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### Book Selector

From the darkness and obscurity of the 1980s, Western neo-paganism (which includes wicca and witchcraft) has emerged as one of the fastest growing religions and sources of interest during the 1990s and the new millennium.

Paganism can be broadly defined as a nature-based spiritual path or belief system. It dates back to the old religions and gods of ancient Europe, but also includes the pantheons of Egypt and, arguably, the cosmologies of all ancient tribal peoples.

Pagans strive to attune themselves to the tides of nature and its effects on their inner selves. Such harmonisation with nature, which is the pagan form of spiritual union

with the Divine, is achieved through reverence of solar and lunar phases, which are acknowledged at the turning points of each season.' (Donna Darkwolf Vos, **Dancing under an African moon**. 2002.)

The story of how the pagan movement emerged in the modern age is as complex as it is fascinating. Many well-written explorations on this theme exist. Richard Cavendish wrote the excellent **A history of magic** (1977) which covers paganism through the ages. Another informative read is **The history of magic in the modern age** (2000) by Neville Drury.

Reference books on historical and modern pagan topics abound, and include **Witchcraft today: an encyclopedia of Wiccan and Neopagan traditions** (1999) by James R Lewis, as well as Rosemary Ellen

Guiley's **The encyclopedia of witches and witchcraft** (1999).

For reasons of brevity, we will focus on the events and people who led directly to the rise of wicca and witchcraft in the 20th century.

Wicca and witchcraft are terms often used interchangeably by modern pagans, yet there are some slight and major differences between the two. It seems our infant pagan community has not yet reached consensus as to exact definitions, so for our purposes here we shall do the same.

Witchcraft, a pre-Christian tradition, has been practised in various forms over the millennia. Most modern wiccans base their practices on those of the Celtic people of Europe, with some being more specifically aligned to the ancient order of the Druids. Many others borrow eclectically from various pantheons and old pagan traditions.

With the advent of Christianity, and the ever-increasing rise of persecution, wiccans went underground, and the tradition was thought to have become extinct. Julio Caro Baroja explores this interesting period extensively in **The world of the witches** (1964).

Interest in magic and spiritualism (the basis of the wiccan belief) was revived during the latter half of the 19th century. Spiritualism was given a boost by the



formation of Madame Blavatsky's (1831-1891) Theosophical Society in New York in 1883, which later also established a branch in London.

The earlier revival of the Rosicrucian Order (1858) and the establishment of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1885 further fuelled interest in alternative spirituality. By the end of the century, the Order of the Temple of the Orient (OTO) had been added to the burgeoning occult society. Simultaneously such luminaries as Samuel Mathers (1854-1918) and the controversial sensationalist Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) were adding colour to the spiritual landscape and finally gave the movement a face. Aleister Crowley is regarded as the most notorious occultist of the twentieth century whose reputation extended itself outside the world of magic and witchcraft, and often courted publicity of the worst kind. Yet his ideas of magic remain influential to this day (see **A magick life**/Martin Booth).

Susan Greenwood's book, **The encyclopedia of magic & witchcraft** lists these and various other forerunners of modern witchcraft in detail.

Large-scale interest and credence was given to witchcraft during the early twentieth century through the writings of self-styled anthropologist Dr Margaret Murray, who in **The Witch-cult in Western Europe** (1921), maintains that an unbroken hereditary line of witches had survived well into the Modern Age. Poet Robert Graves in his 1984 title, **The white goddess** further expanded this theory.

Sir JG Frazer's **The Golden bough** (1949) explores similar themes, and today it stands as one of the classic books on mythology.

Murray and Graves' theories were, and are still fiercely debated. Nonetheless, they managed to attract even more attention to the emerging modern witch cult.

Yet, it was not until Gerald Gardner (1884-1964) published his semi-fictional **High magic's aid** in 1949 that witchcraft really moved into the forefront. By 1951, the United Kingdom had repealed the last remaining laws against the practice of witchcraft and Gardner was thus enabled to launch wicca as a legitimate religion. During the same year, Gardner opened the Museum of Witchcraft in Castletown, Isle of Man, which generated huge media attention, and in turn ensured wicca's place among the religions of the world.

In **Witchcraft today** (1955), Gardner

revealed coven initiations in the New Forest area of England. Gardner had now set himself up as an openly practising witch and spokesperson for the craft. Today witches consider Gardner as the Father of Modern Witchcraft.

By the 1960s, various factions of Gardnerian witchcraft had sprung up. Fuelled by the feminist movement and the more liberal ideologies of the era, wicca soon spread to the United States of America (USA) and other countries. In the USA, Gardnerian initiates Alex and Maxine Sanders established Alexandrian witchcraft, and Alex did much to present a favourable view of wicca to the media and the world at large. Through all of this, Alex Sanders was asked to serve as the technical consultant during the filming of the classic movie, **The Wicker man**.

Two initiates of the Sanders' Janet and Stewart Farrar, wrote the hugely popular titles, **Eight sabbats for witches** (1981) and **The witches way** (1984). Both are regarded as excellent guides to the finer aspects of witchcraft.

Today wiccans may be Gardnerian, Alexandrian, Dianic (a feminist branch), Eclectic or Solitary.

Wicca recognises two equal aspects of deity, the male and the female. Eight sabbats, known as the Wheel of the Year, are celebrated approximately every forty days as well as thirteen Esbats every twenty-eight days. This is comprehensively covered in Gail Duff's recent title **The wheel of the Wiccan year: how to enrich your life through the magic of the seasons** (2002).

Wicca makes no allowance for the existence of Satan (by its very nature a Christian concept of evil), nor does it oppose any other religion. It is therefore not to be confused with Satanism at all.

A well-written local title on the subject which includes references to African Shamanism was published last year under the title **Dancing under an African moon** and it is written by Capetonian witch Donna Darkwolf Vos.

Spellcraft is an important part in many a witches practice, and this is thoroughly documented in prolific New Age author Cassandra Eason's **Practical guide to witchcraft & magick spells** (2001).

A title which is given the more popular treatment on the weaving of spells for the enhancement of life and prosperity, is the 2000 title by Sally Morningstar **Making spells and charms**.

Another title which is still in processing is



Marion Green's aesthetically beautiful title, **Practical magic** (2001) which offers many helpful hints and ready-made formulas to assist in the manifesting of one's intent.

A somewhat older title by David Conway, **Magic: an occult primer** (1972), is just as helpful. It contains tables and symbols to use in spellcraft.

In a religion that tends to focus on the feminine (goddess) aspect of divinity, AJ Drew's **Wicca for men** (1999) and **Wicca spellcraft for men** (2001) brings a refreshingly different approach.

Drew pays attention to the distinct needs of the male witch (not warlock) in a concise yet informative format.

For a more advanced title on the practice of witchcraft, readers can consult Konstantinos' **Nocturnal witchcraft** (2002), which presents an informative, highly readable account of magical fine-tuning and some excellent exercises for mind training. (This title was not bought due to lack of funds, but enthusiasts could try to get a copy)

A well-regarded title delivering an informative history of paganism in 19th and 20th century Britain, is Ronald Hutton's 2001 title **The triumph of the moon: a history of modern pagan witchcraft**. This is a scholarly and comprehensive study of contemporary witchcraft and wicca, and is regarded as an important study against which future works on contemporary witchcraft will likely be measured.

'Western magical practices, including modern witchcraft, offer a kaleidoscope of paths or techniques for attaining alternate forms of consciousness. All of these attempt to go beyond ordinary, everyday

awareness to achieve a heightened state which some, such as high magicians who practice "Western mysteries", describe as contact with a deity or angels. Others, such as chaos magicians, strive to achieve an altered state of consciousness by reconditioning the self to obtain inner knowledge. Many, but not all, of those who have an interest in Western magic see the world in a spiritual way, and so the link that magic has had with religion in the past is still in evidence.' (Susan Greenwood, **The encyclopedia of magic & witchcraft**, 2001, p.215.)

For those interested in learning more about wicca and witchcraft, the list of books available is endless, and the Western Cape Provincial Library Service (WCPLS) has managed to secure a sample of some of the best. Whether reading for personal spiritual enlightenment, or brushing up on comparative religion, or merely satisfying your curiosity, wiccan and pagan literature, it seems, is here to stay.

## Glossary

**Esbat:** A full moon ritual, where the goddess in her mothering aspect is revered.

**Pagan:** Originally a term meaning *one who lives on the heath or in the country*. After the rise of Christianity (mainly confined to the cities), the term became derogatory.

**Sabbat:** A day of religious observance, which usually includes some form of ritual aiding the acknowledgement of the change in season. Essentially a seasonal festival.

**Spellcraft:** A term used to denote the practice of magic for specific use by witches during a ritual.

**Warlock:** From the old English word for *oath breaker*, which in the mid 1400s came to mean *liar*, therefore, clearly an unwanted title for neo-pagans.

**Wheel of the Year:** The term used to define the annual collective of eight sabbats, marking the seasonal changes, for example, solstices, equinoxes, et cetera.