

## *Wicca and Witchcraft in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

The twentieth century Witchcraft revival was initiated in 1954 when Gerald Gardner published *Witchcraft Today*.

Gardner was a member of numerous esoteric orders, among which were the Ancient Order of Druids and the Rosicrucian Fellowship of Crotona on the south coast of England. Gardner became especially attached to a set of fellow members who revealed to him in 1939 that they had become part of an old coven of witches, a survival from a Pagan fertility religion, which met in the New Forest. He was initiated into this himself in September, at the house of 'Old Dorothy', a wealthy lady who functioned as its leader. When France fell in 1940 she 'Called up covens right and left' for a ceremony in the forest to hold back the threatened German invasion.<sup>i</sup>

Gardner's own contribution to the growing number of esoteric orders such as Theosophy, which has since become part of the 'New Age' movement, was Wicca; an old English word meaning male Witch.

Its rites were alleged to consist mainly of dances intended to promote fertility, and of feasting upon consecrated food and drink. The performers were naked, in the belief that this more easily released magikal powers from the body. They venerated a God and Goddess, whose names were kept secret, the former predominant in winter and the latter in summer. They worked within a circle; formed with a consecrated sword or knife and carefully purified to contain the energy which they raised. They held the north to be the most sacred of the four cardinal points, believed in reincarnation, and trained initiates to develop their latent psychic powers.

The religion was organised into covens, led by a High Priestess and supported by a High Priest, which subdivided into couples for training purposes. Training, like initiation, was always between the sexes. As part of this polarity they revered the life-force within the world and regarded the acts of worldly love and pleasure as sacred. Their seasonal festivals were the four traditional quarter days; Imbolg, Beltane, Lughnassadh and Samhain. Trance and ecstasy were important components within their rites, and they aimed not merely to address their deities, but to feel as though they had become them.<sup>ii</sup>

Through others that worked, wrote and promoted Wicca: Doreen Valiente, Alex Saunders, Stewart and Janet Farrar, the Pagan community grew at a steadily increasing rate through the 1960s and 70s. It was in the early 1980s that Wicca travelled across the Atlantic to America, exploding in a wave of enthusiasm.

Wicca has become a leading pathway of the modern manifestation of Witchcraft and Paganism, alongside Druidry, and there are significant overlaps between the traditions.

## *The branches of contemporary Paganism*

- ☉ Witchcraft, often referred to as The Craft:

  - Hereditary Witchcraft

  - Traditional Witchcraft

  - Wicca

- ☉ Druidry

- ☉ Northern Tradition

- ☉ Shamanism and Neo-Shamanism

- ☉ Goddess Spirituality

- ☉ Radical Eco-Paganism

- ☉ Folk Paganism

The beliefs and practices of these varying pathways share certain core principles and guidelines.

Professor Ronald Hutton of Bristol University writes:

The Pagan Federation has issued, since 1989, a set of three principles which define a Pagan: a love of, and kinship with, the natural world; a positive morality based upon the discovery and development of each person's true nature, providing that this is done without harming others; and an active acceptance of both female and male divinity. Modern Pagans are people who hold these tenets and turn for symbolism, kinship and inspiration to the pre-Christian religions of Europe and the Near East.

Another defining quality of the modern Pagan is that the aim of religious ritual is not to honour or supplicate the divine alone; it is to bring out the divinity in human beings; this is a large part of the modern Craft. A literal faith in its deities is not necessary. Some Witches view them as archetypes, representing fundamental truths of the cosmos; others as entities which have been given life by the projection of the cosmos, others as symbols of perceived aspects of the world; and yet others as genuine beings, with their own personalities, consciousness and *Wills*.

The central purpose of it is not to pay reverence to divinities but to cultivate personal powers of self-control and self-knowledge, and perhaps of clairvoyance, prophecy, psychokinesis and psychic healing. Whether or not Witches obtain

power of anything or anyone else, the elders among them certainly acquire it over themselves, which is quite an achievement in itself.

It is a highly eclectic system of operation, in which the basic format of the consecrated circle with potent cardinal points, in which deities are invoked and magik worked, is filled with images and systems taken from a huge span of sources. These include the cultures of ancient Greece, Egypt, Rome, Mesopotamia, Ireland and Wales, and of course the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings, the folklores of the British Isles, Hinduism, Buddhism, eighteenth and nineteenth-century Celtic romanticism, native America, radical feminism, the modern earth mysteries, the structure of prehistoric monuments<sup>iii</sup> and therefore, I would have to add, a cosmology comprising of both Astronomy and Astrology.

Most pathways of modern Paganism share a common practice: the book of shadows, the sacred couple, the consecrated sacred space. Within the circle, rites of magik and healing are performed. There is defined a structure of training or initiation and they observe the full Moon and the Wheel of the year. It is a mystery religion and conducted either in secret groups or by solitary practitioners.

Much of the joy, and effectiveness in it lies in its identity as a tradition of secrets, associated with the night and with wild or hidden places. It is usually recognised as requiring considerable dedication and hard work, and as being unsuitable for the faint-hearted, lazy or flippant. It is accordingly highly selective and exclusive, and is mandated to care only for those who seek its aid. It lacks any sense of missionary duty, or of a redemptive purpose.<sup>iv</sup>

The rhythms of the heavens weave in our modern times the same dance our ancestors held in awe, and carved upon bone or painted upon the walls of their dwellings. The sacred groves still resound with the sounds of the joyous as the children of the earth wonder at the stars, in harmony with the spirit of the Lord of the Greenwood, embraced by the Goddess and her guiding light of the Moon.

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<sup>i</sup> Ronald Hutton, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe vol.6 The Twentieth Century*, Athlone Press,1999, p43 - 44.

<sup>ii</sup> Ronald Hutton, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe vol.6 The Twentieth Century*, Athlone Press,1999, p43 - 44.

<sup>iii</sup> Ronald Hutton, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe vol.6 The Twentieth Century*, Athlone Press,1999, p 74- 75.

<sup>iv</sup> Ronald Hutton, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe vol.6 The Twentieth Century*, Athlone Press,1999, p 75.