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A standard "Witches' Tarot" pattern?

The American publisher Citadel Press in New Jersey published in 1974 in their series *Library of the Mystic Arts* a book by the English Witch-couple, Arnold and Patricia Crowther. The title of the book is *The Secrets of Ancient Witchcraft*, subtitled "...with The Witches Tarot". This subtitle attracted me, so I made an effort to get hold of the book, which was not entirely without problems several years after its publication. The 218 pages book, which has a ten pages introduction by Dr. Leo Louis Martello, is in two parts about equal in size; the first authored by the now late Arnold Crowther is a going through the fundamentals of the, at that time, relatively new wave of Wicca, an explanation of the rites and ceremonies, the implements used, how sexual symbolism is an inherent part of the teaching, the meaning of the Goat symbolism etc. The second part *A Witch under Fire* is authored by Patricia Crowther and has the form of "questions and answers about witchcraft" collected at the author's lectures to various assemblies.

Chapter 8 in Arnold Crowther's part of the book deals with the *Witches Tarot Cards*. The entire chapter contains only 12 pages, out of which the 6 are an illustration of the 22 cards of the *Witches Tarot's* major arcana. The text, which appears to have been written at least in part by Leo Martello, states that these 22 cards were designed especially for use in the circle by Arnold Crowther, and that they are based on Witchcraft symbolism. It also mentions, that Arnold Crowther actually made two packs, which he painted by hand, one of them for the Sheffield Coven and one for Doreen Valiente, a well-known Witch associated with a Brighton coven. Likewise did the

text mention, that this was the first time the cards were reproduced in any book about the craft. Otherwise, the text pointed to how the Witches' Tarot differed from the traditional tarot symbolism, for example by mentioning, that The Empress was substituted by a grotesque Shelah-na-Gig figure, which adorned many early English churches. The chapter finished with a list of keywords for each of the 22 cards, not deviating much from the standard tarot interpreta-

Living Tradition: Witches making their own tarot for coven work

tions. The written text didn't completely coincide with the illustrations shown, for example does the text state that card no. 13 depicts the sacred Cernunos, which it doesn't in the Crowther version, likewise that card 21, traditionally The World is called *The Green Goddess*, which is not the card, Crowther renders. The text does not give any deeper explanation of the meaning or symbols depicted on the cards.

The reader is shortly informed that a minor arcana depicting the same kind of Witch symbolism exists, and that the entire deck soon will be available to the public (which I don't believe it ever was).

After having gotten the book, I rendered some of the cards in my contribution *Mulleposten* to APA-Tarot, and otherwise forgot all about them (frankly, they didn't make that

much of an impression on me at that time), until I, as a contribution to my Mail Art Project "Mail Artist's Tarot" received 5 large, partly handcoloured sheets, depicting an entire 78 cards Witches tarot deck, titled *Tarot of the Ayrshire Witches*, and whose illustrations were rather similar to, but not entirely the same as Crowther's illustrations. The contributor was John Upton, an English artist, who is well known in the mail art movement and who is High Priest of the Scottish Ayrshire Coven, which he joined in 1979, after having been a member of another coven in Brighton, England, since 1967.

John Upton explains to me, that the members of the Brighton coven were encouraged to design their own deck of tarot cards and to work with them. During the years, he himself has made several decks other than the *Witches Tarot*; Bill Butler speaks highly of one of them, a collage deck, in his book *"The Definitive Tarot"* (Rider 1975). Together with his partner, Iona, John Upton has also recently designed a deck based on African art, which currently it is up to US Games system to decide if it shall be made available to others also. Hopefully, it will not just end up in a box in Mr. Kaplan's collection!

The tradition is, that when a new coven is formed, the best artist copies an existing set of "The Witches' Tarot" for use within the new coven. The set of which I now have a copy, was redrawn by John Upton from a set belonging to a coven in Saltcoats. He is of the opinion, that some of the fundamental images are of older date, while others are modern constructions. John Upton mentioned to me, that he is still working on the deck; the copy I received reflects





it's present status, but it has not reached a definite form, and probably never will, since it is worked over, when new insight comes. Nowadays photocopying is taken into use, so that the coven members can colour their own copy made from the master copy.

3 cards from Crowther's deck



After having moved to Scotland, John Upton had the possibility to view other sets of *The Witches' Tarot*, one from a coven on the Isle of Arran and one from a coven in Dundonald. These sets were essentially of the same design he knew from Brighton even though minor differences existed. One peculiar thing is, that the cards, when drawn on a sheet, always are placed in a given order, which is not the numerical order, but rather an order relating to the cards importance (see illustration for the order of the first 16 cards).

John Upton pointed out to me, that the cards proper do not portray the deeper "meaning" of the cards; the coven member is supposed to know this meaning. The deck is essentially designed to reveal insights in Gardnerian Witchcraft, so when the deck is given over to a coven member, either John Upton himself or the coven's High Priestess, Melissa Seims explains this profound meaning to the receiver. While the major arcana in many ways is similar to the traditional tarot imagery (even if the interpretation is different) are the minor arcana cards for a great deal reflecting the work in the coven, like typical situations and details from the rituals or references to historical witchcraft.

It seems to me, that *The Witches' Tarot* is based on a standard pattern, which has circulated in various parts of Britain for several years, being copied by hand, with more or less variations by several members of various Witches' covens. In some sets changes probably were made according to local traditions, and due to variations in artistic abilities the decks might look more or less different, even though they still contain the fundamental symbolism.

I think, that this is quite an unique and so far rather overseen tradition, the only similarity I can think of being *Tarot Provençal*, which is (or probably was) a cartomancy

pack traditionally made by hand by the *Guardiens*, the caretakers of the wild bulls and horses in the Camarque district in the South of France. One can only hope, that the easy access to copying or a commercial manufactured edition of "The Witches' Tarot" will not completely spoil this tradition.

One might believe that a Witches tarot pattern like the one described here would have migrated to USA along with the whole concept of Neo-paganism and its rituals, teachings and tools. However, this seems not to be the case, nor was the idea of such a deck taken up on basis of Crowthers' book, which was published in USA at a time when otherwise the pagan thought spread at an incredible speed. According to APA-tarot contributor Rena Yount, who has a fundamental knowledge of the pagan scene in the States, the existence of such a standard Witches tarot deck pattern is most unlikely. None of the general descriptions of pagan activities, which are found in publications and conferences like "Free Spirit Gathering" mentions anything like that, despite that the practice at such occasions is to share practical experiences. That doesn't mean that the use of tarot decks and -cards is not a part of the pagan practise, for example for meditative purposes, during spell-casting to represent the goal, for focusing on a particular intention, for doing a reading for an individual or for the Coven as a whole. For these purposes a wide variety of decks are used, mainly commercial decks whose imagery and philosophy fits into the coven's belief, even though home made decks also exist. According to Rena Yount do pagans in USA in general regard tarot as a source of meaningful images, as a tool that can enhance their work, or as a related and compatible spiritual discipline - but not as an integral, necessary part of a coven's practice.

