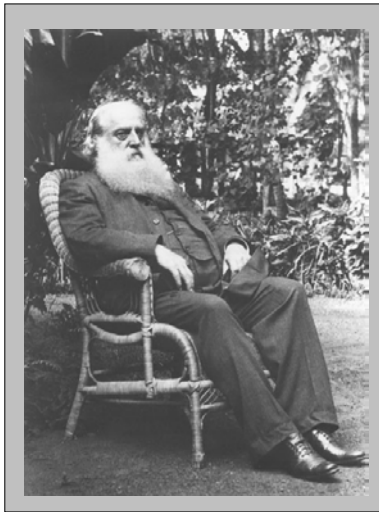


Stranger Than Fiction:
H. S. Olcott's Life in Theosophy



A Study Course by John Algeo

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY IN AMERICA

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“‘Tis strange---but true; for truth is always strange; Stranger than fiction.”

—George Gordon Lord Byron

Paper 1: Introduction and *Old Diary Leaves*, Series 1

The present series of papers is an overview of one of the most important, but also one of the most widely overlooked, basic Theosophical documents: Henry Steel Olcott’s six-volume work, *Old Diary Leaves*. To be sure, Olcott’s work is incomplete as both autobiography and history—nothing in this world of *anitya*, or impermanence, is complete—but *Old Diary Leaves* has no equal for the detail of the picture it presents of Olcott’s life in Theosophy.

Only the first three volumes of the work were published during Olcott’s lifetime. The last three volumes appeared posthumously. Those final volumes compile episodes that Olcott published in the *Theosophist* magazine during his lifetime, the last in December 1906, shortly before his death in February 1907, so they too are Olcott’s own work, with only minor editorial additions and corrections.

The account in *Old Diary Leaves* begins with Olcott’s meeting with Blavatsky in 1874, so it is not a complete autobiography, as it does not treat his earlier life. Nor does it treat aspects of his later life unrelated to his Theosophical career, and it stops nine years before his death. It is also not a history of the Theosophical Society, as its focus is on Olcott’s personal connection with Theosophy and not other important events. Nevertheless, *Old Diary Leaves* is a nonpareil account of the twenty-four years between 1874 and 1898 as Henry Steel Olcott lived them.

These papers will be a sort of “Cliffs Notes” version of Olcott’s work; “Cliffs Notes” are summaries and study guides for literary works. Their proper use is as a help in studying the original work or reviewing it after study, not as a substitute for first-hand knowledge of the literature. This series has a similar purpose: to encourage all Theosophists to read and study the Colonel’s own words.

Olcott’s two most important publications are arguably *The Buddhist Catechism* and *Old Diary Leaves*. *The Buddhist Catechism* is a textbook for teaching the principles of that major world religion, used by generations of students in Buddhist schools; it is also a resource for basic information about the Buddha and his dharma useful to both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. *Old Diary Leaves* is a personal and autobiographical account of the early years of the Theosophical Society by the President-Founder himself. It is no accident that these two works, on Buddhism and the Theosophical Society, are Olcott’s most important publications. In Olcott’s eyes, core Buddhism and core Theosophy were the same thing—both being expressions of the same timeless Wisdom.

Each of the first four volumes of *Old Diary Leaves* has a motto on its title page that summarizes, if not the content, at least the attitude with which the content is reported in that volume and throughout the whole work. The motto in the first volume is a quotation, cited above, from what critics regards as the greatest poem by George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824), namely *Don Juan*, which is an uncompleted epic satire on human beings and society:

'Tis strange—but true; for truth is always strange;
Stranger than fiction. [canto 14]

Byron was not quoting a proverb; he was creating one. His line is the origin of the popular saying “Truth is stranger than fiction.” That was true of Byron’s own life, and it is certainly true of Henry Olcott’s as well. The Founder-President was a person whose life was filled with the unexpected and the mysterious. It is that which makes his life “stranger than fiction.” Most of what was stranger than fiction in Olcott’s life was Theosophical, but his whole life is relevant to that strangeness. So before launching into *Old Diary Leaves* itself, this paper will give a brief overview of Olcott’s earlier life. Henry Steel Olcott was a “Renaissance man” in the sense of a person with wide interests and expertise in several areas.

Olcott was interested in and proud of his Puritan ancestry. A genealogical account of the Olcott family, *Descendants of Thomas Olcott: One of the First Settlers of Hartford, Connecticut*, had been published by Nathaniel Goodwin in 1845. Olcott brought out a revised edition of that book in 1874, the year in which he met Blavatsky. Thomas Olcott came to America in the 1630s; other works have traced the family line back in England to 1580. Henry Steel Olcott, born on August 2, 1832, was a seventh-generation descendant of Thomas; his middle name, Steel, was his mother’s maiden name.

Henry grew up in Orange, New Jersey, and New York City, but the family fell on hard times, so at the age of 16 he became a farmer in Ohio, where his mother’s brothers were farming also. His uncles seem to have been interested in Spiritualism, which came into general attention in the same year Olcott moved to Ohio, and passed on that interest to Henry. He also acquired some skill in the use of mesmerism, a hypnotic state used, among other purposes, to alleviate pain during surgery.

After four or five years in Ohio, Olcott returned to New Jersey to become an expert in scientific agriculture, serving as assistant editor of a magazine called *The Working Farmer*, which began his journalistic career. He also co-founded one of the pioneering schools for scientific agriculture: the Westchester Farm School in New York State. At the age of 25, he published a book in that area: *Sorghum and Imphee, the Chinese and African Sugarcanes: A Treatise on Origin, Varieties and Culture*, which became a widely used text on the subject. It was, incidentally, the only book by Olcott in the University of Georgia Library in 1971, when I arrived at that campus. Olcott both preceded and followed the publication of this book with lectures on agriculture in the United States and Europe and with other distinguished publications on the subject.

As a result of his agricultural and journalistic expertise, Olcott became an associate agricultural editor for the *New York Tribune* and the American correspondent for a British agricultural journal. His journalistic interests soon expanded into other areas. The *Tribune* was a vigorous supporter of the abolition of slavery in America in the years leading up to the Civil War. The paper thus became extremely unpopular in the South, and its reporters were threatened with violence should they appear in that part of the country. Nevertheless, Olcott volunteered to go to Virginia to report on the execution of John Brown, an abolitionist and religious fanatic who had murdered five proslavery men and invaded a government arsenal to seize armaments. Olcott accomplished this dangerous mission with the assistance of a Southern Masonic brother.

During the early years of the Civil War, which followed John Brown’s execution, Olcott saw military action but was soon assigned to investigate corruption and fraud in military

procurement. His exposure of such racketeering earned him a commendation from Edwin Stanton, the Secretary of War, who wrote that Olcott's service was "as important to the Government as the winning of a battle." After the assassination of President Lincoln, Olcott was charged with investigating a suspected conspiracy in support of the assassin, John Wilkes Booth.

After the war, Olcott was admitted to the bar and became Director of the National Insurance Convention and an expert in insurance law, compiling two volumes that became standard works on the subject. His legal clients included the U.S. Treasury, the N.Y. Stock Exchange, New York City, the Panama Railway, and steel manufacturers in Sheffield, England.

In his spare time, Olcott became a freelance correspondent for several New York newspapers, including the *Sun* and the *Daily Graphic*. In that capacity, he went to Chittenden, Vermont, to report on spiritualistic séances being held in a farmhouse. There, in 1874, he met Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, and that meeting was the major turning point in his life. It was also the point at which *Old Diary Leaves* begins.

* * * * *

In July 1874, Olcott unexpectedly began to think about the development of Spiritualism, which he had not been following for a number of years. He picked up a copy of a Spiritualist journal and in it read about some remarkable manifestations happening at the Eddy farmhouse near Chittenden, Vermont. To satisfy his curiosity, he went to view the phenomena for himself and wrote an article about what he saw for a New York newspaper. That article generated such interest among readers that another newspaper commissioned Olcott to return to the farmhouse and write a series on the topic.

On October 14, H. P. Blavatsky came to the Eddy farmhouse, where Olcott made her acquaintance. He first saw her at the noon meal; she was striking in appearance with her Garibaldi red blouse. Olcott whispered to a companion, "Good gracious! look at *that* specimen, will you." When she rolled herself a cigarette, Olcott took that as an excuse to introduce himself by offering to light it for her with the words, "*Permettez moi, Madame,*" as he recognized that she was a foreigner. As Olcott wrote, "Our acquaintance began in smoke, but it stirred up a great and permanent fire."

In the spring of 1875, Olcott's acquaintance with Blavatsky resulted in his receiving messages from some of the Masters, which led to an unsuccessful attempt to form a Miracle Club for the scientific investigation of spiritualistic phenomena and "practical psychology." Olcott, however, was also personally investigating mediums in various localities in the northeast. Toward the end of the summer, Blavatsky moved to an apartment at 46 Irving Place in New York City. There, on September 7, at an evening gathering, George H. Felt gave a talk on "The Lost Canon of Proportion of the Egyptians," which led to a discussion about practical applications of Felt's ideas. In particular, there was great interest in Felt's assurance that he could summon up nature spirits and produce phenomena with the diagrams used in his talk.

The discussion following Felt's talk generated such interest that Olcott passed a note to Blavatsky reading, "Would it not be a good thing to form a Society for this kind of study?" She nodded, and Olcott made the proposal to the group, whose members received it with enthusiasm and chose Olcott as Chairman to organize the Society. That was the genesis of the future Theosophical Society.

Concerning the purpose of the proposed organization, Olcott points out: “It was to be a body for the collection and diffusion of knowledge; for occult research, and the study and dissemination of ancient philosophical and theosophical ideas: one of the first steps was to collect a library. The idea of Universal Brotherhood was not there, because the proposal for the Society sprang spontaneously out of the present topic of discussion” (*ODL* 1:120). The aim of forming a nucleus of Brotherhood was added and made primary after the Founders moved to India, when many other changes also came about. Thus, Olcott adds, “The Theosophical Society was an evolution, not—on the visible plane,—a planned creation” (*ODL* 1:121). The interjected phrase is important: gradual evolution on the physical plane is quite regularly the manifestation of planned intention on inner planes. The outer manifestation sometimes takes a while to echo accurately the inner causal intention.

The following evening, a committee with Olcott as chair was formed to frame a constitution and bylaws for the proposed society. Five days later, the group met again to receive the report of the committee and adopt a name for the organization. Olcott’s description of how the name was chosen is the following:

The choice of a name for the Society was, of course, a question for grave discussion in Committee. Several were suggested, among them, if I recollect aright, the Egyptological, the Hermetic, the Rosicrucian, etc., but none seemed just the thing. At last, in turning over the leaves of the Dictionary, one of us came across the word “Theosophy,” whereupon, after discussion, we unanimously agreed that that was the best of all; since it both expressed the esoteric truth we wished to reach and covered the ground of Felt’s methods of occult scientific research. [*ODL* 1:132]

Without disputing Olcott’s recollection, the idea that the name popped up spontaneously during a flip through dictionary pages is an oversimplification. Madame Blavatsky had used the term in a letter to Hiram Corson some seven months earlier (*Letters* 1:86), so her influence or inspiration in its adoption seems likely.

The formal organization of the Society and the election of officers occurred a month later, on October 16, at the Manhattan home of Mrs. Emma Hardinge Britten, an English-born Spiritualist, medium, and author. At another meeting in her home two weeks later, the bylaws were finally adopted, Olcott was elected to be the first President of the Society, and Mott Memorial Hall at 64 Madison Avenue was chosen as a meeting place.

On November 17, 1875, the first meeting of the newly constituted Society was held at Mott Memorial Hall, at which Olcott delivered his inaugural address. That date has subsequently been taken as the birthday of the Theosophical Society, and every President after Olcott has delivered an inaugural address on accession to the office. Olcott’s inaugural address was an enthusiastic and optimistic assessment of the future of the new organization. It was received favorably by those who heard it at the time, but after it was printed, it became the object of some vigorous, not to say caustic, criticism (*Letters* 1:220-45). Olcott himself came to regret some of his exuberance:

. . . it reads a bit foolish after seventeen years of hard experience. A good deal of its forecast of results has been verified, much of it falsified. What we counted on as its sound experimental basis, *viz.*, Felt’s demonstration of the existence of the

Elemental races, proved a complete and mortifying disappointment. Whatever he may have done by himself in that direction, he showed us nothing, not even the tip end of the tail of the tiniest Nature-spirit. [ODL 1:137-8]

The failure of George Felt to deliver the phenomena that many craved and expected the Society to supply had its inevitable consequences:

So the membership dwindled by degrees, until, at the end of a year or so, there survived the following: the form of a good organisation, sound and strong in its platform; a clangorous notoriety; a few, more or less indolent, members; and an indestructible focus of vitality in the quenchless enthusiasm of the two friends, the Russian woman and American man, who were in deadly earnest; who never for a moment harboured a doubt as to the existence of their Masters, the excellence of their delegated work, or the ultimate complete success that would crown it. . . . We used to speak of ourselves as the Theosophical Twins. [ODL 1:140-1]

It took a while for the Theosophical Society to find its own feet and frame its identity. Many of the early male members were also Freemasons, as was Olcott himself. Consequently early on, there was talk of making the Society into a sort of higher Masonic Degree, a secret body with a ritual and signs of recognition (ODL 1:142, 145-6). That plan was never fully realized and was completely abandoned after the Founders went to India.

At the same time that a secret nature was being considered for the Society (in March 1876), a seal was designed, based on Blavatsky's personal seal, which she used on her notepaper. The seal, unlike the secret aspects of the Society, has survived until the present.



Blavatsky's personal seal



Theosophical Society Seal

Perhaps the most striking and effective event in the early American history of the Theosophical Society was the funeral and cremation of the Baron de Palm. It was also a public relations bonanza for the infant organization. Joseph Henry Louis Baron de Palm was a penniless Austrian nobleman who was also something of a con artist. He played upon the sympathy of both Olcott and Blavatsky and became a member of the Theosophical Society. He was ill, so Olcott took him in, and in return he took Olcott in. He drew up a will ostensibly leaving vast estates in both America and Europe to the Society. He also asked that Olcott officiate at his funeral and that his body be cremated in the Eastern fashion, rather than buried as customary in the West, a request that Olcott accepted out of charity.

After the Baron's death on May 20, 1876, it was discovered that, as a young man, he had been an officer in the Bavarian army but was cashiered for dishonorable conduct. He lived by various dishonest dealings, for which he was sometime imprisoned. After he lost his European

holdings for nonpayment of debts, he emigrated to America, where he lived by his wits; his American real estate holdings were nonexistent. When Olcott opened the Baron's trunk, the most valuable objects he found were two of his own shirts, from which the Baron had picked out Olcott's stitch-marked name.

Despite the fraudulent nature of the Baron's representations about himself, Olcott felt obliged to fulfill his promise concerning the funeral and cremation. For the former, Olcott used his fraternal connections to engage a Masonic Temple in New York on Twenty-third Street and Sixth Avenue. It was such an event as newspapers aspire to cover. Published accounts describe the main participants as decked out in Egyptian-style garments. There were Orphic hymns and mantras set to exotic music. Olcott and others gave funeral orations that expressed such concepts as karma and the objects of the Theosophical Society. Newspaper stories dubbed the funeral a Pagan extravaganza. It was a great publicity achievement.

The cremation was more difficult to arrange. At that time there were no public crematoria in America, and cremation was neither practiced widely nor generally approved of. However, Olcott learned of Dr. Julius Le Moyne, who had constructed a crematorium for his own personal use in Washington, Pennsylvania. Olcott contacted Dr. Le Moyne and got permission to use the doctor's facility for the Baron. He also managed various legal problems that might have inhibited the Baron's cremation. So on December 6th, 1876, the first public cremation in the United States was held under the sponsorship of the Theosophical Society. It was widely reported in newspapers all over this country and in Europe by feature articles in more than seven thousand periodicals.

Baron de Palm, although an impecunious fraud, repaid the Society for the pains and expense it went to on his account by generating the most news (some would say notoriety) that the still infant Society had ever received. Many of the articles reported not just the unusual features of the Baron's funeral and cremation, but also the Theosophical views that underlay them. A *New York Tribune* editorial encapsulated the anomaly by observing that "Baron de Palm had been principally famous as a corpse."

Today, when cremation has become so widely accepted and used, it is hard to realize the excitement surrounding the departure of the Baron's body from this vale of tears. In that regard, it is useful to contemplate Olcott's closing paragraphs in chapter 11 of *Old Diary Leaves*, dealing with the Baron's cremation:

And thus it came about that the Theosophical Society not only introduced Hindu philosophical ideas into the United States, but also the Hindu mode of sepulture. Since that first scientific cremation in America, many others, of men, women, and children, have occurred, other crematoriums have been built, and cremation societies have been originated in my country. . . .

In the abstract it matters not to me whether my "desire-body" be dropped through the salt sea to its amoeba-strewn floor, or left in the snow-locked Himalayan passes, or on the hot sand of the desert; but, if I am to die at home and within reach of friends, I hope that, like those of the Baron de Palm and H.P.B., it may be reduced by fire to harmless dust, and not become a plague or a peril to the living after it has served the purpose of my present *prarâbdha karma* [the fruits of past actions reflected in the present physical body]!

POINTS TO PONDER:

1. How do the early events in *ODL* foreshadow the Theosophical Society's later history?
2. What are present-day attitudes toward some of these early events, such as cremation?

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