

A Poisoned Chalice

The death of Robert Cochrane

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In recent years Robert Cochrane, Magister of the Clan of Tubal-Cain, has attained iconic status in the Craft, and numerous stories have circulated about the circumstances of his death.

The generally accepted version seems to be that he killed himself in a ritual suicide using Belladonna at Midsummer 1966, re-enacting the death of the Divine King, a willing sacrifice to remit his own errors and those of his people, and to secure the fertility of his dominion. What picture does this idea of Cochrane's 'ritual suicide' conjure? Perhaps we see a robed figure lying prostrate in the ritual circle, lips darkened, eyes staring sightlessly into the beyond, fingers yet gripping the envenomed drinking horn, forever stilled? What image do you have of the scene?

The death of a seemingly self-martyred witch engenders a myriad contrasting perspectives. Some can serve to crystallise a highly effective glamour that acts as a vehicle for the individual's work, while others may be detrimental to that work, diverting attention into fruitless speculation and – perhaps – a misplaced romanticism. The intent of this essay is to offer facts with which those interested in Cochrane and his legacy may temper their own beliefs about his death, and its implications.



Backdrop

Doreen Valiente's account in her book *The Rebirth of Witchcraft* is the most extensive published source, which is augmented by comments from Cochrane's loyal student (later Magister of the Clan) Evan John Jones in *Witchcraft: A Tradition Renewed*. Valiente's recollection is kindly, forthright in her typical manner, and tinged with nostalgia and affection for the man who, following the break-up of Gardner's coven and the death of its leader, had given a new and inspiring impetus to her work.

Valiente met Robert Cochrane during the second half of 1964¹; she was impressed by his powerful personality and intelligence and accepted his claim to represent a genuinely pre-modern and hereditary current of witchcraft, becoming the sixth member of his Clan. (1989: 122) Cochrane – known amongst men as Roy Leonard Bowers – was then aged thirty-three and lived with his wife Jane and their young son Adrian at Britwell, a slightly depressing London overspill council estate near Slough, Berkshire. Their coven had been operating for a few years and worked rituals that, unlike Gardner's, were not textually based, utilized plenty of movement, dance and chant, and were generally held outdoors in woodlands, sometimes even underground – caving being one of Bowers' hobbies. Valiente gives an account of one particularly memorable meeting in *The Rebirth of Witchcraft*. (1989:125-8)

As the Clan, though small in number, went from strength to strength on a magical level, Bowers was building up his contacts and forging links with practitioners including Oxfordshire cunning-man and Royal Academy painter Norman Gills and Qabbalist ceremonial magician William Gray. He first went public, albeit anonymously, with his article 'Genuine witchcraft is defended' in the November 9th 1963 issue of *Psychic News*, evidently a response to a series of 'exposés' that appeared during September in the weekly scandal-rag *The News of the World*.

Gerald Gardner's death in February 1964 left the Craft without a visible figurehead and it seems that Bowers hoped to step into this breach – within occult circles at least if not publicly. From late 1964 to Summer 1965 Bowers set out to recover some ground from the

Gardner covens whose publicity over the preceding decade had established a somewhat lurid image of contemporary witchcraft in the public mind. *Pentagram* was the organ of the newly-founded Witchcraft Research Association and it provided the main forum in which Bowers and pseudonymous colleague 'Taliesin' placed articles intended to draw a different picture of what the Craft was about, and to attract new members, especially female aspirants to balance the almost all-male Clan. 'Witches' Esbat' in the November 1964 issue of *New Dimensions* was evidently designed with this latter end in mind. Unhappily, his method backfired as disparaging references to Gardner and his witches in *Pentagram* by both Bowers and particularly 'Taliesin' led to acrimonious exchanges through the magazine's letters page, and the ensuing ill-feeling caused the demise of the magazine as a witchcraft review after the fifth issue in January 1966. The Witchcraft Research Association itself soon ceased to function, apparently as a result of political chicanery behind the scenes. Valiente comments: 'If, then, this episode was a power bid by Cochrane to take over the leadership of witchcraft in Britain (and I was told it was), it did not succeed. Taken in conjunction with Cochrane's personal troubles, I have no doubt that it caused him considerable personal chagrin. In fact, he became desperate to re-assert his authority over his followers.' (1989: 132)

The 'personal troubles' appear to have really begun in the period after Valiente had removed herself from Bowers' orbit, which was during 1965. She had experienced a crisis of confidence in her magical relationship with Gerald Gardner after seeing through his bluffs and tiring of his love for publicity, and had similarly come to disbelieve Bowers' claims to a hereditary provenance. In addition, she recoiled from his increasing hostility to other covens and perhaps especially to her parent tradition: '...Cochrane was becoming more and more authoritarian in his attitude, both towards other covens and toward the members of his own coven. He was starting to do what Gerald Gardner had done before him, namely to pose as the great authority. But he added to this a characteristic which Gerald had never shown; that is, a tendency to threaten anyone who opposed or even questioned him...It seemed to me that there was room for ways of working other than Cochrane's, when they were being pursued by sincere and well-intentioned people. Cochrane, however, thought otherwise and threatened all who dared

to differ from him with fearful occult vengeance.’² (1989: 128-9) Valiente finally came into conflict with Bowers over a comment he made about his hope for a ‘Night of the Long Knives’³ with those he had dubbed ‘the Gardnerians’; she confronted him immediately, and before witnesses. She claimed that he lost face in this exchange and, although it was not her intention, this led to a further deterioration of relations between the Clan and its Magister. (ibid: 129-30)

While this marked the end of their personal contact and working partnership, Valiente kept apprised of events within the Clan through mutual friends: ‘He had also started a liaison with one of the new women members...This unfortunately is what broke Robert Cochrane’s Clan in the end, though it was not the only reason for the break-up. Cochrane had thought Jean [Jane] would accept the situation. I knew that she would not, and I did not blame her. She left him and started divorce proceedings; and in my opinion the true magical power of the coven went with her.’ (1989: 129) Evan John Jones goes further in his assessment of the fate of the Clan and its Magister: ‘The blame can be laid firmly at the door of one person, who was an intrusion into our group that would have been best left out. But the Fates decreed otherwise; and Robert Cochrane, our leader, who had preached to us “not to monkey with the buzz-saw”, got cut himself. This led to the painful break-up of his marriage and his eventual suicide.’ (1990: 16)

A factor that needs to be borne in mind is the gravity exerted on Bowers’ personal work and exploration by his dependent coven; along with the role of Magister came the pressure of responsibility to the Clan in its running and organization, as well as the structuring of the teaching process and the need to compose new material. Gerald Gardner had been a retired man of some means, yet Bowers pursued the work of the Clan while in full-time employment, living in a small council house with a wife and child to support. In an early letter to William Gray, circa November 1964, Bowers wrote: ‘I am seriously considering leaving my group and working alone. I may sound dreadfully un-humble, but J[ane] and I have reached a stage when we go faster by ourselves. The group is beginning to pull us backwards, and I for one would like to establish a new leader and move on myself.’ (2002: 70) Evan John Jones commented: ‘Cochrane repeatedly said this, but he probably had no intention of

carrying out this threat. If he had gone solo he would have not been the centre of attention and this stopped him taking that step.’ (ibid: 74) The difficulty of balancing his personal ambitions – which lay firmly within the magical domain – with the responsibilities of his roles as coven leader and family man must be considered as a very significant element contributing to his eventual fate. Tragically, Bowers stumbled headlong into the snares that lie in wait for those who assume the leadership of magical groups; ego-inflation, sexual infidelity, fear of usurpation and virulent antipathy towards perceived competition. While this is apparent to us with the benefit of hindsight it should be remembered that Bowers was one of the first in the modern age to pursue such a course, and chanced these dangers while treading down the path for others who would follow.

The turbulence in Bowers’ life during his last months and his increasing isolation can be gauged by a very poignant letter written to Norman Gills (not dated but c. April 1966); Gills was an independent and established practitioner whom Bowers could respect and trust as a confidante. ‘Many thanks for your letter, and the well meant warning therein...I am now sans John – sans A.4, sans friends, and working by myself quite happily. It is surprising that the warning came the very week when the final and terribly painful blow fell. Old J. [Jane] is no mean psychic, since she warned me against little A. many months ago – and I took little or no heed. So I have learned. I am of course at the end of a phase – and being like yourself, a man without any true fate – except that which we shape ourselves – I would like to know where I go from here? Can you be a friend and have a look for me – for as you know, one cannot tell one’s own future except by the merest glimpse, and I feel as if I am at the bottom of a well with little or no hope for the future. If you do decide to help me, then I would be very grateful if you would tell me the truth, and not cover up any blows.’ (2002: 178-9) Bowers also told Gills that he was trying to become a professional fortune-teller, and enclosed a business card to this effect, adding, ‘...although I have little or no hope for it as a business, it will give me something to do.’ He continues, ‘The books will not go aright as yet since I appear to have lost all desire to write about the Faith...’ and holds out the rather slender hope of writing a television play which might bring him £300. ‘We are thinking of moving back into London – more or less to get away from this house which has many

unhappy memories for us now...Thank you for saying I have some personal power – I feel flat as a pancake at the present time, and couldn't raise the energy to swat or influence a fly. However unhappiness always causes me to go like that, especially when there is very little or no hope for the future.' (ibid.) Although undated this is clearly a very late letter; the reference to fortune-telling indicates that Bowers was out of work and Valiente also states that his employers had released him on sick leave (1989: 133), but it appears that the marriage was still intact.

During the first months of 1966 Valiente had learned from Justine Glass (journalist Enid Corral) that Bowers was telling followers of his intention to commit suicide at Midsummer. This threat was not being taken very seriously, and Glass, also disillusioned with Bowers, dismissed the idea with 'It's just Robert talking.' Valiente was concerned that the threats, however empty, might lead to some misadventure although Bowers was said to be cheerful and keeping up contact with friends. (1989: 133)

In retrospect we can see this fatal potential foreshadowed by a sombre undercurrent in Bowers' correspondence. In the course of a letter to Joe Wilson in April 1966 Bowers offered his version of the 'Witch Law': 'Do not do what you desire – do what is necessary. Take all you are given – give all of yourself. "What I have – I hold." When all else is lost, and not until then, prepare to die with dignity.' (2002: 50) To both William Gray and Norman Gills Bowers quoted the mournful lines of what he called 'the old song' and a 'witch song', but which sounds more like a verse he had composed and was keen to present to his friends: 'There you and I my loves/ There you and I will lie,/ When the cross of resurrection is broken,/ And our time has come to die,/ For no more is there weeping,/ For no more is there death,/ Only the golden sunset,/ Only the golden rest.' (2002: 124-5, 150) A very definite note of foreboding is struck in Bowers' letter to Norman Gills, written around March 1966 which ends: 'When the time comes pass this, and the other things which we have discussed, on to Mr. [Joe] Wilson, whom I am afraid I will not see.'⁵ At about the same time – April 1966 – he predicted in a letter to Wilson that the young American witch would be visiting Britain within a year. (2002: 54)

Nevertheless, in the letter preceding that just mentioned Bowers was able to counsel Wilson: ‘Never be like I was for a short while, arrogant in the knowledge of power, for She soon tripped me up, and brought me home across my black horse, and I like the knights of old lie wounded, and at this moment without hope.’ (2002: 44) This admonition suggests that towards the end, amidst the magical, emotional and political turbulence in his life, Bowers had reflected upon and regretted his failings – these last letters to Wilson are full of warm and compassionate sentiments. Valiente also refers to a conciliatory letter that she received from him, possibly during these weeks. (1989: 134) In his precarious situation Bowers retained his devotion to ‘the White Goddess,’ writing to Wilson: ‘In Her love (this is a hard thing to say) there is death – and She rends Her poets/lovers apart before finally making them all wise...She is Fate, the Creatoress [sic] and the Destroyer. You will understand why She destroys, but the destruction will bring its own sorrow. As the Goddess of Love, She humbles us all at some time – and that sorrow is perhaps Her greatest gift to the moon-struck poet.’ (2002: 43)

However, unbeknown to Bowers, a further and decisive blow was about to initiate the final phase of his life.

Endgame

The problems in Bowers’ marriage culminated on Wednesday 11th May when wife Jane left the family home with their nine-year old son, apparently for an address in London near Goodge Street. According to her testimony Bowers wrote two letters to her during the ensuing weeks, to which she did not respond. Bowers made visits to his doctor, Dr Lewis Johnman, on May 19th and 30th and on June 1st, seeming distressed by his wife’s departure, and on each occasion was prescribed Librium as a sedative to help him sleep. This drug, one of the then-new benzodiazepams, was regularly prescribed as either an anti-depressant or, because of its high overdose threshold, a sleeping tablet – particularly for patients who might take their own lives with the older barbiturates. Unfortunately

Bowers did not use them as intended but instead stockpiled them as a vital component of his plan.

Valiente recounts that Bowers made a visit to London and met with members of the Clan in a pub on the Saturday before Midsummer (i.e. June 18th), appeared in good spirits and gave them no cause for concern, arranging another meeting for the following Saturday. (1989: 135) This seems erroneous given that according to Evan John Jones a far more portentous meeting took place. He writes that Bowers visited him and his wife at their London home on the Sunday (June 19th), where they were joined by two other Clan members, shared a meal and went home at around seven in the evening. ‘One of the things that stuck in my mind was the way in which he had said that “his future was in the lap of the Goddess”. The other thing he stressed was that he would be with us for an important date, but not in body, and that “he would be hunting from the Other Side”. Not long after saying this he left.’ Jones also affirmed that ‘there was some religious element in his death’.⁶ (1990: 16-17)

The concept of the ‘Divine King’ as Midsummer sacrifice, developed from Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* via the works of his disciple Jessie Weston, Margaret Murray, and Robert Graves exerted a powerful influence on Bowers’ personal mythology and hence on Clan ritual and theology. In his article for *Psychic News* Bowers had claimed, with the readership of Christian Spiritualists in mind: ‘The concept of a sacrificial god was not new to the ancient world; it is not new to a witch...James I obviously had good reason to fear witches. The witch theology of that period demanded that he should die since he descended from a line of “divine kings”. The “divine kings”, in theory anyway, died for the sins of their subjects and to mediate between man and the evil chance.’⁷ We can see this concept reflected in the prominence Bowers’ work gave to certain motifs involving the witch-god as Death, and the goddess as ‘Fate’, treacherous muse of the true poet; Bowers followed Graves in asserting that the (male) poet is an expendable plaything of the White Goddess – a *poet-maudit*, ‘accursed poet’ in the full Romantic sense. In his treatment of the Clan in *Western Inner Workings*, based on personal contact, William Gray wrote concerning the responsibility of its Magister: ‘His solemn duty was to take the ill

of others, if they were closely connected with the “clan,” on his own shoulders. If need be, he might have to die on behalf of his people like the old Sacred Kings.’ (1983: 144) ‘Midsummer is my big night, or as near as I can get to it’ Bowers had written to Gray in a discussion of ritual – and so it would prove to be. (2002: 117)

Midsummer festivities traditionally take place on the evening and night of June 23rd, and it was on Thursday the 23rd of June 1966 that Roy Bowers consumed a mixture of poisons which – by his own account – consisted of Belladonna, Librium and Hellebore. We know this because he then wrote a letter explaining his actions and addressed it to the Coroner. This potent combination of toxins could reasonably be expected to have killed Bowers quickly – he must have thought it would all be over in a few hours. Perhaps the greatest tragedy is that he was thwarted even in this hope.

The following morning Jane Bowers’ solicitors received a letter from Roy informing them of his suicidal intentions; they alerted the police and two officers were sent to the house. PC Albert Russell and his colleague found the doors locked but through an open ground-floor window at the back of the house the figure of Bowers could be seen, lying in a sleeping bag on the settee, alive but deeply comatose. He was taken by ambulance to the local hospital where he remained in coma for nine days. He died at 5.30 a.m. on the morning of Sunday 3rd July 1966, in Wexham Park Hospital, without recovering consciousness.⁸ A Coroner’s inquest was convened the following day at which PC Russell gave a statement about finding Bowers, but the proceedings were adjourned until July 22nd when fuller evidence would have been gathered. A short notice appeared on page 13 of the weekly *Slough Observer* on Friday 8th July under the heading ‘Artist Dies From Overdose’. This reported that ‘commercial artist and abstract painter’ Roy Leonard Bowers had died in hospital from an overdose of tablets; that his wife had left about two months previously with their son; and that the family had lived in Britwell for about seven years.⁹

Sometime after Midsummer, Doreen Valiente returned from a stay in hospital to find a letter from Bowers informing her that by the time she read it, he would be dead; she immediately contacted

the friends who had originally put the two in contact and discovered that it was true. (1989: 134-5) Roy Bowers' funeral was held on Wednesday 13th July 1966.

Inquest

Coroner Mr Percy Nickson chaired the inquest proper which took place at Burnham Police Station at 4.30 p.m. on Friday 22nd July. Inquest records are not open to public inspection so we are reliant upon the reports of two journalists who attended, published in local newspapers *The Windsor, Slough & Eton Express* and, with greater detail, the *Slough Observer* on Friday 29th July, 1966 – these appeared the following week because the inquest was held late on the Friday afternoon.¹⁰

PC Russell resumed his account of finding Bowers at home after being contacted by the solicitors. He reported that after the ambulance had left he found an empty bottle marked 'Librium' beside the dustbin, and on a subsequent visit had noticed Belladonna plants growing wild at the back of the garden.

Dr Lewis Johnman gave evidence about Bowers' three visits to him at the end of May and beginning of June, depressed about his wife's departure but giving no indication of suicidal intent. Johnman identified some empty capsules discovered in the dustbin as the Librium he had prescribed but stated, 'You would have to take an awful lot of them to do any harm.'

The use of Librium as a sedative for patients suffering from stress was also confirmed by pathologist Dr Francis Scott who had conducted the post-mortem. He found signs of atropine and Librium but did not analyse the stomach contents, as the poisons would have been eliminated during the nine days that Bowers lay in hospital. Dr Scott gave the cause of death as congestion of the lungs and heart failure, consistent with Belladonna poisoning.¹¹

Bowers' wife Jane confirmed that she had identified his body, and said that the couple had separated on May 11th. Although her husband had sent two letters she had not been in contact with him. Jane also stated that he had suffered a nervous breakdown some five years previously and that he often became depressed and talked of suicide. The Coroner very compassionately told Jane, 'Whatever happened between you and your husband is of a private and domestic nature which I do not wish to go in to. Therefore I shall not make any reference to the reason why your mutual relations were severed.'

In his summing-up Mr Nickson concluded that it was only possible to surmise that Bowers had in fact taken Deadly Nightshade because no traces of either Librium or Belladonna had been found. Nevertheless, the signs were consistent with the effects of these drugs. Mr Nickson contended that Bowers' claim to have taken Hellebore was feasible as its toxins are to be found in the rhizomes and roots of members of the Buttercup family, and flowers of this type had been found growing near the Belladonna in Bowers' garden.

Recording a verdict of 'suicide while the balance of the mind was disturbed' the Coroner commented, 'There is no doubt in my mind whatsoever that this man put all his concentration and energy into the deliberate destruction of himself.' To emphasize the point he read out some extracts from the letter Bowers had written to him, apparently after taking the overdose, in which case it would have been found at the house; the tone seems factual and formal, though a brief flash of the arch style that characterises his writing appears for the final time. In it Bowers referred to the sudden desertion of his wife and stated:

'This is a carefully prepared suicide. This has been a mixture of Belladonna, Hellebore – terrible tasting stuff – and a dose of sleeping pills to counteract the movements, jerks, actions and all the rest, of my muscles caused by the high quantity of atropine in the Belladonna... This is to indicate, though that must be your opinion, that I took my own life while of sound mind.'

Bowers' death was duly registered on July 28th, the cause of death given as 'Pulmonary congestion and oedema with renal failure due to Belladonna poisoning – Suicide.' Witchcraft cannot have been mentioned at the inquest, otherwise both local and national newspapers would have seized upon it, although it appears to have come within the scope of police inquiry – Evan John Jones relates that the police questioned some who had worked actively with Bowers, but who claimed that they participated only as observers. (1990: 17) According to Michael Howard, Bowers' relatives burned many of his papers – this would have ensured that they did not come into the hands of the police, who had access to the empty home during their investigation (2002: 13). I am given to understand that documents were destroyed by Roy Bowers' brother, who is now deceased. No headstone was raised at Bowers' grave, and it remains today an unmarked plot quartered by the castle-like kerbstones of the adjoining graves. Given his fondness for riddles and mystique, it looks very right somehow.

Summation

The combination of drugs that Bowers took reflected his knowledge and experience of plant poisons and seems perfectly calculated to bring about unconsciousness followed by respiratory and cardiac failure. Librium would also have served to counteract physical effects such as vomiting. Hellebore contains both a powerful narcotic and a cardiac poison similar in action to Digitalis.

Of the effects of Belladonna and the history of its use in witchcraft little need be said – they are well known or can be easily researched. The plant contains a complex of alkaloids in all parts, primarily atropine, a potentially lethal poison to which individual tolerance varies widely, as well as hyoscyamine, hyoscyne and scopolamine. It has been employed as a visionary agent in miniscule quantities and with extreme precaution and respect. Bowers was an experienced user of the herb, which he introduced into Clan ritual; he had made cautious public reference to the use of herbal poisons in his contribution to Justine Glass' *Witchcraft, the Sixth Sense – and Us*, warning, '...it cannot be stressed enough that in the hands of the ignorant or silly such methods are a quick way to the underworld of insanity.' (1965: 144) Valiente claimed, 'I used to tell him that personally I would rather get my tea from the grocer's than drink any brew he offered me, so the use of such things did not arise when I was working with him.' (1989: 133) She goes on to cite a hearsay account suggesting that towards his final crisis Bower's abuse of Magisterial authority included an increasingly cavalier attitude to Belladonna, when he is reputed to have given a large overdose to a couple whom he was handfasting.¹² (ibid)

Valiente speculates that Bowers' suicide could have been an attention-seeking stunt and not intended to be fatal. (1989: 135) This is feasible if he had taken a smaller amount of drugs than his letter to the Coroner indicated, and had sent out sufficient letters to ensure that at least one recipient would raise the alarm in time. He would have had a good idea of his susceptibility to Belladonna, and as the pathologist could not confirm the presence of Hellebore there is no firm evidence that he took it. Bowers wrote to his wife's solicitors,

to Doreen Valiente, and very likely other parties; I think he would have made certain that his estranged wife was informed. It is not, however, necessary to assume that the letters were 'timed' to raise the alarm; mail to addresses in the south of England was delivered the next day, so letters posted on June 22nd would have summoned police before the event, while posted even late in the afternoon of the 23rd they would arrive the following morning, as did the letter to the solicitors. Valiente does not give the dates on which her letter was sent or delivered, nor when she read it and responded; without this information further speculation is impossible. Such letters could be viewed as an effort to maximise the emotional impact of his actions on those he felt had betrayed him, and the conciliatory letter to Valiente then seen as a 'softening-up' move prior to the event – alternatively he could have been confirming that she was still at the same address. This is conjecture, but an interpretation to be considered nevertheless. We do not know the content of these letters, but typically suicide letters are simply informative, as was Bowers' note to the Coroner, often apologetic and absolving the recipient of any responsibility.

Considering the severity of the overdose, the letters he wrote, and the hints and plain statements of intent to friends and correspondents in the preceding weeks, Bowers' death appears as a well planned and, one might say, steadfastly undertaken suicide. His actions certainly do not match the pattern of the 'cry for help' overdose, which usually involves a minimal amount of prescribed or proprietary drugs, followed by a phone call for assistance, or presentation at the casualty department. Nor is it very plausible to read the event as some ritual ordeal or test, a possibility that Valiente raises, apparently quoting a rumour then in circulation. (1989: 135)

Any consideration of Bowers and his fate needs to accommodate the fact that the work for which he is remembered was packed into the short span of just a few years. This meteoric transit, his poetic aspiration and the mode of his death hark back to certain figures of the Romantic movement and the *fin-de-siècle* Decadents, while prefiguring the series of deaths of musicians that would occur within a few years. Disregarding the truth or otherwise of his claims of provenance, this Romantic lineage is certainly one in which

Bowers' ambit and tragedy may be said to have earned him an honourable place.

In whatever spirit Roy Bowers went to his death, it seems clearly to have been a response to the impasse into which he had led himself through his leadership of the Clan of Tubal-Cain – an escape option that was entirely congruent with his beliefs and self-myth, and, as time has proven, his means of ensuring a legend and fame that eluded him in life.



Notes

1. Bowers' letter to William Gray of May 27th 1964 indicates that he had not met Valiente. (2002: 91)
2. The attitude is underlined by a letter to Norman Gills in which Bowers promises, '...when the Clans people get to hear about it, John will be put under the ban – that I am sure of – and you know as well as I do, there is terror and death in that.' (2002: 173) The man referred to had divulged the identity of 'Taliesin' to followers of Gardner; 'Taliesin' was Bowers' mole in the Wiccan camp, and possibly the one who did the greatest harm to Bowers' cause with his inflammatory comments in *Pentagram*. Bowers had confided to William Gray a former propensity for aggression: '...violence, death and destruction possessed me, and I was a walking threat to anyone. If it hadn't been for my beloved J. [Jane] I would have eventually really tangled with the Law and gone down fighting rather than be taken prisoner.' (2002: 67-8) This aspect of his character would seem ultimately to have determined his fate.
3. Valiente 1989, p. 129. This was Hitler's name for his brutal purge of the Sturm Abteilung leadership in June 1934 which secured the ascendancy of Himmler's SS. Bowers' remark drew an unpleasant parallel between the two rival Nazi paramilitaries, and the covens led by Gardner and himself.
4. 'A.' is apparently a reference to the woman with whom Bowers had started an affair, which was now terminated. (1989: 129, 1990: 16) His comment that he was working by himself suggests that the long-standing magical relationship with his wife had also faltered.
5. Joe Wilson who knew Norman Gills well and owned the letter attributed the date and his transcription may be read at <http://www.1734.us/norman03.html> (2004). The sentence quoted was not included in the version published in the Jones/Howard edition of *The Robert Cochrane Letters* (2002: 156-9).
6. There is a very peculiar disparity between Jones' account and the facts of the event, perhaps due to the effect of shock on his memory; he claims that Bowers visited on the eve of his death, took the overdose on the Monday (June 20th), was found by neighbours in the garden, and died three days later.

7. In his study of Bowers' literary sources the late Francis Blackman suggested that Bowers' *nom-de-plume* 'Robert Cochrane' was a kenning for 'Cock Robin' as totem of the Divine King. References to the children's rhyme 'Who killed Cock Robin?' were later used in this context in a Midsummer ritual of The Regency coven. The fifteenth-century architect of the Great Hall of Stirling Castle and a favourite of King James III (1451-1488) was one Robert Cochrane; made Earl of Mar by the King, Cochrane was conspired against by the jealous Earl of Angus and hanged 'in sight of his royal master.' His biography was published in London in 1734.
8. Death certificate and *Slough Observer* July 29th, 1966.
9. Bowers described his employment to Norman Gills as 'typographical draughtsman' (2002: 146) and his death certificate gives 'matrix letter drawer'. He worked for a printer designing fonts for letterheads – the matrix is a punched copper block from which lead type is cast. 'Abstract painter' may have referred to the mural Bowers is known to have begun on his living room wall, probably during the weeks when he was bereft of family, without a job and alone in the house. Possibly, if it contained magical symbolism, this might have been explained to or by the police as 'abstract' – although his mood at the time may have produced no more than a psychotic scrawl. Unfortunately it is not known what this painting portrayed – a final testament expressed in pure symbol would perhaps be fitting for a witch-poet.
10. *The Windsor, Slough & Eton Express* misquotes Bowers' name as 'Arthur William Bowers'.
11. The *Slough Observer* is here at variance with the cause of death given on Bowers' death certificate.
12. It has been contended that over-frequent use of Belladonna affected Bowers' mental integrity; this can perhaps be read as an implication in Valiente's account. (1989: 133) However, there is evidence that Bowers considered the Belladonna-induced trance an essential component in the mystagogy of 'the Great Goddess' and sought to relocate it in this sacral context. On the subject of ritual engagement with tropane alkaloids he told Norman Gills: 'In the past they had very careful directions and sign posts to help the congregation over the difficult way. Today much of those directions have been lost. It appears to be my own life's

work to re-discover them.’ (2002: 154) A correspondence could be made between the biune potential of the ‘fair lady’ Belladonna, a wild herb both intoxicating and lethal, and the similarly equivocal role of the White Goddess as poet’s Muse espoused by Robert Graves. It is unlikely that this parallel went unnoticed by Bowers.

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