

Chapter 1: Meet Mr. Crowley

Edward Alexander Crowley was born in 1875 to a family who were rich *via* the brewing industry. They were also staunch members of a Christian sect, the Plymouth Brethren. Crowley's upbringing was, even by Victorian standards, terribly strict. Reading materials at home were limited to the Bible and religious tracts. His schooling, inbetween several severe childhood illnesses, was harsh: scripture-based and entirely inimical to individual development. For example, sports lessons saw a bizarre form of cricket. Batsmen could not make runs, as it would foster vain, un-Christian notions of superiority in leading scorers²³.

Unsurprisingly, Crowley rebelled. He loathed the Brethren, whom he considered weak, hesitant, obese but spiritually starved: more concerned with pastry than prayer²⁴. His mother constantly called her troublesome heretical son 'beast', from Biblical *Revelations*. He later took this as a magical title, signing his letters '666'. Thus during this piece he is often referred to as 'Beast', rather than repeating 'Aleister Crowley' *ad nauseam*. From his teenage years, Crowley enjoyed excess of alcohol, drugs and sex with one or more partners of either gender. However it is not the case he introduced these habits to *Fin de Siecle* English society. Strong alcohol (including the hallucinogenic spirit absinth), and drugs (e.g. hashish, cocaine) were a staple Bohemian diet in artistic and literary circles, as was overt homoeroticism (of the Wildean kind)²⁵. Both absinth and drugs were still legal, but rather frowned upon by polite society²⁶. What is true is that the seasoned explorer Crowley was later one of the first Westerners to popularize the use of drugs such as peyote in Europe²⁷.

23 AC2, p 64

24 BML, p 7

25 FWB, p 108. Wilde was imprisoned for homosexuality in 1895.

26 Absinth has never been illegal in Britain: Sebor (Website). The Dangerous Drugs Act was passed in 1920: Regardie, F.I. *The Eye in the Triangle*. Las Vegas. Falcon. 1989, p 117.

27 King, F.X. *Sexuality, Magic and Perversion*. New York. Citadel. 1974, p 118

As a creative poet his command of language was astonishing: “(Crowley) **left me gasping..he talked like fireworks**”²⁸. Crowley soon recognised the lack of flow in his polysyllabic forenames, and so changed them to ‘Aleister’²⁹.

From his mid-teens, he was a first-rate mountaineer³⁰, setting climbing records on several of the world’s most challenging peaks, and was almost at Grand Master level as a chess player³¹. It seems ironic that his expertise at two separate disciplines needing such planning and foresight was not reflected in some of his behaviour in the larger world. This may be because he had ‘the soul of a poet’, considering himself to be Shelley’s superior³². They did have plenty in common:

Chemistry and magic fused naturally in Shelley’s mind, the bridge being alchemy...(similarly) Crowley took the Special Examination in Chemistry at Cambridge before being led through alchemy to absorption in magic³³

Shelley was sent down from Oxford for atheism. Crowley too was threatened with expulsion, but the procedure had no time to unfold. His father died while Aleister was young, and during his latter years at University Crowley finally inherited a huge sum. He dropped out of academia and commenced a period of debauchery, intense occult study, travel and mountaineering. As well as his bisexuality, Crowley, like many others of the time archly emulated the acerbic wit of Oscar Wilde. He was famously scathing on many topics, however one gastronomic example must suffice, due to space constraints:

...but nowhere in Europe or America is the Chinese cook able to convey ... (his) ... excellence. Once can

28 The journalist and friend of Crowley: Seabrook, W. *Witchcraft, its Power in the World Today*. London. George Harrap. 1941, p 174.

29 BML, p 47

30 AC2, p 127

31 Symonds, J. *The Great Beast*. St Albans. Mayflower, 1973, p 93

32 AC2, p 138

33 Overton-Fuller, J. *Shelley. A biography*. London. Jonathan Cape. 1968, p 23

**no more understand a Chinese dish in Europe than
... enjoy an Egyptian cigarette. As to cross running
water destroys the enchantment of witches.... so
the flavour of Chinese food is bounded by the Great
Wall...**³⁴

Crowley joined the Golden Dawn and showed a great talent for magic. Political tensions destroyed the order from within and Crowley started to travel the world, exploring, climbing and learning occult techniques from non-Western civilisations such as India, Egypt, China and South America. In Egypt he clairvoyantly received *The Book of the Law* (discussed in Chapter 4), which formed the basis for his new world religion and a complex philosophical system. He continued to travel, research occult systems, write copiously and teach magick. In the 1920s he ran a magical community in Sicily before being expelled by Mussolini's government for being an 'undesirable', and eventually returned to England, from where he ran his magical order, the OTO. His public reputation in tatters due to a concerted press campaign to vilify his name, he took several libel actions. One of these was extremely unsuccessful, and he was made bankrupt in 1935. He spent the last years of his life writing and relying on donations from followers and friends, and died in Sussex in 1947, aged 72.

34 AC2, p 484