Book Reviews

Marco Pasi


For those who have heard about him, the vast majority associate Aleister Crowley with scandal, conspiracy, and/or evil. To the rest, Crowley is one of the central figures of twentieth-century occultism. His admittedly scandal-filled life does not detract from his work as a productive writer of both magical treatises and poetry, or from his important influence on contemporary and later figures.

This kind of apology for writing about Crowley was still deemed necessary when Marco Pasi published the first version of the present work in Italian in 1999. It may have been necessary still for the revised German version in 2006. As the long awaited edition in English is finally out in 2014, once more revised to include recent research, I believe he recognizes that this is no longer the case. Since Pasi broke ground with his thesis on Crowley, many more have followed him in choice of topic. Crowley and his _thelema_ are now an established topic of conference papers, journal articles, and academic books. Add to this a handful of decent to high-quality biographies of recent years, and we have a maturing field of study.

Even though years have passed since the first version, the present work feels fresh and covers new territory. The prose is dense with facts, yet easy to read. Despite Pasi’s text covering a mere 140 pages, he manages to include a general overview of research, some basics of _thelema_, and different sides to Crowley’s life. These supply necessary context and background, and while these issues are most prominent in the first chapter, they play a role throughout the book. Crowley’s varied expressions on politics over the years are presented in the second chapter. Pasi starts with tracing Crowley’s movement from British to Irish nationalism, including his anti-British propaganda activities during World War I. Crowley’s disparate views on modernity, his social Darwinism, and aristocratic elitism with attendant anti-democratic attitudes are dissected and discussed, especially in relation to his appeals to both Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia to implement _thelema._
To Pasi, the central element in these appeals revolves more around Crowley’s increasingly dominant view of himself as the prophet of the Aeon of Horus, trying anything to reach anyone who he thought might positively affect the role of thelema. Elitism and anti-Christian attitudes helped, as did any seeming overlap with the message in The Book of the Law (Liber AL vel Legis). Pasi makes good use of Crowley’s correspondence to note, for example, how Hitler and the activities of the Nazi regime were read through the lens of Liber AL. This includes both his positive and his critical discussions of how the collectivism and totalitarianism of the regime was incompatible with the individualism of thelema. By 1938, Crowley was thoroughly disenchanted with “ferocious fascism, and cackling communism, equally frauds” (p. 58), while still having nothing nice to say about democracy.

Crowley’s attempts to influence regimes were made through his wider network of connections. These had put him into contact with a wide variety of people more involved in everyday politics than himself. Some of them are presented in chapter 3, with the focus specifically on thelema and politics. The contacts mentioned stretch politically from later Major-General J. F. C. Fuller to Tom Driberg. The former is mostly remembered from his contribution to theory on warfare, but, in his later years, politically he was a Mosleyite, whereas Driberg was a Communist and, later, a prominent Labour Party politician. Pasi traces the rise and fall of Crowley’s contact with such people, also with a view to the milieu, common influences, and how the different parties influenced each other over time. Some of those whom Pasi concentrates on had some background in or more than passing contact with intelligence circles; Gerald Hamilton, a man of fluid political convictions, seems to have informed both French and German intelligence; Tom Driberg informed the British (about the Communist Party), whereas Maxwell Knight led an important counter-espionage section of MI5.

Such connections of Crowley’s have led to many speculative theories over time, and Pasi devotes chapter 5 to addressing some of them. Both those popular to Crowley’s devoted fans (Crowley as an agent of British intelligence) and those of his more devoted enemies, past and present, are considered briefly. Good information is scarce, but Pasi discusses the material at hand evenly. The interpretations he finds most likely are pragmatic and cut the Crowley of myth — both the hero and the villain — down to size. He had contacts with, made use of, and was used by people involved in intelligence circles, but at a small scale, regarding small and specific matters. He may have been considered, and was certainly willing, with regard to interviewing Rudolf Hess, but it did not happen, and he played no other role in the affair. The chapter is almost