

Media Statement

The Theosophical Society was founded in New York in 1875, and has had an active presence in Australia since the late 1870s. Its main purpose was to take a stand against dogmatic theology and scientific materialism, and to give voice to matters of the soul and matters of the spirit marginalized since the seventeenth century. It has no views of its own to promote, but seeks to study the good to be found in any religion, philosophy and science that promotes a truly open and profound understanding of life.

There is little argument that the influence of Theosophy has been pervasive in art, music, architecture, popular culture and most of all the New Age. In introducing into everyday speech concepts such as karma, reincarnation, meditation and the spiritual path, it provided almost the entire foundation of the New Age movement. It was mainly within the fold of the Theosophical Society that non-Christian religions and spiritual practices could be openly discussed at the turn of the nineteenth century. The Theosophical Society (TS), not the Church, was where people meditated. One of the Founders of the Society, H.P. Blavatsky, presented the first model of psychological and spiritual evolution to appear in the modern West. The TS was the first organisation to 'preach and teach' karma and reincarnation in modern times.

The substantial impact of the TS on the cultural and intellectual life of Australia has been recognized by the National Library of Australia and the National Museum. Theosophy is mentioned in Kylie Tennant's *Ride on Stranger* (1943) and Sumner Locke Elliot's *Careful He Might Hear You* (1963). Alfred Deakin, our second Prime Minister, was a member of the Society; as was Professor John Smith, one of the Founding Chancellors of The University of Sydney. Artists including Florence Fuller and Clarice Beckett, feminists including Bessie Rischbeith, and a host of animal rights activists and vegetarian activists were members of the TS in Australia.

Despite all of this, two things, and two things alone, erroneously find their misleading way into the Australian media: the hype about the Balmoral Amphitheatre, and the Society for Psychical Research report branding H.P. Blavatsky an imposter and a fraud. Here are some of the facts in the long, complex, far from black & white history of the Theosophical Society.

1. The Star Amphitheatre in Sydney, was built in 1923 with private funds chiefly at the instigation of a Dr Mary Rocke, to provide a venue for the teachings of J. Krishnamurti. It was not owned by the Theosophical Society, but by the Order of the Star in the East (OSE), established by some members of the Theosophical Society and vociferously opposed by others, to promote the work of what they believed was the coming World Teacher. Krishnamurti disbanded the OSE in 1929, repudiating the circus that had grown up around him. He gave just one talk in the Star Amphitheatre. There was never any suggestion that he would walk on the water through Sydney Heads, the idea perhaps coming from the pen of a newspaper editor writing about the coming World Teacher, a concept that was promoted by individual members of the Society who formed the Order of the Star in the East. The Theosophical Society does not subscribe to

a Messiah concept, or any other concept for that matter. It is an enquiry based Society. The story of Krishnamurti's life is the subject of several fascinating biographies. If you are interested you might start with those by Mary Lutyens, which also provide first-hand histories of the TS at that time. J. Krishnamurti went on to speak to thousands of people year in year out in, chiefly in Europe, the USA and India, until his death in 1986. He remained immensely grateful for the care he received at the hands of members of the Theosophical Society, especially Annie Besant, its then President; and he did in fact provide an entirely new insight in the field of religious and spiritual endeavour: namely, that what you seek you shall not find, and the inescapable importance of becoming aware of the process of thought. He is held in high esteem by many members of the TS, but certainly not all.

2. Far more damaging to the Society has been the incomplete reportage of the adverse report concerning Madame Blavatsky published by the Society for Psychical Research in 1885. The SPR was founded in 1882, largely to investigate mediumistic phenomena. One such investigation was conducted by an Australian (as it happens), Richard Hodgson, whose adverse report was published in the SPR's journal. Reporters and academics worldwide make frequent reference to Hodgson's report, usually without having read it. They find it interesting to mention that Hodgson branded Blavatsky a fraudulent psychic who forged letters purported to have been written by her spiritual teachers, known as Adepts or Masters. What they do not find interesting to mention is that in 1986 the Society for Psychical Research circulated a press release condemning the century-old report and apologizing for the wrong and the harm done to Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society. Vernon Harrison, a research physicist and an expert in forgery worked as Research Manager for Thomas De La Rue, a printer of banknotes, postage stamps, passports and other sensitive documents. Having examined all the available evidence, including the allegedly forged letters, Dr Harrison concluded that the Mahatma Letters now preserved in the British Library are not in H.P. Blavatsky's handwriting, disguised or otherwise. The scripts of the letters signed by K.H., M. and HPB (Blavatsky) certainly belong to three different persons; that in fact the incriminating letters on which Hodgson based his dubious investigation are forgeries concocted by her ex-employees for revenge; and that the damning report of 1885 is riddled with slanted statements, conjecture advanced as fact or probability, and the uncorroborated testimony of unnamed witnesses. Harrison's book *H.P. Blavatsky and the SPR* was published in 1997. It concludes that future historians and journalists should read the Hodgson report of 1885 with great caution, if not disregard it altogether.