

BRITISH VOODOO

THE BLACK ART OF

ROLLO AHMED PART TWO

Rollo Ahmed practised black magic, taught Dennis Wheatley yoga, helped Aleister Crowley find a flat and wrote a popular history of occultism. **CHRISTOPHER JOSIFFE** concludes his profile of a forgotten figure from the annals of British magic whose journey from British Guyana to the England of the 1920s encompassed both exoticism and racism.

By the time his history of magic, *The Black Art*, was published in 1936, Rollo Ahmed seems to have won the respect not just of author Dennis Wheatley – who had suggested he write the book – but of other British occult practitioners of the time.

Ahmed had become a friend of Aleister Crowley. In 1936, he helped Crowley find London lodgings, introducing him to Alan Burnett-Rae, a young man who had inherited a house in Welbeck Street divided up into flats. In his *A Memoir of 666*, Burnett-Rae describes how this came to pass: “A person I got to know at the time was a West Indian negro named Rollo Ahmed, who had written a book about the negro struggle... He was also interested in Magic and voodoo, and claimed to be an ‘adept’ and I had watched him try various experiments of an inconclusive nature. One day he rang me up and said that if I had a flat to let he would bring along a friend of his whom he described as ‘a very highly evolved personality’ who would be a model tenant in every respect.”

Against his better judgement, Burnett-Rae agreed to let the flat to Crowley – and lived to regret it: “Of course, I know now that I was rash. I should have obtained references; I might have known that Ahmed was no guarantor of anything, or anybody, that Crowley was an undisclosed bankrupt and one or two other things.”¹

In August 1954, Ahmed’s wife Theodora, a spiritualist medium, wrote a letter to Crowley’s friend and artistic collaborator Lady Harris. “My husband was a friend of Aleister Crowley for some years in the 1930s

THE AHMEDS FELT CUT OFF FROM THE LONDON OCCULT SCENE

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– though towards the end, he lost touch,” she explained. “We know that many people treasure his memory & knowledge,” she added, and asked to be put in touch with “other former friends & followers. Perhaps you would kindly tell us of any group in London, or elsewhere, that still meets to carry out his philosophy of Life? My husband is a lecturer on occult subjects.”² Seemingly the Ahmeds, now living in Hastings, felt cut off from the London occult scene and wished to re-establish links.

And in a diary entry, the Beast recounted an amusing incident in which Ahmed, seeking to demonstrate his Yogic powers, claimed that he could drink an entire bottle of whisky whilst remaining perfectly sober. Having arranged a time and date for the public demonstration, Crowley was disappointed to record that amongst the gathering of people, there was “one absentee: Rollo.”³

LEVITATION AND LECTURES

Ahmed seemed prone to the issuing of challenges. In 1934 he was living at Clapham, and in March of that year he was invited to an ‘informal tea’ held at London’s Mayfair Hotel. The tea promised to be a singular one, as Dr Alexander Cannon, the guest speaker, was to lecture on ‘How to Get What You Want (A Study of The Magic Laws of the Universe)’.

‘His Excellency’ ‘Sir’ Alexander Cannon was a peculiar figure, a psychiatrist, hypnotist and self-styled ‘Kushog Yogi of

LEFT: Dr Alexander Cannon was challenged by Rollo to a levitation competition.

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Northern Tibet' who had been employed at Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum (where he had treated Crowley's second wife, Maria). His methods of treatment there, using electrical healing methods and harnessing the powers of etheric waves and yogic vibrations, had raised some eyebrows. But it was only when his 1933 book *The Invisible Influence* – which advocated these methods – was published, that his employers, the London County Council, took steps to dismiss him.

During Cannon's lecture, in which he demonstrated the principle of fire resistance by passing his fingers through the flame of a lit match, he attempted to levitate the dancer Vaslav Nijinsky's daughter Kyra. This he tried to do, firstly by hypnotising her, using one of his numerous therapeutic contraptions – in this case, the hypnoscope – which shone a bright light into her eyes. She did not levitate, but, in trance, evinced distress and discomfort, going into spasms and convulsions – to the extent that audience members remonstrated with Cannon.

One such was Ahmed, who declared that he himself could demonstrate levitation far more effectively and promising to do so at an open meeting convened by the International Institute for Psychical Research. During a heated exchange, Ahmed also claimed to be able to place the 'lice curse' on a victim; this was apparently a voodoo curse in which the victim is attacked by swarms of vermin.

In the event, Ahmed too was unsuccessful in demonstrating effective levitational powers. He lay on a platform, clad only in a loin-cloth, but failed to rise. Cannon claimed that this was because *he* had placed a curse on Ahmed!

The Caleb Buller character in Ahmed's 1936 semi-autobiographical novel *I Rise* begins to make a name for himself in Britain by lecturing on race issues. During World War II, Ahmed himself came to be known as a public speaker, but his chosen subjects were esoteric ones. He appears to have relocated to the West Country in 1939, perhaps moving from London to escape the impending Blitz.

In her history of MacGregor Mathers and the Golden Dawn, *Sword of Wisdom*, artist, occultist and author Ithell Colquhoun states that Ahmed was at one time a member of the Hermes Lodge of the Golden Dawn, based in Bristol.⁵ Certainly, he was living in Bristol during the 1940s and became an established figure on the local esoteric lecture circuit. In October 1941 he appeared at the Bath First Spiritualist Church, where he inaugurated a series of lectures and study classes. Later that month he gave a talk at the Moffat Logan Discussion Class in Bristol on the subject of 'The New Age.' In January 1942 he lectured at the Gloucester Spiritual Community, billed as "Mr Rollo Ahmed, Bristol, Clairvoyant." Other hot topics for his wartime lectures were 'Death', 'Consciousness', and 'Peace'.

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HE CLAIMED TO BE ABLE TO PLACE THE 'LICE CURSE' ON A VICTIM

STRANGE ARTS

Thus, it becomes apparent that Ahmed did not present himself solely as a voodoo specialist; rather, his association with the Golden Dawn's ceremonial magic locates him in the Western tradition. Doreen Valiente, the "mother of modern witchcraft" long associated with Sussex, and Brighton in particular, mentions Ahmed in this context. In *Where Witchcraft Lives*, she recalled Ahmed as "A modern

LEFT: A masked Rollo Ahmed, as seen in a 1950s newspaper. BELOW: The Bristol HQ of the Hermes Lodge of the Golden Dawn; Ahmed was said to have been a member.

practitioner of strange arts who lived in Sussex... In 1954 he was living in an old house in Hastings." This was Harpsichord House, Cobourg Place: "An upper room in the house was used as a magical temple. Here Ahmed used to receive visitors, attired in a hooded purple robe, his face covered by a black mask. He was of Egyptian extraction, white-haired, dark-skinned, and with a neat Vandyke beard... People came to his candle-lit temple to obtain talismans. Sometimes they came to seek relief from the spells and curses they believed to have been laid upon them by other practitioners.

"On Hallowe'en, 1954, Ahmed staged a ritual at which 13 people were present. Its purpose was to release a young man from a black magic spell which had been cast on him two years previously."⁶

And in her *The Rebirth of Witchcraft*, Valiente, describing Brighton's raffish, bohemian atmosphere, wrote: "Its nickname is 'London by the sea' and, like the capital itself, Brighton has always had its share of the eccentric and the bizarre – and sometimes of the sinister. Between the wars, Rollo Ahmed, author of the book *The Black Art*, had an active magical circle in Brighton... Some of Ahmed's old students and followers were still in Brighton at the time of which I write and still performing their rituals. These sometimes involved blood sacrifices, usually of a cockerel."⁷

In a statement written for Peter Haining's *The Anatomy of Witchcraft*, Ahmed recounts an amusing incident which took place in Brighton's Royal Pavilion: "I particularly remember an occasion at the Pavilion, when I believe my Black robes and accompanying incense scared people into thinking I was practically the Devil himself, that I had a great sale of small amulets to ward off the possible evil effects of having, witnessed a pseudo Black Magic ceremony. Pseudo, because it is obvious it would be impossible to openly hold a true Black Magic ceremony in a well-known public building."⁸

However, from being a mere pseudo-practitioner, Ahmed gradually became embroiled in genuine malefic magic, as he explained in his statement for Haining: "At this period I saw a good deal of Aleister Crowley in London and Brighton and was present at many of his gatherings. Originally my interest in Black Magic as such was purely detached.

"I had practised rituals and experimented personally with much of the knowledge that had come my way in youth and through study, but the darker side had no direct appeal. However, I found it was impossible to maintain

the detached approach – imperceptibly, but surely, the poison of evil seeps into the character – and one cannot associate with those to whom 'Do What Thou Will Shall Be The Whole Of The Law' is actual doctrine, without becoming seriously affected.

"The will weakens, moral values become obscured, the senses blunted. Habits, motives and actions which would previously have appeared grotesque or revolting now appear amusing and desirable, or worse still are taken in deadly seriousness as being a means of obtaining the favour of the Powers of Darkness."⁹

Eventually managing to break free from what he believed were the snares of black magic and its practitioners, Ahmed adopted a 'poacher turned gamekeeper' approach, seeking to expose and publicise these secretive cults: "I do not hesitate to say that I became mentally and morally affected by these things... My nerves also suffered and I became affected in ways which only those who know of, and will admit the powers of the Unseen, will appreciate.

"After a period of prolonged illness and serious misfortune, I gradually disentangled myself from the abyss which threatened to engulf me and I have since set myself to the task of resisting and showing up the evil wherever it is to be encountered. It is an absolute fact, that when you have participated in any form of spiritual evil, there is a force and power, call it what you will, that makes

periodic attempts to conquer you again and draw you back. I am sure that all who have had similar experiences will agree.

"Long after I had disconnected myself, circumstances would arise or people be drawn across my path which aimed at my material and moral destruction... Nevertheless I shall continue my work and if I need to don the role of a Black Magician to do so, I shall not hesitate for an instant. That is my promise and that is my vow."¹⁰

TABLOIDS AND TROUBLES

This statement echoes remarks Ahmed made (as "Mr A") in a lurid story that appeared in one of the *Sunday Pictorial's* investigations into black magic in Britain. The journalist who had written the piece claimed to be in possession of a dossier, "the result of many years' work by an investigator, a Mr A, who is out to expose these malignant people and their teachings and practices. This dossier gives the most detailed information on the activities of many well-known people."¹¹

Three years later, in 1954, Ahmed was featured in a story in the *Daily Sketch*. He is living at the 19th-century Harpsichord House in Hastings, and explains to the journalist, Peter Stewart, that he bought the house with a £1,000 mortgage, but is currently receiving National Assistance and is £150 in arrears.

In the article, Ahmed is a "black magic practitioner" and "father of five, [a] dark-skinned slim man with white hair and a

carefully-trimmed Vandyke beard." Stewart describes Ahmed's "temple of black magic," a locked room on the first floor, "a vast, clean, sparsely-furnished room with tall latticed windows... A cheap lithograph of Christ on the mantelshelf is crowded by jungle idols, an incense burner and a painted sphere used in occult rites." This combination of Christian imagery and what were presumably African statuettes sounds like an altar from one of the African Diasporic traditions such as Vodou or Santeria. The incense burner is more standard esoteric fare, however. The room's walls are lined with "30 hard, uncomfortable chairs" with a table at one end, where Ahmed sits. He explains to the journalist that he will be receiving a visitor at the weekend, a lady from Bristol (no, this is not the start of a limerick). She has written to him seeking his help in regaining the affections of a former partner, a man named Frank, whose Army identity bracelet she has enclosed, together with a lock of his mother's hair. Ahmed had already written to her, enclosing a talisman which, he explains, "has called for work on two periods of the new moon. The aim of the power is to compel the person to do as you wish. If they do not then misfortune will be their lot."

Dressed in "a red silk scarf, fawn beret and duffle coat", Ahmed describes the ritual that will take place when the woman arrives at the weekend. "A single light candle will light the room. The electricity [will be] cut off. He will receive her in a purple-cowled cloak and a

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ABOVE: Sussex witch Doreen Valiente described Ahmed as "a modern practitioner of the strange arts". ABOVE: 23 Old Steine, one of Rollo's Brighton addresses.

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ABOVE AND BELOW: Rollo Ahmed photographed in his 'temple' at Harpsichord House, Hastings, for an article in the *Daily Sketch*, 27 November 1954.

black cardboard mask to the throb of jungle drums – a gramophone record. Music will play, too...¹²

And in the same year, Ahmed made another appearance in the *Sunday Pictorial*, this time as "Mr X". The headline of the piece was "BLACK MAGIC, 'Pic' men eavesdrop on the Devil." Reporters had been invited by Ahmed to observe him as he conducted a magical ceremony. Ahmed, as "Mr X", had told them: "I want to prove that people in Britain are interested in magic." Gerald Gardner, commenting on the bias he perceived in the article, was not impressed: "A ceremony was said to have been performed to release a young man from a Black Magic spell cast on him some time before; this was enlivened by playing a gramophone record of an old negro jazz number. The article was written to suggest that something wicked was going on. Personally I cannot see it is so very wicked to attempt to release someone from a Black Magic spell. But a reporter said: 'I have seen a black magician kneel before a candle and pray to the devil'."

Now, I think this was a very rude allusion to their host's colour. And, anyhow, the Devil, possibly being frightened of the reporters, did not come. The other reporter said he had seen this magician massage a blonde girl's back. That apparently was all that happened.¹³

Valiente had also referred to rituals conducted by Ahmed to lift curses and hexes from afflicted individuals; however, there was a more cynical – even criminal – side to this aspect of his work. Rollo Ahmed was imprisoned on three occasions for fraud.

The first incident took place during the

autumn of 1930 on the island of Jersey, where Ahmed was living with his wife. At this time, the Channel Islands still had a rich and living tradition of witchcraft, ghosts, the evil eye, and so on, even if it was beginning to fade under modernity's glare. In fact, such age-old folk beliefs were given a new, if temporary, lease of life following the rise of Spiritualism and mysticism, during a period roughly between 1850-1950. Ahmed seems to have exploited these beliefs, particularly amongst rural Islanders.

A Mr and Mrs Dumaesq Rondel, of Cemetery Farm, St John, were the aggrieved

parties. Rondel had himself served one month's imprisonment some six years previously, after he severely beat and kicked an elderly neighbour whom he thought had placed a curse on his horse. Subsequently, Rondel's farm fell on hard times, with Rondel believing that someone – presumably the neighbour – had placed a spell on one of his daughters, and on his animals and crops.

Enter Rollo Ahmed, who told the desperate farmer that he could lift the ill luck for a fee of £5 (approximately £260 in today's money). Whatever magic Ahmed worked, it did not change the luck, and Rondel went back to him; Ahmed explained that it was a difficult job, but that he could sort matters out for a further 20 guineas (about £1,100 today). Again, there was no improvement in the farm's fortunes, and a further £65 (£3,360) was paid.

It emerged in court that Ahmed's attempts to cleanse the farm involved his walking around the farmhouse, uttering incantations, while striking at the doors and windows with a knife. During this procedure he was dressed in a black gown, red girdle, and a red fez. He is also described as burning incense (or burning coals on a shovel around the farm) in an effort to cleanse the place of evil influences. Statuettes and a powder (with which Ahmed said he would blow the evil spirits away) were also utilised – perhaps a hint of Obeah or Voodoo methods.

It was when Ahmed requested the Rondels give him another £70 that the police were called in. It was alleged in court that he had threatened them with death if they didn't pay up; letters sent to them were signed with a seal bearing crossbones and the name "Ahmed". He also gave Rondel a packet

containing a "mystic" powder, with the injunction not to open it on pain of death, to be followed by the deaths of 14 members of his family.

Ahmed's defence was that the initial £5, and the subsequent £65, had been payments for two magic rings; when one of the rings was produced in court, the magistrate, examining it, declared that it was worth one penny. Ahmed was found guilty of "false representations and the exercising of 'black magic'" and sentenced to nine months' hard labour, with the magistrate telling the unfortunate farmer Rondel: "You should be in an asylum." When officials opened the packet of powder in court, Rondel had become visibly alarmed, indicating his belief in Ahmed's powers.¹⁴

Sadly, this was not to be Ahmed's only court appearance in Jersey. In 1932, living at Havre des Pas with his wife and their two children, he was again convicted of obtaining small sums from a number of people by misrepresentation. This time, he was sentenced to one month's imprisonment with hard labour. At this point in his life he is described as being near destitute, scraping a living by selling women's clothes by mail order.

Fourteen years later, in autumn 1946 he was charged with using false pretences to obtain the sum of £800. The court heard that Mrs Violet Rogers, of Castlebar Road, Ealing, a 67-year-old widow, had been a Spiritualist for 33 years. She was a firm believer in the powers of a medium, Mrs Eve Lukat, who claimed to have a spirit guide, a Chinese Mandarin named Tai Li, who spoke through her. Mrs Rogers had been in contact with Tai Li since 1942.

Ahmed had apparently told Mrs Rogers that Tai Li had suggested he approach her for a loan of between £300 and £500; he explained that he was shortly to have three books published and that he would be able to repay her with the ensuing royalties. Mrs Rogers, a relatively wealthy woman, sold stocks worth £500 to give to Ahmed. He later asked for (and received) a further £90 in order that he might hire the prestigious Kingsway Hall to give a lecture on 'Occultism.' As it turned out, however, he

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had only hired a small room. Further details emerged as the case progressed. It seems that Tai Li (via Ahmed) had told Mrs Rogers that she was guilty of wrongdoing in a past life and that financial assistance to Ahmed would be a way of righting these wrongs. In November 1946, Ahmed was found guilty of fraud and fraudulent conversion, and sentenced to two years' imprisonment.

It is notable that Ahmed claimed, at least initially, to be able to lift curses and not place them. While this may indicate his benevolent intentions, it may also have been through a desire to avoid prosecution under the Witchcraft Act (only repealed in 1951). We might also regard his lectures and advertised Yoga tuition as a respectable cover; his clients, in the privacy of his consulting room, may have had other requests.

REMEMBERING ROLLO

What, then, are we to make of Rollo Ahmed? Was he ultimately just another hustler, con-man and charlatan? I would caution against such a one-dimensional interpretation. Dennis Wheatley, who was no fool, had a great liking and respect for Ahmed. If Wheatley had thought him a mere crook, would he have recommended he be recruited for Intelligence work during WWII? Wheatley was a member of the London Controlling Section, the secretive, high-level co-ordinating body for wartime code-breaking, deception and security operations (for more on the work of the LCS, see David Sutton, 'Bodyguard of Lies', FT185:38-45). Wheatley's boss was Maxwell Knight, alias Ian Fleming's 'M', who asked

LEFT: Rollo's spirit lives on in this advert from the *Jamaica Weekly Gleaner*, 19-15 June 2014.

Wheatley to "sound him [Ahmed] out very gently particularly with a view to finding out if he would be willing to do this sort of work abroad."¹⁵

However we may disapprove of the illegitimate money-raising schemes for which Ahmed was convicted, I think it would be unfair to condemn him as nothing more than a con-man. After Crowley's inheritance had run out, the Beast was not averse to getting hold of money by dubious means. Just as Ahmed had swindled Mrs Rogers of Ealing out of a large sum of money, ostensibly to finance publication of his books, Crowley did the same thing to his own followers on several occasions, using the cash for his own lavish living expenses. Crowley is not remembered solely as a confidence trickster, but also for his erudition, his prolific literary and artistic output, and for having written one of the earliest Yoga and meditation books by a Westerner, as well as being the founder of a new religion. Ahmed, too, deserves to be remembered as one of Britain's early practitioners and teachers of Yoga, as a popular early 20th century historian of magic and as the author of a caustic and elegant critique of 20th century British racism – just as much as for his flamboyant black cloak and red fez, and for selling cheap rings at high prices. **BT**

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