

*Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, by Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr. Oxford University Press, 2012. 432pp. hb., \$99.00. ISBN-13 9780199863075; pb., \$35.00, ISBN-13: 9780199863099.

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Aleister Crowley is an enormously divisive figure in the history of Western esotericism. He has been called a genius, a Magus, a spoiled scion, a modern Master, a racist, a misogynist, a eugenicist, and a pioneer of consciousness research. Despite the influence of later occult philosophers and theoreticians, Aleister Crowley retains his significance; indeed a thorough knowledge of Crowley and his work could be considered to be a requirement for any scholar of Western Esotericism. Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr's edited collection *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism* provides a scholarly examination of this important esoteric thinker, combining a multi-faceted view of Crowley from a variety of respected scholars in the fields of history and sociology of religion.

In the foreword, "Bringing Light to the Underground," Wouter Hanegraaff (University of Amsterdam) challenges the idea that Western culture is built upon the twin pillars of scientific reason and Judeo-Christian religious traditions, and opens the door to the possibility that paganism and alternative spiritual modes are important and integral parts of this culture. The following thirteen chapters explore Crowley's contribution to this by bringing "colour and depth to the dark canvas by going into intricate detail, exploring a whole range of historical contexts and asking uncomfortable questions" (p. ix). Indeed, each chapter knits together to provide an overall work of excellent scope and depth of analysis.

Mirroring Crowley's breadth of esoteric direction, the work explores Crowley's use or involvement in wide ranging practices or philosophies including yoga, Freemasonry, millennialism, dispensationalism, and the symbolism of Plato's *Phaedrus*. It also explores Crowley's influence on various occult, esoteric or religious figures, including A. E. Waite, Joseph Smith, Gerald Gardner (in Ronald Hutton's "Crowley and Wicca"), the Australian artist Rosaleen Norton, L. Ron Hubbard and Scientology, as well as other movements including Freemasonry and Mormonism (Massimo Introvigne's "The Beast and the Prophet: Aleister Crowley's Fascination With Joseph Smith").

The depth provided in these chapters is significant and opens up a much more developed understanding of the enormous scope of Crowley's influence and influences. This is amplified and contextualized by the chapters on the social and cultural background of Crowley's esoteric beliefs and practices. The chapter on Crowley's idea of magical practice by Marco Pasi, "Varieties of Magical Experience: Aleister Crowley's Views on Occult Practice," is noteworthy as Crowley's own writing is remarkably dense and abstruse, and it is often difficult to draw together his concepts and develop an overall picture. Pasi manages to do this in a remarkably clear and eloquent manner, allowing the reader to easily grasp Crowley's concepts and views.

Generally, works on Aleister Crowley tend to be either biographical, or overviews of Thelema or Crowley's general esoteric work. In contrast, *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism* explores specific aspects of Crowley and his esoteric contribution by bringing leading scholars to examine the aspects they are most proficient in. This difference leads to a profound depth of analysis into the wide-ranging aspects of Crowley's life and esoteric contributions, and awakens new questions and directions of exploration. In this way, it is recommended for any scholar of the esoteric or occult, the New Age, or the history of modern religions to read this work, however, some chapters may be too academic for the layperson, simply interested in the occult. Bogdan and Starr have produced an important work, contributing significantly to an understanding of Crowley's influence, context, and concepts, which should be sought out by any scholar of the occult or esoteric.