

# CHARLES CLARK – Gardnerian High Priest and child of the Wica

Melissa Seims

This is my story about the life of a Gardnerian High Priest and Elder who became my mentor. Many of you may have never heard of him – and indeed whilst he was alive he preferred to stay in the background. He, sadly, is no longer with us, and I feel that his part in the early Gardnerian movement is worth telling. He was actively involved in the Craft for about 20 years, starting in the mid 1950's. Knowing him afforded me a rather unique insight into how things were in the beginning of what has now become such a popular spiritual path.

## Merry Meet

In August of 1993, Dave<sup>1</sup>, my Working partner at the time, and I, drove to Dreghorn on the West Coast of Scotland to visit Iona, a pagan friend of ours. This trip was to mark a major turning point for both of us in our spiritual paths! Iona had recently moved in with John, an artist, who had been initiated by Doreen Valiente during one of her visits to a coven in Brighton in the 1970's. John had subsequently moved up to Scotland in 1979 to fulfil the role of 'artist in residence' for the small town of Irvine.

Dave and I were in our early twenties, and we had started a small eclectic pagan group in Peterborough. We were both avid readers of magic and occult literature. I myself had started with the works of Dolores Ashcroft-Nowicki, Dion Fortune, and Doreen Valiente. Dave had particularly enjoyed books by Patricia Crowther and, of course, we both read the obligatory Aleister Crowley! However, we were both strongly drawn to Wicca and its more natural approach to magic, but had been unable to locate any working covens close by. As you can imagine, we were especially eager to meet someone who was already initiated into a Wiccan tradition, and, more than that, had actually worked with such a noted figure as Doreen Valiente.

That evening, after our arrival, John proceeded to tell us about his experiences with Doreen, of how she had a huge collection of broomsticks and would tell everyone that she flew around on them! He then moved on to tell us about an elderly gentleman he had met on a bus one day. For some reason, John had started talking to him about esoteric matters; the gentleman at this point mentioned an old friend of his called Gerald Gardner. John had, of course, instantly recognised the name and felt a little dubious. Dave and I were also sceptical upon hearing this story. However, when John told us that he knew where the man lived we both knew we had to go and meet him.

The man on the bus was Charles Clark, and he lived (quite literally!) just around the corner from John and Iona. By now, Dave and I were already feeling rather overwhelmed by all the synchronicities and, with much anticipation, set off the following morning to pay him a visit.

Charles resided in a small council bungalow almost right at the foot of 'Dragon Hill,' which gave 'Dreghorn' its name. As we entered, I remember noticing that there were books and miscellaneous bric-a-brac piled up almost everywhere! Charles was balding, with short white hair, glasses, and a smiling twinkle in his eyes. We sat down and, after the introductions had been made, we asked him to tell us more about Gerald Gardner and his relationship with him. I was still not ready to believe that we could possibly have stumbled across someone who had actually *known* Gerald and, was a High Priest of the Wica<sup>2</sup> himself! This all quickly changed when, to our astonishment, he started to cautiously produce letters from both Gerald Gardner and Doreen Valiente and proceeded to tell his story.

## Charles Clark and Gerald Gardner

Charles was born on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1930 to Margaret McEwans and Charles Clark Senior, who was a shipyard labourer. When he was in his twenties, Charles lived and worked as a Post Office linesman in Saltcoats on the West Coast of Scotland. Just a few miles up the coast at Ardrossan is the ferry terminal from which, during the summer, a ferry would run to the Isle of Man. This gave Charles one of the means by which he was able to meet up with Gerald Gardner, who had lived on the island with his wife Donna from 1952.

I believe<sup>3</sup> that Charles met Gerald Gardner in the early to mid 50's at the FATE club. This was a group that would meet and discuss the periodical "FATE<sup>4</sup>," which was produced and published on the Isle of Man. The magazine described itself as "The Journal of Fantastic Reality," and covered things like Parapsychology, Witchcraft, and UFOlogy. Charles told us that he was subsequently initiated by Gerald and Donna<sup>5</sup> at their home in Malew Street,

Castletown, which he described as a “wee corner house with a big red barn attached.” He went on to say that there was a housekeeper who was known for discouraging visitors and especially disliked Gerald’s “witch friends!”

### Charles and the Wica

Charles started his own coven back in Saltcoats in the late 1950’s. The meetings would usually take place at his house on Davaar Road, and Gerald Gardner would sometimes attend them<sup>6</sup>; Gardner would have been in his seventies at this point, and Charles said of him that he had “mad white hair” that would be tousled by the wind! On one occasion Gerald had come over to see Charles; whilst there, he heard that the actress Diana Dors was appearing close by. Gerald, being an admirer of hers, hastily dashed off to see her!

By the early 60’s, Charles had been instrumental in the creation of several other Gardnerian covens in Scotland, including ones based in Glasgow (which was run by one of his former High Priestesses, Edith), Fife, Edinburgh, and Perth. The latter was led by Campbell and Monique Wilson, (Loic and Olwen), whom Charles had originally initiated and ‘brought in’ to the Craft<sup>7</sup>. The Wilsons played a significant part in Gardnerian history as they went on to initiate others, probably most notably Raymond Buckland, who is an internationally noted author on Witchcraft and Magick.

Charles also became a ‘secretary’ for Gerald, who sent him inquiries from others for Charles to reply to. Charles wrote to me: “At one time I had over 100 letters a week, but very few were genuine Wica initiates.” From time to time Doreen Valiente would also write to Charles to discuss issues that the Craft was facing. For example, in September 1964 (a few months after Gerald’s death), Doreen writes to Charles about the publication of *Witch* by ‘Rex Nemorensis,’ a nom-de-plume of the stage magician, witch, and purported psychologist Charles Cardell. In the letter she describes this pamphlet as a “scurrilous attack upon the Craft and everyone in it”, and continues “I feel sure that you will be glad to hear that the idea you put forward has in fact come to fruition. It doesn’t mean that we all have to think alike, but it is in fact the old traditional way in which the Craft governed itself. There was overall unity of purpose but each coven had its own officers and did things in its own way – like the old Congregational churches as old Gerald used to say.” At this time both Doreen and Charles had been initiated for over a decade and were both acutely aware of how damaging the ‘politics,’ that followed Gerald’s death, could be to the Craft. Doreen had previously been involved in a rift over publicity that had divided the Bricket Wood coven in the summer of 1957, and Charles was involved in another altercation between members of the Scottish covens a few years later.

Another noted correspondent of Charles was Anton Miles, who on a visit to Britain in 1959 had been initiated into the Bricket Wood Coven at St Albans<sup>8</sup>. Anton had subsequently returned to Sydney, Australia where he, along with his High Priestess Diane, began corresponding with Charles who would send them material for their Book of Shadows and tutor them on Craft liturgy. Anton Miles’ coven, who worshipped Pan and Diana, made the Australian news in 1961, where it was written about and pictured in the press<sup>9</sup> but then appears to have subsequently disbanded.

Carl Weschcke of Llewellyn publications was another of Charles’ correspondents. In 1960, Carl contacted Gerald Gardner with some questions about Witchcraft, and after a few letters had been exchanged, Gerald referred Carl to Charles for further discussion. Although they never met in person, Charles and Carl wrote to each other for about 20 years. In 1969<sup>10</sup>, Charles sent some typed documents, which Gerald had given him, to Carl in America. According to Charles, some years earlier, he and Gerald had discussed the merits of publishing Craft material and had agreed that it would help people understand Witchcraft better. Permission was thus given by Charles for Carl to write about the documents<sup>11</sup>. Extracts from them were subsequently published in Llewellyn’s periodical, *Gnostica*. They were then largely forgotten until several years later, when they were re-discovered by Isaac Bonewits<sup>12</sup>. Isaac subsequently sent them to Aidan Kelly, who analyses them in his book, *Crafting the Art of Magic*.

By the early 70’s, Charles had predominantly stopped his involvement with the Gardnerian movement and those in it. He told me that things had changed, and certain people had become obsessed with money and fame; he felt that the old Craft loyalty to each other had been disappearing. He was concerned that the Wica were losing sight of their initial goals and ‘unity of purpose,’ and were consequently fragmenting. When I first met Charles in 1993 I remember two things in particular that struck me about him. Firstly, although there had been an extensive period of time when he had been an Anglo-Catholic, the love he had for the spirit of the Craft had never left him. Furthermore, as he had been out of touch for so long, he actually had no idea how popular Witchcraft, in its many forms, had become!

## Merry Part

Charles passed to the Summerlands on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August 2002, almost nine years to the day after I had first met him. I was living in England and was unaware of this at the time. Sadly, his possessions, which included items that Gerald had given him, were subsequently thrown out by Environmental Services. Over the years, and especially following our discovery of his passing, finding out more about his life and involvement in Gardnerian Witchcraft has become a personal quest for me and my High Priest Dave. We have pieces of a jigsaw that we are endeavouring to finish. In the last year further details have come to light and, no doubt, will continue to do so.

My relationship with Charles over the years has deeply affected my own philosophies and attitudes toward my brothers and sisters of the Craft. On a spiritual level, he gave me confidence and guidance, and also impressed upon me a strong sense of 'family' through the genuine love and affection he displayed for many of his Gardnerian brethren.

During my conversations with him he made me very aware of how 'alternative' the Wica must have appeared. British society was still quite conservative, and the social and moral revolution of the late 1960's had yet to happen. I think it is difficult for many of us these days to truly appreciate the way it was. In a letter to me, Charles writes: "GB [Gerald Brosseau Gardner] and others were masters at misleading unwelcome intrusions. We were all breaking new ground in a very moral field of thought and [a] drastically misunderstood way of life... You would need to understand how the moral way of life was." If we look back to the late 1950's when, several sensationalist newspaper articles appeared with titles such as "They worship sex in secret" and "'Now I will lose my job' says girl who revels in nude rites"<sup>13</sup>, his words become clearer.

Now, think about the kind of newspaper reports that we receive today. They are generally a little more sympathetic and accepting than they certainly used to be! Given the atmosphere of society at the time, it is very easy to see why Charles Clark wanted to keep his involvement secret. Back then, they were indeed 'rebels' forging a new, alternative way of life. Thus, I think it very appropriate that Aradia, Goddess of the Oppressed, is still one we use today.

## Notes and references

- 1: David Johnson: 30th of July 1971 – 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2004. We will meet again.
- 2: Charles insisted that it was to be spelt with one 'c' and said that the two 'c' Wicca had come later. Charles attributed the popularisation of the 2 'c' version to Charles Cardell.
- 3: I know that Charles was involved with the Wica around 1954 / 1955, and that he mentioned Gerald in connection with the Fate club, but I am uncertain as to whether they actually *first* met there. This is currently one of my avenues of research.
- 4: FATE Magazine: Times Building, Douglas, Isle of Man. "Journal of Fantastic Reality". Fate topics included Parapsychology, Vanished Civilisations, Witchcraft, Ufology, Prediction, Healing, Spiritism, Radiesthesia, and Reincarnation. "From all newsagents 2 shillings!" Thanks to Philip Heselton for the additional information.
- 5: I plan to expand on this and other points in a future article or book.
- 6: This information was confirmed for me by Doreen Valientes' notebooks. Many thanks to John Belham-Payne who gave me access to them, and to Philip Heselton for the information he shared with me.
- 7: Doreen Valiente has an entry in her diary for the 25th January 1964 which reads "Olwen (Perth) originally initiated by Charles Clark." Charles had told us in 1993 that he had "brought in" Monique and Campbell ('Scotty') Wilson.
- 8: *The Cauldron* 'Gerald Gardner: 'The Man, the Myth & the Magick' part 4, by Mike Howard.
- 9: *The Rebirth of Witchcraft* Doreen Valiente (Hale 1973:29)
- 10, 12: *Crafting the Art of Magic* Aidan Kelly (Llewellyn 1991: xv) To be reprinted this year (2005) under the title *Inventing Witchcraft – The Creation of a New Religion* by Thoth publications. (tom@thoth.co.uk)
- 11: In a letter to me from Charles about Aidan Kelly's book, he writes: "I remember Carl Weschcke said he would write about those papers given him, GB [Gerald Gardner] agreed with me it would help a lot. Perhaps Carl gave them to him [Aidan Kelly] with that intention. Carl did have permission."
- 13: *The People* newspaper – Sunday, January 11th 1959

Biographical note: The author has been involved with various Pagan and Witchcraft groups for over 13 years. She was instrumental in the creation of the Nottingham Goddess Camp in 1999 and currently runs a Wica Coven in Leicestershire, England where she lives with her partner and daughter. She is hoping to write more about Charles Clark and his involvement, and influence on Gardnerian history and would welcome any comments or information.