
Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr, eds., *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 432 pp., £60 (cloth), £22.50 (paper).

Born to a life of Victorian privilege, Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) was a talented chess player, an accomplished mountaineer, and a prolific poet and painter. He was also an infamous Pagan occultist, the self-proclaimed “Prophet of the New Aeon,” and an individual dubbed “the wickedest man in the world” by the tabloids of his day. Love him or loathe him, Crowley was one of the most influential Britons of the early twentieth century, as evidenced by his election to the position of history’s seventy-third “Greatest Briton” in a 2002 BBC poll. Although the new religious movement that he founded, Thelema, has a membership well below 100,000, Crowley’s wider influence over Western esotericism, contemporary Paganism, and the Western counter-culture has been immense. Since his death, “the Great Beast” has become an object of both fascination and revulsion in equal measure. As could perhaps be expected for a figure of such infamy and importance, at least twelve biographers have turned their hand towards exploring his life and times, from the sensationalist early attempts by John Symonds and Daniel P. Mannix to the scholarly, well-researched works of Lawrence Sutin and Richard Kaczynski. Such interest has only intensified in recent years, as is exemplified by both Churton’s biography and a new collection of essays.

The most recent author to take up the mantle of Crowley biographer, Tobias Churton (1960–) is both a lecturer in Freemasonry at the University of Exeter’s Centre for the Study of Esotericism (EXESESO), as well as an accomplished novelist, screenwriter, and non-fiction writer. Churton has published widely on the subject of Rosicrucianism, Gnosticism, and the Masons’ Craft. Upon hearing of his latest literary venture, I wondered what purpose *yet another* Crowley biography could serve, a concern that Churton was clearly aware of; his book professes to be “The Biography,” a definitive
account that supplants all those which have gone before. He states that Crowley led “a life not written, but written over” (3), implying that earlier biographies have buried the truth about the notorious magician, a truth that can only now come to light. This highly ambitious claim is echoed by Churton’s EXESOSO colleague Christopher McIntosh in a brief preface in which he controversially proclaims that “Crowley has at last found a worthy biographer” (xxi).

Churton has thoroughly researched his subject over the past two decades, having examined the material held in both London’s Warburg Collection and in the archive of the OTO, the world’s foremost Thelemic organization. In doing so, he has unearthed fresh evidence and a number of photographs not utilized by prior biographers, and his presentation of these is most welcome. For the first time, we are provided with evidence that Crowley’s intense relationship with fellow mountaineer Oscar Eckenstein had a sexual dimension (56), and that some of the uses of language and turns of phrase found in Thelemite holy text The Book of the Law are present in Crowley’s earlier work (68). Churton theorizes that Crowley’s 1913 trip to Russia was at the behest of Britain’s intelligence services (178–82), and also offers us much information (new to Anglophone scholarship) on exactly who expelled Crowley from Sicily and why (263–70).

Although such revelations are of great interest to those with an established fascination for all things Crowley, none are of such magnitude to force a significant paradigm shift in the way that recent scholarship has come to look at the self-professed “Great Beast.” Sutin and Kaczynski have already scoured most of the same sources that Churton has explored while Richard Spence has already outlined the argument (which Churton espouses) that Crowley was an agent for British intelligence throughout most of his life. This being the case, I don’t find any ground on which to claim (as Churton does), that previous biographers have “written over” Crowley’s life. Elsewhere, I think that Churton is again unfair to his predecessors. For instance, when arguing that the mystical revelation that Crowley claimed to have experienced in Sweden on New Year’s Eve 1896 came as a result of his first same-sex encounter, he announces that previous biographers have “missed the point” on this issue (29). This is untrue and misleading; both Sutin and Kaczynski have already put forward this same argument in their own biographies. While perhaps unintentional, my overall sense is that Churton was trying to undermine prior books on the subject in order to make his seem more original.
Brought out by Watkins Publishing at an affordable price, the book is marketed at the lay rather than specialist reader. Unfortunately, the contents would present difficulties for most members of this target audience, and I would only recommend this work to those who already possess a good understanding of Crowley’s life and times. Names are dropped with little or no explanation as to who they are or what their wider relevance is, and focus is placed on certain—often relatively trivial—elements of Crowley’s life, glossing over more important events. Both Crowley’s ascent of K2 (83) and his relationship with Hollywood actress Jane Wolfe (251) are dealt with in single paragraphs, whereas other biographies typically give these several pages. Similarly, one of Crowley’s most important publications, The Book of Lies, appears only in a passing reference (167). Conversely, Churton devotes five pages to the relatively minor situation between Crowley and the Earl of Tankerville (131–36). No explanation is provided for this bizarre allocation of space, and this erratic structure makes the book unsuitable as a primer. Furthermore, Churton’s informal, poetic style of prose is dominated by unusually short sentences, which together with his own particular sense of humour is likely to cause some readability issues. For instance, at one point in the third chapter Churton suddenly breaks from the main narrative to relate “—that’s ‘Crowley’ as in ‘holy’ by the way; many persist in calling him ‘Crowley’ as in ‘foully’” (28), before returning to what he was originally discussing. In another, he remarks (tongue firmly in cheek) that “the Loch Ness Monster was never in fact anything more than Aleister Crowley’s potent penis” (110). Although I personally found this literary style quite refreshing, I suspect that many readers will be simply perplexed and put off from finishing the work.

Whereas biographers like Symonds have demonized Crowley, Churton has gone too far the other way, painting him in an overly positive light and glossing over the more controversial aspects of his personality, such as his conflicting attitudes to women, Jews, and non-white peoples. As a result, the Crowley that emerges from these pages is a benevolent and misunderstood eccentric, someone a little more lacklustre than the headstrong controversialist conjured up by earlier biographers. This reverential and at times hagiographic attitude masks the cruelty, the arrogance, and the contempt for others that Crowley clearly exhibited. This outlook is stretched to breaking point with Churton’s assertion that Crowley was “a major figure, as significant as Freud or Jung” (7). Crowley was certainly an important
figure, but was he as significant as Freud? I doubt it, and Churton fails to convince me otherwise.

In all, it seems that Churton has attempted two things with this book. First, he has aimed to present new information and new theories, based on years of painstaking research, to those who are already well versed in the life and times of “the Great Beast.” In this task he admirably succeeds and has done a great service to academics and occultists alike. Second, he has tried to author a definitive and accessible primer for those seeking to learn about Crowley for the first time. In this, I believe, he unfortunately fails, and I would recommend that anyone wanting to learn about Crowley look elsewhere first.

Not another biography, Oxford University Press’ Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism is the first academic anthology devoted to the Thelemite prophet. The work is edited by Henrik Bogdan, an associate professor in history of religions at the University of Gothenburg who has previously published on Western esoteric rites of initiation, and Martin P. Starr, an independent scholar who has published on the history of Thelema in the United States. This pair are well suited to assemble together the fourteen separate papers that make up this work, and have accomplished this task admirably. It should be stressed that this is a work clearly aimed at those already well acquainted with Crowley; those with no background knowledge would no doubt soon be mystified by the various references to Crowley’s various workings and publications. Similarly, a background in the academic study of Western esotericism is also necessary to make sense of many of the allusions contained throughout.

The anthology opens with a foreword by one of the foremost living figures in the academic study of Western esotericism, Wouter G. Hanegraaff of the University of Amsterdam. Hanegraaff’s use of language betrays an unusual androcentric assumption that the reader is male, something made all the more poignant in that fourteen of the fifteen contributors to the anthology are men. We are then presented with Bogdan and Starr’s obligatory introduction, in which they express their opinion that Crowley’s importance to academia is not in his expansive influence on the Western counterculture but instead as “an example of religious change in Western culture” (7).

The first paper is provided by Alex Owen of Northwestern University, the only female voice in the anthology. Drawing on a chapter of her 2004 book The Place of Enchantment, Owen explores the meaning of Crowley’s 1909 Enochian sex magic working in the
Algerian desert, in which he claimed to have invoked the demon Choronzon. Making reference to the context of the wider occult milieu, she focuses on issues regarding the magical “second self” and the manner in which it related to psychoanalysis and Crowley’s bisexuality. The University of Amsterdam’s Marco Pasi follows with an abridged version of a paper previously published in the journal *Magic, Witchcraft and Ritual*. Here he discusses Crowley’s attitude to paranormal phenomenon, yoga, and magic, highlighting the influence of scientific naturalism on Crowley’s thought. Interesting as it certainly is, the chapter is quite dense. Pasi is at his most interesting when discussing Crowley’s own conflicting ideas of what exactly Aiwass (the entity who gave him *The Book of the Law*) actually was.

Bogdan’s chapter looks at Thelema’s apocalyptic and millenarian understanding of history, identifying such diverse influences as the anthropology of James Frazer, concurrent esoteric ideas of a New Age, as well as the premillenialist dispensationalism that characterized Crowley’s evangelical Christian upbringing. This is a fascinating topic and one that I hope Bogdan returns to in the future. Gordan Djurdjevic of Simon Fraser University then takes us on to a discussion of Crowley’s relations with two Indian religious practices, yoga and tantra. Discussing Crowley’s experiences with these traditions during his 1902 sojourn on the subcontinent, Djurdjevic then examines the tantric influence over Crowley’s later antinomian and sex magic praxes.

Chapter six is provided by one of Crowley’s foremost biographers, Richard Kaczynski, who examines the social and literary background to the occultist’s work. Looking primarily at the influence of Spiritualism, occultism, sexuality, and ideas regarding the phallic basis to religion, Kaczynski discusses contributors such as Ida Craddock and Theodor Reuss, as well as providing an overview of groups like the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. This is an interesting primer to the milieu from which Crowley surfaced, and I’m surprised that it wasn’t included as the opening paper. From Kaczynski, the editors let Crowley’s latest biographer, Tobias Churton, expand on an idea that he first advocated in *Aleister Crowley: The Biography*. Churton notes Crowley’s claim that Aiwass was the “true most ancient name of the God of the Yezidis,” before using this as a starting point to explore Crowley’s understanding of the Kurdish religion of Yezidism. Churton suggests (on the bases of a vague phonetic similarity) that Crowley connected Aiwass to Melek Tawus, the Yezidis’ Peacock Angel.
Although highly speculative, the paper nevertheless represents an interesting and worthwhile endeavor. Independent scholar Matthew D. Rogers follows with a chapter examining Crowley’s use of the Furores, the “Frenzies” that appear in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Noting the use of these ideas among Neoplatonists and many significant Renaissance esotericists, Rogers describes how they were used by Crowley in his various magical workings. Unfortunately this paper is relatively short, and relies to a large extent on the reader having a pre-existing knowledge base about the Furores and the nature of Neoplatonism.

Starr follows with his examination of Crowley’s relationship with Freemasonry. Although Crowley was never initiated into any mainstream Lodges, throughout his life he had dealings with what has been termed “Fringe Masonry”—groups that were not recognized by the Grand Lodge of England. It is excellent to have all of this information assembled in one place, although Starr too assumes prior knowledge of Freemasonry on behalf of the reader. We are then provided with a chapter by Robert A. Gilbert on the relationship between Crowley and the magician A.E. Waite. Noting that the two never actually met, he questions why Crowley took such a hostile attitude to Waite while at the same time admiring his poetry and recognizing that his work helped introduce him to ceremonial magic. Massimo Introvigne of the Italian Centre for Studies on New Religions contributes a lengthy paper on Crowley’s interest in Joseph Smith, the self-proclaimed prophet of Mormonism, bringing a much-needed injection of “new religious movement” scholarship to the book. Highlighting two references to Smith in Crowley’s writings, he proceeds to offer potential explanations for why Smith would have fascinated him. Unfortunately, Introvigne is not well versed in Crowleyan scholarship, and makes no use of the more recent biographies. Instead he relies on the work of John Symonds; indeed, Symonds’ negativity clearly rubs off on Introvigne, who describes Crowley as “depraved” and makes the erroneous claim that he hated his father (262). Unfortunately he similarly relies a great deal on the dubious claims of evangelical Christian polemicist William Schnoebelen, many of which are largely or completely irrelevant to Crowley to start with, and serve little purpose here.

The final four papers are devoted to an examination of Crowley’s influence over subsequent esoteric currents, starting with Ronald Hutton of the University of Bristol on the relationship between Crowley and Wicca. Examining the friendship between Crowley
and Gerald Gardner, the “Father of Wicca,” Hutton then explores the manner in which Gardner incorporated elements of Crowley’s writings into the Gardnerian liturgy. Staying within the realms of Pagan Witchcraft, the editors feature Australian independent scholar Keith Richmond, who looks at Crowley’s influence on the Witch Rosaleen Norton. Although an engaging, well-written, and interesting paper, Richmond unfortunately fails to make reference to Nevill Drury’s recent Norton biography Homage to Pan (2009). Richmond’s essay is followed by an important chapter from Hugh B. Urban of Ohio State University, in which he examines Crowley’s influence on Scientology. Noting that the religion’s founder, L. Ron Hubbard, was involved in California’s Thelemite community in the late 1940s, he examines several of Hubbard’s early writings, highlighting instances of potential Crowleyan influence. The final chapter is provided by Asbjørn Dyrendal of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, and looks at the influence of Crowley on two of the most prominent figures in the history of modern religious Satanism: Anton LaVey of the Church of Satan and Michael Aquino of the Temple of Set. It doesn’t look at the Crowleyan influence on other forms of contemporary Satanism and/or the Left Hand Path, but this reviewer hopes that Dyrendel might turn his attention to these neglected areas in future.

Although Crowley is more often associated with the academic study of Western esotericism, his role in the creation of one of the very first contemporary Pagan religious movements (and the influence that he has exerted over many others) suggests there can be little doubt of his importance to Pagan studies. Although a grounding in the history of Western esotericism is a necessity to understand much of the book, there is certainly much to interest the scholar of Paganism here, particularly with its discussions of Thelema and Pagan Witchcraft. The publication could have done with a firmer editorial hand, with some papers being expanded and others reduced, but nevertheless I would highly recommend Bogdan and Starr’s anthology for all those with a particular interest in the life, times and influence of Aleister Crowley.

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