

## “You’re researching the history of *what?...*”

“You know that no-one’s going to believe you if you write this subject up honestly” said the magician. “No-one believed a lot of the political shenanigans that went on in the past, and which probably still do... er, some folk think we never landed on the Moon and that Elvis is alive... so I’m just going to try to write it up as objectively as I can, and they can judge it from there” I replied, with a broad smile <sup>2</sup>.

This book is a social history of some important developments in the modern magical subculture in Britain following the death of the highly influential British magician Aleister Crowley in 1947. Crowley was perhaps the most significant public magical figure in Britain, if not the world, during his lifetime (1875-1947), and arguably ever since, and he taught a notable coterie of apprentice magicians and published numerous books and periodicals, albeit often in small print runs.

Since his death the importance of his considerable literary output and methods has become magnified, and broadcast to a wider audience by the continuing post-war development of cheaper printing and mass distribution methods, and latterly *via* the Internet. Thus many groups and individuals have taken on elements of his magical teachings and his works have more students (and detractors) now in the 21st Century than was possible at any time during his life.

The total, all-encompassing and definitive history of such an intricate topic cannot be the content of even this thick book, since within the given date and place constraint, the subject is of such breadth and depth that my time available for research precluded a complete and comprehensive overview. There was also the matter of the original word limit for the thesis on which this book is based as a containing factor, although this re-write for book publication has had many additions plus some alterations to remove some academic jargon, to make it more attractive to a broader range of readers.

This then is more accurately portrayed, after taking a deep breath, as ‘A partial history of some *elements* of the philosophies and magical

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<sup>2</sup> Conversation with anonymous magician, December 2001.

practices of a skewed and not totally representative subset of magicians working in some magical styles in a few areas of Britain, since the death of Crowley at approximately at the end of World War Two'. Not such a snappy title, eh...

Since I have attempted to compress considerable material into this project in order to increase coherence and scope, and to emphasise the inter-connectedness of many disparate factors there have of necessity been some simplifications. I have been particularly brief with some peripheral components, and in some cases this summarising has been positively brutal, such as with the moral philosophical intricacies that underpin some of the discussion.

However in these cases my brevity is admitted, and further reading is suggested for those with an interest in those various additional angles of the material under consideration, some of which should be available to the keen reader through the public library system.

## British Magic, or Magic in Britain?

Magic is not in any way confined to Britain, of course.

I suspect that a study of European, African, Australian, Asian or 'American' (both in the North and South of that land mass) magicians in the same time period would be an invaluable comparison to this book, and would indicate both many historical and contemporary similarities in approach, practice, belief etc and some important differences due to cultural variations and perceptions.

It is purely speculation at present, but I would not be surprised to hear that to be a known ritual magician in a country that still has profoundly strong Catholic sensibilities that are intimately tied to the national legal system would be a very different experience to that of the same kind of magician working in an atheist region, or a region less committed to a state religion, for example. Magic is always of interest to those in power, since magicians are by definition not fitting the *status quo* - and those seeming to display particular powers have in the past sometimes even been regarded as potential threats to national security<sup>3</sup>.

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3 Uri Geller, *My Story*, London, Corgi, 1977, p 23

To my knowledge no such academic researches in world magical history that could be used for a comparative meta-study have yet been carried out.

Before describing some of the major magical figures in the period in which this book is based, I need first to define some terminology in use.

### **Definitions:**

First of all, just what is magic? While the dates and geographical location concerned in the title of this book are easily understandable, Magic is a most ambiguous and problematic term, and one that has been defined and redefined in many different ways, depending on the stance of the person doing the defining. In this book magic is used as an academic analytic shorthand term that I have here chosen to define (based on discussions with practitioners and academics and much reading of both practical and academic texts) as:

volitional acts of a ritual nature with an intent of somehow changing the perceived universe and-or the internal consciousness of the operator {or witness(es) or 'target(s)} through means not entirely understood by modern science, and acts not performed primarily to an audience for entertainment and-or financial reward.

That definition is perhaps tending rather towards the practitioners' own self-images, since as is discussed in detail below, academia has in the past had a tendency to whitewash the entire subject as simply delusion or fraud, without apprehending or appreciating the subtle nuances that are often present. There are certainly those individuals within the magical field who are wholly or largely charlatans, and many practising magicians have elements of trickery in their repertoire (as is particularly discussed in my chapters on Amado Crowley), and elements which are at best ahistorical if not downright factually incorrect (and for further discussion of this area see the chapters on Kenneth Grant), but this does not detract from their position of historical importance within the sphere of occultism.

This definition does not include any coverage of the very thorny issue of 'does magic work?'. This is not necessarily a matter of debate in a historical study, since regardless of whether "it" (whatever it is) "works" (what-

ever one means by that functional term) “it” happens, people practice “it”, and thus “it” can be researched on that level.

This stance also means that the agnostic sceptic can read this book with a clear conscience, as no specific claims to the veracity of any particular magical reality are suggested or substantiated, they are only explored. Total cynics (as opposed to sceptics) will probably get no further than the book title in any case, and as a non-academic-tenured wise thinker once wrote “the difference between a cynic and a skeptic is... one is dismissive, the other only *doubtful*”<sup>4</sup>. There is always room for doubt....

There is also scope for adding some religious sub-aspect to my definition, with magic being performed as a means of contact with Divinity (that again being a most difficult concept to define), but that might exclude the hardcore ‘Carrollian’ chaos magicians<sup>5</sup>, for example, who often concentrate on ‘real world results’ and have little time for mysticism or the ingress of non-human powers into their wholly self-created world-view, as is discussed in detail in the Chaos Magic chapters which follow later.

This choice of definition is to differentiate magic from conjuring (or illusionism), which describes ‘stage magic’. This, contrary to the above description, is here defined as:

*performances* given by one or more persons with the intent of entertainment for onlookers, often for financial or other reward. These use means which are better understood by modern science than ritual magic, including, but not limited to, optical illusions, sleight of hand, misdirection, theatrical effects (such as smoke, mirrors, production or vanishing of ‘fake’ objects which appear to be solid but which are not, etc, or illusory escapes such as the use of fake or trick locks), stage hypnotism using of stooges in the audience, camera tricks etc.

However like the content of many such ‘compare and contrast’ definitions in any field, there is some scope for crossover between the two subsets. Many a good magician will have a grasp (no pun intended) of sleight of hand and suchlike, as the sense of wonder from a good ‘conjuring trick’ used (without pre-announcing it as such) at the start of a magical ritual can have useful occult effects on ritual participants who desire to

4 Neil Peart, *Ghost Rider*, ECW Press, Toronto, 2002, p 338

5 This will be explored later, the term means those magicians influenced by the work of Peter J Carroll.

be awed, or if the person in charge of running the ritual wishes to include surprise or a sense of wonder as a possible causal factor for any magical effect which is to be induced in the participants.

For example, in 2003 I participated in a large celebratory group ritual (a marriage ceremony of two of my friends) that was held out of doors in the semi-darkness of a full moon evening, in a small Welsh forest, where two identical-looking magic wands were used to conduct the ceremony. One of these wands was a plain solid rod, and appeared obviously so to the assembled participants, but it was covertly swapped later for another one, identical in external appearance to the first but hollow, and fitted with a hidden battery, switch and a small light source. The substituted electrical wand 'lighting up' with an impressive amber glow at an important point during an invocation to a deity had a suitably positive effect on those present, making them 'awed', and 'primed' for odd, namely more 'magical' things to subsequently happen <sup>6</sup>.

It has long been known in psychological research that if you 'prime' experimental subjects with medical words, for example, they are then much faster to identify other medical terms presented verbally or textually, as compared to non-medical ones, in a word-association task. Similarly, if you prime people with magical referents they will much more rapidly move to associate anything that subsequently happens with what they have just been primed with, ascribing a magical cause, even if the event is, objectively, pretty mundane.

The 'trick' with the wand also made the onlookers pay rapt attention to the proceedings, which was an additional aim of the person running the ritual, which was both lengthy and complicated, thus needing the full concentration of those present.

Similarly, the Russian anthropologist Waldemar Bogoraz (1865-1936) made detailed early studies of native North American peoples, which showed that their folk magicians (shamans) often used such trickery, including 'throwing the voice' and sleight of hand in their work. However Bogoraz was convinced these tricks comprised only a small aspect of their magic; something meant to concentrate and maintain the attention of those present.

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<sup>6</sup> For example: T.N Carr *et al*, Words, pictures and priming: on semantic activation, conscious identification and automaticity, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 8, 1982, 757-777.

Trickery seems to be an element running through Western occultism to an extent. For example the mid-20th Century medium Helen Duncan <sup>7</sup> underwent testing by The Society for Psychic Research, simply because to have their seal of approval meant that one was considered by the public to be 'authentic' and thus could use this in advertising, and ultimately charge more money for consultations, having been 'approved by science'. This sideline-issue of a financial incentive to pass such tests might ironically have made it "even more likely that they used tricks to try to impress the investigators" <sup>8</sup>.

There have also been persons who have openly worked on both sides of my operational definition, such as the Czech-born magician Franz Bardón (1909-1958) who as *Frabato* was a renowned stage mind-reader and illusionist in the 1920s and 1930s, and was a practising ritual magician too, in a magical Order related to one of those run by Aleister Crowley.

In the early twentieth-century in Britain, 'stage' magicians were very worried about being associated with any kind of 'real' magical practitioners or mediums, fortune-tellers or clairvoyants, as there were legal implications on this. *The Magic Circle*, a governing body of illusionists, formed an 'occult committee' and during the Second World War they were in part given the task of investigating mediums, in alliance with the police, with a view to bringing about prosecutions under the Vagrancy Act (1824) and occasionally the by then archaic Witchcraft Act (1735) <sup>9</sup>, the latter of which was ultimately repealed in 1951. *The Magic Circle* accumulated quite a collection of Crowley books and letters during their researches, and eventually, with some embarrassment, sold them at auction once the law was repealed and thus their legal consultancy role vanished, as they then wished to distance themselves from occultism completely <sup>10</sup>.

In such a wide academic research area, sneering and ridicule of one sub-topic tends to spread, and with some tricksters being unmasked as such, the reification of magic as *all* being 'hocus pocus nonsense' is rife,

<sup>7</sup> Malcolm Gaskill, *Hellish Nell: last of Britain's Witches*, London., 4th Estate, 2001, p 334

<sup>8</sup> The historian Vanessa Chambers, posting to JSM Discussion list, 8-9-2004

<sup>9</sup> Gaskill, *Hellish Nell*, is an extensive and moving study of the last prosecution before the latter act was repealed in 1951

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 188. The Magic Circle had maintained an occult investigation committee since the 1920s.

and it is important to guard against this *a priori* generalist assumption both in order to remain academically credible, and to retain the respect and co-operation of those whom one is studying. For example while in the chapters that follow I appear to have comprehensively refuted the claimed lineage (and much of the historical narrative) of the magician, author and claimed son of Aleister Crowley, 'Amado Crowley', I stress that his magical system may well work, in that his students may gain some benefit from the practice, even though the 'hook' to join Amado's group, that he is a direct descendant of Aleister, is unlikely.

Similarly, in researching the magician and author Kenneth Grant I highlight some apparent historical errors of fact which are hugely problematic to the terrestrial validity of his story at times, but that does not detract from his major importance and influence within the history of magic, and the value (for magicians especially) of the *corpus* of written materials that he has produced.

Equally the *premises* of some chaos magical techniques (discussed much later) at first sight appear totally spurious, being overtly based on acknowledged fiction, but they still appear to have an effect on the operators. An additional problem is the assumption of one or more pseudonyms by (in particular) chaos writers, so it is not always obvious if different authors are expressing true philosophical or practical accord, or it is simply the same author paraphrasing or praising himself under two or more pen names.

Under matters of trickery there is the additional consideration that some magical effects or comments may be a 'put on' purely for the amusement of those who are trying to fool the researcher, for whatever reason. A subtlety of approach by the researcher and holding insider knowledge (which technical advantage is dealt with below) help a great deal in combating this potential pitfall. For the record, I think I was only 'put on' once during my research, with a really rather ludicrous claim that was being made, and my facial expression at what I was being told obviously betrayed my opinions on the claim. The discussion immediately changed to something more magically coherent and useful to the research. It may have been that the initial 'put on' was some kind of test of my gullibility, and (presumably) having passed that test I was judged worthwhile to talk to.