



Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: Theosophy and the Invention of the Guru

Peter Washington

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In 1875 the Theosophical Society was founded in New York by a renegade Russian aristocrat and a superannuated American colonel. Its stated objectives were to promote the brotherhood of man and encourage the study of comparative religion and psychic phenomena, but it was really the vehicle whereby one of the founders, Madame Blavatsky, could exercise her occult powers. These she claimed to derive from communion with an immortal secret brotherhood who revealed to her - and only to her - the secrets of the universe. Despite the fact that Blavatsky was repeatedly exposed as a fraud, her society prospered for more than half a century, attracting thousands of members from around the world. She also became the model, and sometimes the source, for the gurus and spiritual teachers whose influence is still with us, from Annie Besant and Rudolph Steiner to Gurdjieff and Krishnamurti. This book traces the rise and fall of theosophy and the careers of the other Western gurus who have looked to the East for esoteric wisdom. The story, a curious comedy of passion, power and gullibility, illuminates some of the 20th century's abiding preoccupations - the revolt against materialism, the quest for immortality, the argument between science and religion, and the hunger for authority. Peter Washington's other books include "Fraud: Literary Theory and the End of English".

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