary, G.R.S. Mead, who I suspect was consulted by Ralph Shirley, before the article appeared in "The Occult Review". Any balanced account of H.P.B. must draw on Mead (Mead 1906; Mead 1926; Price 1983).

A later case

A case with similarities to that of H.P.B. was reviewed in J.S.P.R. in 1960 by Dr. Thouless. "The Boy and the Brothers" (Omananda 1959) tells of a Cockney man through whom "The Brothers" speak, usually in a trance, though they are capable also of appearing as apparitions (p.75) or even as solid men (p.40). Despite deep spirituality, the Boy showed one of the traits common in the dissociatable personality; Swami Omananda, the lady who was nurse to his work, writes,

"He could and did weave stories about himself, just as a child will do; and he believed them - though sometimes I had my doubts, and gradually came to know when he was weaving and when not. I was indeed rather shocked by this over-imaginative life of the

Boy's; but presently I learned on very good authority, as we shall see, that this was his "psychic umbrella", and then I understood. (Later, he almost entirely dispensed with it.) A psychiatrist would call it "compensatory" something - which is the same. Had the Boy not kept this psychic umbrella well open in those early slum days, goodness knows what would have become of him. Among other things, his umbrella immunized him against injurious influences, so that he could make vital contacts when the time came." (p. 31)

Like H.P.B., the Boy had "a terrific, volcanic, unpredictable temper" (p.178), "and after long observation I came to the conclusion that the Boy's periods of rage and frenzied rebellion were indeed - among other reasons - his necessary safety-valve ... " (p.179). The Boy was vulnerable to possession by evil entities, who would try to make him do things damaging to the work and himself. The powers of the Brothers extended to interfering with lines on a page (p.219) but they did not intervene to protect their own agents from certain difficulties they were meant to suffer. Swami Omananda argues that the trances of the Boy have more in common with those of the great Indian saints than those of ordinary mediums. The Boy had considerable affinities with Kashmir and Northern India. (It will be recalled that K.H. was early nicknamed "Cashmiri" by the T.S. founders.) Swami Omananda had known Annie Besant, and had enjoyed psychic experiences of her own, including Glastonbury (p.18), and she recalled:

"The three Masters who were known to H. P. Blavatsky and others - "M", "K. H.", and "The Count" - were often with us in force. Obviously these are not their real names. Of these K. H. said that he was Pythagoras; but that does not tell us who he is now, or even that he was Pythagoras. One's only guides are intuition, atmosphere and - above all - their teachings and action." (p. 61)

Olcott's testimony

I have drawn attention, with brief inadequacy, to this more recent case because one aspect of H.P.B.'s teachers can I think be agreed. They were entities, who spoke to her clairaudiently, and sometimes entranced her. Thus Olcott recalled how some of the replies to the English F.T.S. (Myers) were received "That she was taking down from dictation was fully apparent to one who was familiar with her ways" (Olcott 1900 p.467). Whatever the origin of clairaudiently received material, there are ample cases in psychic literature and life of persons receiving philosophical teachings in this way, though the Theosophical teachings are of above average importance.

Sometimes the handwriting of Mahatmic material changes to reflect, I would suggest, different personalities, as in the Stainton Moses notebooks long on display at the College of Psychic Studies. In some Mahatma letters, it is by no means clear why the handwriting alters in different sections. In the celebrated Kiddle incident, complex enough to deserve a paper itself, a Mahatma letter included a passage from a published Spiritualist source. This is similar to the misfortune of Geraldine Commins who used some passages from an article by Col. Fawcett, published in his life, in presenting some post-mortem messages from him (Edmunds 1966 J.S.P.R. March). It is explicable in both cases as unconscious regurgitation. I believe that H.P.B. was in trance when she received some of her written material, and that she wrote it at times automatically.

Especially in New York, the entities spoke through her in a trance, and one of the most fascinating sections of "Old Diary Leaves" is Col. Olcott's long discussion of theories to explain it. But there are other witnesses, such as William Q. Judge, who wrote to Sinnett from New York in 1881 "While H.P.B. was here, they came many and many a time and spoke with Olcott and myself. But their identity was secure because neither of us at that time could pierce the

wall of matter and see the true occupant. We had to depend entirely on changes of expression" (Barker 1925 p.312).

In the Hodgson report, Olcott is savaged as a witness, and interestingly he is called "exceedingly credulous" by the anonymous historians of the "Theosophical Movement" (New York, Dutton, 1925 p.332), who represent the followers of Judge who had been accused by Olcott and others of writing Mahatma letters himself. (Note H.P.B.'s letter quoted above about her use of Mahatmic script, however.) Both Hodgson and the "Judge" historians had their reasons for wishing to discredit Olcott, yet his book contains reports of phenomena and personal incidents around H.P.B. that are worth the most serious thought. Olcott himself recognises the possible use of mesmerism by H.P.B. on such occasions. Like the biblical author of "Acts of the Apostles" he may not penetrate the most profound levels of his main character (in "Acts" it is Paul, claimed by H.P.B. to have been an initiate), but Olcott's long acquaintance with H.P.B. in the prime of life gives his account enormous value. He admits that his seven or so theories leave her a mystery. In a letter once in the S.P.R. archives - I have not located it myself - Olcott wrote to Stainton Moses and Massey about 1877:

"The Blavatsky shell is a shell, tenanted by a copper-coloured Hindu Solon or Pythagoras" (quoted in Besterman 1934 p. 150)

Among the phenomena described by Olcott are the production of psychic scents, and the ringing of a bell sound. Consider this quote from Vol.1 p.427:

"Before meeting this evening we heard the 'fairy bells' playing in different parts of the garden where we were talking; at times they sounded far off, seemingly playing at the tip of some high elm trees, music and stars mingling together, then they would approach nearer to us, eventually following us into the seance-room, which opened on to the lawn."

Yes, the seance-room, for Olcott is here quoting from Mrs. Speer's account of the musical sounds that used to accompany Stainton Moses (M.A. Oxon) in his physical mediumship. Olcott comments "The musical phenomena were evidently identical with those of H.P.B. but with the radical difference that she produced the sounds at will, while in Stainton Moseyn's case (sic - L.P.) they were beyond his control and most brilliant when his body was entranced".

There are in fact many similarities in the phenomena of Stainton Moses and H.P.B. But after his death Moses was accorded a respectful two-part article in S.P.R. Proc. In Vol. IX you will find Hodgson's rejection of "The Defence of the Theosophists" - and part one of Myers' paper on Moses, with fairy bells, scents and other phenomena (e.g. p.346). The occult connections of H.P.B. and Moses were close, and Olcott had seventy of his letters at Adyar in writing "Old Diary Leaves" (p.311), letters which should be edited and published. But whereas Moses was founder vice-president of the S.P.R., and took the chair at Council on occasion even during the Theosophical investigation, H.P.B. was cast out. Moses was a gentleman, H.P.B. was not. Incidentally it was in studying the mystery of Stainton Moses that I was led in 1980 to the Theosophical tradition. Perhaps Myers was credulous, but it is certainly unwise to dismiss the astral bells of H.P.B. while entertaining those of Moses.

Olcott also reminds us that anything written through a medium, even a letter precipitated on the other side of the room, will take on something of the personality of the medium, including handwriting mannerisms. This certainly complicates graphological analysis. He further believed that "a certain wonderful psychophysiological change happened to H.P.B." (p.18) and that he was transferred to the Indian section of the Mahatmas tuition, from the African section. This may be why,

"the "Mahatma M.'s" handwriting, which was so carefully scrutinised by the S.P.R., their experts and agents, and said to resemble that of H.P.B. was a coarse, rough script, something like a collection of chopped roots and brush-wood, while the handwriting of the same personage in the Isis (Unveiled-LP) manuscript and in the notes he wrote me was totally different. It was a small, fine script, such as a lady might have written, and while generally resembling H.P.B.'s own handwriting, yet differing from it so as to present an appearance of distinct individuality, which enabled me to recognise it as that personage's M.S. whenever I saw it." (p. 256)

The real nature of the trance entities is a matter on which we may differ - spirits of the dead, gods, living men distant in space but projecting (as H.P.B.'s were said to be), secondary personalities or whatever composite we like. These entities stayed in evidence around H.P.B. as long as she lived, but to a diminished extent after her health declined. I suspect too that Olcott was a battery for phenomena, and that in his absence (on missionary tours in India, especially after he began magnetic healing) the phenomena declined.

Two H.P.B.s

Some Theosophical sources, including H.P.B. herself, distinguished between the outer H.P. Blavatsky and the inner, wiser, H.P.B. (Alice Bailey's D.K. sometimes even calls that H.P.B. "He" instead of "She".) Dr. Archibald Keightley, who knew her later in life, suggested,

"For the purpose of the theosophical work that body was an instrument used by one of the Masters, known to us as H. P. B. When he had to attend to other business the instrument was left in charge of one of his pupils or friends, who ran the body as an engineer directs his machine when taking duty for another. But the substitute engineer has not the same sympathy with his machine or instrument as the regular man and is "outside the machine". I conceive that, just as the engineer and his machine overcome the inertia of matter, so the body and its tendencies proved no light task to control in the

absence of the real owner and head engineer. And a certain letting off of steam was the result. But the energy was not wasted but used up in the work." (Keightley 1959 p. 10)

The safety valve of the cockney "Boy" quoted above may be compared with the letting off of steam from H.P.B.'s psyche. Dr. Keightley makes a further comparison between how the outer Madame Blavatsky might react hostilely to a suggestion in a paper but the inner H.P.B. approve.

"When she read it through I was subjected to what I have since learned is called epilation, for I was divested of my scalp hair by hair. Exactly why I did not know, nor was I told. But when the process was finished somebody "upstairs" or "within" accepted the article and was rather pleased with it as being timely!"

The constitution of this person was androgenous, possibly hermaphrodite. Today psychical researchers face a similar problem in the phenomena of Sai Baba, also of uncertain sexual identity, producing powerful physical phenomena, and setting up a movement, which has become well-known since about 1975, that includes symbols of various religions.

Both Blavatsky and Olcott attributed many of the physical phenomena produced by mediums to elementals - so - incidentally - did Sir William Barrett, and quite a case could be made out for it. This is but one of the valuable theoretical ideas in early Modern Theosophy. "Astral shells" is another, that may yet prove of more value to survival research than "super-E.S.P.". Dr. Vernon Harrison, a senior member of the S.P.R. comments (private communication),

"I am prepared to defend her writings because I have taken the trouble to read some of them carefully. Far from being muddled, I find "The Key to Theosophy" and other minor works to be models of clarity and ordered exposition of difficult subjects. Far from being worthless, I find that the only other authors who have had comparable effect on my thinking are Swedenborg, William Blake and Carl Jung. As to the material being stolen, H. P. B. expressly

states that the beginning of "The Secret Doctrine" that none of it is her own; she has merely provided the string that ties the nosegay together."

"The Secret Doctrine" to which Dr. Harrison refers is the main work of H.P.B. It was written of course with a team of helpers, but was still an achievement of immense proportions for a person written off by an S.P.R. committee publicly three years before, a seminal work. Any assessment of H.P.B. must confront the book and, I would suggest, wrestle with it. Theosophists have a favourite and perhaps not entirely fair way of responding to superficial observations about their movement. "Have you read "The Secret Doctrine"?" they enquire ...

Tibet

H.P.B.'s material, implied Hodgson in his "Defence", was European translations and manuals on Oriental thought, rather than Oriental sources direct (p.159). It is known however that one of the greatest exponents of Manayana Buddhism of this century, Dr. Suzuki, more than once spoke admiringly of one of her last works. In a review, kindly copied for me by the Librarian of the Buddhist Society, and believed written by Dr. Suzuki for his journal "Eastern Buddhist" (Old Series) V p.376, the Japanese scholar said,

"The Voice of the Silence" is true Mahayana doctrine. Undoubtedly, Madame Blavatsky, had in some way been initiated into the deeper side of Mahayana teaching and then gave out what she deemed wise to the Western world as theosophy. It is true that some things were added and some subtracted from pure Mahayana doctrine according to the extent of her knowledge and her judgement."

In the days before he became disillusioned with the T.S. Mr. Massey thought he had identified even more precisely the source. In his pamphlet "The Metaphysical Basis of "Esoteric Buddhism"" he says "There can hardly, I think, be a doubt that Mr.

Sinnett's teachers belong to the sect of the Swabhavikas, the oldest of the four great schools into which Nepaulese and Tibetan Buddhism is divided" (p.21). An account had appeared in English of their beliefs in 1874, by another Hodgson. Unfortunately this theory was denounced by H.P.B. as astounding in Barker (1925) p.78.

In 1892 an American journalist Anna Ballard recalled interviewing H.P.B. on her arrival in New York in July 1873, not more than a week after she had landed. "I remember perfectly well her saying with an air of exultation 'I have been in Tibet'. Why she should think that a great matter, more remarkable than any other of the travels in Egypt, India, and other countries she told me about, I could not make out, but she said it with special emphasis and animation. I now know, of course, what it means" (quoted in Olcott 1895 p. 21).

And I know of course that many researchers do not believe H.P.B. was ever in Tibet, but that this item, along with others in the Ballard interview, was invented. Sinnett, it will be remembered, had difficulty fitting such a visit into her life history. In 1966, Geoffrey Barborka, a Theosophist scholar re-examined the Tibetan connections of H.P.B. and offered an interpretation of her as a tulku, that is, roughly speaking, a projection of a Tibetan or other adept, the best-known example of which in the West is the Dalai Lama's successive incarnations. Barborka's argument has yet to be considered by psychical researchers (Barborka 1966).

In his new account of the race for Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, Mr. Peter Hopkirk makes only an incidental reference to H.P.B., and he tells me that her name did not come to his attention in the "Tibetan" files of the India Office (Hopkirk 1982). But he points out that there is a narrow "political" Tibet, ruled by the Dalai Lama, and a wider ethnographic Tibet where people of Tibetan stock predominate (p.6).

This includes Ladakh, a journey to which is described by H.P.B. (1877, Vol. 2 p.598), and which she calls "Central Tibet". In a letter published in "Light" on August 9 1884, she claims to have stopped in Tz-gadze (Shigatse), the seat of the Tashi Lama, also known as the Panchen Lama, which was certainly in "political" Tibet.

I am not aware of any claim by H.P.B. to have visited Lhasa, or to have a special link with the Dalai Lama; her claim related to Shigatse and the Tashi Lama. Mr. Walter A. Carrithers Jr. of The Blavatsky Foundation (P.O. Box 1543, Fresno CA. 93716, U.S.A.) has emphasised this in his paper "Madame Blavatsky and Occult Tibet", originally published in "Theosophical Notes" September 1974 by Victor Endersby, which also reminds us that some of the occult practices of Tibet are black sorcery. Another Mahayana expert, Professor Conze is said (jestingly?) to have thought H.P.B. was an incarnation of Tsong kar pa, the Tibetan religious reformer whose successor founded the monastery at Shigatse (Eliade 1968). If H.P.B. was linked with a purifying influence in Tibetan religion, opposed for example to necromancy and sexual occultism, not every Tibetan would endorse her. In short, the Tibetan connection of H.P.B. remains open for study.

Steiner

It has generally been assumed by psychical researchers that H.P.B. was not part of a group of real people called the Brothers or Mahatmas. I am not aware, however, of any critical assessment in English of Rudolf Steiner's views on this question, to which he often alluded, but most conveniently perhaps in the lecture series "The Occult Movement in the Nineteenth Century and its relation to modern culture" (Steiner 1973). Steiner stated that H.P.B. was successively a member of a European occult brotherhood, probably based in Paris, an American

brotherhood and an Indian brotherhood. It was in this third phase of her life that the T.S. was started. Steiner's views are similar to those expressed in C.J. Harrison's "The Transcendental Universe" (1893), which was translated into German. But in view of his personal acquaintance with the European occult scene, especially Vienna (supposedly the site of a meeting called to consider what to do about H.P.B.'s disclosure of occult secrets), Steiner's statements merit further study.

It is idle to deny that H.P.B. had some political interests, for she claimed after all to have fought for the Italian Nationalists, and to have been shot for her efforts. Although I understand she may be mentioned in the files of the India office that deal with subversives - she was kept under observation after her arrival with Olcott - I am not aware of definite evidence that she was a Russian political agent. The possibility was again raised by the late James Webb in his biography of Gurdjieff "The Harmonious Circle" (1980) in the context of a discussion of whether Gurdjieff was a Tsarist agent (Webb 1980). If anyone of the S.P.R. has evidence that would support Hodgson's theory, that she was an agent, I call upon them to declare it. The 1885 Committee did not commit themselves to Hodgson's own theory about H.P.B., that she was best explained - not as being in the T.S. for the money or the notoreity or because she was a maniac - but as a Russian agent; and I know of no one in the S.P.R., since Salter cited earlier, who gives it credence. Hodgson may have been quite right in thinking H.P.B. was under orders from somewhere, but wrong in his suggested source. I prefer G.R.S. Mead's suggestion (1926) that her whole outlook on life was that of an occultist.

The 1885 Committee also detected flaws in the visits by Mahatmas in solid flesh. It is well known that there are evidential difficulties in some of the accounts of "Old Diary Leaves" first three volumes (though not all are easily explained). Mr. Ramaswamier

saw a Mahatma, for example (1885 report p.360) whom Hodgson suspected had been an impersonation involving Mr. Pillai among others (p.363). Support for this comes from the second series of "Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom" published by Mr. Jinarajadasa (1973) where what looks like Pillai's pseudo-Mahatmic letter of instructions is printed (p.119), although deeper study of the circumstances may clear this up innocently. He is told to put on yellow robe and cap. It is perhaps not surprising that a son of Ramaswamier, not sharing his father's faith, repudiated the T.S. in a pamphlet "Isis Further Unveiled" as Jinarajadasa tells us (p.93). Theosophists are unlikely to have the opportunity, like Hodgson, of reading Mme Coulomb's pamphlet, which indicated Mr. Pillai as the culprit (curiously, he was a police inspector). (p.49).

It has been suggested by a Theosophical historian, Sven Eek (1965) that Hodgson himself was deceived at Theosophical headquarters, by the Brahmin Subba Row.

"That he should wish to protect his Teacher's name (i.e. the Master M. -LP) against profanation and the mocking levity of the young Australian whom the S. P. R. had selected to investigate the reality of H. P. B.'s phenomena, stands to reason. But in doing so he failed to discriminate between truth and falsehood. He added to Hodgson's perplexities by deliberately leading him astray, instead of forth rightly telling him that there were matters in Occultism which chelas and students were not permitted to divulge. It must be said in all fairness to Damodar and Subba Row that they were not the only ones to resort to these questionable tactics. Darbhagiri Nath and the Europeans at the Headquarters finally joined the deception on Hodgson, particularly so Dr. Franz Hartmann who was chairman of the Board of Control." (p. 669)

One may well wonder what complexities are alluded to in this paragraph. Were Theosophists at Adyar trying to deceive Hodgson?

Later letters

Eek says K.H. blamed Damodar (his pupil) and Subba Row for two thirds of the delusions under which Hodgson laboured. And in a letter said to have been precipitated on the last blank page of one written by an Indian Theosophist in June 1886 (Jinar-jadasa 1934;1964), K.H. writes, apparently in response to a query in the main letter about the fate of Damodar, who had disappeared northwards,

"The poor boy has had his fall. Before he could stand in the presence of the "Masters" he had to undergo the severest trials that a neophyte ever passed through, to atone for the many questionable doings in which he had over-zealously taken part, bringing disgrace upon the sacred science and its adepts. The mental and physical suffering was too much for his weak frame, which has been quite prostrated, but he will recover in course of time. This ought to be a warning to you all. You have believed "not wisely but too well." To unlock the gates of the mystery you must not only lead a life of the strictest probity, but learn to discriminate truth from falsehood. You have talked a great deal about Karma but have hardly realised the true significance of the doctrine. The time is come when you must lay the foundation of that strict conduct - in the individual as well as in the collective body - which, ever wakeful, guards against conscious as well as unconscious deception."

Hodgson accused Damodar of being very much a partner of H.P.B. in fraud. Mme Coulomb gives him a smaller role, in fraudulently claiming, for example, that he had clairvoyantly seen that H.P.B. had injured her knee when this had been arranged beforehand (Coulomb p.73, on which account, in one of the S.P.R.'s copies, annotated by H.P.B. she comments, "Preposterous lie - lie - lie"). But clearly there had been some "conscious deception" of one or more persons, even if it was only of Hodgson, because K.H. says so. This letter, by the way, was written when H.P.B. was in Europe, and if you believe she wrote the letters with occasional confederates I invite you to identify its author.

I do not think that K.H.'s warning was entirely taken to heart because we find him again writing severely in a letter first made public after the issue of the Hare book (1936). The Hares had suggested, unoriginally, that H.P.B. wrote the Mahatma letters but Mr. Jinarajadasa released part of a letter said to have been received in 1900 by Annie Besant (Jinarajadasa 1964 p.99), nine years after H.P.B.'s death, and precipitated on to a letter from India to Mrs. Besant. The evidential value of the letter is greatly reduced by the fact that only a censored version has been published (it is said to contain references to the occult life of Mrs. Besant), and that it only saw the light of day much later. This K.H. letter is critical of the T.S. policy of its time, and is not the kind of letter (as some might think) that Theosophical headquarters would casually manufacture; it tries also to discourage the idea then current in some circles that H.P.B. had reincarnated, and it uses the K.H. script which was not then widely known. Part of it reads,

"The cant about "Masters" must be silently but firmly put down. Let the devotion and service be to that Supreme Spirit alone of which each one is a part. Namelessly and silently we work and the continual references to ourselves and the repetition of our names raises up a confused aura that hinders our work."

I should be interested to know who wrote that letter. A syntactic analysis by C.W. Marshall of Taunton, unpublished, suggests that it was not the same K.H. as earlier but the sample is small and necessarily incomplete for 1900, and H.P.B. cannot have been the medium.

Conclusions

Madame Blavatsky may have been officially unveiled by the 1885 report, just as Jesus of Nazareth, another "impostor" was decisively dealt with by physical crucifixion. But Hodgson himself acknowledged she was a "rare psychological study", and it

is my view, which I have illustrated, that there was much more to her than he and his colleagues supposed, and that she is worthy of further study by psychical researchers. This is particularly appropriate at centenary time because, as Mrs. Sidgwick said at S.P.R. half-centenary, in speaking of the Blavatsky case "I have dwelt on this investigation at perhaps undue length because I think it had a great effect on our understanding of the difficulty of our work and the care required not to arrive at conclusions prematurely" (Proc. XLI p.9).

I believe that conclusions were reached prematurely by the 1885 Committee, and that the S.P.R. as a whole has had to suffer consequences for this. But the 1885 debacle also has a long list of Theosophists who shared in the responsibility including (as she said) H.P.B. herself, Theosophists at Adyar, and the Theosophical Society which forbade her to sue the Coulombs, in effect deserting her, and, perhaps, bringing upon itself many problems in later years. It is possible however that H.P.B. would never have got "The Secret Doctrine" finished if she had not been publicly discredited and forced back to Europe for health reasons.

As the S.P.R. enters its second century under the presidency of a Theosophist/Psychical Researcher Professor Ellison, may I invite all S.P.R. members and all Theosophists to join in an informal and cooperative effort to understand these complex historical events, and in particular to secure publication of surviving archival material in Adyar, London and elsewhere that is relevant. Both authors and editors have difficulty in publishing long historical pieces, and to help with such problems, I propose the establishment of a neutral Theosophical History Group, representing all those with an interest in Theosophical history broadly defined.

Some Theosophists have asked the S.P.R. to withdraw the 1885 report. Technically however it express-

es only the views of its authors even though popularly it is assumed to be the definitive S.P.R. view. It did then represent the conclusions of the emerging ruling group, the "Cambridge scholars", whom mythology snobbishly credits with the founding of the S.P.R. To the younger generation of psychical researchers, however, the question of Madame Blavatsky is an open one. It is necessary to be sceptical of psychical researchers, we have found, as well as psychic persons.

The S.P.R. today, while it respects its pioneers, knows that they were not infallible either about H.P.B. or anything else. Moreover we have no collective view, and any writer or speaker who says the S.P.R. exposed Madame Blavatsky is exposing only his own ignorance. (If anyone was responsible for that kind of "exposure" it was the Coulombs, a year before.) The S.P.R. has shown by turning to a Theosophist for its centenary president that it is open to imput from Theosophical sources. But these questions are ones on which members have varied views, and on which research is still proceeding, some of the most valuable, historically, by Walter A. Carrithers Jr. But it is not practical to expect the S.P.R. to "withdraw" the 1885 report which charged fraud, when as I have shown, it is suggested by Theosophical sources themselves that there was some conscious deception going on. What can be done is to move forward to a more balanced view of H.P.B., and this is partly happening naturally as history unfolds, and research proceeds.

Madame Blavatsky was the most important person ever to be investigated by the S.P.R. in detail. But in this paper I know that I have conveyed only glimpses of her many-sided character, and I have had to compromise between reviewing all the points on which she came in conflict with the S.P.R., but which formed only a fraction of her achievement, and dealing with deeper sides of her work and appearing to neglect

the serious charges against her. Not one lecture but a whole book would be required to follow up all areas of mystery, and not a book but a library to place her in context. Beyond written exposition and evidence, there is the voice of the silence.

Leslie Price, 6 April 1983

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Appendix - The Stack Memorandum

The note that follows was first published in "Theosophical History" January 1985, where a discussion of its significance will be found. It is handwritten, and the correct interpretation of some of its words may remain always in doubt. But the present version is the result of a re-examination of the text, and is more accurate than the original transcription.

Rough Notes on Report

- (1) It seems to me that its length alone is an objection. It will appear that Theosophy is a very serious and important matter when we devote to it such a voluminous document. AGREED SHORTEN
- (2) We should remember and perhaps point out that persons indifferent to pecuniary temptations may be tempted to invent or exaggerate tales in order to excite wonder and secure social consideration for themselves. AGREED
- (3) To quote from books already published long lists of witnesses about whom we know nothing is unprecedented. We have not asked a Roman Catholic member to give us at secondhand an account of the miracles at Lourdes nor a convinced Spiritualist to collect from "Light" and other sources tales of apparitions. Why in this case depart from our proper work "research" and simply go in for compilation? DISAGREE H.S.
- (4) As regards the appearance of Damodar at Adyar the evidence is not conclusive - simply because if he and Madame Blavatsky arranged the affair beforehand the "miracle" was easy. Of course if they are incapable of such collusion the miracle is established: if not, not. OF COURSE
- (5) That Mr. Myers, Mr. Gurney and Mr. Thurstan (note spelling - LP) heard two tinkles of a bell in Madame Blavatsky's presence is clear - but surely this is a very small fact to be so elaborately and solemnly recorded. The phenomenon is parallel with the unaccountable raps heard in the presence of a medium. Nobody can say such things are by themselves proofs of anything supernatural: the possibility of fraud

or confederacy is always present, unless we insist on tests which Madame B. would certainly not submit to. AGREED OMIT BELL

(6) As regards the vast mass of Oriental evidence for what is called the "existence" of the Mahatmas it only disproves the absurd theory of those who believe that Madame Blavatsky stands alone in this matter. Why should there not be all over India many persons calling themselves "Masters" and claiming to have supernatural powers? India in all ages has swarmed with them. Why should not some of these men be associated with Madame B. - some honest, some dishonest, all believing in antient (?-LP) magic and some half believing their own powers? Why may not some of them actually possess the powers exercised undoubtably by travelling native conjurors? In what do their marvels differ from those of the native conjurors except that they are on the whole less wonderful but accompanied by higher pretensions IRRELEVANT?

(7) One distinction between the wonders produced by mediums or Indian conjurors and those produced through Madame Blavatsky and her allies is very obvious. Everybody suspects the mediums or conjurors and surrounds them with severe conditions. The Theosophists on the contrary require to be approached with respect and they perform their marvels where they like, when they like, and before whom they like. They select time, place and witnesses. Give such chances to the others and they could do probably much more - but who in his senses would attach importance to "miracles" so produced? WE AGREE AS TO MOST OF SHRINE-MARVELS

(8) The "appearance" of Koot Hoomi to Eglinton on board the Vega is to my mind the most suspicious circumstance in the whole history of Theosophic wonders. Here is Koot Hoomi - one of the Mahatmas who manages the universe - performs the most astounding of all his feats - transit from Thibet to mid-ocean - to visit not a Chela, not even a Theosophist, but a professional Medium - and to give him in writing what he calls a certificate of his "wonderful mediumship"! Then it should be pointed out that the identity of the letter as seen on board the Vega with the letter seen in India has never been established - simply because Englinton deliberately destroyed the marked envelope. The whole affair was a splendid advertisement for Englinton and in that we see, perhaps, the motive for its invention by him.

How far there was collusion on the Theosophical side it is impossible to say, but if there were, the "miracle" is easy enough. TRUE BUT ADMITTED IN REPORT. ?SHORTEN REPORT

(9) The appearances of Damodar at Elgin Crescent, Notting Hill are not established. There is no confirmation of Mr. Ewen's impression while the "confirmation" of the appearance to Madame Blavatsky simply depends on the supposition that she did not send the telegraph to India at a cost of £12. My own impression is that she did not, but you cannot establish a fact of this kind on probabilities.
HELPS AS REGARDS DAMODAR

(10) It is curious as regards the dropping of letters that the instances are all, or nearly all, confined to India or in Europe to railway carriages. India ceilings are not generally plastered - they are often even in first-class houses made of rough boards with chinks. A railway carriage is a very easy place for the "chucking up" of a letter so as to make it fall from the ceiling. Nobody sees a letter fall from an "English" ceiling while he is quite alone."
IRRELEVANT POINT IS THAT OLCOTT IS INVOLVED

(11) It should be remembered that the whole argument implying that Madame Blavatsky's absence is after a manner a guarantee of the genuine character of a phenomenon falls to the ground if we for a moment suppose that she has confederates. There is no country in the world where confederates and witnesses could be purchased so cheaply as in India and where false testimony is so common. TRUE BUT ?
RELEVANT. POINT IS RESPECTABLE PERSONS INVOLVED

(12) Many of the appearances of the Mahatmas are simply attested by the evidence of witnesses who say they saw a figure in white walking or floating at night many yards off, and that in some cases the figure resembled the portraits they had seen of Mahatmas. Many of the so-called portraits are signally wanting in individuality and to make up an Indian figure that would look like them "twenty or thirty yards away" in the moonlight would not be difficult. AGREED

(13) We must bear in mind that Theosophy has made very few converts amongst Englishmen in India - notwithstanding the conversion of Mr. Hume, Mr. Sinnett, General Morgan, Colonel Gordon and perhaps one or two more. English people in India have ample opportunity of judge-

ing the leaders and the phenomena. The slow progress of the cause amongst Anglo-Indians many of whom are highly educated and its rapid progress amongst uneducated, superstitious and credulous natives is prima facia against it. UNIMPORTANT

(14) One advantage of circulating this long and detailed report amongst our members is obvious: it places within their reach an interesting account of many marvels. But there is something to be said on the other side. May not some of the members be repelled by our unscientific treatment of these tales? There are two methods of investigation - the judicial and the experimental. We make a judicial or quasi-judicial inquiry into isolated abnormal facts but in presence of the Spiritualists or the Theosophists we ought to adopt the experimental method. They say "These things are occurring day by day", and so we should wait till we can see them under our own eyes with test conditions. There is the more reason to do this in the case of the Theosophists because they claim to have powers that the Masters or Madame Blavatsky can exercise at will. Yet after all we heard of what they could do, and all our respectful solicitations for a "sign", the net result is that the Secretaries of the S.P.R. heard a bell sound in Madame Blavatsky's presence and that they cannot account for the phenomenon. That is the sole outcome of the research of the Society into these Oriental phenomena. The rest is a collection of depositions more or less trustworthy - the immense mass, Indian testimony.

THIS REPORT GIVES PRIMA FACIA CASE FOR INQUIRY. IF R.H. IS TO GO, WE HEDGE BY REPORTING NOW.

(15) One thing should not be allowed to drop out of sight. Colonel Olcott published in the Pall Mall Gazette an account of himself in which he claimed to have cured 2,000 persons in India - he made the blind see, the deaf hear, etc. He told us at Dean's Yard that his power was in full force - probably better because he was not in India. He has not supplied the Society with evidence of a single indisputable case of cure in Europe or attested by Europeans: he has done nothing to justify his original tale. Compare in this case the pretensions that "roared so loud and thundered in the index" with the performance! Are the other pretensions of the Theosophists as baseless when brought to the test? ? RELEVANT

(16) It is suggested that by spending £70 on circulating Theosophic legends we may get new members. May we not rather secure new members for the Theosophical Society itself? Can not Mr. Sinnett or others say to our friends "If you want to get at the heart of this mystery - to be admitted to the inner sanctum, become Theosophists. Then Isis will unveil her face and you will see the whole secret: the S.P.R. simply stands in the outer court."

(17) The present time seems especially unsuitable for this publication. India is ringing with the Coulomb scandal. Suddenly the Theosophists can point to a Society with some of the highest names in English literature and science coming forward to gravely repeat their theories and gravely reprint their wildest legends. We may serve the Theosophists and in doing so injure ourselves. Just too as we are sending a representative to India we commit ourselves to this indirect partisanship - for to republish these stories without a severe searching analysis of the evidence is, in a way, to give the stamp of our silent approval to them. Why not wait until Mr. Hodgson has seen the Coulomb letters and determined whether or not they are forgeries?

GOOD ARGUMENT FOR MAKING NEUTRALITY CLEARER

The covering letter of Mr. Stack is printed below.

30 Kensington Park Gardens, W
London

17 Oct 84

My dear Sidgwick

I find I cannot come to Cambridge tomorrow: many thanks for asking me to stay with you if I came.

I tried to convert Myers and Gurney yesterday: I am afraid my arguments had not much effect: they are still under the spell of Mme. Blavatsky. I have therefore jotted down some "Rough Notes" on the Report and enclose them: they may be of some use in enabling you to revise the report or in inducing its suppression for a time.

One of the greatest difficulties of any decisive or clear verdict in Theosophy arises from the reluctance we all feel to speak plainly. For instance if you touch on the Coulomb letters you ought in candour (to -LP) point out that

Madame Blavatsky has been already detected in a fraud closely resembling some of those attributed to her by the Coulombs. She wrote to Mrs. Billing "Deliver this letter to Mr. Massey in a phenomenal way". She wrote (or is said to have written) to Madame Coulomb "Deliver this letter to Damodar in a miraculous way". Then we must bear in mind that her own friends and disciples admit that she is "untruthful" and "untrustworthy". Next we have Koot Hoomi convicted not only of plagiarism but of a deliberate falsification in order to get rid of the charge. Add the Coulombs, confessed cheats - and we find the foundress of the Society, the leading Mahatma, and the guardians of the sacred "Shrine" all tainted.

Now to point out all this clearly in your report would be just but painful and harsh. I should not like to write such a public report for personally I have a strong respect and regard for Sinnett. But if you talk of character at all you cannot in justice omit these facts. My refuge in such case would be silence - or very great reserve.

Gurney seems to think we are on the horns of a dilemma: we must believe or impute fraud. But I know from my researches into alleged Spiritualist miracles that you are constantly confronted with cases where you honestly suspend judgment: you neither accept the tales nor impute fraud. You sometimes find a family circle including a private "medium", and they tell you marvellous tales of what occurs when no stranger is present. You do not decide that they are story-tellers - they seem respectable disinterested people - but for all that you do not accept their evidence as conclusive nor should you dream of quoting their confidential family miracles as proofs of the supernatural. The same argument applies to the wonders wrought in the inner ring of Theosophists.

As to their favorite phenomenon, the dropping of letters, there is none so well within the reach of a conjuror and none that if they pleased could be so unmistakeably attested by outsiders. Men who are once a week conveying letters thousands of miles away by occult means could surely for once send one bearing on its surface the London and Calcutta postmarks of the same day. They will not, they say: they will not condescend so far. Then why all these publications and lectures and private efforts at propaganda? Why try to convert the West at all if they are .

resolved to remain wrapped up in Oriental dignity?

What perfectly honest persons may say in good faith as to marvels of a supernatural kind I learned, not for the first time, at a public meeting the other day. I heard a leading and most respected Spiritualist say that he had of late frequently seen the vision of his wife - at night, in his own bedroom, no medium present. The statement caused great sensation. But only the day before he had given my wife full particulars of these "visions" and the tale amounted to this that he saw a white light in the corner of the room and believed it was his wife! There was not even the outline of a human form. Yet he was perfectly honest, is quite disinterested, has been a liberal supporter of "the cause" and is in his way a religious conscientious man. He simply spoke loosely but he deceived the whole audience. It is men like these who make investigation difficult, and who ought to make investigators cautious.

Mr. Pease suggested at the Council yesterday that we should print the report and hold the copies back from circulation until Hodgson returns. That seems a fair compromise between the Believers and Unbelievers.

Your very faithfully, leaving the whole matter with great confidence to the second thoughts of the Committee meeting tomorrow.

J. Herbert Stack

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