

*Boris de Zirkoff
on Charles Johnston*



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Bio-bibliography of Charles Johnston by Boris de Zirkoff, from *H.P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, Vol. IX, pp. 422-26.

CHARLES JOHNSTON WAS AN IRISH ORIENTALIST, Theosophist, writer and traveller, born at Ballykilbeg, County Down, Ireland, February 17th, 1867. His father was William J. Johnston, member of Parliament for Belfast, a famous Orangeman and leader of the Temperance Movement. His mother was Georgina Barbara Hay, daughter of Sir John Hay, a Scottish Baronet, of Park, Scotland. He was educated at Derby, England, and later at Dublin University. In August 1888, he took and passed brilliantly his final examination, notoriously “stiff,” for the Bengal Civil Service. Soon after, he married in London Vera Vladimirovna de Zhelihovsky, daughter of Madame Blavatsky’s sister, Mme. Vera Petrovna de Zhelihovsky, by her second marriage, whom he had met while mother and daughter were staying in London visiting Madame Blavatsky. In October of the same year, Charles Johnston and wife sailed for India on the same steamer with Col. Henry S. Olcott, arriving at their destination in November. Stationed in an unhealthy district, Johnston contracted jungle fever, and, after visiting Bombay, Madras, Calcutta and Allahabad, became so ill that he was officially invalided home some two years after his arrival. At one time he told a friend of his about a yogi who used to emerge from the depths of the jungle whenever a particularly bad attack of fever had him in its grip. He said that the yogi would squat on the veranda, near him, and smile sympathetically, occasionally discussing philosophy, but more often saying nothing; and that the effect of this man’s presence was most soothing and helpful, seeming always to quiet the fever and make it more endurable.

On his return to Europe, his Civil Service career at an end, Johnston’s first effort had to be to recover his health while somehow making a living, which must have been quite difficult without either mercantile or professional training. He tried to become a professional writer, and succeeded in connecting himself with some English journals, to which he sent letters on foreign news. He also contributed to more serious reviews, articles on ethnological, political, and economic subjects. Employed in this capacity, he [423] and his wife travelled extensively throughout Europe for the next six years, staying in various places in England, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Austria and France; they also visited Madame Blavatsky’s nearest kin in Russia, and lived for some time in Salzburg, where Dr. Franz Hartmann helped Johnston finally to get rid of his fever.

It was in 1885 that Johnston joined the Theosophical Society, and in the Spring of 1887 met Madame Blavatsky in London, where she had just moved from Ostende. Regarding this, he writes:

I had been first introduced to her by reading A.P. Sinnett's *Occult World* in November 1884, and *Esoteric Buddhism* in the following spring; and had been completely convinced of the truth of her message, of the reality of the Masters, and of her position as Messenger of the Great Lodge. This conviction was tested by the attack made on her by the Society for Psychical Research in London, in June 1885, when I made a vigorous protest in H.P.B.'s defence. . . . I was in London for Indian Civil Service examinations, and was able to make arrangements through these friends to visit her. When I entered the room, she was sitting writing, with her back to the door. She turned to greet me, the powerful face lit up by a smile in the great blue eyes, her hair light golden brown, naturally waved or rippled, and parted and drawn back.

She was at work on the first volume of *The Secret Doctrine*, which came out at the end of 1888; we talked about some of the ideas it contained, and such was the immense generosity of her nature that she never made her visitor feel young, ignorant, inexperienced. There was an unconscious, whole-hearted humility about her, as rare as it was beautiful. One was always aware of the largeness and dignity of H.P.B.'s nature, yet there was nothing stilted or artificial about it. When at Lansdowne Road in the summer of 1888, whither she had moved from Maycot¹ with her loyal friends, she stood behind my chair at lunch, stroking my hair and accusing me of using a tallow candle-end to keep it smooth — there was not the least lapse from dignity: it was the humour of a good-natured Titan.

An immense feeling of power surrounded her; it was like being in a room with a tremendously active volcano, though eruptions — and there were eruptions — had less to do with that impression of power than had the steadily maintained force that was present in everything she did — was present equally when she seemed to be doing nothing . . .

In talking to her, one had always the sense of power, wisdom, integrity, humour. But at rare intervals there was a notable change. It was as though a door had opened within here, a door into the infinite worlds. One had a sense of a greater than H.P.B. speaking, a tremendous authority and force. [424]

I once asked her what her own experience was during such visitations. She said that it was as if she stepped out and stood at one side, listening, keenly interested, fully remembering afterwards all that was said. "Nothing of the medium about it!" she added.²

In October 1896, Johnston and his wife moved permanently to the U.S.A., where he became a citizen in 1903. Here, as in Europe, he made his living by contributing to various magazines and journals; he wrote book reviews on Oriental and philosophi-

¹ [Maycot Cottage, Upper Norwood, London]

² *Theosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XXXIX, July 1931, pp. 12-13

cal subjects for the *New York Times*, from 1917 on. In 1908 he was special lecturer in political economy at the University of Wisconsin. He lectured also at Cooper Union, and for the New York Board of Education, and at one time taught at the Russian Seminary. He was a member of the American Oriental Society, and during the years 1918–19 was a Captain of the Military Intelligence Division of the U.S. Army. A great lover of nature and science, he was especially interested in ornithology, and was a valued member of the Linnæan Society. Towards the close of his life, he was one of the Editors of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

Charles Johnston became a widower in 1922 or 1923, when his wife Vera passed away (she was born in 1864). She was buried in the small churchyard of the Old St. David's Church (Episcopal), at Radnor, Pennsylvania., where the grave is marked by a white stone with her name on it. Mrs. Vera V. Johnston's signal contribution to the Theosophical Cause was an English translation of the greater part of Part I of H.P. Blavatsky's Russian serial story entitled *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan*. It is a good translation as far as it goes, but it is only a partial one, with many passages eliminated for some unknown reason.

Charles Johnston suffered from a heart ailment for about a year before he died. He passed away October 16th, 1931, at St. Luke's Hospital, New York. Services were held at the Chapel of the Comforter, New York, by Rev. Dr. Clarence C. Clark. The body was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in New York. Charles Johnston was survived at the time by two sisters, one in Ireland and another, Mrs. Samuel Brew, in British Columbia. The Johnstons had no children.

The *New York Times*, in an obituary notice, stated that Charles Johnston was "at one time identified with the Theosophical Movement." This gem of an understatement has reference to the 46 years of his sixty-four years of life, during which he was dynamically engaged in the work of the Theosophical Movement, [425] having joined the Society when only 18 years of age. While a student at Dublin University, he had as friends a notable group of young Irishmen, including the poets W.B. Yeats and G.W. Russell (Æ), who shared his enthusiastic interest in Theosophy. With them, and backed by the encouragement of William Quan Judge, he collaborated in the formation of the Dublin Theosophical Society in April, 1886.¹ His dynamic efforts on behalf of the Movement spanned therefore close to half a century. The leaven of his work, his particular genius and gift, especially as an Orientalist and linguist, remain a permanent portion of the Movement, an integral part of that "corner stone, the foundation of the future religions of humanity," which was laid down by H.P. Blavatsky and her Teachers.

The first strictly Theosophical essay of Charles Johnston's, entitled "The Second Wave," was published as the leading article in *The Theosophist*, Vol. VIII, December 1886, when the author was but nineteen years of age. It was succeeded by 15 other essays in the same Journal. He contributed 27 articles to *Lucifer*, five of which com-

¹ When the American Section, T.S., declared its organizational independence, as the Theosophical Society in America, in 1895, Charles Johnston and his wife continued to be affiliated with it. After Judge's passing, when, in 1897, Katherine Tingley formed the Universal Brotherhood Organization, both Johnstons remained associated with the Theosophical Society in America, under the Presidentship of E.T. Hargrove, and continued to be very active workers in that Organization.

prised his first translations from the *Upanishads*, and eight half-pages of translated aphorisms. He wrote 15 articles for *The Irish Theosophist*, 20 for *The Path* and 8 for *Theosophy*, which was published for two years following the original ten volumes of *The Path*. In November 1893, William Q. Judge enlisted him for the task of translating systematically and commenting upon the *Upanishads* and the writings of Śamkarāchārya, for the benefit of the American *Oriental Department Papers*, which Mr. Judge had inaugurated as early as February 1891.¹ Johnston supplied these Papers with 53 translations from the Sanskrit. Another 53 contributions have been identified in *The Theosophical Forum*, 26 of which were translations. In addition to the above, he contributed 242 articles and essays to the pages of the *Theosophical Quarterly*, founded by C.A. Griscom in New York in 1903.² [426] All of his Theosophical writings were a voluntary contribution to the Cause he loved so well.

The Theosophical and Oriental writings from the pen of Charles Johnston which are known to have been published in book-form are as follows:

- *The Theosophy of the Upanishads*. London & Benares: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1896; 203pp.
- *From the Upanishads*. Dublin: Whaley, 1896; 2nd ed., Portland, Maine: Thos. B. Mosher, 1897. 60pp; 3rd ed., *ibid.*, 1913; 69pp.
- *The Memory of Past Births*. 5th ed., New York: The Metaphysical Publishing Co., 1899; 55pp.
- *Karma*, *ibid.*, 1900; 56pp.
- *The Bhagavad-Gita* (The Song of the Master), 1908; also published serially in the *Theosophical Quarterly*.
- *The Parables of the Kingdom*. New York: The Quarterly Book Department, 1909; 31pp.
- *The Song of Life*. Flushing: The Author, 1901; 69pp; also New York: The Quarterly Book Department, 1910.
- *The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali*. New York: The Author, 1912; 119pp.
- *The Great Upanishads*. New York: The Quarterly Book Department: Vol. I, 1927; 245pp; Vol. II, published later.
- *The Crest-Jewel of Wisdom*, originally published in the *Oriental Department Papers*; also published by The Theosophical University Press, Covina, California, 1946; 163pp, together with several other Oriental Scriptures in translation, and several of Johnston's essays from the *Oriental Department Papers* and Judge's *Path* magazine.

¹ In introducing Charles Johnston as the translator of the Sanskrit works to be produced in his *Oriental Papers*, Judge wrote:

“Of his qualifications there is no doubt, as he has had experience in this in this field, [and] has also for some time been teaching Sanskrit, and brings to the work a sincere sympathy with Indian thought, as well as devotion to the Society which will, without question, make the matter furnished of value as well as of interest.”

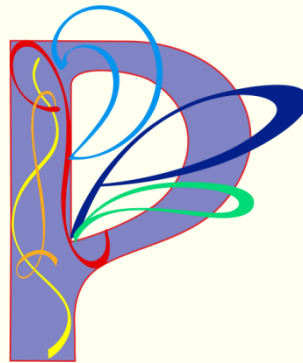
² Vols. 1-35, July 1903 to October 1938

Of the non-theosophical works of Charles Johnston mention should be made of the following:

- *Kela-Bai: An Anglo-Indian Idyll*. New York: Doubleday & McClure Co., 1900; 106pp.
- *Ireland, Historic and Picturesque*. Philadelphia: H.T. Coates & Co., 1902; 393pp.
- *Ireland Through the Stereoscope*. New York: Underwood & Underwood, 1907; 260pp.
- *Why the World Laughs*. New York & London: Harper & Bros., 1912; 388pp.
- *Ireland's Story*. In collaboration with Carita Spencer. Boston & New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1905; 414pp.; new and enlarged ed., *ibid.*, 1923.

Charles Johnston translated from the German Paul Deussen's *The System of the Vedanta*, and from the original Russian, *What is Art?*, by Count Leo N. Tolstoy (1898), and *Julian the Apostate*, by D.S. Merezhkovsky (1899).

There can be no doubt whatever that Charles Johnston was a first rate scholar in his chosen field of Orientalism, a devoted student of the Ancient Wisdom, a man of high courage, keen sense of humour, of steadfast aspirations, and an indefatigable worker for the dissemination of the ageless wisdom. The modern Theosophical Movement owes him a great debt of gratitude.¹



“Blavatsky interviewed by Charles Johnston” in our Blavatsky Tributes Series.

¹ *Chief Sources: Theosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XXIX, July 1931, pp. 12-13; January 1932, pp. 206-22; *The Canadian Theosophist*, Vol. XII, November 1931 (portrait).