

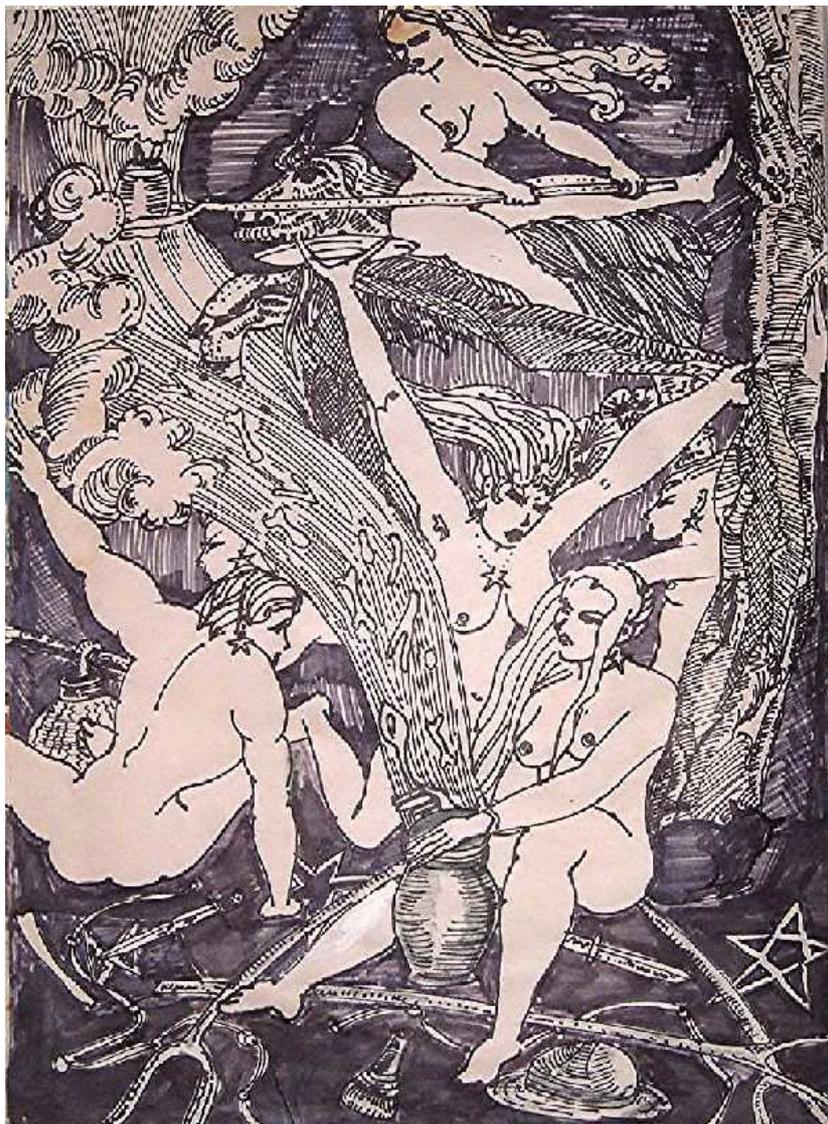
# The Scottish Roots of the Wica – the Early Gardnerian Craft in Scotland.

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Scotland has long had a connection with strange happenings. Its high mountains, changeable weather, bleak moors, remote islands, and isolated communities readily lend themselves to spooky tales, paranormal affairs, and the preservation of old country wisdom and folk healing. The notorious Aleister Crowley lived there for a while, believing that the surroundings better suited his Magical Work, and of course, Scotland is home to that other 'beast', the elusive (yet infamous) Loch Ness Monster!

Scotland also has a strong association with Witchcraft, both in the Early Modern and, as we shall see, the modern day. Witchcraft became a statutory crime in Scotland in 1563 and, during the reformation period of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, several thousand cases of alleged witchcraft were brought to trial. The final *properly documented* case of death through witch-burning was recorded as late as 1722 in Sutherland. Of these cases it is thought that roughly 67% were executed<sup>1</sup> and, unlike in England where witches were hanged, Scotland preferred to burn their witches, usually following their torture and strangulation. Sadly, it is now fairly certain that a lot of these cases were based on little more than malicious gossip and neighbourhood quarrels.

Probably the most famous historical case was that of Isobel Gowdie, whose tales of shape-shifting and cavorting with the devil and his unnaturally cold penis have inspired music, plays, paintings and books. Gerald Gardner, a member of the Folklore Society, was fascinated by tales such as this, and he owned several books on the subject of the Scottish Witch trials as well as its native country folklore and superstitions.



Interpretation of a scene from *The Confessions of Isobel Gowdie* by Scotland-based artist and Witch John Upton.

Gardner's interest in Scotland was more than just a hobby. In his biography *Gerald Gardner: Witch*<sup>2</sup> we are told "the [Gardner] family had never forgotten that it was of Scottish ancestry, and they traced their descent still further, to Simon le Gardinor, born in the fourteenth Century. Through three centuries they had remembered the highland country of their grandsires."<sup>3</sup>

Gerald also alludes to his Scottish connection in an interview he gave in the early 1960s to the journalist Jean Macauley of the Scottish newspaper *The Daily Record*, who wrote of him: "This self-confessed, severely-criticised witch told me he was a Scot. It is 72 years since he left the parental home in North Berwick. The skeleton in the family cupboard was his grandfather in North Berwick, who was a witch." This is almost certainly an affectation, as Gardner was actually born at the family home in Blundellsands, near Liverpool. However, North Berwick is well known for its association with Witchcraft as it was there, in the 1590s, a group of witches reputedly met and conjured up a storm to destroy the ship carrying King James VI and his bride, back from Denmark. Gardner would certainly have known of this story, and being the little Loki he was at times, I think he used that knowledge to make his story more pertinent and interesting.

It is not only in this newspaper report where we hear about Gerald's grandfather being a witch. In the aforementioned biography, we hear more about his grandfather and his involvement with a witch 'up north'. The story goes that in 1905, on a visit to England, Gardner went to see some relatives, the Surgenson's. Whilst there, he was introduced to a doctor and his sister whose surname was also Gardner. He noticed that: "Occasionally someone would tease them, asking whether they had done any magic recently; or if they had attended any good Witches' Sabbaths. Why should they have, Gardner wanted to know. Because, of course, their mother had been a witch. He was extremely intrigued by this. Who had their mother been? And why had they the same surname as he had? Were they relations?"<sup>4</sup> Gerald asked at home about Dr Gardner and his sister and, after receiving evasive answers finally got the truth from his brother, Bob, who told him that: "Grandfather Joseph, the founder of the timber firm in its present name (who had died in 1865) had married a shrew. Everyone agreed about this: she had been a thoroughly unpopular woman. As a result, Grandfather reached the end of his tether, cut through it and freed himself. He stayed at home, but kept the lady somewhere up north. There is some doubt as to whether he really married her. At all events, he had a second and happier home, where there were strange goings-on.

'This Ann, the tale ran, had led him into wicked ways. She had been a witch, and had taken Grandfather Joseph up into the hills where secret meetings and horrible rites were held.'<sup>5</sup>

This information would seem to suggest that Gerald's grandfather had a second home 'up north', with a 'witch' called Ann with whom he had two children. The Craft historian, Philip Heselton, informs me that after searching the Medical Register and cross-referencing his finds with university and Census records, he discovered that there was a Dr James Gardner living within reasonable travelling distance of the Surgenson's. He had graduated from the University of Glasgow in 1882 and his home address was given as Pacemuir, Kilmalcolm. This is interesting as the moor at Kilmalcolm has long had a reputation for being a haunt for local witches. However, James Gardner's mother's name was Marian, not Ann, and the picture that the historical records seem to portray of James Gardner does not quite fit the picture that Gardner paints for us in his biography.

Philip Heselton has actually investigated Gardner's family tree and has managed to accurately trace it back to 1645. He was unable to find any Scottish ancestors, but he was able to discover that Gardner's grandfather was actually born on the 2nd October 1791 at St. Michael's on Wyre in Lancashire<sup>6</sup>, and there doesn't appear to be any recorded connection with North Berwick.

Gerald would also have us believe that not only was his grandfather associated with Witchcraft, but that he also had a distant Scottish relative, Grizell Gairdener, who had been burned as a witch. In Gardner's biography, we learn that upon meeting the members of the New Forest Coven (which he was later to be initiated into) he tells them "... an ancestress of mine had been burned alive as a witch at Newborough in Scotland about 1640, although I did not mention Grandfather."<sup>7</sup> There was indeed a 'witch' with the name Grissel Gairdner burned at Newburgh<sup>8</sup>, although again, Philip Heselton's research suggests that there is no evidence for her being a relative of Gerald Gardner's.

Nevertheless, Gardner was obviously proud of his 'Scottish ancestry,' and in his Will explicitly bequeathed his own kilt, plaid and brooch, along with his grandfather's Scottish *sgain dubh* (stocking knife) and dirk, to his sister-in-law Miriam Gardner (the widow of his brother Francis Douglas Gardner), requesting that they should always stay within the family. In view of the lack of evidence, we might ask: why then did his grandfather have these traditional Scottish weapons, and why did Gerald covet his own kilt and plaid? I suspect that, like his

'Scottish birth,' it may have just been a romantic notion that Gerald liked to foster. Similarly, Samuel Liddell-Mathers, one of the founders of the Golden Dawn, changed his name to MacGregor-Mathers, claiming that he was descended from the clan MacGregor and therefore of highland blood. Again, there is little evidence for this being true. It seems that claims of Scottish ancestry and its inherent mystery and association with 'secret societies' like the Knights Templar and the Masons, were popular in the early part of the last century.



**Gerald Gardner in his Scottish regalia.**  
*(Photo used by kind permission of Philip Heselton)*

Despite his love for things Scottish, Gardner never actually lived there, although in 1952 he moved to the Isle of Man, which is a short ferry or plane journey from the south west coast of Scotland. He and his wife Donna bought a stone cottage in Malew Street, Castletown, and Gardner became the 'resident Witch' at Cecil Williamson's Isle Of Man Witchcraft Museum, usually referred to as 'The Witches Mill'. After a financially difficult couple of years, Gardner took over the museum in 1954 and, with the help of Donna, set about trying to turn it into a thriving and interesting tourist attraction.

Also resident on the island was one Mr Henrie Leopold Dor, who owned a printing press at Douglas. The press produced the Isle's main newspaper, and in 1965, Patricia Crowther's first book, *The Witches Speak*. Another publication produced by them between the 1950s and the 1970s was entitled *FATE* and described itself as the "Journal of Fantastic Reality. Fate Topics include Parapsychology, Vanished Civilisations, Witchcraft, Ufology, Prediction, Healing, Spiritism, Radiesthesia, Reincarnation. From all newsagents 2 shillings." This magazine was a British version of the American publication of the same name, which covered the same sort of topics, and was first published in 1948.

In the 1950s, quite possibly as a result of the American *FATE* magazine, a small collection of like-minded people were motivated to create a group that would meet to discuss various 'alternative ideas' such as UFO's, unconventional forms of healing, psychic phenomena, and Witchcraft. They called themselves the FATE club and members met weekly. It was at one of these meetings, a Scotsman, Charles Clark, first met Gerald Gardner. They developed a friendship and Charles told me that he was subsequently initiated into the Craft of the Wica by Gerald and his wife, Donna at their home in Malew Street. At that time Gerald was especially eager to spread 'the Cult', as he often called it, and Charles, who was a customarily enthusiastic man, made it his mission to aid Gerald by promoting the spread of the Craft in Scotland.

Charles Clark lived in Saltcoats on the West coast of Scotland with his wife, Annie, and their two children. Unfortunately Annie did not share her husband's interest, and so Charles had to be quite covert about his Craft activities. On meeting nights, Charles would tell his wife that he was to hold a Masonic meeting at their home, and she would go out with the children leaving him to the business of treading the circle and working magic. By 1960, Charles had managed to involve several students from the Universities at Glasgow, as well as a nurse, a butcher, an artist, and a few other people. Edith H.<sup>9</sup>, a librarian and student at the Scottish College of Commerce at Pitt Street, Glasgow, became his High Priestess. On occasion, Gerald Gardner would come over from the Isle of Man to attend the meetings of the Scottish Wica, bringing with him magical items to give to the various members. At that time, you couldn't just order a wand or an athame online like you can nowadays, but fortunately, Gerald, and others, had the necessary tools and skills to make magical equipment.

Due to the notoriety of Gardner as a writer on Witchcraft, he would receive inquiries from people all over the world. As Gardner liked to travel often (especially during the cold British winter when he would head for sunnier climes), he enlisted various people to help him reply to these inquiries. Charles was one such person and at one time, handled tens of letters a week for Gerald. This was how Charles, in 1960, first came to hear about Mr and Mrs Campbell Wilson, who were then living in Perth. Of all the Wica in Scotland at that time, this meeting ultimately came to be responsible for one of the biggest influences on the Craft and its history, that being its export to the USA.

Mrs Monique Wilson was born in Haiphong, Vietnam to French parents. She met her husband, Campbell 'Scotty' Wilson, when he was an R.A.F. Flight Lieutenant stationed in Hong Kong following the War.<sup>10</sup> They subsequently moved to Perth, and Campbell went to work for the local gas board. Charles considered it particularly efficacious to initiate a couple as the two halves of a magical partnership were already in place with the polarity already established. He quickly elevated Monique, making her a High Priestess by 1961. As is customary she took a Craft name, 'Olwen,' and her husband became 'Loic'. Charles encouraged the Wilsons to set up their own Coven in Perth and furnished them with the various Craft tools that they would need.

In 1961, Charles wrote excitedly to Gerald to tell him about the 'Gardnerian' Covens in Scotland that he [Charles] had helped to establish. These were located in Glasgow, Perth and Saltcoats, with a further two planned for Fife and Edinburgh. It is unclear whether these last two ever got off the ground as shortly after this, Charles had an altercation with Monique and Campbell Wilson regarding a lady whom they wanted to initiate. For various reasons, Charles felt that the proposed candidate was unsuitable for the Craft of the Wise and could potentially attract unwanted media attention, which he thought could pose a real risk to the Craft's integrity. In light of the various 'revelations' about the Wica which had hit the tabloid newspapers in the late 1950's, this was naturally

something that he was very keen to avoid. Ultimately, this incident led to Charles resigning his help, not only from the Perth Coven, but from the Craft movement in Scotland generally. For the rest of his life he kept a low profile whilst periodically taking the odd magical student under his Craft's wing.

Following Charles' withdrawal, it would seem from notes made by Doreen Valiente at the time, that Gerald Gardner, along with the help of Lois Bourne (who was then the High Priestess at Bricket Wood) carried on the task of proliferating the Craft in Scotland by establishing a 'coven by correspondence' in Glasgow. Lois and Gerald would visit Glasgow to initiate members and would send them the Crafts rituals by post.

As for Monique, she still felt that she had much to learn and so approached Gardner, who she first met at a "witches meeting"<sup>11</sup> (almost certainly one of Charles'), to ask him if he would now help to train her. He subsequently re-initiated Monique Wilson, and as the Wilsons grew closer to him, they often helped out with the museum and his correspondence.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, Raymond Buckland had been reading Gerald Gardner's books and decided to write to him about the Wica. As a result of this correspondence, it was arranged for him to be initiated by Monique Wilson following a 10 day intensive course. On the 18th November 1963, Raymond flew to the UK to begin the program. Gardner had sent the mail enquiries he received from the USA to Raymond and so, upon his return to the U.S.A., Raymond initiated his first wife Rosemary. Together they proceeded to establish one of the first 'Gardnerian' Covens in America, located in Queens, Long Island. In 1966, Buckland, following in the footsteps of Gerald Gardner, established the USA's 'First Museum of Witchcraft and Magic' in his basement, and was subsequently moved to its own premises. The collection is currently in storage in New Orleans and was thankfully undamaged by Katrina. It is hoped that it will be on display again at some point in the future.

Less than a couple of months after Raymond's visit to Scotland, on the 12<sup>th</sup> February 1964, Gardner passed away on board *The Scottish Prince* whilst sailing back from his holiday in the Lebanon. In Gardner's Will he bequeathed the contents of the Witchcraft Museum, along with his home at Malew Street and all of its contents, to Monique Wilson. Another beneficiary was William Worrall, who had helped Gardner to look after the museum. He was bequeathed the museum and its outbuildings. Financial gifts and property were also left to a few of the other High Priestesses and Gardner's acquaintances of the time.

Following Gardner's death, the Wilsons left their home in Nimmo Avenue, Perth and moved into the Witches Cottage on the Isle of Man where they set about trying to continue the work of Gerald Gardner. By this time, the relationship between the Wilsons and many of the other members of the Craft had become quite strained. Patricia Crowther and Ray Bone strongly objected to Monique's proclamation that she was the 'Queen of the Witches,' a title she claimed to have inherited in Gardner's Will<sup>12</sup>. Research shows his Will mentions no such thing. This caused a stir in the newspapers, who loudly proclaimed: "bubble bubble, toil and trouble split the magic circles of Britain," but, as often happens, the media attention quickly died down. Then a few years later, in 1969, the *News of the World* ran a story about the Wilson's 11 year old daughter and her involvement in Witchcraft rites. This event proved to be another link in the chain of events that ultimately led to the Wilsons deciding to move to Spain in 1973. They funded their emigration by selling many of the items from the struggling Witchcraft Museum to Ripley's in the USA. A large chunk of the collection was purchased and is still owned by Richard and Tamarra James, who started the 'Wiccan Church of Canada.'

Throughout the 1960s, and up to the present day, the Craft movement in America has been a rapid and successful one. Its arrival coincided with the 'free love' movement, and an increasing interest in alternative spiritualities, which helped to ensure both its popularity and survival. Today, there are many different types and traditions of Witchcraft, and nearly all of them have been influenced to some extent by the work of Gerald Gardner and the early Craft pioneers of the 1950's and 60's. If it wasn't for the Scottish Wica, the Craft may never have made it to the USA, and Craft history could have been very different.

It is not only in America where Witchcraft has proved so successful. In Britain too, figures suggest an upward trend and last year in *The Scotsman*<sup>13</sup> it was stated "Wicca (as witchcraft is more properly known) is reportedly the fastest growing religion in Scotland..." Therefore, I think it is appropriate to finish with a quotation taken from one of Charles' letters to Gerald Gardner, where he is relating his efforts to get the Craft of the Wica well and truly established in Scotland:

*"If the foundation is laid with love and perfect workmanship, then thro time shall stem the perfect edifice, only the way I am working things just now, will we ever prosper here in Scotland, and it will be as has been since I came*

into the craft. This to me is not an interest like most folk, but my life work, I know it may seem to one looking on that I have not achieved much, but give me time...”

## **Endnotes**

- 1: Figure of 67% taken from <http://www.arts.ed.ac.uk/witches/introduction.html>
- 2: J. L. Bracelin *Gerald Gardner Witch* by (actually penned by Idries Shah) (IHO books 1999)
- 3: *Gerald Gardner Witch* by J. L. Bracelin (IHO 1999: Page 12)
- 4: *Gerald Gardner Witch* by J. L. Bracelin (IHO 1999: Page 114)
- 5: *Gerald Gardner Witch* by J. L. Bracelin (IHO 1999: Page 115)
- 6: Personal correspondence from Philip Heselton author of *Wiccan Roots* and *Gerald Gardner and the Cauldron of Inspiration* (Capall Bann).
- 7: *Gerald Gardner Witch* by J. L. Bracelin (IHO 1999: Page 150, 153)
- 8: Actually Grissel Gairdner, listed as dying in 1610 by Margaret Alice Murray in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921). See <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/wcwe/wcwe07.htm>
- 9: I have withheld Edith's surname as I have so far, been unable to locate her.
- 10: *Daily Mail* Thursday October 1<sup>st</sup> 1964.
- 11: *Evening Standard* September 19<sup>th</sup> 1964 Monique is quoted as saying “Dr. Gardner met her first about two years ago when he was attending a witches meeting.”
- 12: *Daily Mirror* March 6<sup>th</sup> 1964
- 13: *The Scotsman* October 31<sup>st</sup> 2005. See <http://news.scotsman.com/features.cfm?id=2171092005> (free registration required.)

Many thanks to Philip Heselton, John Avalon Champion-Grant, Fyrnae and my test readers for their help.

Biographical note: The author has been involved with various Pagan and Witchcraft groups for over 14 years. Last year, along with Dr. Stuart Whomsley, she spoke at the annual conference of the Transpersonal Section of the British Psychological Society on the subject of Witchcraft as a ‘conduit’ for spirituality and they are currently collaborating on a book exploring the connections between psychology, society, and modern Witchcraft. Melissa 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, daughter and a lionized feline.