

Lon Milo DuQuette*Interviewed by Sven Davisson*

Ashé: Aleister Crowley is often misunderstood and has been much maligned from his own time continuing into the present. Would you give a little introduction to the man?

DuQuette: First of all, in the last five or six years several fine biographies of Crowley have been published. The best of these, in my opinion is: *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley* by Richard Kaczynski (New Falcon Publications)

Aleister Crowley was born in 1875 in Leamington Spa, Warwickshire. His father was a wealthy brewer of Crowley Ales and (oddly enough) a lay preacher for the ultra-conservative Protestant sect, the Plymouth Brethren. Young Crowley was traumatized thoroughly by his upbringing and early on developed a dislike for the repressive and life-denying doctrines of that particular type of Christianity. He attended Cambridge University and studied to be a foreign diplomat. His interest in poetry and all things mystical, however, consumed him and he left the University before finishing his final examinations.

There is no question Crowley was a genius who passionately mastered any subject or skill which happened to consume him, including chess, poetry, and mountain climbing. (If I'm not mistaken, several of his world climbing records still hold). Once he was introduced to magick and the spiritual arts of western hermeticism he focused the full ray of his genius on these subjects and quickly mastered them.

He joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1898 and featured prominently in the events which ultimately led to its destruction.

In 1904, while honeymooning in Cairo, his new wife, Rose, fell into a trance and spoke to Crowley as if she were an emissary of the Gods of ancient Egypt who had a message for Crowley. The message concerned the ending of the magical Aeon of Osiris (and the spiritual formula embodied in the Christian concept of faith, self-sacrifice, and



hope for a life after death) and the birth of the new magical Aeon of Horus (and the spiritual formula which focuses upon the individual, and the true Will of each individual as the key to spiritual liberation).

The events which took place in Cairo in March and April of 1904 would eventually convince Crowley that he was the Prophet (or voice) of the New Aeon a role that would consume him and dominate his magical career until his death in 1947.

Ashé: I know that Crowley himself cultivated the negative sides of his reputation, but is it really fair to describe him as a Satanist or Black Magician?

DuQuette: I'm reminded of a conversation I had with my friend, Mad Bob, when I first ran across the name Aleister Crowley in a cheap occult dictionary. It said. "Aleister Crowley famous Scottish Satanist". Bob, who had read Crowley's autobiography, chided me for my fear of Crowley and told me something like..."Well, maybe he was a Satanist...but he was a good kind of Satanist and a true holy man. You're a fool if you don't learn more about him and his work."

From the very narrow, superstitious, and uninformed point of view of the fundamentalist Chrislemew (Christian, Moslem, and Jew) Mark Twain, Timothy Leary, Joseph Campbell, Paramahansa Yogananda, Gandhi, Thomas Paine, Deepak Chopra, and Aleister Crowley are all Satanists and Black magicians. In my opinion it is not fair to characterize any of these individuals, including Crowley, as either Satanists or Black Magicians.

That being said, I believe it is accurate to say that Crowley himself (because of his own understanding and interpretation of certain pre-Christian, Qabalistic, and Gnostic doctrines) at one time or another in his long and colorful life considered himself a 'Satanist'. And, as you mentioned in your question, he loved to scare people who were capable of being scared by superstitious nonsense.

Ashé: Almost as misunderstood as the man is his dual mottos. Please explain the meaning behind "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law" and "Love is the law, love under will."

DuQuette: As these are quotes from Liber AL vel Legis (The Book of the Law) it is inappropriate for me or anyone else to presume to interpret any passage of the text for another individual.



Ashé: Why do some people feel this Thelemic philosophy and studying Crowley to be dangerous?

DuQuette: Because they haven't yet begun to understand it or him for what they truly are. Thelemic philosophy (if we can call it that) posits that each individual is responsible for his or her own life. This is an awesome responsibility, It's so much easier to surrender that responsibility to the family or the state or the church. For those not ready for such accountability even the thought of others living in such freedom is a terrifying nightmare.

Ashé: As is often the case, the myth at times threatens to eclipse the actual achievements. What do you see as Crowley's lasting influence on religion and spirituality?

DuQuette: The Aeon of Horus would have dawned without Aleister Crowley as its prophet. It's bigger than all of us. He, like the prophets of old, just gave voice to the winds of change. Not everyone listens the voice of the prophets, but no one can miss what they are talking about. Just look around. The whole world's changing and it is all revolving around a universal change in human consciousness. Individuals are now really seeing themselves as the center of their universe not families, not communities, not nations, or churches. The Law is for all, and this revolutionary leap of consciousness is happening even if people have never heard the words "Aleister Crowley" or "Thelema" or "Magick" or "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law."

I believe Crowley's greatest contribution is to the tiny segment of humanity who are able to take full advantage of the magical essence of this new formula and seize control of and accelerate the pace of their own spiritual evolution. Liber AL vel Legis is the jewel in the crown of Thelemic Holy Books that serve to guide and inspire all who would take the path of the Thelemic magician. But there are other Crowley works, including The Vision and the Voice, Liber Aleph, and the Thoth Tarot, that will, in my opinion, stand in the centuries to come as tools of lasting influence.

Ashé: In your view, what's his greatest legacy?

DuQuette: His immense body of writings that, thanks to the efforts of his legacy magical, Ordo Templi Orientis, will be preserved, published, and perpetuated in accurate and quality editions long after you and I have passed on.



Ashé: What was his role in bringing Asian religious concepts to the West, vis a vis that of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors such as Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophists?

DuQuette: It's impossible to weigh his influence. His work touched many influential people during his lifetime many people who were afraid to admit that they even knew the man, let alone confess they admired or were influenced by his work. His Eight Lectures on Yoga was certainly one of the first of its kind from a westerner.

Ashé: Often I hear people talking of Crowley as if he arose in a vacuum, and certainly he was a unique personage in his time, but no doubt there were influences to his philosophical and spiritual views. Would you describe what/who you perceive as some of these influences?

DuQuette: Crowley was about as well-rounded in his philosophical and spiritual education as a man could be in his day. It is clear that he was influenced by the Old and New Testament scriptures and drew on their style and images to format many of his own writings. It is also obvious that he was profoundly influenced by the classics of Hindu literature, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. His translations of the I Ching and Tao Teh King were impressive bits of doing at a time when you could count the English translations of both texts on one hand.

Influences on his poetry were numerous, but I would have to say that William Blake and Algernon Charles Swinburne influenced him the most.

Ashé: How did you first come across Crowley's work?

DuQuette: The Thoth Tarot was my introduction to Aleister Crowley. Then, *The Book of Thoth*. Once I crossed the abyss of fear and superstition generated by the rumors he was the "wickedest man in the world" I soon discovered that this guy was probably the greatest occult mind of the 20th century and not only that --- he wrote in English!

Granted, 99% of what I read went way over my head. Still it was clear to me that if I was really serious about magick and the western mystery tradition I was going to have to educate myself so that I could understand what this man was saying. After over thirty years of study, I can still say the more I learn the greater is my appreciation of the genius of Aleister Crowley.



Ashé: Speaking of the Book of Thoth, Crowley's classic work on the Tarot, last year you published your own book on Crowley's Thoth deck "Understanding Aleister Crowley's Thoth Tarot" (see review this issue). What led you to write this book?

DuQuette: I was blindsided 3 years ago in Chicago at a meeting between Don Weiser, Betty Lundsted (of Samuel Weiser) and Judith Hawkins-Tillirson, senior occult buyer of New Leaf Distributing. Judith called the meeting during the BookExpoAmerica to pitch Don and Betty the idea of me writing a book that explained what Crowley was talking about in The Book of Thoth, and to offer an commentary from the point of view of a Crowley expert on exactly what makes the Thoth Tarot the Thoth Tarot. I had no intentions of writing such a book and her pitch took me completely by surprised. I was too shocked to protest or support the idea. I just sat there with my mouth open. Don and Betty said something like, "Yes, that sounds like a good idea. Send us along what you've got and get it finished." That was that.

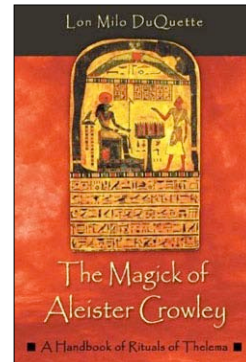
Ashé: Last year a revised edition of Magick of Thelema (Now titled...) was also published. Can you tell our readers anything of your current projects? What can we expect next from the gifted and prolific Mr. DuQuette?

DuQuette: I'm finishing up an off-beat book on oracles that is scheduled for 2005 release, and I'm working on both radio and television projects that are such a long shots that I don't even want to get my own hopes up. The same goes for a movie script about Crowley that I was hired to write and which I finished late last year.



The Magickal Writing of Lon Milo DuQuette

There is little doubt that Lon Milo DuQuette is one of the finest occult authors currently practicing their craft. DuQuette's writing is intelligent and avoids the dumbing-down that seems to be increasingly the rule for modern occult texts. On the other side of the publishing spectrum are texts that are so cryptic they are incomprehensible—whether due to elitism, myopia or ignorance of their subject. DuQuette avoids all these pitfalls and consistently produces works that are easily accessible to those new to his subject. At the same time his books contain a wealth of information that even experienced occultists will go back to again and again.



2003 saw the publishing of two of DuQuette's finest works of magickal theory: *Understanding Aleister Crowley's Thoth Tarot* and a revised edition of his immediate classic *The Magick of Thelema*, now retitled *The Magick of Aleister Crowley*. Both published by Weiser Books.

Magick is billed as a "handbook of rituals of Thelema." It is that and then some. DuQuette does much more than simply collect the extent rituals of Thelema that Crowley left behind scattered throughout his voluminous writings. DuQuette brings all these rituals into one place—a first in and of itself. In addition, he provides extensive commentary on their symbolism and meanings.

Being a high ranking member of the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), he has unique access to the orders archives containing many of Crowley's original, hand annotated manuscripts. He brings what he has found in Crowley notes and variant versions to the reader using it to powerfully inform his commentary.

DuQuette goes one step further. He includes the 'traditional' rituals that form the antecedents to Crowley's own. These, drawn mostly from the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, provide a valuable comparison. The Golden Dawn rituals, along with DuQuette's commentary, show the similarities and, more importantly, the differences between Crowley's work and that of his predecessors. Crowley's life was a demarcation between the old and new ages and this is eloquently demonstrated by DuQuette's juxtaposition.

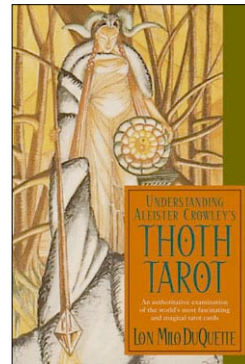


There is no question in my mind that anyone calling themselves a Thelemite should have a copy of this book in their library. Of course Thelema was not made to have rules, but there is no one who won't find something useful in this work.

Crowley, of course, himself wrote a commentary on his Thoth Tarot, *The Book of Thoth*. This book filled with an almost unfathomable depth of wisdom, does as much to obscure the tarot as it does to reveal it. Crowley's artistic collaboration with Frieda Harris, which resulted in the Thoth Tarot, is one of the great convergences in the history of occultism. Rarely is the full tarot completely redesigned, even modern artists concentrating their efforts on the major arcane at the expense of completeness.

Crowley and Harris not only set out to redesign the tarot, but to redefine it as well. The product of their efforts still remains singular to this day. The Thoth Tarot is second only to the Rider-Waite in use and popularity—the latter only maintaining its position through ubiquity.

It is then a fortunate occurrence that DuQuette's publisher talked the author into tackling the subject of the Thoth Tarot, almost the K-2 of occultism. The resulting book is the only comprehensive explication of the Crowley-Harris tarot available. DuQuette brings his normal intelligence and intelligibility to the subject culminating in a book that is both accessible and packed with insight.



In *Understanding Aleister Crowley's Thoth Tarot*, DuQuette provides an abundance of background material and foundational discussion. He follows these chapters, running some 81 pages, with a card-by-card commentary. The emphasis of the book is on teasing out the symbolism woven into the cards. He does provide a chapter covering Crowley's use of the cards as a divinatory tool. Throughout DuQuette adheres to his avowed goal of remaining "faithful to Crowley's delivery."

I would be remiss in not mentioning another of DuQuette's books his autobiography: *My Life With the Spirits: The Adventures of a Modern Magician*. This book rightly belongs on the required reading list of all Magick 101 classes. One may not avoid the same mistakes or learn the same lessons in the same way, but one can not over-exaggerate the power of reading how another wandered from point A to B. The magical life is not always an easy one and the lessons often not of the warm-fuzzy variety. When an elder (no reference to age intended) chooses to open themselves and talk frankly about their past, everyone should take advantage of the opportunity.

