Crowley, Aleister (1875-1947)

Aleister Crowley was an occultist, writer, and mystic who founded the spiritual philosophy of Thelema. Crowley’s work combines European, South Asian, and Chinese esoteric teachings. His fictional, poetic, and spiritual writings celebrate free will. The popular press frequently referred to him as “the wickedest man on earth”. Crowley died in 1947, leaving behind a vast corpus of writing, multiple followers, and a growing store of legends.

Crowley was born Edward Alexander Crowley into a wealthy Quaker family in Warwickshire. After the death of his father, Crowley rejected formal education and his parents’ religion. After withdrawing from multiple public schools and working with tutors, Crowley entered Trinity College at Cambridge in 1895. At Cambridge he met Leonard Smithers, the publisher of some of Oscar Wilde’s late work. Smithers published Crowley’s first two books of poems.

**The Golden Dawn and Thelema**

While on a mountaineering expedition in the Alps, Crowley read about the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. On his return to London, he sought out members of this secret society and was initiated into it, taking on the name Perdurabo. At the Golden Dawn’s peak, members included Arthur Machen, Maud Gonne, and William Butler Yeats. Crowley shared his verse with Yeats and received a cold response. Crowley’s friendship with Samuel Liddell Mathers, a founding member of the order, led to a power struggle that resulted in the expulsion of Mathers and Crowley.

After Crowley’s expulsion, he studied Yoga and Buddhism in Burma and India and participated in an abortive attempt to climb K2, the second highest peak in the Himalayas. After marrying Rose Kelly in England, Crowley travelled to Cairo in 1904. There he claimed to make contact with a mystical spirit named Aiwass. His first major occult work, *The Book of the Law*, was the result of this experience. To disseminate this book, which contains Crowley’s most famous dictum: “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law,” Crowley established his own publishing imprint, the Society for the Propagation of Religious Truth.

After another failed Himalayan expedition, Crowley returned to England and founded, the A∴A∴, a magical order based on Thelema. Crowley used automatic writing to produce the order’s holy books and founded a journal, *The Equinox*, as the order’s house organ. Crowley’s magical rituals involved both heterosexual and homosexual rites. In 1912, as the A∴A∴ was falling apart, he produced *Book Four*, in which he began to use the unconventional spelling magick to refer to his mystical rites. As the A∴A∴ continued to founder, Crowley joined the O.T.O. (Ordo Templis Orientis) another secret society with roots in masonic orders. Under Crowley’s leadership, the O.T.O. became devoted to Thelema.

After spending the First World War in the United States., Crowley returned to Europe in 1920 and founded the Abbey of Thelema in Sicily. While in the U.S., Crowley was a habitual user of cocaine and heroin. His addiction led to his composition and publication of his novel *The Diary of a Drug Fiend* in 1922. Crowley envisioned the Abbey as a site of retreat. Reports of his activities, however, drew the attention of London’s tabloids, which printed a series of sensational exposés. When Benito Mussolini came into power Crowley and his followers were expelled from Italy.

**Later Life and Legacy**

At this point Crowley had exhausted most of his funds. He retreated to Tunisia to work on his autobiography, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*. The Mandrake Press, which had previously published *The Paintings of D. H. Lawrence*, published *The Confessions* in 1929. In 1933 Crowley’s brought an unsuccessful liable lawsuit that left him bankrupt. In the late 1930s Crowley attempted to interest both the British government and the Nazis in his teachings. For the rest of his life, Crowley was based in Britain.

Crowley’s teachings are carried on by chapters of the O.T.O. His influence on culture extends from W. Somerset Maugham’s caricature of him in *The Magician* (1908) to his presence as a character in the work of Alan Moore and Robert Anton Wilson. References to Crowley permeate popular music; most famously his face appears as one of the many figures reproduced on the cover of The Beetles’ *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

**Biographical and Autobiographical Texts**

*The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, eds. John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970)

Sutin, Lawrence. *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000)

**Recommended Editions**

Given the complexity of the publishing history of Crowley’s work a complete bibliography is nearly impossible. Below are two useful collections:

*Portable Darkness: An Aleister Crowley Reader*, ed. Scott Michaelsen (New York: Harmony Books, 1989) (Collects a career spanning overview of Crowley’s writing)

*Magick: Book 4 Parts I-IV*, second revised edition, ed. Hymenaeus Beta (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 1997) (Collects the foundational works of Themera including *Book 4* and *The Book of the Law*)