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Book Reviews

The Judge Case. A Conspiracy Which Ruined the Theosophical Cause. By Ernest E. Pelletier. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Edmonton Theosophical Society, 2004. Part I: Pp. xvi + 472, Part II: Pp. viii + 511. ISBN 0-9681602-3-9. \$95.00.

Many followers of Theosophical history are aware that one of the most defining periods in this movement took place between the deaths of H.P. Blavatsky in 1891 and William Quan Judge in 1896. Shortly after Blavatsky's death, Annie Besant, aided by Henry Steel Olcott, accused Judge of forging Mahatmic letters on the assumption that Judge was trying to gain more control over the Society's management. This episode marked the beginning of a series of splits within the movement. The justification for the existence of several Theosophical organizations today can be traced back to unresolved issues throughout Judge and Besant's dissonant relationship. Despite such an important touchstone within the movement, and because of the scars this troublesome era left on some of the surviving Theosophical groups, as far as I know there has not been an earnest attempt to impartially study this controversial period in depth. Of course, general summaries of this story have been recounted through several published histories of the Society. However, accounts by historians within Theosophical organizations have reflected the assumptions and biases of their partisan view on Mr. Judge or Mrs. Besant by relating selected portions of the whole story.¹

In one sense, the recent publication under review is the first attempt to exclusively present an in depth study on what has come to be known as *The Judge Case* in Theosophical circles. This nearly 1,000-page folio is divided into two parts whose pages are numbered separately and each part will be identified throughout this review as I or II. The volume's first part contains Mr. Pelletier's extensive chronology of events, followed by a Supplement where he unfolds his narrative version of this period and analyzes various aspects of the controversy. The second part of this book transcribes or reproduces source documents arranged in ten appendices that will be of interest, and, from my own studies into this period, a measure of frustration for documents that were left out. I understand that it may not be practical to reprint all the documentation on this episode, but deciding what is relevant or essential to present depends on both the acuity and perspective of the editor. Several of the appendices also contain additional analysis and notes by the compiler on selected material.

Many elements of *The Judge Case* are controversial for Theosophists. Mr. Pelletier's own presentation and his conclusions will undoubtedly foster more debate. His position on this period is clearly described in the Introduction: "This work is an attempt to bare the facts, to present a detailed factual defense to vindicate W.Q. Judge's reputation, and to repudiate the accusations of fraud [Judge was accused of committing] (I, xiv)." Therefore, the material presented in this volume is solely intended to exonerate Mr. Judge's role in this drama and highlight the events that Mr. Pelletier contends led to the downfall of the movement. His

¹ Histories defending Judge are (Anonymous) *The Theosophical Movement 1875 – 1925 A History and a Survey*, and its compressed update, *The Theosophical Movement 1875 – 1950*, as well as *H.P. Blavatsky and the Theosophical Movement* by Charles Ryan. For histories defending Besant, see *A Short History of the Theosophical Society*, compiled by Josephine Ransom, and volumes 4 and 5 of Henry Steel Olcott's *Old Diary Leaves*.

narrative is drawn from many of the historical documents included in Part II. In Pelletier's Supplement, he describes an alleged plot against the Society, which was strongly promoted by Judge. Judge contended that the Society's Hindu members were being influenced by Black Magicians (who are never identified) in order to destroy the movement. According to Judge and some of his adherents, the black magicians' first strike was to discredit Blavatsky in 1884. In the 1890s, they continued their scheme by attacking Judge in order to prevent a renewed occult diaspora, which was supposed to be a part of the Society's "Original Program," from being promulgated to the (primarily Western) world by the Society's founders (i.e. the Masters of Wisdom) (I, 332 & 415). A mouthful to say the least, yet this is the conspiracy Mr. Pelletier refers to in his book's title. While researchers are given access to a variety of material in order to initiate their own study of this period, Mr. Pelletier's analysis of the material is calculated to uphold the conspiracy that Judge first presented in an Esoteric Section circular issued well into the conflict on November 3, 1894 (II, 130 – 137). Judge's contention is certainly a part of the overall history of this period. However, some readers might ask why this premise is never put under the microscope for questioning and analysis just as Mr. Pelletier does with many other components of this story. If I am not mistaken, we mortal folk seem totally capable of creating our own machinations without being considered puppets of dark hidden hands. There are many issues concerning this conflicted episode that need to be taken into consideration when deciding what caused the ensuing fragmentation of the Society. In this study, we end up reading a rendition of this conflict that endorses Judge's ideological view. Mr. Pelletier's approach reveals much about Judge as the declared protagonist, yet this exclusive focus sacrifices other points of view. Like many of Judge's supporters during his lifetime, Mr. Pelletier portrays other characters in this story who questioned Judge's claims in a pejorative and (what he proclaims throughout the text) evil-doing context. Therefore, Pelletier's presentation of *The Judge Case* makes no attempt to impartially portray the many-sided views of this period. It is another matter whether any reader comes to the conclusion that this conflict damaged the Theosophical Society, or if it did so, in the manner that Pelletier advocates. A discussion of how the Society may have been damaged, whether by a conspiracy of Black Magicians, or other mundane human factors, is not adequately explored in this volume.

How Mr. Pelletier portrays Judge or Besant can be ascertained by reviewing the way he treats their contacts with the Mahatmas. Judge's contacts are shown in a *de facto* manner without any question of their authenticity (e.g. I, 4, 11, 61, 112, 361, 383). Besant's contacts, on the other hand, are buried among critical comments about her (e.g. I, 36, 48), thus giving her messages a weaker significance. In one instance, Mr. Pelletier introduces one of her Mahatmic letters with the caveat: she "claimed to receive" that message (I, 46). No such qualification is ever made about any of Judge's Mahatmic communiqués discussed in this volume. At one point Mr. Pelletier quotes a Mahatmic message to Judge, which stated that the Master had spoken to Besant, by using an occult *nom-de-plume*, Heliodore, about the possibility of her going to India. While Pelletier does not question Judge's Mahatmic missive, he makes no comment about the Master's contact with Besant therein (I, 364). However, on the preceding page, Mr. Pelletier seeks to demonstrate how Besant was warned by Blavatsky's sister, Vera Jelihovsky, in the latter part of 1891 not to go to India in order to avoid future troubles. Ms. Jelihovsky claimed to receive this warning as an impression from her then deceased sister (I, 363). The Mahatma's view that Besant could go to India is not reconciled with Jelihovsky's warning (*via* Blavatsky).

Additionally, background into Judge's early life before Theosophy and his whereabouts in the 1880s, after he helped to form the Society, encompass seven chapters of the compiler's Supplement. Besant is introduced for the first time in two short paragraphs at the beginning of the ninth chapter, which primarily discusses the whereabouts of Blavatsky's Will. Compared to the amount of space Mr. Pelletier allotted for Judge's personal history, his treatment of Besant's

life before entering Theosophy seems little more than a footnote. However, Pelletier occasionally adds short comments about her character traits in future chapters. Nonetheless, Besant's character deserves more attention other than the occasional, and typically critical, quip about her pride or her search for moral justice (that Mr. Pelletier has determined to be skewed) throughout her many activities. Additionally, Judge's horoscope is included with two interpretative articles in an appendix. Whatever one may think of astrology, Mr. Pelletier does not try to analyze Besant's personality with the same attention given to Judge.

Mr. Pelletier's Chronology is drawn mostly from selected primary sources, and he also references secondary sources with a particular reliance on The United Lodge of Theosophists' (ULT) historical narrative, *The Theosophical Movement 1875-1925* published in 1925. There are several source documents incorporated in ULT's history of the Society, which are not found elsewhere. Nonetheless, the perspective of this earlier historical narrative also defends Judge. Mr. Pelletier acknowledges in his Introduction that a ULT member provided him with a synopsis of this period, which became the model for his own outline of *The Judge Case*. The starting point for Pelletier's chronology begins in the early 1880s, soon after Blavatsky and Olcott had left New York City for India. Judge remained in New York and lived under dire financial circumstances. A few years later Judge received an invitation to come to India. He departed in the spring of 1884 and stopped in London and then Paris to meet up with Blavatsky's party. He was soon asked to travel on to India, ahead of the others, to help manage the problems being caused by the Coulobms who had accused Blavatsky of forging letters from the Mahatmas. These accusations of forgery led to a report published by the Society for Psychical Research denouncing Blavatsky's character. There is some justification for Mr. Pelletier to start his story here, since his rendition of events is based on Judge's and his supporters' perspective, all of whom referred to Blavatsky's earlier controversy as relevant to their own troubles. This and subsequent events are restated in the compiler's supplemental analysis that follows the Chronology.

What may be new to readers familiar with this era is an intriguing piece of evidence introduced by the author. It is a letter Judge wrote at the request of a prominent Indian member and fellow lawyer, N.D. Khandalavala in September 1884 in relation to the Coulomb controversy. The letter is presented in Chapter 15 of the Supplement. Khandalavala wanted to know whether the Coulobms could have forged a series of letters they were claiming had been written by Blavatsky. Judge responded by saying that forgery was quite feasible and he gave several demonstrations of forged signatures, which he had asked an unidentified friend to execute. Pelletier states that Judge's letter remains in the archives of the Adyar Society to this day. This letter was meant to be included as evidence during Judge's judicial hearing that was held in the summer of 1894, but for reasons that would have violated the Society's constitution, this meeting did not present any charges against him. Consequently, neither this letter nor any other document was ever presented to the Society's Judicial Committee. While Judge's 1884 letter had been assigned as "Exhibit A" in Besant's collection of evidence, it did not appear in her booklet *The Case Against W.Q. Judge* published in 1895 (II, 34 – 80) nor did Besant discuss it elsewhere. Controversy is said to surround this letter, since a handwritten note had been attached to it hiding several words indicating who had originally written the simulated signatures (i.e. Judge's unnamed friend, rather than himself). Mr. Pelletier contends that this document set off *The Judge Case*.

The compiler also introduces another factor that may further illuminate the origins of this conflict. This was the deleterious effort—also occurring during the 1880s—instigated by one of Col. Olcott's colleagues named Richard Harte. Mr. Harte was serving as acting editor to *The Theosophist* in India while the Colonel was frequently touring Southeast Asia. Harte had written a series of articles proclaiming Adyar to be the spiritual center of the movement. Judge

disagreed with Harte, and the dispute developed into an antagonistic relationship. Harte had a good relationship with many Indian members, and Pelletier states that Harte spread rumors to discredit Judge's occult abilities. Prominent Indian members from Poona and Bombay, including Khandalavala, are believed to have held these suspicions and convinced Olcott and several other English members that Judge was forging Mahatmic letters and producing false impressions by using the Master's seal. The only mention of Judge's letter to Khandalavala during the 1890s came from its writer, when Judge replied to Besant's charges in 1895 (II, 108 – 109). He discounted the importance of his letter as evidence, since he characterized the simulated signatures as poorly executed imitations, in order to counter Besant's charge that his alleged forgery of Mahatmic letters was perfect. This letter is an interesting addition to the history of this era, and it deserves further treatment, possibly by making a trip to archives in Adyar and Mumbai (Bombay). Nonetheless, some of the links in Mr. Pelletier's treatment of Indian members' deep suspicions and further actions towards Judge are only supported by his own suppositions concerning the black magicians, rather than by any hard evidence (I, 346, 357, 365, 371, 373-374, 380-383, 397, 405, 407).

Mr. Pelletier's portrayal of Judge's actions throughout his book is consistently beneficent. One example will demonstrate how certain material has been presented and other material bypassed with the clear intent to vindicate what Pelletier considers to be Judge's flawless conduct. One Brahmin Judge identified as having a malign influence on Besant was the North Indian member, Garendra Nath Chakravarti. Once *The Judge Case* was in full swing, Judge and his supporters considered Mr. Chakravarti to be one of the lead conspirators against the Society. First hand accounts and excerpts from Judge's and his supporters' letters were primarily published in the American magazine, *The Path*, to expose what they considered to be Chakravarti's manipulative tactics. This magazine published one excerpt from a letter written by Besant to Judge in February 1894, with the aim of demonstrating Chakravarti's alleged manipulations. Mrs. Besant wrote on February 14th: "He [Chakravarti] endorsed the idea that I should take sole charge of the School [the E.S.T. or Eastern School of Theosophy].... Indeed, he told me last summer [1893]... [sic] that it had to be so presently (I, 88 & 162)." This letter was published in *The Path* in early 1895—a year after it was initially written. By this time, Judge had already released his November 3, 1894 circular detailing the conspiracy he contended was afoot. This became the context in which Judge and his advocates presented any testimony or letter. The February 14th letter was meant to show Chakravarti's manipulative influence over Besant. Yet the original suggestion that Besant could run the E.S.T. occurred in a different context. Mr. Pelletier places the February 14th letter in his Chronology in its appropriate sequence—during the date it was originally written in 1894 and, again, when it was published in *The Path* in 1895 along with Judge's additional comments. What Judge did not disclose in 1895, nor does Pelletier in his Chronology or Supplement, was that Judge did propose that Besant might become the sole head of the E.S.T. before she wrote her February 1894 letter to him. This was revealed in at least two documents. Besant, herself, noted this offer in an E.S.T. circular she wrote on December 19, 1894 when she stated that Judge told her "the time had come for you [Besant] to be the sole head of the E.S.T., and rejoice in your closer touch with the Masters." Judge's advocates could easily be suspicious whether Besant was telling the truth by this time, yet Archibald Keightley, one of Judge's strongest defenders, also noted Judge's offer to Besant in his own E.S.T. circular on January 12, 1895. Mr. Pelletier's Chronology briefly notes Besant's December E.S.T. circular. However, he only extracts a quote showing Besant's rejection of Judge's order to release her as a co-head of the Eastern School of Theosophy. Judge's fiat (his order was actually supposed to have come from the Master) appeared in his November 1894 circular. Keightley's E.S.T. circular is also referenced in Mr. Pelletier's Chronology, yet Pelletier only quotes a brief portion that pertains to Judge writing the E.S.T.'s *Book of Rules*. While

Besant and Keightley's documents are valuable for the reasons cited, they also discuss other issues that Mr. Pelletier does not address in this volume—nor did he include these two documents in the second half of his book.

If one considers when it occurred, Chakravarti's endorsement of Judge's offer to Besant may not come across in such a malign fashion as it is portrayed in *The Path*. Pelletier does not mention that, once Chakravarti attended the Parliament of Religions in the fall of 1893, Judge began to solicit Chakravarti for his help with the Theosophical work in America. Besant provided excerpts from Judge's letters to Chakravarti in her booklet, *The Case Against W.Q. Judge*, where Judge was said to have written to his new Indian friend in gracious terms, such as being from "your loving friends here" who "are full of love for you and [have] happy recollections" of their recent experience at the Parliament. Mrs. Besant's booklet is transcribed in the second part of Pelletier's book where these brief excerpts can be found (II, 40). Nevertheless, the comments are neither mentioned in the Chronology, nor discussed in the Supplement. Besant also reprinted a long excerpt from a letter Judge had written to Chakravarti on January 15, 1894. The letter reveals that Judge had asked Chakravarti if he would be willing to become the next president of the Society, noting "It needs as President to be in India just a man like you [sic] (II, 39)." If Chakravarti was not interested in the presidency, then Judge asked him if he would come to America so that Judge could "work here with you and for you." Judge added earnestly, "I am not joking one little bit in this (II, 39)." Mr. Pelletier does not address Judge's earlier efforts to form a relationship with Chakravarti. Judge also ignored his initial efforts to recruit Chakravarti when he later claims to expose this Brahmin's malicious actions. Judge's account of Chakravarti's work in the Society, along with any reference to his early efforts, are grandfathered into Judge's charge that Chakravarti was scheming to derail the Society's work all along, partly by using Besant as a pawn. Since Judge omitted any account of his early attempts to embrace Chakravarti, inquirers might ask several questions: Did Judge's early efforts to partner with this Hindu, then, seem too embarrassing or problematic to explain once he released his conspiracy theory? Or, did Judge rationalize his early efforts with Chakravarti to be irrelevant? Besant did not think so, and she released excerpts from Judge's letters to show his attempts to forge a relationship with someone he later accused of working in league with Black Magicians. Besant was asking why Judge could not recognize these alleged nefarious intentions at an earlier time.

There are other issues that could also be mentioned, such as members' impressions of Chakravarti at the Parliament. Theosophists related different views on his presentations, yet Mr. Pelletier only presents testimony that casts Chakravarti's speeches in an unfavorable light (I, 394). Some Theosophists, such as the prominent member on the West coast, Jerome Anderson (who supported Judge throughout the conflict), wrote in his magazine, *The Pacific Theosophist*, very sympathetically about Chakravarti's efforts at the Parliament, yet his appraisal is not mentioned in Pelletier's book.

Throughout this volume, Mr. Pelletier also discusses the relationship between Indian and European Theosophists. Their interaction did not always go well and Pelletier casts this troubled relationship as another victim of the Black Magicians who incited doubt among the Brahmin members (I, 415). Judge's November 3, 1894 E.S.T. circular also announced that Blavatsky's work was geared all along to introduce a renewed Western-style of occultism, particularly for American students. This claim infuriated Besant, who believed that Judge was denigrating India and the East, by characterizing Indians as no longer capable to use or share the wisdom teachings available to them. The Indian story of Theosophy is complex, involving issues such as culture, the Brahmins' natural suspicion of its colonial invaders, and the Hindu Revival movement that was already under way before Blavatsky and Olcott's arrival to the subcontinent. Mr. Pelletier merely interprets the complex issues involving the Indian Theosophists in terms of

Judge's conspiracy theory. Therefore, Pelletier contends that events occurring in India before 1891 were a "breeding ground to incubate doubts and suspicions until the proper time when the evil self-serving and cunning Brothers of the Shadow could take advantage of the fermented conditions (I, 332)." Mr. Pelletier further states that the Black Magicians influenced the Indians by "occult means" (that are not described), and they used "tools of deception, doubt and suspicion (I, 415)." Other conventional and verifiable alternative explanations, as suggested above, are neither considered nor analyzed in this study.

Judge had his own ideas about the development of occultism in the West, and this fueled even more tension between him and Besant.² Mr. Pelletier only gives this issue passing notice when he notes that Judge was "chosen by the Masters of Wisdom to initiate a paradigm shift in human consciousness in the Western World (I, xiv)." Readers are also indirectly informed about the coming Western occultism at the end of the Supplement. Mr. Pelletier quotes an excerpt from Judge concerning the end of one cycle in the Society and the beginning of another. However, the context and full import of its Western occult leanings is lost by the brief manner in which it is presented. Judge wrote about this ideal in two E.S.T. papers he called Subsidiary Paper A (September 1894) and B (January 1895), as well as several articles in *The Path* where the same basic information was reiterated. None of these documents are noted or included in this volume.

On the other hand, researchers will be grateful to find other scarce documents in this volume culled from archives and rare journals, such as the *O.E. Library Critic* and *Theosophical Quarterly*. The *Critic* published documents in the 1930s pertaining to Judge's relationship with Katherine Tingley, which took place during the period of the Judge Case. Despite the amount of material included in an appendix on Tingley, she is given minimal attention in the Chronology and the Supplement. She played an influential role behind the scenes in the last few years of Judge's life that deserves much deeper study. After Judge's death, Tingley quickly rose to prominence and continued Judge's Society in America. It is doubtful that this happened by chance. Mr. Pelletier's skeptical remarks questioning the veracity of the documents concerning Tingley that are reprinted from the *Critic* comes across as apologetic. I contend that more studies into her relationship with Judge will probably show that she was a controversial figure in Judge's life, just as others consider that Chakravarti was a controversial figure in Besant's life. The manner in which Chakravarti and Tingley influenced their respective Theosophical leader is a topic for others to decide.

Besides the various documents I previously mentioned that should have been included in this volume, there are other important items that have also been excluded. If they were reprinted, these documents would have given the reader a more balanced portrayal of members' contentious activities throughout this period. While Pelletier reprints the American section's history of the Society that was read to the delegates in order to justify their autonomy from Adyar, he does not include Olcott's rebuttal, entitled *Historical Retrospective 1875 – 96* that appeared a year later. Yet, you will see references to it throughout footnotes in the Supplement. The booklet, *The Neutrality of the Theosophical Society: An Enquiry Into Certain Charges Against the Vice-President* is an essential document from this era, yet it was also not reprinted in this volume. Long excerpts from this booklet are used in Chapter 23 of the Supplement, but the reader is at the mercy of the editorial decisions of the writer. Since Judge brought up constitutional issues throughout his numerous defensive explanations, it would have been helpful to include G.R.S. Mead and Bertram Keightley's March 27, 1894 circular criticizing the president's procedure to bring Judge to London in order to hold a hearing on his Mahatmic

² Brett Forray, "William Q. Judge's and Annie Besant's Views of Brahmin Theosophists," *Theosophical History* 10, no. 1 (January 2004).

messages. In fact, someone could make a small study on the way the Society's leaders used the By-Laws during this period to defend their position, as well as introduce and vote on resolutions concerning Judge at several sectional conventions. Another useful item missing from this volume is Besant's *The Theosophical Society and the Present Troubles* that appeared in *Lucifer* in February 1895. Her perspective on this period would have been better served by including this article.

There were items published outside of the Theosophical Society that are also valuable in order to better understand this period. For example, the series of articles published in the *Westminster Gazette* by Edmund Garrett that were later bound as a booklet with responses from Theosophists, contains important information and excerpts from letters found nowhere else. Therefore, Garrett's *Isis Very Much Unveiled, Being the Story of the Great Mahatma Hoax* is another essential document that should have been reprinted in an appendix. It could have replaced, at the least, Appendix I – *Judge's Pseudonyms and Words of Wisdom*, which adds little to this period historically.

By noting certain documents included in this volume and pointing out other items that have been left out brings us back to where I started this review. Mr. Pelletier is straightforward in his purpose to release some of the material available from this Theosophical era, and to share his ideas about this troubled time. In his Introduction, he bemoans the fact that various Societies withhold preserved documents on this period, the act of which only serves their own desirable ends and purposes and (purposely or not) hinders the telling of authentic history. However, some clearly accessible and important documents have slipped past, or have been ignored by Mr. Pelletier's eye. The historian of modern Psychology, John Kerr, ably pointed out the pitfalls a historian can fall prey to in his work on the triumvirate, Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud and Sabina Spielrein. When historians try to tell genuine history (whether it is complete or not), he noted that some attempts run the risk of being overshadowed by a historian's convictions that fit their ideologically preferred assumptions. This fixation results in a rendition of past events that only serve to protect and reinforce an assumed or possibly preferred point of view, rather than pursuing the story for honest and critical historical and intellectual accuracy.³ The current retelling of *The Judge Case* maintains the general account of this story that had been previously told from the perspective of Judge's supporters. However, Mr. Pelletier does introduce two areas that deserve further study: Judge's September 17, 1884 letter, and information about Richard Harte's efforts to denigrate Judge in the eyes of some prominent Indian members, which contributed to the Indians' suspicions of Judge's later Mahatmic letters. Besant's story throughout this volume is buried under what is likely to remain an improbable conspiracy theory. While this hypothesis deserves its own place in the history of this era, so does Besant's own voice. Unfortunately, we never get to fully understand her motives or adequately hear her views in this volume.

Brett Forray
Turlock, CA

³ John Kerr, *A Most Dangerous Method. The Story of Jung, Freud, and Sabina Spielrein* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1993), 14.