

Philip Heselton, *Witchfather: A Life of Gerald Gardner: Volume One – Into the Witch Cult* and *Witchfather: A Life of Gerald Gardner: Volume Two – From Witch Cult to Wicca* (Loughborough, Leicestershire: Thoთ Publications, 2012), 686 pp., £16.95 (Vol.1) £18.95 (Vol.2).

Gerald Gardner, the “Father of Wicca,” should be a name familiar to all those with even the most basic of interests in contemporary Pagan Studies. There are few figures in esoteric history who can rival him for his dominating place in the pantheon of Pagan pioneers, and I have little doubt that if it were not for his hugely influential work in the mid-twentieth century then the world of witchcraft would look very different today. Many historians and others involved in Pagan Studies have turned their attention to Gardner and his work over the past two decades – famous names like Aidan Kelly and Ronald Hutton among them – but none have dedicated themselves so thoroughly to studying the life and times of this extraordinary eccentric as Philip Heselton.

Having made a name for himself within the Earth Mysteries community during the 1980s, in the following decade Heselton – himself a Wiccan initiate – began to delve into the realm of the early Gardnerians and their globally renowned founder. Having travelled across Great Britain rummaging through county records, club membership lists, and old newspaper clippings, Heselton has gained an understanding of Gardner the individual like no one else alive today. His first publication on the subject, *Wiccan Roots* (Capall Bann, 2000), explored the evidence for the New Forest coven which Gardner claimed had initiated him into its ranks in 1939. This was followed by *Gerald Gardner and the Cauldron of Inspiration* (Capall Bann, 2004), an exploration of early Gardnerian history and the foundation of the Bricket Wood coven. Heselton’s research did not stop there, and in the ensuing years he has continued his work via articles that have appeared in the pages of the Pagan magazine *The Cauldron*. As a result, *Witchfather* stands as the long-awaited culmination of almost two decades of diligent and laborious research.

As their titles suggest, these two volumes offer a chronological discussion of Gardner’s life, from his 1884 birth into a wealthy bourgeois home in Lancashire to his death aboard a ship off the coast of Tunisia in 1964. It charts his early days as a colonial adventurer in East Asia through to his return to England and his involvement in the country’s blossoming occult scene. Detailing his claims regarding the New Forest coven, it then explores the early history of the Gardnerian Craft through Gardner’s efforts to propagate it right up until his death. Heselton’s text is accompanied by a collection of photographs, many never published

before, which, although important, have nevertheless been reproduced on a small scale and are regrettably not of the best quality.

Heselton's scholarship has greatly matured since *Wiccan Roots*; still here are the meticulous attention to detail and thorough use of first-hand sources, but gone are the wilder and more speculative theories linking Gardner's Craft to Margaret Murray's (non-existent) witch cult. Comparisons will naturally be drawn not only to Heselton's earlier works on the subject but also to *Gerald Gardner: Witch* (Octagon Press, 1960), the authorised biography written by Gardner's friends Idries Shah and Jack Bracelin which for half a century has served as the only biography of Gardner available. *Witchfather* is more exhaustive with greater detail than either Heselton's earlier works or the Bracelin-Shah biography, making it the most up-to-date and best-researched text on Gardner available anywhere.

As could be expected from a practising Wiccan, Heselton is essentially sympathetic to Gardner. This is a fact that he never attempts to hide, and which is evident in his prose throughout the book. Nevertheless he has clearly attempted to paint a mixed picture of the Pagan pioneer, identifying areas of his personality that could well be deemed negative. For example, he presents a new theory that while working as a civil servant in Malaya, Gardner became complicit in the illicit opium trade, accepting bribes in order to build up his own small fortune (99–102). This is no hagiography, and to the benefit of the book itself, the Gardner depicted by Heselton is believably human. The prose is engaging, simple, and easy to read, although throughout the work Heselton shows his propensity for ending paragraphs with exclamation marks. Undoubtedly this particular tendency in his writing will not be to everyone's taste. It is surprising that the editor had not picked up on this and dealt with it; certainly the work could have benefited in part from the guidance of a firmer editorial hand.

Although excellent in most respects, the work is not free from problems, and I must note one particular bone of contention with Heselton over his uncritical use of the accounts provided by one of Gardner's most important initiates, Patricia Crowther. In the past Crowther has presented multiple conflicting reports as to the nature of her initiation, a fact that Heselton has unfortunately neglected to mention. Instead Heselton chooses to present merely the most probable and unproblematic scenario that she has offered. He furthermore makes uncritical use of Crowther's comments on (what she claims to be) the negative relationship between Gardner and the young Gardnerian initiate Alex Sanders, subsequent founder of the Alexandrian Craft (572–74). This is particularly problematic considering the long-standing animosity that

had existed between Crowther and Sanders ever since she turned the young man down for initiation back in 1961. As such her claims on this issue must therefore be thoroughly scrutinised; here they are unfortunately not. The work also suffers from a lack of elaboration on the figures around Gardner, including such notables as Raymond Buckland and Monique Wilson, who are mentioned but not fleshed out with sufficient biographical detail. Even worse is the case of Anton Miles, a Bricket Wood initiate who would take Gardnerianism to Australia, who fails to receive a single mention. Admittedly, the work is first and foremost a biography of Gardner himself, rather than a history of the early Gardnerian movement, but greater depth on these peripheral figures would have certainly added a further dimension to the work that is currently lacking, helping to set Gardner within the context that surrounded him.

There seems to have been little need to publish the book as two separate volumes, a decision made by the publisher and not by Heselton himself. At 686 pages, it would not have been excessive to have Heselton's text fitted into one single volume, particularly had the (rather large) font been reduced in size. The book is clearly designed to have been read as one single work with the page numbering continuing straight on from the first volume to the second. A bibliography and index are included only in the latter volume. There seems to have been no logical reason for the publisher to divide up the work as they have, except perhaps for the financial incentive of being able to sell two books rather than one, which is unfortunate as it is clearly detrimental to Heselton's work itself. Although the overall cover design is tasteful and nicely composed, it is a shame to see this book available only in paperback, a problem that was also evident in Heselton's previous volumes on the subject. Ultimately, the presentation of the books lacks the quality present in several other recently published esoteric biographies, such as Richard Kaczynski's *Perdurabo* (North Atlantic Books, 2010) and Phil Baker's *Austin Osman Spare* (Strange Attractor Press, 2011), even if the scholarship itself is of a comparable quality to them.

While *Witchfather* could justifiably be described as *the* definitive biography of this fascinating pioneer, there is clearly room for improvement, something that would rest not only on Heselton but largely on the editor and publisher. Should Heselton ever decide to produce an expanded second edition, the resulting tome would, I suspect, be near-impossible to surpass. Nevertheless, both the Pagan community and the fellowship of Pagan Studies scholars owe Heselton a great debt for his role in shining light on the Father of Wicca. He has established himself as the foremost and greatest independent researcher active within our field, and *Witchfather* serves only to crown him in this position. A magisterial

work, it deserves to be read by anyone with an interest in Wicca, Contemporary Paganism or the history of new religious movements more generally.

Ethan Doyle White
University College London