

Archives and Special Collections

Dickinson College

Carlisle, PA

COLLECTION REGISTER

Name: **Besant, Annie (Wood) (1847-1933)** **MC 1999.7**

Material: Papers (1873-1974)

Volume: 0.75 linear feet (Document Boxes 1-2, 1 Oversized Folder, 2 Photograph Folders)

Donation: Gifts of Various Donors, 1973-1978

Usage: These materials have been donated without restrictions on usage.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Annie Wood was born October 1, 1847 in England, the daughter of William Page Wood, a London doctor, and Emily Roche (Morris) Wood. She married Rev. Mr. Frank Besant in the winter of 1867. The marriage was troubled from the beginning as she and her husband had very different goals and ideas. In 1869, Annie had a son, Digby, and the following year a daughter, Mabel, who as an infant became very ill and nearly died. It was during this time period that Besant began to question her faith in Christianity and turn to Atheism. She regularly attended intellectual free-thought meetings and developed her own ideas concerning religion, to the disappointment of her husband and mother. As she refused to conform to the Christian life required by her marriage, she left Rev. Besant when she was twenty-six. Annie maintained custody of Mabel and Rev. Besant kept Digby with him.

Annie's mother died in 1874, and at that point Annie separated completely from the Church and was essentially disowned by her family. Shortly after her mother's death she joined the National Secular Society, presided over by Charles Bradlaugh. Together, Annie and Charles traveled throughout England giving lectures and teaching Atheism. Soon she became vice-president of the society, and in 1877 she became sub-editor of the National Reformer.

1877 was a difficult year for Annie Besant. She was sued for the re-publishing of a pamphlet advocating feminism and the advantages of population control. The presiding judge ruled against Annie and removed Mabel from her custody. She then made it her personal mission to help unfortunate children since she was without her own, writing in profusion against the prosecuting forces of faith that had taken her child.

In 1879 she went back to school to become better acquainted with science. She took advanced classes and was an honor student. Eventually she earned her B.S. at London University and became a qualified science teacher.

The Theosophical Society of America, founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky, was an organization intended to teach the "Divine Truth" that all religions descend from one truth and are

merely different versions of each other. The society also taught that the “truth” is equal to God, and can be found within each individual -- when a people discover God within themselves, they are enlightened, in a sense. Besant became increasingly involved in the Theosophical Society and in 1907 was elected its president. She would stay involved with that organization for the rest of her life. At various times in her life, Annie was also a member of the Socialist party, the Socialist Defence Association, the Malthusian League, and the Fabian Society, among others.

Besant moved to India in mid-life and worked for social reform and education. Later, she took on the cause of home-rule for India; she addressed the government on the issue on a number of occasions, and formed the Home Rule League in Madras in 1916 to spread propaganda.

Annie Besant died on September 20, 1933 in Madras at the age of 85.

COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

The Besant Collection contains correspondence, pamphlets, and photographs of Dr. Annie (Wood) Besant, a prominent and revolutionary free-thinker of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These materials are housed in two document boxes and are arranged into the following three categories: Correspondence, Miscellaneous Materials, and Pamphlets. One folder of oversized material (OC 1999.7) has been separated out due to its size, and two folders of photographs (PC 1999.7) are housed with the Dickinson College photo collection.

The category entitled Correspondence contains primarily letters from Annie Besant to various colleagues, students, and acquaintances from 1873 to 1929 concerning both personal business and that of the Theosophical Society. Correspondents of note include Moncure Conway, Sir Edwin Arnold, and Esther Windust. Nearly half of the letters are to unknown addressees. Of the three letters to Annie Besant contained in this collection, perhaps the most interesting is a signed letter from Mohandas K. Gandhi, thanking Besant for her remembrance of his birthday.

The Miscellaneous Materials includes ephemera related to the Theosophical Society including an explanation of the society’s seal, and a card of entrance to one of its meetings signed by Besant. This section also contains a stamp struck by India in commemoration of Besant’s life, and a short note relating the personal reminiscences of Winifred Allan in regards to Besant.

The category entitled Pamphlets contains a number of Besant’s printed works on atheism, feminism, free-thinking, Hinduism, socialism, and theosophy, as well as three pamphlets printed in recognition of her life as a public servant.

The one oversized folder contains Daisy Hoover’s certificate of membership in the Theosophical Society, signed by Besant, a pencil and chalk drawing of Annie Besant, and a newspaper printing of an address delivered by Besant in 1925.

The first folder of photographs contains several pictures of Mrs. Besant as a young woman, while the second folder contains images of her later in life.

COLLECTION INVENTORY

BOX 1 - MC 1999.7

CORRESPONDENCE

Besant, Annie

Folder 01)	Letters to Sir Edwin Arnold - 1896-1899	(2)
Folder 02)	Letters to Moncure Daniel Conway - 1874-1878	(2)
Folder 03)	Letters to Piet - 1894-1899	(15)
Folder 04)	Letters to Esther Windust - 1896-1904	(11)
Folder 05)	Letters to Esther Windust - 1905-1928	(15)
Folder 06)	Letters sent - 1873-1878	(5)
Folder 07)	Letters sent - 1881-1888	(5)
Folder 08)	Letters sent - 1889-1889	(5)
Folder 09)	Letters sent - 1890-1894	(7)
Folder 10)	Letters sent - 1895-1897	(6)
Folder 11)	Letters sent - 1898-1899	(3)
Folder 12)	Letters sent - 1906-1910	(6)
Folder 13)	Letters sent - 1911-1912	(6)
Folder 14)	Letters sent - 1913-1917	(7)
Folder 15)	Letters sent - 1919-1924	(6)
Folder 16)	Letters sent - 1926-1929	(5)

BOX 2 - MC 1999.7

CORRESPONDENCE (cont.)

Gandhi, Mohandas K.

Folder 01) Letter to Annie Besant - Oct. 2, 1917

Martyn, T. H.

Folder 02) Letter to Annie Besant - May 20, 1921

Pole, David Graham

Folder 03) Letter to Annie Besant - Oct. 19, 1911

MISCELLANEOUS MATERIALS

Folder 04)	Card - "The Golden Chain: A Morning Prayer for Children" Explanation of the seal of the Theosophical Society Printed ticket of admission for three meetings of the Theosophical Society, Blavatsky Lodge in London, signed by Besant - no date
Folder 05)	Mounted commemorative stamp struck by India in 1963. With description by George Bernard Shaw.
Folder 06)	Personal reminiscences of Winifred Allan regarding Annie Besant - 1974

PAMPHLETS

Besant, Annie

Folder 07)	The Basis of Morality - 1915
Folder 08)	Catholicism & Rationalism - 1875

BOX 2 - MC 1999.7 (cont.)

PAMPHLETS (cont.)

Besant, Annie

- Folder 09) The Coming of a World-Teacher - 1926 (2 copies)
- Folder 10) Dharma - 1918
- Folder 11) The Future Socialism - 1912
- Folder 12) H.P. Blavatsky and the Masters of the Wisdom - 1907
- Folder 13) Hypnotism and Mesmerism - 1935
- Folder 14) Landlords, Tenant Farmers and Labourers
- Folder 15) Liberty, Equality, Fraternity
- Folder 16) Nation Building - 1917
- Folder 17) On the Political Status of Women
- Folder 18) Popular Lectures of Theosophy - 1919
- Folder 19) Reincarnation: Do We Live on Earth Again?
- Folder 20) Till He Come: Extracts from Addresses given by His Servant

Theosophical Society

- Folder 21) Star Congress at Ommen - 1925
- Folder 22) The Use of Thought Power

Various Authors

- Folder 23) Annie Besant, D. L.- Queens Hall — Jubilee Demonstration - 1924
- Folder 24) Dr. Annie Besant: Fifty Years in Public Work - 1924
- Folder 25) Dr. Annie Besant: A Sketch of Her Life and Career

OVERSIZED - OC 1999.7

Folder 01)

Besant, Annie

- Pencil and chalk drawing of Annie Besant by Marthe Antoine Gerardin - 1929
- “Women and Politics,” an article from The Christian Commonwealth - July 1, 1914

Hoover, Daisy E.

- Certificate of Membership in the Theosophical Society - Oct. 29, 1925

PHOTOGRAPHS - PC 1999.7

Besant, Annie

- Folder 01) As a young woman (postcard by Rotary)
- As a young woman (2 images, by London Stereoscopic Co.)
- Folder 02) As an elderly woman, 1919 (by E. Hymans)
- As an elderly woman (by Ziegler Zwolle)
- Reclining in a chair (by E. Hymans)
- With Rudolf Steiner

This collection register was prepared by Sarah W. Dunham, April 1999.