Book Review:
A VOICE IN THE FOREST: CONVERSATIONS WITH ALEX SANDERS

by 'Jimahl'
Trident Publications, P.O. Box 990591,
Boston, Mass. 02199. 1999. 200 pages. $15.

Although it is written for a narrowly defined audience, *A Voice in the Forest* should interest anyone concerned with issues of mediumship and the establishment of what are sometimes called magical "contacts" within revived Witchcraft. Modern practitioners do frequently refer to the presence of ancestral spirits and deceased Witches who take an interest in their religious descendants' activities: these persons are often referred to as The Mighty Dead or as The Hidden Company, for example. Yet, paradoxically, modern Witches seem almost embarrassed by their traditions' founders and elders. Some are too quickly forgotten, such as the science-fiction writer Margaret St. Clair (see *The Pomegranate* #2). Others find themselves on the trash pile of history because their eccentricities seem less charming than obsolete: Gerald Gardner's alleged sexual kinks are better remembered than his genuine religious creativity.

In this case, the embarrassing elder is Alex Sanders, who blazed a streak through the British news media in the 1960s. According to Patricia Crowther, he boasted "that he could make the front page of the *Manchester Evening Chronicle & News* any time he liked." Furthermore, he attempted briefly to make money by performing magical rituals in theatres and on nightclub stages. Profiled in June Johns' K*ing of the Witches* (1969) and in Stewart Farrar's *What Witches Do* (1971), Sanders and his wife Maxine were probably the most-photographed British witches of the 1960s and 1970s, appearing also in the 1970 *Man, Myth and Magic* series and elsewhere. He died in 1988 of lung cancer, having mellowed considerably and having taught the Craft to many students who regarded him with emotions ranging from embarrassment to tolerance to genuine fondness. Stewart and Janet Farrar and others were content to focus on what they believed was his genuine gift for healing.

Morwen, who is Jimahl's high priestess and who once edited a Pagan journal called *Harvest,* describes Sanders in her introduction to *A Voice in the Forest* as the "arrogant showman" of the Craft: "His goal was to make [the Craft] more accessible, which he certainly did, but detractors were horrified by his pandering to the press and his giving away of the Craft secrets."

As a literary work, *A Voice in the Forest* is not fully formed. Jimahl's writing style is sometimes gushy and overloaded with modifiers: fires are "vigorous," hands "strong," and November landscapes "distinctly" uninviting. Events and persons are only sketchily contextualized. And like many devotional religious books, it is written only for insiders—not merely for Wiccans, but for those who know who Alex Sanders was. I suspect that today that would mean fewer than half of North American practitioners of the Craft.

But the book has its strengths as well. The narrative pace is quick and the description of the coven's necromantic ritual on Hallowe'en 1998—and its unintended consequences for one member—is reminiscent of Dion Fortune's *The Secrets of Dr Taverner,* albeit more compressed. Most importantly, it raises a question that many if not most Wiccan groups gloss over: the importance of magical "contacts."

As Alan Richardson, author of two books on Dion Fortune and her associates in ceremonial magic, *Dancers to the Gods* and *Priestess,* defines them, contacts are "discarnate sources of power and intelligence—in short, the so-called Secret Chiefs … entities of high status who have what is essentially an evolutionary interest in humankind." The entities favored by ceremonial magicians may be legendary figures like Melchizedek, "Lord of the Flame and also of Mind," whom Richardson identifies as one of the guides of what was to become Fortune's Society (later Fraternity) of the Inner Light, or historical figures, such as John Scott, Lord Eldon, chancellor under George III and IV. However, to lose one's contacts means psychic sterility for the magician: in Richardson's phrase, he or she "would be like a light bulb in which the electricity has suddenly been shut off," the filament slowly going to black.

Alex Sanders, and by extension the "Alexandrian" tradition of Wicca which sprang from him, have often been described as more ceremonially oriented than the Gardnerian tradition to which they owed a great deal. (Sanders hounded Gardnerian leaders for initiation, despite the story that he fed to June Johns about being initiated by his grandmother as a boy—the eponymous "grandmother story" of modern Witchcraft.) By contrast, the late Doreen Valiente, who did a great deal to shape the modern Craft in the 1950s, first working with Gerald Gardner's coven and then with Robert Cochrane's, actively purged much of the ceremonial magical tone from the Gardnerian rituals as "not really suitable for the Old Craft of the Wise." Likewise, the Farrars, trained by Alex and Maxine Sanders, sometimes used Cabalistic magic but felt that it was "out of context" in many Wiccan rites.

But communicating with dead elders is not unknown in modern Witchcraft. Valiente, having broken with Gardner and connected with Robert Cochrane's group, recounted having received "a series of communications from what purported to be the discarnate spirit of a traditional [which is to say pre-Gardnerian] witch, who gave his name as John Brakespeare." What began as a vision on the edge of sleep of a group of dark-clad people grouped around a stang (staff) stuck in the ground evolved into a series of impressions, pictures, and conversations recorded during meditative states, leading to a portrait of a group of witches in (possibly) early nineteenth-century Surrey, which Valiente describes in the chapter "A Voice in the Past?" in her 1989 book *The Rebirth of Witchcraft*. Furthermore, she quotes Brakespeare as saying, "We were used to speaking with spirits of the dead, so the Christians could not frighten us with tales of hell-fire, burning pits, devils with pitchforks, and all the bugbears they used to terrify poor yokels." And she gives two examples of necromantic rituals performed by his coven. Elsewhere, Valiente describes contact with the dead as a hallmark of "traditional" Craft.

Similarly, Patricia Crowther, quoted above, mentions in her recent autobiography, *One Witch's World,* that Gerald Gardner "has often communicated with us from the World of Spirit."

At this point, it is tempting to regard communication with the dead as yet another of the rough edges that has been smoothed off modern Wicca. You will not find it in Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance,* for example, nor in the popular introductory works of the late Scott Cunningham. So it takes an author like Jimahl and a tiny publisher like Trident to remind us that communication with discarnate spiritual ancestors remains important to some modern Witches, even as in Afro-Brazilian religion and many other traditions worldwide. Here is an opportunity for further scholarly investigation that has been little taken up.

Reviewed by Chas S. Clifton