

# From Decadent Diabolist to Roman Catholic Demonologist: Some Biographical Curiosities from Montague Summers' Black Folio

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### Introduction

The history and practice of black magic, witchcraft, and Satanism have long held a deep fascination in British—and indeed international—popular culture. Beginning with the gothic literature of the eighteenth century, through to the nineteenth century occult revival and Victorian “penny dreadful,” and then into twentieth century pulp fiction, tales of the supernatural involving maleficent magic have been authored some of Britain’s most popular—if not always critically acclaimed—writers including, among others M. R. James, Arthur Machen, William Somerset Maugham, Agatha Christie, Charles Williams, and Dennis Wheatley. These writers, as well as various other short story writers, novelists, and journalists, have all played an important role in shaping, recording, and reflecting popular beliefs about these topics. Indeed, not a few occult practitioners, most notably Aleister Crowley, Dion Fortune, Gerald Gardner, and Doreen Valiente, even turned their hands to writing popular occult fiction. Despite this, the frequent blurring of the often porous boundary between actual occult practices and groups, and the imagined worlds of the purveyors of popular and literary fiction, has been seldom explored outside of highly specialised academic literature dedicated to the history of gothic or weird fiction and the burgeoning study of what has come to be called Western Esotericism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Nick Freeman, ‘The Black Magic Bogeyman 1908–1935’, in *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875–1947*, ed. Christine Ferguson and Andrew Radford, pp. 94-109 (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017); Darryl Jones, *Sleeping with the Lights On: The*

In order to examine one trajectory whereby popular culture artifacts have influenced and reflected this wider British fascination with black magic, witchcraft, and Satanism, this article offers a series of biographical sketches about the life, writings, and reception of arguably the most seminal twentieth century purveyor of pop culture occultism: (Augustus) Montague Summers (1880–1948). Summers’ writings have often been dismissed as equal parts pedantic, eccentric, and sensationalist; as one scholar aptly characterised it a “commixture of spooks and sex and God”.<sup>2</sup> However, as an anthologist of supernatural fiction, author of short stories, and writer of popular books on the history of witchcraft, he undeniably played a pivotal role in laying the foundations for the British popular image of the occult in its more threatening guise across the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> As the founder of the Church of Satan, Anton LaVey (1930–1997) noted (with tongue firmly planted in cheek):

The British, although enamored of ghosts, hauntings, pixies, witches, and murder mysteries, have drawn most of their Satanic repertoire from European sources. Perhaps this is because a European Catholic who wanted to rebel became a Satanist: an Englishman who wanted to rebel became a Catholic—that was blasphemy enough! If most Americans’ knowledge of Satanism is gleaned from the tabloid press and horror films, the average Briton can boast of “enlightenment” from the pens of three of their writers: Montague Summers, Dennis Wheatley, and Rollo Ahmed.<sup>4</sup>

LaVey’s perceptive comment, as I will outline below, has significance for understanding Summers, who played both a pivotal role in importing the continental image of Satanism from French decadents, especially Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907), but also went one step further and converted to Roman Catholicism, restyling himself Father Alphonsus Joseph-Mary Augustus Montague Summers.

The title of this article takes its cue from a description of his biographer, which speaks of Summers’ in 1927 as he appeared to the average observer,

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*Unsettling Story of Horror* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), pp. 29-80; Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West, Vol. 2: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), pp. 207-278.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy d’Arch Smith, *Montague Summers: A Talk* (Edinburgh: The Tragara Press, 1984), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> On Summers’ influence see Juliette Wood’s excellent study, ‘The Reality of Witch Cults Reasserted: Fertility and Satanism’, in *Palgrave Advances in Witchcraft Historiography*, eds Jonathan Barry and Owen Davies (London: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 69-89.

<sup>4</sup> Anton LaVey, *The Satanic Rituals* (New York: Avon Books, 1972), p. 21.

the striking and sombre figure of the Reverend Montague Summers in black soutane and cloak, with buckled shoes—a la Louis Quatorze—and shovel hat could often have been seen entering or leaving the reading room of the British Museum, carrying a large black portfolio bearing on its side a white label, showing in blood-red capitals, the legend ‘VAMPIRES’.<sup>5</sup>

This quote begs the question of what other documents might have been found in this mysterious black portfolio over Summers’ eventful life. To offer some answer to this question, this article takes the form of, like Summers’ several anthologies of supernatural fiction, a series of thematic vignettes dealing with aspects of Summers’ life and purportedly “non-fiction” writings on the occult.<sup>6</sup> First, I will address in brief Summers’ biography, focusing in particular on questions surrounding his clerical career—both in the Church of England and later the Roman Catholic Church—and his projected self-image as a pious man-of-the-cloth and defender of the Faith. Next, I will address the rumors surrounding Summers’ alleged “Diabolist,” and in particular the basis for enduring rumors that early in his clerical life he officiated at so-called “Black Masses.” Third, I will deal with Summers’ writings and their reception, both popular and critical. Then, I will look at Summers’ bitter literary dispute with the Jesuit apologist and parapsychologist Father Herbert Thurston (1856–1939) and what this tells us about Summers’ approach to his adoptive faith. Finally, I will look at some of the portrayals of Summers preserved in later writers.

### **A Curious Clergyman**

The colourful life of Montague Summers continues to be surrounded by an air of rumour, mystery, and infamy, so much so that even invoking his name in academic circles is an invitation to what was apparently his favourite greeting when meeting with friends, asked in his characteristically high pitch and lispéd voice: “Tell me strange things.”<sup>7</sup> Despite his prodigious, if

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<sup>5</sup> Brocard Sewell, ‘Foreword,’ in Montague Summers, *The Vampire in Europe* (New York: University Books, 1961), p. xvi.

<sup>6</sup> This article will not examine Summers’ important work as an anthologist or his work on the gothic novel. On these see, for example, Montague Summers, *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964 [1938]) and *The Supernatural Omnibus: Being a collection of stories of Apparitions, Witchcraft, Necromancy, Satanism, Divination, Sorcery, Goety, Voodoo, Possession, Occult Doom and Destiny* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1974 [1931]).

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Jerome, *Montague Summers: A Memoir* (London: Cecil & Amelia Woolf, 1965), p. 6.

uneven, literary output and while still attracting a wide readership, a critical biography of Summers is yet to be written. It was only relatively recently that his long-lost personal papers were re-discovered in Canada among the personal affects he bequeathed to his long-time companion and literary executor Hector Stuart Forbes, and subsequently to Forbes' surviving relatives.<sup>8</sup> These papers can be added to various scattered items of 'Summeriana' already deposited in the Georgetown University library and other institutions, though at the time of writing these items have only been consulted by a handful of scholars.<sup>9</sup>

What has been written is a well-researched biography by 'Joseph Jerome', a pseudonym of the controversial Carmelite religious Father Brocard Sewell (1912–2000).<sup>10</sup> In addition to this, numerous anecdotes have been recorded in the writings of others about Summers, most notably the discussion of Summers' friend the poet Charles Richard Cammell (1890–1968) in his biographical portrait of occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), and a brief but highly illuminating biographical sketch by the Oxford bookseller and erstwhile occultist Timothy d'Arch Smith (both discussed below).<sup>11</sup> For the purposes of this article, however, only a brief biographical understanding is necessary as is relevant to Summers' religious life.

Born in Clifton in 1880 to evangelical Anglican parents, Montague Summers (as he was best known) entered Trinity College, Oxford in 1899

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<sup>8</sup> Gerard O'Sullivan, 'The Manuscripts of Montague Summers, Revisited', *The Antigone Review*, vol. 159 (2009), pp. 111-131; 'Prologue: The Continuing Quest for Montague Summers,' in Montague Summers, *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin – A Critical Edition*, ed. Jonathan Edgar Browning (Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2011), pp. xxviii-lxxii.

<sup>9</sup> For a listing of these see Wood, 'The Reality of Witch Cults Reasserted', p. 87, n. 29. See Brian Regal, 'The Occult Life of Montague Summers', *Fortean Times*, no. 349 (January 2017), pp. 42-46 for one of the few scholars to examine these papers. In writing this article I was unfortunately unable to obtain copies of specific papers held at Georgetown University library, for details of their holdings see:

<https://findingaids.library.georgetown.edu/repositories/15/resources/12229>.

<sup>10</sup> See also Brocard Sewell, *Like Black Swans: Some People and Themes* (Padstow: Tabb House, 1982), pp. 157-170 and *Tell Me Strange Things: A Memorial to Montague Summers* (Wirral: Aylesford, 1991). A useful overview of his life can also be found in Paul Adams, *Written in Blood: A Cultural History of the British Vampire* (Stroud: The History Press, 2014), pp. 88-96.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Richard Cammell, *Aleister Crowley: The Man – The Mage – The Poet* (New York: University Books, 1962), pp. 171-175. D'Arch Smith, *Montague Summers*. This was republished in Timothy d'Arch Smith, *The Books of the Beast* (Oxford: Mandrake, 1991), pp. 37-47, and this article draws on both editions.

and in 1904 was awarded a fourth-class degree in Theology, going on to receive a BA in 1905 and an MA in 1906. From this he went on to study at Lichfield Theological College as a candidate for the Anglican priesthood. Lichfield had been established in 1857 as one of a number of new theological colleges with an aim of encouraging the declining number of potential ordinands, particularly those needed to serve poorer urban curacies, and to train those from more humble social backgrounds than those who had traditionally been trained at the more socially elite universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Such colleges, however, had disadvantages, and were often seen as problematic both for the low-intellectual attainments of their ordinands and their potential for fostering an unhealthy spiritual environment which could readily develop into a party-spirit (that is, would lead to a Roman Catholic styled seminary model). At the time of its founding, for instance, Lichfield was considered somewhat suspicious for its High Church scruples, though this reputation waxed and waned over the remainder of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.<sup>12</sup>

What made Lichfield more important, and what perhaps explains Summers' remarkably short tenure as a student there (1906–1907), was that from 1870 it pioneered what has been called a “Probationers’ Scheme” for training clergy for urban ministry. This scheme sought to fast-track potential clergy into active ministry in order to meet the parochial needs of the industrial centres of the Black Country – often recruiting talented laymen from the working classes who lacked the financial resources to attend other theological colleges or the universities. This training entailed a year of intensive study comprising “a curriculum ... based primarily on the Articles of Religion and selected Bible passages.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to this, the program’s founder, Bishop George Selwyn (1809–1878), emphasised a communal life centred around organised worship and physical work. At the end of the year “the successful student would receive the college certificate from the principal and be ordained to serve as a curate, almost certainly within the Lichfield diocese.”<sup>14</sup> While this initial “Probationer’s Scheme” was modified after 1892, Lichfield remained an educational choice closely linked to its local diocese where a poorly performing graduate from the universities might

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<sup>12</sup> John Tomlinson, ‘An Innovation in Nineteenth-Century Theological Training: The Lichfield Probationers’ Scheme’, *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, vol 83, no. 2 (2003), pp. 424-434.

<sup>13</sup> Tomlinson, ‘An Innovation in Nineteenth-Century Theological Training’, p. 431.

<sup>14</sup> Tomlinson, ‘An Innovation in Nineteenth-Century Theological Training’, p. 431.

still hope to find fast-tracked ordination. For Summers, particularly as having studied theology at Oxford, he would already have been familiar with much of the curriculum.

While there is no mention of Lichfield (or, indeed, his subsequent clerical career in either the Church of England or the Roman Catholic Church) in Summers' highly selective autobiography *The Galant Show*, the kind of college life which Summers met at Lichfield was unlikely to have been to his satisfaction. The official history of the college paints a portrait of the college during the tenure of principal Edwin Elmer Harding from 1901 to 1909 that suggests that life would have been somewhat uncomfortable for Summers. With the exception of the college magazine, which Harding set up during the eight years of his appointment, the college's life appears to have been anything but the type of Anglo-Catholic haven which the ritually inclined Summers appears to have sought. Instead one is struck reading Inman's account by the almost complete absence of interest in liturgy, or even theology, with more space instead devoted to the recreational life of the students and the sporting achievements of both the cricket and rugby teams.<sup>15</sup>

While Summers' own tantalisingly vague memoir leaves no trace of his theological training, and nearly as little about his later interest in the occult, it is possible to turn to other sources collected by Sewell for some insight into Summers' character at the time. As a student at Lichfield, Summers was noted by his fellows for his decidedly ritualist scruples. As one contemporary, Reverend Arthur Valentin, later a priest in the Diocese of Westminster, described him:

Summers had great charm, and scintillated with wit, but there was something very exotic about him. Joss-sticks burned in his room, and he dressed fastidiously, and in Lent wore purple silk socks! Pale, with dark curly hair, he left an unfading impression of extraordinary cleverness and fine scholarship ... he was in part an Oscar Wilde, but far more religious. Unfortunately he became immersed in the externals and in the extravagances of the Anglican advanced party to which he and I belonged [but] He had sincere piety.<sup>16</sup>

Valentin's reflections might at first glance be dismissed as remembering Summers as an example of a particular variety of aspiring Anglo-Catholic clergyman with homosexual inclinations familiar from that period, men who

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<sup>15</sup> E. C. Inman, *History of Lichfield Theological College 1857-1927* (Lichfield: Lomax's Successors: 1928), pp. 65-79.

<sup>16</sup> Jerome, *Montague Summers*, pp. 9f.

found emotional and aesthetic satisfactions in the church which were often not available to them in late Victorian and Edwardian society.<sup>17</sup> However, Valentin's comparison of him with the decadent Wilde and other sources of information from the time bear out the accuracy of this description. Summers was, by all accounts, a decidedly ritually scrupulous and dandyish postulant with a flair for aesthetics and the dramatic. Indeed Summers' vast body of later writings includes a considerable amount of work on the more risqué of Restoration era theatre and playwrights.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to his interest in Anglo-Catholic churchmanship, however, Summers was also by this stage developing a reputation for what was seen as an unhealthy fascination with the occult, one which was—despite the sanitised account given by Sewell in his biography—attracting concern from those around him. Here the surviving papers on Summers are revealing, in particular the manuscript by poet John Redwood Anderson entitled *Montague Summers: The Early Years*, written at the behest of Sewell which Gerard O'Sullivan describes as a series of “anecdotes [which] paint a highly unflattering portrait of a man in his twenties and thirties who is deeply ambivalent about his sexuality, and drawn to outright diabolism.”<sup>19</sup> The revelations contained in this curious document will be discussed below.

Despite his somewhat unconventional interests, Summers was still ordained to the diaconate by the then Bishop of Bristol Dr Forrest Browne in 1908 and was appointed to his first curacy in Bath, followed soon after by his last curacy in the parish of Bitton in Bristol.<sup>20</sup> By this stage, however, Summers' fascination with the occult was manifesting itself more openly, and aside from claiming that the Bitton manse was haunted, according to a contemporary witness, Summers had become “thoroughly neurotic” and was “exhibiting a morbid fascination with evil which, even if partly a pose, was shocking in a clergyman.” Reflecting on his interview with the witness in question, the usually admiring Sewell concluded that “from his conversation it was clear that Summers had been giving a great deal of thought and study

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 345-354 and David Hilliard, ‘Unenglish and Unmanly: Anglo-Catholicism and Homosexuality’, *Victorian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1982), pp. 181-210 (esp. 200).

<sup>18</sup> See for example, Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 345-354.

<sup>19</sup> O'Sullivan, ‘Prologue’, xxxiv-xxxv.

<sup>20</sup> This section draws *inter alia* on the detailed account in Jerome, *Montague Summers*, pp. 9-23.

to the matter of Satanism; more thought and study than was good for a young clergyman with no special mandate to concern himself with such matters.”<sup>21</sup> It does not appear, at least directly, however, that Summers’ diabolical interests were responsible for putting a premature end to his Anglican clerical career. It was rather his arraignment on a charge of pederasty alongside another clergyman. One suspects here that Bishop Browne came to regret an earlier speech he had made in 1908 praising the “well-liked” Lichfield candidates he had ordained as businessmen of “sterling common-sense.”<sup>22</sup>

While Summers was apparently acquitted—all records appear to have been destroyed during the Blitz—it quickly ended his clerical career in the Church of England and in 1909 he entered the Roman Catholic Church, receiving instruction from the Dutch-ex-Dominican John Hautman. He was received into the Church on 19 July at the then Redemptorist church of St Joseph’s in Kingswood, Bristol. Summers went on to study for the priesthood at St John’s Seminary in Womersley, near Guildford, though after a few months he moved to study privately under St George Kieran Hyland, the otherwise unremarkable author of a now rare book on the persecution of English Catholics under the Tudor and Stuart monarchs.<sup>23</sup> The bookend to Summers’ recorded clerical career—both Anglican and Roman Catholic—came on 28 December 1910, when he received the clerical tonsure from the then Bishop of Southwark Peter Amigo (1864–1949), the same bishop who only a few years earlier had excommunicated the ill-fated Jesuit modernist Father George Tyrell (1861–1909) and known—even by the standards of his day—for his conservative Ultramontane views and intolerance for even a whiff of dissent.<sup>24</sup>

At this stage the ecclesial waters become increasingly murky and dammed in by various persistent rumours. Some say that Summers transferred to the Diocese of Nottingham, but on the eve of his ordination to the priesthood certain incriminating information from either a Catholic priest or Anglican bishop passed to the Bishop of Nottingham and led to ordination being withheld. Others suggest that Summers was received into holy orders overseas, either from Cardinal Désiré-Félicien-François-Joseph Mercier (1851–1926) of Belgium or the Bishop of Parma, and now canonized Saint,

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<sup>21</sup> Jerome, *Montague Summers*, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> Inman, *History of Lichfield Theological College 1857-1927*, p. 75.

<sup>23</sup> St George Kieran Hyland, *A Century of Persecution Under Tudor and Stuart Sovereigns from Contemporary Records* (London: Kegan Paul, 1920).

<sup>24</sup> On Summers’ later clash with Amigo see Sewell, *Like Black Swans*, p. 159.



Guido Maria Conforti (1865–1931). If these rumours were not sufficient, a third tradition exists. In this case one of the notorious *episcopi vagantes* (“wandering bishops”), then active in England, was responsible for his ordination—Ulrich Vernon Herford (1866–1938).<sup>25</sup> Given the well-documented relationship between various occultists and the subculture of “wandering bishops,” the story pertaining to Herford is a definite possibility and may also explain the lengths to which Thurston went in investigating the validity of Summers’ ordination (see below). However, such a conclusion is by no means secure, and certainly Sewell was convinced that there was “a strong probability, but not a moral certainty” that Summers was validly ordained in the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>26</sup> Whichever option one chooses, Summers began to style himself as a Roman Catholic clergyman from 1913 onwards, and, whatever his subsequent eccentricities, he subsequently acted—at least in private—in this capacity and vociferously defended his adopted church, often to the chagrin of its less outspoken members.

Summers’ subsequent career can be briefly dealt with here. It suffices to say he never held a parish appointment and worked for a period as a schoolteacher—remembered by his students for quietly praying through his breviary in class—between 1911 and 1926. Throughout the late 1910s and into the 1920s Summers made a name for himself as a controversial, but not unsuccessful, reviver of interest in Restoration drama and founder of the Phoenix Theatre, for which in 1916 he was even made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Summers was eventually able, through private means and his literary and editorial earnings, to persist as a private scholar until his death in 1948. For the purposes of this article, however, the most important question relates to what occasioned his subsequent foray from self-styled cleric to scholar of the occult and supernatural from the 1920s onwards?<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Montague Summers’, in *Man, Myth and Magic: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion and the Unknown*, Vol. 18, New Edition, eds Richard Cavendish and Brian Innes (Sydney: Marshall Cavendish, 1995), p. 2498. See also here J. Gordon Melton, ‘Foreword’, in *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin – A Critical Edition*, pp. viii-ix. On Herford more generally see Peter Anson, *Bishops at Large* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), pp. 130-155 and Henry R. T. Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes and the Anglican Church*, Second Edition (London: SPCK, 1961), pp. 90-94.

<sup>26</sup> Jerome, *Montague Summers*, p. 15. On the involvement of various occultists and the subculture of *episcopi vagantes* see Jo Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage: Ritual, Sex and Magic* (London: Routledge, 2007).

### A Decadent Diabolist

Summers' reputation as having a morbid fascination with the occult began as a student, and certainly from at least 1916 onwards one encounters his work in popular occult periodicals like *The Occult Review* and the Spiritualist newspaper *Light*.<sup>28</sup> However, his reputation for dabbling in diabolism began early during the period of his theological studies and was almost certainly influenced by his interest in French and English decadent literature, most notably the work of Huysmans, whose 1891 novel *La-Bàs* more than any other work provided a blueprint for decadent Satanism with its evocative scenes of the Black Mass as allegedly performed in fin-de-siècle Paris.<sup>29</sup> In 1907, whilst still studying at Lichfield, Summers self-published his first book of poetry, entitled—the title is suggestive of its content and subsequent events—*Antinous and Other Poems*. This collection of decadent verse, which one reviewer described as “the nadir of corrupt and corrupting literature,”<sup>30</sup> was generally seen as a poor stylistic example of the genre and is of little interest in the present context, except to note a curious piece entitled ‘To a Dead Acolyte’ which some have suggested alludes to Summers' involvement in a version of the so-called “Black Mass.”

Whether the mass described in this poem is necessarily of the “black” variety is unclear. Its central theme of eroticising the Catholic liturgy and the priest-acolyte relationship was popular amongst the group of late nineteenth and early twentieth century English writers euphemistically referred to as the “Uranians,” whom Summers certainly sought to emulate.<sup>31</sup> Without reciting the entire poem, it suffices to say here that in light of his subsequent career

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<sup>27</sup> Summers' non-occult career is covered at length by both Jerome and in Summers' posthumously published autobiography *The Galanty Show*.

<sup>28</sup> For Summers' sizeable periodical output from 1914 until 1948 see Timothy d'Arch-Smith, *Montague Summers: A Bibliography*, Revised Edition (Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1983), pp. 105-126. For his general bibliography see this work and also Frederick S. Frank, *Montague Summers: A Bibliographical Portrait* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1988).

<sup>29</sup> On Huysmans and decadent Satanism see esp. Robert Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), pp. 137-171; Henry R. T. Brandreth, *Huysmans* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1963), pp. 69-81; and Richard Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution: The Catholic Revival in French Literature 1870–1914* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1965), pp. 122-146; and Maximilian J. Rudwin, ‘The Satanism of Huysmans’, *The Open Court*, vol. 4 (1920), pp. 240-251. Summers was an admirer of Huysmans' work, a member of the Société Huysmans, and wrote the forward to the 1943 Fortune Press edition of *La-Bàs*.

<sup>30</sup> See Jerome, *Montague Summers*, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> On the Uranians see Timothy d'Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives of the English 'Uranian' Poets from 1889-1930* (London: Routledge, 1970), esp. p. 170.

and reputation some commentators—notably d'Arch Smith—have concluded that even at this early stage Summers' liturgical interests stretched not only to Anglo-Catholic ritual, but also to performing Black Masses. These rumours of his dabbling in diabolism continued to circulate throughout his life and beyond, but his reputation was likely as much a product of the vivid imagination of some acquaintances than as actual events.<sup>32</sup> Returning to 'To a Dead Acolyte', the incriminating poetic stanzas in question read:

Clad in Love's priests' apparel,  
White alb and scarlet camail,  
We stand in his dim carell  
With prayer and ritual meet.

We wave the fragrant censor,  
And as the fume steams denser,  
The Gloria groweth tenser,  
That mounts unto his feet.

Across the crowded place  
His bright eyes gleam with malice,  
When we uplift the chalice,  
Brimful of sanguine wine.

No mass more sweet than this is,  
a liturgy of kisses,  
What time the metheglin hisses  
Plashed o'er the humid shrine.

He dreams of bygone pleasures,  
Whose passion kenned no measures,  
Of all his secret treasures,  
The lust of long dead men.

And thro' dishevelled tresses,  
He smiles at our caresses,  
To know that he possesses  
As great a power now as then.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> A good example of this can be found in the confused series of claims about Summers and Crowley made in Lance Sieveking's *The Eye of the Beholder* (London: Hulton Press, 1957), pp. 247-248.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in d'Arch Smith, *Montague Summers*, pp. 9f. For a fuller discussion of the poem's style see Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*, pp. 349-350.

As d'Arch Smith notes in his discussion this poem, "this is satanism, satanism celebrated by Montague Summers in 1907 with as much fervour as in 1926 he would denounce it."<sup>34</sup> However, this may be over-interpreting, and whether what we have here is a poetic rendering of an actual "Black Mass" officiated by Summers, or rather an erotic sublimation of a Catholic liturgy, is open to debate. There is a further piece of evidence worth considering here—and one which both d'Arch Smith and other scholars of the occult have taken more seriously.<sup>35</sup>

Later in the same work cited above d'Arch Smith notes, while discussing Summers' friendship with one "Anatole James" (a pseudonym for one Geoffrey Evans Pickering), that "on Boxing Day of that year [1918] on Eton Road, Hampstead, Summers invited James to participate in the Black Mass."<sup>36</sup> Several histories of modern Satanism have suggested that this may in fact be the first "confirmed" instance of a so-called Black Mass celebrated in the twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> The Carmelite priest Sewell was naturally circumspect on this event (and gives an earlier date of 1913) but the aforementioned memoir penned by Redwood Anderson on which Sewell based his sanitised account is a far less coy and mentions an earlier invitation in 1908 while Summers was still an Anglican curate:

He [Summers] made this suggestion [that Redwood-Anderson join him in celebrating a Black Mass] in apparently entire seriousness; but did he mean it seriously? I did not know, and I do not know; but I prefer to think that he did not. At any rate, I affected to believe that his suggestion was mere banter, and I as banteringly replied that I declined the honour. Then, sitting on one end of the pew-ends and swinging his leg, he entered upon along discourse on the subject of Satanism and the Black Mass. He made it clear to me that Satanism was not the same thing as pagan devil-worship, but could only have meaning for one who had been a sincere Christian, and that, in this connection, it had its own awful logic. As to his description of the

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<sup>34</sup> D'Arch Smith, *Montague Summers*, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> See for example, Gareth Medway, *The Lure of the Sinister: The Unnatural History of Satanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), pp. 382-383; and Ruben van Luijk, *Children of Lucifer: The Origins of Modern Religious Satanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 317.

<sup>36</sup> D'Arch Smith, *Montague Summers*, p. 23. Sewell gives the date of 1913 in Joseph, *Montague Summers*, p. 56.

<sup>37</sup> See n. 36 above and also Ruben van Luijk, 'A Brief History of the Black Mass', in *Sanctifying Texts, Transforming Rituals: Encounters in Liturgical Studies*, eds Paul van Geest, Marcel Poorthuis, and Els Rose (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 275-288.

Black Mass itself I prefer to say nothing: the whole subject is not only the height—or, rather, depth—of blasphemy, but is too utterly disgusting in its revolting details to be set down on paper. But whether Monty was or was not serious in his suggestion to me, it was undeniable that he had himself given to the matter a great deal of thought and study; for he, then and there, proceeded to recite to me the *Pater Noster* in Latin and in reverse. After this, it was no small relief to get out again into the bleak wintry sunshine and to escape from that tunnel-like, and now desecrated House of God.<sup>38</sup>

While it is certain from these accounts that Summers was taking an active—and perhaps morbid—interest in these topics while still a curate, it raises the practical question of, given his subsequent conversion to Roman Catholicism (a faith where on the grounds of its higher sacramental theology such a participation would have arguably been treated with greater *gravitas* than in the Church of England), coupled with his later letter to the literary journal *Notes and Queries* in 1920 regarding “Prohibited Masses,” whether he would have actually had the faintest clue on how to perform such an infernal rite, if indeed any instructions or rubrics existed outside fictional texts like Huysman’s *Là-Bas* or the Marquis de Sade’s *Justine* (1788)?<sup>39</sup>

Despite d’Arch Smith’s assurances that “there can be no question of the truth” and of James’ integrity on this matter—and James’ subsequent revelations about Summers’ alleged sexual proclivity for seducing young Catholic men—his story may just as easily have been the kiss-and-tell revelations of a jaded ex-paramour (Summers ceased any contact with James in 1923).<sup>40</sup> Regardless, rumours of Summers’ diabolism were only bolstered by his subsequent publications and it is here worth turning to his literary output on the occult.

### **An Erudite Eccentric**

Summers’ interest in witchcraft and related matters did not begin as a cleric, but probably actually started in his formative years. His biography, for example, notes that “Glanvill was, I remember, upon the Library shelves at

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in O’Sullivan, ‘Prologue’, p. xxxv.

<sup>39</sup> Montague Summers ‘Prohibited Masses,’ *Notes & Queries*, s12-VII, no. 116 (3 July, 1920), p. 8. This letter suggests more that he was seeking information on illicit masses for his later *History of Witchcraft and Demonology* (1926), which featured an entire section on the Black Mass.

<sup>40</sup> D’Arch Smith, *Montague Summers*, p. 23.

home,”<sup>41</sup> a reference to the Restoration cleric Joseph Glanvill (1636–1680). Given this citation it is hardly surprisingly that Summers’ work is remembered chiefly today as the example par excellence of what has been called the “Anti-Sadducee” school of witchcraft historiography. This is a name taken from the words of the New Testament Book of Acts (23: 8) regarding the Sadducees’ lack of belief in angels or spirits first applied to unbelief regarding witchcraft by Glanvill in his posthumous 1681 work *Saducimus Triumphatus*, subtitled “Or, Full and Plain evidence concerning Witches and Apparitions. In Two parts. The First treating their Possibility, the Second of their Real Existence.”<sup>42</sup>

This Anti-Sadducee position, as outlined in the often-neglected work of historian Elliot Rose, was marked by a wholesale belief in all manner of claims about witchcraft and Black Magic, focusing on both “the reality of the marvelous” and on “the witch’s moral turpitude.” At the same time it stressed the blasphemous and thoroughly demonic nature of witchcraft and placing great emphasis on baroque scenes of Black Masses, pacts with the devil, and the orgiastic revelries of the Witches’ Sabbat.<sup>43</sup> Rose, quite rightly, associated this position primarily with Roman Catholic fiction writers like the French decadent Huysmans in *La-Bàs*, which contained vivid descriptions of the Black Mass and fin-de-siècle French occultism cited approvingly by Summers. Also associated with this were the cautionary tale against Spiritualism *The Necromancers* (1909) by Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson (1871–1914), as well as the later pulp Satanism found in the writings of Summers’ younger contemporary and plagiariser Dennis Wheatley (1897–1977) (on whom see below). This intellectual pedigree is worth bearing squarely in mind as we examine Summers’ purportedly “non-fiction” writings in the area.

Summers’ literary foray into the history of witchcraft and black magic began over drinks at the Royal Societies Club with the editor of Kegan Paul and fellow member of the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology Society, C. K. Ogden (1889–1957), who suggested Summers contribute a volume to his forthcoming History of Civilization series. The book produced, *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology*, appeared on 13 October 1926,

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<sup>41</sup> Summers, *The Galanty Show*, p. 155.

<sup>42</sup> On Glanvill see Roger Clarke, *A Natural History of Ghosts: 500 Years of Hunting for Proof* (London: Penguin, 2012), pp. 70-84.

<sup>43</sup> See Elliot Rose, *A Razor for a Goat: A Discussion of Certain Problems in the History of Witchcraft and Diabolism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989 [1962]), pp. 10-14.

and at least according to Summers' own account of its reception, occasioned a minor sensation, "a veritable bombshell exploded amid the anti-Christian and nihilist rabblement." Summers went on to note:

The edition sold out in two or three days. Within less than a week copies were at a premium. Men awoke to the danger still energizing and active in their midst. The evil which many had hardly suspected, deeming it either a mere historical question, long dead and gone, of no interest save to the antiquarian, or else altogether fabled, was shown to be very much alive, potent in politics, potent in society, corrupting the arts, a festering, leprous disease and decay.<sup>44</sup>

While Summers' account may be somewhat coloured by his own sense of self-importance, the book was certainly widely reviewed, and Sewell was likely correct when he said that in the 1920s Summers became "something of a social celebrity."<sup>45</sup> The work proved topical and in one article in the *New York Times*, written by dystopian novelist H. G. Wells (1866–1946), Summers' book was used for launching a tirade against contemporary anti-communist hysteria, noting that:

Mr. Summers makes interesting, disagreeable reading of the sort that enhances its excitement here and there by a coy resort to the transparent Latin, and its shows popes and prelates and puritans, kings and judges, all manner of respectable people, succumbing to exactly the same sort of emotional disturbance that now makes members of the Communist Party so dangerous.<sup>46</sup>

However, what struck most reviewers, perhaps erroneously, was Summers' apparent sincerity. Surely, a modern author writing in the Roaring Twenties could not be serious in opining, as Summers did in his famous preface in which he attacked romanticizing images of the witch, that:

All this is very unhistorical and very unscientific. In the following pages I have endeavoured to show the witch as she really was—an evil liver; a social pest and parasite; the devotee of a loathly and obscene creed; an adept at poisoning, blackmail, and other creeping crimes; a member of a powerful secret organization inimical to Church and State; a blasphemer in word and deed; swaying the villagers by terror and superstition; a charlatan and a quack sometimes; a bawd; an abortionist; the dark counsellor of lewd court ladies and adulterous

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<sup>44</sup> Summers, *The Galanty Show*, pp. 156f.

<sup>45</sup> Brocard Sewell, 'Introduction', in Montague Summers, *The Galanty Show: An autobiography of Montague Summers* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1980), p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> H. G. Wells, 'Wells links Witchcraft and the Reds', *The New York Times* (21 August, 1927), p. 3.

gallants; a minister to vice and inconceivable corruption; battering upon the filth and foulest passions of the age.<sup>47</sup>

Certainly not everyone took Summers at face value. In his review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the Jesuit priest Father Herbert Thurston fired the opening salvo in a tit-for-tat literary feud between the two men which was to continue in print until Summers' last work on the occult published in 1946. Thurston found himself opining "the more Mr. Summers gives proof of general ability, of scholarship and of wide reading, the more the suspicion deepens that a mystification is in progress and that he is amusing himself at our expense."<sup>48</sup> Thurston's choice of language here is intriguing and it is highly likely that in choosing the term "mystification" he is making an allusion to the infamous "Taxil Hoax" of the 1890s, in which a significant number of esteemed Roman Catholics had been caught off guard by the wild tales of Masonic Satanism purloined by the French anti-clerical writer turned feigned convert Léo Taxil (b. Gabriel Jogand-Pagès, 1854–1907) before he confessed to what he famously dubbed his "mystification."<sup>49</sup> Thurston appears to have initially suspected something similar was afoot. Summers, however, replied to the *TLS* forthwith, telling readers of the next issue in no uncertain terms that "I here state, most truly and emphatically, that my two recent books on witchcraft are put forth in all seriousness of purpose."<sup>50</sup> Summers was to stick by this position right up until his final days.<sup>51</sup>

Summers' protestations of sincerity here, however, perhaps proved worse in the longer term and his lauding of the excesses of the inquisition, coupled with his deliberately provocative reading of Reformation era English history—his comments on Anne Boleyn and Queen Elizabeth the First would make even Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953) blush—threatened to bring ridicule

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<sup>47</sup> Montague Summers, *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* (London: Kegan Hall, 1926), pp. xvf.

<sup>48</sup> Herbert Thurston, "Witches and Demons," *Times Literary Supplement* (2 June, 1927), p. 384.

<sup>49</sup> On this suspicion see Herbert Thurston, 'Diabolism', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 16, no. 63 (September 1927), pp. 443-444. The bibliography on the Taxil Hoax is extensive, but for three recent scholarly summaries see Massimo Introvigne, *Satanism: A Social History* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 158-226; van Luijk, *Children of Lucifer*, pp. 207-241 and Robert Ziegler, *Satanism, Magic and Mysticism in Fin-de-siècle France* (London: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 50-73.

<sup>50</sup> Montague Summers, 'Witches and Demons', *Times Literary Supplement* (9 June, 1927), p. 408.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Summers, *The Galanty Show*, pp. 154-164.



and opprobrium down on English Catholics, not least those of old recusant stock like Thurston who for most of their lives had walked a careful tightrope in order not to stoke anti-Catholic sentiments. Thurston's more extended review in the Irish Catholic publication *Studies*, published in September, was to prove far more pointed (see below).

Even allowing for Summers' high opinion of his achievements, *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* and its companion volume *The Geography of Witchcraft* (1927) both certainly solidified Summers' reputation as an authority in this area and are still (if, perhaps, somewhat begrudgingly) referenced by historians. Having achieved moderate success, from 1926 onwards Summers set out to make a living as a writer and went on to publish a series of further books on werewolves and vampires, both with Kegan Paul, before returning twice to the theme of witchcraft.<sup>52</sup> Both his later works, *A Popular History of Witchcraft* (1937) and the *Witchcraft and Black Magic* (1946), are in large part a resume of his earlier two volumes, though they do suggest—*pace* Juliette Wood—that Summers had adopted a far more paranoid and conspiracy-driven worldview as he aged.<sup>53</sup> *A Popular History of Witchcraft* is largely an abridgement sans references of *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology*—far more interesting is *Witchcraft and Black Magic*.

By the time Summers was preparing this last volume on the occult, his conspiratorial worldview and cantankerous tone both reached their apogee. Written over the course of World War II, *Witchcraft and Black Magic* is in many ways a rehashing of his earlier and more trenchant works, augmented with a mixture of more recent tabloid press clippings (which Summers was always fond of collecting) and references to what Summers saw as the clear and present danger of Satanism, opining on the final page that “witchcraft-black magic-Satanism, call it what name they will, for it is all one, the cult of the Devil is the most terrible power at work in the world today.”<sup>54</sup> If one

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<sup>52</sup> See Montague Summers, *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin* (London: Kegan Paul, 1928); *The Vampire in Europe* (London: Kegan Paul, 1929); and *The Werewolf* (London: Kegan Paul, 1933). These have all been reprinted in numerous additions and under slightly modified titles.

<sup>53</sup> Wood, ‘The Reality of Witch Cults Reasserted’, p. 78 suggests that: “Although not paranoid, he accepted the reality of conspiracy and quoted early writers on conspiracy theories such as Nesta Webster.” This, however, is too generous when one reads Summers' work chronologically—especially when one includes the introductions he penned to his translations and editions of demonological texts.

<sup>54</sup> Summers, *Witchcraft and Black Magic*, p. 223.

wants to find one place outside late nineteenth century Paris where the imagery which informed the “Satanic Panic” of the 1980s and 1990s finds its earliest fullest expression it is most definitely this book (or the writings of Summers’ younger contemporary Dennis Wheatley). In long strings of rambunctious prose Summers’ paints a vision of an age-old Satanic conspiracy, drawing deeply from the work of earlier writers in the conspiracy school of history including the French counter-revolutionary Abbé Augustin de Barruel (1741–1820) and the English Fascist Nesta Webster (1876–1960) with memorably breathless passages like:

So ancient, so vast, and so wicked an organization as the world-wide, world-old, supernatural, subversive, secret Society of Witches will necessarily in its method and procedure differ in some obvious details according to country and to century, according to policy and to opportunity, but actually since the aim and ends are invariably the same, since the lord and master of them all from the beginning has been and eternally is himself the same, the fundamental principles, the real activities and calculated operations of the Satanists will be found everywhere and in every age to prove precisely similar and unified, inspired, continued, and energized by essential evil.<sup>55</sup>

Liberal historians like H. C. Lea (1825–1909), who had been both highly critical both of the Roman Catholic Church and suspicious of the anti-secret society lore which it built up over the nineteenth century,<sup>56</sup> and Summers’ now deceased clerical nemesis Father Thurston, came in for bitter attack, while clerical writers and inquisitors are introduced throughout with laudatory epithets like “the learned” and held up as:

Those best qualified to investigate the subject of witchcraft, that Satanism which as a political and social factor permeates all history, and is the undercurrent influencing and polarizing events today in its hell-born eternal impulse to precipitate the world into the abyss of utter perdition, to ruin the human race here and hereafter.<sup>57</sup>

In *Witchcraft and Black Magic*, Summers’ long-term reinvention of himself from decadent occult dabbler to Roman Catholic arch-reactionary is complete and this is perhaps not historically surprising. If, as historians often note, the work of later historians of witchcraft like Hugh Trevor-Roper (1914–2003) and Norman Cohn (1915–2007) wrote under the long shadow

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<sup>55</sup> Summers, *Witchcraft and Black Magic*, p. 191.

<sup>56</sup> See for example, H. C. Lea, ‘An Anti-Masonic Mystification’, *Lippincott’s Magazine*, no. 66 (1900), pp. 948-960.

<sup>57</sup> Summers, *Witchcraft and Black Magic*, p. 111.

of Nazi atrocities and in reaction to the kind of paranoid conspiracist thought which informed European anti-Semitism, Summers' final volume was penned during the eye of the storm, in a period of ill-health, and fully endorsed a thoroughly dualist, anti-modernist and anti-rationalist view of the world.<sup>58</sup> Given the circumstances, it is not difficult to see even an arch-reactionary like Summers brooding over the fate of Europe and seeing in events the encroachment of the forces of darkness. Regardless, this did not make the book's concluding words any more palatable: "England has repealed the laws against witchcraft. The Divine Law she cannot repeal. 'Thou shalt not suffer a Witch to live'."<sup>59</sup> The long-term influence on popular culture of Summers' prose works is undeniable, but it is also equally important not to forget his work as a translator and editor of English language editions of important historical texts.

Alongside his larger studies of witchcraft and the supernatural, Summers produced English language editions of major historical texts on the topic—most notably his 1928 translation of the *Malleus Maleficarum* ("The Hammer of Witches"), perhaps the most notorious of early modern demonological texts. These kinds of translation and editing activities continued to occupy Summers over the late 1920s and into the 1930s as he prepared a series of ornate folio editions of what he considered the most historically important texts in the history of witchcraft for publishers like John Rodker and the Fortune Press, beginning with Ludovico Sinistrari's *Demoniality* in 1927. Summers later prepared editions or translations of Richard Bovet's *Pandaemonium*, Henry Boguet's *An Examen of Witches* (1929); Francesco Guazzo's *Compendium Maleficarum* (1929); Nicolas Remy's *Demonolatriy* (1930); and (with a less approving foreword) Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1930).

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<sup>58</sup> For the views of these two important historians see Norman Cohn, 'The Myth of Satan and His Human Servants', in *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, eds Mary Douglas and E. E. Evans-Pritchard (London: Tavistock, 1970), pp. 3-16, and *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt* (New York: Basic Books, 1975); Hugh Trevor Roper, 'Witches and Witchcraft: A Historical Essay', *Encounter* (May 1967), pp. 3-25 and 'Witches and Witchcraft: An Historical Essay (II)', *Encounter* (June 1967), pp. 13-34. These were revised and republished as *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969). On the historiography of Trevor-Roper and Cohn see, for example, Raisa Maria Toivo, 'The Witch-Craze as Holocaust: The Rise of Persecuting Societies', in *Palgrave Advances in Witchcraft Historiography*, pp. 90-107.

<sup>59</sup> Summers, *Witchcraft and Black Magic*, p. 223.

His activities as a translator and editor of demonological manuals, however, came to crashing halt in 1934 following the appearance of his translation of the notoriously lascivious 1652 French text *The Confessions of Madeleine Bavent* in 1933. Summers had earlier written of this text that “the details are so utterly abominable that even the soul of a priest steeped in the fires of the confessional, whom no human aberration can shock or surprise, shudders and sickens at the dark mass of turpitudes which are as the stench and vomit of the pit of hell.”<sup>60</sup> However, he still agreed to produce a translation for R.A. Caton’s Fortune Press, a publisher better known at the time for the publication of homoerotic poetry and pornography (what d’Arch Smith tactfully referred to as “amatory unorthodoxy”).<sup>61</sup> Here the British censors agreed with Summers’ earlier estimation of this work and in 1934 copies of this and Summers’ earlier Fortune Press translation of Sinistrari’s *Demoniality*—a text which discussed sex between humans and demons in great detail—were seized by the authorities. Caton was arraigned on charges of obscene libel under the auspices of the Obscene Publications Act (1857).<sup>62</sup> An interesting footnote to this whole affair, however, was that Caton was able to launch a spirited defence of Summers’ *bona fides* as a scholar of witchcraft and translator, calling in no less a figure than a young E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973), according to d’Arch Smith because Bronislaw Malinowski was unavailable!<sup>63</sup> Evans-Pritchard, whose groundbreaking *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* was to appear in 1937, informed the court that Summers was undoubtedly an authority on witchcraft and that “from the point of view of an anthropologist the book is of value.”<sup>64</sup> This opinion, however, proved to no avail and the court ordered the books destroyed.

Longer term estimations of Summers’ scholarly work, however, especially amongst historians of witchcraft, have not been as kind as that of Evans-Pritchard. Here it is worth citing two representative examples, the first of which is Jeffrey Burton Russell, a fellow Roman Catholic who has spent

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<sup>60</sup> Montague Summers, *The Geography of Witchcraft* (London: Kegan Paul, 1927), p. 417.

<sup>61</sup> On Caton see Timothy d’Arch Smith, *R.A. Caton and the Fortune Press: A Memoir and a Hand List* (London: Rota, 1983). See also d’Arch Smith, *Books of the Beast*, pp. 47–62.

<sup>62</sup> See d’Arch Smith, *Montague Summers*, p. 63. On the case against Caton and the Fortune Press see Alec Craig, *The Banned Books of England* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1937), pp. 46–55.

<sup>63</sup> D’Arch Smith, *The Books of the Beast*, p. 52.

<sup>64</sup> “Professor defends ‘obscene’ books,” *Daily Herald* (24 June, 1935), p. 7.

his career writing in the areas of medieval heresy, demonology, and witchcraft was skeptical of Summers' work. In a highly opinionated literature survey in 1972, Russell referred to Summers as "the most determined and informed modern defender of orthodoxy against the skeptics," before going on to summarise:

Summers' own works and his many editions and translations of classical witchcraft handbooks are marred by frequent liberties in translation, inaccurate references, and wild surmises; they are almost totally lacking in historical sense, for Summers saw witchcraft as a manifestation of the eternal and unchanging warfare between God and Satan.<sup>65</sup>

Russell was not, however, completely negative and he appreciated Summers' insight on the relationship between witchcraft and heresy—with which he substantially agreed—ultimately concluding that his "work was erratic and unreliable but not without value."<sup>66</sup>

The second example is Norman Cohn, writing a few years later in 1975. He was similarly ambivalent but far more blunt in his assessment, calling Summers a "religious fanatic," and "a Roman Catholic of a kind now almost extinct—obsessed by thoughts of the Devil, perpetually ferreting out Satan's servants whether in past epochs or in the contemporary world; horrified yet at the same time fascinated by tales of Satan-worship, promiscuous orgies, cannibalistic infanticide and the rest."<sup>67</sup> As perhaps the most trenchant historian of religious persecution writing in the second half of the twentieth century, Cohn's work, beginning with his groundbreaking *The Pursuit of the Millennium* in 1950, always had one eye fixed on the exterminatory actions of the totalitarian regimes in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany and the types of paranoid ideation which informed these policies.<sup>68</sup> Cohn's assessment of Summers' work—which, as suggested above, exhibited the same conspiracy-driven worldview which Cohn detected in other writers<sup>69</sup>—was most definitely coloured by his deeply held conviction

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<sup>65</sup> Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 29f. See also Jeffrey Burton Russell and Mark W. Wyndham, 'Witchcraft and the Demonization of Heresy', *Mediaevalia*, vol. 2 (1976), pp. 1-21.

<sup>66</sup> Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, p. 30.

<sup>67</sup> Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, p. 120.

<sup>68</sup> On Cohn's career see William Lamont, 'Norman Rufus Colin Cohn 1915-2007', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 161 (2009), pp. 87-108.

that the kinds of fantastical ideas about witchcraft purloined by medieval demonologists and endorsed by writers like Summers still had the potential for very real and deadly consequences.<sup>70</sup>

While in the long-run Summers' work has not convinced later historians, he certainly did introduce an entire generation of lay readers to the phantasmagoric world of medieval inquisitors and witch hunters, complete with its incubi, succubae, ghosts, werewolves and vampires.<sup>71</sup> His self-assessment here has certainly been born out and there is a significant degree of truth in his claim (made a number of times in his later writings) that:

More than one writer on sorcery of recent years has taken this englishing of the *Malleus*, added a snippet or so from my *Geography of Witchcraft*, recast his borrowings in current journalese, and airily exhibited himself, well in the limelight, as a profound master of occultism and goetic lore.<sup>72</sup>

As alluded to above, however, it was precisely the fear that Summers' ideas might be taken up as indisputable facts by the more credulous and bring ridicule to the Roman Catholic Church that the Jesuit Herbert Thurston penned what became the most unflinching contemporary critique of Summers' work, as well as setting tongues wagging about the validity or otherwise of Summers' holy orders.

### A Controversial Catholic

Summers' zealous advocacy on behalf of the Church's historical position on witchcraft did not sit well with all Roman Catholics and it was the Jesuit priest Father Herbert Thurston—the author of the entry on 'Witchcraft' in the 1913 *Catholic Encyclopedia* (one of his 150 entries!)—who took

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<sup>69</sup> In particular here see Cohn's introduction to the revised edition of *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (London: Serif, 2005), pp. xi-xv.

<sup>70</sup> Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, pp. 124f.

<sup>71</sup> As Wood concludes in 'The Reality of Witch Cults Reasserted,' p. 84: "[Summers'] real legacy is that he combined all the elements of the gothic novel into an allegedly real satanism that creates a tension between reality and fiction that appeals so strongly to postmodern imagination."

<sup>72</sup> Summers, *The Galant Show*, p. 162. It is likely that Summers had Dennis Wheatley in mind here.

particular exception to Summers' writings.<sup>73</sup> That Thurston and Summers eventually crossed paths and literary swords is hardly surprising. Their interests and opinions overlapped in some curious areas, so much so that it would not be a stretch to see them as each other's nemeses—or more likely Summers saw in Thurston his modernist doppelgänger! Both men were at various times habitués of the British Museum Reading Room and meticulous researchers of their given subjects. As mentioned, thirteen years before Summers' books appeared, Thurston had written on 'Witchcraft' in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* and his articles on the topic continued to appear into the 1950s.<sup>74</sup> Nor was Summers unfamiliar with Thurston's work. In *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* he was already referring to the Jesuit as "the ultra-cautious—I had almost said skeptical—Father Thurston."<sup>75</sup> The two men, however, were not entirely opposed on the history of witchcraft and they certainly shared a distrust of late nineteenth and early twentieth century liberal historiography like that of H. C. Lea and were both scathingly critical of their contemporary Margaret Murray (1863–1963) and her infamous *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921).<sup>76</sup> Moreover, both men were critical of the post-war British enthusiasm for Spiritualism.

Their agreement ends in the abstract and their divergent approach to these topics, especially Spiritualism, was considerable and worth discussing further. Summers' account of Spiritualism is in essence a loose paraphrase of *Catholic Encyclopedia* article on 'Spiritism' and a summary review of a celebrated collection of essays edited by Huntley Carter in 1920.<sup>77</sup> Summers infamously concluded—taking his cue from the earlier Catholic anti-Spiritualist writer J. Godfrey Raupert (1858–1929)—that "the "New

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<sup>73</sup> On the remarkably understudied figure of Thurston see especially Joseph Crehan, *Father Thurston: A Memoir with a Bibliography of his Writings* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1952). See also C.C. Martindale, 'Father Herbert Thurston, S. J. 1856–1939', *Studies*, vol. 28, no. 112 (December 1939), pp. 662–666; Ernán McMullin, 'Herbert Thurston, S.J.' *The Furrow*, vol. 4, no. 4 (April 1953), pp. 207–210; and Don Reynolds, 'Fr. Herbert Thurston, S. J.', *The Irish Monthly*, vol. 83, no. 972 (September 1954), pp. 358–363.

<sup>74</sup> See, for example, Herbert Thurston (with additional notes by Joseph Crehan), "The Church and Witchcraft," in *Satan* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1951), pp. 300–309.

<sup>75</sup> Summers, *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology*, p. 63.

<sup>76</sup> Compare here Summers, *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology*, pp. xiv and 40–46 and Herbert Thurston, 'Witchcraft', *Studies*, vol. 11, no. 41 (March 1922), pp. 97–110.

<sup>77</sup> Summers, *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology*, pp. 249–269.

Religion” is but the Old Witchcraft.”<sup>78</sup> Thurston, on the other hand, penned numerous well-research pieces on the topic beginning with a piece in *The Tablet* in 1909. These essays were eventually collected in the 1935 book *The Church and Spiritualism*, which received the approbation of not only Pope Pius IX but also the editor of the Spiritualist newspaper *Light!* Indeed, despite the misgivings about Spiritualism he shared with other Catholic writers of the time, Thurston’s measured approach found himself on the end of a censure from his provincial (and an investigation in Rome) for speaking too sympathetically about aspects of Spiritualism during the Great War and it is generally agreed that the declaration of the Holy Office in 1917 on Spiritualism was in answer to questions posed as a result of Thurston’s speculations.<sup>79</sup> For Summers, Spiritualist phenomena were either demonic possession or fraud, whilst for Thurston things were far more nuanced.

Similarly, while both men were intrigued by paranormal phenomena—ranging from ghosts and poltergeists to the physical manifestations associated with mystical phenomena—their approach differed considerably. Thurston was a member of the Society for Psychical Research in good standing from 1919 and wrote with a more skeptical eye in his works like *Superstition* (1933) and his posthumous collection *Ghosts and Poltergeists* (1954), noting in the former when discussing what he called the “mischief of credulity” some of the ways in which Catholic popular religion shaded into what he considered the superstitious world of apotropaic magic and folk charms.<sup>80</sup> Summers, however, was intent on accepting and affirming all manner of preternatural phenomenon, but stood aloof when it came to organisations like the SPR.

Finally, both men held an intense devotion to the saints, and each spent much time producing and editing translations of hagiographical literature. But, once again, their convergences here are tempered by their differences. Summers’ works are marked by a focus on the extraordinary, perhaps most

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<sup>78</sup> Summers, *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology*, p. 256. For the essay collection see Huntly Carter (ed.), *Spiritualism, Its Present-Day Meaning: A Symposium* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1920).

<sup>79</sup> See Crehan, *Father Thurston*, pp. 133-147. For the decree in question see ‘Response of the Holy Office, April 24, 1917,’ in Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, Sixty-Third Edition, ed. Peter Hünermann (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), p. 727.

<sup>80</sup> Herbert Thurston, *Superstition: A Backward Glance over Nineteen Centuries* (London: The Centenary Press, 1933), pp. 75-99.



notably in his posthumous work *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*; whereas the convert C. C. Martindale aptly and approvingly summarized Thurston's approach as:

It seems to me, then, that his reverence for *sanctity* was such that he really *wanted* to wean the devout from concentration on those semi-physical or maybe purely psychological phenomena on which the greedy-for-oddities do prefer to concentrate.<sup>81</sup>

Certainly, the two men shared interests, but their approach to their shared faith ultimately had little congruity and one can quickly identify the points of potential conflict. It is worth, then, turning to examine Thurston's broadside against Summers in 1927 in more detail.

After contextualising Summers' work against the inter-war backdrop of a renewed interest in diabolical and paranormal phenomena like Spiritualism, Thurston noted what was his chief contention against Summers' work stating:

Nothing could serve Satan's purpose better than that the Catholic Church, his most uncompromising opponent, should be identified once more with all the extravagant beliefs and superstitions of the witch mania ... It really plays into his hands; first, because it makes the Church ridiculous by attributing to her a teaching flagrantly in conflict with sanity and common sense; and, secondly, because it is associated with stories of all sorts of nastiness which feed a prurient curiosity under cloak of supplying scientific information.<sup>82</sup>

That Summers' work had appeared in a prestigious series by a major publisher added weight to Thurston's concerns, as did Summers' scatological prose, but it is at this point that Thurston's ostensible review slowly shades into an more *ad hominem* polemic. Thurston expressed indignation that an author, whose previous publications had covered such unedifying topics as the Restoration dramatist Aphra Behn and the Marquis de Sade, should present himself—with all the Roman Catholic trappings sans an *imprimatur*—as a devout son of the Church. To this end, Thurston not unsurprisingly rhetorically asked who this Reverend Montague Summers thought he was and inquired "Reverend of what Church?" This question was important, but not for the reasons which it have often been discussed.

It was at this point that Thurston outlined the case that Summers' holy orders may have been dubious, and summarised the then publicly available biographical information from *Who's Who* and *Crockford's*

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<sup>81</sup> Martindale, 'Father Herbert Thurston, S. J.', p. 664.

<sup>82</sup> Thurston, 'Diabolism', p. 442.

*Clerical Directory* about Summers' clerical career in both the Church of England and (allegedly) in the Roman Catholic Church. While additional pieces of information—summarised above—have come to light since, the gauntlet thrown down by Thurston that Summers declare himself was never answered and cast a dark shadow over Summers' subsequent clerical activities. If we examine Thurston's earlier apologetic activities over the period from 1912 to roughly 1919 a clue emerges as to the possible background to his inquiries regarding Summers' ordination.

During this period Thurston had researched and written at length about the background of Arnold Harris Mathew (1852–1919) and his activities as a “wandering bishop.” Without going into detail, Thurston had been tracing the activities of various *episcopi vagantes* in print and behind the scenes providing information to journalists to expose the irregular nature of their consecrations. As such, Thurston had also familiarised himself with the less than salutary activities of figures like Frederick Samuel Willoughby (1862–1928) and founder of the Liberal Catholic Church James Ingall Wedgewood (1883–1951), both of whom had been accused of similar sexual indiscretions to those for which Summers had escaped conviction in 1908.<sup>83</sup> Joseph Crehan summarised the purpose of Thurston's mission at this time as:

[The] fact that an irresponsible ecclesiastic must be checked who was endangering the simply piety of uneducated Catholics, who was drawing aside clergymen already treading the hard road that leads to Rome, and who by some cast of a Circe-wand had contrived to mingle spiritual and bestial ideals in strange confusion.<sup>84</sup>

Given Thurston's activities it seems very likely that his suspicion was that Summers' affectation of continental Catholic piety—by 1927, like the honorific nomenclature adopted by many an *episcopi vagantes*, Summers had styled himself somewhat pompously as “The Rev. Alphonsus Joseph-Mary Augustus Montague Summers”—and his outré intellectual interests may have been linked to this ecclesiastical subculture. However, that Thurston was certain of such suspicions is less clear and, given the propensity of the *episcopi vagantes* to resort to the law of libel when publicly exposed, it seems clear that if Thurston had unimpeachable evidence of Summers' dubious orders he would have said so openly, rather than erring on the side of caution. Regardless, the blow dealt by Thurston's article to Summers' reputation was one he was never able to live down and for the rest of his life he remained

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<sup>83</sup> See Crehan, *Father Thurston*, pp. 125-133.

<sup>84</sup> Crehan, *Father Thurston*, p. 133.

under the baleful gaze of Bishop Amigo and members of the London clerical establishment.

Never the wilting violet, but biding his time, Summers' response appeared a year later in the lengthy introduction to the first edition of his translation of the *Malleus Maleficarum* in 1928. It was equally scathing and clearly illuminates of what was at stake between the two men. After over two dozen pages of panegyric directed at the inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, Summers turns to comment on Thurston's entry on 'Witchcraft' in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, noting:

Since a Jesuit Father emphasizes in a well-known (and presumably authoritative) Catholic work an opinion so derogatory of the Holy See and so definitely opposed to all historians, one is entitled to express curiosity concerning other writings which may have come from his pen.<sup>85</sup>

What follows is a bibliographical survey of Thurston's work published in *The Month* on various saints in which Summers accuses Thurston of an "ugly prejudice" against the miraculous "conducted with a roughness and rudeness infinitely regrettable."<sup>86</sup> To Summers:

What is worse, in every case Catholic tradition and loyal Catholic feeling are thrust to one side; the note of scepticism, of modernism, and even of rationalism is arrogantly dominant.<sup>87</sup>

The mischief intended here by invoking the specter of modernism is clear, and Summers further notes that Thurston's projected book *The Physical Phenomenon of Mysticism* never saw the light of day because of censure and that he had "heard on good authority that the ecclesiastical superiors took exception to such a publication."<sup>88</sup> Summers' rejoinder, however, reaches its crescendo in his rhetorical reworking of Thurston's early criticism of him (see above), noting:

[T]he series of articles I have just considered may be by no means unwelcome to the Father of Lies. It really plays into his hands: first, because it makes the Church ridiculous by creating the impression that her mystics, particularly friars and nuns, are for the most part sickly hysterical subjects, deceivers and deceived,

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<sup>85</sup> Montague Summers, 'Introduction', in *Malleus Maleficarum: Translated with an Introduction, Bibliography and Notes by the Rev. Montague Summers* (London: John Rodker, 1928), p. xxvii

<sup>86</sup> Summers, 'Introduction', p. xxviii.

<sup>87</sup> Summers, 'Introduction', p. xxviii.

<sup>88</sup> Summers, 'Introduction', p. xxviii.

who would be fit inmates of Bedlam ... and, secondly, because it contemns and brings into ridicule that note of holiness which theologians declare as one of the distinctive marks of the true Church.<sup>89</sup>

Moreover, Summers was at pains to emphasise that he was not alone in his criticism and comments that “in Italy I have heard an eminent theologian, an Archbishop, speak of these articles [i.e. Thurston’s] in terms of unsparing condemnation.”<sup>90</sup> Summers’ response in many ways encapsulates the two men’s different backgrounds and temperaments.

Thurston and Summers’ attitudes aptly represent the tensions between two different conceptions of Roman Catholicism, which co-existed in the English Catholic Church in the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth century.<sup>91</sup> Thurston was the scion of recusants and had studied at the University of London in the days before Catholics could attend the great universities of Oxford and Cambridge. He was therefore used to living as part of an often-distrusted minority. As such, Thurston was cautious and deliberative in his apologetics for publications like *The Month* and in pamphlets written for the *Catholic Truth Society*, relying on careful scholarship and measured argumentation in his public role as an apologist which spanned decades.<sup>92</sup>

Unlike Thurston, however, Summers had only entered the Roman Catholic Church after Pope Pius X condemned Modernism in his 1907 encyclical *Pascendi Dominici gregis* and was never called like a number of English Catholic intellectuals of the time to walk the tightrope of between Ultramontane submission to the Vigilance Committees set up to eradicate Modernist tendencies in English dioceses, and the last gasping of a kind of latter-day Cisalpinism, which prized the autonomous attitudes and

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<sup>89</sup> Summers, ‘Introduction’, p. xxviii.

<sup>90</sup> Summers, ‘Introduction’, p. xxix.

<sup>91</sup> For a general view of this period see for example, Derek Holmes, *More Roman Than Rome: English Catholicism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Burnes & Oates, 1978) and Edward Norman, *The English Catholic Church in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); William J. Schoenl, *The Intellectual Crisis in English Catholicism: Liberal Catholics, Modernists, and the Vatican in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1982).

<sup>92</sup> On some of Thurston’s more famous controversies with major literary figures see Crehan, *Father Thurston*, pp. 95-124.

independence of mind exhibited by more liberal English Catholics.<sup>93</sup> Thurston, for his part, had been an erstwhile friend, confidante and mentor to the ill-fated George Tyrell and knew what it meant to proceed with caution.<sup>94</sup> Summers, however, presented himself as a continental Ultramontanist whose high view of Papal Infallibility was of a variety that had sat uncomfortably with many English Catholics since at least the time of John Cardinal Henry Newman (1801–1890) and his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* (1875).

These cultural differences aside, there was, however, some truth to Summers' rejoinder that Thurston's skeptical tone had upset some within the English and Italian Church hierarchy. Thurston, moreover, was certainly aware of this, noting in the posthumous *The Physical Phenomenon of Mysticism*:

The role of the Devil's Advocate is a thankless one and does not make for popularity. Indeed, I may confess that, when writing somewhat in the character of a doubting Thomas, I have felt at times, in spite of good intentions, that I was even playing a mean and an unworthy part.<sup>95</sup>

But Thurston was also unapologetic, and went on to note:

Why, I have asked myself, should a sceptical line of argument be put forward which may possibly trouble the simple faith of many good people much nearer and dearer to God than I can ever hope to be? And yet in these days of widespread education, universal questioning and free discussion, a premature and ill grounded credulity cannot in the long run be of advantage to the Church. The Christian has to be able to justify his beliefs, and adequate equipment for an encounter with rationalists or agnostics requires some previous study both of the position which it is intended to take up and of the form of attack to which the position may be exposed.<sup>96</sup>

To this end, whether chastened by Summers' robust response or not, Thurston did not deign to revisit the dispute, instead concentrating in his later

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<sup>93</sup> On this see Ellen M. Leonard C. S. J., "English Catholicism and Modernism," in *Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context*, ed. Darrell Jodock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 248-273.

<sup>94</sup> On the friendship between Thurston and Tyrell see Crehan, *Father Thurston*, pp. 48-72. See also Robert Butterworth, *A Jesuit Friendship: Letters of George Tyrell to Herbert Thurston* (London: Roehampton Institute, 1988).

<sup>95</sup> Herbert Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (Guildford: White Crow Books, 2013 [1952]), p. 113.

<sup>96</sup> Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, p. 113.

years on answering the claims of the anti-clerical historian G. G. Coulton (1858–1947). Nor did Summers take up the matter again with any real enthusiasm, even expunging his rejoinder from his later introduction to the *Malleus Maleficarum*.<sup>97</sup> However, Thurston’s fear that the impact of Summers’ works would give anti-Catholic critics “the occasion to declaim against the ignorance, credulity and intolerance of Catholic theologians, or even to rail against the obscurantism of the Roman Church in our own day,” was borne out.<sup>98</sup> At the height of the Cold War in 1956, the notorious American communist turned publisher Felix Morrow (1906–1988) wrote in his forward to the American University Books edition of *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* that:

It was his [Summers’] contention, and we are inclined to agree with him, that his account is not only the true story as it appeared to the Catholic church in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but that this remains, in spite of what Catholic apologists may say in encyclopaedias and other public forums, the true position of the Roman Catholic church today. This really unique character of his book becomes apparent when we contrast Summers’ views with such an apologetic article as Father Herbert Thurston’s in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*.<sup>99</sup>

The irony here was, however, that the Jewish-born communist Morrow could be found endorsing the views of an author he knew to be both a reactionary anti-Semite and rabid anti-communist in order to score points against the Roman Catholic Church—here by singling out Thurston who had bravely risked the censure of his superiors and received the hearty thanks of the Chief Rabbi of London Hermann Adler (1839–1911) in 1898 for his careful historical debunking of claims about the Jewish blood libel which circulated widely in some French and English Catholic circles at the height of the Dreyfus Affair.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> See Montague Summers, ‘Introduction’, in *Malleus Maleficarum* (London: Pushkin, 1948), pp. xi-xvi.

<sup>98</sup> Thurston, ‘Diabolism’, p. 444.

<sup>99</sup> Felix Morrow, ‘Foreword’, in Montague Summers, *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* (New York: University Press, 1956), p. x.

<sup>100</sup> On this incident see Crehan, *Father Thurston*, pp. 101-103. Summers wholeheartedly believed in reality of the Blood Libel. See Summers, *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology*, pp. 161f. For a more critical account of Thurston and Summers’ attitudes toward Judaism see Simon Mayers, ‘From the Christ-Killer to the Luciferian: The Mythologized Jew and Freemason in Late Nineteenth-and Early Twentieth Century English Catholic Discourse’, *Melilah: Manchester Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 8 (2011), pp. 31-68.

Posthumously, it was Summers, outliving Thurston by nearly a decade, who seems to have had the last laugh. Thurston's book *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* had been slated to appear as far back as 1928, but it did not appear until 1952. In the meantime, in 1950, two years after Summers' death Rider and Company published Summers' own book on the subject—with an identical title but drawing an unsurprisingly diametrically opposed conclusion. In this volume, which contains a thorough bibliographical note, Summers assiduously avoided any mention of his erstwhile nemesis, even while in large part plagiarising his earlier articles!<sup>101</sup>

### **Reverend Monty Remembered**

While Montague Summers' posthumous autobiography, which did not appear until 1980, was tantalisingly vague on his occult interests, and commentators have long lamented that he was never able to complete the promised second volume, his colourful persona meant that he left an indelible impression on the memories of not only his friends but even passing acquaintances. Indeed, when Brocard Sewell published a letter in the journal *Theology* during the late 1950s seeking information particularly pertaining to Summers' ecclesiastical career, he appears to have been inundated with correspondence and curious anecdotes.<sup>102</sup> Quite apart from the anecdotes preserved in Sewell's writings, however, a number of other accounts of Summers survive which have bearing on his occult interests; notably those of the poet Charles Richard Cammell and the self-styled "Prince of Thriller Writers" Dennis Wheatley.

Cammell was friends with Summers toward the end of his life and leaves a fascinating portrait of the man he calls "one of those rare personalities to whom the epithet *extraordinary* may be applied without exaggeration."<sup>103</sup> Cammell account discusses, among other matters, Summers' famed library, comprised of "everything that is unusual, bizarre, peculiar, or sinister." He also comments on, among other things, Summers' expensive tastes and the effeminate but sartorially splendid way in which he dressed. What is most intriguing in the present context, however, is the light Cammell's account sheds on the acquaintance between Summers and his

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<sup>101</sup> See Montague Summers, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (London: Rider and Company, 1950), pp. 8-12.

<sup>102</sup> Brocard Sewell, "Montague Summers," *Theology*, vol. 60, no. 445 (1957), pp. 291-292.

<sup>103</sup> Cammell, *Aleister Crowley*, p. 171.

contemporary—the most infamous occultist of the twentieth century—Aleister Crowley.

That these two men should have crossed paths is hardly surprising, nor is the fact that they appear to have thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. Crowley's diary, for example remarks that a dinner between the two arranged at Cammell's flat in 1938 had been "the most fun I have had in years."<sup>104</sup> Both men were literary snobs and witty raconteurs, decadents of what was then considered questionable sexuality who had perhaps been born too late. One can well imagine the fun they had at Cammell's dinner as they "discussed their many interests with sparkling wit and good-fellowship."<sup>105</sup>

How Summers actually felt about Crowley, however, appears more ambivalent. He was, on the one hand, certainly highly critical of the actions of Father Ronald Knox—whom he called a "clerical fusspot"—for having used his influence as Catholic chaplain to have Crowley's lecture on Gilles de Rais to the Oxford Poetry Society cancelled in 1930.<sup>106</sup> On the other hand, whether Summers' defence of Crowley here was out of genuine admiration, or merely an act of artistic solidarity resulting from Summers' own disputes with the famous convert and Catholic apologist Knox, is uncertain. What is clear is that Summers certainly appreciated Crowley as a poet more generally noting:

In justice, it must be said that although he wrote much that is fantastic and grotesque; much which is, I fear, definitely and designedly evil; Aleister Crowley had flashes of genius. He has left some fine poetry. His little volume, *Amphora*, for example, is exquisitely beautiful.<sup>107</sup>

For his own part, Crowley gave BBC producer Lance Sievking (1896–1972) the impression that Summers was afraid that Crowley would "change him into a toad," but Sievking's garbled account suggested a much closer relationship between the two figures than was certainly the case, and it is likely that the equally mischievous Crowley and Summers were pulling a leg each here.<sup>108</sup> Summers' final word on Crowley is brief and to the point – to him the Great Beast 666 was "one quarter conjuror and three-quarters charlatan, and whole common-publicist" but also "one of the few original

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<sup>104</sup> On Crowley and Summers' acquaintance see Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2000), pp. 338f.

<sup>105</sup> Cammell, *Aleister Crowley*, p. 175.

<sup>106</sup> On this incident see Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010), pp. 444-445.

<sup>107</sup> Summers, *The Galant Show*, p. 242.

<sup>108</sup> Sievking, *The Eye of the Beholder*, p. 252.



and really interesting men of our age.”<sup>109</sup> Crowley and Cammell were not the only to experience Summers’ famed company however, and the thriller writer Dennis Wheatley’s experience was no less colourful—though perhaps a good deal less pleasant.

Like Crowley, Wheatley was an indefatigable self-publicist and his occult novels like *The Devil Rides Out* (1934), *To the Devil – a Daughter* (1953), and *The Satanist* (1960) were all runaway bestsellers.<sup>110</sup> Wheatley also prided himself on his research and in preparing to write *The Devil Rides Out* he arranged to meet Summers through an introduction from the infamous pioneer gossip-columnist, Labor politician, and probable traitor to the British realm, Tom Driberg (1905–1976). Following this introduction, Summers invited Wheatley and his wife Joan to stay the weekend at his then home in Alresford. However, after just one night the Wheatleys had had enough of Summers’ sparkling company—and the gigantic spiders which inhabited Summers’ home—and Wheatley contacted their nanny back in London to wire Summers, claiming their son Colin had fallen ill and that they had to leave urgently, “never to see the, perhaps not so Reverend, gentleman again.”<sup>111</sup> Wheatley milked his meeting with Summers for decades after in public lectures and appearances in the press, but despite the claims in his posthumous autobiography the two men appeared to have remained cordial even after the Wheatleys’ timely escape from Summers and his arachnid familiars!<sup>112</sup>

That during their brief time together the impish Summers was deliberately playing up to his sinister reputation at Wheatley’s expense, however, seems likely. Part of the account of their meeting which Wheatley told a number of times over the ensuing decade (but which is suspiciously

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<sup>109</sup> Summers, *The Galanty Show*, p. 242, and Cammell, *Aleister Crowley*, p. 175.

<sup>110</sup> On Wheatley see, for example, Christopher Bentley, ‘Fifty Million Copies: The Fiction of Dennis Wheatley,’ in *Twentieth-Century Suspense: The Thriller Comes of Age*, ed. Clive Bloom (London: MacMillan, 1990), pp. 143-160, and Gina Wisker, ‘Horror and Menaces to Everything Decent in Life: The Horror Fiction of Dennis Wheatley’, in *Creepers: British Horror and Fantasy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Clive Bloom (London: Pluto Press, 1993), pp. 99-110.

<sup>111</sup> On this meeting see Dennis Wheatley, *The Time Has Come...The Memoirs of Dennis Wheatley, Vol. 2: Drink and Ink 1919–1977* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), pp. 131-134.

<sup>112</sup> See for example Dennis Wheatley, ‘The Novelist’s Task,’ *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 101, no. 4908 (September 1953), p. 764. On their subsequent correspondence is discussed further in Phil Baker’s superb biography, *The Devil is a Gentleman: The Life and Times of Dennis Wheatley* (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2009), pp. 317-318.

absent from his autobiography) was a story Summers allegedly told him about an exorcism the latter had performed. The story reads:

The Reverend Montague Summers told me of an exorcism he had performed in Ireland. He was called by a farmer's wife who, it was said, was possessed by an evil spirit. He arrived in the evening. On the table in the living-room the remains of a cold leg of mutton had already been placed for supper; the woman was in the same room. At the sight of the priest she became so violent that she had to be held down. As he sprinkled the Holy Water on her and commanded the demon to come forth, a small cloud of black smoke issued from her foam-flecked mouth. It went straight into the cold mutton, and within a few minutes everyone present saw that the meat was alive with maggots.<sup>113</sup>

While Wheatley had been fed more than a few dubious occult anecdotes which later appeared in his writings, this one was repeated a number of times between the 1950s and 1970s. The only problem was that the story was lifted entirely from R. H. Benson's short story 'Father Meuron's Tale,' published in his collection *A Mirror of Shalott* (1907), with the only detail changed by Summers' being that the demon-infested mutton was in Ireland rather than Jamaica! It is impossible, given his unsurpassed knowledge of the English ghost story, that Summers was not aware of this, though Wheatley clearly was ignorant. In an amusing aside, Summers' apparent ruse was not picked up until 1956 when the founder of modern Wicca Gerald Gardner (1884–1964) showed a press report from the *Sunday Graphic* quoting Wheatley's narrative to his then "secretary"—almost certainly a reference to the highly perceptive Doreen Valiente (1922–1999)—who proceeded to point out that it was "a good story when I first read it, too. It had the Fourth Form scared stiff," before alerting Gardner to its origin. This revelation subsequently appeared in *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959).<sup>114</sup>

Wheatley's debt to Summers was less by way of long-term acquaintance than literary borrowing and reading the two authors alongside one another one can identify dozens of passages where Wheatley had either

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<sup>113</sup> Dennis Wheatley, *Gummen, Gallants and Ghosts*, Revised Edition (London: Arrow Books, 1963), p. 243. The story also appears in Dennis Wheatley, *Satanism and Witches* (Aylesbury: Sphere, 1974), p. 142 and in abridged form in an interview with Peter Grosvenor, "Dabbling with The Devil: the real danger," *Daily Express* (27 March, 1975), p. 12.

<sup>114</sup> See Gerald Gardner, *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (London: The Aquarian Press, 1971 [1959]), pp. 245f. See Philip Heselton, *Doreen Valiente Witch* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2016), pp. 90-92 on the contention that Valiente was the "secretary" in question.

directly plagiarized or closely paraphrased Summers' work.<sup>115</sup> Wheatley did, however, pay Summers the dubious honor of basing one of his characters, the sinister Satanist Canon Copely-Syle in *To the Devil – a Daughter*, on him, with an all-too-familiar visual description: "He's certainly a picturesque one. All black satin front, pink face, and long silvery locks curling down behind his ears—like a person in a Restoration play. He couldn't have made himself pleasanter."<sup>116</sup> Moreover, it was certainly Wheatley, more than any other acquaintance, whose fiction and non-fiction writings perhaps best-preserved Summers' unflinching vision of an ancient and enduring Satanic conspiracy at work in the modern world.<sup>117</sup>

So, how did Summers himself wish to be remembered? *The Galanty Show* paints a self-portrait of an urbane, witty if somewhat catty, *litterateur* and man-about-town equally at home in London's Theatreland and the scholarly world of Oxford. This version is certainly an accurate representation of one side of Summers' personality. But as the foregoing has outlined this was only one of the masks which Summers wore and should be placed alongside Summers' other self-image as an anachronism. On this it is worth quoting Summers self-authored entry in Stanley Kunitz and Howard Haycraft's *Twentieth Century Authors*:

I have a great dislike of and contempt for that superficial charlatany in literature which now seems to pervade the world of letters. I find modernity frankly detestable. I like old books, old china, old wine, old houses, tranquillity, reverence, and respect. My chief recreations are travel, staying in unknown monasteries and villages in Italy, pilgrimages to famous shrines, investigations of occult phenomena, research in hagiology, liturgies, and mysticism, and talking to intelligent dogs—that is, all dogs ... Above all, I hate the skeptic and modernist in religion, the Atheist, the Agnostic, the Communist, and all Socialism in whatever guise or masquerade.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> For just a few examples see Baker, *The Devil is a Gentleman*, pp. 307f.

<sup>116</sup> Dennis Wheatley, *To the Devil – A Daughter* (London: Heron Books, 1972 [1953], p. 47.

<sup>117</sup> On the continuity between the two here see esp. Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 253-271.

<sup>118</sup> Montague Summers, 'Montague Summers', in *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature*, eds Stanley Kunitz and Howard Haycraft (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1942), p. 1373.

## Conclusion

What to make of the figure of Summers has continued to perplex commentators and will likely continue to do so until a more systematic examination of his papers is undertaken. Mysteries are likely to remain, and this article has certainly not solved any of the more enigmatic puzzles which comprised Summers' complex public and private lives. Instead, I have sought to place his occult writings within a wider historical, religious, and biographical context.

Summers may well have been, as d'Arch-Smith suggested, a sincere if misguided convert to a reactionary form of Catholicism following some kind of "psychic kick-back" during his occult dabbling—like the character of Dr Julian Hodsall in Summers' short story 'The Grimoire'.<sup>119</sup> As Summers ends that unsettling story: "It does not require a very active imagination to appreciate why Julian Hodsall, the cultured and intellectual agnostic, fasts much and prays, and a Tertiary of the Order wears around his neck against his skin the brown scapulary of Carmel."<sup>120</sup> Given the passion with which Summers later denounced such practices, it does seem likely that d'Arch Smith had cottoned on to something here and Sewell suggests as much when alluding to the comments of an unnamed Dominican acquaintance who informed him regarding Summers that he had been "a good man whose romantic fascination with evil had in earlier days involved him in certain dark activities."<sup>121</sup> Summers would not be the first erstwhile occultist frightened into the church in such circumstances—one need only think here of Summers' hero Huysman's own experiences in the 1890s and his famous claim that "with his hooked paw, the Devil drew me toward God."<sup>122</sup> On this, Summers' own advice in *The Galanty Show* is worth quoting in full:

There is room, there always will be, for studies of witchcraft, of hauntings, of the occult. We only ask that these books should be written seriously, and with knowledge. The ignorant may posture and pose as authorities upon art, upon poetry, upon literature generally, and there is no vital mischief done. True, they lower the standards of culture and of taste. This many will consider harm enough. But there the dilettante is not playing with the eternal issues of life and death.

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<sup>119</sup> D'Arch Smith, *Montague Summers*, p. 25.

<sup>120</sup> Montague Summers, *Six Ghost Stories* (London: Snuggly Books, 2019), p. 163.

<sup>121</sup> Jerome, *Montague Summers*, p. 79.

<sup>122</sup> Robert Baldick, 'Introduction', in Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Down There (La Bas): A Study in Satanism* (New York: University Books, 1958), pp. xxvi-xxvii.

The amateurs, and alas! There are all too many of them, who invade the occult are awakening forces of which they have no conception.<sup>123</sup>

Summers was far from alone amongst literary men of the period with an interest in the occult who found themselves drawn to the Roman Catholic Church and here he followed a similar, but perhaps more spiritually perilous path, from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism already tread by earlier figures like Frederick Rolfe (1860–1913), R.H. Benson, and even the anti-Spiritualist writer J. Godfrey Raupert whom he held in such high esteem. Moreover, with the exception of the more idiosyncratic Rolfe, the adoption of a strongly Ultramontane and anti-Modernist perspective was hardly uncommon amongst such converts and while readers then and since have sometimes bristled at Summers' unwavering loyalty to Rome, the zeal of the convert is hardly a rarity both then and now. Besides, Summers was never one to do things by half-measures and even a critic like Father Ronald Knox did not doubt Summers' Catholic *bona fides*, even if he found Summers highly objectionable during his lifetime.<sup>124</sup> For other Catholics, however, Summers remained a sinister presence in their midst—a latter day Abbé Boullan who was not to be trusted.

Finally, while there was certainly an element of posturing and theatricality in both Summers' writings on witchcraft and his behaviour following his conversion, he appears to have found stability in his Catholic identity and despite Thurston's insinuations it is perhaps best to give Summers the benefit of the doubt and take him at his word that he had "an absolute and complete belief in the supernatural, and hence in witchcraft."<sup>125</sup> Here, moreover, Summers was perhaps far more representative of English Catholics at the time than the skeptical Jesuit would like us to believe.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Summers, *The Galanty Show*, pp. 163f.

<sup>124</sup> On Knox's view of Summers see Jerome, *Montague Summers*, p. xiii.

<sup>125</sup> Summers, 'Montague Summers,' p. 1373.

<sup>126</sup> See, for example, Hilaire Belloc, *Survivals and New Arrivals* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1939), pp. 270f; and G. K. Chesterton, *The Common Man* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1950), p. 94.