

Wica or Wicca? - Politics and the Power of Words

by **Melissa Seims**

How did modern Witchcraft come to be known as Wicca when this was never a word used by the 'Father of Modern Witchcraft', Gerald Gardner? In this article, I am going to examine the use of Wica and Wicca throughout the 1950s and 60s in an attempt to cast light on how this change in spelling may have come about. The answer may have little to do with Gardner's bad spelling, or indeed any particular etymological argument. It may actually have far more to do with Charles Cardell, the man responsible for first publishing the Gardnerian Book of Shadows, one-time head of the Coven of Atho and leader of the 'Wiccens.'

We shall start with a brief excursion into the etymological arguments for the origin and meaning of the Words Wica and Wicca. Then, using evidence from newspaper reports and other written sources we shall look at how people like Gardner, Charles Cardell and others used these words. I believe history reveals that the apparently simple difference in spelling actually had some powerful political meanings to the Witches of that time.

The etymological source most often cited as being the root word for Wicca, is the Anglo-Saxon word *Wicca* (fem.) and *Wica* (masc.) with *Wiccan* often cited as the plural form. Gardner also appears to support Anglo Saxon origins for in his book, *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, he writes:

'It is a curious fact that when the witches became English-speaking they adopted their Saxon name "Wica".' [\[1\]](#)

'...[the word witch] in the original Anglo-Saxon possessed two forms, "wicca", (masculine), and "wicce", (feminine).'' [\[2\]](#)

Yet despite these etymological observations about the Saxon word having two 'c's, Gardner still chose to write Wica, with one 'c'. This is clearly seen in his published books where a pattern also emerges which shows that Gardner's usage of the word increased throughout the 1950s. This seems to be in accordance with Gardner's vehemence in ensuring that the Witch Cult thrived and also helped to firmly define Gardner's Witchcraft not only from that of his contemporaries, but also from the 'Black Magic' mongers, stories of which often graced 1950s newspapers.

If we look at Gardner's 1949 attempt at magical fiction *High Magics Aid*, we find absolutely no reference to the Wica or Wicca. A few years later, with the 1954 publication of *Witchcraft Today*, We find no examples of the word 'Wicca' being used, but there are 3 instances of 'Wica' all of which appear in Chapter 10 'What are Witches?'

'What are they then? They are the people who call themselves the Wica, the "wise people", who practise the age-old rites and who have, along with much superstition and herbal knowledge, preserved an occult teaching and working processes which they themselves think to be magic or witchcraft.'^[3]

Moving on a few years to his 1959 book *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, we find quite a leap in the usage of the word 'Wica', for it occurs 17 times. 'Wicca' is also seen for the first time and is used a total of 5 times, but in all instances it is when etymology is being discussed. As Doreen Valiente helped Gardner with this book, my personal feeling is that it is more likely to have been Doreen who suggested the etymological sections. Her other writings and notes clearly indicate that she was very interested in the roots of the word.

Finally, we come to the 1960 book *Gerald Gardner: Witch* written by Idries Shah, but attributed to Jack Bracelin, it was written whilst Gardner was still alive and so could be considered almost autobiographical. Within its pages we find the word 'Wica' being used a grand total of 21 times with absolutely no reference at all to 'Wicca'. This pattern of word usage is further supported by all of Gardner's extant, personal Books of Shadows where the word 'Wica' is consistently used and 'Wicca' is never seen.

Irrespective of any etymological argument it is very clear that Gardner used the word 'Wica' with intent and had a firm concept in his own mind as to how this word was used and to what it referred. A good example of this can be seen in an interview he gave to the *Daily Dispatch* (5th August 1954) where Gardner explains to the reporter:

'...there are man and woman witches. Each is called a wica.'

In *The Observer* (16th December 1956) Gardner writes: 'The priests and priestesses who directed these festivals, were called The Wica, meaning 'The Wise ones'. Whilst combing through newspaper reports from the 1950s and 60s, collected by Doreen Valiente^[4] it can be seen that Gardner's usage and chosen spelling is nearly always 'Wica'. There are some rare instances of 'Wikka' and one or two other

variations being used but in these cases, I suspect it was down to a reporter who had simply failed to clarify the spelling.

Looking at the context in which Gardner used 'Wica' it can be said that he saw a single Witch, as 'a Wica', a wise-one. Collectively, they were 'the Wica'. Gardner's usage does *not* make it automatically interchangeable with 'Wicca'.

The online compact Oxford English dictionary definition of 'Wicca' is '(noun) *the religious cult of modern witchcraft*'. Today, adherents of Wicca are called Wiccans. To Gardner the religion was the 'Cult of Witchcraft or 'The Witch Cult' (almost certainly inspired by the title of Margaret Murray's 1921 book 'The Witch Cult in Western Europe), its adherents were known as The Wica.

We could just dismiss this as a peculiar glitch in Gardner's understanding, a quirk of his idiosyncratic personality, if it were not for the fact that he is considered to be the 'Father of Modern Day Witchcraft' so surely, his usage and understanding of these words is really rather important!

Having briefly looked at etymology and Gardner's usage of 'Wica' in the 1950's, we turn now to look at what I believe to have been a major political factor that influenced the usage and meaning of this word. In the face of Charles Cardell and his Craft of the Wiccans, 'Wica' took on a new meaning and helped to define the differences between Gardner and Cardell's Witchcraft in their ensuing publicity battle.

Cardell: Leader of the 'Wiccans'

It is unclear when exactly Gardner first met Cardell. We do know that Cardell was in discussion with Gardner when the latter was looking to move the Witchcraft museum to London. This would seem to indicate that there was an amiable relationship between the two of them, by the mid 1950s.

Then, in 1957, Gardner appeared in the 'Weekend' newspaper under the headline 'I Am a Witch'. This was followed in 1958 by more reports about the activities of members of the Bricket Wood Coven. With the Wica grabbing headlines, Cardell started to write a series of articles which appeared in the College of Psychic Science journal, *Light*. One of which called for all genuine 'Wiccans' to get in touch. This was followed shortly after by Cardell demanding the Crafts traditional passwords from Gardner. Their

previous alliance, had now turned into rivalry and with the arrival of Olive Greene this rivalry was about to turn into a 'Witch War.'

Olive Greene, (AKA Olwen Armstrong Maddocks) was the wife of the chairman of the Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, Mr Edward Greene. Described as being well-dressed and always wearing a leopard-skin coat, her initial application to join the Wica through Jack Bracelin at Bricket Wood, failed. Gardner, easily charmed by a fair lady, decided to initiate her himself, later claiming that Olive had 'drugged' him with sweets.

Olive took the Witch name of 'Florannis' but does not seem to have been overly impressed by Gardner and his Witchcraft and shortly afterwards Olive wrote to Cardell about his articles in *Light*. At that time, Cardell was practising as a pseudo-psychologist out of ornately decorated consulting rooms in Queens Gate, London. He replied to her saying that he would indeed be very happy to meet with her and proposed a date at the end of May 1959.

Following their meeting, it appears that Olive became a spy for Cardell, reporting back to him on Gardner and his Craft activities. She also started to work as a receptionist in Cardell's consulting business. Olive subsequently fell out with Gardner who, along with his wife Donna, was left genuinely upset by Olive's betrayal. Sadly, Donna passed away shortly after in January 1960, and Gardner believed that the stress of this unpleasant situation had taken its toll on her life.

Shortly after Donna's death, Margaret Bruce, the owner of a magical mail-order business and friend of Gardner's, wrote to him about the sad state of affairs surrounding Olive, the Cardell's and their 'Moon Magick' business. Margaret composed a revealing little ditty about Cardell and his machinations:

*'We feel it is tragick
That those who lack Magick.
Should start a vendetta
With those who know betta
We who practice the Art
Have no wish to take part
Seems a pity the 'Wicca'
Don't realise this Quicca.'* [\[5\]](#)

The mocking wording of this poem clearly reflects the animosity that Margaret and Gardner had towards Cardell's 'Wicca' and also reveals that this spelling, along with 'Wiccen' was used by Cardell.

Cardell's War with Gardner was still not over. A few years later, following Gardner's death in 1964, sections from the Gardnerian Book of Shadows that Olive had been given by Gardner, were published by Charles Cardell in the defamatory pamphlet, 'Witch'. In it, Cardell (AKA Rex Nemorensis), draws his literary 'sword of the Water city' [6] and claimed;

'Our own investigations and those of the Folk-Lore Society have proved conclusively that there was no suggestion of modern Witchcraft in Britain prior to the advent of Gerald Brosseau Gardner and Doreen Vlachopoulos[7]. Until then, Witches were merely characters in children's fairy tales.' [8]

The pamphlet also included a disparaging condemnation on the motives of both Gerald Gardner and Doreen Valiente, bizarrely going as far as reproducing Doreen's marriage and birth certificate's.

This action understandably outraged many of the Wica and set them firmly against Cardell. Doreen sent out letters to several of the other Elders, appealing for them all to unite in the face of Cardell's hostilities.

A few years later in 1967, Mary Cardell (Charles' pseudo-sister) was in court denying allegations of 'Witchcraft in the Woods'. The case had started several years earlier in 1961, when a reporter had been witness to the Cardell's engaging in a Witchcraft ritual in the woods on their estate. When asked about the series of articles in *Light*, Mary replied that the name 'Wiccens', was invented by Charles and that the articles had been written in an attempt to deliberately catch Gardner's eye, so that they could undermine his Witchcraft Cult.

Another example of the word 'Wica' being used in a defining way can be seen in a 1963 letter sent from Arnold Crowther to Gardner.^[9] The letter has the phrase 'The Wica detective agency' at the top and is about Crowther's investigations into a new Witch that had appeared on the publicity scene - Alex Sanders. Such 'detective' work was probably partially inspired by the fact that Alex, who started to appear in the media in 1962, initially showed a clear preference for the one 'c' spelling. Arnold's reference to

himself as 'The Wica Detective Agency' reveals a sense of ownership of the word 'Wica'.

This same year also sees the following advertisements appearing in *Fate Magazine*. One was for a 'Wica Perthshire Circle'. This is almost certainly Monique and Scotty Wilson. Another advert is for 'Wicca - Dianic and Aradian' based in Cardiff Wales. Mary Cardell was originally from Wales and Diana is the main Goddess mentioned in the Atho material which appears to have originated with Cardell, so it seems likely that this advertisement is something to do with them.

By the late 1960s a glance through newspaper archives will readily show that the word 'Wicca' is increasing in frequency. This isn't to suggest that Cardell's Witchcraft was gaining strength but rather that people were becoming more aware of the etymology of the word and had started to assume that Gardner had mis-spelt it in the first instance. Additionally the writings of Doreen Valiente (whose more perspicacious personality generally chose correct etymology over Gardner's spelling), were also increasing in frequency and I suspect that her use of Wicca served a double purpose. For not only was it etymologically correct, but it also meant that she could aid in reclaiming a word that she considered Cardell as unworthy of using. Other 1960s writings by Justine Glass and June John's book, *King of the Witches*, also used 'Wicca', with Glass stating that 'Wiccan' was the correct plural form of 'Wicce'. By the end of the 1960s its reclamation was just about complete.

By the time we get to the 1970s Wicca and Wiccan now have a firm identity of their own and it has largely remained that way ever since though interestingly, in the last few years there have been signs of reclamation of the term 'Wica', especially in the USA, where it is now being employed to try and distinguish Gardnerian Witchcraft from the more generic pop Wicca.[\[10\]](#)

Is it not slightly ironic that Gardner's legacy should now be called 'Wicca', a term that was never used by him? Especially when one also considers that 'Gardnerian' was a term originally coined as a derogatory reference to Gardner's initiates.[\[11\]](#) These examples show us the ease with which words and their meanings can be skewed and also reclaimed. On the one hand, it doesn't really matter that 'Wica' has been transformed by many into 'Wicca'. We all know what we are talking about and surely that's what counts right? Words do have power and 'by names and images are all Powers awakened and reawakened.'[\[12\]](#) The word 'Wica', tells us a story about a

period in Craft history which helped to shape what we are today. 'Wicca' can never do that.

[1] Gardner, 'The Meaning of Witchcraft' p96 *Magickal Childe* 1991.

[2] Gardner, 'The Meaning of Witchcraft' p120 *Magickal Childe* 1991.

[3] Gardner, 'Witchcraft Today' p121 *Arrow* 1970

[4] Many thanks to Melissa and Rufus Harrington, Boscastle Witchcraft Museum and Philip Heselton.

[5] Letter dated 23rd February 1960. Boscastle Collection.

[6] 'The Coven of Atho' Melissa Seims. *The Cauldron* no.126.

[7] A previous surname of Doreen Valiente

[8] 'Witch' by Rex Nemorensis (1964)

[9] Letter privately owned by the James' of the Wiccan Church of Canada.

[10] I am also guilty of reclaiming 'Wica' because I would get told off by my initiator, Charles Clark, if I spelt it 'Wicca'! The former spelling, for him, was firmly associated only with Gardner's Craft.

[11] *Pentagram* magazine August 1965

[12] Line from the Neophyte ritual of the Golden Dawn.