

*Tributes to De Robigne
Mortimer Bennett*



Tributes to D. M. Bennett 1818–1882

A remarkable man held in high esteem by the Founders of the Theosophical Society.

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De ROBIGNE MORTIMER BENNETT. American Freethinker, writer, editor and lecturer, born at Springfield, N.Y., December 23rd, 1818, two months prematurely. He received about four years of schooling in Cooperstown, N.Y., then worked in a printing office and at wool-carding, although he would have preferred studying medicine. At fifteen he joined the New London Shaker¹ community, and some ten years later rose to be head of its medical department. At 27 he became the community's physician. Having fallen in love with the Shakeress Mary Wicks, he left the community, as the Shakers were celibates. After a term as drug clerk in St. Louis, he established himself in business and made considerable money. In 1850, he took the road as salesman and collector; he manufactured [626] proprietary medicines in Cincinnati, Ohio, and became quite wealthy, but later lost heavily. In 1868 he worked in Kansas City and lost more money. He then went to Long Island and made bricks. He turned apothecary once more, this time in Paris, III, and became a partner in a seed firm. It is in Paris, III, that Bennett started in 1873 his journal called *The Truth Seeker*, a name suggested by his wife. Next year he brought it over to New York and established the Editorial Offices in the Moffatt Bldg., at 335 Broadway.

In 1875, Bennett declared himself in sympathy with various Spiritualistic ideas then coming to the foreground, and espoused that cause for a while, although fundamentally he was a Freethinker and on close friendly terms with many famous members of the Freethought Movement.

¹ [The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, more commonly known as the Shakers, are a millenarian restorationist Christian sect founded c. 1747 in England and then organized in the United States in the 1780s. They were initially known as "Shaking Quakers" because of their ecstatic behaviour during worship services. Espousing egalitarian ideals, women took on spiritual leadership roles alongside men, including founding leaders such as Jane Wardley, Ann Lee, and Lucy Wright. The Shakers emigrated from England and settled in Revolutionary colonial America, with an initial settlement at Watervliet, New York (present-day Colony), in 1774. They practice a celibate and communal utopian lifestyle, pacifism, uniform charismatic worship, and their model of equality of the sexes, which they institutionalized in their society in the 1780s. They are also known for their simple living, architecture, technological innovation, music, and furniture. — *Wikipedia*.]

Bennett was a man of average height, small-boned, inclined to be somewhat overweight, and walked with a slight limp as one of his feet was deformed. He had rather long hair and whiskers, and an open, friendly face. He was a prolific writer and an indefatigable worker who would get up at 5 a.m. and work late into the evening.

It is natural that a man like Bennett, a forceful protagonist of various unpopular causes and a man whose pen was often clipped in gall in defence of those unjustly attacked, would make for himself many enemies. The ridiculous frameup which he became the victim of was partly due to his publishing in 1875 his “Open Letter to Jesus Christ” and another author’s article on “How Marsupials Propagate their Kind?” He also sold, among other books available at his Editorial Offices, E.H. Heywood’s *Cupid’s Yokes; or The Binding Forces of Conjugal Life*, a pamphlet which, according to the authorities of the day should have never been sent through the mails. Today none of this literature would receive the slightest attention or even be of any interest. But Bennett lived in another era than ours. He was forthwith arrested in November 1877. This fact aroused a tremendous wave of support and the Journal he was editing naturally reaped benefit from this situation. A petition bearing some two hundred thousand signatures was sent to President Hayes to demand the dismissal of the case. Hayes did not act, and Bennett was eventually sentenced, June 5th, 1879, to 13 months in Albany’s Penitentiary and the payment of \$300 in fine. He was allowed to write while in jail, and continued to contribute heavily to his Journal. He was set free in May 1880, and on May 8th a huge audience greeted him at a Chickering Hall reception. In August of the same year he sailed for England in company of A.L. Rawson, a well-known artist and writer who was a close friend of [627] H.P. Blavatsky and Col. Olcott, and was Secretary of the National Liberal League.

The very next year Bennett undertook his round-the-world trip, starting July 30th, 1881, and returning to San Francisco May 30th, 1882. It is the description of this trip that fills his best known work in four volumes which Madame Blavatsky reviewed herself.¹

Towards the end of the year, Bennett became quite ill and passed away on December 6th, 1882, after a life of enormous activity and ceaseless effort in the cause of Truth. He was buried at the Greenwood Cemetery, on Sylvan Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y., where, on the corner of that avenue and of Oscar path, there is a monument in his memory erected by “A Thousand Friends.”

Bennett’s wife, Mrs. Mary Wicks Bennett, a woman of strong intellect and firm convictions, died at Glen Ridge, N.Y., July 31st, 1898.



¹ [De Robigne Mortimer Bennett (1818–1882), *A Truth-Seeker Around the World. A series of letters written while making a tour of the globe*. New York: D.M. Bennett, Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, 1882. Four Volumes: Vol. I, From New York to Damascus. Vol. II, From Damascus to Bombay. Vol. III, From Bombay to Hong Kong. Vol. IV, From Hong Kong to New York. [Library of Congress]

The circumstances under which the Founders of the T.S.,¹ then in Bombay, met Mr. Bennett are best described by Col. H.S. Olcott in his *Old Diary Leaves*² where, in recounting the events of 1882, he says:

An early incident of the year was the arrival at Bombay, on a round-the-world tour, of the late Mr. D.M. Bennett, Editor of the *Truthseeker*. He came on the 10th of January, and was met on board his steamer, the P. and O. *Cathay*, by K.M. Shroff (the Parsī gentleman who lectured in the States), Dāmodar, and myself. Mr. Bennett was a medium-sized stout man, with a big head, a high forehead, brown hair, and blue eyes. He was a very interesting and sincere person, a Freethinker who had suffered a year's imprisonment for his bitter — often coarse — attacks upon Christian dogmatism. A sham case was manufactured against him by an unscrupulous detective of a Christian Society at New York, who ordered of him, under an assumed name, a copy of a popular work on sexual physiology, which Mr. Bennett supplied in his capacity of bookseller, without having even read it. A prosecution was then begun against him for circulating indecent books through the post, and an evidently prejudiced judge and jury condemned him to prison. The animus and trickery were identical with those of the bigots who prosecuted Mrs. Besant and Mr. Bradlaugh in the matter of the Knowlton pamphlet.³ He was made to serve out his whole term of one year, despite the fact that a petition, signed by 100,000 persons, was sent to President Hayes on his behalf. When he was discharged, a monster audience welcomed him enthusiastically at the most fashionable public ball in [628] New York, and a fund was subscribed to pay his expenses on a world-round tour of observation of the practical working of Christianity in all lands. The record of his observations was embodied in an interesting work, entitled *A Truth-Seeker Around the World*. His shrewd and sarcastic notes on Palestine are especially striking.

In conversation, I learnt from him that both he and his wife had been members of the Shaker Society; he, for a number of years. His religious yet eclectic mind had revolted against the narrowness and intolerance of the Shakers and of Christian sectarians in general; he and the gentle Shakeress in question decided to marry and make a home of their own; they left the Community; he devoted himself to the study of Christian evidences; became a confirmed sceptic, and, after some years in mercantile business, devoted the rest of his life to a vigorous Freethought propaganda. There was a candour and friendliness about the man which made us sympathize at once. *The Occult World* of Mr. Sinnett had just appeared, and Mr. Bennett read it with avidity: in fact, he made very extensive quotations from it in his journal and in his new book. A full discussion about our views with Madame Blavatsky and myself led him to apply for membership, and this put me into the dilemma which I have frequently de-

¹ [Theosophical Society]

² Second Series, pp. 328-32

³ [Charles Knowlton (1800-1850). *Fruits of Philosophy: a treatise on the population question*. <contraception> Edited by Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891) and Annie Besant (1847-1933). New York?: Garden City Publishing Company; 1880?]

scribed, orally and in writing, but which should not be omitted from my present historical sketch, as the case teaches a lesson to much needed by us all.

A blatant theological Boanerges,¹ named Cook — Joseph Cook, the *Reverend Joseph Cook*, to be exact — a burly man who seemed to believe in the Trinity, with himself as the Third Person — happened at Bombay on a lecturing tour, simultaneously with Mr. Bennett's arrival, and was boomed by the Anglo-Indian public. Their journals did their best for him, and used the story of Mr. Bennett's martyrdom as a trump card, denouncing him as a corrupter of public morals and a jail-bird whom decent people should avoid. The Christlike Joseph opened the ball at his first lecture at the Town Hall, and committed the blind folly of equally denouncing us, Theosophists, as adventurers, in the hearing of a large audience of Hindus and Parsīs, who loved and knew us after two whole years of intercourse. The clue thus given to the hostile press caused them to attack and revile Mr. Bennett to such an extent that I hesitated to take him into membership, for fear that it might plunge us into another public wrangle, and thus interfere with our aim of peacefully settling down to our proper business of theosophical study and propaganda. It was an instinct [629] of worldly prudence, certainly not chivalric altruism, and I was punished for it, for, on expressing my views to Madame Blavatsky, she was overshadowed by a Master who told me my duty and reproached me for my faulty judgment. I was bidden to remember how far from perfect I had been when they accepted my offer of service at New York, how imperfect I was still, and not venture to sit as a judge over my fellowman, to recall that, in the present instance, I knew that the applicant had been made the scapegoat of the whole anti-Christian party, and richly deserved all the sympathy and encouragement we could give him. I was sarcastically told to look through the whole list of our members and point out a single one without faults. That was enough; I returned to Mr. Bennett, gave him the Application blank to sign, and Madame Blavatsky and I became his sponsors. I then turned upon our reverend slanderer and defied him to meet me in public on a given date, and make good his false charges against us. Swami Dhyānānda Sarasvati² — then in Bombay — also challenged him on behalf of the Vedic Religion, and Mr. Bennett on his own account. The Swami and I received shifty replies, but Mr. Bennett's note went unanswered. Mr. Cook's excuse was that he had to go to Poona. Captain A. Banon, F.T.S., 39th N.I., who was with us at the time, sent him a challenge to meet us at Poona, with notice that if he again evaded us, he — the Captain — should post him as a liar and a coward. We held the meeting at Framji Cowasji Hall, Bombay, on the evening designated in our challenges; Mr. Bennett, Captain Banon, and I made addresses; I had Dāmodar read some certificates of our good character and of my public services in America, and the packed multitude, which crammed every inch of room and the approaches to the Hall, thundered their approval of our conduct. The next evening Madame Blavatsky, Banon, and I went on to Poona,

¹ [Appellation by Christ to James and John (*Mark* iii, 17), meaning a fiery preacher, especially one with a powerful voice; from Ancient Hebrew *benē reghesh*, sons of thunder.]

² [Consult "Obituary to Pundit Dayanand Saraswati," in our Blavatsky Speaks Series. — ED. PHIL.]

only to find Mr. Cook had fled to the other side of India without filling his engagement with the Poona public!

The prosecution of D.M. Bennett in America is also mentioned by Annie Besant in her work: *Annie Besant: An Autobiography*¹ wherein, after explaining the events connected with the Knowlton Pamphlet, she says:

A somewhat similar prosecution in America, in which the bookseller, Mr. D.M. Bennett, sold a book with which he did not agree, and was imprisoned, led to our giving him a warm [630] welcome when, after his release, he visited England. We entertained him at the Hall of Science at a crowded gathering, and I was deputed as spokesman to present him with a testimonial.

Mrs. Besant then quotes in full her eloquent remarks as well as those of Charles Bradlaugh, President of the National Secular Society.

When the news about D.M. Bennett's death reached Bombay, there appeared in the Supplement to *The Theosophist*² the following unsigned tribute, which to judge by its style and contents, was most likely the joint production of Madame Blavatsky and Col. Olcott. Together with what Madame Blavatsky had already said about this man in reviewing his writings, this tribute gives us a rather complete picture of his character and of the high esteem in which the Founders held him. We quote it in full:

We had but just begun to read for our review of the third volume of Mr. Bennett's *A Truth-Seeker Around the World*, when the Overland Mail brought us the news of his death — on the 6th of December, at the age of 64, after an illness of less than a week. This event, which will be so gladly hailed by all enemies of Freethought, will be the cause of sincere sorrow to every friend of religious agitation, the world over. For whether in full agreement with him or not, all will admit that he was a bold, brave thinker, the champion of free discussion, a hard working, kindly disposed, intellectually active, honest, religious agitator. One episode in his life, his imprisonment, which has been made the subject of reproach to him by the Christian majority, will be treasured in the memories of Freethinkers as his best claim to their respect. For as time wipes out the smirched record of the case, the men who respected him and the scheme by which he was haled to prison, will be despised, and as the fact that he was made a scapegoat by a cabal of powerful bigots for the whole infidel movement in America will come out clearly, many who are now prejudiced by the slanders of persons like Mr. Joseph Cook, will do justice to his memory. Mr. Bennett was a rough-and-tumble theological wrestler. He struck from the shoulder straight at the mark, without caring to pay compliments or pick the best phrases. There is therefore a flavour of coarseness in his controversial writings, and a tone of scorn or bitterness throughout. This seems a little strange at first sight, since his youth was passed among the Shakers, the quietest, most honest, prosaic, and inoffensive community imaginable. But no doubt it was his very [631] combativeness of nature which drove him out from their bosom to fight the world

¹ London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893, p. 232 *et seq.*

² February 1883, p. 4

and win his footing: he had that in him which revolted at the disciplinary restraints of the Shaker family, and he found his greatest happiness when in the thickest of the battle. During his public career as a leader of the Freethought party he was a prolific writer, and sent out tract after tract, pamphlet after pamphlet, book after book. It was a shower of sledge-hammer blows upon the crest of Christian theology. He was engaged in numerous controversies with clergymen and others of their party, a study of which gives the enquirer about all that can be said for or against the Christian religion. The history of his memorable voyage around the world in search of the truth about the creeds and practices of all nations, is fresh in the public mind. And the work is a marvel of cheapness¹ and full of interesting facts. His unexpected and undesired appearances as a lecturer in Bombay and Ceylon were forced upon him by unforeseen exigencies at those points. His lecture at Galle and Colombo, contrasting Buddhism with Christianity, was so admired by our Singhalese brothers that they rendered it into their vernacular, and hundreds of copies are already circulated throughout the Island. It was the good fortune of the founders of our Society to aid him to some extent in both India and Ceylon to make acquaintances and procure information pertinent to his researches. He stopped with us at Bombay and in Ceylon was the guest of our Fellows. Particulars of all these are given in Vol. III of the work above noted, and it is also there stated that he joined our Society. Now that he is dead (but not *gone*, since he lives in his works) we shall always look back to our intercourse with pleasure, and the good wishes we had for him shall pass to the faithful wife of whose devotion and self-sacrificing industry it made him so evidently happy to speak. He impressed us as being a thoroughly honest man, of decided opinions, which he was conscientiously trying to propagate, and as one who in the prosecution of that work was ready to undergo every necessary privation and run every risk. His untiring industry was shown in his utilizing every moment in either the accumulation of material or writing out his notes. The fact that while actually on tour around the world, flitting from land to land, he contrived to write four volumes 8vo of about 900 pages each, shows what a great literary worker he was. We doubt if a like feat was ever previously accomplished. And though thousands of sympathizers will mourn him in the West, we can assure them that if he had lived but a few years longer, until the Asiatic people had time to become acquainted [632] with him, there would have been tens of thousands among the Hindus and Singhalese to bewail him as a true friend snatched away when they needed him most.

There was a good deal more to D.M. Bennett than appeared on the surface. This is evidenced by the little known fact that Jua Khool, at the time a favourite chela of Master K.H., transmitting in January, 1882, a message from the Master to A.P. Sinnett, wrote as follows:

I am also to tell you that in a certain Mr. Bennett of America who will shortly arrive at Bombay, you may recognize one, who, in spite of his national provincialism, that you so detest, and his too infidelistic bias, is one of our agents

¹ [inexpensive]

(unknown to himself) to carry out the scheme for the enfranchisement of Western thoughts from superstitious creeds. If you can see your way towards giving him a correct idea of the actual present and potential future state of Asiatic but more particularly of Indian thought, it will be gratifying to my Master.¹

In February, 1882, Master M. writing to A.P. Sinnett gently rebuked him for his unsympathetic attitude saying:

You saw only that Bennett had unwashed hands, uncleaned nails and used coarse language and had — to you — a generally unsavoury aspect. But if *that* sort of thing is your criterion of moral excellence or potential power, how many adepts or wonder-producing *lamas* would pass your muster? This is part of your blindness. Were he to die this minute — and I'll use a Christian phraseology to make you comprehend me the better — few hotter tears would drop from the eye of the recording Angel of Death over other such ill-used men, than the tear Bennett would receive for his share. Few men have suffered — and unjustly suffered — as he has; and as few have a more kind, unselfish, and truthful a heart. That's all; and the unwashed Bennett is *morally* as far superior to the gentlemanly Hume as you are superior to your *Bearer*.²

Bibliography

For bibliographical purposes we append the following incomplete list of D.M. Bennett's writings: [633]

- *The World's Sages, Infidels and Thinkers*, being biographical sketches, etc. [with a portrait], 1048pp. New York, 1876, 8vo. [British Museum: 10602. dd. 1.; and Library of Congress]. Second rev. & enl. ed. publ. same year.
- *The Champions of the Church: their crimes and persecutions* [Comp. & ed. by D.N.B.], 1119pp. New York, 1878, 8vo.; 2nd ed., 1880. [Brit. Mus.: 4016. b. 12.; and Library of Congress].
- *The Bennett-Teed Discussion*. Held in the columns of the *Truth-seeker*, between its Editor, D.M. Bennett, and Mr. Cyrus Romulus R. Teed . . . Proposition — Jesus Christ is not only divine, but is the Lord God, Creator of Heaven and Earth. Teed affirming; Bennett denying. New York, 1878, 8vo., 151pp. [Brit. Mus.: 4227. b. 12.]
- *The Gods and Religions of Ancient and Modern Times*, etc. 2-vols. New York, 1880-81, 8vo. [Brit. Mus.: 4506, i. 1] This work was written in jail.
- *Truth seeker tracts upon a variety of subjects, by different authors*. New York: D.M. Bennett, Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, 1881.
- *A truth seeker in Europe: A series of letters written home during a ten weeks' visit*. New York: D.M. Bennett, Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, 1881.

¹ *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, Letter No. 37

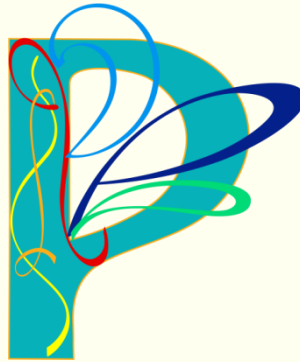
² *op.cit.*, Letter No. 43

- *A Truth-Seeker Around the World. A series of letters written while making a tour of the globe.* New York: D.M. Bennett, Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, 1882. Four Vols.: I — From New York to Damascus; II — From Damascus to Bombay; III — From Bombay to Hong Kong; IV — From Hong Kong to New York. [Library of Congress.]

In connection with Bennett's trial, the following item is of interest.

- *Trial of D.M. Bennett in the U.S. Circuit Court*, Judge Chas. L. Benedict, presiding, New York, March 18, 19, 20, 21, 1879, upon the charge of depositing prohibited matter in the mail. Reported by S.B. Hinsdale, official stenographer of the Court. "Truth Seeker," New York, 1879, 8vo., pp. viii, 298. [British Museum: 6615. aaa. 1.]

Consult also: *Fifty Years of Freethought*, by George E. Mac Donald. New York: The Truth Seeker Co., 1929, 2-vols.



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- BLAVATSKY DEFENDS THE KEY TO THEOSOPHY
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- DE ZIRKOFF ON FRANZ HARTMANN

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- DE ZIRKOFF ON HP BLAVATSKY COLLECTED WRITINGS
- DE ZIRKOFF ON SUBBA ROW
- DE ZIRKOFF ON THE COUNTESS OF CAITHNESS
- DE ZIRKOFF ON THE DREAM THAT NEVER DIES
- DE ZIRKOFF ON THE SECRET DOCTRINE
- DE ZIRKOFF ON THE SIBYLLINE ORACLES
- DE ZIRKOFF ON THE THIRD VOLUME OF THE SECRET DOCTRINE
- DE ZIRKOFF ON THREE EMINENT THEOSOPHISTS
- DE ZIRKOFF ON WILHELM HÜBBE-SCHLEIDEN
- DE ZIRKOFF RECALLS HIS FORMATIVE YEARS IN RUSSIA
- EASTERN LIGHT SHINES ON WESTERN MINDS
- EASTERN THEOSOPHY IS NEITHER A CREED, NOR A RELIGIOUS BODY
- ESSENTIAL THEOSOPHICAL DOCTRINES
- HARTMANN ON HOW TO ENTER THE PATH TO INFINITE LIFE
- HARTMANN ON THE HARMONICAL SOCIETY
- HOW THEOSOPHY REKINDLED TRUE BROTHERHOOD IN INDIA
- HUMANITY SEEMS TO PROGRESS BY INVENTING ONE DISCOVERY AFTER THE OTHER
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- IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE THEOSOPHICAL MOVEMENT
- ISIS UNVEILED IS THE MAJESTY OF TRUTH UNVEILED
- JUDGE AND DE ZIRKOFF ON GEORGE MEAD
- JUDGE ON THE HEART DOCTRINE
- JUDGE ON THE THEOSOPHICAL MOVEMENT
- JUDGE ON THE TRUE THEOSOPHIST'S PATH
- JUDGE ON THEOSOPHICAL STUDY AND WORK
- KEYS TO THE MYSTERY LANGUAGE
- LET THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY PERISH, THAN FORSAKE THE CAUSE OF TRUTH
- MYSTERY IS NOT UNREVEALED KNOWLEDGE
- NO THEOSOPHICAL JOURNAL CAN SATISFY ALL CREEDS AND BELIEFS
- OCCULT TRUTH IS NATURE WITHOUT THE ILLUSORY VEIL OF THE SENSES
- OUR GOD IS HUMANITY AND OUR CULT THE LOVE OF OUR FELLOW-MAN
- OUR ONLY DELIVERER AND SAVIOUR

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- SPURNED THE SUBSTANCE AND CLUTCHED THE SHADOW
- STUDENTS HAVE A CHOICE OF TWO PATHS
- SUBBA ROW DEFENDS ESOTERIC BUDDHISM
- SUBBA ROW'S ESOTERIC WRITINGS (1895)
- THAT WHICH IS FALSE CAN ONLY BE KNOWN BY TRUTH
- THE AIMS AND MISSION OF THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY FULFILLED
- THE BROTHERS OF THE ROSY CROSS NO LONGER EXIST
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- WHO CAN READ THE RIDDLE OF THE SERPENT?
- WHO SHOULD BE INVITED TO THEOSOPHICAL MEETINGS?
- WHY A BRAHMIN ABANDONED HIS CASTE
- WHY PAGAN SYMBOLISM IS INDESTRUCTIBLE?
- WILDER ON THE WISDOM RELIGION OF ZOROASTER

