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THE GUIDING LIGHT OF HISTORY

Many years ago, when I was a youngster in high school, like most of my peers, I found the study of history to be somewhat less than exciting. It was a rare teacher who had the ability to make history come alive. But as I grew older, my interest in history blossomed, prompting me to explore a wide variety of books on historical figures and bygone eras. Perhaps, an appreciation of history is a function of age.

Americans are not noted for their grasp of history. A study conducted in 2008 by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute found that 70% of Americans were unable to pass a basic test on core history and civics; less than one-half of those surveyed could name the three branches of American government. In 2007, after conducting a survey of 14,000 college freshmen, the ISI found that the average test score for civic literacy was an appalling 50.4%. Freshmen attending elite Ivy League schools hardly fared much better, averaging an embarrassing 64% on the same test. The economist Thomas Sowell once observed, "Everything seems new to those too young to remember the old and too ignorant of history to have heard about it."

This is not the time or place to speculate on the reasons for such dismal statistics, but it's worth noting that both the Theosophical Society and the esoteric ideas associated with the Ageless Wisdom have their own colorful and distinct history. Why is this of any importance, you may ask? Here's why. For the Society to continue to flourish, dedicated members should have a degree of interest in the history of our movement as well as the perennial ideas that constitute modern Theosophy. While memorizing names and dates is of marginal value, it seems that serious members should strive to develop a basic understanding of the reasons for which the Theosophical Society was founded; they should be able to articulate what the Founders viewed as its fundamental mission in the world. Consider these words from the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville: "When the past no longer illuminates the future, the spirit walks in darkness."

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