

THE MAGICAL WORLD OF DION FORTUNE

By Gareth Knight

Draw a line from St Alban's Head on the south coast of England up to the holy island of Lindisfarne in the north east, passing through the great stone circle at Avebury, and another from King Arthur's legendary birth place at Tintagel in Cornwall, across to St Albans north of London, the old Roman city of Verulamium and place of Britain's first Christian martyr, and that line too will pass through Avebury. So says Mona Wilton, heroine of Dion Fortune's novel *The Goat-Foot God*, to Hugh Paston when he is seeking a suitable site to construct a nature temple dedicated to the great god Pan. Thus the land of Albion (the ancient name for Britain the White Island) is divided up into four quarters of real significance, each having a different approach and response to the legends and traditions, be they Brythonic Celtic, Saxon or Viking.



Dion Fortune when young

What makes Dion Fortune's novel differ from the average fantasy novel is that she fully believed in everything she wrote, and not least that which she wrote under the guise of fiction, for in writing fiction she could speak of things that might seem strange if presented as bare fact. For there is a truth of the imagination, that when coming from sufficient depth of knowledge and conviction is just as valid as any more prosaic speculation.

GLASTONBURY CONNECTIONS

The proof of this is evident in the fact that her novels written almost 70 years ago are still in print today and much of what she wrote in them has been taken on board by the esoteric world. Ley lines are commonplace matters of talk nowadays but Dion Fortune was a pioneer in making their existence more widely known. She was also very conscious of power points throughout the land and not least that of Glastonbury which she described as the mystical heart of England and here she first set up a group of like-minded friends in a Chalet on the lower slopes of Glastonbury Tor.

Her love of Glastonbury is encapsulated in an imaginative guide she wrote that is also still in print, *'Glastonbury Avalon of the Heart'*, in which she describes the various strands of legend that not only permeate Glastonbury but filter into the subconscious mind of the nation as a whole as part of its natural heritage.



Glastonbury Tor

Thus in one sense it forms a part of Camelot, for the bodies of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere, in the time of Richard the Lionheart, were discovered by the monks buried before the high altar of their abbey. It was also the place of the first Christian church in England, a wattle and daub circular structure that predated the abbey, and that legend equates with the coming of Joseph of Arimathea, who after he had taken possession of the body of Christ from Pontius Pilate, was vouchsafed a vision of the Holy Grail and brought a party of devotees to these islands. He landed at Wearyall Hill, then an island, and struck his staff in the ground where it took root, and can still be seen as the Holy Thorn, flowering every Christmas, an offshoot of which grows within the abbey grounds. Dion Fortune's evocation of the ancient traditions of Glastonbury has inspired another generation of novelists to take up the story, not least the epic tale of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*.

CHILDHOOD INSPIRATION

She also evoked yet more ancient traditions of the west and was well placed to do so, for she spent her childhood years in Somerset. Born in 1890 in Llandudno in North Wales, her family moved to Weston super Mare soon after her birth where they helped to run a hydrotherapeutic establishment near Bath.

What gripped the young Dion Fortune's imagination was Brean Down, a spur of land that stretches out into the Bristol Channel at the point where it faces directly onto the wide Atlantic Ocean, unobstructed by the land masses of Ireland, Wales or the Cornish peninsula. It is now a nature reserve and site of great historical importance, owned by the National Trust, and at its far end, before a line of jagged rocks that jut into the sea is an old fort. Built as a defence against the French in the mid nineteenth century, it was abandoned in 1900 although brought back into temporary use during the Second World War.



Great Orme's Head Llandudno 1903



Weston-super-Mare, 1903

The fort at the end of the down remains a wild and romantic spot despite the proximity of holiday camps and resorts along the coast, and it is here that the heroine of Dion Fortune's major novel *The Sea Priestess* set up a temple to evoke the powers of the Sea. Her broader aims were to inject by her evocations some of the forgotten ancient powers into the conventional repressive society that she found in the 1930s. At the same time she rebuilt the fractured emotional life of her chosen priest Wilfred Maxwell transforming him from a limp-wristed wimp, henpecked by his mother and elder sister, into a vibrant and active man, successfully married to a local girl with whom he developed a personal knowledge of the inner worlds revealed to them by the sea priestess.

The psychological side to her work was ever important to Dion Fortune. In her early twenties she had practised as a counsellor at the Medico-Psychological Clinic in London until coming to the conclusion that there was more to the human mind than orthodox psychology was prepared to admit. She came to these conclusions after some unusual experiences of her own. First discovering that she was telepathic when she attended by chance a lecture demonstration on the subject and then after reading Annie Besant's *The Ancient Wisdom*, experiencing a vivid vision where she seemed to be taken up into the high Himalayas to meet two great spiritual

beings who set her upon her subsequent life as an esoteric teacher.

THE GOOD DOCTOR

At first she learned the ropes through a remarkable occult practitioner Dr Theodore Moriarty and it was watching him at work that first disenchanted her with orthodox psychology. She wrote up some of her experiences of Moriarty at work in a series of short stories published as *The Secrets of Dr Taverner*, and came close to replicating his work when after Moriarty's death in 1923 she met and married Dr Thomas Penry Evans with whom she hoped to set up a clinic that combined knowledge and practice of orthodox medicine with the insights of esoteric and spiritual healing. Something of her work on these lines was recently discovered in an exciting literary find and has been published as *Principles of Esoteric Healing*.

Hopes for establishing a clinic were eventually displaced by calls upon their time to establish an esoteric school. She had already been initiated into the famous Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn where she worked under the Scottish novelist Brodie Innes and Moina MacGregor Mathers wife of the founder of the Golden Dawn. Nor was the eastern side of things neglected, for she was also a member of the Theosophical Society becoming President of its Christian Mystic Lodge. However in 1927 the call came that rather than work with either of these established organisations they should do their own thing. This marked a watershed in her life. Her ideals in starting a school were laid out in two important books: *The Esoteric Orders and their Work* and *The Training and Work of an Initiate* which laid out in modern terms how one might train to become an initiate after the style of the ancient schools of initiation. This was the genesis of The Society of the Inner Light whose work continues strongly to this day.

She followed up with four years intensive work which resulted in publication of *The Mystical Qabalah*, regarded by many as the most lucid and student friendly introduction to the Tree of Life the great symbol system that forms the backbone of much of the western esoteric tradition. Then as a means of illustrating some of its metaphysical principles she set about writing a series of novels to show their possible application in daily life.

The first of these was *The Winged Bull* followed by *The Goat-foot God* and *The Sea Priestess* and finally *Moon Magic*. This last novel is perhaps the most practical of her books giving very full details of how the Sea Priestess goes about her magical work in the city of London, on the south bank of the Thames, as she teaches her chosen priest the methods and rationale of her work.

LOST SECRETS

Much of the theory and practice in her novels illustrates what she later came to call “**the lost secrets of the West**”. This is an amalgam of orthodox and less orthodox psychological practice. She was very much aware of latest developments in analytical psychology, being in close correspondence with the Jungian Foundation in Zurich, and from her earlier psychological work she was aware of the importance of techniques of induced autosuggestion, whilst at the same time she became a confidant of a London University academic researching into techniques of Yoga.

Practical examples abound in the relationship between her main characters of the interchange of etheric magnetism, techniques which fell out of fashion in the English speaking world in the mid-nineteenth century, but which continued to have a strong following by practitioners in France.

In her last years Dion Fortune had to struggle with the problems of working within the

restrictions upon publishing and public meetings exercised by the conditions of the Second World War. Not in the least subdued by these difficulties, she ran a widespread meditation group by means of a series of weekly letters, the gist of which have since been published as Dion Fortune's *Magical Battle of Britain* and, written in the heat of the London blitz, have found a new lease of life in bringing comfort and instruction to victims of 9/11 in New York.

The work of this meditation group brought about deeper concern with the Arthurian legends and the Holy Grail and the possibility of launching a complete training system in three degrees, consisting of the grade of Arthur, concerned with civilised ideals and chivalry, the grade of Merlin, concerned with an awareness of the inner planes and particularly ancient nature and faery contacts, and the grade of Guinevere, concerned with the powers of the human aura and their polar use. Finally there come the high mystical contacts of the Holy Grail. Much of this work sustained the work of the Society of the Inner Light immediately after the war and the gist of it has subsequently been published by myself as *The Secret Tradition in Arthurian Legend*.

THE FUTURE

Another important plank in Dion Fortune's platform in the latter days of war concerned thoughts about postwar reconstruction envisaging a world where the forces of materialism might hold unfettered sway. She therefore sought a broad popular front between the esoteric world and the broader spiritualist movement. She herself had since 1922 developed her own mediumistic capacities which informed much of her work throughout the rest of her life. Although because of their occasional abuse such techniques have been frowned upon in esoteric circles she had kept this ability secret from all but her immediate colleagues.

Channelling in various forms has now become a widely accepted phenomenon. Dion Fortune had much experience of it which as a psychologist and occultist she was well able to describe uniquely from personal experience. Scattered in many unpublished as well as difficult to obtain published sources her writings on this have now been collected under the title *Spiritualism and Occultism*, to give perhaps the most lucid account yet in occult or spiritualist literature of the dynamics and techniques of psychic perception and verbal communication.

Dion Fortune died in January 1946 and her body is buried in the municipal cemetery at Glastonbury Close by that of her close colleague Charles Thomas Loveday advocate of the Church of the Grail. The work that she founded lives on not only in the Society she founded but in the inspiration of her life. This fact came home very vividly to me when trawling through the archives of the Society to prepare her biography *Dion Fortune and the Inner Light* (Thoth Publications Loughborough) a project which turned out to be one of the most educative and rewarding experiences of my own life and one which I feel privileged to have been able to share with others.