

---

## Wicca Reading *The White Goddess*

Steven Michael Stroud

**Abstract:** This essay explores the influence Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* has had on people practicing witchcraft, from the 1960s to present and suggests that for segments of this community, *The White Goddess* was a consequential book. It also points out that Graves had an interest in witchcraft prior to publication of *The White Goddess* (1948) and respected it as a legitimate religious practice.

**Keywords:** Witches, Witchcraft, Ogham BLN Tree Calendar, *The White Goddess*

—

Few readers of Robert Graves's many works have been as heavily influenced as the witchcraft counterculture has been by *The White Goddess*, whose legacy, begun in the early 1960s, continues to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

By 1960, Graves was aware of the nascent witchcraft movement,<sup>2</sup> and believed that witches had everything to do with the preservation of Goddess worship. When there was a plan afoot to make a movie of *The White Goddess*,<sup>3</sup> he explained to Dereck Boothby:

I wrote to my millionaire producer and said that certain witch friends of mine would help if called upon and he answered wanting to know where witches came into the story so I said that they kept the goddess religion alive throughout the Middle ages in most historic style. He got that point.<sup>4</sup>

---

The thirteen lunar month Beth-Luis-Nion tree calendar (BLN) became a touchstone of the witchcraft community, as it continues to be to this day. A letter to Graves from Dr Margaret Alice Murray in 1946,<sup>5</sup> written in response to an inquiry of his (in a letter as yet not located), indicates that Graves was well into the process of constructing or refining the BLN. He appears to have expressed an interest in how witches used trees and shrubs and the specific months these were planted, as well as in the initiation of witches.

In her reply, Murray discusses initiation and provides a short list of known witches, including both their real names and adopted names, or craft monikers, but, disappointingly, admits she knows very little of Graves wanted most keenly to know about, the ritual use of plants and herbs.

### **The BLN Thirteen Month Lunar Tree Calendar**

Graves states, in the opening pages of *The White Goddess*, that the language of poetry descends from ancient rituals in honour of the Moon-Goddess, which is squarely based on tree-lore and seasonal observations. In the second chapter, 'The Battle of the Trees', he discovers its historical trace within a Welsh poem composed of riddles, 'Câd Goddeu', or 'The Battle of the Trees', which involves a calendar used by the Celts. Graves demonstrates that the 'Câd Goddeu' represents an intellectual combat between druidic colleges, an idea he had adopted from Edward Davies:

The reverend Edward Davies, a brilliant but hopelessly erratic Welsh scholar of the early 19th century, first noted in his Celtic researches 1809, the battle described by Gwion is not a frivolous battle or a battle physically fought but a battle fought intellectually in the heads and with the tongues of the learned. Davies also noted that in all Celtic languages trees means letters and that the

---

druidic colleges were founded in woods or Groves that a great part of the bulk of druidic mysteries was concerned with twigs of different sorts and the most ancient Irish alphabet the BLN.<sup>6</sup>

He expands on the ‘brilliant but hopelessly erratic’ Davies, reconstructing the BLN tree language and corresponding calendar. It’s possible that Graves was influenced by the *Auraicept na n-éces: The Scholars’ Primer*, edited by George Calder (1917).<sup>7</sup> While no copy of it appears in his library collection at St John’s, perhaps he was alerted to its existence many years earlier by his father, the folklorist Alfred Perceval Graves.<sup>8</sup>

### **Witchcraft, Graves, and the BLN Tree Calendar**

A decade or so after Graves published the Ogham BLN calendar in *The White Goddess*, it was embraced by witches as a sacred calendar, in alternative to the ubiquitous twelve-month calendar. I am grateful to historian Ronald Hutton for directions in seeking out its influence:

Graves’s Tree Calendar was never formally added to Gardnerian Wicca as a component: it is not included in any of the main lineages of Books of Shadows, for example. Nor did *The White Goddess* become as foundational to Wiccan thinking as it did for example, to that of Robert Cochrane and his network. However, it clearly did make a considerable impact on individual Wiccans [... and] did so mostly in the mid to late 1960s. The reason it is not in Alexandrian Wicca is that it split off from the Gardnerian in the early 1960s, and so its book of shadows contains none of the material which came into Gardnerian books after that period.<sup>9</sup>

---

As Hutton indicates, there are numerous witchcraft traditions, under those traditions are individual covens, and, lastly, solitary practitioners. Among the numerous traditions, those focused on in this article are the Gardnerian Wicca (founded by Gerald B. Gardner, also known as ‘Scire’: (1884-1964));<sup>10</sup> The McFarland Dianic Tradition (Co-founded by Morgan McFarland (1944-2015));<sup>11</sup> and The Clan of Tubal Cain (founded by Roy Bowers, also known as Robert Cochrane (1931-1966)).<sup>12</sup> This is far from an exhaustive list of witchcraft traditions influenced by Robert Graves and *The White Goddess*. At this point it is impossible to provide such a list, as many practitioners of witchcraft and many individual covens prefer to remain out of the spotlight. The air of secrecy with which they choose to cloak their craft extends to the publication of their beliefs and practices. However, following are some traditions, covens, and practitioners who have reported their influence by *The White Goddess*.

### **Gardnerian Wicca and *The White Goddess***

One of the Gardnerian Witches so influenced was Major Frederick ‘Derick or Derek’ Boothby. In the introduction to the Graves-Boothby correspondence (1960-1969) held in the Ellsworth Mason Collection in the University of Tulsa, Boothby is characterized ‘[a]t the time of the beginning of the correspondence [... as] the head of an organization of a group of covens in the British witch cult and a practicing witch.’ Within their correspondence, Boothby attempts to reconcile the thirteen-month Ogham BLN calendar with the twelve-month calendar he had learned from Gerald Gardner. Until 1960, Boothby was a part of Gardner’s first Wiccan Coven, The Bricket Wood Coven. Writing to Graves about the BLN Tree Calendar, he states:

---

I have been doing a job on the allocation of which festivals to the 13-month calendar, using the vowels for the festivals and placing the intercalary day at Midsummer, with no greater authority than *Midsummer Night's Dream*. It seems to me to work out rather well.<sup>13</sup>

How much progress, if any, Boothby made in his efforts is unknown.

In 1964, Celia Penney (1930-2008), known in the craft as either Francesca or Floranis, one of Gerald Gardner's last high priestesses,<sup>14</sup> chose to use the BLN calendar for her practices. It is possible that she may have passed this tradition on down her coven line. In Penney's notebook is a page entitled 'The Craft'. Among her notes on the craft, is a reference to Robert Graves. 'Witchcraft is a moon cult. The year has 13 moons, with 13 weeks to each quarter. I myself have chosen to use the Ogham tree calendar that Robert Graves posits with the 13 trees as it makes the greatest sense to me.'<sup>15</sup>

The daughter of Celia Penney, Tanith Burcombe (b. 1975) had access to an almost exact copy of Graves's calendar in her mother's notebooks. Burcombe chooses to use the calendar herself to this day. 'My mother felt that Graves's calendar most closely represented how the wheel of the year turn[s]. Each Gardnerian chooses which calendar they choose to employ. Graves, BLN Calendar was hers (and subsequently mine).' (Ibid)

Burcombe has been a solitary Gardnerian Wiccan Tradition practitioner (by choice) since 1991. She was initiated at her request on Beltane (01 February 1991). She states: 'My lineage comes from Gerald B Gardner, through Celia Penney (Francesca) as my mentor, and my mother. I was initiated in 1991 by my parents at my request, and have been practicing Gardnerian [witchcraft] ever since. Each

---

month I celebrate the full moon based on associations, symbols and intentions that these trees carry.’ (Ibid)

Burcombe demonstrates the persistent, ongoing appeal of Graves’s calendar, even in the absence of institutional dogma. Its intellectual or aesthetic appeal is noted by Christina Oakley Harrington, author of *Dreams of Witches*:<sup>16</sup> ‘many witches love toying with [the 13 month and tree calendar] as a personal choice to adopt into their own practice.’<sup>17</sup>

The trees Graves assigned to each month are important to Burcombe since they are not just a symbol of nature and the seasons but a symbol of the Goddess as she passes through the wheel of time. Each and every tree Graves assigned to each month holds importance. ‘Each month I celebrate the full moon based on the associations, symbols and intentions that these trees carry. There are many different associations based upon each tree. It is important to observe such detail in my blessings.’ (Burcombe)

Burcombe’s specificity suggests she has studied the text of *The White Goddess*:

I tailor the intentions specific to the tree for all my magical workings around the full or new moon. This way I feel I am honoring the nature of that tree i.e., using rowan to bless the wolf moon (beginning of the year) or the cold moon (end of the year), honing my protection or healing for a friend or family member.’ (Ibid)

### **The McFarland Dianic Tradition**

What is now known as the McFarland Dianic tradition (a tradition named after the Roman goddess, Diana) is another form of witchcraft, co-founded by its namesake Morgan McFarland (1941-2015) in 1971. *The White Goddess* has had a greater lasting impact on this tradition than many others.

---

Silver Moon Withers, who has been involved with the McFarland Dianic tradition since 1990, asserts:

The Celtic tree calendar as written by Robert Graves has had the most impact on the McFarland tradition. I knew Morgan McFarland in my youth. The BLN Celtic tree calendar is a centerpiece of the tradition. How it is used is secret however, and discussing such would be breaking an oath.<sup>18</sup>

The importance of *The White Goddess* in the McFarland Tradition is concisely explained by Karen Perry, also known as Kalisha Kfp. Perry is a high priestess in several traditions, a second-generation High Priestess in the McFarland Dianic, and a long-time friend of Morgan McFarland. Because of its wealth of information, which includes an assertion that *The White Goddess* created space for the masculine principle in the McFarland Dianic cult, I am quoting extensively from her letter of 22 July 2023.

McFarland Dianic Mysteries are almost entirely founded from *The White Goddess*, although not exclusively. Morgan McFarland used other sources in her research and studies. The tradition most likely would have simply developed in different ways had she never used *The White Goddess*, developing with different Mysteries, as women needed something that addressed their individual spirituality and needs at the time. Morgan started to grow her vision of a feminist / goddess based religion. Growth over time became inevitable with or without *The White Goddess*.

Using *The White Goddess* also opened the doors to men becoming involved as well, unlike the other feminist Dianics that excluded anything masculine. In my

---

opinion, two things define McFarland Dianics as the tradition has developed and grown over the decades: 1) The use of Graves's *White Goddess*, and 2) including men and a masculine principle. [These] became the two most [...] important common denominators that separate the McFarland Dianic cult tradition from their feminist Dianic traditions that exist today.

The McFarland tradition usually utilizes some of Graves's methods in deducing poetry and myth as well as the tree calendar; however that [...] information [...] is oath bound and for initiates only.

It took me over five years to even start to truly begin to understand the complexities of *The White Goddess*. Every year since I was first introduced around 1983 to *The White Goddess*, that understanding grows and multiplies. Studying *The White Goddess* has been a life changer as each Riddle, each lap wing, began to unfold and reveal a totally different way of seeing, of comprehending myth, symbolic metaphor and symbol, and how we can use those lessons to have a better quality of life. That awakening changes and evolves every year as I travel the lunar calendar of the Ogham tree alphabet and related stories.

This book has had a major influence on the other traditions I am a part of, except one: Gardnerian Wicca; and even then, Gerald Gardner used *The White Goddess* in recreating a revival of the old religion [in] the UK. The original Artemesian Tradition founded in 1978 in Dallas, Texas is a sister tradition to Morgan McFarland Dianic, and the lotus branch of the Isian tradition (Grand Prairie, Texas). Unlike the other two branches, West Coast Isian (California) and American Isian (Florida) started to incorporate *The White Goddess* in



---

1982. So, yes Robert Graves has had a tremendous influence in the shaping of my journey through the craft and in life.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Clan of Tubal Cain**

Much has been written about Robert Cochrane (Roy Bowers), Founder of The Clan of Tubal Cain in 1966, and currently active in the UK. Cochrane was one of the more enigmatic and dedicated individuals inspired by Graves. In the early 1960s, he placed an ad in a local newspaper, *The Manchester Guardian*, seeking to contact anyone who had read *The White Goddess*.<sup>20</sup> Shani Oates, Maid of The Clan of Tubal Cain discusses Cochrane's commitment to Graves's poetic orientation to myth.

There is no doubt that Cochrane was intrigued and inspired by Graves's *poesis*, though this certainly influenced his own approach to his craft as a process in itself, rather than [focusing on] the actual content of Graves's writings. By that I mean that Cochrane seized upon the methodology of how to approach her (The Goddess) through a living muse, and how lateral thinking, intuition and a poetic vision can be applied as a valid practice within craft for gathering personal *gnosis*.<sup>21</sup>

Oates emphasizes that *The White Goddess* should be used for valuing Graves's methodology 'as a tool of poesis'. Cochrane perceived in Graves's intuitive work, a perennial philosophy that appealed to his own assertion that truth (neither male nor female) is the absolute godhead. Cochrane declared that until others embraced this principle: 'we are all still babes sucking at the breast of poison' (ibid).

Graves published an article on contemporary witches titled, ‘Witches in 1964’ in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Fall 1964 issue), the year that Gerald Gardner died. He ended the article with this rather prophetic statement:

Yet the craft seems healthy enough in 1964, and growing fast, though torn by schisms and Dr. Gardner’s death. It now only needs some gifted Mystic to come forward, reunite, and decently reclothe it, and restore its original hunger for wisdom. Fun and games are insufficient.<sup>22</sup>

Little did Graves realize that he would be one of those figures ‘to come forward and reunite and decently reclothe the craft’, though he may have suspected The White Goddess herself might do so without his intention.

**Acknowledgements:** I would like to thank the archivists at St John’s College, Oxford, and the University of Tulsa at Oklahoma for their research assistance and their institutions for permission to quote from materials in their collections, and William Graves for his permission to quote from his father’s letters. I would like to thank Ronald Hutton for his willingness to share his considerable expertise with a rookie, and a very special thanks to the people who trusted me with details of their belief and practice, most notably Tanith Burcombe and kalisha KFP (Karen Perry).

**Steven Michael Stroud** is an independent scholar with an interest in occultism 1950-the present and in Mystery Religions. His most recent publication is ‘Derick Boothby’s *White Goddess*’ in *The Robert Graves Review*, vol. 1 (2022). He can be reached at [stevenmichaelstroud@outlook.com](mailto:stevenmichaelstroud@outlook.com).

---

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The editions most influential in the modern witchcraft movement were the first edition (1948), the revised ed. (1952), and the enlarged and expanded edition (1961), appearing at a time the movement was in a formative stage.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Grevel Lindop's article, 'Good Luck ... and Blessed Be': Robert Graves and F. A. C. Boothby', in this issue of *The Robert Graves Review*.

<sup>3</sup> Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (New York: Holt, ), pp. 390, 392.

<sup>4</sup> Graves to Boothby, 12 July 1960, St John's College, Oxford.

<sup>5</sup> Murray to Graves, 3 April 1946, St Johns College, Oxford.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historic Grammar of Poetic Myth* (Manchester, England: Carcanet, 1997), repr. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2013), p. 97

<sup>7</sup> *Auraicept Na n-éces: The Scholars' Primer: Being the Texts of the Ogham Tract from the Book of Ballymote and the Yellow book of Lecan, and the Text of the Trefhocul from the Book of Leinster*, ed. by George Calder (Edinburg: J. Grant, 1917)

<sup>8</sup> Offered in the purest spirit of speculation.

<sup>9</sup> Email from Ronald Hutton to author, 02 January 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Gerald B. Gardner was prominent in bringing the contemporary pagan religion of Wicca to public attention. A plaque attached to his grave describes him as the 'father of modern Wicca. Beloved of the Great Goddess'. For more on Gardner, see Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of The Moon; A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (New York: Oxford university press, 1999), pp. 205-39.

<sup>11</sup> Morgan McFarland and The McFarland Dianic Tradition have existed from 1971 to the present. There are no reliable published sources of information. For information I have relied on personal contact through email.

<sup>12</sup> The Clan of Tubal Cain was founded by Robert Cochrane, also known as Roy Bowers. Cochrane founded The Clan of Tubal Cain as his second coven in the early 1960s. Cochrane wrote to Graves twice in the 1960s, but unfortunately did not date his letters. He

---

was one of Robert Graves's biggest fans among the witchcraft community, though also one of his more vocal critics.

<sup>13</sup> Boothby to Graves, 3 March 1960, St John's College, Oxford.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Howard, *Modern Wicca* (Minnesota: Llewellyn, 2021), p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Email from Tanith Burcombe to author, 12 June 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Christina Oakley Harrington, *Dreams of Witches* (Black Letter Press: Obernkirchen, Germany, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Facebook Messenger Chat Text, Christina Oakley Harrington to author, 06 November 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Phone conversation with Silver Moon Rivers, 16 July 2023.

Rivers is a member of The Administrative Counsel for the Tradition.

<sup>19</sup> Email from Karen Perry (Kalish Kfp) to author, 22 July 2023.

Kalisha is a second-generation High Priestess in McFarland Dianic, and longtime friend of Morgan McFarland, Current Matriarch Original Artemisian Tradition of Witchcraft, High Priestess third degree Gardnerian Wicca, High Priestess third degree Lotus branch and West Coast Isian.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Howard, *The Roebuck in The Thicket: An Anthology of The Robert Cochrane Witchcraft Tradition* (Milverton, England: Capall Bann, 2022 ), p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> Email from Shani Oates to author 23 May 2023. For more on The Clan of Tubal Cain see Shani Oates, *Tubal's Mill: The Round of Life* (Creative Space IndependentPlatform, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Robert Graves, 'Witches in 1964', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 40 (Autumn, 1964), p. 550.