

Gardnerian Witchcraft in Canada

Gardnerian Witchcraft is a matriarchal, matrilineal tradition that honours the Great Mother and Her consort, the Horned God. The Great Mother's domain consists of life and the present world, and the Horned God's domain consists of death and the Netherworld. Nevertheless, Gardnerians may also choose to conduct rites in honour of, or in petition to, additional Gods as they see fit. At the core of Gardnerian practice is affirmation of the value of life, the inevitability of death, and the promise of reincarnation after this life has ended. We see the never-ending cycle of birth, death and rebirth all around us in nature.

The Canadian scene

A uniquely Canadian sensibility is gradually emerging within the Gardnerian Tradition, but we are far from monolithic in our outlook concerning our Craft. We therefore maintain very close ties with our Craft ancestors both within Canada and in Britain and America.

Most of us live in Ontario; there are Gardnerian covens in Alberta and British Columbia as well. Canada has a Gardnerian initiates' magazine, *Six Roads, a Gardnerian Journal of the Art*, which has been published in Alberta since 1995, and has its own web-site.¹

Initiatory Practices

Gardnerian Witchcraft is exclusively coven-based and initiatory. Self-initiation is not practised, and solitary practice is rare, being confined mainly to isolated retired Elders. Initiates who have become geographically isolated remain in formal covenant with their High Priestess until and unless they either attain Third Degree, or have entered into a working relationship with a new High Priestess.

Initiations follow forms as set forth in the *Book of Shadows*; Gardnerians work within a three-degree system of cross-gender initiation and degree elevations. The normal minimum period of formation between initiation and degree elevations is a year and a day; many covens take longer than a year and a day to work through the necessary pre-elevation teachings. In Gardnerian practice, initiation makes an irrevocable change in the initiate's circumstances; as such, it cannot be revoked or overturned by human intervention.

We offer no 'honorary' initiations, nor is Gardnerian initiation 'inherent' or 'contained' in the initiations of any Church or any other Tradition. Claims made to this effect by anyone should be taken with great suspicion.

Coven Leadership and Autonomy

Canadian practice is distinct from American practice, in that some covens are led by Second Degree initiates and others are led by Third Degree initiates. As a general rule (exceptions do occur!), Canadian covens that trace their lineage directly or almost-directly to Britain are led by Second Degree initiates. Those covens that trace their lineage directly or almost-directly to America are led by Third Degree initiates. Confused? So are we ...suffice it to say that the historical reasons for this state of affairs are beyond the scope of a pre-initiate discussion.

Covens are wholly autonomous. Each coven is ruled by its High Priestess in consultation with her consort (the High Priest) and with the aid and advice of the coven's Elders. In all matters, the decision of the High Priestess is final, even when she has chosen to delegate authority on certain issues to her High Priest or another Elder. In times of need, a High Priestess can function as a coven leader without a High Priest, but cross-gender partnership is by far preferred.

How We Work

Gardnerian covens in Canada generally work unclothed, rather than robed. Coven work is participatory: all participants are initiates in their own right and there are therefore no spectators, nor 'congregation' vs. 'clergy' dichotomies. Gardnerian rites are conducted exclusively within a magic circle, properly and intentionally cast according to traditional usage. Healing magic is often performed by our covens. Evil spells are never cast by us, for such actions are an affront to our Gods.

That which takes place within the circle is held in confidence by those people who were present in the circle. To that end, Gardnerians take magical names for use solely within the circle, where the use of 'legal names' from the outside world is strongly discouraged. Outside the magic circle, the High Priestess of the coven is sometimes addressed by other Gardnerian initiates as 'My Lady' in conversation, or as 'Lady So-and-So' in third-party discussion with other Gardnerian initiates (but note that as a general rule we keep quiet about our Traditional identity and it is unlikely to arise as a conversational topic in mixed-Tradition venues.)

In contrast with the practice in some other Traditions, the title of 'Lord' is *not* used by Gardnerian High Priests. You should cast a jaundiced eye at the *bona fides* of anyone who attempts to convince you otherwise.

Lineages and Lore

Every Gardnerian initiate can trace her or his initiatory lineage back to Gerald Gardner. In the interest of brevity, lineages are often documented in terms of the ancestral High Priestesses only; nevertheless, the intervening High Priests are an integral part of Gardnerian heritage and history. As a matter of practice, we do not usually inflict recitations of our lineage on non-Gardnerians. At best they might think we are strange; at worst they might think we are full of ourselves.

Effective recording and verification of Gardnerian lineage is facilitated by the systematic archiving of initiation records. Gardnerians use a semi-standardised *Book of Shadows*, consisting of rituals passed down from generation to generation, augmented by additions and alternative rites which are ordinarily signed and dated by their authors. Most Gardnerian initiates in Canada hand-copy all or part of their teacher's *Book*, with the objective of more closely engaging with the texts. A genuine or authentic *Book of Shadows* cannot be purchased; nor can it be obtained in any other way without the seeker's having first properly undergone the Gardnerian rite of initiation.

Money is never charged for teaching, initiation, or magical work. Some High Priestesses set dues for the collective handling of coven expenses; others choose to rely on individual donations of consumables such as candles, wine and incense as the need arises.

Caveat: Insofar as all Gardnerian covens are autonomous, none of us may speak for all of us. The foregoing thoughts are my own opinions concerning the nature of the Gardnerian Tradition, which I love and cherish. I accept full responsibility for the ideas here presented. I owe thanks to my spiritual director, Lady Theos, for her comments and advice.

written by Brigantia Stone December 31, 1997, revised January 2, 1999

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<http://beaufort.bravepages.com/cgrdtrad.html>

More information at: www.geraldgardner.com

1 The link is no longer active and I cannot find a new web site for it. CWB 21/02/2010