

## *Witchcraft, the law and Winston Churchill*

*The Witchcraft Act of 1401: the persecution of Pagans and followers of polytheistic beliefs.*

The first act of Parliament directed specifically against witchcraft was the act *De hæretico comburendo*, passed at the instigation of Archbishop Thomas Arundel in 1401. It specifically named witchcraft, *sortilegium*, 'sorcery', or 'divination', as a species of heresy and, provided that unless the accused witch abjured these beliefs, she was to be burnt at the stake.

This law, however, was directed against an ecclesiastical offence, which was not technically a felony of common law. Offenders were tried before an ecclesiastical tribunal: the Inquisition, *per se*, did not operate in England, but the procedure was comparable. The penalty of burning at the stake was prescribed for ecclesiastical offences only because the Church shied away from the shedding of blood.

It was not until the start of the sixteenth century, however, that religious tensions increased the penalty for witchcraft in England. A statute of Henry VIII provided the death penalty for 'invoking or conjuring an evil spirit'. This statute was repealed by his more liberal son, Edward VI.

England's most notorious Witchcraft Act was passed early in the reign of Elizabeth I. This act of 1563 stated that anyone who should 'use, practice, or exercise any Witchcraft, Enchantment, Charm, or Sorcery, whereby any person shall happen to be killed or destroyed', was guilty of felony without benefit of clergy, and 'is to be put to death'. This law was broadened further by Elizabeth's successor James I, a king who wrote a treatise on *Dæmonologie* and who, as James VI of Scotland, took a personal interest in the trial of some accused witches at Berwick on Tweed.

In 1604, the first year of James's reign, the Elizabethan act was broadened to bring the penalty of death without benefit of clergy to any one who invoked evil spirits or communed with familiar spirits. It was this statute that was enforced by Matthew Hopkins, the notorious 'Witch-Finder General'.

The acts of Elizabeth and James changed the law of witchcraft in two major respects. First, by making witchcraft a felony, they removed the accused witches from the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts to the courts of common law. This meant that the accused witches were theoretically subject to ordinary criminal procedure. Burning at the stake was eliminated, except in cases of witchcraft that were also petty treason; most instead were hanged. However, by making witchcraft an ordinary crime, they invoked all the penalties of felonies against the convicted witch, including 'escheat', which forfeited the convict's land and goods to the Crown. This gave local officials a financial stake in finding witches to convict, and led to the most pervasive witch-hunts in English history.

It was during this period that Pagan temples such as Avebury were wilfully destroyed. Great pits were dug beside each stone and a fire lit. Once the stone was sufficiently heated, cold water would be poured upon it, encouraging it to crack. The remains were then buried. The stones that have been recovered to date were restated to their present positions in the first half of the twentieth century. Many of the stones were re-erected in the 1930s by the archaeologist Alexander Keiller.<sup>i</sup>

After the Restoration, the witch hunting gradually died down, not because people had ceased to believe in or fear witches, but because the witch-hunting enterprise smacked of the 'enthusiasm' and revolutionary Puritanism that led to the regicide of Charles I.

This statute was replaced under George II in 1736 by a new Witchcraft Act that marks a complete reversal in attitudes. No longer were people to be hanged for consorting with evil spirits. Rather, a person who *pretended* to have the power to call up spirits, or foretell the future, or cast spells, was to be punished as a vagrant and a con-artist, subject to fines and imprisonment.

Astrology was outlawed under this witchcraft act, and again in 1825 under the 'Vagrancy Act', which classified astrologers with 'rogues and vagabonds'. As late as 1964 astrologers were still liable to prosecution under these laws as 'fortune tellers', but few cases have been brought to trial. A famous exception is the case of Alan Leo (1860 – 1917). Leo was tried and acquitted in London in 1914. In 1917 he was arrested again on a charge of 'pretending and professing to tell fortunes'. His lawyers argued that he was not an impostor, since he made no claims to predict the future with certainty, but merely indicated tendencies. A sceptical judge fined him £30<sup>ii</sup>.

As late as 1944, Helen Duncan was the last person to be convicted under the Witchcraft Act. The authorities feared she could betray details of the D-Day preparations with her alleged clairvoyant powers; she spent nine months in prison.

The British Society of Paranormal Studies write, 'In the following memo, an irate Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, reveals his anger over Helen Duncan's treatment in his memo to his wartime Home Secretary Herbert Morrison.

But was this stern outburst just his frustration at legal 'tomfoolery' at a time when all national and international efforts were focused on the looming Normandy Landings?



PRIME MINISTER'S  
10, Downing Street.  
PERSONAL MINUTE

HOME SECRETARY.

SERIAL No. 11.362/4

[ Let me have a report on why the Witchcraft Act, 1735 was used in a modern Court of Justice.

What was the cost of this trial to the State, observing that witnesses were brought from Portsmouth and maintained here in this crowded London for a fortnight, and the Recorder kept busy with all this obsolete tomfoolery, to the detriment of necessary work in the Courts.]

W.C.

3.4.44

Some maintain that Churchill, a natural psychic in his own right, who had been ordained as a Druid during a special ceremony at his ancestral home of Blenheim Palace at the turn of the century and no stranger to Spiritualism, was actually defending a religious freedom.<sup>iii</sup>

A photograph, featured on the following page, in Stuart Piggot's book, *The Druids*, shows a young Churchill flanked by a number of men, some wearing druid robes and others in ordinary suits.

According to the inscription this photograph shows Churchill's initiation into the Albion Lodge of the Ancient Order of Druids in August 1908 at Blenheim, his family home.<sup>iv</sup>



Sir Winston Churchill joins the Albion Lodge of the Ancient Order of Druids, 15<sup>th</sup> August 1908.

Elsewhere in *The Druid Tradition*, Phillip Carr-Gomm describes the same photograph in another way, stating it was Churchill's initiation into the Ancient and Archaeological Order of Druids. Given the tendency for Druid groups to have overlapping memberships and joint ceremonies, it is possible that Churchill was a member of both these Druid orders.

During World War Two Sir Winston Churchill had working associations with countless individuals, aiding the war effort in numerous ways. One of the people Churchill encountered was a writer of thrillers called Dennis Wheatley. Wheatley volunteered a paper at the onset of the war, outlining his views on how Europe would be divided at the cessation of hostilities, which in hindsight proved to be very accurate. Wheatley took a place as one of the deception planners, whose task it was to think of ways to fool and undermine the enemy. There were, however, some rather unconventional duties for him:

He was asked to write a paper for Churchill on Satanism and occult practice after intelligence had reported that Hitler followed or used occultists and astrologers: a form of this work was later published under the title of *The Devil and all his works*.

One of the many plans thought up by the deception planners has the stamp of Wheatley upon it. The following article appeared in *The Sunday Times*, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2004:

#### *Devilish plot of Hitler's horoscope*

Peter Day and Maurice Chittenden

British intelligence hatched a plot during the second world war to flood the world of astrology with fake horoscopes in an attempt to influence Hitler. They planted fake predictions of his imminent death in a bid to destabilise his regime. Details of the plot are divulged in papers released last week at the National Archives in Kew, southwest London.

It was devised as a propaganda weapon by the Special Operations Executive (SOE), set up by Winston Churchill to sabotage the Third Reich.

Hitler was known to be interested in astrology. As early as 1923 he had taken heed of a prediction that a man with his birth date would sweep to power, although his beer hall putsch in Munich later that year ended in imprisonment.

He subsequently retained the services of Karl Krafft, a Swiss astrologer, who warned of dark powers at work in November 1939. Hitler ignored the warning and attended an anniversary celebration of the putsch in the beer hall, leaving just before a bomb exploded, killing eight people.

British agents decided to exploit Hitler's interest in the stars by inserting bogus horoscopes in newspapers around the world, knowing that reports of his impending demise would get back to Berlin. It was hoped that the weight of

celestial opinion would undermine Hitler's authority and cause him to doubt his own decision-making ability.

A Colonial Office file kept secret for 63 years shows that Charles Hambro, deputy director of SOE, introduced the plan.

"I am always asked to do curious things and this is probably one of the most curious I have ever been asked to arrange but nonetheless most important," he wrote in April 1941.

"The whole subject has been carefully discussed and is being done on a worldwide basis according to a definite plan."

Major Leslie Sheridan, an SOE operative, duly arrived at the Colonial Office bringing with him "accurate" data on which to predict the dictator's downfall.

Hitler's birth time of 6.30pm on April 20, 1889, made him a Taurus by a few hours. As his birthday approached in 1941, Neptune would be in opposition to his birth sign.

Sheridan wrote: "Neptunian fate is always mysterious, usually violent and full of conspiratorial danger from closest associates."

"Hitler maintains astrologer Krafft and fears death before completion of his work. His decisions are reported to be influenced by portents in the stars."

He added: "If we can organise an elaborate orchestra of Hitler's fate which will echo round the world, the result will not only be the breaking down of the belief that Hitler is superman, but also music may be heard within Germany, where astrology is now a recognised science, and even reach the ears of Hitler himself, with unsettling effect on his judgment."

Agents were dispatched to spread the word in Turkey, Egypt, Singapore and West Africa. Sir Geoffrey Northcote, the British governor of Hong Kong, entered into the spirit of the plot, briefing a Chinese contact who arranged for the prediction to emerge from a planchette message - a type of séance - at a Chinese temple in Macao. This was passed to Reuters news agency, which filed a dispatch reporting the prediction that Hitler would suffer a great reverse in the second half of 1941 and die in 1942.' The effects of this plan, one among thousands, were never reported.

While many people view Sir Winston Churchill as a staunch authoritative Tory, a crusty figure of an antiquated past, it can also now be concluded that the man voted the *Greatest Britain* in a public pole early in the twenty-first century was an initiated Druid with more than a slight association with Witchcraft and its mysterious arts.

It may also be seen as significant that on his return to power, following the immediate post-war Labour Government, the only item of legislation Sir Winston Churchill permitted to be carried over from the previous administration was the private Parliamentary Bill replacing the archaic 1735 Witchcraft Act under which Mrs Duncan was 'convicted' by the Fraudulent Mediums Act.<sup>v</sup>

In 1951, under the Prime Ministership of Sir Winston Churchill, the last Witchcraft Act was repealed, largely at the instigation of Spiritualist mediums.<sup>vi</sup> Witchcraft in Britain had regained its legal status after five hundred and fifty years of persecution and its practitioners are free to worship their Gods and Goddesses, re-kindling the spirit of an ancient light in the oldest temples of this land.

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<sup>i</sup> National Trust web site:

<http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/scripts/nthandbook.dll?ACTION=PROPERTY&PROPERTYID=316> -  
sourced 2.10.2004.

<sup>ii</sup> Curry, Patrick, A Confusion of Prophets,

<sup>iii</sup> <http://members.tripod.com/helenduncan/wcletter.html>. Sourced 25th November 2004.

<sup>iv</sup> Helen Duncan Web Site: <http://members.tripod.com/helenduncan/wcletter.html> - sourced 01.10.2004.

<sup>v</sup> Unknown author, web site: <http://www.angelfire.com/weird2/obscure2/druid.html> - sourced 02.10.2004.

<sup>vi</sup> Unknown author, web site: <http://www.angelfire.com/weird2/obscure2/druid.html> - sourced 02.10.2004.