

# Why

# Witch- craft?

by

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**W**HY witchcraft in 1964? The fact that witchcraft has re-emerged in the present day is indisputable. Ever since 1951, when the last of the Witchcraft Acts in this country was repealed, it has been more and more in the news.

Churchmen have issued warnings against it. People who claim to be witches have appeared on television to defend it. Controversy about present-day covens has enlivened the Press.

Private museums showing collections of objects connected with witchcraft and magic have been opened. I myself have shown some things from my own little collection on television on three occasions.

Nor is interest confined to this country. I have received from friends in America printed catalogues, containing businesslike order forms, from American supply houses for would-be witches.

They offer candles, incense, anointing oils, herbs with alleged magical virtues, lodestones, "effigy wax" for making images, virgin parchment for inscribing talismans, lambskin bags and belts with concealed pockets for carrying charms, together with occult books of every description.

These catalogues come, not from far-off places in the backwoods, but from New York, Minneapolis and San Francisco.



Wearing a necklace of magic Sussex "witch stones", Mrs Valiente holds aloft a witches' Athame, the ritual knife with which the circle is drawn, and a bell whose handle is shaped like a cloven hoof. On the table are: an incense burner, skull-shaped salt cellar, five-pointed bottle of anointing oil and a wand tipped by a hand making the sign of the horns or Mano Cornuta. On the right are the ritual book, bronze Athame and engraved pentacle; on the left, a crystal ball, bowl for consecrated water and a silken cord used in the rituals

**I**N the latter city Roy Heist, an eighty-year-old taxidermist, has for the last thirty-three years been selling the animal requisites of sorcery, from the backbones of snakes to powdered rhinoceros horn. His trade extends all over the world.

He stated last year that business had been increasing every year since World War II, and that belief in witchcraft is "very, very widespread". Trade was especially brisk with New York, Chicago, New Orleans and Los Angeles.

Roy Heist has come to be known as "Dr Voodoo". Voodoo is the name given in the United States to much that in Europe would be called witchcraft. It should not be confused with the voodoo practised in Haiti, which is a religion with its roots in Africa.

Why should these beliefs not only flourish, but increase, in the highly complex civilization of America? And why should people of the professional classes in Britain belong to witch covens—as a recent survey on behalf of a responsible national newspaper found that they did?

Thinking over this question, I feel that there is no single, ready-made answer to it. We are dealing here with something deeper than normal consciousness.

Part of the answer, undoubtedly, is that these people have found by experience that the old "powers of witchdom" work. The



smart-aleck materialist may jeer. The more superficial type of psychologist may try to explain away. Centuries of human experience from all ages and countries confute them both.

**B**UT there is much more to it than that. People are beginning to realize that the benefits of modern civilization have brought dangers with them; some obvious, as those inherent in the discovery of nuclear energy, and some more subtle.

There is a danger of being cut off from Nature, "orphaned of the Great Mother". A danger of becoming just one more entrant in the material rat-race.

Orthodox religion today is being questioned even by Churchmen themselves. Younger people especially are unconvinced by religious dogma. They want something different; something that appeals to the deeper levels of imagination and dream.

One of the basic appeals of witchcraft is that, apart from magical practices and the search for supernormal powers, it is a religious cult in itself.

Margaret Murray made this clear in her classic book, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe*. The magical practices she defined as Operative Witchcraft. The religious beliefs and rites of the Dianic Cult she named Ritual Witchcraft.

The Dianic Cult takes its name from the moon-goddess Diana, who is found throughout Western Europe as the female deity or leader of the witches.

The god of the cult is usually depicted horned, a primitive symbol of power. Like the goddess, he has many names. Perhaps the one which will best convey the idea of his nature to the ordinary reader is Pan.

**T**HESE deities are personifications of forces in the life of Nature. Some readers with practical experience of Occultism will understand me when I say that they are "magical images".

Witchcraft is really as simple or as complicated as people choose to make it.

It appeals to the love of the mysterious. We do not know, for instance, by what means visions appear in a crystal or a magic mirror during a magical ritual. But I can personally testify that they do.

The purpose of ritual is to create atmosphere. Being in the magic circle, lit by candle-light, breathing the fumes of incense, stimulate the imagination. Under such circumstances, quite ordinary people may find within themselves resources they had not known before.

Earlier this year I took part in a full moon Esbat rite in Sussex. In the course of it, I was invited to look into the ball of dark green glass which was being used as a gazing instrument.

After a few moments, I saw therein a landscape, with peculiar weathered rocks lying scattered about. The impression was vivid, and conveyed with it the idea that although these strange stones were a natural formation, they had at one time been used for religious rites.

**A**FEW weeks after this, I took a holiday in Cornwall. Passing in the train through a little place called Luxulyan, I found myself strongly affected by a sense of weirdness. I realized that here was the landscape I had seen in the depths of the green glass ball.

It is a curious valley of rocks, possibly an ancient river bed. I had never been to Cornwall before, or seen any pictures of this rather out-of-the-way little place. It would be interesting to know if my impression connected with it is correct.

The point of recounting this little incident is that it happened to a person who can make no claim to any striking degree of clairvoyance. Would I have achieved the same result in the coldly scientific atmosphere of a psychic research laboratory? I doubt it.

The Esbat meeting takes place every full moon. The Sabbats are more important occasions. The Greater Sabbats are May Eve (April 30th), Lammas (August 1st), Halloween (October 31st), and Candlemas (February 2nd). The Lesser Sabbats are midsummer, called Beltane; midwinter, called Yule; and the spring and autumn equinoxes, which probably once had special names, now forgotten.

**K**EEPING up these old ritual occasions, even if it is only a little social ceremony "for luck", links us to the great natural forces that bring the changing seasons. We are no longer such dried-up little townies if the moon's waxing and waning mean something to us; even if we have to watch her rise over the chimney-pots.

If we have ever joyed in the scent of a bonfire; or seen, with a catch at the heart, the bare tree branches black against the moon on Hallowe'en; or felt a desire to worship the elder, simpler, kinder gods; we know why witchcraft lives on.

However, most things in this world have a dark side as well as a bright one. I am not going to disguise the fact that, human nature being what it is, some of the practices taking place in Britain today deserve to be called Black Magic. They are twisted and perverted versions of the true, ancient, Craft of the Wise.

I mention them here only to distinguish them from the traditions of white witchcraft. The latter do not involve blood sacrifices, violation of graves, or degrading orgies. In fact, people keen on such things might well be very disappointed by what *really* happens in a white witch coven.