

## **Modern Witchcraft / Wicca**

Witchcraft and Wicca are one of many Pagan paths that could be classified under the umbrella term 'Paganism' along with things like Druidry and Asatru. It is a nature-based, mystery religion that honours the Goddess and the Horned God in their many guises, which can be viewed as psychological archetypes. The terms Witchcraft and Wicca are often used interchangeably and seen as synonymous, although not everyone would agree with this definition. It is perhaps truer to say that Wicca is a form of Witchcraft but not all Witches practice Wicca. There are now many forms, branches and traditions of Witchcraft, with rituals and beliefs that can vary quite widely, the main ones are summarised below.

Probably the most well-known manifestations of modern Witchcraft are often referred to as 'Gardnerian' and 'Alexandrian' Witchcraft; so-called due to the people who are seen as being mainly responsible for their growth, namely one Gerald Gardner and Alex Sanders. Although Alexandrian Witchcraft could also be considered to be a slightly later variation on Gardnerian Wicca, with its main distinguishing feature being its greater use of ceremonial magic. It tends to be these two branches that are more readily identified with the terms 'Wicca' and 'The Wica'. People following these paths tend to be a member of a Coven that meets regularly to celebrate the festivals and work magic. Rituals are often performed 'skyclad' (naked), and ideally there should be a balance of male and female members, though this is often not achieved in practice. There is an overall emphasis on fertility, and the natural cycles of the year.

'Traditional' Witchcraft is thought to have a link to an older tradition. Members are more likely to wear robes during ceremonies and usually work outside. Like the Gardnerian and Alexandrian Craft, Traditional Witchcraft observes the cycles of nature and is woven together with native, British folklore and customs. Robert Cochrane, a contemporary of Gardner's, is the name generally associated with the resurgence of interest in Traditional Witchcraft.

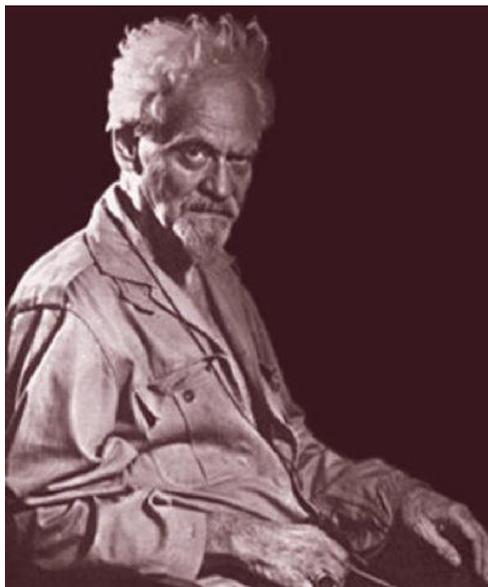
The connection with nature is an exceptionally strong theme running through what is considered to be another form of modern Witchcraft, namely the more Goddess-orientated, Eco-Witchcraft which has been popularised by American authors like Starhawk (nee Miriam Simos), and Zsuzsanna Budapest. Generally speaking, this form of Witchcraft has tended to attract more women than men, and those women tend to be older than those attracted by the previously mentioned traditions.

You also get individual Witches / Wiccans, often called 'solitaries' or 'hedge witches' who practice alone by choice. Rae Beth's book *Hedge witch* was particularly influential in this movement. Hedgewitches tend to be more shamanic and are akin to the cunning folk of traditional England. Alternatively, 'solitaries' may work alone as their geographical location means they are unable to attend a Coven. I should also mention 'Hereditary Witchcraft', whose adherent's claim that their tradition of Witchcraft has been passed down through their family - hence the term 'hereditary.' Quite a few of these also tend to be solo practitioners.

The last ten years has also seen an upsurge in interest in Witchcraft from young people. I think it would be fair to say that the success of the Harry Potter books, as well as the influence of ‘magical’ TV shows such as Buffy, Charmed, and Bewitched has been a significant contributory factor. This has given rise to eclectic Covens of young people casting spells and performing rituals from the numerous books on the subject that are now readily available.

### **Brief History of Modern Witchcraft with regards to the last 50 years**

One of the key factors that influenced the resurgence of interest in Witchcraft in the second half of the last century was the repeal of the 1736 Witchcraft Laws, in 1951. A pivotal role was then played by the British civil servant, Gerald Gardner. Gardner could be considered a somewhat eccentric character sporting a shock of unruly white hair in his later years. Over the years he had travelled extensively, working as a customs officer, anthropologist and archaeologist, something that combined well with his great love of swords and weaponry. Gardner’s interests also extended to folklore and magic, he was a member of the Folklore Society, a Freemason, and was also involved with various magical orders which themselves had been experiencing a resurgence of interest since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1939, after Gardner returned to England following the years he had spent in the Far East, he claims to have been initiated into a Coven in the New Forest. Initially he was forbidden to speak about, or publish anything in connection with their rituals and practices, although they appear to have subsequently relented, allowing him to mention a few things in his second novel *High Magic's Aid* (1949), which is peppered with extracts of ritual material ‘disguised’ in this work of fiction.

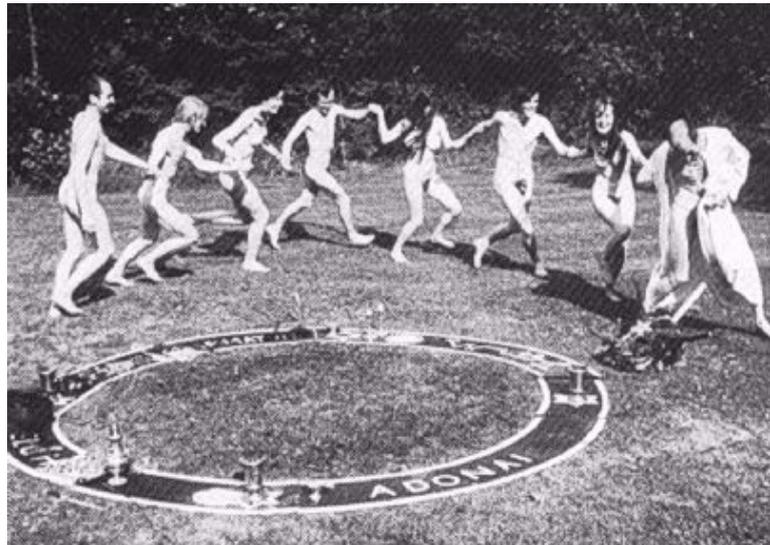


Gardner was fearful that Witchcraft, which he often referred to as the ‘Cult’, was going to die out. So, bolstered by the change in law, he published his classic non-fiction book *Witchcraft Today* in 1954, with an introduction by the noted Egyptologist and folklorist Margaret Murray. Throughout the 1950’s people started to contact the likes of Gerald Gardner and Cecil Williamson, an acquaintance of Gerald’s, who owned the Museum of Magic and Witchcraft on the Isle of Man. This resulted in Gerald initiating various people, including Doreen Valiente, who is generally considered to be the ‘Mother’ of ‘Gardnerian’ Witchcraft due to her involvement in the writing of some of its rituals.

So began the rise of ‘Gardnerian’ Witchcraft, which has now spread all over the world, with initiates in over 66 countries. Today, Gardnerian Witchcraft consists of various ‘lines’, dependant on which one of the first generation initiates brought in by Gardner, is responsible for a particular persons lineage, with the idea being that a certain ‘power’ is passed at initiation. A ‘Book of Shadows’ which contains various rituals and spells is passed down to every initiate, although it’s contents are generally kept secret as it is

considered to contain oath-bound material which is not meant for discussion outside the Gardnerian Craft. However, much of it has now been published and is freely available on the internet.

Much of the popularity of Gardnerian and Alexandrian witchcraft can be attributed to the changing socio-political climate of that era. With the Second World War over, the process of moving away from the depressing ramifications of it began. The UK and USA started to move towards the hippy and 'free love' movement of the 1960's where liberation seemed to be the order of the day. Gardner himself had



been involved with naturism since the 1930's so the shift in cultural ideologies suited him well, which in turn, also suited 'Gardnerian' Witchcraft with its skyclad rituals and accompanying sexual liberation. Alexandrian Craft in particular, went down well with students and young people of the time who wanted to 'make love not war'.

Another leading figure of the time, with respect to Traditional Witchcraft, was Robert Cochrane (also known as Roy Bowers) who formed the 'Clan of Tubal Cain' in the late 1950's. Its later export to the USA, through Joe Wilson, led to it being known over there as the '1734 Tradition' though its most popular and well known form today is referred to as 'The Roebuck' tradition.

Once British Witchcraft had spread to America, it started to metamorphose into various forms including the strongly Goddess-orientated Witchcraft promoted by Starhawk and Zsuzsanna Budapest. These traditions have more of an ecological, feminist slant and tend to be quite political. Starhawk was influenced by Gardnerian Wicca, as well as Victor Anderson's 'Feri Tradition', of which she is an initiate. With the publication of her first book *Spiral Dance*, which was very successful and highly influential in both America and Britain, Starhawk's idea of Witchcraft (called the 'Reclaiming' tradition), really started to wave a banner of its own and continues to be a leading light in the Goddess movement.

Today Witchcraft attracts many people, and in the 1990's it was suggested by the prominent American Witch Silver Ravenwolf, that it was one of the fastest growing religions in America. Indeed, it seems to have also experienced a prolific propagation throughout the UK, Australia and Europe as indicated by its extensive presence on the internet, and the popularity of sites such as 'Witchvox' which is dedicated to uniting Witches and Pagans from all over the world.

## Figures

1: [www.geraldgardner.com](http://www.geraldgardner.com)

2: [www.controversial.com/Alex%20Sanders.htm](http://www.controversial.com/Alex%20Sanders.htm)

## Websites

[www.witchvox.com/xtrads.html](http://www.witchvox.com/xtrads.html) - Writings on the various witchcraft traditions.

[www.paganfed.org/](http://www.paganfed.org/) - UK Pagan Federation website.

## Recommended Reading

*Triumph of the Moon* Ronald Hutton (Oxford Paperbacks 2001 ISBN 0192854496)

*The Spiral Dance* Starhawk (Harper San Francisco 1999. ISBN 0062516329)

*Gerald Gardner and the Cauldron of Inspiration* Philip Heselton (Capall Bann 2003. ISBN: 1861631642)

*Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology* Susan Greenwood (Berg 2000: ISBN 1859734502)

*Wicca: A Comprehensive Guide to the Old Religion in the Modern*

*World.* Vivianne Crowley (Harper Collins 2003. ISBN 0722532717)

*Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids and Goddess Worship* Margot Adler (Beacon Press 1987: ISBN 0807032530)

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