

Shadow Worlds

A History of the Occult
and Esoteric in New Zealand



Andrew Paul Wood

Shadow Worlds

A History of the Occult
and Esoteric in New Zealand

Andrew Paul Wood



MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS

For Fiona Pardington
Διπλουν όρωσιν οι μαθόντες γράμματα

Contents

Introduction	13
1. The not-so-secret doctrine	29
2. Children of the Golden Dawn	77
3. The Empire Sentinels	107
4. The Golden Dawn: A coda	115
5. Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy	129
6. Gomorrah on the Avon	141
7. Bumps in the night	155
8. The women of the Beast	221
9. In science's robe	247
10. The Age of Aquarius	271
11. Witchcraft and neopaganism	295
12. The Rosy Cross and the OTO	321
13. The Devil rides out	341
Epilogue	363
Notes	368
About the author	412
Acknowledgements	413
Index	414

For the scientific method can teach us nothing else beyond how facts are related to, and conditioned by, each other. The aspiration toward such objective knowledge belongs to the highest of which man is capable, and you will certainly not suspect me of wishing to belittle the achievements and the heroic efforts of man in this sphere. Yet it is equally clear that knowledge of what *is* does not open the door directly to what *should be*. One can have the clearest and most complete knowledge of *is*, and yet not be able to deduct from that what should be the *goal* of our human aspirations. Objective knowledge provides us with powerful instruments for the achievements of certain ends, but the ultimate goal itself and the longing to reach it must come from another source. And it is hardly necessary to argue for the view that our existence and our activity acquire meaning only by the setting up of such a goal and of corresponding values. The knowledge of truth as such is wonderful, but it is so little capable of acting as a guide that it cannot prove even the justification and the value of the aspiration toward that very knowledge of truth. Here we face, therefore, the limits of the purely rational conception of our existence.

— ALBERT EINSTEIN, 'SCIENCE AND RELIGION',
AN ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE PRINCETON
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY ON 19 MAY 1939

But memetics possesses the very fault for which it purports to be a remedy: it is a spell with which the scientific mind seeks to conjure away the things that pose a threat to it — which is also how we should view scientism in general. Scientism involves the use of scientific forms and categories in order to give the appearance of science to unscientific ways of thinking. It is a form of magic, a bid to reassemble the complex matter of human life, at the magician's command, in a shape over which he can exert control. It is an attempt to *subdue* what it does not understand.

— ROGER SCRUTON, 'SCIENTISM IN THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES: WHY ART IS MORE THAN MATTER AND MEME', *THE NEW ATLANTIS*, AUTUMN 2013

Introduction

Philosophy is odious and obscure,
Both law and physic are for petty wits;
Theology is basest of the three,
Unpleasant, harsh, contemptible and vile.
'Tis magic, magic that has ravished me.

— CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE, *THE TRAGICAL
HISTORY OF THE LIFE AND DEATH OF
DOCTOR FAUSTUS*, I. I, 1604

The occult and the magical are very much part of the everyday world. Even if you don't check your horoscope regularly, you probably know your zodiacal star sign. At some point you may have had your palm read or your cards done. You've probably seen a clairvoyant on television or know someone who says they saw a ghost. You may have experimented with a Ouija board, have a four-leaf-clover or own lucky underwear. You may throw salt over your shoulder when you spill it. You may have participated in a formal religious ceremony or read a self-help book. I do not mean magic in the sense of conjuring tricks, but for an excellent history of that in Aotearoa, consult Bernard Reid's *Conjurors, Cardsharps and Conmen*.¹

The magical takes many forms, from the ability of marketing and public relations experts to change how millions of people experience reality, and thoroughly ridiculous politicians rising to the highest office through the proliferation of memes on the internet, to someone you know shifting consensual reality on its axis by changing their pronouns. Around 75 per cent of adults in the Western world have some belief in magic or the paranormal. A survey of 35,000 Americans carried out by the Pew Research Forum in 2007 revealed that 79 per cent believed in miracles in the Old Testament sense. In the 2011 UK census, out of the total population of 63.2 million, 56,620 people identified as pagans, 11,766 as Wiccans, and 1276 described their faith as 'witchcraft'.²

By comparison, in the 2018 New Zealand census, out of the total population of 4.7 million people, 19,434 people identified their religious affiliation as 'Spiritualism or New Age' and 6453 people identified with Māori belief systems other than Rātana or Ringatū. In 2021, All Black Ethan de Groot had his elbow tattooed with a *vegvísir*, an ancient Icelandic runestave — sometimes inaccurately called a 'Viking compass' — that is supposed to protect the wearer while travelling, particularly in bad weather.³ That's not to say that he is some kind of magician, but rather that he clearly felt some sort of symbolic attraction to a magical talisman.

Before we can tackle the particulars of the unique and fascinating history of the Western occult, esoteric and magical in Aotearoa New Zealand, we must first tackle the fraught subject of definitions for terminology — or rather, what I intend by definition.

The term ‘occulture’ was a neologism coined in the late twentieth century in the Industrial Music scene by Genesis P-Orridge,⁴ and later taken up by scholar of religion Christopher Partridge, in an academic sense, to describe the influential counterculture of esoterism, magic, parapsychology and the occult, which, largely ignored by the mainstream, has had a major influence on moulding Western modernist identity. Partridge describes it as ‘the new spiritual environment in the West; the reservoir feeding new spiritual springs; the soil in which new spiritualities are growing’.⁵



The emergence and rapid evolution of a ‘modern’ occulture over the past 200 years or so is, in part, a response to the trajectory of multiple strands of philosophy that developed out of the work of Immanuel Kant in the 1780s and 1790s, particularly in Germany, as to the nature of the relationship between thought and being. These arguments carried on through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), for example, believed that the world exists only as an idea and was susceptible to the human will. This idea becomes important as a kind of metaphysics of magic.

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), deeply unfashionable these days because of his enthusiasm for Nazism, determined (in more convoluted terms than I care to go into here) that being was defined by time and death — or, to paraphrase Nietzsche, who put it rather more succinctly, the meaning of life is that it ends — and that being is defined by the social relationship of a community’s way of life.

In a similar vein, sociologist and philosopher Max Weber (1864–1920) warned of the ‘disenchantment’ of the world by modernity, that is science, technology, bureaucracy, capitalism, and the decline of traditional religion and folk culture.⁶ Essentially modernity was draining the colour, ritual and magic out of life, and as it turns out colour, ritual and magic are important to a healthy sense of human identity. Weber’s theory of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) is an important concept here. Weber saw in modernity a society based on the desecralised pursuit of rational goals without any appreciation of the mystical and the mysterious, and on valuing scientific explanation over belief.⁷

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Anglo-Czech philosopher Ernest Gellner (1925–1995) argued that an unexpressed desire for ‘re-enchantment’ manifested itself variously in forms that considered themselves rational and naturalistic: psychoanalysis, analytical philosophy, Marxism, ethnomethodology and phenomenology.⁸

American philosopher and social scientist Jason Josephson Storm argues that Weber has been misrepresented because he was well aware of the existence of occult and esoteric movements, but this position implies that Weber saw them as something authentic and organic — something of which I am unconvinced.⁹ Arguably those occult and esoteric movements are all responses to a desire for re-enchantment that Gellner would have recognised. For with the exponentially accelerating modernisation of the nineteenth century, orthodox religion lost authority to science and new spiritualities emerged.¹⁰



It all distils to a yearning for spiritual experience. Writing in the early decades of the twentieth century, the German theologian Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) described the essence of the spiritual experience as an encounter with the overwhelming, compelling and ineffably numinous.¹¹ That’s a tall order when science is culturally ascendant and bent on describing and rationalising everything in the universe. To an extent it could be sublimated into the sublime wonder of the natural world. This was the age in which X-rays, radio waves, early atomic physics and diesel engines first made an appearance, leading to a yearning for the numinous beyond all this rational positivism, and a turn to the romantic and subversive. At times even the science could seem magical.

In 1846 the historian George Grote (1794–1871) observed that the science of his day understood the physical world as ‘lifeless and impersonal aggregate, slavishly obedient to the rules of which it has no consciousness, and destitute of all sympathy with the men who suffer or profit by it’.¹² This was a strictly materialistic view of an arbitrary universe with little room for human abstractions such as love, justice or religion. By the 1890s, science in the form of anthropology was turning its analytical lenses

upon what archaeologist Chris Gosden describes as magic as part of a ‘triple helix’, with science and religion threading through culture, rather than magic being some primitive precursor of religion. Religion can be slippery, though, and easily confused with magic when it comes to things like animism, totemism and fetish-worship, yet it distinguishes itself from magic by its tendency to moral precepts and the expansive development of an afterlife and an eschatology.¹³

In the late Victorian and early Edwardian period, two anthropologists emerge whose understanding of magic would colour all later responses to it: founder of cultural anthropology Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), and the social anthropologist and folklorist Sir James George Frazer (1854–1941).

Tylor saw anthropology as an ‘emancipatory science’ for rooting out the superstitious, primitive worldviews that warped Western rationalism. Frazer — whose ideas, despite often being crude projections based on dubious information, were widely popularised in his 13-volume work *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915) — saw human civilisation as an evolution away from the magic of fertility cults to the power of nature represented by the gods, and eventually science.

For Frazer, magic was an attempt to directly control nature; religion was an attempt to intercede with God or gods; and science sought to understand the world in exclusively naturalistic terms. Frazer divided magic into two principles: ‘contagion’, where magical properties and influence were transferred by proximity or contact; and ‘sympathy’, where influence could be conveyed by using something that resembled what the magic user wanted to influence, like affecting like.

The Victorian occult, which is where the story of the New Zealand occult begins, is very much of the aesthetic of its time. Seeking distraction from late nineteenth-century industrialism and social problems, the Victorian age saw the enormous popularity of mock-medievalism in the form of the gothic revival architecture, Pre-Raphaelite paintings, and Arts and Crafts-style decoration. It makes sense that other practices consigned to the Middle Ages in the popular consciousness might likewise be resuscitated, including magic. An obsession with the gothic seems to go hand-in-hand with the rediscovery of magic.¹⁴

The Victorians who colonised Māori Aotearoa had reinvented the gothic. New Zealand cities are full of stunning examples of gothic revival architecture — or were, prior to the machinations of developers in Auckland and the earthquakes in Christchurch. In the late nineteenth century, a substantial body of gothic fiction was set in imperial contexts — Rudyard Kipling’s short story ‘At the End of the Passage’ (1890) and Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899), for example — tending to focus on white colonial encounters with terrifying indigenous experiences.¹⁵

At the same time, we find a bewildering array of occult groups and movements taking root in antipodean soil among the neo-gothic piles, influenced by a lot of complex feelings about colonialism and the indigenous, and culminating in the splendid final phase of the Stella Matutina magical order in Havelock North (Chapters 2 and 4). By comparison, the magical, occult and esoteric activities of the twentieth-century New Age look a little dumbed-down and ignoble.¹⁶



These islands at the end of the Earth, where the light of the dawn first touched each day, must have seemed deeply appealing to nonconformists. A very early example of this attitude was Robert Pemberton (1788?–1879), one of the last of the Owenite sect in England, whose utopian plans for a collectivised commune in New Zealand were outlined in his book *The Happy Colony* (1854). Efforts were made to establish a colony in Taranaki, where children were to be raised communally and educated in spiritual perfectibility, but nothing ever came of it.¹⁷

Worldwide in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, even within Christianity itself, old and new beliefs struggled with each other, and novel syntheses emerged. These included Christian Science, the Church of the Latter-day Saints (Mormonism), the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the syncretic movements of Theosophy and Spiritualism, and a host of secretive occult and esoteric societies. Within the High Anglican Church, a desire for renewal resulted in Tractarianism, otherwise known as the Oxford Movement, which eventually led to Anglo-Catholicism, of which Lytton Strachey writes, tongue deep in cheek, in *Eminent Victorians* (1918):

Some of the divines of the seventeenth century had, perhaps, been vouchsafed glimpses of the truth; but they were glimpses and nothing more. No, the waters of the true Faith had dived underground at the Reformation, and they were waiting for the wand of [Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801–1890)] to strike the rock before they should burst forth once more into the light of day.¹⁸

A similar yearning for spiritual supernaturalism was to be found in the decadent and symbolist movements of fin-de-siècle France. The French writer Jean Lorrain (1855–1906) bemoaned in his short story ‘Lanterne magique’ (1900) the dissection of fantasy by psychiatrists, and witches’ sabbats driven from cemetery cypress groves by the electric lights and whitewashed corridors of hospitals.¹⁹ J.-K. Huysmans (1848–1907), author of the infamous novels of the decadence, the outré aesthetic *À rebours* (1884) and the satanically-themed *La-Bas* (1891), likewise confessed that his interest in the occult came from a need to be compensated for the squalor of daily modern life.²⁰

Perhaps, then, it is better to speak of ‘occultures’ rather than a single global occulture, as each version tends to acquire a regional flavour, including in New Zealand. The surprising thing is the degree to which these ideas have had an influence on culture, society and modernity. It is not the purpose of this book to answer any epistemological or metaphysical questions about the reality of occult beliefs or the supernatural. Yet most Victorian occultists and magical practitioners regarded themselves as only a slightly spicier flavour of Christian. Many saw their esoteric pursuits as entirely consistent with, and therefore unproblematic for, their profession of High Church Anglicanism.

This was not an attitude shared by mainstream New Zealand, and we see, circa 1900, vigorous, even vitriolic resistance from the churches to Theosophy and Spiritualism. In 1933 we find a lengthy *Auckland Star* column warning of the dangers of the occult:

But observation would lead one to assert that urbanites are not a whit more enlightened than the people of the soil; an Aucklander returned from a visit to Great Britain tells of the flocking crowds

of Londoners to various halls and ‘temples’ to listen on Sunday nights to lectures on the occult; and here in Auckland one learns of a large number of apostles (chiefly women) of various cults; that there is something much more serious and sinister afoot than the silly tea-cup reading and fortune-telling by cards, with which we are all familiar, is only too evident; even in these days of stress and strain there are still many so little touched by the realities of life that they can retain the puerile mind which makes for belief in fantastic fatalism . . .²¹

The same article, by ‘M. B. Soljak’ (teacher, political activist, feminist and journalist Miriam Soljak, 1879–1971), likewise warns of the rise of the occult in Nazi Germany, and goes on to say:

The publicity given in the cables a short while ago to the Brocken scene in the Austrian Alps, made some of us scornfully pitiful for the ignorance of a populace which could believe that magic could enable a beautiful maiden to induce a he-goat to turn into a handsome youth; — but if the next few years bring about an increase of the recent swing to superstition — the signs of which are all round us — we may expect to see similar scenes enacted among the snows of Egmont [Taranaki] or Ruapehu, or even on our own Mount Eden.²²

It behoves us, also, to acknowledge the postmodern erosion of the authority of scientific positivism and ‘progress’. These days we tend to accept the validity of a far broader range of forms of knowledge that don’t fit into the usual hierarchy.²³ This inclusivity hasn’t been without pushback, as in 2021, when, in response to a government review of the secondary school curriculum, seven University of Auckland professors and emeriti professors published a letter in the *New Zealand Listener* titled ‘In Defence of Science’, claiming that the inclusion of mātauranga Māori (ancestral Māori knowledge) in the science curriculum ‘falls far short of what can be defined as science itself’.²⁴ This resulted in considerable controversy.

And yet the welfare of Māori, and social reform more generally, was often a prominent component of many early occult and esoteric

movements in Aotearoa. German historian Anna Lux points out that ‘science’ is ‘not only determined in the arena of scientific practice, but also in the public’.²⁵

Likewise there is a certain amount of truth in philosopher, psychologist, sociologist and polymath Theodor Adorno’s assertion that ‘semi-erudite’ occultists were, and likely are, ‘driven by the narcissistic wish to prove superior to the plain people’, but were ‘not in a position to carry through complicated and detached intellectual operations’.²⁶ We should, however, recall that Adorno was viewing the subject through the lens of a Holocaust survivor looking at the popularity of occultism and superstition in Nazi Germany with justifiable hostility.

Yet one might wonder if we should be so quick to dismiss beliefs that have lasted many thousands of years. We run up against French Enlightenment philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal’s distinction between mathematical reason and the sort of *intuitive* reason that allows us to perceive space or understand one plus one equals two without recourse to theory.²⁷

Nor should we pretend that occultism is incompatible with modernity or fall into the dialectical trap of assuming occult thought is irrational.²⁸ Rather, it follows a consistent, if circular, logic of its own, as does theology, and modern neuroscience seems to show that the brain processes evidence differently in either a ‘scientific’ or a ‘religious’ framework.²⁹ A belief in the occult or magical, therefore, isn’t necessarily the product of ignorance or delusion.

Drawing on philosopher Charles Taylor’s notion of a ‘social imaginary’, Eric Kurlander raises the concept of a ‘supernatural imaginary’ or ‘how people imagine their social existence, how they integrate with others, and the deeper normative ideas that influence these expectations’. The social imaginary ‘is shared by a whole society or large group; theory is expressed in theoretical terms while imaginary is described by images and legends; the imaginary is the common understanding that creates possible commonplace actions and a sense of legitimacy that is shared among all’.³⁰

The social imaginary cannot be expressed as doctrine or theory because it is entirely indefinite and unlimited. Taylor sees the *social* imaginary emerging from post-Enlightenment disenchantment, but Kurlander

frames the *supernatural* imaginary as the transfer in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of supernatural thinking and authority from Christianity to occultism.³¹

Of course, there had been many occult revivals before the late nineteenth century; indeed, the occult had never really gone away even at the heights of its most fervent persecution, but its rabid expansion and diversification in that later period is remarkable. It could not have happened without, as Christine Ferguson and Andrew Radford observe of Britain, *infrastructure*, ‘a rich and robust public sphere of institutions, gathering places, performance venues’ to provide a public platform.³² This revival was unprecedentedly open in discussion and consumption — that which the philosopher Jürgen Habermas called the ‘public sphere’.³³ And New Zealand’s flourishing development was contemporary with, and part and parcel of, the Victorian age.

This openness continues into the twenty-first century, and in Aotearoa has expanded to include many Māori traditional understandings, detected in the granting of legal personhood and associated human rights to Te Urewera National Park,³⁴ the Whanganui River,³⁵ and soon Taranaki National Park.³⁶ Although this animistic way of looking at the landscape is very much rooted in a Māori worldview, its adoption into an otherwise materialistic and literal Western legal structure suggests a certain degree of intellectual flexibility on the part of the Crown.



Occulture, as I understand the concept, is primarily a Western phenomenon, and while this book will talk about Māori who were interested in these Western traditions and ideas, and the many occasions where these movements appropriate from Māori tikanga and Māoritanga, it is not my intention to attempt to colonise Māori traditions any further than they already have been.

With the possible exceptions of the Māori prophetic movements and their Christian syncretism, Māori traditional medicine and reverence for the spirit world would have been regarded by the likes of Renaissance Swiss alchemist and physician Paracelsus (Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus

Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493–1541) as no more sinister than the natural magic of stones and herbs condoned by the Catholic Church of his day. In any event, those things need to be written about by Māori.

By the same token, while I am absolutely certain that when they came to the goldfields of Otago in the 1860s some Chinese gold prospectors brought with them *feng shui*, a knowledge of the properties of the five elements — wood, fire, metal, water, earth — and the flow of energy (*qi*) that links all things, and probably the *I Ching* as well, I am going to try to restrict myself to Western esoteric traditions.

With a nod to the British historian Eric Hobsbawm, New Zealand culture in the long nineteenth century leading up to the First World War tended to be a highly organised and international affair. There were, of course, the folkloric natural magics brought by settlers from the more rural parts of the British Isles; hence we occasionally find, in common with the other British colonies, deposits of items of clothing, single shoes and knives hidden away in the walls and floors of old buildings to ward off or deflect evil and misfortune. Aside from these, however, the most influential esoteric movements were established ones primarily from Britain.

The first of these was undoubtedly Freemasonry, with the first Masonic meeting in New Zealand being held in 1837 by the captain of a French whaling ship, the *Comte de Paris*, and the first lodge being founded in 1842. At the time there was considerable debate as to whether Freemasonry in Aotearoa should be allied to the British or the French lodges.³⁷ By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the grand fraternal order was well on its way to becoming a community service club in exotic drag, its mysteries taking a back seat to mutual security and public good deeds.³⁸

But what defines the esoteric? Essentially a whole web of concepts of mystically understood (anagogic) ideas and attitudes are drawn together by the gravitational pull of Renaissance-era Hermeticism, a highly influential school of esoteric thought in the early modern period, consisting of a syncretic quasi-religious philosophy derived from the purported writings of the mythical Hermes Trismegistus as translated into Latin by Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499). Surprisingly it can even be found discussed in early twentieth century New Zealand newspapers.³⁹

The broader esoteric tradition is a Western development, incubated within a Christian culture, and includes alchemy, the Christian and post-Christian variants on Kabbalah,⁴⁰ Paracelsianism (alchemical medicine), Theosophy (a mystical form of Christianity developed by Jakob Böhme in the seventeenth century and unrelated to the Theosophical Society of Chapter 1), Bavarian Illuminism, Rosicrucianism (which we will look at more closely in Chapter 12), and various forms of occultism.

They are all loosely compatible, believing in a system of correspondences that link this world with another, that these correspondences are united in nature in a cosmic order, that the creative imagination through ritual or invocation can connect to this other world, with a desire to transcend this world's limitations, that wisdom to do so can be found in a synthesis of historical traditions, and that this knowledge can be transmitted, leading to *gnosis*.⁴¹

So, what is gnosis? It is the Greek word for 'knowledge', and generally refers to a personal, inner revelation about the true nature of the universe in which the human is part of the divine essence but kept in darkness and ignorance by a material world created for that purpose. As a concept it occurs across many ancient philosophies and some religions. In New Zealand, its most pure form may be found preserved among the Iraqi community of Mandaeans in Auckland, the Naqshbandi Sufi and Gurdjieff-influenced Gnostic Society founded in Auckland by Shaikh Abdullah Isa Neil Dougan (1918–1987) in 1986, and in barely recognisable form in Scientology, but in general Gnostics believe in an evil material universe created by a demiurge to ensnare souls and prevent them realising their intrinsic divinity.⁴²

This demiurge, inherited from Platonic thought, goes by various names — Yaldabaoth, Saklas, Samael, Nebro, Leontoeidēs and Achamoth among them. The last, Achamoth, is a feminine version, a fallen Sophia or Gnostic wisdom, and was used as a sociological allegory by New Zealand writer M. K. Joseph in his speculative novel *The Time of Achamoth* (1977). In a broader neopagan or neo-shamanic worldview, gnosis can be transitory and doesn't necessarily bring coherent clarity, but may speak through archetypes and metaphors during an altered state of consciousness and communication with another realm and entities. These

entities can take many, often culturally determined forms: embodied and disembodied, animal, vegetal, nature spirits, gods, angels, demons, elementals, devas, the land itself, fairies, DMT clockwork elves, aliens and many others. It is a non-rational or a-rational form of knowledge, but not an irrational one.



The first actively esoteric group with a fully unique cosmology to establish in New Zealand was the international Theosophical Society, followed in short order by that bastion of the Western occult tradition, the Order of the Golden Dawn — or at least some of its offshoots. Spiritualism — communicating through the veil to the spirits of the departed by means of séances, mediumship and other techniques — was not an organisation per se, but was a loosely consistent global mass movement which also featured strongly in Victorian life. As can be imagined, there were also a fair number of charlatans, for which our exemplar case study is the Temple of Truth (see Chapter 6), which so scandalised Christchurch in the final decade of the nineteenth century.

In the twentieth century, esoteric and occult movements continued to find adherents in Aotearoa, but increasingly they had to appeal to a pragmatic, materialistic and technologically minded society. The UFO phenomena were assimilated into the mix. The first homegrown examples of occulture begin to emerge at this time, spurred on into the 1970s by the late arrival in Aotearoa of the Summer of Love. In the 1980s, variants of the libertarian Satanism, kicked off by the American Anton LaVey a generation earlier, stirred interest in the 'Me Generation'. Wicca and various flavours of Wicca and neopaganism arrived, practised by individuals and communities.

This leads us to magic, and the famous difficulty in trying to define it.⁴³ In its broadest sense, magic is the use of ritual or will to manipulate natural and supernatural forces. In the Western tradition this can be loosely grouped in a self-explanatory and moralistic way: the right-hand path of light and good, or white magic; the left-hand path of the material realm, often linked with negativity and black magic (though of course such

positions are subjective); and natural magic, the magic inherent in natural phenomena, often intricately linked with folk magic and Wicca. Magic can also be, again loosely, divided between the instrumentalised (often lumped together as ‘witchcraft’) and the ceremonial, abstract high magic of groups such as the Golden Dawn.

My own view is that magic or magical thinking overlaps intensely with creativity and imagination. Arthur Schopenhauer says repeatedly throughout *The World as Will and Idea* (1819) that the universe only exists as a representation or thought-image in an individual’s mind rather than being a true perception of an outer reality.⁴⁴ An analogous concept is Robert Anton Wilson’s ‘Chapel Perilous’, borrowing from Arthurian legend — the point where you cannot determine whether you have experienced something supernatural or entirely of your own imagination, and therefore you may continue in life either deeply paranoid or entirely agnostic.⁴⁵

Fantasy and comic-book author and ritual magician Alan Moore once had the important realisation that his manipulation of words and images were the equivalent of a magical manipulation of reality, and that the only place he could be sure magic and the gods existed was in his own infinite imagination.⁴⁶ In other words, his will. Magic is, perhaps, something that lies at the intersection of these concepts.

This book primarily deals with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, despite several of these groups and beliefs still being active. At the point in time that the internet becomes omnipresent, the idea of secretive esoteric groups, successive lineages and initiation into mysteries becomes largely redundant as occult practices become almost exclusively DIY affairs with little social stigma attached to them. By the millennium, any bored, disenfranchised soul with too many candles and a penchant for table arrangements might call themselves a Wiccan without having the faintest clue who Gerald Gardner and Doreen Valiente, the founders of the Wiccan movement, were.

In the New Age section of any bookshop you will find popular books on inviting the fairies into your home; previous generations, rather more sensibly, endeavoured at great lengths to keep them out. Occulture merges with pop culture to the point that sustaining the methodology of this book

becomes difficult. That, and you have to set limits somewhere or where will it end?

I do not pretend this to be a comprehensive or exhaustive history of the subject — an undertaking of that sort would take many years of research and extend to multiple volumes. Sometimes you will be astonished at the well-known figures of our history who rub up against occulture — as former US Vice President Dan Quayle said of Rasputin, ‘people that are really very weird can get into sensitive positions and have a tremendous impact on history’.⁴⁷ What I hope this book will do is give a taste of the parallel universe of the unexpected, the strange, and the high weird that exists just beneath the New Zealand story you thought you knew.

Chapter 1.

**The
not-so-secret
doctrine**

As when with
downcast eyes we
muse and brood,
And ebb into a former
life, or seem
To lapse far back in
some confused dream
To states of mystical
similitude . . .

— ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON,
'TO ____', "AS WHEN WITH
DOWNCAST EYES" ', 1872

Excluding Freemasonry, the earliest esoteric group to gain traction and influence in nineteenth-century New Zealand was the Theosophical Society. As American religion historian Robert Ellwood acknowledged in his landmark 1993 study of alternative spirituality in Aotearoa, *Islands of the Dawn*, no other unconventional spiritual movement in the Anglosphere has had the persuasive, and often indirect, penetration and influence that Theosophy had, and in New Zealand it was supreme in terms of membership, influence and stability. Until after the Second World War, Theosophy and Spiritualism stood alone as alternative creeds among Pākehā, and the new alternatives spawned in the 1960s owe much to the successes of the Theosophical Society.¹

Theosophy offered a heady cocktail of spiritualism, reincarnation, lost continents and Eastern metaphysics attractively packaged for Western tastes. Its reach was international, and connected industrialists, politicians, social reformers and avant-garde artists attracted to its promise of something that transcended Victorian rational materialism and Protestant morality.

The Society was formed in New York City — the ‘new world’ appropriately enough — in 1875 by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891). This Russian — descended from minor nobility, unprepossessingly moon-faced and portly, extraordinarily charismatic, and rapaciously partial to material comforts and other people’s money — had emigrated to the United States in 1873. Her formidable hypnotic stare is at once evident in photographs, which in combination with her forthright personality and aristocratic manners quickly attracted followers.

Blavatsky claimed to have visited Tibet in 1849 and to have made telepathic contact with a group of hidden ascended mystics known as the ‘Indian Masters’ in the vicinity of Tashi Lhunpo. It seems unlikely that Blavatsky did in fact visit Tibet — even Sylvia Cranston’s earnest 1993 biography hedges its bets. For one thing, none of the many travellers to the region, nor indeed the Tibetans themselves, had ever heard of these Indian Masters. Additionally, Blavatsky’s descriptions of Tibet are few, and her explanations of Tibetan cultural and belief are trivial where not outright erroneous.²

But Blavatsky’s claim did play to a discernible psychological urge

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky,
minor Russian noble, devotee
of Indian Masters and founder
of the Theosophical Society.



among her compatriots. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a significant number of Russians felt drawn to their Asiatic heritage as a way of distinguishing a more authentic Russian identity from the Western European influences introduced by Tsar Peter the Great in the eighteenth century. In the final decades of tsardom, Russian intellectual life readily embraced the fringe.

Russian artists and writers had forged their own Symbolist movement, distinct from that in the West, and boundaries between the separate realms of science and religion softened, so that by the early 1900s the latest advances in Russian mathematics, particularly the study of infinity, were being influenced by the heretical *Imiaslavie* or ‘Name worshipping’ sect of the Orthodox Church.

The sect was known for its obsessive worship of the name of the mystical God as God itself.³ Theosophical conventions about higher spiritual dimensions and the so-called ‘Fourth Way’ promulgated by the mystics P. D. Ouspensky (1878–1947) and George Gurdjieff (d.1949) — we will encounter them in Chapter 8 — were inspired by developments in mathematics and pangeometry made by Nikolai Lobachevsky (1792–1856) at Kazan University in Russian Tartarstan.⁴

Another widespread underground heretical sect was the flagellant and reputedly sin-to-be-saved (autoerotic asphyxiation was said to feature) the *Kblysty*, which arose in the seventeenth century and was finally stamped out in the Soviet period. Radical politics simmered, and Lenin would embrace revolutionary socialist politics following his brother’s 1886 execution. Notoriously randy peasant mystic Grigori Rasputin would become a major figure at the Romanov court in 1905.

Less known is that before Rasputin, the French occultist Gérard Encausse (1865–1916), better known as ‘Papus’, held similar sway over Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra, visiting Russia in 1901, 1905 and 1906, and prophesying that the Tsar would rule as long as Papus lived. Nicholas held out a further 141 days.⁵ Russian minds at the time were, clearly, wide open.

Blavatsky may not have visited Tibet, at least in the flesh, but Tibet had come to her. Buddhism had been an officially recognised religion in Russia since the incorporation of Siberia in the seventeenth century. Blavatsky’s