

A woman's hands with dark nail polish are shown holding a small, weathered animal skull. The scene is set in a dark, rustic environment with a table covered in dried twigs and leaves. Several lit candles in various holders provide a warm, golden light. The overall mood is mysterious and ritualistic.

A WOMAN'S BOOK OF SHADOWS

A CELEBRATION OF WITCHCRAFT

ELISABETH BROOKE

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OF SHADOWS

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A Celebration
of Witchcraft

Elisabeth Brooke

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*Dedicated to troublesome hags, crones and
harpies wherever you might be.*

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A WOMAN'S BOOK OF SHADOWS

This book is not intended to be a definitive guide to witchcraft but an account of a twentieth-century urban witch at work. The opinions expressed are my own and come from many years' work as well as feedback from other witch-friends. Budding wisewomen should take what they like and leave the rest.

Blessed Be!

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction



A book of shadows is a record of spells, rituals, recipes and Goddess-lore which was handed down from mother to daughter in the wisewoman tradition. No one has seen one. Perhaps they were burned, along with their owners in the burning times, or maybe they are a wishful myth created by latter-day witches cut off from their roots. We will never know. The Inquisitors did their job well and only hearsay and whispers of dreams remain of the witch culture prior to the Witchcraze.

This book is about my relationship with the Goddess, as I express it through the practice of witchcraft. I have brought together my learnings and experiences, with history and traditional practice (as far as they are known), to present a personal account of witchcraft as it is practised in the West in the late twentieth century.

The Goddess is everywhere, immanent. She is the creatrix of the universe and is found at the beginning of all life, and at its close. The Great Mother gives birth to all living things, and they return to her as they die. From the Goddess radiates all

the power and beauty of the natural world. And it is this power and this beauty that witches embody.

The Goddess empowers women and for this reason many modern witches are feminists. Witchcraft gives us a vision of ourselves which is whole and encompasses both the darkness and the light. A wholeness which is denied by Fathergod (the male god of the Christians, Jews and Muslims). In patriarchal religion, Fathergod embodies only what is good, while woman holds all that is evil. In contrast, the Goddess promises both wisdom and clarity, power and compassion, joy and sorrow. She speaks to us of a balanced world.

In Chapter 3 on the Goddess, I discuss how she was usurped by Fathergod. In telling two versions of the myth of Persephone I aim to show how the shift from woman as Goddess to woman as slave and rape victim was accomplished. Myths were and are used to teach us values, and rules to live by. The Greeks were no exception. The myth of Persephone was changed from the matriarchal myth of a woman's journey deep into herself to the patriarchal story of rape and abduction. It clearly shows us how the peaceful values of the Goddess worshipping people were replaced by the violence and force of the Fathergod.

The book reflects my interest in history (herstory) and the value I place on it. Women need to re-write our history not once or twice, but a thousand times and in a thousand different ways for it to survive and counter the negative images Fathergod promotes.

Our foremothers come from all over the world, particularly from the great continent of Africa, but our ancestry is a common one. The Egyptian Goddess Isis who found her way to these shores was carried by ancient seafarers through Greece, Spain and France. The Celts of Britain and Ireland were strongly influenced by the mystery traditions of the Egyptians and Chaldeans.

The peoples of Europe, the Middle East and India exchanged their mystery traditions, through traders and scholars. When the burning times came to Europe, this knowledge went underground and was kept alive by country folk and wandering tribes of gypsies.

Witchcraft is almost universally regarded as harmful. This reflects not only the misogynist culture which knows no boundaries (most witches are still women), but often a very realistic fear of those who play with occult forces. The accusations made against witches are the same made against any minority, whether racial, religious or ethnic: infanticide, sexual perversion and conspiracy to shatter the status quo. The latter, although often lost in the hysteria surrounding the two former changes, is the bedrock of persecution of any minority. For clearly and logically, any persecuted minority would want things to be different. When force makes decision, subversion has to be the order of the day. In this respect, witches are no different from any other persecuted people (see Chapter 4).

It has to be stated clearly that witchcraft has nothing whatever to do with Satanism or any of the perversions which come under that name. Satanism is a corruption of the Roman Catholic faith, the Black Mass is the centre of its practice. Its rituals centre around blood sacrifice, sexual exploitation and sadomasochism and are a distortion of Christian teachings. *Witchcraft has nothing to do with these practices.* The Craft abhors them.

Witchcraft pre-dates all of the patriarchal religions by millennia and is completely separate and independent of them. Many of the Christian festivals were lifted wholesale from pagan/Wiccan traditions in a conscious campaign to replace the Goddess with the Christian God. (see Chapter 5.) Part of this campaign to dethrone the Goddess was to remove any power, spiritual or temporal, from women. To do that women were accused of being anti-life, evil, dirty, devilish. From this, the witchcraze grew into a world-wide belief in the evil of

women. Misogyny can be traced directly back to the appearance of the patriarchal religions. These beliefs are now so firmly enshrined in our culture that it is extremely difficult to imagine a time when they were not so. Unconsciously the fear of witches remains a potent and disabling force. Witches are seen as the epitome of evil, the embodiment of the dark, devouring Mother and, much more importantly, the forces of chaos. 'The crime of magic is the crime of rebellion.' (The Book of Samuel.)

The green women and men of these islands took to the hills to escape the religious persecution of the Christians, but they did not die. The body of the earth soaked up their blood. The north wind blew the ashes of their funeral pyres into the Cairns and Holy Wells. The screams of tortured women were lifted high above the clouds into the noonday sun. The sweat of the brow of the abused and downtrodden peasant mingled with the rich, red earth, and the oak tree grew.

Witches did not die; they went underground until such time as the stranglehold of the Christians loosened a little. They waited for a time when it would be safe to worship the Mother, when they might again celebrate the wheel of the year and the moon's passage through the night sky, and dance through the midsummer meadows.

Magic is power. As we begin to work with occult forces the vexed question of how we use that power arises. We are accustomed to being – or perceiving ourselves as – powerless. Feminist witches are defining a new ethic which allows us personal and collective power, without oppressing anyone else. Our magical behaviour must be constantly appraised in the light of this ethic. Our spells, our rituals and thoughtforms must be harmless.

Patriarchal religion has a common theme of woman hatred and the bondage and exploitation of nature and all those who are vulnerable. This has led us to the rape and poisoning of the very earth we walk on and the air we breathe. Witchcraft and Goddess-lore offer an alternative to the slow, inexorable slide into perdition. Rebuilding our tradition is one of the

greatest contributions we, as individuals, can make to saving our planet. The values of witchcraft are life enhancing, nature-celebrating, peaceful and tolerant. These values are needed urgently in the culture of death that is the legacy of Fathergod.

The witches I have associated with are feminist witches, whose practice for the most part came about through the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. As we researched into our common history we uncovered a genocide of women, starting when patriarchal belief systems replaced the Goddess worship. The horror of our findings prompted many of us to go back into pre-his-story to find a time when equality and respect were our birthright.

We were searching for the time before. Before the life denying rule of Fathergod. Over the years evidence has accumulated to prove that there was a time when women were worshipped, when we were respected, when we had both spiritual and worldly power.

Feminism, therefore, colours witchcraft. But so does a revulsion against the materialistic culture Fathergod has created. People, surfeited and often sickened by excesses of materialism, or denied access to its fruits, are becoming increasingly aware of the opposite pole, the spiritual.

Religion and spiritual practice make sense of, and provide an antidote to, the glammers of the material world. When times are hard people look for explanations of their suffering and search for a meaning to their lives.

Witches are a polymorphic body, loosely constructed of like-minded folk who share certain beliefs and practices. For the most part, they celebrate the eight festivals, and the thirteen full moons. Most will be involved in some kinds of divination, and have a knowledge of astrology. They will have some understanding of plant lore and may be gardeners. Many keep cats.

There is no one form of witchcraft, and not all witches worship the Goddess in the ways I have described; some, for instance,

worship the God as the masculine polarity of the Goddess. But our spiritual practices are not designed to replace Fathergod with Mothergod as a hierarchical system. Instead we believe in immanence, the Goddess within. This belief sees everything as sacred and no one act as being of more value than another.

In Chapter 3 on the triple Goddess, I talk about the witch's concept of the spiritual. Through the myth of Demeter and Persephone the three faces of the Goddess, maiden, mother and crone, emerge. Visible, her three faces show in the moon's phases, and in the waxing and waning of the solar year.

Witchcraft is closely related to the natural world, and wise-women use the cycles of both sun and moon as touchstones and reference points for their own cyclic development. The moon is close to the life of woman, and her cycles reflect those of this most mysterious planet. Through the waxing and waning of the moon we come to understand the fluid nature of our bodies, and we can learn to use those changes in the most creative ways. Chapter 6 on starcraft and the moon discusses the full moon in each sign of the zodiac and how to fit magical work in with the astrological year.

Witchcraft is a celebration of life, and the yearly festivals (Chapter 8) mark the changing seasons and different stages in our lives. The rituals at the eight main festivals as well as the new and full moons help to anchor our spiritual practice. The ebb and flow of life as described by the sun's journey around the zodiacal year mirrors the death-rebirth cycle of all life.

In Chapter 7 on ritual I show how the changing face of the moon reflects both the monthly menstrual cycle and the life cycle of maiden, mother and crone. Plants and all natural life are integral parts of that great round and the yearly festivals mark the changing seasons and the mystery teachings which they reveal. The celebration of the witch's year gives a structure to our lives and yet leaves room for individual creativity and preferences.

Witchcraft can be as simple or as complex as you choose. The rituals I have written about will give an idea of what is

possible and can be used as a template for readers who wish to develop their own rituals.

Creating new and vivid ritual is vital. As a culture we are undergoing the profoundest of changes and many people feel deeply alienated and powerless in the face of this upheaval. The traditional ways have, for the most part, long since gone, and have been replaced by an ersatz TV culture of consumerism and greed.

Witches value nature as having worth in itself and not as goods which can be translated into money. We favour ecologically sound practices in agriculture, in industry, and responsibility in the way we share this beautiful planet of ours. Feminist witches align themselves with the peace movements, with ecology and human rights campaigns.

Herbal lore is another magical practice kept alive despite the concerted efforts of the ruling classes to stamp it out. Plants can reveal the innermost workings of the Earth Mother and are integral to any practice of witchcraft (see Chapter 13).

Witchcraft is about empowering the individual not solely for her own sake, but so that she might then be a useful and valued member of society. The concept of service is discussed in Chapter 9 about ethics. Any work on self-development is undertaken so that we might participate fully in life, not as an end in itself.

I have tried only to write about things I have had personal experience of or which I have studied. For this reason, people-centred skills are fully represented. Many witches choose to do personal one-to-one work as a way of re-cycling spiritual energy. Chapters 11 and 12 on psychic skills and Tarot give a taste of these two fields of service. The images of the Tarot hold the key to the Western mystery tradition. Disguised in picture form to prevent profane eyes understanding them, these cards are deeply esoteric. Together with astrology, the Tarot is the cornerstone of our magical tradition, and their study has been preserved despite 500 years of persecution by the patriarchs.

The chapter on the Tarot discusses the history of the cards as well as my own interpretations for all the cards of the major and minor arcana.

Witches need to understand the nature of the subtle bodies so they might use their energy wisely. The chakras and the etheric and astral planes teach us about our own inner workings as well as the ways we interact with others. The chakras show us how we exchange energy with our environment. Chapter 11 on healing and psychic skills discusses the etheric body and the chakra system and gives some practical exercises to develop psychic skills.

On saying I am a witch, people often jokingly ask if I can do a spell for them; sometimes they are not joking. Spells are acts of will which can transform reality. In Chapter 10 on spellcraft I discuss how spells can change lives. I have included some ordinary spells which can be done to find work, a lover or protect yourself. Women need to develop such skills and to find creative ways to deal with our violent, materialist culture. In this respect, witchcraft encourages self-determination and responsibility rather than passivity and the acceptance of being a helpless victim.

This book is written in dedication to the Goddess, the immanent divinity of the roses in my fire place, the healing herbs a friend grew and brought me, the scent of sandalwood, and the soft aroma of cooking apples. All these things remind me of her presence in my life. The biting Siberian wind and the egg-blue sky speak of the darkness of this past winter and promise spring and new beginnings. The wheel of the year moves on carrying our lives with it. This is her mystery.

Conjure, with your dreaming
moonlight shadows.
Dance in solemn steps
This mystery.

*Elisabeth Brooke
Beltane, 1993*