

The Gardnerian Tradition

Gerald Gardner (1883-1964) was a widely traveled British Civil servant and plantation manager in Southeast Asia for most of his adult life. He was largely self-educated, but was an active contributor to studies of local archeology, folklore, and native weaponry in the colonial outposts where he lived and worked. Although seriously afflicted with asthma when in Europe, in Asia he led a physically-active, often danger-filled life. Old photos of him show a lean, wiry figure in khaki, pistol in belt, reminiscent of Indiana Jones!

Although Gardner had an interest in the occult, he had little opportunity to explore it, other than the Masonic Lodges that existed in the larger colonial towns. He also conducted private research on spiritualism, (about which he was skeptical) when he was on leave in England. After his retirement, he returned to England shortly before the Second World War and began to explore the occult more fully. It was in this context that he encountered and was initiated into a secret group that called themselves the Wica in autumn 1939. He found Witchcraft to be a beautiful, deep, and meaningful religious path. Thereafter, he dedicated his life and resources to preserving and promoting Witchcraft, which he feared was a religion on the verge of extinction. During his retirement, he ran a Museum of Magic and Witchcraft on the Isle of Man.

Gardnerian Witchcraft is the tradition taught by Gerald Gardner and his initiates, largely as it was passed on from his original coven. As a tradition which has been visible for more than 50 years, Gardnerian Witchcraft is one of the oldest traditions of the current Neo-Pagan revival, and has a clear and defined history. Many elements of Gardnerian practice and liturgy are ancestral to other traditions of Witchcraft, partly through Gardner's influential books on the Craft. Gardnerians are among the most widespread of Wiccan traditions around the world.

A Gardnerian is a person who has had a Gardnerian initiation administered by someone empowered to do so in a line of descent tracing an unbroken lineage of initiations and elevations back to Gerald Gardner, utilizing a particular and consistent body of teaching and liturgy. Gardnerians have the reputation of being serious and secretive. This is because the details of Gardnerian practice, like the Mysteries of Antiquity, are protected by Oath, and may not be revealed to non-initiates. A high level of commitment is required and expected of students. Practices common to Gardnerian covens are possessory workings called Drawing Down the Moon (or Sun), studying and preserving the Book of Shadows, and cultivating relationships with deities sacred to this tradition. Gardnerian Craft follows a lengthy course of study, involving magical practice, oaths of secrecy, the memorization of traditional scripts, and more. Successful Wiccan Elders complete three degrees of initiation and elevation, after which they may "hive off" to form independent daughter covens in a continuous lineage. In this way, Gardnerians are preservers of Wiccan heritage, some of it old when Gardner joined.

To Witches of other traditions, this emphasis on preservation and memorization is sometimes characterized as "stuffy." In fact, a wide variety of viewpoints exists on many topics among Gardnerians and debate and discussion is quite active.

There is no central authority in Gardnerian Witchcraft; each coven is autonomous. Most Gardnerians view the tradition in the context of a large extended family.

New seekers on the Wiccan path are advised to seek traditions and people with whom they feel kinship and trust. Each tradition has a unique quality, and there are many paths. May you find your kin be they Gardnerians or others.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Crowley, Vivianne: *Wicca: The Old Religion In The New Age* (1989: The Aquarian Press)

Crowther, Patricia: *One Witch's World* (1998: Robert Hale)

Gardner, Gerald: *Witchcraft Today* (1954: Rider, 1982: Magickal Childe)

Please note: Gardner's title is commemorated in a multi-volume series of essays edited by Chas Clifton, also called *Witchcraft Today*. Don't confuse this series with Gardner's book; these essays offer views of modern, mostly eclectic traditions of Witchcraft.

Gardner, Gerald: *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959: Aquarian Press, 1982: Magickal Childe)

Valiente, Doreen: *An ABC of Witchcraft, Past and Present* (1973: St. Martin's Press)

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