

THE ENGLISH SCHOOL

by Christine Payne-Towler

A number of histories have been written to clarify the people and events connected to the founding of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the most familiar of this century's Secret Societies and source of most of the Tarot decks sold today. One of the best of these written works is Mary K. Greer's *The Women of the Golden Dawn*, which not only chronicles the well-documented events that attended its founding, existence and eventual collapse, but also examines the role of powerful and magical women who were neglected in previous treatments of the subject.

From personal experience, I know Ms. Greer to be a scholar and a gentlewoman who is evenhanded to the extreme. Most of her published work has been either about the Order or the Tarot decks that have emanated from it, yet she retains her objectivity about their place in the history of Tarot. So it was to her book that I turned first in order to gain an overview of the events that created, and later destroyed, this association of talented, inspired, highly educated occultists who changed the face of Tarot for the twentieth century.

That said, I must add that I can present these events with only a fraction of Mary Greer's understanding. My primary focus for this CD has been on the ancient Mysteries that Tarot preserves. Therefore, I will leave any more in-depth review of modern Tarots to future projects, where they can be given their due.

The goal of this essay is only to relate in the simplest terms those portions of Golden Dawn history that pertain to that group's treatment of the Tarot Arcana and their body of correspondences to the Hebrew letters, astrology, numbers, paths, angels and the rest of the panoply of Mystery School tradition inherited from our ancient and Renaissance esoteric ancestors.

A curious person can reference numerous sources to find a fuller treatment of these fascinating artists, magicians and scholars and their tumultuous times. The bibliography of *Women of the Golden Dawn* makes an excellent starting point for your research.

A Brief History of the Golden Dawn

Eliphas Levi made quite an impression on the English Rosicrucians in 1853 when he visited Rosicrucian friends in London. One of those friends, Fred Hockley, decided to send his young apprentice, Kenneth R.H. MacKenzie, to visit Levi in Paris and find out more on the state of Levi's research into the mysteries of the Tarot. The two men visited several times over the course of a few days in the winter of 1861, and MacKenzie took copious notes.

Four years later in England, a Rosicrucian group was formed called the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, and it was made up of master Masons only. Kenneth R.H. MacKenzie was one of its earliest members, along with the Rev. A.F.A. Woodford (co-compiler with MacKenzie of the *Masonic*



Cyclopedia published in 1887), W. Wynn Wescott and S.L. MacGregor Mathers. Twenty years later, this same group (minus Woodford) were still associates, between them founding the Golden Dawn.

Even in these early years before the Golden Dawn, MacKenzie was fascinated with Eliphas Levi, so when he went on that visit to Paris in 1861 he made every effort to cultivate a personal relationship with Levi despite their language barrier. In the detailed notes he kept about their meetings, he enthused that theirs was a profound meeting of occult minds and that they shared ideas and compared experiences like old friends.

A decade later he published an article about their meeting in the *Rosicrucian*, the short-lived magazine of the Societas Rosicruciana, describing a number of the subjects they had covered in their wide-ranging discussions. This meeting had taken place before any of Levi's work had been translated into English, so MacKenzie was in effect helping the English Masons and Rosicrucians "discover" the important contributions that Levi was making through his publishing and teaching in France. At the point the article was published, Levi had been the Supreme Grand Master of the Fraternitas Rosae Crucis of Europe (with the exception of England) for over sixteen years already, and was to hold the position for two more years until his death.

Because of their imperfect French/English communications (neither spoke each other's language), the exchange was bound to be a bit inexact. MacKenzie, well-known as a creative ritualist and connoisseur of magical codes and cyphers, had wanted to show Levi some correspondences he had worked out for the

links between Tarot and the Christian Cabbalah. It is not entirely clear whether Levi was responsive to these ideas or not because the only version of events ever reported was MacKenzie's.

For whatever reason, somewhere in the decade between the meeting and the publication of his article MacKenzie conceived the idea that Levi had intentionally "blinded" the astro-alphanumeric correspondences he used when talking about the Major Arcana of Tarot in his books. This is actually true of Etteilla, an earlier member of Levi's esoteric "lineage" in France, so perhaps this seemed a logical assumption at the time.

But in truth, as we have shown in other chapters, Levi was faithfully reporting the correspondences as they had come down through the Hermetic/Alexandrian writers of the first and second centuries AD, which then were picked up by the Renaissance magi during the Hermetic Revival. Levi did insert one correction into the ancient pattern of correspondences, but it was subtle and did not change the ancient number/letter connections, only two Arcana that were switched between the last two letter/numbers (see "The Continental Tarots").

MacKenzie Devises His Own System

Recalling that MacKenzie, Wescott and Mathers were lodge members in the Societas for years before the Golden Dawn was ever conceived, we probably can assume that they would talk to each other about their studies and their personal spiritual work. It is through this friendly association that Wescott learned of MacKenzie's project of "adjusting" the system that Levi had taught. Eventually MacKenzie's adjustment blossomed into an



entire system of his own, but in his lifetime he never shared the details with Wescott and Mathers. It came into their hands only after MacKenzie died in 1886, when his impoverished widow was forced to sell the manuscript to Wescott.

The official story goes that in 1885, after the death of Fred Hockley, MacKenzie's mentor, a "cypher manuscript" was "discovered" among his personal effects. Because Hockley, the man who first introduced MacKenzie and Levi, was an avid collector of ancient magical texts, the Golden Dawn founders were able to claim they had discovered a cache of esoteric rituals and teachings that seemed ancient, authentic and more accurate than those of the French lodges. Among the papers was found a set of astro-alphanumeric correspondences that appeared to them to correct the "blind" they felt existed in Levi's work.

Three years passed between the "discovery" of the cypher manuscript and the founding of the Order of the Golden Dawn. Ostensibly, in that interval they were translating the manuscript, deducing that it described the workings of a German lodge, gaining permission to convene an English branch of this lodge, and fleshing out the quasi-Masonic rituals for their own use. The first lodge of the new order was founded March 1, 1888.

Let us remember what Dr. Keizer mentions in his essay "The Esoteric Origins of the Tarot": "The synthesis they created for the Golden Dawn rituals combined Rosicrucian and Christian Cabbalistic doctrine with the kind of layout used on a Masonic floor. The floor and officers represented Sephiroth, and initiation from 0=0 to 5=6 represented the upward ascent from Malkuth to Tiphareth." If we

review the essay "The Confluence of the Ancient Systems," we can see what a challenging and sophisticated task they set themselves to.

The Story Comes Apart

Occult scholar R.A. Gilbert eventually managed to see through this myth of origins, revealing that MacKenzie (possibly with the aid of his old friend the Rev. A.F.A. Woodford) had superimposed the new correspondences onto the Renaissance Christian Cabbalah model (see "Kabbalah/Cabbalah") in such a way that they could present the "correction" as another historical tradition. Then, when it came into the hands of Wescott and Mathers, it was fleshed out into an entire lodge and grade system based upon the new correspondences. In this way, their new Secret Society had genuine traditional-seeming secrets of its own.

The deception was revealed to the rest of the members of the Order of the Golden Dawn in 1900, upon the appearance of an American woman calling herself "Madame Horos." She was passing herself off as the fabled German source of the cypher manuscript, the woman who had supposedly obtained for Wescott and Mathers the charter for their English lodge. Madame Horos presented herself to MacGregor Mathers as having come to help them with their "Isis movement" (the mother lodge of the Golden Dawn was called the Isis-Urania Temple). He formally introduced her to his group, the Ahathoor Lodge, as the very woman who had been their contact with the original German lodge. It is not at all clear why he would do such a thing, as subsequent events show that he knew she was a fraud.

The very day that Madame Horos was intro-



duced to his group, Mathers wrote a letter to Florence Farr, one of the most active of the founding women of the Golden Dawn, denouncing Wescott and calling into question Wescott's avowed connection with the Secret Chiefs of the order. Mathers was clearly rattled, angry and feeling betrayed by the appearance of the impostor Madame Horos, as well as by internal difficulties that were threatening to break up his lodge from within. In the state of mind he found himself in that day, he must have felt he had nothing to lose.

Upon receiving this devastating news, Florence Farr, who was a scrupulously honest soul, meditated on what to do. She formed a seven-member committee to investigate the matter. Together they wrote a letter to Mathers asking him to either prove or disprove these very serious allegations. He refused to answer any questions, pro or con, and dismissed Florence summarily from the Order.

Over the next few years, amidst much acrimony, the Golden Dawn flew into fragments, with each founder accusing the other of intellectual dishonesty of various kinds. MacGregor and his wife Moina Mathers were expelled from the Golden Dawn, Florence eventually resigned, and the movement, so illustrious at the outset, became principally a legend in its own time.

Twelve years after the dissolving of the original lodge, Aleister Crowley, himself a member, published the Golden Dawn astro-alphanumeric correspondences along with their grade rituals and other materials that had previously been kept private. People have responded warmly to the system as set forth by Crowley, so it has continued in use and has spread around the world.

Aftereffects of the New System

The eighteen-year life span of the Golden Dawn is merely a passing hour in relation to the history of Tarot. But in this case, it was a very significant hour. The effort the Golden Dawn undertook to create the impression of having an authentic body of teachings and practices was so convincing and so thorough that they singlehandedly managed to call into question the veracity of the two previous centuries of esoteric scholarship.

How were they able to so convincingly package their version as part of the historical record? For one thing, parts of the cypher manuscript were inscribed upon antique paper, giving it the right look of venerability. Also, its creator used a great deal of the older Christian Cabbalah paradigm that had been inherited from the Renaissance magi and the first and second century Hermeticists. In all honesty, however, the changes the Golden Dawn founders and followers instituted upon the Renaissance model rendered it no longer either Christian or Cabbalah (see "Kabbalah/Cabbalah").

Translate and Conquer

The main method used by English esotericists to insert their new version into the historical record was to become the primary translators of Eliphas Levi's works into English. In this way they were able to carefully craft footnotes and explanatory insertions into his works, thereby casting doubt upon Levi when his teachings diverged too far from those that the Golden Dawn was promoting. For example, the preface to the second edition of *The Mysteries of Magic*, a digest of the writings of Eliphas Levi collected by Waite, illustrates the typical commentary laced all through this compilation (available through Kessinger



Publishing Co. in Kila, Mont.).

In his preface, Waite justifies the new ordering he has imposed upon Levi's writings. Waite abandoned the one-chapter-per-Arcanum structure which Levi favored in his magical writings, and which Levi's students felt "cast great light upon the mysteries of magical interpretation." Waite counters with these remarks: "While I in no way deny that there is weight in this objection from the Kabbalistic standpoint, I submit that the great light mentioned exists mainly for those who are in possession of the true attribution of the Tarot keys, which attribution neither was nor could be given by Eliphas Levi in writing" (p. xiv-xv).

Furthermore, Waite complains that he has "incurred . . . some unpopularity for a time among extreme occultists by tabulating a few of the discrepancies and retractions which occur in the writings of Eliphas Levi, and are either typical of different stages in the growth of his singular mind, or difficulties willfully created for the express purpose of misleading the profane." He means us, dear reader; Waite says that Levi is willfully creating difficulties for us, the profane.

He continues: ". . . it is rather generally admitted by those who consider themselves in a position to adjudicate upon such matters, that Eliphas Levi was not a 'full initiate,' a fact which might account naturally for his occasional deflections from the absolute of infallibility." In light of what we now know about Levi's Supreme Grand Mastership of nearly twenty years, about which Waite was fully aware, I just wonder what accounts for Waite's "occasional deflections from the absolute of infallibility"? "Those who consider them-

selves in a position to adjudicate upon such matters" must be Waite's own cronies and students.

In Levi's *The Key of the Mysteries* as translated by Crowley (published in 1959 by Rider & Co.), we reach a segment where Levi wants to talk about the construction of the Hebrew alphabet according to its three divisions—the three mother letters, the seven double letters and the twelve single letters. Levi had just launched into the line "Now, this is what we find in all Hebrew grammars" when we run into a footnote by Crowley. His insertion reads, "This is all deliberately wrong. That Levi knew the correct attributions is evident from a manuscript annotated by himself. Levi refused to reveal these attributions, rightly enough, as his grade was not high enough, and the time not right. Note the subtlety in the form of his statement. The correct attributions are in Liber 777.—A.C." Crowley makes it sound as if Levi kept a private list of the "correct attributions" which he could not share "because his grade was not high enough." Or is Crowley perhaps implying that the cypher manuscript contains Levi's annotations? Note the subtlety of the form of *his* statement!

Following is a quote from W. Wynn Wescott in his preface to *The Magical Ritual of the Sanctum Regnum Interpreted by the Tarot Trumps, Translated from the Manuscript of Eliphas Levi* (this too is available through Kessinger): "The twenty-two Tarot Trumps bear a relation to numbers and to letters; the true attributions are known, so far as is ascertainable, to but a few students, members of the Hermetic schools: the attributions given by Levi in his *Dogme* and *Rituel*, by Christian, and by Papus are incorrect, presumably by design. The editor has seen a manuscript page



of cypher about 150 years old which has a different attribution, and one which has been found by several occult students, well known to him, to satisfy all the conditions required by occult science” (p. ix).

We can guess who those “several occult students” are. And in these few sentences, we can see the device by which all Levi’s writings as well as those of his published followers, each scholars in their own right, are called into question—on the “prior historical claim” of the cypher manuscript, which they each knew was a fake as they were writing those footnotes. This was not a simple misunderstanding among friends. Wescott, Waite and Crowley are not saying “we like our correspondences better” or “there are other versions than Levi’s”. No, they are saying that Levi and his followers deliberately misinformed their public, and the English fellows have “the correct attributions,” known only to “full initiates” like themselves.

These quotes are just the tip of the iceberg, I assure you. I have read many translations through the years and have never encountered a phenomenon like this anywhere else. In the innocence of my first studies in the 1970s, I could not understand why a person would bother to translate a book if they felt the author was a humbug! Little did I know the issues—and the egos—that were involved.

I possess two books written by Levi that were translated by W.N. Schoors and published by Weiser in the 1970s, *The Book of Splendours* and *The Mysteries of the Qabalah*. These volumes do not have all the extra commentary, so annoying and disparaging, that is found throughout the books translated by the English group. I would hope that future printings of

these earlier translations will include a disclaimer about the commentaries, so that sincere students reading them in present and future times don’t have to wade through the thicket of “attitude” without a context.

A Lesson For The Future

To me, the real cause of the propagation of erroneous esoteric history is the fact that the English-speaking world, as a rule, does not feel the need to research what our “experts” tell us about the Tarot. William Wescott published several books before he cofounded the Golden Dawn, and in them he actually reveals the Hermetic/Alexandrian correspondences, presenting them without guile in their proper historical context. But few people compare those books with the Golden Dawn version and notice that the story had changed. Mathers had published a booklet in 1888, on the eve of the founding of the Golden Dawn, referring to the French Occult Tarot and employing the sequence and enumeration taught by Eliphas Levi. No one inside the Order seemed to question how different the Golden Dawn sequence was from the Continental mode. Aleister Crowley dropped many hints to lead his readers to the writings of Levi (which he, Wescott and Waite worked hard to translate into English), but very few people bother to look Levi up and read him for themselves. I am assured as well that Waite encouraged his students to look beyond his writings to see the truth for themselves, but most lay readers would not have the knowledge or motivation to question the legacy left by these three turn of the century esotericists.

I encourage you to acquire and read the English translations of Levi’s works that are currently available, but if you do, be prepared for the fierce editorial commentary if the



translator is affiliated with the Order of the Golden Dawn. Occasionally these translators will grant him a point, but the overwhelming impression is that Levi was not the magus he was thought to be. To achieve the true value from Levi's work, one has to learn how to read through this overlay, which seems also to have been carried over into those works of his currently available on the Internet.

Another way to finally clear up all this controversy would be for a non-aligned scholar of the Secret Societies to publish a book detailing the change of relations which emerged between the Continental lodges and the English ones. Such a project could also address the emergence of the modern Spanish school of Tarot, which also appeared at the turn of this century. Dr. Keizer mentions the French/English rift in his essay "The History of Esoteric Tarot," but I am sure a full exposition of the interior philosophical, political and personality dynamics would help us all see those pivotal times in a clearer light.

Tarot Users Who Love Too Much

We in the West may be guilty of loving the fad of Tarot too much and the history too little. Because we crave novelty, something new and different, we overlook the ancient and long-term traditions that give Tarot its very form and content (see "Confluence of the Ancient Systems" essay). Those systems of thought and spiritual practice have not lost their value just because fashions have moved on! As a matter of fact, those most ancient strata of the Tarot mysteries, the Astrology Wheel, the Hebrew Kabbalah and its Hermetic/Alexandrian counterpart, and the astrological angels of the Minor Arcana have been at the foundation of all the Mosaic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These are

truly the Western Mysteries, and they are just as relevant today as in Biblical times.

We also have to be clear about the "magical theory" we are bringing to the Tarot and the operations we might do with the cards. If we believe that these ancient letters, Arcana, numbers and angels refer to something real in the worlds within worlds that is this life, then perhaps the ancient correspondences, either the Hebrew or the Alexandrian/ Hermetic, are worthy of study and deep meditation. At least we know that generations of souls have walked this path and smoothed the road before us, working out the kinks and throwing light into the dark night of the soul. We have a developed and profound wellspring of philosophers, artists, magicians and healers to study and emulate in the work of becoming our own God-selves.

Of course there will always be pioneers, those who steer a course into uncharted waters, who refuse to stay between the lines. Innovative souls exist in every generation. We see these characteristics in the founders of the Golden Dawn, who like the Spanish School(s) departed from the Hermetic/Alexandrian model at the turn of this century. Again, perhaps all the questions can only be answered by someone who has cordial relations with all the relevant lodges, someone who can shine a light on the revolutionary tendencies that were shaping Tarot at the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s.

In the future, let us not be such passive consumers of Tarot but instead take the time to learn about the various systems available so we can evaluate them intelligently. Tarot is such a powerful tool that we should want to know what our options are, philosophically



and spiritually. As we create a Tarot culture wherein imagination and inventiveness can be coordinated with the true history of the Western Mysteries, we will see scholarship and innovation become better partners rather than work at cross-purposes, as they sometimes seem to at present.

My hope is that in the twenty first century we can complete the excavation of this intellectual monument and see once again the beautiful architecture of Tarot as still strong and true to its Hebrew/Alexandrian/Gnostic/Renaissance roots. This project has only just begun. When we have more fully fathomed this treasure from our ancestors and more correctly apprehended its stature as a spiritual and philosophical vehicle of the highest subtlety, we will be better able to evaluate its variations and realize their best applications within our lives.

This chapter is excerpted from Christine Payne-Towler's forthcoming book, *The Underground Stream: Esoteric Tarot Revealed*. To order copies of her book, or to reach Christine for private consultation call 1-800-981-3582.

