

The Halloween Wars

(Or, How *Rosemary's Baby*, Pat Robertson and Eight Bottles of Tylenol Changed How We Think About Halloween)

Dear Friends,

This was a first draft of what later became much edited down for a book chapter. This whole subject still fascinates me, so I decided to post it and see if you all have any thoughts. Please feel free to write - lesley.bannatyne@gmail.com
Lesley Bannatyne c. 2013

1968, New York City. Janis is hanging out in the Chelsea Hotel with the ever-elegant Leonard Cohen. *Hair* just opened on Broadway and up at Columbia University, students barricaded themselves inside the University president's office. It was a good year for revolution. A good year for a group of New York City radicals to release their first manifesto under the banner, Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell, or WITCH.(1)

Bankers' gall, politicians guile,
Daley's jowl, lackey's smile,
Trustee's toe, bondholder's liar
These we cast into our fire.

—Member of WITCH hex on the Chicago Transit Authority, 1969

The manifesto – to be “...female, untamed, angry, joyous, and immortal” (2) is meant to agitate. Just one year before, Abbie Hoffman had mobilized a group to exorcize the Pentagon by chanting and singing until it levitated, something that couldn't have been lost on the women of WITCH. They were more guerilla theater artists than magic-makers, and staged political/media events such as putting a curse on Wall Street on Halloween, 1968, or, on the next Halloween, demonstrating outside the courtroom of the Chicago Seven trial.

WITCH's manifesto declared that witchcraft was the religion of all Europe before Christ, a religion suppressed by the ruling elite, and that nine million strong, sexually liberated women died in a church-engineered genocide meant to wipe out female power. To be free, modern women needed to get back to the business of witchcraft. (3)

The ideology and characterization of the historical battle of witch vs. establishment suited the politics of second wave feminism. This wouldn't be the first, or the last, time that witchcraft was at-

**FEMINIST
WITCHCRAFT
IN
TODAY'S
WORLD**



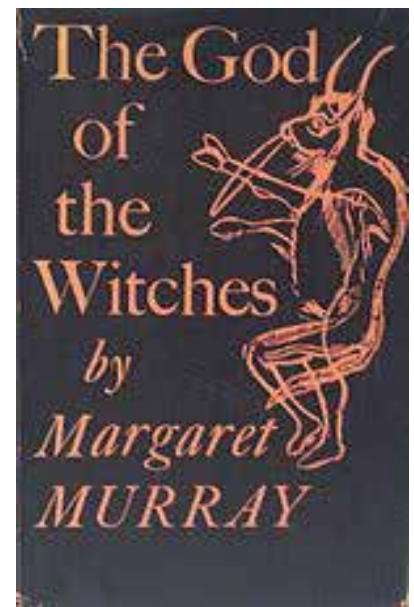
On the Issues Magazine.

tached to political activism. The witch had been portrayed as anti-establishment figure since German archeologist Franz Mone (1796-1871) first floated the idea that those killed as witches were remnants of pagan religion, something 19th-century radical French historian James Michelet built on in his book, *The Sorceress* (La Sorciere): pagans were liberty-and freedom-loving self-expressive rebels. (4)

The underground, anti-establishment, witch-cult thesis gained momentum when Egyptologist Margaret Murray published *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) in which she used British witch trial testimony to document a theory of the continued existence of an organized religion that had descended from a pre-Christian, Dianic fertility cult. Although scholars later proved that Murray had distorted her evidence, and most do not believe there was a witch cult as Murray described, (5) her vision of witchcraft was the one most came to know—it was published for 40 years as the entry on witchcraft in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Importantly, it fascinated Gerald Gardner, an English civil servant and occultist who went Murray one further--his book, *Witchcraft Today* (1954) put flesh and fat on Murray's ideas to create what later came to be called Gardnerian Wicca, a modern witch religion complete with structure, rituals, clergy, and theology.

Murray cited Halloween as one of the eight annual witches' sabbaths. She based them on the solstices, equinoxes and their midpoints—four Scottish “quarter days” (November 1, February 1, May 1 and August 1) that she took from the confession testimony of 17th-century trial of Isobel Smyth of Forfar. (6) Gardner adopted Murray's calendar. He wrote the Wiccan Halloween ritual sometime between 1948 and 1952, using original material as well as texts from Masonic initiatory rites, the works of Aleister Crowley, magic history books, and fiction such as such as a sorcerer's incantation he found in a 13th-century play. (7) Gardner's Halloween ritual dealt with the fate of the soul; it addressed death and the possibility of reincarnation in modern witchcraft. As there's no written evidence of Wicca before him, Gardner's Halloween ritual was the first to be disseminated. Years later, around 1968, Aiden Kelly (his *Crafting the Arts of Magic* [1991] was a study of the origins of modern witchcraft) called the eight festivals by new names (8) and Halloween became better known among Wiccans as Samhain--the same name that Yeats and other Irish writers had used to align Hallow's Eve with a more ancient, and more independent, Ireland.



We all pray for 20 innocents
We all bow down 20 innocents,
We all hang high -20 innocents,
We all accused – 20 innocents,
The End – The End of the American Witch
--Rob Zombie, “American Witch”



RoyalArmouries.org

The sky was not blue, but black. Clouds hung like the gray beards of hovering giants peering at the round orange globe of the moon. A cold wind blew from the sea, and filled the air with tiny murmurings from afar.

This was the sky that witches flew through to their Sabbath. This was the moon of wizardry, the sable silence of black prayers and whispered invocations. The clouds hid monstrous Presences shambling in summon from afar. It was Halloween.

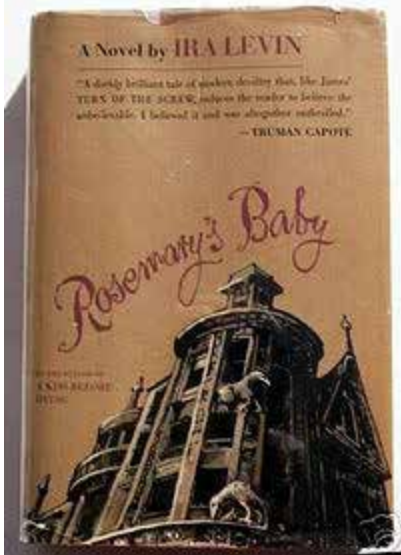
--Robert Bloch, "The Cloak," 1939

Over in the States, most Americans saw witchcraft as something medieval, or imagined witches as bonneted Puritans or, perhaps, vaguely British. But something was about to change all that.

Although American paganism may have existed in pockets for a few decades, (9) most of us in the late 20th century had no idea witches were real. The witch was a creature of Halloween, often two dimensional and decorative, or the midnight creature of some distant past, vaguely evil, a dark blot pasted against the "round orange globe of the moon" as in Robert Bloch's story, "The Cloak," excerpted above. She was, for many of us born after 1939, a fantasy of fairy tales or film--a green-skinned Margaret Hamilton floating her boney fingers over a crystal ball crooning, "Poppies, poppies...."

Imagine what people thought when they picked up the *New York Times* on October 31st, 1969, and read that Dr. Raymond Buckland and his wife, Rosemary, were meeting that very night with their coven in a Brentwood, Long Island basement. Nude. That their neighbors--clerks, a barber, housewives--were with them, hopping around the basement on broomsticks, and that they regularly practiced magic in coven gatherings around each full moon. Buckland--with a gold earring and a goatee--had even opened the First Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in the United States a year before, in 1968. The year Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* hit the big screen.

Rosemary's Baby (based on Ira Levin's bestselling 1967 novel) was one of the very first horror blockbusters, grossing \$30 million and receiving two Oscar nominations. In Polanski's film, Rosemary



(another Rosemary!) and her actor-husband, Guy Woodhouse, move into an apartment in Manhattan that shares a wall with the leaders of a coven who are plotting to use Rosemary to bring the son of Satan into the world. The witches are mostly older—they're dentists, grandparents—people you trust. They hold esbats, work in covens, harvest the flesh of infants. In the film's creepiest witch scene, the coven chants, nude, in the smoky half-light of a nightmare, and Polanski captures Satan's brackish fingernails scraping Rosemary's marble-white skin as the son of hell is conceived.

Imagine what people felt when they saw the ad for paranormal expert Hans Holtzer's book, *The Truth About Witchcraft* (1969) with its image of a very sexy woman atop the teasing tagline, "Barbara is a Witch" (Read the fine print and the ad describes naked rituals and "magic spells, potions, and so on so intriguing some readers might be tempted to run to the nearest coven." (10)) Or when Sybil Leek—already famous as a witch due to her partnership with Holtzer---told the *New York Times* that there were 400 covens in the U.S., going on to confess, "Almost 1000 people tell me each week they want to be witches." (11)

Polanski's film put a Satanic cult right beyond our bedroom walls. Hollywood bled into reality when people read that the Bucklands were practicing Wicca in a basement of a ranch house in Long Island. Most Americans wouldn't discriminate between the real god-and-goddess, nature-based Wicca and Polanski's Hollywood "Hail Satan!" coven in Manhattan. All they knew was that witches now looked like insurance secretaries or elevator operators, that there were more of them than anyone ever imagined. As Buckland told a reporter when asked just how many covens there were in America in 1972, "It's probably closer to 2000 than 20." (12)

The outing of witchcraft as a present-day, seemingly viral, spiritual movement--as a religion, with priestesses, practitioners, and a calendar of ritual celebrations--changed Halloween in two ways. First, it bound the holiday to contemporary witchcraft in the public's imagination. Although there are usually eight seasonal celebrations in the modern pagan calendar, Halloween was often the only one cited in news stories. Secondly, it cast modern Halloween as a pagan spiritual



holiday. The more “out” the witch became, the more controversial Halloween became. (13) Just what were we celebrating here?

“I put the boy in the casket, I killed the unborn”
--spoken by an actor playing Satan at a Hell House in Arvada, Colorado amidst crocks of burning Limburger cheese (14)

As interest in the occult and alternative spiritual practice rose, so did more and more outspoken reaction to it, specifically from religious groups. The American Christian Cause was founded in 1974; Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority followed in 1979. It was no small moment when, on October 29, 1982, Reverend Pat Robertson looked right into the television cameras on the set of “The 700 Club” and said: "I think we ought to close Halloween down. Do you want your children to dress up as witches? The Druids used to dress up like this when they were doing human sacrifice... [The children] are acting out Satanic rituals and participating in it, and don't even realize it." (15)



Something may have been running amok in American culture in 1982, but it wasn't the witch. On October 1, 1982, newspapers broke a story about five people in the Chicago area who'd been poisoned by cyanide tamped into Extra Strength Tylenol capsules. By October 3, seven people were dead and 100 state and federal agents dispatched to find “a madman” or “random killer.” Within the next week the investigation moved from California to Philadelphia to Wyoming. By October 21st police were questioning two suspects in New York and one in Boston. On October 25, the week before Halloween, cyanide was found in an 8th bottle. (16)

The Chicago Tylenol tamperings were unsolved by October 31st. The media warned parents to ban or restrict trick-or-treating, and several towns made it official. (17) Robertson happened on the right time to urge his audience to stop celebrating Halloween. Although he cited (erroneous and non-existent) Druid rituals (18) as the reason, the Tylenol murders made it seem like a good idea at the time.

The fact that modern witches openly and aggressively dealt with magic was unsettling to those who believed the world was pulsing with demons ready to rage through any portal available, be it the Ouija board, tarot card, unbaptised infant, or even Halloween, a holiday that is, after all, populated by monsters and celebrated after dark. On the other hand, the fact that witches, Wiccans, and other modern pagans were lambasted for their spiritual practices challenged the first amendment, the very bedrock of religious freedom in America.(19) Halloween had become more than a holiday for kids.

The firestorm stoked by Robertson in 1982 smoldered for years. The idea that Halloween was once pagan (as were many of our favorite holidays, including Easter and Christmas) and that it is currently marked by witches made Halloween the time for annual public battle, for a national discussion about good and evil, spirituality and Satan. The rest of us listened in, and the celebration of Halloween

changed because of it. Halloween parties dropped out of many schools, for example, and new traditions like trunk-or-treating confined kids to a church parking lot rather than a neighborhood.

The rise of the occult (some might say new age) and the rise of interest in the religious right were two sides of the same coin. Halloween wasn't reviled by Christian conservatives until it was envisioned as pagan/spiritual. A line was drawn in the sand that polarized us. If pagans were going to take Halloween, then the most fundamental of Christian churches would find it harder and harder to celebrate. The real issues may really have been cultural and political, but on Halloween, everyone got a loud-speaker and an audience. (20)

“As a witch I am appalled by the way society views us. On the one hand we are portrayed as silly, green-skinned hags flying on broomsticks across children's Saturday cartoons. On the other, we are used as scapegoats for all the bizarre cult crimes and violent rituals staged by misguided individuals who think they are practicing witchcraft.”

Laurie Cabot, the “Official Witch” of Salem, Massachusetts, in an editorial, 1989 (21)



High up in the Bolivian Andes, the witches of La Paz set up shop in the early morning in a 4-block by 4-block warren of shops everyone knows as the witches' market. Dried llama fetuses hang from the shops' archways. Shelves are packed with feathers, bones and ceramic statues of Pachamama, the earth goddess, wrapped in colorfully dyed wool. Frankincense wafts through the tiny streets as men tell fortunes with coca leaves placed on a board etched with squares. If you move to a new house, you'll need a llama fetus to bury near the front step for good fortune. If your wife no longer loves you, you'll need a witch to fix up a bowl full of the right elements – herbs, tokens, papers-- that you can

burn to bring her back. The witches are an important part of modern life in this, and many other, parts of the world, an uncontroversial part of life, existing side by side with Catholicism and native Aymara beliefs such as the conviction that spirits live in the mountains, skies, and lightning, and that tributes must be made to Pachamama to insure fertility of soil.

Ritual magic is something that's come to us from ancient times. Magic is a way to deal with helplessness and fear, and to give expression to hope. The 21st century is no different. The things we know now are fearsome: Banks fail. Towers fall. Levies crack. Maybe the biggest bogeyman of our time is the sense that we're under assault, but we can't put our hands on the assailant. There's a helplessness afoot, so much that's out of our control. It's no wonder we all seek out a bit of magic now and again.

Forty-odd years after the women of WITCH cursed the stock market and Roman Polanski shocked us with the naked bodies of old folks hailing the prince of darkness in a New York apartment building, most people have come to see Halloween as secular. Halloween is not a religious holiday. It is, instead, a holiday that is viewed as religious by some people.

1 Information and photos of WITCH can be found at Joe Freeman's sites, <http://www.jofreeman.com/photos/witch.html>; also "The Revolution is happening in our minds," <http://www.jofreeman.com/feminism/happening.htm>

2 Ronald Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 2001, p. 341

3 Much research has been done since 1968, and scholars agree that the number of deaths is closer to 60,000 (and no where near 9 million), that secular courts were as culpable as church courts; that men as well as women were prosecuted (although women represent the majority of victims); and that the people tried for witchcraft during the 15th through 18th centuries were not practicing a paganism that had survived from pre-Christian times. [Hutton, *Triumph*, p. 341; www.witchvox.com]

4 Ronald Hutton, "Modern Pagan Festivals," keynote lecture, "Forging Folklore: Witches, Pagans and Neo-Tribal Cultures, Harvard University, May 4, 2007)

5 Murray's theories were popular, according to folklorist Jacqueline Simpson, because they seemed reasonable, they made sense within the context of post-WWI romanticism, the scholars who took issue with them remained silent until the 1970s, and because they were widely distributed through published material such as the Encyclopedia Britannica and the Murray-influenced fictional work of Robert Graves and others. Jacqueline Simpson, "Margaret Murray: Who Believed Her, and Why?", *Folklore*, 105 (1994), p. 89-96.

6 Although Murray based her theories about quarter days on the testimony of just one source, (Simpson, p. 92), Scottish trial testimony includes several specific mentions of witch gatherings on Halloween. A survey of Scottish witch trial testimony ("Survey of Scottish Witchcraft," 2003) contains more mentions of Halloween than any other day. 3837 people were accused between 1593 and 1736 (the dates when witchcraft act was in effect); 3210 were named, 320 of which have extent records. 32 confessions mention Halloween as a time when witches gathered, or when magic was effective. That's around 10%. The next most popular days were Candlemas (Feb. 2, with 12 mentions) and Whitsunday (with 10). What sorts of things were cited? Sinking ships (North Berwick, 1590-/91) giving advice such as sprinkling drops of blood over a sheep on Halloween to save it (Jonet Forsyth (1629); healing (Agnes Sompson, 1591), or using linen cloth and a hair to protect cattle (Issobell Sinclair, 1633).

7 Hutton, *Triumph*, 232-34

8 Hutton, "Modern Pagan Festivals"

9 The Church of Aphrodite may have been the first, in 1938. Hutton, *Triumph*, p. 340

10 *New York Times*, 10/26/1969, p. BR30

11 *New York Times*, 10/31/1969 p. 50

12 *New York Times*, 10/31/1972, p. 27

13 Halloween had been a secular celebration since its 19th-century emergence as a public holiday in America. Several scholars have made the point that the non-celebration of Halloween for religious reasons today is the same theological argument made by anti-Catholic reformers in the 16th century; that it's possible the modern battle over the holiday might still contain some remnants of the theological war between Protestantism and Catholicism.

14 "Using Ghouls to Get God," *New York Times*, 10/27/1996, p. E1

15 Pat Robertson, "The 700 Club," 1982-OCT-29

16 The following pieces, along with many others, appeared in the *New York Times* between October 1-31, 1982: "5 Die After Taking Tylenol Believed to Contain Cyanide," 10/1, p. A-12; "100 Agents Hunt for Killer in 7 Tylenol Deaths," 10/3, p. 1; "Capsule Deaths: A Hunt For More Than One Suspect," 10/4, p. A14; "Production Is Stopped After New Tampering Sickness in California," 10/6, p. A1; "Cyanide Is Discovered in Tylenol In an April Death in Philadelphia," 10/7, p. A1; "Cyanide Death Investigated in Wyoming," 10/9, p. 9; "At Time of Tylenol Deaths, Suspects were in New York," 10/21 p. B15; "Woman Questioned in Boston," 10/21, p. B15; "Cyanide s Found in 8th Pill Bottle," 10/26 p. A23; "Suspect in Tylenol Ex.... Is Arrested in Newark," 10/31 p.33, "Poison Leads to Precautions for Halloween," 10/28 p. B1; "Fear of Tainted Candy Prompts Wide Concern for Halloweeners," 10/30 p. 6.

17 Vineland, New Jersey and five towns in Massachusetts banned it, and Greenwich and Vernon, CT moved trick-or-treating to the daytime.

18 There is no evidence the Druids dressed up in costumes, nor do Satanists have any investment in trick-or-treating. See W.J. Bethancourt III's detailed account of four Christian anti-Halloween essays: "Halloween: Myths, Monsters and Devils" <http://www.geocities.com/>

19 By 1986, Wicca was protected by the Constitution; in 1996, the military officially recognized Wicca, prompting congressman Bob Barr to wryly ask Fort Hood's commander, "will armored divisions be forced to travel with sacrificial animals for Satanic rituals?", "I Saluted a Witch," *Time*, <http://www.time.com/magazine/article/0,9171,27389,00.html?iid=chix-sphere/>

20 The main issues with celebrating Halloween in the schools, often in the name of inclusion, are still religious. In my town (near Boston, MA), the public schools downplay Halloween because they view it through the lens of politics and religion: Halloween, the argument goes, isn't inclusive of Muslims, 7th Day Adventists, Pentecostals, or Haitians.

21 10/31/1989 *New York Times*, p. A2