

= Wilfred Talbot Smith =

Wilfred Talbot Smith (born Frank Wenham ; 8 June 1885 ? 27 April 1957) was an English occultist and ceremonial magician known as a prominent advocate of the religion of Thelema . Living most of his life in North America , he played a key role in propagating Thelema across the continent .

Born the illegitimate son of a domestic servant and her employer in Tonbridge , Kent , Smith migrated to Canada in 1907 , where he went through a variety of jobs and began reading about Western esotericism . Through Charles Stansfeld Jones he was introduced to the writings of Thelema 's founder , Aleister Crowley . He subsequently joined Crowley 's Thelemite order , the A ? A ? , and the Thelemite wing of the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.) . In 1915 , he joined the O.T.O. ' s British Columbia Lodge No. 1 , based in Vancouver , and rose to become one of its senior members .

In 1922 Smith moved to Los Angeles in the United States , where he , Jane Wolfe , and Regina Kahl tried to establish a new Thelemite community . They founded an incorporated Church of Thelema which gave weekly public performances of the Gnostic Mass from their home in Hollywood . Seeking to revive the inactive North American O.T.O. , in 1935 Smith then founded the O.T.O. Agape Lodge , which subsequently relocated to Pasadena . He brought a number of prominent Thelemites into the O.T.O. , including Jack Parsons and Grady Louis McMurtry , but he had a strained relationship with both Crowley and Crowley 's North American deputy , Karl Germer , who eventually ousted him from his position as Agape Lodge leader , replacing him with Parsons . Smith retreated to Malibu , where he continued to practice Thelema until his death .

= = Early life = =

= = = Youth : 1885 ? 1914 = = =

Smith was born as Frank Wenham in Tonbridge , Kent , on 9 June 1885 . He was the illegitimate son of Oswald Cox , a member of a prominent local family who resided at Marl Field House , and one of his domestic servants , Minnie Wenham , whom Frank would never come to know . Considered an embarrassment by the wealthy Cox family , from an early age he was sent away to live with relatives , and aged four sent to a boarding school where he was physically abused by staff before being removed from the institution by his paternal grandmother , who took him for a year in Switzerland . From 1899 to 1901 , he studied at Bedales School , where he developed his lifelong hobby of book binding , before becoming the apprentice to a cabinet maker in Kendal until 1906 .

With few ties in Britain , he decided to emigrate to Canada , arriving in Nova Scotia in 1907 , where he gained work on a farm in Saskatchewan . From 1909 to 1911 he worked at a confectioner 's warehouse , and then for a further nine months at a logging camp , before gaining a job as an accounting clerk at the British Columbia Electric Railway in April 1912 . He had come to loath Christianity and the Victorian moral systems that he associated with it ; instead he began reading about Eastern religion , yoga , and Western esotericism . While at work , he met Charles Stansfeld Jones , a Thelemite who shared Smith 's interest in these subjects and who lent him copies of Aleister Crowley 's Book 4 and volume one , number one of The Equinox . Intrigued , Smith paid to join Crowley 's Britain @-@ based magical order , the A ? A ? , in doing so obtaining more of Crowley 's writings . He began performing many of the practices encouraged by the group , including yoga and the keeping of a diary recording his magical endeavours .

Smith entered into a relationship with a woman twenty years his senior , Emily Sophia " Nem " Talbot Smith , although it remains unclear whether they ever married . With Nem and her daughter Katherine , Smith moved into a specially @-@ constructed house designed by the Thelemite architect Howard E. White . Located at 138 13th Street East , North Vancouver , Smith converted the attic into a temple for Thelemic rituals .

= = = O.T.O. British Columbia Lodge No. 1 : 1915 ? 1922 = = =

Smith also decided to join the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.), an occult organisation whose British branch , the Mysteria Magica Maxima (MMM) , was run by Crowley , who used it to promote Thelema . In January 1915 , Smith signed up to the MMM , and in April went through the Minerval degree initiation at the British Columbia Lodge No. 1 . In May , he took part in the Lodge 's public performance of the Rites of Isis , which it was hoped would attract further members . In a private capacity , he meanwhile continued performing his A ? A ? practices , and also began experimenting with the entheogenic properties of anhalonium . In October 1915 , Crowley visited the Lodge , where he met with Smith . Soon after , Smith would be upgraded to the position of Master Magician within the Lodge , and in March 1916 received the Probationer level in the A ? A ? , adopting as his personal magical motto the Latin words Nubem Eripiam (" I will snatch away the cloud ") .

Smith 's relationship with Nem was strained , and he began an affair with his step @-@ daughter , Katherine . In November 1916 , the three of them tried to resign from the O.T.O. lodge so as to prevent their problems affecting the group . Their resignations were rejected , and by January 1917 they were once again active within the lodge . Nevertheless , in March the lodge shut down for 13 months , during which time Crowley and Jones scrutinised Smith 's diaries to ascertain his magical progress . Katherine became pregnant with Smith 's child , who was born in December 1917 , and named Noel Talbot @-@ Smith . Jones proclaimed that Noel represented " the Crowned and Conquering Child " prophecised in the main Thelemite holy book , The Book of the Law . Jones was soon named O.T.O. Viceroy for Canada , and in April he re @-@ initiated the lodge at Smith 's home , with Smith himself being appointed the lodge 's Right Worshipful Master . Jones himself claimed that he had undergone a " Great Initiation " and was now an Ipsissimus ; his relationship with Crowley broke down , and he subsequently resigned from the O.T.O. , deeply disappointing Smith .

Smith meanwhile continued working towards the A ? A ? grade of Zelator , while the British Columbia Lodge No. 1 became increasingly moribund following the death of White , a key member , who had succumbed to Spanish Flu aged 33 in November 1918 . Jones had rejoined the O.T.O. and relocated to Detroit in the United States . When Smith was fired from his job following a bout of flu in February 1920 , he decided to join Jones in Detroit , where there was a small O.T.O. community ; there he gained work as a clerk with the Detroit City Gas Company . In his absence , Nem was appointed Right Worshipful Master of the Vancouver lodge . In March 1921 , Jones and Smith proceeded to Chicago , but in June Smith returned to North Vancouver to see his family . That year , Jones convinced Smith to join an esoteric organisation known as the Universal Brotherhood (UB) . Smith however was unnerved that rather than expressing a Thelemic viewpoint , the UB adhered to Roman Catholicism , and he also considered its literature purposeless , vague , and grandiose ; he soon dropped out . Back in Vancouver , Smith aided one his initiates , Frank Page , in founding the British Columbia Lodge No. 3 in Kamloops , creating all the furniture for their temple . Nevertheless , the lodge closed after a year , with Smith 's own British Columbia Lodge No. 1 also becoming defunct in February 1922 .

= = = Los Angeles : 1922 ? 1935 = = =

Unable to find work in Vancouver , Smith headed to Los Angeles in California , United States . On the way he stopped at San Francisco , where he met with Cecil Frederick Russell , a Thelemite who had departed from the Crowleyan orthodoxy to found his own group , the Choronzon Club . Smith however disliked Russell , and later claimed that he had been unnerved when Russell began expressing a sexual interest in children . After settling in Los Angeles , Smith gained a job at the Southern California Gas Company , entered into a relationship with a woman named Ann Barry , and began attending occasional meetings of the United Lodge of Theosophists , an esoteric organisation centred in the city . Jones meanwhile had united Thelema with auto @-@ suggestion to found his own group , the Psychomagian Society (PMS) , and he appointed Smith to be its Local Recorder for Los Angeles ; out of friendship to Jones , Smith did so , but was uninterested in the PMS ' teachings . Through their correspondences , Crowley came to reject the PMS and relations

between himself and Jones once again broke down , this time permanently . Smith retained much affection for Jones , whom he saw as his mentor and friend , but nevertheless agreed with Crowley over the PMS and also rejected Jones ' ongoing fascination with the UB , which Smith considered incompatible with Thelema ; their relationship too came to an end in 1926 .

Now based in Los Angeles , Smith applied for US citizenship but was rejected , due to the fact that in his application he had claimed to be married but he was unable to prove with paperwork . Seeking to promote Thelema in the city , he adopted his own student , Oliver Jacobi , whom he mentored in the A ? A ? system , and in the autumn of 1927 , he developed a close friendship with fellow Thelemite and Hollywood actress Jane Wolfe . Although he continued to have sexual relationships with other women , Smith retained his love for Katherine , who came to visit him in Los Angeles , where they were legally married on 24 August 1927 at the Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale , the day before she returned to Montreal . She tried to get Smith to abandon occultism and Thelema and return to her in Canada , but he refused , leading her to file for divorce in May 1930 , taking sole custody of their child . Smith continued to have sexual and romantic relationships with other women , and ? influenced by Crowley 's bisexuality ? also experimented with same @-@ sex sexual relations , but felt no attraction to men . From July to September 1929 , a married woman named Leota Schneider moved in with Smith , and they had an affair , but she soon returned to her husband , while from July to December 1930 , Smith began undertaking sex magic rituals with Wolfe , although their relationship remained platonic . Smith soon met Regina Kahl and her sister Leona " Lee " Watson , whom he initiated into the O.T.O. in early 1931 , with Regina also joining the A ? A ? . Smith had sexual relations with both sisters , but while Regina ? with whom his activity became sadomasochistic ? became romantically attached to him , Lee soon abandoned Thelema .

In 1932 , Crowley , now based back in England , fell seriously ill , and believing his death to be immanent , he sent Smith a testament proclaiming that in the event of his death , Smith would become Frater Superior and Outer Head of the Order (OHO) of the O.T.O. ; he soon however recovered . In May of that year , Smith and Kahl began renting the large house at 1746 Winona Boulevard in Hollywood , and began to take in lodgers to help pay for it . Kahl and Wolfe began using the attic for Thelemic rituals , and in March 1933 they performed their first public Gnostic Mass in the room , hoping to attract interested persons to Thelema . Crowley was pleased with their progress , and asked them to raise funds so that he could afford to visit . The weekly performances of the Gnostic Mass began to attract increasingly large crowds , with their " Crowley Nights " attracting around 150 guests , among them the film star John Carradine . In April 1934 , Smith incorporated the Church of Thelema under US law , although retained the North American O.T.O. as an unincorporated secret society . Crowley however was confused , and believed that Smith had incorporated the O.T.O. , something which angered him ; he subsequently complained about Smith in letters to other initiates . After an argument , Crowley and Smith ceased correspondence for a time . Smith also attempted to revive the largely defunct North American O.T.O. , attracting 15 initial initiates , many of whom were dissatisfied members of the Choronzon Club , which was now in decline .

= = Later life = =

= = = The Agape Lodge : 1935 ? 1944 = = =

With the O.T.O. now being revived in North America , Smith founded the Agape Lodge No. 1 , based at his Hollywood home , and brought in 7 initiates to the Minerval level in September 1935 . He advertised the foundation of his group through an advert in American Astrology magazine and printed a pamphlet explaining what the O.T.O. was . The Agape Lodge held regular meetings , lectures , and study classes , as well as social events and a weekly Gnostic Mass open to the public . In February 1936 they held a Mass in honour of Wayne Walker , a proponent of New Thought who ran a group known as The Voice of Healing ; they had hoped to attract Walker and his supporters to Thelema , but they were put off by the Lodge 's sexual openness . Later that year , Smith and Jacobi

's employer , the Southern California Gas Company , discovered their involvement in the Lodge , demoting Smith to bookkeeper and firing Jacobi . Angered , Jacobi left the Lodge altogether , while Smith shut down the group 's private ritual activities for the next three years . As a result , the public attendance of the Gnostic Mass plummeted .

Activities picked up again when Kahl , who worked as a drama teacher , brought three of her interested students into the group , among them Phyllis Seckler , and other individuals also joined the group , among them Louis T. Culling and Roy Leffingwell . However , the rising number of members caused schisms and arguments , and the Lodge again ceased its private activities from March 1940 to March 1941 . They returned to their activities to initiate a couple who had become interested in the O.T.O. through attending the Gnostic Mass , rocket scientist Jack Parsons and his wife Helen . Parsons became enamored with Thelema , although initially expressed both " repulsion and attraction " for Smith . Smith wrote to Crowley , claiming that Parsons was " a really excellent man ... He has an excellent mind and much better intellect than myself ... JP is going to be very valuable " . The Parsons would help bring new members into the group ; Grady McMurtry and his fiancée Claire Palmer , and Helen 's sister Sara Northrup . In February 1939 a young college student who had attended the mass , Ayna Sosoyena , was murdered ; although police drew no connection to the Lodge , sensationalist local tabloids connected the two , although were unaware that the Lodge was involved with Crowley or Thelema . A sympathetic local radio reporter allowed Smith to explain the purpose of the Mass to allay fears of the group , but the interview was never aired in an agreement with local press that they would drop the story .

By this point , the Agape Lodge was fully operational once more , although Crowley had remained highly critical of Smith , believing that he was failing to raise sufficient funds for Crowley 's personal use . He appointed Karl Germer , a German Thelemite recently arrived in the US , to be his representative on the continent , and instructed Germer to oversee the payment of dues to himself . He also specified that it would now be Germer , and not Smith , who was his chosen successor . Attempting to placate Crowley , in December 1941 Smith stated that all Lodge members now had to contribute 5 % of their earnings as an " Emergency Fee " that went to Crowley . Crowley 's criticisms nevertheless continued , and Smith suffered a mild heart attack , retiring prematurely from work at the age of 56 before undergoing an operation to remove haemorrhoids in February 1942 .

Smith decided to relocate Agape Lodge to a larger premises , renting the large house at 1003 South Orange Grove Avenue in Pasadena from June 1942 for \$ 100 a month , moving many of the lodge members in to the house , living as a form of commune and raising livestock and vegetables in the grounds . Parsons had begun a relationship with Sara Northrup , while Smith consoled Helen , who would become his partner for the rest of his life ; nevertheless the four remained friends . Although they had ceased to publicly perform the Gnostic Mass , membership of the lodge continued to grow . A number of prominent members however left , among them Regina Kahl and Phyllis Seckler . Soon , both the FBI and the Pasadena police department began to investigate the O.T.O. and Agape Lodge , particularly as Germer , now leader of the North American O.T.O. , was German ; ultimately , they decided that the group was no threat to national security , describing it as a probable " love cult " . Crowley however had remained highly critical of Smith 's leadership of the lodge , and ordered Wolfe to send him on a personal magical retreat ; she felt conflicted , but eventually conceded to Crowley 's demands . Both Crowley and Germer wanted to see Smith ousted permanently , believing that he had become a bad influence on the other lodge members ; many of the members , including Jack and Helen Parsons , wrote to them to defend their mentor , but Germer nevertheless ordered him to stand down , with Parsons appointed head of the lodge .

In April Helen gave birth to Smith 's son , who was named Kwan Lanval Parsons . In May , Smith and Helen left for a two @-@ room cabin in Rainbow Valley with their baby , where Smith undertook his magical retirement . Back in England , Crowley undertook an astrological analysis of Smith 's birth chart , and came to the conclusion that he was the incarnation of a god , greatly altering his estimation of him ; Smith however remained sceptical . Refusing to take orders from Germer any more , Smith resigned from the O.T.O. , while Parsons ? who remained sympathetic and friendly to Smith during the conflict ? ceased lodge activities and resigned as its head . In a letter informing Crowley of this decision , Smith remarked " Would to God you knew your people better . " Germer

subsequently appointed Max Schneider head of the Agape Lodge , which remained inactive , while Crowley , Germer , and Schneider began spreading lies about Smith , including that he was responsible for raping initiates , claims that were denied by many Lodge members .

= = = Final years : 1944 ? 1957 = = =

In September 1944 Smith went on a second magical retirement , during which he performed pranayama and the lesser banishing ritual of the pentagram , invoked Thoth , and recited the Holy Books of Thelema from memory . During the retreat he learned that Kahl , his former lover , had died , which greatly upset him . Returning to his Pasadena home , he was welcomed by Parsons , but Crowley insisted that Smith be shunned by the lodge members , and so he moved back to Hollywood . Increasingly alienated by Crowley 's attitude , Parsons resigned from the O.T.O. in August 1946 . Now renting a house , Smith sought out various handyman jobs , when he learned that Crowley had died and been succeeded as OHO of the O.T.O. by Germer . He became good friends with the art dealer Baron Ernst von Harringa , who commissioned Smith to construct Asian @-@ style furniture for his gallery . Smith 's own health was deteriorating , and in 1948 he suffered from a number of mild heart attacks . He nevertheless continued to believe in Thelema , and hoped to revive the Church of Thelema through performing the Gnostic Mass once more . Following Parsons ' death in an explosion ? which Smith suspected was a case of suicide ? Smith was invited to perform the Gnostic Mass in his memory .

Although they had long disliked each other , Germer recognised that Smith was the only living individual with a good practical knowledge of the O.T.O. degree system , and so put him in contact with Kenneth Grant , who was then trying to revive the O.T.O. in London . Smith and Germer would only meet in person for the first time in June 1956 , when the latter was visiting California , and soon after Germer introduced him to young Brazilian Thelemite Marcelo Ramos Motta , who would later grow to despise Smith . Smith purchased a plot of land in Malibu where he built his own house for himself , Helen , and their son , which he named " Hoc Id Est " (" This Is It ") . Construction was interrupted in February 1955 when he underwent surgery for an enlarged prostate . This developed into prostate cancer , and mistrusting of conventional medicine , he sought out an alternative treatment at the Hoxsey Clinic in Dallas , Texas , which he visited in December 1956 , but they were unable to help him . Smith died as a result of the disease at home on 27 April 1957 , subsequently being cremated at the Grandview Memorial Park in Glendale .

= = Legacy and influence = =

The Unknown God was reviewed by Robert Ellwood of the University of Southern California for the peer @-@ reviewed journal Nova Religio : The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions . Ellwood described it as " the definitive work on American Crowleyanity " , noting that it was the product of 15 years of " careful and documented " research . He praised " Starr 's lucid style and the inherent fascination of the material , replete with vivid characters , epic rows , and sexual intrigue " .