



## Crowley, Aleister (1875-1947)

by Andrew Matzner

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Aleister Crowley wearing the headdress of Horus in 1910.

Often publicly reviled in his time, Aleister Crowley, the colorful British mystic and prolific author, was recently cited by the BBC as one of England's most influential citizens. Charismatic and ambitious, Crowley was an important figure in the European occult movement that blossomed in the late nineteenth century.

Crowley, who was an active bisexual throughout his life, is notable for incorporating "sex magick," which involved sexual relations with both men and women, into his occult practices. From his youth to the end of his life, Crowley followed a philosophy of free will, as epitomized by his famous quote: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law."

Named after his father, Crowley was born Edward Alexander Crowley in Leamington, Warwickshire on October 12, 1875. Crowley's parents belonged to an austere Puritan sect, the Plymouth Brethren. The young Crowley, growing up during the height of the Victorian era, reacted strongly against both the prudery of the times and the strictly religious values of his wealthy, dogmatic family. At age eleven Crowley took the occasion of his father's death to change his first name from Edward to Aleister in order to distance himself from his heritage.

Materially, however, Crowley took full benefit of his father's brewery fortune, and in 1895 entered Cambridge University. During this period Crowley had sexual relationships with both men and women. One of his more notable student affairs was with Jerome Pollitt, a female impersonator ten years his senior. Crowley later honored the memory of this relationship in his book of poetry *The Scented Garden of Abdullah the Satirist of Shiraz* (published privately in 1910).

In 1898 Crowley published *White Stains*, a collection of poetry. It featured a cornucopia of sexually explicit material, including themes of homosexuality and pederasty, and has become one of Crowley's most notorious works. Crowley claimed that his goal was to turn *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing's groundbreaking study of "deviant" sexuality, into verse form. Printed in Amsterdam, *White Stains* had an initial run of 100 copies, most of which were seized and burned by British customs.

Also in 1898 Crowley joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which was led by Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers. Crowley was in the process of rapidly ascending its ranks when a powerful block of London members stepped in to prevent his further advancement. This action stemmed from their disapproval of Crowley's homosexual affairs. Mathers, however, supported Crowley. This dissension fragmented the order, and eventually both Crowley and Mathers were expelled.

Deciding to take a break from life in Britain, Crowley used his inheritance to travel around the world, visiting countries such as Mexico, Egypt, Ceylon, and India. Crowley had become interested in mountaineering while at Cambridge, and took part in many expeditions during his international travels. In 1903 he married Rose Kelly, who gave birth to Crowley's daughter, Lola Zaza.

In March 1904, while Crowley was in Egypt with Rose, he had a revelation, in which he supposedly made

contact with his Holy Guardian Angel. Identifying itself as Aiwass, this being allegedly spent three days dictating a text to Crowley. Known as the *Book of the Law*, it contains the core philosophies that underlie Crowley's esoteric system of thought. According to this work, Crowley was the prophet who would introduce the world to the Age of Horus. This new era, in which sexuality was to occupy a central, honored position, would be characterized by the integration of male and female sexual energies.

Crowley continued to travel widely. In 1905 he was part of a harrowing Himalayan expedition; it ended badly, with several of the group dying in the mountains. Crowley also made his way to China, Canada, and the United States. During this time, his wife and child stayed with Crowley only periodically. Thus, it was only after his return to Britain that Crowley learned that his young daughter, while in Rangoon, had succumbed to disease.

In 1907 Crowley founded his own occult group, which he named the "Order of the Silver Star." One of his notable followers was Victor Neuburg, whose initiation was reported to have included homoerotic elements. In 1909, while Crowley was in the process of divorcing Rose (on the grounds that she was an alcoholic), he traveled with Neuburg to North Africa. There, in the desert, the two men engaged in a series of magical rituals, some of which involved homosexuality.

With the arrival of World War I, Crowley decided to leave England; he lived in the United States from 1915 until 1920. He spent his time there writing anti-British propaganda. He also had a child named Poupee with a woman named Leah Hirsig. Unfortunately, this daughter also passed away at an early age.

In 1920 Crowley moved to the city of Cefalu, on the northern coast of Sicily. There he purchased a villa, which he dubbed "Abbaye de Theleme" (Thelema Abbey). Crowley planned to make this site a magnet for those interested in learning about the occult and sexual magic. However, a young man named Raoul Loveday died at the abbey under mysterious circumstances, and Crowley was expelled from the island by Italian authorities in 1923.

Back in England, Loveday's widow, understandably bitter, told the newspapers shocking stories about what had supposedly gone on at Thelema Abbey. The sensationalistic articles that resulted featured reports of orgies, human sacrifices, and satanic rites. Labeled "the wickedest man in the world" by the press, Crowley developed a notorious reputation. As the years passed, however, he found that his notoriety did not translate into a sustainable living, as his literary work garnered less and less interest from publishers.

Crowley married a second time in 1929, to Maria Ferrari de Miramar. That same year he published *Magick in Theory and Practice*, one of his major philosophical works. Crowley preferred the particular spelling of "magick" in order to differentiate his unique ritual occult system from common stage magic.

By 1932 Crowley, now physically addicted to the morphine he had originally begun using to treat his asthma, was forced into bankruptcy. His survival depended on monetary gifts from friends and students. Yet it was during this late period of his life that Crowley developed his final major work.

From 1938 to 1943, Crowley worked with artist Lady Frieda Harris to create the *Thoth Tarot*. This highly influential divination system, as outlined in *The Book of Thoth* (published in 1944), was a groundbreaking tarot deck as a result of its inclusion of sexuality, as well as its fantastic, surreal imagery.

Three years after this crowning achievement, on December 1, 1947, Crowley, penniless and dependent on heroin and alcohol, died of a respiratory infection in a British boarding house. He was 72 years old.

Aleister Crowley greatly influenced twentieth-century practitioners of esoteric magic, through both word and deed. One of his most notable contributions to the occult world was his emphasis on sexuality and the free expression of gender roles. Crowley was a larger-than-life visionary, widely reviled yet also greatly respected, who privileged sex, both homosexual and heterosexual, as a central, meaningful component in

his philosophy and ritual.

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