

lives of their practitioners through ritual praxis. Its methodology of compassion and reflexive acknowledgement of the intimate dance of scholar and subject provides a worthy model for scholarly analyses and comparisons of contemporary Paganisms with other world religions.

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Philip Heselton, *Gerald Gardner and the Cauldron of Inspiration* (Milverton, Somerset: Capall Bann, 2003), 438 pp., £16.95 (paper).

Philip Heselton is an outstanding researcher. In two books on the origins of Wicca, first *Wiccan Roots* (Capall Bann, 2000) and then *Gerald Gardner and the Cauldron of Inspiration*, he has dug deeper than anyone before him into the life and associates of Gerald B. Gardner (1884–1964), the chief figure of twentieth-century Wicca. Whereas Gardner's previous biographer, Jack Bracelin (evidently a 'blind' for the true author, the Sufi mystic Idries Shah), used Gardner's own recollections as his only source, Heselton has done his best to locate independent evidence of Gardner's doings: newspaper clippings, personal journals, correspondence, tombstones, the records of various esoteric societies, and even 25 inch : 1 mile governmental Ordnance Survey maps from the 1930s, maps of such a detailed scale that they showed individual private homes. No historian of Wicca's beginnings has conducted such patient and detailed research into primary sources.

Unfortunately, when it comes to interpreting his data, Heselton has one handicap. He wants to believe literally Gardner's version of how Wicca began. The "Bracelin" biography tells the story about how Gardner, retired from his careers as tea planter and civil servant in the Far East, moved to the south coast of England and there, under cover of the Rosicrucian Players in Christchurch, discovered a surviving coven of witches who, through centuries of persecution, carried on the ancient traditions of what he first labeled "Wica" (with one "c"). According to the story, he was initiated in 1939 at a house owned by the prosperous widow Dorothy Clutterbuck, but not until the early 1950s was given permission by his coven to write his first nonfiction book, *Witchcraft Today* (1954), following an earlier novel, *High Magic's Aid* (1949), whose magico-religious practices little resemble what came to be known as Wicca.

That, then, is the origin myth of Wicca: the discovery of the hidden remnant of the Old Religion, the novel, the "permitted" nonfiction book, and subsequently during the 1950s, with the help of Doreen Valiente and other newcomers, a flood of publicity and a steady, exponential growth in the new Pagan religion of Wicca. But what if the evidence supports a different interpretation?

Let me propose an enthymeme: A man who has found the spiritual path that he has long been seeking, when he discovers that "that which I had thought burnt out hundreds of years ago still survived," to quote the Bracelin biography, is not likely to then seek initiation into multiple other esoteric groups. Yet, according to Heselton, that precisely is what Gardner was doing during the 1940s. In 1946, Gardner is listed as a member of the Ancient Druid Order, a group whose membership overlapped with the Crotona Fellowship, the Rosicrucian group in whose theatrical productions Gardner allegedly discovered the surviving witches. At this time, under the leadership of George Watson Macgregor-Reid, the Druid order has become more self-consciously a non-Christian

religion, precipitating a split in which many Christian members departed. But not only did Gardner join a twentieth-century Druidic group with Theosophical and Golden Dawn-style ceremonial-magic connections, he also sought and received ordination in 1946 in the Ancient British Church, one of many tiny, esoteric “Old Catholic” splinter churches. This ordination, Heselton suggests, was probably a “status symbol, perhaps compensating for his lack of academic credentials... I have no evidence that Gardner took an active part in any of these churches” (145).

First Druids, now esoteric Christians. Through J. S. M. Ward, one of the Ancient British Church’s leaders, Gardner becomes involved with Ward’s Abbey Folk Park, a collection of restored or replicated historic buildings, ranging from the Neolithic period to the Middle Ages. One of these, furnished by Ward himself, was a “16th-century Witch’s cottage” that used genuinely sixteenth-century timber but had most recently been a storage building on a farm in Herefordshire. The Folk Park closed shortly after World War II, following a lawsuit. In 1946, when Gardner helped found Five Acres, a nudist club that he largely underwrote financially, the pastiche “witch’s cottage” was moved to the club’s land.

Finally, as is widely known, Gardner in 1947 sought out the famous magician and writer Aleister Crowley, then living in retirement in Hastings and only months from death. Crowley’s magical order, the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO) existed largely on paper at this time. Hoping, perhaps, that Gardner would revive it, Crowley gave him an initiation and a charter to form an OTO “encampment” in Great Britain, in fact, in “all English-speaking countries of the Earth.” Gardner did leave for America shortly thereafter, but his chief purpose was to visit his relatives in Memphis, Tennessee, although he apparently visited Karl Germer, another of Crowley’s OTO subordinates, in New York. When he returned to England in 1948, Crowley was no more.

Thus, in a space of perhaps no more than two years, we see Gardner receiving initiation in three esoteric groups, any one of which could have occupied his time and energies. Instead, he flirts with each one and then moves on—but he is inspired to finish *High Magic’s Aid*, which is published in 1949.

Here Heselton admits frustration. He cannot imagine any reason for moving the “Witch’s cottage” to Five Acres other than as a place for Wiccan meetings, but he is forced to admit that he is “unable to find any evidence that Gardner was involved in any witchcraft activity in the London area before *High Magic’s Aid* was published in 1949.” Puzzled, he continues:

I am sure that the main driving force behind writing *High Magic’s Aid* was not just the desire to make known the existence of what Gardner called “the witch cult,” but to recruit suitable members and to encourage the formation of new covens. It was only after its publication, and probably as a direct result, that there are hints of a coven being established in the London area (251).

Heselton also chronicles the creation of what was at first called “The Folklore Centre of Superstition and Witchcraft,” a museum and restaurant operated seasonally on the Isle of Man by the occultist Cecil Williamson, with financial underwriting and other support by Gardner. The museum opened in 1951 and primarily housed Williamson’s and Gardner’s collection of magical implements and edged weapons, together with a reconstructed ceremonial magician’s circle and items from the Abby Folklore Park’s “witch’s cottage.” In 1954, when Williamson was unable to repay

money that Gardner had loaned him, Gardner took over the museum, renamed it "The Museum of Magic and Witchcraft," and operated it during the tourist season until his death in 1964.

Of course, if one is to have a museum, there must be something to put in the exhibit cases. Much of the museum's contents were frankly reproductions or, like the "witch's cottage," assemblies of genuinely old furniture and domestic artifacts placed in a new context. Gardner had an enormous collection of swords, daggers, and so on, which added atmosphere, while Wilkinson collected amulets and talismans, but still there was not enough material. Their correspondence is illuminating. In the hurry to open the museum, Gardner has promised "various items on loan from the Southern and Northern Covens (i.e., from Edith Woodford-Grimes and Barbara Vickers)", but they are not enough. He writes about manufacturing artifacts, a "unicorn's crown," a picture, and "I have written out a lot of the grimoire...I think it will look quite imposing when it's stuck up. Binding it is a trouble, but will fake up something." (I have corrected Gardner's notoriously irregular spelling.) Likewise, he writes, "I'm bringing up 2 swords for you to see & I think we can fake them up" (340-41).

Finally, Heselton returns to his concern in *Wiccan Roots*: if, as Gardner maintained, he met the members of the "Southern Coven" in the late 1930s through the Crotona Fellowship and they initiated him, who were those people? Here he offers a new suggestion: that one of the fellowship, a woman named Rosamund Sabine, having read Margaret Murray's *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* during the 1920s, felt "memories of a previous lifetime as a witch [and] believed that this was sufficient to make her a witch in the present lifetime." She, her husband, another couple, and Edith Woodford-Grimes, Heselton suggests, "remembered, or thought they remembered, being together as a coven of witches in the past."

This new version of the Gardnerian origin myth is still sprinkled with "might have been" and "possibly" and "it seems to me likely." But another, simpler explanation would fit the data that Heselton has so painstakingly assembled: There was no 1939 initiation at Dorothy Clutterbuck's house; but, rather, the mystery religion of Wicca was created circa 1951 by Gardner, Edith Woodford-Grimes ("Dafo"), and possibly others. There was probably no ritual against the threatened German invasion in the summer of 1940. We have only Gardner's word that these events took place. Likewise, there were no witches – other than Gardner himself and Woodford-Grimes – to grant permission for writing a fictional version of the Craft in *High Magic's Aid* or a nonfictional account in *Witchcraft Today* five years later. Instead, these two books represent stages in Gardner's own working-out of what the new mystery religion of "Wica" ought to be. Once that development process was complete, he would devote the last decade of his life to promoting it – and he would never look back to Druids, esoteric Christians, or OTO-style magic.

I believe that this interpretation better explains Gardner's bouncing from one esoteric group to another during the 1940s – as late as 1952, he tells Williamson, he is seeking a charter for a Druidic group on the Isle of Man, the better to perform public ceremonies and draw tourists to the museum. Postponing the accepted creation date of Wicca to about 1951 would also better explain the vast differences in the "witchcraft" described by Gardner in his books *High Magic's Aid* and *Witchcraft Today*; the first is purely fiction with no relation to contemporary practice, while the second represents an attempt to cast the new Wicca as a continuation of Murray's hypothetical Old Religion.

By backdating Wicca's creation to 1939, on the eve of World War II, Gardner placed it in "history." The literary critic Lionel Trilling, discussing George Orwell's reporting on the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39 in *Homage to Catalonia*, makes a similar point: "In the 1950s it was established beyond question that the 1930s had not simply passed into history but had become history. [The decade] was to be canonized as a veritable epoch or period, an entity with a beginning, middle and end, and a style appropriate to the discernible logic of its events." The war years stood like a wall between "then" and "now." Gardner, as his writing reveals, loved to dabble in archaisms; and I submit that placing a key event in Wiccan history, his "discovery" of a living Old Religion, in an early epoch was in keeping with his style.

With all his digging, Heselton has been unable to independently corroborate Gardner's version of events – and that fact itself is valuable. As Ronald Hutton writes in his foreword, Heselton's research gives all who follow him "a quantum leap in knowledge...the indispensable starting-point for any future research." Thus, while I find myself led to different conclusions than the author's, I am keeping both books on my shelf.

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Bill Ellis, *Lucifer Ascending: The Occult in Folklore and Popular Culture* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), xii + 229 pp., \$29.95 (cloth).

Continuing the provocative work he began in *Raising the Devil: Satanism, New Religions and the Media* (University Press of Kentucky, 2001), in his newest work folklorist Bill Ellis tackles the ongoing tension between the dominant (Christian) culture and the occult in America. Evidence of this conflict is all around us, from its humorous and metaphorical treatment as the opposition between wizards and muggles in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, to the Evangelical condemnation of *Harry Potter* and anything else that alludes to magic, the supernatural, or the occult. But according to Ellis, this dispute is only the latest manifestation in a long-standing clash between mainstream religions and the occult that can be traced at least as far back as the Early Modern period in Great Britain and North America. In this book, Ellis examines a range of occult beliefs and practices, from the definition of "witchcraft" in early Anglo-American society, to the use of fetishes such as rabbit's feet for good luck, to the occult games of American adolescents and their transformation, in the hands of dominant discourses, into social panics. From his research emerge three premises that are central to this work: that traditions of vernacular magic and witchcraft are alive and well; that adolescents have been purposely playing with magic for many centuries; and that such play is part of an attempt to participate directly in what he calls "the mythic realm," in spite of institutionalized religions' attempts to control access to it.

The first premise will be nothing new to most scholars of Pagan religions, and in fact to the majority of folklorists. But the second and third premises are of key importance to the study of modern movements that reclaim folk practices, such as contemporary Paganism and revival Witchcraft. Ellis argues that magic provides a set of symbols through which subdominant groups—for example, women and adolescents—can contest the power of the dominant society. He illustrates this