
The Magick of Jack Parsons

Strange Angel: The Otherworldly life of Rocket Scientist John Whiteside Parsons, George Pendle

(Harvest Books, 2005, 368pp, \$25.00hc; \$15.00pb)

Reviewed by Mogg Morgan



I read in a recent review of the life of Austin Spare that becoming a cult figure is “a mixed blessing which threatens to overshadow his unique talents.” It is often the case that visionary individuals with unusual biography, are for a long time only remembered by fellow enthusiasts, who with unparalleled grace, are often happy to stand aside when the mainstream media finally gets up to speed.

Another example is the life of Jack Parsons, well known to occultists as one time head of a highly productive occult lodge in 1930s Hollywood—amongst whose luminaries were Wilfred Smith, Ron Hubbard, Jane Wolf and Marjorie Cameron, to name but a few. The story of how the house was brought tumbling down by the machinations of a geriatric Crowley are told in Martin Starr’s *Unknown God* (2005, see review below). George Pendle is of the opinion that for Jack Parsons, magick was only a sideline, his real passion the then infant science of rocketry. Difficult as it is to imagine, rocket science was once the

domain of science fiction buffs and amateurs, space flight itself being dismissed as physically impossible by leading academics of the day!

Pendle's biography of Parsons is therefore also a potted early history of rocketry and the American space programme. This is also another counter example to those intellectual historians who argue magick and science have not been bedfellows since the age of Isaac Newton. This is a highly entertaining book, that goes into just enough technological and management detail for the non scientist such as myself to make what might seem an unlikely tale of scientific progress really come to life. Parsons emerges as a complex character, whom despite being born with a silver spoon firmly in mouth, managed to avoid formal education and through empirical methods, to become one of the founders of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Unfortunately he was 'swindled' out of his shares by what would nowadays I'm sure be termed 'insider trading.' On the brink of a lucrative sale to a major industrialist, he was persuaded to sell up, 'as there was no future in this line of research!' The real reason being that the new owners wanted to purge the company of its maverick founders. It was long after Parson's death before his colleague and *eminence grise* Frank Malina, argued for some acknowledgement of Parsons' pivotal role in rocket research—hence the minor honour of the eponymous crater on the dark side of the moon.

The author manages to shine some new light on many of the well know incidents in Parsons' life that have taken on a folkloric gloss. He writes at length about his relationship with founder of Scientology L. Ron Hubbard and his entry into the bohemian community of Thelemites in Pasadena. Parsons' first wife Helen had already transferred her affections to the 'cult's' then head, Wilfred Smith. Parsons struck up an another 'open relationship with Helen's younger sister Betty, who was then to fell under the charismatic charms of Hubbard. Despite the presence of the 'green eyed monster', Parsons invested pretty much all his severance pay from JPL in a dodgy business venture with the Hubbards. It all ends in mutual recriminations and litigation.

The author falls into the view that Parsons' greatest interest in magick 'see-saws' with low points in his scientific career. At the time of his mysterious death he was reconciled with his third wife, the hypnotic Marjorie Cameron (Candy), the result, so he thought, of a magical invocation to gain himself a new 'scarlet woman' (magical partner to you or I). By then Parsons was engaged in a new commercial enterprise manufacturing explosive special effects for the movie industry. It was whilst completing a rush order before holidaying with 'Candy' that Parsons' cavalier attitude to explosives finally caught up with him. His body torn apart by the blast, he died a little while later, followed soon after by his mother's suicide.

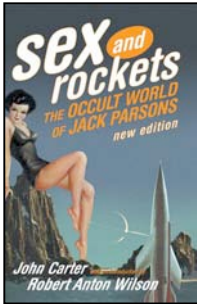
I found Pendle's science writing more convincing, and indeed entertaining, than the analysis of Parsons' magical work—which is perhaps not unexpected for a book coming from a mainstream academic press! There is little in here that is not better treated in other books on magical history, such as Martin Starr's masterful *Unknown God*. I quibble with the book's lack of a decent bibliography, making it quite tricky to really follow his sources or indeed see the influence of earlier books on the same topic. In my opinion it is extremely churlish of mainstream authors to cherry pick a story from the occult world but not even leave the fig leaf of a citation in the bibliography. The book has far fewer illustrations than others I have seen. Furthermore, I thought Pendle completely missed the significance of Parsons' resignation from the OTO and subsequent writings on witchcraft as the next new thing. Who could know that another fellow initiate of the OTO would meet Parsons and thereafter leave fallow his OTO charter, following the admonitions to start a witchcraft cult in UK. That was Gerald Gardner and the rest is history, although not one American writers are fond of acknowledging. But all in all this is a very informative and entertaining read. A good book, highly recommended.

Sex and Rockets: The Occult World of Jack Parsons, John Carter.

Introduction by Robert Anton Wilson.

(Feral House, 2005 reissue, 239pp, \$16.95).

Reviewed by Charlotte



I've had this book on my 'to read' list for some years now, so being asked to review Feral House's new edition of *Sex and Rockets, The Occult World of Jack Parsons*, a book which seemingly contained all the elements that press my buttons, (Sex! Magick! Science Fiction! Occult gossip! AND Socio/Political Commentary of America!) was like Christmas and birthdays combined.

An initial superficial perusal of the book provided instant gratification.

Sci-fi cheesecake chick posing provocatively in front of a rocket, super-imposed over characters of the Enochian alphabet made for an ultra cool book cover.

The necessary appendices were there also, which in my personal checklist gives a near automatic degree of credibility and there was also a good-sized section of photographs which is always a good thing when one needs a break from reading text in order to ruminate over their contents.

There was, however, no biography given of the author and contact with the publishers revealed that 'John Carter' was a pseudonym of someone whose governmental job doesn't allow for out of office occult interests...thus the need for a degree of confidentiality. I found this an intriguing aside; especially in view of the fact that Carter's writing treads that fine line of intellectual and practical understanding of the Occult world without showing whether it was a spiritual path that was his own or just skilled researching abilities.

That said there was an occasional wry reference to Aleister Crowley, mention of Parsons perhaps using his Thelemic beliefs as a crutch in

times of personal stress and perceptions that didn't necessarily agree with mainstream occult orientated thinking that could be seen as giving a subtle indication of Carters personal predilections.

Robert Anton Wilson's introduction is fast, fun and near pop art subversive in style (a direct contrast to John Carter's more formal presentation). His writing moves rapidly from subject to subject covering what he considers relevant to understanding the life and times of Jack /John/ Marvel Parsons and giving a series of viewpoints that complement nicely with those of John Carters in the main body of the book (though not necessarily agreeing on some points admittedly, such as which is the chapter in 'The Book of Lies (Falsely so Called)' where Crowley purportedly revealed the secret of the 9th degree of the OTO seem to provoke some difference of opinion!).

The main body of the book looks at the separate personas of Jack Parsons that Robert Anton Wilson has already introduced to us; the man, the magician and the scientist and the aspects of these that one would expect to be covered in a reasonably comprehensive biography of Jack Parsons.

The scientific innovations, correspondence with Crowley, involvement with L. Ron Hubbard, and leadership of the Agape Lodge of the OTO are all examined as well as details of Parsons' Babalon workings. All these components are in many ways information anyone with an interest in this field would have come across prior to reading this book.

However there is more thorough and in depth analysis given and there are some details that I, personally, had never encountered before.

The chapters which focus on Parsons scientific discoveries with his invention of solid Rocket Fuel and innovations in the field of Jet Propulsion, as well as the section which gives an 'Introduction to Enochian Magic' whilst dealing with hugely different topics could perhaps be seen as being rather technical, however in my opinion this in depth analysis enhances the book and it remains accessible and highly

readable; which for someone as generally technically disinterested as myself is quite an impressive achievement.

The use of Parsons autobiographical essay 'Analysis of The Master of The Temple' provided fascinating personal insights that Carter weaves into the book skillfully, and the afterward of this edition gives an interesting take on the origins of the concept of Parsons' Black Pilgrimage.

Perhaps the greatest part of my enjoyment and appreciation of this book was derived from its looking closely at Jack Parsons' personal interpretation and application of Thelemic Principles and the changes this created within his life.

The mention of a bizarre black box being found after Parsons death, which contained films of Parsons, his mother and the mother's dog having sex, if true, casts an interesting and perhaps tragic light on the above.

On one hand you could applaud Parsons commitment to breaking the conditioning that bind and constrict, on the other (especially bearing in mind that Jack Parsons mother killed herself within hours of her son's death...and the dog was also killed on the same day) one could see his attempts at doing this as being literal to the point of instability and near fundamentalism.

There was no judgement conveyed in this book, and no over emphasis on the nature of Jack Parsons' death or over exploration of conspiracy theories beyond what was necessary in the name of thorough research.

There was, however, information given beyond the standard available, and a well-researched and unbiased insight into the multi faceted life of Jack/John/Marvel Parsons, which makes this, book a highly readable classic.

The Unknown God: W.T. Smith and the Thelemites, Martin P. Starr. (Teitan Press, 2004, 432pp, hardback, over 44 photographs and illustrations \$49.95) Reviewed by MMM



That's got to be one of the most interesting books on magical history I've read in a long while, perhaps ever. Martin Starr debut book is a documentary study of the North American followers of the English mystic Aleister Crowley told through the life of their defacto leader, Wilfred Talbot Smith (1885-1957). The author is fairly well known as one of the owners of Teitan Press, who for many years have produced fine, authoritative editions of the master's more obscure works: books like the beautiful facsimile of *Konx Om Pax*; the pornographic classic, *Snowdrops from a Curate's Garden* (of which I'm told there are many) and Crowley pastiche of Sufi sexual mysticism *The Scented Garden of Abdullah the Satirist of Shiraz*.

Starr tells the story of Wilfred Smith's and I suppose what one might call the second generation of Thelemites who set about to promulgate the Crowleyan teachings in 1930s Hollywood. Perhaps the following quotation from the books terminus ad quem, might give some idea of the ups and down of the Thelemic movement:

With Germer expired the last chance for Thelema to take root in the United States, and the prospects internationally were no more bright. Or so one might have thought. Germer had successfully accused Mellinger of being an FBI agent and kicked him out of the house, expelled Grant for blasphemy, dismissed McMurtry as a slave to his wife and ceased corresponding with Metzger over differences in the Crowley translations in German the latter had published. Motta had fled the United States for his

native Brazil after having been arrested in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in February 1961 on suspicion of drug trafficking; while in jail he confessed that the source of the drugs found in his compartment was none other than his OTO Brother, Louis T. Culling. In the following year Germer refrained from giving Motta a charter to open the OTO in Brazil, mindful of the fact that Motta, in his experience only ‘switched temporarily back into sanity.’ Yet on his deathbed what faith Germer had in a future for Thelema he chose to vest in Motta, telling Sasha to inform Frater Adjuvo that he was ‘The Follower.’ What this may have meant was the subject of speculation that was never satisfactorily resolved. The issue of Germer’s heir to the headship of the OTO remained an open question to the few who knew or cared about it. (Starr 2004: 343)

For those perhaps less familiar with some of the above names let me tell you that we’re talking about all the main players in the subsequent history of Thelema—here laid low by the mind games of Crowley and his successor Germer. And that’s not counting the ones that had already expired in scene two—i.e. Crowley’s co-superior in the OTO Frater Achad, Jack Parsons and the books hero Wilfred Smith. It reminded me of the first act of the *Mahabharata* when Vatsyanana tells the audience that the character who represents the ancestor of all humanity is at that point rendered permanently barren—what can possibly happen next??

Well that would take another book, but it seems to me that the modern stop go progress of Thelema is in part made more comprehensible by reading this fascinating history of its first days. In a way, it really is act two of the same play. When Crowley had trouble with his frater superior Theodor Reuss he upped and gave him the sack proclaiming himself head of the order (Starr 2004: 112.) It was a tradition he was to recommend to others with the words of John

Bunyan: “my sword to him that can take it.” And indeed, according to this book, if Crowley could have proved his right to the OTO crown he might also have succeeded in imposing his control over the Theosophical Society and AMORC—and then how differently the magical world of the 80’s might have looked. I could go on but hopefully that’s more than enough to wet your appetite for this highly recommended masterpiece.

Reviews courtesy of *Mandrake Speaks*
(mandrake-subscribe@yahoo.com).