

## THE WRITING OF *ISIS UNVEILED*

By Henry Steel Olcott

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Of the writing of Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*, let us see what reminiscences memory can bring out of the darkroom where her imperishable negatives are kept.

If any book could ever have been said to make an epoch, this one could. Its effects have been as important in one way as those of Darwin's first great work have been in another: both were tidal waves in modern thought, and each tended to sweep away theological crudities and replace the belief in miracle with the belief in natural law. Yet nothing could have been more commonplace and unostentatious than the begin-



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ning of *Isis*. One day in the summer of 1875, HPB showed me some sheets of manuscript that she had written, and said: "I wrote this last night 'by order,' but what the deuce it is to be I don't know. Perhaps it is for a newspaper article, perhaps for a book, perhaps for nothing. Anyhow, I did as I was ordered." And she put it away in a drawer and nothing more was said about it for some time.

But in the month of September—if my memory serves—she went to Syracuse (N.Y.), on a visit to her new friends, Professor and Mrs. Corson of Cornell University, and the work went on. She wrote me that it was to be a book on the history and philosophy of the Eastern Schools and their relations with those of our own times. She said she was writing about things she had never studied and making quotations from books she had never read in all her life. To test her accuracy, Prof. Corson had compared her quotations with classical works in the University Library and had found her to be right.

Upon her return to town, she was not very industrious in this affair, but wrote only spasmodically, and the same may be said as to the epoch of her Philadelphia residence. But a month or two after the formation of the Theosophical Society, she and I took two suites of rooms at 433 West 34th St., she on the first and I on the second floor, and thenceforward the writing of *Isis* went on without break or interruption until its completion in the year 1877.

In her whole life she had not done a tithe of such literary labor, yet I never knew even a managing daily journalist who could be compared with her for dogged endurance of tireless working capacity. From morning till night she would be at her desk, and it was seldom that either of us got to bed before 2 o'clock A.M. During the daytime I had my professional duties to attend to, but after an early dinner we would always settle down together to our big writing table and work, as if for dear life, until bodily fatigue would compel us to stop.

What an experience! The education of an ordinary lifetime of reading and thinking was, for me, crowded and compressed into this period of less than two years. I did not merely serve her as an amanuensis or a proofreader, but she made me a collaborator. She caused me to utilize—it almost seemed—everything I had ever read or thought, and stimulated my brain to think out new problems that she put me in respect to occultism and metaphysics, which my education had not led me up to, and which I only came to grasp as my intuition developed under this forcing process. She worked on no fixed plan, but ideas came streaming through her mind like a perennial spring that is ever overflowing its brim. One minute she would be writing upon Brahma, the next minute upon Babinet's electrical "meteor-cat." One moment she would be reverentially quoting from Porphyrios, the next from a daily newspaper or some modern pamphlet that I had just brought home. She would be adoring the perfections of the ideal Adept, but diverge for an instant to thwack Professor Tyndall or some other pet aversion of hers, with her critical cudgel. Higgledy-piggledy it came, in a ceaseless rivulet, each paragraph complete in itself and capable of being excised without harm to its predecessor or successor. Even as it stands now, and after all its numerous re-castings, an examination of the wondrous book will show this to be the case.

If she had no plan, despite all her knowledge, does not that go to prove that the work was not of her own conception; that she was but the channel through which

this tide of fresh, vital essence was being poured into the stagnant pool of modern spiritual thought?

As a part of my educational training she would ask me to write something about some special subject, perhaps suggesting the salient points that should be brought in, perhaps just leaving me to do the best I could with my own intuitions. When I had finished, if it did not suit her, she would usually resort to strong language and call me some of the pet names that are apt to provoke the homicidal impulse. But if I prepared to tear up my unlucky composition, she would snatch it from me and lay it aside for subsequent use elsewhere, after a bit of trimming, and I would try again.

Her own manuscript was often a sight to behold; cut and patched, re-cut and re-pasted, until if one held a page of it to the light, it would be seen to consist of perhaps six, or eight, or ten slips cut from other pages, pasted together and the text joined by interlined words or sentences. She became so dexterous in this work that she used to often humorously vaunt her skill to friends who might be present. Our books of reference sometimes suffered in the process, for her pasting was frequently done on their open pages, and volumes are not wanting in the Adyar Headquarters and London libraries, which bear the marks to this day.

From the date of her first appearance in the *Daily Graphic* in 1874, throughout her American career, she was besieged by visitors, and if among them there chanced to be any who had some special knowledge of any particular thing cognate to her field of work, she invariably drew him out and, if possible, got him to write down his views or reminiscences for insertion in her book. Among examples of this sort are Mr. O'Sullivan's account of a magical séance in Paris, Mr. Rawson's interesting sketch of the secret initiations of the Lebanon Druses, Dr. Alexander Wilder's numerous notes and text paragraphs in the Introduction and throughout both volumes, and others that add so much to the value and interest of the work.

I have known a Jewish Rabbi to pass hours and whole evenings in her company, discussing the Kabbalah, and have heard him say to her that, although he had studied the secret science of his religion for thirty years, she had taught him things he had not even dreamed of and thrown a clear light upon passages which not even his best teachers had understood.

Whence did she get this knowledge? That she had it was unmistakable; whence did she get it? Not from her governesses in Russia; not from any source known to her

family or most intimate friends; not on the steamships or railways she had been haunting in her world-rambles since her fifteenth year; not in any college or university, for she never matriculated at either; and not in the huge libraries of the world.

To judge from her conversation and habits before she took up this monster literary task, she had not learnt it at all, whether from one source or another; but when she needed it she had it, and in her better moments of inspiration—if the term be admissible—she astonished the most erudite by her learning quite as much as she dazzled all present by her eloquence and delighted them by her wit and humorous raillery.

One might fancy, upon seeing the numerous quotations in *Isis Unveiled* that she had written it in an alcove of the British Museum or of the Astor Library in New York. The fact is, however, that our whole working library scarcely comprised one hundred books of reference.

Now and again single volumes would be brought her by Mr. Sotheran, Mr. Marble or other friends, and, latterly, she borrowed a few of Mr. Bouton. Of some books she made great use—for example, King's *Gnostics*; Jennings' *Rosicrucians*; Dunlop's *Sod* and *Spirit History of Man*; Moor's *Hindu Pantheon*; Des Mousseaux's furious attacks on Magic, Mesmerism, Spiritualism, etc., all of which he denounced as the Devil; Eliphas Lévi's various works; Jaccoliot's twenty-seven volumes; Max Müller's, Huxley's, Tyndall's, Herbert Spencer's works, and those of many other authors of greater or less repute: yet not to exceed the hundred, I should say.

Then what books *did* she consult, and what library had she access to?

Mr. W. H. Burr asked Dr. Wilder in an open letter to the *Truth-seeker* whether the rumor was true that *he* had written *Isis* for HPB; to which our beloved old friend would truthfully reply that it was a false rumor, and that he had done as much for HPB as I have stated above—had given her much excellent advice, and had, for a consideration, prepared the very copious Index of some fifty pages, from advanced plate-proofs sent him for the purpose. That is all.

And equally baseless is the oft-repeated tale that I wrote the book and she touched it up. It was quite the other way about. I corrected every page of her manuscript several times, and every page of the proofs. I wrote many paragraphs for her, often merely embodying her ideas that she could not then (some fifteen years

before her death and anterior to almost her whole career as a writer of English literature) frame to her liking in English. I helped her to find out quotations and did other purely auxiliary work. But the book is hers alone, so far as personalities on this plane of manifestation are concerned, and she must take all the praise and the blame that it deserves. She made the epoch with her book, and, in making it, made me—her pupil and auxiliary—as fit as I may have been found to do Theosophical work during these past twenty years.

Then, whence did HPB draw the materials which compose *Isis*, and which cannot be traced to accessible literary sources of quotation?

*From the Astral Light*, and by her soul-senses, from her Teachers—the “Brothers,” “Adepts,” “Sages,” “Masters,” as they have been variously called. How do I know it? By working two years with her on *Isis* and many more years on other literary work.

To watch her at work was a rare and never-to-be-forgotten experience. We usually sat at opposite sides of one big table, and I could see her every movement. Her pen would be flying over the page, when she would suddenly stop, look out into space with the vacant eye of the clairvoyant seer, shorten her vision as though to look at something held invisibly in the air before her, and begin copying on her paper what she saw. The quotation finished, her eyes would resume their natural expression and she would go on writing until again stopped by a similar interruption.

I remember well two instances when I, also, was able to see and even handle books from whose astral duplicates she had copied quotations into her manuscript, and which she was obliged to “materialize” for me to refer to when reading the proofs, as I refused to pass the pages for the “strike-off” unless my doubts as to the accuracy of her copy were satisfactory. One of these was a French work on physiology and psychology; the other, also by a French author, upon some branch of neurology. The first was in two volumes, bound in half calf, the other in pamphlet wrapper. It was when we were living at 302 West 47th street—the once famous “Lamasery,” and the executive headquarters of the Theosophical Society.

I said: “I cannot pass this quotation, for I am sure it cannot read as you have it.” She said: “Oh don’t bother; it’s right; let it pass.” I refused, until finally she said: “Well, keep still a minute and I’ll try to get it.” The far-away look came into her eyes and presently she pointed to a far corner of the room, to an *étagère* on which were

kept some curios, and in a hollow voice said: "There!" and then came to herself again. "There, there; go look for it over there!" I went, and found the two volumes wanted, which, to my knowledge, had not been in the house until that very moment.

I compared the text with HPB's quotation, showed her that I was right in my suspicions as to the error, made the proof correction and then, at her request, returned the two volumes to the place on the *étagère* from which I had taken them. I resumed my seat and work, and when, after awhile, I looked again in that direction, the books had disappeared! After my telling this (absolutely true) story, ignorant skeptics are free to doubt my sanity. I hope it may do them good. The same thing happened in the case of the *apport* of the other book, but this one remained, and is in our possession at the present time.

The "copy" turned off by HPB presented the most marked dissemblances at different times. While the handwriting bore one peculiar character throughout, so that one familiar with her writing would always be able to detect any given page as HPB's, yet, when examined carefully, one discovered at least three or four variations of the one style, and each of these persistent for pages together, when it would give place to some other of the calligraphic variants. That is to say, there would not often—never, as I now remember—be more than two of the styles on the same page, and even two only when the style which had been running through the work of, perhaps, a whole evening or half an evening would suddenly give place to one of the other styles which would, in its turn, run through the rest of an evening, or the next whole evening, or the morning's "copy."

One of these HPB handwritings was very small, but plain; one bold and free; another plain, of medium size, and very legible; and one scratchy and hard to read, with its queer, foreign-shaped a's and x's and e's. There was also the greatest possible difference in the English of these various styles. Sometimes I would have to make several corrections in each line, while at others I could pass many pages with scarcely a fault of idiom or spelling to correct. Most perfect of all were the manuscripts that were written for her while she was sleeping. The beginning of the chapter on the civilization of Ancient Egypt (vol. i., chap. xiv.,) is an illustration. We had stopped work the evening before at about 2 A.M. as usual, both too tired to stop for our usual smoke and chat before parting. She almost fell asleep in her chair while I was bidding her good night, so I hurried off to my bedroom. The next morning, when I came down after my breakfast, she showed me a pile of at least thirty or forty

pages of beautifully written HPB manuscript, which, she said, she had had written for her by—well, a Master, whose name has never yet been degraded like some others. It was perfect in every respect and went to the printers without revision.

Now it was a curious fact that each change in the HPB manuscript would be preceded either by her leaving the room for a moment or two or by her going off into the trance or abstracted state, when her lifeless eyes would be looking beyond me into space, as it were, and returning to the normal waking state almost immediately. And there would also be a distinct change of personality, or rather personal peculiarities, in gait, vocal expression, vivacity of manner, and above all, in temper. The reader of her *Caves and Jungles of Hindustan* remembers how the whirling pythoiness would rush out from time to time and return under the control, as alleged, of a different goddess. It was just like that with HPB. She would leave the room one person and then return to it another. Not another as to visible change of physical body, but another as to tricks of motion, speech, and manners; with different mental brightness, different views of things, different command of English orthography, idiom, and grammar, and different—very, very different command over her temper, which, at its sunniest, was almost angelic, at its worst, the opposite. Sometimes my most stupid incapacity to frame in writing the ideas she wished me to put would be passed over with benevolent patience. At others, for perhaps the slightest of errors, she would seem ready to explode with rage and annihilate me on the spot! These accesses of violence were, no doubt, at times, explicable by her state of health, and hence quite normal. But this theory would not in the least suffice to account for some of her tantrums.

A. P. Sinnett admirably describes her in a private letter as a mystic combination of a goddess and a Tartar, and in noticing her behavior in these different moods, says:

She certainly had none of the superficial attributes one might have expected in a spiritual teacher; and how she could, at the same time, be philosopher enough to have given up the world for the sake of spiritual advancement, and yet be capable of going into frenzies of passion about trivial annoyances, was a profound mystery to us for a long while, etc. (174).<sup>1</sup>

Yet, upon the theory that when her body was occupied by a sage it would be forced to act with a sage's tranquillity—and when not, [it would] not—the puzzle is

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<sup>1</sup> Sinnett, A.P. *Incidents in the Life of Madame Blavatsky*. London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1913.

solved. Her ever-beloved aunt, Mme. N. A. F., who loved her, and whom she loved passionately to her dying day, wrote Mr. Sinnett that her strange excitability of temperament—still one of her most marked characteristics—was already manifest in her earliest youth. Even then she was liable to ungovernable fits of passion, and showed a deep-rooted disposition to rebel against every kind of authority or control.

. . . The slightest contradiction brought on an outburst of passion, often a fit of convulsions (Ibid. 19).

She has herself described in a family letter (*Op. cit.*, p. 157) her psychical experience while writing her book:

When I wrote *Isis* I wrote it so easily, that it was certainly no labour, but a real pleasure. Why should I be praised for it? Whenever I am *told* to write, I sit down and obey, and then I can write easily upon almost anything—metaphysics, psychology, philosophy, ancient religions, zoology, natural sciences, or what not. I never put myself the question: ‘*Can* I write on this subject?’ . . . or, ‘am I equal to the task?’ but I simply sit down and *write*. Why? Because *somebody who knows all* dictates to me. My MASTER, and occasionally others whom I knew on my travels years ago. Please do not imagine I have lost my senses. I have hinted to you before now about them . . . and I tell you candidly, that whenever I write upon a subject I know little or nothing of, I address myself to *Them*, and one of Them inspires me, *i.e.*, he allows me to simply copy what I write from manuscripts, and even printed matter that pass before my eyes, in the air, during which process I have never been *unconscious* one single instant.

She once wrote her sister Vera about the same subject—the manner of her writing.

You may disbelieve me, but I tell you that in saying this I speak but the truth; I am solely occupied, not with writing *Isis*, but with *Isis* herself. I live in a kind of permanent enchantment, a life of visions and sights, with open eyes, and no chance whatever to deceive my senses! I sit and watch the fair goddess constantly. And as she displays before me the secret meaning of her long lost *secrets*, and the veil becoming with every hour thinner and more transparent, gradually falls off before my eyes, I hold my breath and can hardly trust to my senses! . . . For several years, in order not to forget what I have learned elsewhere, I have been made to have permanently before my eyes all that I need to see. Thus, night and day, the images of the past are ever marshalled before my inner eye. Slowly, and gliding silently like images in an enchanted

panorama, centuries after centuries appear before me . . . and I am made to connect these epochs with certain historical events, and I *know* there can be no mistake. Races and nations, countries and cities, emerge during some former century, then fade out and disappear during some other one, the precise date of which I am then told by . . . Hoary antiquity gives room to historical periods; myths are explained by real events and personages who have really existed; and every important, and often unimportant event, every revolution, a new leaf turned in the book of life of nations—with its incipient course and subsequent natural results—remains photographed in my mind as though impressed in indelible colours . . . . When I think and watch my thoughts, they appear to me as though they were like those little bits of wood of various shapes and colours, in the game known as the *casse-tête*: I pick them up one by one, and try to make them fit each other, first taking one, then putting it aside until I find its match, and finally there always comes out in the end something geometrically correct . . . I certainly refuse point-blank to attribute it to my own knowledge or memory, for I could never arrive alone at either such premises or conclusions . . . I tell you seriously *I am helped*. And he who helps me is my GURU" (*Op. cit.*, 157-8).

She tells her aunt that during her Master's absence on some other occupation—

He awakens in me, His substitute in knowledge . . . At such times it is no more *I* who write, but my *inner Ego*, my '*luminous-self*,' who thinks and writes for me. Only see . . . you who know me. When was I ever so learned as to write such things? . . . Whence was all this knowledge? (*Op. cit.*, 157)

Readers, whose taste leads them to probe such unique psychical problems as this to the bottom, should not fail to compare the above explanations that she gives of her states of consciousness with a series of letters to her family that was begun in the *Path* magazine (N.Y. 144 Madison Ave.) for December, 1894. In those she plainly admits that her body was occupied at such times, and the literary work done by foreign entities who taught me through her lips and gave out knowledge of which she herself did not possess even a glimmering in her normal state.

Taken literally, as it reads, this explanation is hardly satisfactory; for, if the disjointed thought-bits of her psychical *casse-tête* always fitted together so as to make her puzzle-map strictly geometrical, then her literary work should be free from errors, and her materials run together into an orderly scheme of logical and literary sequence. Needless to say, the opposite is the case; and that, even as *Isis Unveiled* came off the press of Trow, after Bouton had spent above \$600 for the corrections and

alterations that she had made in galley, page, and electroplate proofs,<sup>2</sup> it was, and to this day is, without a definite literary plan. Volume I professes to be confined to questions of Science, Volume II to those of Religion, yet there are many portions in each volume that belong in the other; and Miss Kislingbury, who sketched out the Table of Contents of Vol. II on the evening when I was sketching out that of Vol. I, can testify to the difficulty we had in tracing the features of a plan for each of our respective volumes.

Then, again, when the publisher peremptorily refused to put any more capital into the venture, we had prepared almost enough additional MS. to make a third volume, and this was ruthlessly destroyed before we left America. HPB not dreaming that she should ever want to utilize it in India, and the *Theosophist*, *Secret Doctrine*, and her other subsequent literary productions, not even being thought of. How often she and I mingled our regrets that all that valuable material had been so thoughtlessly wasted!

We had labored at the book for several months and had turned out 870-odd pages of manuscript when, one evening, she put me the question whether, to oblige—(our “*Pâramaguru*”), I would consent to begin all over again! I well remember the shock it gave me to think that all those weeks of hard labor, of psychical thunderstorms and head-splitting archaeological conundrums, were to count—as I, in my blind-puppy ignorance, imagined—for nothing. However, as my love and reverence and gratitude to this Master, and all the Masters, for giving me the privilege of sharing in their work was without limits, I consented, and at it we went again.

Well for me, was it, that I did; for, having proved my steadfastness of purpose and my loyalty to HPB, I got ample spiritual reward. Principles were explained to me, multifarious illustrations given in the way of psychical phenomena, I was helped to make experiments for myself, was made to know and to profit by acquaintance

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<sup>2</sup> He writes me, May 17th, 1887, “the alterations have already cost \$280.80, and at that rate, by the time the book appears it will be handicapped with such fearful expense that each copy of the first, 1000 will cost a great deal more than we shall get for it, a very discouraging state of affairs to begin with. The cost of composition of the first volume alone (with stereotyping) amounts to \$1,359.69, and this for one volume alone, mind you, *without paper, press work or binding!* Yours truly, J. W. Bouton,” Not only did she make endless corrections in the types, but even after the plates were cast, she had them cut to transpose the old matter and insert new things that occurred to her or that she had come across in her reading.

with various Adepts, and, generally, to fit myself—so far as my ingrained stubbornness and practical worldly self-sufficiency would permit—for the then unsuspected future of public work that has since become a matter of history.

People have often thought it very strange, in fact incomprehensible, that of all those who have helped in this Theosophical movement, often at the heaviest self-sacrifice, I should have been the only one so favored with personal experiences of and with the Mahátmas that the fact of their existence is a matter of as actual knowledge as the existence of my own relatives or intimate friends. I cannot account for it myself. I know what I know, but not why many of my colleagues do not know as much. As it stands, many people have told me that they pin their faith in the Mahátmas upon my unchanging and unimpeached personal testimony, which supplements the statements of HPB. Probably I was so blessed because I had to launch the ship “Theosophy” with HPB for HPB’s Masters, and to steer it through many maelstroms and cyclones, when nothing short of actual knowledge of the sound basis of our movement would have influenced me to stick to my post.

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