

DONNA GARDNER: PRIESTESS OF WICA?

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Some years ago there many who were sceptical about the contribution of the late Scottish witch Charles Clark in the development of Wica. Little by little, evidence revealed unambiguously his involvement. The trouble was that Charles Clark was said to have been initiated into the Craft by Donna, the wife of Gerald Gardner. On the rare occasions when Donna Gardner spoke to the press, she stated that she was absolutely not opposed to her husband's practices, but she also categorically denied any personal involvement in witchcraft. However, today there are elements that make one think that was not true and, if you look closely, you can have no more doubt that she had also been initiated into the cult of the witches, even if she did not want to publicly admit it.

Dorothea 'Donna' Frances Rosedale was born on August 24th, 1893. She was the daughter, niece and granddaughter of a clergyman, while her grandfather was a German Jew. First he wanted to become a rabbi, but he left Germany for America and then came to England and converted to Christianity and also became a clergyman. Donna Rosedale met Gerald Gardner in 1927. At the time she was a nurse at St Thomas' Hospital, not far from Westminster Bridge in Central London. It turned out that they were distant relatives as Donna Rosedale was Gerald Gardner's brother Horace Gardner's sister-in-law's step-daughter

When Gardner first set eyes on Donna Rosedale, he knew she was the woman with whom he would spend the rest of his life. After a quick courtship, the two lovebirds decided to get married. Their wedding was conducted a little in haste, on August 16th 1927 at St Jude's church in Kensington, West London. They then went to the Isle of Wight, where they spent their honeymoon and after that to Liverpool in northern England, where Harold Gardner used to live.



Gerald and Donna Gardner in Malaya

Soon afterwards the married couple left for Malaya, with a detour through France and Spain, and then back to France and the port of Marseilles, where the newlyweds embarked on a ship to Singapore. Donna and Gerald Gardner then travelled on to Johore, Bahru, where they lived until Gardner's retirement in 1936. After he had retired, the couple returned to England at Donna Gardner's request. First they lived in London, and then moved to Highcliffe in Hampshire on the south coast of England. After the war they moved back to London and some years later relocated to Castletown on the Isle of Man, where Gardner had purchased the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic from his business partner Cecil Williamson. Donna Gardner died on January 30th 1960 in Nobles Hospital in Douglas, the capital of the Isle of Man. She had suffered from osteoporosis for many years.

In all this there is no evidence of Donna Gardner's involvement, even occasionally, in the witchcraft practised by her husband. Apart from the testimony of Charles Clark, there is no definitive proof of this implication, but there are many clues pointing in that direction. There is absolutely no doubt that Clark was initiated into Wica in the presence of Gerald Gardner. Clark was known to all the witches who knew Gardner and he was the man who in turn first initiated Monique Wilson, the woman who is at the top of the 'family tree' of many American Gardnerian witches. But in 1954, when Charles Clark was initiated, neither 'Dafo' (Edith Woodford-Grimes, the Maiden and possibly High Priestess of the old New Forest Coven Gardner was initiated into in 1939), or Doreen Valiente or Barbara Vickers (this well before the initiations of Monique Wilson, Dayonis, Eleanor 'Ray' Bone or Lois (Pearson) Bourne) or any female witch friend of Gardner could go to the Isle of Man, so it was Donna Gardner who was the High Priestess responsible for his initiation. It is also quite possible that Gardner had given his wife the degree necessary to perform an initiation just shortly before the event, or even the same evening.

But this was not the first time that Donna Gardner had been active in the circle with her husband. It is very likely she was present (and actively so) in the famous rituals performed by the New Forest Coven and others in the summer of 1940 to prevent the Nazi invasion of Britain during the Second World War. There are also some pictures of Donna Gardner in witch vestments and posing with a ceremonial sword in her hand. These photographs are part of the collection from the Manx witchcraft museum sold by Monique Wilson to the Ripley International organisation in the 1970s. They were later bought by Tamara and Richard James of the Wiccan Church of Canada. Even if these pictures are not publicly known or shown to everyone, they have been seen by some researchers.

Other evidence to suggest that Donna Gardner had been initiated as a witch is from what she said to the press. We can see that she knew some details of Wica rituals at the time when they only known to insiders. One can also add that Melissa Seims, one of Charles Clark's initiates, has picture on her website of a necklace of green pearls that Donna Gardner apparently work in the circle. If she was in a circle then one can reasonably suppose that she had the right to so as an initiated witch.

Finally, and this seems to be very good evidence, a person who wishes to remain anonymous, still residing on the Isle of Man and having known Scotty and Monique Wilson well, gave me some photographs of Donna Gardner's gravestone. On the stone is carved the symbol of a third-degree initiation into Wica. This would not appear if she had not been a Wican High Priestess.

So here are a series of small clues that suggest Gerald Gardner's wife was an initiated witch with the rank of High Priestess. Obviously in this article there is no real proof, except perhaps the testimony of Charles Clark about his own initiation at her hands on the Isle of Man. However you must admit , after reading this, that you may also believe in it now.

Biographical note: Tof lives in Strasbourg and he is a second-degree initiate of Gardnerian Wica from the Manx line founded by the late Monique Wilson. He is the author of a biography of Gerald Gardner in French called *Gerald Gardner et le Culte des Sorcieres* (*Gerald Gardner and the Cult of Witches*). It can be read at lulu.com.