



Whare Atua Temple

Islands of the Dawn

(Book Review for Gnosis Journal)

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Islands of the Dawn (book review)

- Michael Freedman

The Story of Alternative Spirituality in New Zealand by Robert S. Ellwood University of Hawaii Press.

During 1988 Dr Ellwood spent six months in New Zealand on a Fullbright grant, doing research for a historical study of alternative spirituality in this country. Two previous books by Dr Ellwood, *Many People, Many Faiths* and *Alternative Altars* on religious and spiritual expressions in the United States, have become standard reference works.

New Zealand

New Zealand has a population of barely 4 million, most of whom are British immigrants or descended from British migrants, who have been arriving in the country from 1840. At least 10% of New Zealanders are of either Maori or other Polynesian origin.

Dr Ellwood was influenced to study alternative spirituality in New Zealand before other, more populous countries by a scholarly dispute concerning the extent to which newer societies, such as the United States, are more receptive to new religious movements than older societies like Europe. New Zealand had been mentioned as being particularly receptive to new religions.

Another influence was the persistent myth that New Zealand is the country where Utopia might be achieved. Dr Ellwood cites Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* and Aldous Huxley's *Ape and Essence*. He might have added others, such as *Fortune* magazine in the 1950s, which advised U.S. businessmen to move to New Zealand if they wanted to avoid the nuclear holocaust. Many wealthy U.S. citizens still maintain second homes in New Zealand, while several spiritual teachers deliberately moved to New Zealand during the '60s and 70s for similar reasons.

An important conclusion Dr Ellwood draws is: "New Zealand was more like the American West, with its miner, logger and cowboy cultures than other aspects of American society. The West significantly has the lowest church attendance in America and the highest interest in Eastern and alternative spirituality and this parallels the New Zealand experience.

Dr Ellwood found that alternative spirituality has played an unusually large role in New Zealand. For example, on a *per capita* basis, there are 25 times as many Theosophists in New Zealand as there are in the U.S.A. He found comparable proportions of other well established alternative groups in New Zealand, such as Spiritualists and Anthroposophists.

Alternative Spirituality in the West

Dr Ellwood begins his book with a brief, comprehensive outline of the development of alternative spirituality in the Western world from its origins in the Renaissance to the present day. Especially valuable is his analysis of the nature of alternative spirituality. He suggests that there are half a dozen beliefs, all or most of which are held among a wide variety of alternative spirituality groups, "In contrast to the majority Western religious and scientific outlook." They are stated baldly here, without Dr Ellwood's discussion and qualifications.

- A continuity between the natural the human and the divine
- The separability of soul and body
- As plants and animals stand between minerals and man, so between humans and the ultimate reality range hierarchies of gods, angels, spirits and ascended masters
- Laws on the boundary between nature and consciousness, when mastered, can give access to psychic and magic powers
- Correspondences exist between aspects of cosmic and human nature; compare the hermetic saying, "As above, so below"
- Gnosis, the knowledge of these things, is a saving and liberating knowledge
- Leaders of alternative groups are more like sages among pupils, than public preachers or institutional leaders

The book deals 'largely with two broad groupings within alternative spirituality: Spiritualism, with its modern companion, the U.F.O. religions; and Theosophy and other groups in the theosophical tradition.

The Golden Dawn in New Zealand

- Considerable space is also given to Whare Ra, the Golden Dawn Lodge in New Zealand. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, founded in England in 1887 by W. Wynn Westcott and others, has had an enormous influence throughout the 20th century on most magical orders, as well as many wiccan and pagan groups. The Golden Dawn in its original England form existed for only 15 years before it fell apart into at least three separate Orders, succeeded by a multitude of often short-lived imitators.

Whare Ra was founded in 1913 by Dr. Robert Felkin, who was in contact with W. Wynn Westcott until the latter's death in South Africa in 1925. It survived whole and

unchanged for 65 years, until its senior members decided that it should be closed down in 1978. Although situated in a small country town, it maintained through much of its history an Inner Order membership of around a hundred people. There is evidence to justify the belief that Whare Ra adhered more closely to the original G.D. rituals more than any other GD style lodge.

Surviving initiates

It is perhaps unfortunate that Dr Ellwood did not meet any of the surviving initiates of the Golden Dawn while in New Zealand. He had to find his information at second hand. I am told that his account of its early history in New Zealand is both accurate and full. Frank Salt, an initiate of Whare Ra since 1936, who eventually held the position of examining all candidates for advancement to higher degrees, commented that Dr Ellwood clearly had not been given fully accurate information on its later history. Frank Salt's comment illustrates the difficulties any sociologist has in gathering information about contemporary, often secretive, alternative groups in any country. Nevertheless, *Islands of the Dawn* is carefully documented and generally accurate in its historical sections, which account for the bulk of the book.

The contemporary scene

A lengthy appendix, *The 1960s and After* deals with the contemporary scene. He covers a wide range of Eastern-derived and other alternative groups. That it is less satisfactory than the historical section is not the fault of Dr Ellwood. Its handful of shortcomings are in omission, not inaccuracy.

A problem is the fast moving nature of alternative spirituality in New Zealand in recent years, particularly among neo-pagan and women's spirituality groups. Dr Ellwood points out that these groups are "still in the process of emerging" in New Zealand. He describes them as mostly informal or undocumented and refers to their accessibility within his research schedule and calendar.

Since his visit, regular open-air seasonal ritual gatherings of several hundred women have been held on beaches near Auckland. The well established *Women's Spirituality Newsletter* began at about that time. A quarterly magazine (founded by Jean de Cabilis - Ed) for New Zealand magicians, witches and pagans, begun in 1990, now has about a thousand readers. Pan Pacific Pagan Alliance is active in New Zealand, and Pagan Revivalists hold well-attended meetings on more than one university campus.

Another problem is faced by all who do sociological or anthropological research. The friendly natives tell the well-intentioned researcher what they think he would like to hear. For example, Dr Ellwood says he did not know of any New Zealand expression of ceremonial magic other than the Crowleyite O.T.O. In fact, members of at least three of the other groups (of one whom is the Guardians, see *Island of Dawn* - Ed) whom he interviewed practise various forms of ceremonial and sexual magic.

"Witches are Satanists"

A further error, again not Dr Ellwood's fault, is the 1986 government census statistics concerning the number of Satanists in New Zealand, which he correctly quotes as 165

males and 21 females. Letters from the Department of Statistics point out that, in the 1986 Census, the number of people giving their religion as Witchcraft was so small that the Department of Statistics felt justified in listing Witchcraft as Satanism, "as they are officially considered to be the one and same."

No work dealing with contemporary history can hope to be up to date, especially in such a swiftly moving area as alternative spirituality. However, Dr Ellwood's book is a valuable record of important facet of New Zealand history, while the few shortcomings it has can readily be corrected in a second edition.

In my opinion, 'Islands of the Dawn' will stand alongside his other books as a standard reference work on alternative spirituality.