

Aleister Crowley

By James K. Walker

Dates: Edward Alexander Crowley, an influential occultist, practitioner of magick, and author, was born October 12, 1875 in Warwickshire, England and died December 1, 1947 in Hastings, East Sussex, England.

Other Names: Crowley is pronounced with a long *o* and rhymes with “holy.” He took the name Aleister which is a Gaelic form of his middle name. He also used many pseudonyms including: The Great Beast, Mega Therion, the Beast 666, Frater Perdurabo, and Mahatma Guru Sri Paramahansa Shivaji.

Organizations: Crowley was a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, cofounded the A.∴A.∴¹ (Order of the Star called S.S.), and became head of the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.). The Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica (E.G.C) is a branch of the O.T.O. which conducts a Gnostic Mass, and in 1920 Crowley cofounded the short-lived Abbey of Thelema in Palermo, Sicily.

Books: Crowley was a prolific writer and authored scores of books on poetry and fiction as well as magick. His best-known work published in *The Equinox III (9)* is *The Book of the Law*. Crowley authorized a verse-by-verse commentary on it entitled *The Law is for All*. Other important works on Crowley’s occult theories include: *777 and Other Qabalistic Writings*; *The Book of Lies*; *Eight Lectures on Yoga*; *The Equinox*; *The Holy Books of Thelema*, *The Equinox III(10)*; *Liber Aleph*; *Magick: Liber ABA, Book Four*; and *The Revival of Magick and Other Essays*.²

HISTORY

Aleister Crowley has been called the “wickedest man in the world” and sometimes the father of modern Satanism. Although Crowley died in 1947, in 2002 he was listed as one of the top 100 British heroes of all time.³ Despite his notoriety, much of his life remains a mystery. Crowley came from an intensely spiritual family that had gained considerable wealth through their own brand of ale and a chain of prosperous brew houses. Shortly after Crowley’s birth, the brewery was sold to a family member and the profits reinvested in successful business ventures. The family fortune he inherited allowed Crowley the freedom and means to travel the world, become an accomplished mountain climber, write extensively, and evolve a unique form of Western esoteric ritual integrated within an occult system of philosophy he called Thelema.

Crowley’s parents came from a Quaker background but by the time Aleister was born in 1875, his father, Edward, had converted to a fundamentalist sect of the Plymouth Brethren⁴ and eventually published and distributed over one hundred titles of Brethren pamphlets throughout England.⁵ Although he admired his father as a child, Crowley later rejected Christianity as presented through the strict fundamentalism of his parents’ faith. A major turning point in Crowley’s life was in 1887 at the age of 11 when his father died of tongue cancer. In his autobiography, Crowley recounted in the third person:

From the moment of the funeral the boy’s life entered on an entirely new phase. The change was radical. Within three weeks of his return to school he got into trouble for the first time.... This was the first symptom of a complete reversal of his attitude to life in every respect. It seemed obvious that his father’s death must have been causally connected with it... his reaction [following the death] makes it almost incredible that he was the same boy.⁶

Crowley’s resentment after his father’s death fueled a growing skepticism about the Christian faith. Crowley and his mother moved in with his uncle Tom Bond Bishop, whose Christian faith Crowley described as “extraordinarily narrow, ignorant and bigoted Evangelicalism.”⁷ He rebuffed his mother’s attempts to keep him in the Christian faith and

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during outbreaks of misbehavior Crowley mother's occasionally called him "the Beast" (from Revelation 13), a title that Crowley would proudly repeat as an adult.⁸

His aversion to the Christian faith grew during his university studies at Trinity College in Cambridge where he refused to participate in mandatory chapel and became somewhat of a loner. He did not eat with the other students but paid the kitchen to bring his meals to his room. He regularly skipped lectures preferring independent studies, playing chess and writing poetry. Ultimately, he left Cambridge without a degree but his private studies intensified. "He voraciously read the books once forbidden to him and quickly amassed a large library of poetry, religion, history, philosophy and science" and he also began experimenting with sex.⁹ For Crowley, sexual immorality was a vehicle to both defy Christianity and express his misogyny. Crowley writes:

My sexual life was very intense. My relations with women were entirely satisfactory. They gave me the maximum of bodily enjoyment and at the same time symbolized my theological notions of sin. Love was a challenge to Christianity. It was a degradation and a damnation. Swinburne had taught me the doctrine of justification by sin. Every woman that I met enabled me to affirm magically that I had defied the tyranny of the Plymouth Brethren and the Evangelicals.... But, morally and mentally, women were for me beneath contempt. They had no true moral ideals. They were bound up with their necessary preoccupation, with the function of reproduction. Their apparent aspirations were camouflage. Intellectually, of course, they did not exist. Even the few whose minds were not completely blank had them furnished with Wardour Street Chippendale. Their attainments were those of the ape and the parrot. These facts did not deter me. On the contrary, it was highly convenient that one's sexual relations should be with an animal with no consciousness beyond sex.¹⁰

Crowley was bisexual and "maintained a vigorous sex life, which was largely conducted with prostitutes and girls he picked up at local pubs and cigar shops, but eventually extended into homosexual activities...."¹¹ Some have suggested that Crowley's homosexuality was never "recreational" or romantic but was strictly used to empower his sexual magick with the alleged power its taboo nature added to the rituals.¹² One of Crowley's college lovers, Herbert Charles Pollitt, was never a believer in the occult, however, and Crowley expressed lifelong feelings for him.¹³ In a letter to Montgomery Evans, Crowley wrote, "There have been about four men in my life that I could say I have loved... Call me a bugger if you like, but I don't feel the same way about women. One can always replace a woman in a few days."¹⁴

Golden Dawn, A.∴A.∴., Ordo Templi Orientis, and the Abbey of Thelema

In 1898, while on a mountain climbing expedition in the Swiss Alps, Crowley happened to meet occultist Julian Baker, a chemist and alchemist, who promised to introduce Crowley to an "invisible college" of magical practitioners back in London. Thus, Crowley was initiated into the Order of the Golden Dawn, "the most celebrated and influential late nineteenth-century magical society."¹⁵ Crowley rose quickly through the degrees but the organization was decimated by infighting and he eventually lost interest. He turned his attention to the eastern religions and traveled to Sri Lanka to study Yoga, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

After returning to London he married Rose Kelly, his first wife, and they honeymooned in Egypt visiting the pyramids. Following a magick ceremony, Rose "responded by later going into a dreamy state and speaking distractedly about how the Egyptian god Horus wanted a word with Crowley." Rose described a ceremony for Crowley to perform on March 20, 1904 in which he would hear the voice of Horus. During a three day period the following month, Crowley recorded the words he heard which became one of his most influential books, *The Book of the Law*. The book identified Crowley as "the Beast 666" and the prophet of the new age. It also introduced Crowley's core philosophy, "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law."¹⁶

Crowley and Rose traveled to China with their infant daughter, Lilith, where he began daily rituals to invoke the presence of a spirit guide who would be his "Holy Guardian Angel."¹⁷ Lilith died of typhoid during the journey and consequently Rose quickly succumbed to alcoholism. Crowley divorced Rose, his personal life in ruins. Crowley interpreted his misfortunes as punishment from the gods for his failure to perform his duties as their "chosen prophet."¹⁸ Crowley went to live with his former Golden Dawn mentor, George Cecil Jones and they purposed to form the A.∴A.∴. as a new occult order with an official semiannual periodical, *The Equinox*. Membership flourished initially but negative publicity concerning Crowley's homosexuality and rumors of his "cult of immorality" scattered most of the membership.

In 1912, Theodor Reuss, head of the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.), was angered that some of his order's secrets had been published in Crowley's *Book of Lies*. Crowley explained that he was unaware of any O.T.O. secrets claiming to have independently written the section in question under the inspiration of the god Dionysus. Impressed, Reuss initiated Crowley into his order appointing him as the British head of the Oriental Templars with Crowley taking the magical name Baphomet.¹⁹

Following World War I, Crowley cofounded the Abbey of Thelema in Cefalù (Palermo), Sicily with Leah Hirsig, whom he called his "Scarlet Woman" who rides the beast (Revelation 17).²⁰ Controversy and negative publicity soon engulfed Crowley's "magical colony" which "served as the site for numerous sexual orgies and magical rites, many attended by his illegitimate children."²¹ Following the controversial death of an Abbey parishioner, Frederick Loveday, the London media branded Crowley "The Wickedest Man in the World." Eventually, the negative press led Italian dictator Benito Mussolini to expel Crowley from Italy and the Abbey soon closed.²²

Espionage, Drugs, and Death

There is some evidence that Crowley may have been used as a secret agent during both world wars. Crowley's provocative anti-British statements have been interpreted by some as evidence that he had successfully infiltrated the German propaganda machine. Critics have dismissed this as empty boasting or "disingenuous backpedaling."²³ Dr. Richard Spence, chairman of the History Department of the University of Idaho, has recently authored a book which makes a compelling case that Crowley was being employed by British intelligence.²⁴ Crowley was also associated with Jack Parsons (1914-1952) a U.S. rocket scientist who cofounded the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California. Parsons, who was entrusted with top-secret clearance, was also heavily involved with the occult and became the leader of Crowley's O.T.O. lodge in the U.S. Considered a security risk by some, Parsons had an:

...unfortunate relationship with a man he identified to Crowley as 'Frater H.' This was a former U.S. Navy officer, L. Ron Hubbard, the future founder of Scientology.... Soon after the war, Hubbard and Parsons ventured into the Mohave Desert to perform the Babylon Working, a ritual aimed at achieving the Beast's longtime goal of spawning a Thelemic messiah. Hubbard eventually ended up running off with Parsons' money and girlfriend. Years later, Hubbard explained his dealings with Parsons as part of his secret work for the Naval Intelligence... to infiltrate a dangerous black magic cult, the OTO which was being used by someone to enlist or compromise scientists.²⁵

Crowley used a wide variety of hallucinogenic and narcotic drugs that were incorporated into his magick or used to treat symptoms of chronic illnesses. He experimented with opium, cocaine, hashish, cannabis, alcohol, ether, mescaline, morphine, and heroin. "Crowley developed a drug addiction after a London doctor prescribed heroin for his asthma and bronchitis" an experience "that influenced his 1922 novel, *Diary of a Drug Fiend*."²⁶

Having exhausted his inheritance decades earlier, Crowley's health was also failing during World War II. He was "a sick man suffering from bad teeth, chronic bronchitis, and a failing heart" complicated by "years of abuse, narcotic and otherwise."²⁷ Crowley died December 1, 1947 at the age of 72. Conflicting accounts of the events preceding his death add final controversy to his story. Some claimed that Crowley put a curse on his doctor for withholding additional heroin. Coincidentally, his doctor did die the day after Crowley. According to one account his last words were "I am perplexed," while his attending nurse disagreed testifying that his final utterance was, "Sometimes I hate myself."²⁸

DOCTRINE

Crowley named his system of magick Thelema from the Greek word for "will." Crowley's Law of Thelema is summarized in his famous maxims from *Liber AL vel Legis* (Book of the Law): "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law" (1:40) and "Love is the law, love under will" (1:57). The heart of Crowley's doctrine of magick involves self discovery of one's "true will" – his or her absolute and unique destiny, purpose, calling, and desire. A person's "true will" transcends what that person merely wants or fleeting desires. Once the "true will" is discerned, a Thelemic practitioner then invokes the principles and practices refined by Crowley in order to create the necessary changes that will cause reality to conform to that will.

Crowley attempted to extract that essence from the teachings of the world's varied schools of spiritual attainment. Building on an idea common in esoteric groups like the Theosophical Society²⁹ and the Golden Dawn, he forged a particularly effective integration of Western magic, Eastern yoga, Qabalah, Hermeticism, Freemasonry,³⁰ Rosicrucianism, and other mystery traditions throughout history.³¹

Crowley's theories borrowed from "the Buddhist doctrine of *dukkha* (the belief that attachment to material things is the cause of all suffering, karma, and reincarnation) [and the] Hindu idea that our world of individuality and separateness is *maya* (illusion)."³² While freely incorporating diverse doctrines from disparate spiritual systems and world religions, he maintained his resolute disdain for traditional faiths – particularly Christianity. In his *Book of the Law* he records, "With my Hawks head I peck at the eyes of Jesus as he hangs on the cross, I flap my wings in the face of Mohamed & blind him. With my claws I tear out the flesh of the Indian and the Buddhist.... Let Mary inviolate be torn upon wheels..." (3:51-55).

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Crowley's Law of Thelema, "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law," is the antithesis of Christ's summary of the biblical law. Jesus said the two greatest laws are, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart... [and] Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:34-40). Ultimate human fulfillment can only be found in taming self-will, ego, and personal desire in order to fully love and serve God and others.

The futility of the wanton pursuit of self gratification that pleasures "the will" is epitomized by Satan's own fall described by the prophet Isaiah in chapter 14:

¹² How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn!

You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations!

¹³ You said in your heart, "I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon.

¹⁴ I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High."

¹⁵ But you are brought down to the realm of the dead, to the depths of the pit.

Perhaps no man in modern times has with more intention or greater resolve sought to fulfill the prophet's words than Aleister Crowley.

Notes

- ¹ The symbol □ stands for a secret word or concept in Freemasonry. The actual name is never revealed to nonmembers. Richard Kaczynski, *The Weiser Concise Guide to Aleister Crowley*, (San Francisco: WeiserBooks, 2009), 36.
- ² This list of "top eleven" books on Crowley's magick was compiled by Kaczynski, *Weiser Concise Guide*.
- ³ "BBC reveals 100 great British heroes," 8/22/2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/2208671.stm>.
- ⁴ "Plymouth Brethren: An early 19th century movement of Evangelical Christianity that developed in Ireland and spread to England... [and] is traced to the assembly of believers (brothers) who were in Plymouth, England.... The movement has experienced numerous schisms basically falling into two categories. Open Brethren recognize and cooperate with other Christian churches. Closed Brethren do not support the events and meetings of other Christians and usually enforce the disciplinary actions taken by churches in fellowship with them." James K. Walker, *The Concise Guide to Today's Religions and Spirituality*, (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2007), 255.
- ⁵ Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, ed. by John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983 ed.), 35-36.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.
- ⁸ *Aleister Crowley – Portrait of an Occultist*, (Minneapolis: Filiquarian Publishing, 2008), 4.
- ⁹ *Weiser Concise Guide*, 17-18.
- ¹⁰ *Confessions*, 141-42.
- ¹¹ *Portrait of an Occultist*, 6.
- ¹² For example, Crowley sometimes used sex magick to break through "spiritual barriers" blocking the inspiration of his occult writing. When progress on his book, *30 Enochian Calls*, was blocked by "a voice instructing him to depart," Crowley "offered himself upon a makeshift altar as a sexual sacrifice to his scribe and student Victor Neuburg." This resulted in a spiritual "epiphany" and the remainder of the book was thus revealed to Crowley. *Weiser Concise Guide*, 88.
- ¹³ *Confessions*, 142-44; 148-49.
- ¹⁴ Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 334.
- ¹⁵ *Weiser Concise Guide*, 19.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

- ¹⁷ Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley*, (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2002), 154.
- ¹⁸ *Weiser Concise Guide*, 24.
- ¹⁹ *Confessions*, 708-10; *Weiser Concise Guide*, 26.
- ²⁰ Seven other women were also given that title including his first wife Rose Edith Crowley (1874-1932), Mary Desti (1878-1927), Jane Foster, Roddie Minor, his second wife Maria de Miramar (1894-196?), Dorothy Olsen, and Leila Waddell (1880-1932). *Thelemapedia: The Encyclopedia of Thelema & Magick*, "Personalities in Thelema," http://www.thelemapedia.org/index.php/Personalities_in_Thelema (accessed Nov. 20, 2010).
- ²¹ "Crowley, Aleister," *Geddes & Grosset Guide to the Occult & Mysticism*, (New Lanark, Scotland, 1996), 441.
- ²² *Weiser Concise Guide*, 28-30.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ²⁴ Richard B. Spence, *Secret Agent 666: Aleister Crowley, British Intelligence and the Occult*, (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2008). See also the audio podcast "Panopticon: Episode 4 - Aleister Crowley, British Intelligence, and the Occult with Dr. Richard Spence," (April 18, 2010) <http://www.panopticonpodcast.com/2010/04/episode-4-aleister-crowley-british.html> (accessed November 20, 2010).
- ²⁵ *Secret Agent 666*, 261. Hubbard once claimed Crowley was "my very good friend" but there is no evidence that they ever met. "L. Ron Hubbard, The Occult, and Aleister Crowley," (video includes the audio excerpt of the voice of L. Ron Hubbard from his 1952 Philadelphia Doctorate Course Lectures), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYOMJwFV4Q>. See also: Craig Branch, "Hubbard's Magic," www.watchman.org/sci/hubmagk2.htm.
- ²⁶ *Portrait of an Occultist*, 14.
- ²⁷ *Secret Agent 666*, 255.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ A separate 4-page *Profile* has been published on this subject: Viola Larson, "Theosophy," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2010). A complete *Profile Notebook* (over 350 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook.htm.
- ³⁰ A separate 4-page *Profile* has been published on this subject: Ron Rhodes, "Freemasonry," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2010). A complete *Profile Notebook* (over 350 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook.htm.
- ³¹ *Weiser Concise Guide*, 54.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 61.