

The Key to Blavatsky?

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Book Reviews

Gary Lachman. *Madame Blavatsky: The Mother of Modern Spirituality*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2012. xx + 331 pp. ISBN-1: 1585428639. ISBN-13: 978–1585428632

“There are as many biographies of Helena Blavatsky as there are biographers.”¹

The key to a good biography is turning a life into an engaging story without straying too far from the historical facts. Gary “Valentine” Lachman (born 1955)—former Blondie bassist who has successfully reinvented himself as a popular writer on “consciousness, culture and what happens when they meet”—must have a biographical skeleton key, for he has opened up the esoteric lives of Ouspensky (2004), Steiner (2007), Swedenborg (2009) and Jung (2010). His latest book dives into the “histerey” of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), whose past contains as much history as mystery (289).

Scholars of religion, especially in the field of Western esotericism, are well aware of the influence Blavatsky and her Theosophical Society have exerted on modern culture and religion. But “to the general public, [she] is virtually unknown” (xi). It is mainly for this lay audience that Lachman is retelling her story; for those who still believe that “popular interest in the occult, the esoteric and the spiritual started sometime in the 1960s” (90). Does this mean scholars need not bother with this book? Not necessarily. Lachman (xvii–xviii) also sets out to scrutinize the “legends, hearsay and lazy repetitions” that continue to be projected onto Blavatsky, by “tabloid

¹ Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 380.

journalists” and “serious scholars” alike. There are two Madame Blavatskys, he reckons, the “foul-mouthed, over-weighed, chain-smoking charlatan,” on the one hand, and the “saintly, holy guru steadfastly following her destiny,” on the other, to which he intends to add a third “more fascinating, exciting, surprising and ‘real’ character” (4–5). That sounds very promising.

After a short introduction about her socio-historical significance, Chapter 1 turns to Blavatsky’s childhood, sketching a character profile that, Lachman admits, at times succumbs to the cliché of biographical writing “to see in early experiences patterns that will be repeated in later life” (10). Lachman recounts several strange events that, he thinks, could explain what started her “quest for the answers to life’s mysteries” (18).

Based on a desire to understand her extraordinary experiences, Blavatsky set out to travel around the world, running away from a short-lived marriage with a man twice her age. In Chapter 2 the reader learns about these Jules Vernian adventures across the globe and her numerous meetings with what Gurdjieff might call “remarkable men.”

In what is arguably the most original part of the book, Chapter 3 investigates Blavatsky’s suspect claim of having visited the proverbial “roof of the world,” at a time when no place was more inaccessible than Tibet, let alone to a heavy-set white woman (53). After objectively weighing pro and contra arguments—with a talent for connecting factual details from different sources—Lachman arrives at the understandable, but slightly disappointing, conclusion that we are “no nearer to knowing whether or not Madame Blavatsky was in Tibet ... In all honesty I do not know myself” (75).

Next, the reader follows Blavatsky on a boat to America, where she finds her way to a haunted farmhouse in Chittenden, to meet her “chum” Henry Steel Olcott—whom Lachman takes care not to portray as the “gullible, earnest dimwit” (94) he is sometimes made out to be. Chapter 4 describes their not entirely coincidental first encounter.

In Chapter 5, Lachman relates, tongue in cheek, “Blavatsky’s work as an esoteric undercover agent—an occultist in Spiritualist clothing” (94) as well as her subsequent distancing from Spiritualism in anticipation of the impending founding of the Theosophical Society. From this point on—not yet halfway through the book—the reader, like Lachman himself (121), indeed, begins to feel “a bit dizzy” from the myriad strands of this intricate story, which the narrative, regrettably, never completely recovers from.

The events around the writing of the first of Blavatsky’s “two gargantuan tomes” are related in Chapter 6. The fact that Lachman expresses his preference for *Isis Unveiled* over the commonly considered crown jewel of *The Secret Doctrine*—assessing the former as “more accessible, thought-

provoking and readable” compared to the “set-in-stone pronouncement” of the latter (155)—is one indication of the refreshingly bold self-reliance of this critical independent researcher. Lachman did his homework and is not afraid to take a stand.

A few years after the establishment of the Theosophical Society, Blavatsky and Olcott decided to relocate in India, leaving third co-founder William Quan Judge behind. This sets the stage for Chapter 7. Enter several prominent characters, including Alfred Percy Sinnett and Emma and Alexis Coulomb, who will later come to play crucial parts during a seminal phase in the history of Theosophy. Leading up to these events, we first find out about the mysterious “Simla phenomena,” involving buried teacups and brooch filled pillows.

The scandal incurred by the controversial “Mahatma Letters”—the curious correspondence between Sinnett and Blavatsky’s Masters, allegedly through psychically transmitted letters—unravels in Chapter 8. Interestingly, Lachman decides there is no solid proof that Blavatsky communicated telepathically with her Masters, but stresses we cannot dismiss her claim on the grounds that telepathy is false *per se* (208). For him, it is a possibility or even a probability. The Coulobms and Richard Hodgson of the Society for Psychological Research concluded differently—their criticism would brand Blavatsky a fraud.

Blavatsky spent her remaining years in Germany, Belgium and England, largely bedridden, suffering from a failing body. In Chapter 9, Lachman describes the arduous road to completing her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, and briefly touches upon two minor works, *The Key to Theosophy* and *The Voice of the Silence*, without covering any new ground.

Finally, Chapter 10 relates some of the internal power struggles that took place in the wake of Blavatsky’s death, which lead to several breaches within the Society. Lachman briefly elaborates on the history behind the main branches.

Lachman concludes by positioning himself in the debate surrounding Blavatsky and her Masters: “I think HPB’s Masters were a *ludibrium* [“serious joke”] that got out of hand” (293–294)—a teaching strategy gone haywire. And about the grande dame herself: “My belief is that HPB was one of the most creative synthesizers in modern thought ... [who] produced at least two undeniable classics” (297). The question is, to return to my opening statement: does the chronicle leading up to these conclusions offer an engaging story that stays true to the facts?

On both accounts, only partially so. But, let me add right away, this is partially due to the ambiguous material itself—which explains why there are

as many biographies of Blavatsky as there are biographers. Lachman strikes a fair balance between conflicting facts and opposing appraisals of Blavatsky's "histerey"—a testament to his skill as a researcher and writer. And yet, the narrative deteriorates into a web of convoluted speculations a few times too often for any type of reader to get really pulled in. He has done an admirable job at creating *some* order in "the bundle of contradictions" that is Blavatsky (xii). Suspended between a popular story and an academic history, his is the most readable biography of this enigmatic lady, so far. Even though I am fairly confident that anyone interested in "HPB"—scholars and lay readers alike—will be able to appreciate this well-informed and well-argued narrative, I do suspect that both will feel shortchanged. Scholars will likely enjoy the story, but will not come away with startling new discoveries. Lay readers will not always enjoy the story, stunned by the startling torrent of historical strands, but will likely come away with new insights. Despite valiant attempts, Lachman never reaches through to "the real character," like he promised he would. And as a result, he fails to bring Blavatsky to life in the way that he did Ouspensky, Steiner, Swedenborg and Jung.

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