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When Witches Came Out of the Broom Closet

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When did witchcraft, paganism and other occult activities stop being esoteric, or “hidden”, and become part of mainstream Australian culture? This was the question that launched this research aimed at discovering both an identifiable starting point and, perhaps, some reasons for its popularisation at that particular time.

In May 2003, when research on this project began, *Australian Women’s Weekly* had their usual “Garden by the Stars” and another regular feature, “Horoscopes” by Athena Starwoman. There is nothing unexpected about that; the public has long been used to mainstream magazines and newspapers including horoscopes. This magazine, however, does not include the more occult type of material that two other popular magazines do—material which a couple of decades ago would have been confined to specialised publications not read by the general public.

The May 10, 2003 issue of *New Idea* had an advice feature called “Psychic World”; a horoscope section and 14 ads for psychics who can be phoned for help. They offered numerology, dream interpretations, tarot readings, clairvoyant readings, mediumship and claim to be able to find lost objects, predict the future and solve money and relationship problems.

Woman’s Day May 12, 2003 issue had a multi-page section called, “Your Destiny”. It begins with a horoscope; devotes one page to a psychic who answers readers’ questions with help from the spirits; has an astrological feature on celebrities; a feng shui expert provides reader advice and a psychic-astrologer gives current lucky numbers for racing and lotto. This is followed by two pages of ads for a total of 14 psychics, some of whom will reveal past lives, provide help through guardian angels or will give business and career advice. There is also a full-page horoscope. The June 2, 2003 issue’s “Your Destiny” section contained 19 ads and had a “Wish on an Angel” page along with the usual features. The section opened with three pages of witchcraft spells by Lori Reid for obtaining love, money, health and happiness.

To give teenage readers a start on the adult world of the occult, the June 2003 issue of *Dolly*, had 16 pages of “Dolly Destiny Book”. There is an article on hypnosis and self-hypnosis; another on palm reading; two pages on boyfriends with various star signs; a dream consultant answers readers’ questions; there is also a five-page horoscope; “Angelic Wisdom”; a lunar calendar and a page of witchcraft spells the reader can use to achieve various desires.

When the mythical Dame Edna Everage, then just a housewife from Moonie Ponds, emerged into Australia culture in the 1950s, she and others of her ilk would have been shocked to find an array of such items, including witchcraft columns and advertisements for psychics, in mainstream Australian women’s magazines.

There is no doubt that publications change with the times and reflect the tastes, interests and current culture of the magazine-reading public. Feminist viewpoints, alternative medicine, homosexuality, multiculturalism are all found today in various mainstream magazines. Since research revealed that witches have appeared off and on in various magazines from mid-1997, by which time

they were apparently acceptable to the general public, it seems that the waxing and waning of do-it-yourself witchcraft columns may simply be governed by whether the publishers have a witch available at the time, rather than any other reason.

Other segments of the media, such as television serials, newspapers, movies and internet all currently cater for an upsurge of interest in the occult, particularly witchcraft. While some mothers of teenagers might not approve of the esoteric features in *Dolly*, they probably would not approve of the articles on sexual matters contained therein either. However, many of those same mothers would most likely not be particularly disturbed by the occult material in *New Idea* and *Woman's Day*.

Research revealed that by the early 1990s *New Idea* was regularly running their "Outer Limits" page, featuring readers' questions and answers by a psychic and by a tarot card reader. Uri Geller of spoon-bending fame was a writer for this feature, which also included the usual horoscopes. A dream analysis column had started in 1987. By June 1995 "Your Destiny with Mystic Meg" (an astrologer and psychic) was included. These columns were beginning to set the scene for a coming trend. The following month there were a few ads for astrology and tarot. By December of 1995 there was a two-page spread of ads promoting tarot, astrology, and psychics.

July 12, 1997 marks the beginning of the "Cast a Spell" column by "Good Witch Deborah Gray" in *New Idea*. Readers could write Deborah to obtain a witchcraft spell for a particular purpose. "Outer Limits" and Mystic Meg were still regular features. By this issue there were eight ads for psychics, six for clairvoyants, four for tarot, two for numerology, one for mystical magic. Some of these were combined ads for more than one occult skill.

Woman's Day published an occasional article on the supernatural or occult during the late 1980s. Of course, horoscopes had been a regular feature prior to this. On September 14, 1987 there was an article about the healing power of crystals. By the early 1990s they were regularly running a palmistry column, a dream column and the psychic column, "Dear Fiona" which ran for many years and has been replaced by another psychic columnist. By March 1993 feng shui was added.

Advertising in *Woman's Day* for the occult was limited until about March 1996, by which time it had increased to include two clairvoyants, two psychics, one on tarot, one on astrology and the sale of crystal balls. By June 1996 it jumped to 15 psychics, five clairvoyants, three on astrology, seven on tarot, and also ads for I ching, dreams and star magic.

Clearly this was becoming a viable industry, since between late 1995 and mid-1996 both *Woman's Day* and *New Idea* were capitalising on occult advertising. We can assume the advertisers were getting enough customers to make continued advertising worthwhile. Since the ads are still a major feature in both of these magazines in 2003, they must still be making money.

So if we date public acceptance, as measured by mainstream Australian women's magazines, from about 1996 when there was an massive increase in advertising, or perhaps from July 1997 when the first witchcraft column appeared

in *New Idea*, we therefore need to ask, just why did this sort of reading material and advertising become acceptable to mainstream readers of Australian magazines at that particular time?

There was no major war, no great depression and nothing particular going on in Australia or the Western world that might suddenly push mainstream women readers to take an interest in such material. There is a never-ending debate about whether the media shapes or simply reflects society. The magazines discussed have a very important segment of women readers of the Australian media and their editors and publishers obviously decided it was an appropriate and profitable line to begin taking at that time.

Just to keep the record straight, it should be noted that *Australian Women's Weekly* and *Woman's Day* are both published by ACP Pty Ltd, as is *Dolly*. So lest we think that the publishers of *Women's Weekly* are above printing such materials, it is important to note that they do so in two of their magazines. The reader profiles on their website do not indicate major differences in age or socio-economic status between their two women's magazine, although there are slightly more readers of *Women's Weekly* over age 50, a somewhat larger number of readers in the "professional or managerial" category, and also a larger number in the over \$60,000 annual income group. *New Idea* is published by Pacific Publications and they identify their typical reader as a woman in her mid-forties, either based at home or working part time.

While efforts to pin down a "when" were reasonably successful, the "why" remains elusive. Dr. Douglas Ezzy, Senior Lecturer in the School of Sociology and Social Work, University of Tasmania, has indicated (personal communication) that the observation among Australian witches is that the release of the film, *The Craft*, in 1996 marked the point when many young women became interested in witchcraft. It was from that point that many books and magazines aimed at young women began covering this sort of material. This date roughly coincides with the date found in the magazines and is possibly a clue to the "why".

Although witches and the like have always been part of children's literature, the publication of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in 1997 certainly marks the point when the public went berserk over a witchcraft book. So from about 1996-97, after a few years of accepting psychics, tarot and similar occult activities, mainstream Australia began to take public witchcraft for granted. Of course, while those who are seriously involved in witchcraft or paganism might quarrel with whether Good Witch Deborah's magazine magic has any validity, it seems to be acceptable to many readers who like to dabble in a quick and simple occasional spell. Her August 1997 potion for getting a promotion at work only required rock salt, ginger, sandalwood incense, a box and some paper—no eyes of newt or anything difficult.

Australia is well into the modern occult on its own but it does seem to follow trends in other English-speaking countries. An article in the *New York Times* on February 13, 2000, "Like Magic, Witchcraft Charms Teenagers", cites popular culture and TV shows as influencing the growing phenomenon of teenage interest in witchcraft. It mentions occult activities of teenage girls explaining they

are captivated by the “glossy new image” of witches on such television programs as ‘Sabrina the Teenage Witch’ and ‘Charmed’, and in films like *The Craft*. Once largely underground, the practice of Wicca is now out in the open and the numbers of its adherents climbing rapidly since 1986 when a United States federal appeals court ruled that Wicca was a legal religion protected by the Constitution. The article quotes an assistant professor of anthropology at Long Island University as saying that wicca appeals to middle-class girls who practice sorcery to exert power over their existence.

Social anthropologists have traditionally been interested in magic and witchcraft as part of their studies of pre-literate societies. In 1890, Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* contained the first extensive study of magic, myth and religion. E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* is another of the publications still read by anthropologists. He did his fieldwork in Africa in the 1920s.

Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, has also become a classic. He worked with Trobriand Islanders off the New Guinea coast. It was Malinowski’s (1954) conclusion that they combined magical beliefs and rituals with practical and genuinely scientific knowledge. Skilled gardeners with knowledge of soil types and planting methods, they also performed magical rites over their gardens to insure success. When they fished in the lagoon they only used standard methods but when they fished in the dangerous open seas, they used elaborate magical rituals. He believed that they used magic as a response to uncertainty—perhaps this is no different from someone today turning to magic to ensure a desired outcome.

Spiro (1969) deals with the “truth” of religious beliefs from an anthropological perspective, stating that a religion is a cognitive system with a set of propositions concerning the superhuman world which it claims to be true but for which there is seldom any documentary evidence. When the belief system is acquired by members of a group it becomes a culturally constituted belief system. This description could also be applied to a belief in the occult by Australians today. Spiro (1969) explains that Freud stressed the importance of personifying the terrifying forces in the world into gods, so they can be controlled—reflecting the child’s experience with an all-powerful father.

In the past, anthropologists found that witchcraft, communing with the dead, shamanism, fertility rites, fortune-telling and such activities were used by pre-literate people to control the unknowable, to ward off evil and bring good fortune, rain or abundant harvests and to placate the things they feared. Modern urban anthropologists might then reasonably turn their attention to the occult phenomena in our midst, particularly because it seems to have sprung suddenly out of nowhere and for no apparent reason.

As Malinowski learned in his study of Trobrianders, they also had certain scientific knowledge of agriculture and other matters. They seemed to apply science when they could and then magic for good measure. Shamans or witch doctors in many cultures practised medicine, which was often a mixture of science and superstition. Alternative medical practitioners remind us today that a vast number of supposedly scientific remedies produced by chemical companies

are from herbs and other plants which, in many cases, were known to traditional herbalists. The fact that today many mainstream medical practitioners cooperate with those using alternative methods, such as acupuncture and even herbal remedies, are examples of how the esoteric and the scientific are gradually coming together in Western society.

Thirty years ago the general Australian public thought that the few people who admitted being witches were not only strange, and probably disturbed, but quite possibly dangerous. Now the "Good Witch" in *Dolly* provides the formulas for spells and the necessary incantations for ordinary teenagers to use.

A number of writers date modern witchcraft from the 1930s when, according to Nelson (1987), it was revived by Gerald Gardiner. Ezzy (2001) dates the modern revival of witchcraft in England and the United States from the 1950s and says that at that time it was secretive, not commodified and generally practiced in small groups. According to University of Queensland anthropologist Dr. Lynne Hume (1997), Paganism arrived in Australia from Great Britain in the 1970s. She also mentions three groups that brought other esoteric beliefs into Australia from England considerably earlier: Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Order of the Golden Dawn. Famous author and Spiritualist, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, had a successful lecture tour in Australia in the 1920s, although Spiritualism had actually arrived in the middle of the 19th century. Hume (1997) mentions that the Druids came to Melbourne in 1849 and Theosophy was also established in Australia very early. She says the Theosophical Society and the Spiritualist movement laid the foundation for such Eastern concepts as karma, reincarnation, chakras, psychic centres, the astral body, nature spirits and the akashic records, which she points out are now "household words, even for Australians who have neither belief nor interest in such matters." Clearly the hippy movement also paved the way for more broadminded views of the world.

Hume (1997) explains that in the 1960s and 1970s occult and associated beliefs became more widespread in Australia and people took an interest in New Age ideas, Neo-Paganism and witchcraft. Among certain segments of the community it became popular to have a witch ancestress. Hume (1997) describes Sydney's famous Rosaleen Norton, who was called the "witch of Kings Cross" in the 1950s and early 1960s, when Australia was still very conservative. Norton became well known for her occult artwork.

According to Hume (1997), by the 1960s a number of magical groups were starting up in Australia, Transcendental Meditation began to attract interest and bookstores started stocking more occult books, while New Age magazines and shops began to emerge. By the late 1960s and early 1970s witches' covens began to form and Hume (1997) said that in the 1970s there developed a substantial amount of journalistic coverage of various occult practices that displayed more tolerance towards such differences.

Following a rush of demands for exorcisms after the release of the film, *The Exorcist*, the Anglican Diocese of Sydney established a Commission of Enquiry in 1974 to investigate the occult and its effects in Australia. The report concluded that the occult was potentially satanic, dangerous and linked to decadent tendencies in modern society.

In 1976 some covens were actively advertising in local newspapers for new members and it was reported that there were up to 200 witches getting together for major celebrations. A documentary on Channel Nine showed a Perth coven conducting rituals. Hume (1997) found that by the 1980s there was a widespread increase of interest in New Age philosophies, alternative healing and bookstores selling do-it-yourself occult paraphernalia from crystal balls to dream-catchers. The Age of Aquarius had arrived. The Australian Wiccan Conference, a national annual meeting which later included all Pagans, was established in 1984. The first two meetings were held in South Australia.

Ezzy (2001) studied what he calls “the commodification of witchcraft” and believes that the three Australian websites of commodified witchcraft he has analysed play on people's sense of isolation and alienation, offering the hedonistic consumption of commodities as solutions and substituting the purchase of commodities for engagement with personal self-discovery. These websites he looked at, that of Deborah Gray, Fiona Horne and Wendy Rule, market books of spells, potions and witchcraft paraphernalia.

Ezzy (2001) classifies Deborah Gray and Fiona Horne as “part of mainstream Australian culture, having published best-selling popular books, written articles and columns in magazines such as *New Idea*, and appeared on television talk shows”. He believes that the main aim of these three websites is to encourage people to buy their products and describes commodified witchcraft as a different type of witchcraft not only because of the profit motive but because it is embedded in a different set of social relationships from that of traditional witchcraft. He said: “Commodified witchcraft is designed to be attractive to casual, pleasure seeking part-time consumers.”

New Age and crystal shops, which sell books on the occult, as well as other esoteric items, are now easily found in Australian shopping centres and upmarket retail precincts. While until recent times publishers and vendors of works on the occult, psychic phenomena, parapsychology, paganism, witchcraft and similar matters were specialised and often hard to locate, today mainstream publishers and bookstores sell these types of materials. According to Vyse (1997) the number of titles listed in *Books in Print* under the subject “occult and psychic” grew from 131 in 1965 to 1071 in 1975. By 1990 the number under similar categories had grown to 2150 and in 1994 it was 2858 titles. This suggests a growing acceptance of these types of books. To measure the commercial power and influence of witchcraft books in today's market, simply consider the Harry Potter phenomenon.

Ezzy (2001), in his analysis of Deborah Gray's website, shows that witchcraft in its commodified form is not used to encourage self-development but to support the consumer's fantasy that purchasing the product will provide the anticipated pleasure. Her Goddess of Love Potion, for example, will help attract a soul mate and bring love into one's life. Rather than offering advice, her website offers products to solve personal problems.

How much of this is media-driven, or the result of advertising, and how much of it can be explained by the media simply picking up on a cultural trend and exploiting it? An item in the *Courier Mail*, March 21, 1997 called “No New Broom

for Qld Witches” by Jacob Greber said: “Queensland’s witches, fortune-tellers and ‘spiritualists’ have been spellbound by the State Government’s failure to exorcise a nineteenth century anti-witchcraft law.” The article points out that tarot readers, palm readers and ‘perfectly decent middle-class citizens’ could be accused of criminal behaviour under the law. It claims one of Brisbane’s leading doctors is a “very senior Pagan”. Chris Griffith in the *Sunday Mail*, on October 12, 1997, describes a Pagan wedding, or Ritual of Handfasting, in Toowoomba, which the article said would not be recognised under Australian law.

A *Sunday Mail* item on May 4, 1997, is an informative and sympathetic article called, “Pagan Power”. It says:

“Pagans are coming out in Queensland. A once-secretive national pagan organisation has appointed a public relations officer to dispel myths that equate paganism to salacious sex, blood sacrifices and bizarre rituals and worst of all, satanism. These days, druids are greenies and twentieth century witches practice a code of ethics.”

The writer stated that there are hundreds of Pagans in the state; mainly in Brisbane, Toowoomba, Ipswich and Far North Queensland. Some practise alone and others are members of a coven. They include scientists, solicitors, students, health care professionals, teachers, farmers, soldiers, engineers, public servants, librarians and psychologists. Various types of paganism are practised in Australia including: Norse, Celtic, Dianic, Druidism, ethnic (such as voodoo and aboriginal), shamanism, wicca and witchcraft. Most of them celebrate up to eight major events per year including Samhain (Halloween), Yule, Midsummer, and the Spring and Autumn equinoxes. These articles in the *Courier Mail* and *Sunday Mail* imply that this particular publisher is willing to report pagan/witchcraft material as straight news or features.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* described a Sydney witchcraft event in an article, “The Pagans of Suburbia” dated January 9, 2003. It stated that in the 2001 census 8755 people declared themselves as witches and 10,632 called themselves pagans. It mentions that the inaugural New South Wales Pagan Pride Day was held in September 2002.

According to a number of writers, there has traditionally been an upsurge of interest in the occult in the closing years of a century. At the end of the Victorian period (1901) and into the Edwardian there was an occult revival in Europe. Therefore, having just passed into not only a new century but also a new millennium perhaps it is to be expected that we would currently be experiencing a wave of interest in the occult. This is also the first end-of-century where the world has had the influence of mass media and mass communications to rapidly spread ideas.

It should be noted, however, that not only are teenagers and perhaps disgruntled housewives or others who may be suffering isolation and alienation, turning to articles and books on how to cast spells for love, money and career satisfaction—but there is current academic interest in looking at witchcraft as a social phenomenon. Dr. Ezzy teaches a course called “Magic, Spirituality and Religion” at the University of Tasmania and Dr. Hume continues her work along similar lines at the University of Queensland. Such studies help to provide a critical analysis of religious traditions of various kinds, including witchcraft.

It is hard to draw a firm dividing line between various branches of the occult, such as witchcraft and paganism; the paranormal, which includes parapsychology, the study of telepathy and other psychic phenomena; and activities like astrology, palmistry, tarot and feng shui. Many people involved in one or the other clearly draw the line, while others who run courses or sell items connected with one or more of the disciplines often simply lump it all in together under a catch-all such as “New Age and Spirituality Courses”. Courses include witchcraft, paganism, astrology, angels, aromatherapy, psychic powers, meditation, reiki, spirit communication, out-of-body experiences, astral travel and shamanism.

However, if we include parapsychology in this group of interests, the University of Edinburgh and University of Nevada offer courses and Duke University in North Carolina had a famous department of parapsychology from 1935 to 1965. Other universities around the world have individual researchers working in parapsychology and similar fields. While these types of programs tend to examine the validity of various psychic abilities, such as telepathy, precognition and clairvoyance, anthropologists more often tend to simply record the various occult activities observed or reported in groups they are studying, without considering whether they are scientifically provable or not. To a certain degree the ethnologist simply accepts that the informant believes it to be true and operates his or her life on that basis.

Nelson (1987) noted that the “gifts of the spirit” and charismatic movements are now accepted even within the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. Some observers consider this to be a growing spirit of toleration, while others have suggested it indicates the growing weakness of Christianity. An example is the El Shaddai movement in the Philippines, which Chan (2001) found to be popular among Filipinos in Australia. It remains within the framework of traditional Catholicism. Many priests and lay Filipinos object to the movement while others recognise that it is bringing thousands back to the Catholic Church.

While there have traditionally been sects breaking off from the major world religions, the sudden establishment and growth of a large number of cults was also a feature of the second half of the 20th century. No doubt this reflects problems in Western culture and with the establishment. Millennial movements have, according to Nelson (1987), been a “persistent though usually subterranean element of Christianity since, at least, St. John’s publication of the *Book of Revelations*.” Cohn (1970) reviewed millennial movements in Western Europe between the 10th and 16th centuries and described them as being the result of despair.

Nelson (1987) classed the resurgence of witchcraft along with what he called an “unprecedented burst of religious creativity on a world scale” in the second half of the 20th century in which reformist movements reshaped Christianity, cults and new religions “sprouted in profusion” and Asian religions were introduced to the West. He said this outburst on this scale is unique in human history. This is countering the previously growing tide of rationality that had swept away elements of magic and spirituality.

In his summary of why new religions arise, Nelson (1987) listed the decline of traditional institutional religion and a rapidly changing social environment which forces people to find a new basis for security. In the latter half of the 20th century, some found this in Eastern religions or in the revival of witchcraft. He indicated that the outburst of religious creativity of the 1960s and early 1970s had subsided by the early 1980s in Britain, America and Europe. He described the members of those 1960s and 1970s movements as mostly middle-class youth who appeared to be rebelling against their parents' life style and materialism. By the 1980s unemployment was beginning to be a problem and the age of affluence was over.

Should we perhaps consider whether modern witchcraft and other occult activities in Western societies do any harm? This is a complex question that would require extensive examination on its own. However, it might be worth mentioning some information on the use of telephone psychic advisors. Vyse (1997), using American data, reported that psychic advisors counsel callers for between \$3 and \$5 a minute. At \$4 a minute it represents \$240 per hour, which he describes as a "bad deal". He said there have been reports of people running up \$5000 phone bills from calls to psychics and suggested it could become problem behavior. Current prices in Australia average about \$5.45 a minute.

Vyse (1997) describes several important social trends over the past three decades that have helped to popularise a variety of superstitious and paranormal beliefs. He says the New Age movement since the 1970s has rejected science, technology and orthodox religion. It has promoted channeling, non-traditional medicine, crystals, therapeutic healing, reincarnation, astrology, numerology, and extrasensory perception. Actor Shirley McLaine has written five books on spiritual subjects that have sold over eight million copies. More recently there has been an increased belief in angels. The latest trend he mentions is people becoming increasingly anxious about their world and suspicious of the media. This has fostered conspiracy theories and an increasing belief in unidentified flying objects and alien abduction.

Humphrey (1999), in his debunking work, explained:

Surveys show that in general the degree of belief in supernatural forces is highest amongst the most vulnerable members of society—the poor, the sick, the socially marginalised. Predictably it comes to the fore at times of personal stress, as, for example, in athletes before a competition, students before examinations, women during pregnancy, people who are recently divorced or bereaved, soldiers on the battlefield, and whole nations in times of political and economic chaos.

To an anthropologist looking at the many flourishing aspects of the occult in Australia in 2003, it appears that witchcraft and many related activities are alive and well both outside of, and within, mainstream culture. It may be due to a failure of traditional religion or other belief systems to cope with the current era; it may be media-driven and a commercially viable activity; it may be because there are many people who feel they have lost control of their lives and need a magical prop; or maybe there is something mysterious at the turn of the millennium which has brought this cultural revolution upon us. Some writers have also described

the connection between certain occult activities and viewpoints and the development of feminism and environmentalism. In line with a parallel burst of interest in science fiction, fantasy, dungeons and dragons in the latter half of the 20th century, some people show up at pagan events in Star Trek gear.

However, given the historical progression of the occult in Australia, from its early beginnings in the 19th century, its gradual increase and spread during the 20th century, and the witches ultimately “coming out of the closet” in the final decades of the 20th century—with spells becoming part of popular magazine culture—perhaps there is nothing curious about the timing of it at all. It may have reached the point in its development by the 1990s that the appearance of the occult in popular magazines was simply the normal and logical result to be expected.

Hume (1997) has stated:

As Paganism filters into society at large, and more individuals express their own ideas which reflect and are a reflection of the symbols, ideology and practices of Paganism, society in turn, will be changed.

What the ultimate consequences of the occult becoming commonplace will be, in terms of cultural change in Australia, remains to be seen in the 21st century.

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