

Henry Steel Olcott

At a time when spiritualism was the subject of widespread discussion and responsible journalism in America, a group of serious-minded men and women came together in the apartments of H.P. Blavatsky in New York to share a common interest, not only in the topic of the day but in a wide variety of intriguing subjects. These, according to the records of the meetings, ranged from mediumship and magical phenomena to contemporary scientific discoveries, curiosities of nature and the beliefs and practices of ancient civilisation. At one of these meetings, the question was asked: "Would it not be a good thing to form a Society for this kind of study?" The date was September 7th 1875.



Colonel H.S. Olcott was President-Founder of The Theosophical Society from 1875-1907. He was born on 2 August 1832 at Orange, New Jersey, U.S.A. He gained international renown at 23 for his work on the model farm of Scientific Agriculture at Newark and declined a Chair of Agriculture at the University of Athens, offered by Greek Government. He was co-founder of the Westchester Farm School, near Mount Vernon, New York, the first American Scientific School of Agriculture. His first book *Sorghum and Imphee* became a school textbook and brought him, at 25, offers of a governmental botanical mission to Caffraria, S. Africa, Directorship of the Agricultural Bureau at Washington, and managership of two immense properties, all of which he declined. At 26 he toured Europe in the interests of agriculture and his report was

published in the *American Cyclopaedia*. He became American correspondent for the *Mark Lane Express* (London), an Associate Agricultural Editor (1858-60) of the *New York Tribune*, and published two more books on agriculture. For his public service in agricultural reform he received two medals of honour and a silver goblet.

As a reporter for the *New York Tribune* in 1859, Olcott was present at the hanging of John Brown, and though in considerable danger, extricated himself under the seal of Masonic confidence. He joined the Northern Army, fought through North Carolina Campaign and was invalided to New York (1862-5). He was drafted as Special Commissioner of the War Department and later Navy Department for the investigation of frauds. Olcott also received high commendation for purifying the Public Service and cleansing these departments in peril of life and reputation.

In 1868 he was admitted to the Bar and practised till 1878, specialising in customs, revenue and insurance cases. He published a valuable report on insurance while Secretary and Managing Director of National Insurance Convention, a conference or league of State officials, to codify and simplify insurance laws. A statute drafted by H.S.O. and another

lawyer was passed in ten State Legislatures. As Attorney he had such clients as New York City, the N.Y. Stock Exchange, Mutual Equitable Life and Continental Life Insurance Companies, the Gold Exchange Bank, Panama Railways, and The United Steel Manufacturers of Sheffield, England. He was Hon. Sec. to Citizens' National Committee, working with French Government for first International Exposition of World Industries; and also served on International Italian Committee to erect statue to Mazzini in New York. As retiring Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, he was nominated and listed by President Johnson to succeed in that office, but he took sides with Congress against the President and lost the appointment. He was a Member of Lotos Club, an intimate friend of Mark Twain and other famous authors.

Interested in Spiritualism from the age of 19, he reported on the psychic phenomena at Eddy Farm in 1874, for New York Sun and New York Graphic. Single copies sold at \$1 and seven publishers contended for the book rights. Published as 'People from the Other World', 1875, one of the earliest books on psychical research, this book was highly praised by Sir Alfred Russel Wallace, FRS and Sir William Crookes, FRS. At the Eddy Homestead he met Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and together they threw themselves into defence of reality of spiritualistic phenomena, while attempting to purify spiritualistic movement of its materialistic trend. He helped with the preparation of her book, Isis Unveiled. Together they founded The Theosophical Society at New York on the 17 November 1875. He organised the first public cremation in the USA in 1876. In 1878 the Cofounders moved T.S. Headquarters to Bombay, India.

Before leaving, H.S.O. received from US President an autographed letter of recommendation to all US Ministers and Consuls; and from Dept. of State a special diplomatic passport, and a commission to report to Government upon the practicability of extending the commercial interests of US in Asia. He held the first Swadeshi Exhibition in Bombay, in 1879. As President of the TS, he championed in India, Ceylon, Japan and other oriental countries, the revival of Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Islam and other faiths. He also stimulated a Sanskrit revival and united the sects of Ceylon in the Buddhist Section of the Theosophical Society (1880); and united the 12 sects of Japan into a Joint Committee for the promotion of Buddhism (1889); Burma, Siam, and Ceylon into a Convention of Southern Buddhists (1891); and joined the Northern and Southern Buddhism through joint signatures to his Fourteen Propositions of Buddhism (1891). With a delegation of Buddhists (1882) in a Hindu Temple at Tinnevely, he planted a "Tree of Friendship" as the first act of fraternisation for hundreds of years between Buddhists and Hindus.

In 1886, he founded the Adyar Library, where for the first time in history the religious teachers of Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Islam were united to bless a common cause. Though HSO's vision the principle of autonomous Sections with an international Headquarters was developed. In one year (1882-83) of mesmeric healing, he treated 6,000 cripples, deaf, dumb, blind and insane with phenomenal success. He started the Olcott Harijan Free Schools for the education of the outcasts of India, and throughout India he founded Hindu schools, Boy's Aryan Leagues and libraries, and sponsored and published Arya Bala Bodhini for Hindu boys. In Ceylon, he established

schools for Buddhist children and secured for Ceylon Buddhists freedom from religious persecution and established Wesak as public holiday. In 1891, he sponsored an informal conference on the possibility of a Women's National Society in India, and in 1888, planned and institute of technological education for the Maharaja of Baroda.

Yearly, he travelled many thousands of miles by land and sea to lecture for the TS. He was made an Hon. Member of many famous clubs and learned societies. He received the official blessing of Pope Pio Nono; was blessed by the Buddhist High Priests of Ceylon, Burma, Siam and Japan, for his work for Buddhism (he took Pancha Sheela as a Buddhist in 1880); and was adopted into the Brahmin caste for distinguished services to Hinduism.

Col. Olcott was Publications Editor for The Theosophist after H.P.B. left for Europe in 1885; and in 1938, he translated 44 editions of the 'The Buddhist Catechism' into 20 languages, and an internationally used textbook; Old Diary Leaves, a history of the TS (in six volumes); and many pamphlets and articles on Theosophy, religion, psychic phenomena, etc.

He died on 17 February 1907, at Adyar, nominating Annie Besant his successor.