

Sylvia Cranston: An Eyewitness

by Daniel H. Caldwell

I consider [Sylvia Cranston](#) (pen name of Anita Atkins) to be **an eyewitness** to the fact that HPB's Christmas letter of 1886 was originally one of the letters to J. Ralston Skinner preserved at Harvard.

Here is Anita's *own testimony* as given in her HPB biography titled *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky*:

...Recently, much new material has been uncovered, including Blavatsky's long-lost correspondence with James Ralston Skinner, the learned author of the *Key to the Hebrew-Egyptian Mystery in the Source of Measures*. Although Skinner had mentioned their existence, no one knew what was in these letters. They were discovered in the archives of the Andover-Harvard Theological Library at Harvard University. The present writer played a small part in bringing them to light.... [p. xxi]

...For a century, Theosophical historians searched for HPB's correspondence with him. Recently it was located in the archives of the Andover-Harvard Theological Library at Harvard University. The letters were all written from Ostend during the period under consideration. The credit for the discovery belongs to Dr. Ananda Wickremeratne from Sri Lanka, an Oxford graduate who had received a grant from the Harvard Center in the Study of World Religions to investigate records at Harvard on the influence of the Theosophical movement in Southeast Asia....[p. 315]

...In **one of her letters to Ralston Skinner in the Harvard collection**, HPB indicates that such ceremonies can be dangerous: [Anita then quotes the following from the Christmas letter of 1886.]

"I have read and re-read your Hebrew Egyptian Mystery twenty times over and recommend it to all our Kabbalists such as Rev. A. W. Ayton . . . and Mathers, a very good Kabbalist, only one who loses too much his head with ceremonial magic which I detest. [Certain] geometrical diagrams and figures especially have a power in them of reacting on the awakening to activity [of] the half blind and brainless creatures of the elements, which power and creatures you may deny. . . . We of the

esoteric Vedanta philosophy of Hinduism . . . know the power certain circles and diagrams have on the Elements. This is why I believe in but hate and dread ceremonial magic. Beware of certain figures and combinations thereof, Mr. Skinner...." [p. 367] [Bold added.]

And Anita's endnote 166 at the end of this HPB extract from the Christmas letter reads: "Blavatsky, Letters to Ralston Skinner, Ralston Skinner Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts " [p. 610]

So in her HPB biography, Anita gives **an extract** from HPB's Christmas 1886 letter. And she specifically writes that this letter is "**in the Harvard Collection**" and in her endnote to this letter Anita again tells us that this letter she has just quoted from is one of the letters in "**Ralston Skinner Collection at Harvard.**"

And in 1982/1983 when Anita sent me the transcriptions of all these letters, one sees at the top of the first page of the Christmas 1886 letter this prefatory note by Anita:

"original in Andover-Harvard Theological Library Cambridge Massachusetts"

This note confirms what Anita writes in her HPB biography.

And for what it is worth, I do remember that she said in her phone conversation with me that the transcriptions that she would send me were from the originals at Harvard Library.

All of the above **pieces of evidence** when taken together indicate that the Christmas letter was certainly there at Harvard in the early 1980s *when Anita actually went there and looked at the letters and worked on the letters.*