

THE ORIGIN OF MODERN WICCA

Witchcraft sometimes called Wicca is a form of paganism based around sabbats, magic spells and the God and Goddess. It claims to be the old religion that was persecuted in the witch craze of the Dark Ages. Gardnerian Wicca is a form that passes on a priesthood and claims to be the real thing.

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Gardnerian Wicca

The modern witchcraft revival can be largely attributed to Gardner's publishing his non-fiction book *Witchcraft Today* in 1954. The repeal of the last English witchcraft laws in 1951 made it possible for Gardner, a retired British civil servant with a long career in the Far East, to openly publicize his 'witchy' religion.

Witchcraft Today described a surviving pre-Christian religion that celebrated the seasonal changes with Sabbats and the lunar cycles with Esbats. The model Gardnerian coven consisted of thirteen people who worked together skyclad during fairly elaborate rituals. The High Priest and High Priestess participated in 'The Great Rite' of ritual sex at least in private if not at coven events. Gardner called this religion 'Wica.' Later another "c" was added to Wica to form the word 'Wicca' commonly used today. Wicca is the Anglo-Saxon word for a male witch according to Baker, who notes that this term had been out of popular usage centuries before Gardner adopted it.

In the thirty years since Gardner's death in 1964, Wicca has had an amazing growth. This religion obviously fills a need in the lives of people, who seek spirituality but who reject patriarchal and often anti-sexual alternatives. Wicca, or the Craft, is the major path followed by members of a neo-Pagan community now estimated to be 500,000 people by Aidan Kelly, who believes that Wiccans should distinguish between Gardner's Wiccan mythology and its actual history.

Gardner's source of information about Wicca came purportedly from the New Forest coven in England where he was initiated as a witch in 1939 by 'Old Dorothy' Clutterbuck. He also traced the roots of the New Forest coven back to pre-Christian times, and stated that a handwritten Book of Shadows was the source of their ancient rituals.

However, starting in Gardner's lifetime and continuing until today, several persistent critics have challenged his claim that Wicca was a surviving ancient religion. His critics primarily focus on the fact that no independent research has validated the existence of Wicca. Baker, for example, notes that Gardner was a member of the Folklore Society in England, but society members interviewed after his death said they had never heard of the Wiccan sect that Gardner claimed to have uncovered.

The Four Criticisms

I will now examine in greater detail four of the criticisms raised about Wicca by those who believe that Gardner completely fabricated it. The first criticism is that the New Forest coven too neatly followed the model of witchcraft that Margaret Murray had described in her 1921 book, *The Witch Cult in Europe*. Murray's thesis was that a universal, pre-Christian, goddess-based religion existed throughout Europe. This idea was greeted with ridicule by her academic colleagues and damaged her credibility as a respected Egyptologist. Today, few scholars consider her interpretations of the then-known facts to have been accurate. Still, Murray brought the idea of goddess-worship, which Gardner's Wicca practiced, back to center stage after a long absence.

A second criticism is that 'Old Dorothy' Clutterbuck and her New Forest coven never actually existed, except in Gardner's mind. However, Doreen Valiente, who in the 1950s belonged to Gardner's coven (which was not the New Forest coven), located the birth and death certificates of Dorothy Clutterbuck in the early 1980s. Clutterbuck was born in India in 1881 and died in England in 1951. She left an estate of 60,000 pounds, which made it reasonable for her to have owned the old large house near the New Forest where Gardner said he was initiated.

A third charge is that British occultist Aleister Crowley was paid by Gardner to write his rituals. Valiente, who is the author of several books about modern witchcraft, is a source of many facts about Gardner. After joining Gardner's coven, she said she helped him write or rewrite some of his original rituals. The copy of Gardner's Book of Shadows that Valiente first saw did owe a good deal to the works of Aleister Crowley, as well including an adaptation of a poem by Rudyard Kipling called "A Tree Song." When she confronted Gardner, he admitted that he had borrowed freely from Aleister Crowley's writings to

fill in gaps in the original New Forest materials. Valiente, however, dismisses the charge that Aleister Crowley who died in 1947, several years before *Witchcraft Today* was published, wrote Gardner's rituals.

Valiente further believes that Wicca's Freemasonry terms such as 'the working tools,' a reference to the candidate's 'being properly prepared' for initiation, plus the three-degree system of initiations were incorporated from Masonic ritual by Gardner, who also was a Co-Mason.

A fourth criticism, made by Issac Bonewits, is that the Wiccan Rede is also of modern origin. Bonewits is an independent scholar, active Druid, and long-time critic of Gardner. He noted that Crowley wrote "Do what thou whilst, that is the whole of the Law," early in the 20th century. This statement is quite similar to the second part of the Wiccan Rede, "Do as thou whilst." The first part of the Wiccan Rede, "And ye harm none," may have been added by Gardner, Bonewits believes, to avoid charges that Wicca was a negative religion involved in cursing people.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, it mattered greatly to some witches whether or not Gardner had discovered a true surviving witch's coven or if, instead, he mostly created the Wiccan religion based on his extensive knowledge of the occult. It's true that Gardner did boast about his extensive knowledge of the occult in *Witchcraft Today*. Based on the critiques made by Bonewits, Baker, Kelly and others, today most Wiccans accept that Gardner freely added materials from other occult traditions to his brand of Wicca.

Gardnerian Wicca does provide us with a positive mythology of pre-Christian religion that we wished had survived, but for which there is almost no historical evidence. The worship of the Goddess and the Horned God of Nature at seasonal and lunar celebrations are authentically very ancient. Only the Gardnerian rituals and tools we use are of modern origin.

Historical Witchcraft

A traditional witchcraft, untainted by Gardner or other modern reconstructionists, does exist, although its practitioners usually do not call themselves witches. Instead, Baker writes that they are called the village sorcerers, wizards, cunning men, and wise women. These wise ones, or white witches, were common in the British Isles and isolated parts of the United States until well into this century, when mass public education spread a scientific viewpoint that devaluated and dismissed traditional knowledge as being merely superstitious. Baker says that the cunningfolk had no unifying Book of Shadows that contained their standard rituals. Traditional village witchcraft was practiced by solitaries who passed on their knowledge to one apprentice at a time. Local folk went to the wise ones for cures, prophecy, and protection. The wise ones also knew and used local native plants in their medicines and magical potions.

Two American folk magic traditions with historical roots in white witchcraft are those of the Southern Appalachians and the Pennsylvania Dutch. I will examine each of these traditions in the following sections.

Appalachian Folk Magic

Starting in the mid-18th century, Anglo-Celtic settlers from the lower social classes sought to flee recurring religious and political persecutions in Scotland and Ireland by immigrating to the southern Appalachian mountains in North America. Cross-cultural exchanges of customs and intermarriage between the European immigrants and American natives led to a hybrid magic that was based on Celtic and some native customs.

Geographical barriers, imposed by the mountains, resulted in widespread poverty and isolation among the mountain people, which allowed their beliefs and magic that dated back to the Middle Ages to survive undisturbed.

Edain McCoy summarizes both the beliefs and rituals of this magical tradition in her book *Mountain Magick, Folk Wisdom from the Heart of Appalachia* formerly called *In a Graveyard at Midnight*. A spell cast in a graveyard at the stroke of twelve was the most prevalent folk magical practice, because while burial grounds were considered places where evil lurked, they also were believed to contain great magical power that could be harnessed for good or evil.

McCoy writes with a special understanding about this magical tradition because she is both a descendent of the "feuding" McCoy clan of eastern Kentucky and a practicing Wiccan living in Texas. Some of the specific beliefs behind the magical practices she writes about include the following:

- 1) Good and evil are divided into two distinct and warring camps that are lead by the Christian God and the powerful Devil, respectively.
- 2) Mountain people have a sense of fatalism, which means they believe there are certain conditions that their magic cannot cure. Fatalist thinking is related to predestination and is a legacy of the Calvinist theology of the early Scottish Protestant churches.
- 3) Certain individuals are blessed with paranormal powers and have more powerful magic than ordinary people. These

people can choose to use their power for either good or evil purposes.

4) Magical curses are both real and potent.

5) Nature provides omens and portents of the future which the wise heed.

Southern folk magic has always tended to be a solitary practice. This folk magic requires little preparation, and no expensive tools, specialized knowledge, nor priestly caste. It is primarily concerned with omens, portents, curses, cures, and protection and is not geared toward obtaining material goals. For more information on how to perform the Southern mountain spells, make the charms, do the divinations, or even cook traditional southern recipes, you should check out McCoy's charming book. Today the continuing survival of Southern mountain magic as an indigenous folk practice is doubtful. However, elements of this folk magic may survive or be revived through McCoy's book and her personal magical practice.

Pennsylvania Dutch Hexcraft or "Pow-wow"

Further north in Pennsylvania, German settlers began arriving in the late 17th century, the bulk of them immigrating in the first half of the 18th century. The term Pennsylvania "Dutch" is a corruption of the German word "Deutch" meaning German. Silver RavenWolf lives in Pennsylvania and describes this magical tradition in *American Folk Magick: Charms, Spells & Herbals* [formerly called] *HexCraft*. She has Pennsylvania Dutch ancestors, as I also do.

Two distinct groups of German immigrants came to Pennsylvania. The Fancy Germans, or Lutherans, brought their elaborate folk history with them, including the ornate customs of Christmas and Easter, the Yule tree and log, colorful decorations, baskets, and pictures of bunnies. The other German group was the Plain or Pietist Germans. They included members of the Mennonite, Amish, Dunker, and Brethren denominations. The Plain Germans wore distinctive clothing and tried to live a simple rural life-style guided by their interpretation of the Bible. Some of the pow-wowers Silver RavenWolf interviewed were Brethren, Mennonites, and Dunkers.

South central Pennsylvania was fertile and not physically isolated, as were the southern Appalachians. Hexcraft, or pow-wow, as it is locally called, survived because of the tendency of both Fancy and Plain Germans to live in tightly knit communities, where they preserved their customs and language into the 20th century.

Native Americans were present, at least initially, when the Germans arrived and the term pow-wow was possibly derived from the early settlers' observations of Indian pow wows. Silver RavenWolf thinks the word pow-wow may also be a derivative of the word power or may come from the Native American pow wow definition meaning "he who dreams."

Pow-wowing includes some charms and incantations dating from the Middle Ages plus elements borrowed from the Jewish Qabala and Christian Bible.

Pow-wowing generally focuses on healing minor health problems, the protection of livestock, success in love, and the casting or removing of hexes. For over 200 years, pow-wowers have considered themselves to be staunch Christians endowed with supernatural powers to both heal and harm.

Hex signs are the most widely recognized symbols associated with pow-wow magic. The word hex means a spell or bewitchment and comes from the German word *hexe* for witch. Hex signs are round magical signs and symbols used primarily to protect against hexerie (witchcraft). They were used by the Fancy Dutch but not the Amish and strict Mennonites.

Some hex symbols and designs originate in the Bronze Age. Ancient Celtic and Germanic tribes put emphasis on the energy patterns of the divine Source rather than its representation as a human archetype. The Source was depicted in universal designs that assisted in focusing power either toward or away from the design. The basic pattern found in the original hex signs is the double rosette, which is found at many ancient European holy sites.

Most of the charms used in pow-wow magic were originally described in two books. The first book, *Long Lost Friend*, was written in 1820 by John George Hohman. He was a German Catholic immigrant who documented various charms and herbal remedies that had been preserved orally for centuries. The second book is the anonymous *Seventh Book of Moses*, also called the *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*. This book contains a mixture of wisdom derived from the Talmud, Qabala, and Old Testament. Silver RavenWolf says these two books were once found in almost all Pennsylvania Dutch households.

Pow-wow tools include common items such as spools of red and black thread, a ball of red yarn, several lengths of red and black ribbons, small hand-made ceramic bowls, a seam ripper, a creek stone (divinity stone) and a container of holy water. Red and white are the basic colors used in pow-wow.

Pow-wowing was still common in the early 20th century. Gradually over time, several local murders were attributed to pow-wowers. One belief held by some pow-wowers was that a curse could be broken by killing the person who placed it. Pow-wowing rapidly declined in the 1920s when the news media portrayed it as an embarrassing example of backward and superstitious Pennsylvania Dutch behavior. While researching her book, Silver RavenWolf found only elderly pow-wow practitioners, who often lived in local nursing homes.

Conclusions

Gerald Gardner's reputation as the "discoverer" of an ancient witch religion may have been damaged beyond repair. However, even staunch critics, Issac Bonewits and Aidan Kelly, point out that his role as the inspired creator of a 'new' religion has not been given its deserved recognition. For example, the Wiccan Rede, regardless of its origin, has greatly helped Wiccans in distinguishing their positive magickal religion from that of Satanic cults and other negative occult groups.

The folk magic of the southern Appalachians and the Pennsylvania Dutch is rapidly disappearing as these communities are integrated into the modern America of satellite television, fancy cars, and conspicuous consumption. Edain McCoy and Silver RavenWolf have performed a valuable service in recording what is left of these magical traditions.

The power of American folk magic rests on its ability to fulfill a basic human need by providing more certainty and control in the lives of its practitioners. Adding elements of either folk tradition to our Wiccan practices can help us become more connected with an authentic folk magic brought to this continent by our immigrant ancestors.

In Part 2 of this series, the Roots of Our Religion, I will describe Wicca's medieval roots including those derived from Hermeticism, the Qabala, and the Tarot.

To read Part 2, and the rest of this series by Merlyn, visit <http://connectionsjournal.com/files/archives/rootsreligion/reroot.html>

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