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AN INTERVIEW WITH SHANI OATES

By Michael Howard

M.H: Can you tell us how you became the Maid of the Clan Tubal Cain (CTC)?

S.O: Yes of course. In 1996 I finally decided to emerge from my solitary working status and make contact with others within the broader Craft. Letters were written to a number of people with whom I later engaged in correspondence. One letter, sent to *The Cauldron*, remarking upon an article by the late Evan John Jones, was passed to him and so began our seven-year friendship and professional relationship that lasted until his death in 2003. Eventually, in 1998, he invited me to his home in Brighton, whereupon he announced his intention to appoint me as the Maid, heir and successor to the Clan of Tubal Cain. It was his earnest wish we initiate this immediately, and so I returned a month later in September 1998 to perform the necessary rites. He bade me appoint an 'acting' Magister and together we worked closely with John over the following year, under his tutelage, during which time he officially and ceremoniously handed over office, all Clan regalia, inner rites and knowledge of its history etc., being assigned only to official heirs as unequivocal symbols of legitimacy.

M.H: How does the role of Maid differ from that of the High Priestess of a Wiccan coven?

S.O: The distinction between the Maid within CTC and a Wiccan High Priestess is considerable and very important in understanding the fundamental differences between the two traditions, having contra purpose, criteria and modus operandi. Briefly, within Wicca each priestess is appointed to head her own autonomous coven, spreading and passing on 'the line' ad infinitum, all (in theory at least) sharing equal status and all having clear rights to initiate others into the Wiccan system. None of them, however, share a name, nor are they known by a specific dedication to a single overall named deity, rather each coven arbitrarily decides upon their own name and chooses deities with whom they wish to concentrate and work. Clanships operate differently on every point mentioned above. It remains a closed unit, retaining its (often hereditary) 'line' within, subject to its passing and receiving just once in every successor's lifetime or term of office. Robert Cochrane allegedly received his authority from a female relative, which he passed on to his wife, who passed this to John Jones and thus finally to myself. The Clan therefore is headed by only one working couple at any time, which has no parallel whatsoever in Wicca. However, clanships also allow for adoptions from kindred groups into its patronage. These satellite groups are headed by male and female leaders, with the given and distinct titles of a Maid and a Magister. Even these however remain dissimilar to Wicca in that they are not autonomous and are allowed to initiate members into their own kindred groups, and not into the Clan proper, and according to Clan Suzerianity Law must offer sworn fealty to the Maid and the Magister of the Clan every seven years. This allows each satellite group to adopt and dedicate themselves to the Clan's tutelary name deity. It is, at heart, a very English feudal system, which protects and centralises the core legacy against factionalising elements. There is one Clan and everyone consists within it.

M.H: In what respect is a Wiccan coven different from a traditional witch clan?

S.O: This question is intrinsically linked to the one above, although some minor differences may naturally exist between other clans and families and my own. All that I may add is that within Wicca specific magickal training is offered through the degrees or grades of initiation with a view to moving on to form additional groups or covens. Traditional Craft, on the other hand, maintains an intrinsic organic philosophy – there is no formal 'training'. Rather, magickal awareness is awakened through a natural perspective in accord with phenomenal experience through the medium of circumstance and opportunity. It is a way of life centred

around the 'family' who continue to grow within that stable unit. Last, but not least, within the working area./circle the Wiccan High Priestess leads, but in Traditional Clan/Craft the Magister/Master leads, and for very different reasons.

M.H.: What was your personal impression of Evan John Jones (EJJ) as both a person and a practitioner?

S.O.: First of all, I would like to mention how my sons always affectionately refer to him as "wizard", a half-serious, half-joking comment that epitomises him perfectly. After having his kneecap blown off in Egypt in the 1950s, during his service with the armed forces, he walked with the aid of a stick, but he was broad in nature as well as stature. He was certainly 'old school', a true gentleman and clearly ex-Army; he was fiercely loyal, steadfast and resolute, possessed a scathing wit, had no time for fools, yet loved to play the fool himself and remained utterly devoted to the divine feminine to his last breath and to his family. When staying with us just a few weeks before his death in August 2003, he asked me to light a candle for him at the shrine of the Black Madonna at Guadalupe – this I did in November of that year when I visited Mexico. As a teacher, his Socratic discourses were paradoxically frustrating and ingenious. As a practitioner, despite his considerable knowledge of the Craft, he was extremely humble, possessing a quiet, but astonishing, level of mediation, and we witnessed him 'whistle up' the wind. Despite ill-health, John had preserved a low active profile in the Clan, quietly working on and off for years with several people, some of whom we had the good fortune to meet. His working site was an eerie, but stunning locale.

M.H.: What is CTC's relationship (if any) with other groups in the public eye who are following the Cochrane tradition, such as 1734 and the Roebuck Coven in the United States?

S.O.: Unfortunately such a matter is Clan business and yet one that has regrettably been made a public issue, by others, and that is not of our choosing. John made the situation clear to us over ten years ago and we have maintained a respectful silence on the matter. The leaders of the Roebuck in the USA were adopted into the Clan and given kindred status (as above) by John by letter and then in person during the mid-1980s when they visited the UK. Despite giving them his blessings to head a branch of CTC in the States, the relationship disintegrated and after an acrimonious split John had no more to do with them. He stated in a letter to me that their status had 'decayed'. To date it has not been reassigned. We had offered, but this was declined as the leaders of the US branch claim total independence from CTC, yet wish to retain its name. Under Clan law this is not possible. As this is a private Clan matter, we respectfully decline to make further or personal comments. We nevertheless seek no animosity and wish them well in their practice of Robert Cochrane's legacy. As to '1734', to my knowledge this was formerly a system developed by the late Joe Wilson, inspired by several sources, one of them being Cochrane. It is my understanding that he set up many independent groups in the United States that practise this system, none of whom are affiliated to CTC at this time. However, quite recently, we have become firm friends with the English branch of the 1734 tradition.

M.H.: Does the CTC have any links or connections with other traditional witchcraft groups or individuals that are not already publicly known? If you have, do you think that there are more traditional witches underground than out in the open? Do you believe that any of the old witch families still exist?

S.O.: Yes, we do have links with and knowledge of other traditional clans and families, mainly in the north, all of whom have wisely chosen anonymity. Though it is naturally impossible to say exactly how old or authentic they are. One of them once jokingly said to me – in gauging others they must "smell right". This they certainly do. Seriously though, as but a handful of genuine traditions are in the public eye (although declining an Internet presence) then yes I would say there remains a greater number in the shadows.

M.H: Recently you have been accused of releasing sub-rosa material into the public domain? How do you respond to that allegation?

S.O: This is of course a nonsense and it has no basis whatsoever in fact. John made it quite clear that as inheritor of the tradition, the entire corpus of works pertaining to CTC, including his own and Robert Cochrane's public works, was mine to disclose or develop at my discretion only. No oath binds me otherwise. Moreover, John often remarked how he'd felt himself to be a 'caretaker' for Cochrane's legacy and said it was his belief that it could be finally fulfilled in Robin and myself. He actively encouraged this fruition. This has proved an arduous mantle and responsibility and, with regard to the public obligations of that duty, we will both continue to discuss, as insightfully as possible, all the known and public works of EJJ and RC to ensure the continuity of Cochrane's legacy to the Craft, in which they both gifted so much. Several of my own public works are just a representation of their work, resting upon information they have both chosen to disseminate. It is encouraging that much interest in these works has transpired, but the materials from which they are composed and related to have long been in the public domain. Quite separate from this however, and from these known works, are the private and deservedly secret inner core workings, rites and gnosis of the CTC, which will remain so, and guarded by more than oaths.

M.H: EJJ decided to go public about CTC and Robert Cochrane's tradition in the 1990s through his two books *Witchcraft: A Tradition Renewed* and *Sacred Mask, Sacred Dance* and the various articles he wrote for *The Cauldron*. You have followed in his footsteps by writing articles and giving talks. This has sparked a revival of interest in traditional witchcraft and Cochrane and his tradition and also brought in its wake a lot of problems. In hindsight do you think it was a good idea to go public?

S.O: Here is the nub! There are pros and cons for either remaining hidden and for exposure. When we first inherited the tradition we both shunned publicity, having no desire for recognition. Ironically, we declined all pronouncements to the contrary, and I believe that John had to discreetly inform his colleagues of our appointment – people like Ronald Hutton, Chas S. Clifton, Nigel Jackson, and yourself etc. Now, in hindsight, had our initial public presence been greater then many recent problems could not have occurred. Staying, relatively, low key has therefore exposed us to unfavourable and factionalising elements. So for us, at least as representatives of CTC, a larger and earlier public presence would have been prudent. That said, for my own preference, I would rather John had not gone 'public', but then Robert Cochrane's letters had already been in the public domain for nearly three decades and John wished to reign in the considerable speculation about them. In an early letter to me, John stated that he'd found nobody worthy enough to whom he could hand over everything to and had decided he'd nothing to lose by releasing some information into the public domain and taking the rest with him to his grave, including the name! And of course, had he not written to you at TC then I should not be here, answering this question. Fate is indeed a bizarre mistress!

M.H: EJJ said the fact that a person is not initiated or a member of a covine should not hold them back from worshipping the Old Gods and the Goddess. He also said that if a person is of serious intent they can go out at midnight on the full moon and make their own pledge to the Gods and that has the same validity as a formal oath sworn to a group. Do you agree?

S.O: All oaths, vows, pledges and pacts are valid, serving as they do different purposes. Sincerity before one's maker is of the highest merit and cannot be more so declaimed before human witnesses. Such an act is binding whosoever is present – or not! All acts of magick and worship are intensely personal, be they performed alone or in companie. Initiation 'proper' comes through spirit, however this is manufactured, and is not dependent upon human agency, though commonly this format is preferable for many, feeling that the physical process adds validation. Though I feel it is important to add that initiatory traditions are not about keeping secrets, nor about superiority to non-initiatory traditions. It is about

commitment to a deeper level of work through which access to the Mysteries may be achieved. Consider, for example, the Hindu sage and the dalit (untouchable); one is revered, the other is detested, yet both wear the loincloth of humility before their maker, who it is said recognises the ability within each of them to express the sincerity of their piety. We cannot all be ascetics or mystics, but those who choose to be must make some gesture of deep intent. This is the purpose of initiatory traditions.

M.H: Robert Cochrane was a controversial figure in life and even more so after his premature death in 1966. It has been said that he had a dysfunctional personality and suffered from depression and suicidal tendencies. He was also a trickster who loved playing games with people. Do you think these personality traits had any bearing on the tradition he led and which he left behind?

S.O: For many, the cult of personality has superseded the Work, an issue discussed elsewhere within at least two of my articles. It has been equally stated how profound Robert Cochrane's unprecedented genius was. Undoubtedly, his personality defects activated the disintegration of his coven, which they had also paradoxically created. His strange ambivalence marks his work with a lancet to the heart of Truth. Like other self-destructive souls before him, with the torment comes insight, raw and bleeding. This poignancy inspires others in turn – and do not forget, it was once believed that those who appear mad have been touched by the Gods. All prophets are divinely inspired.

M.H: Cochrane's widow is supposed to have told Doreen Valiente after he committed suicide that Cochrane made up the story about being a hereditary witch from a family tradition. A person who has met members of his family has also said that they were not involved in witchcraft and his critics say that he made it all up. Do you think that Cochrane was a hereditary witch or do you agree with EJJ's view that he had contact as a young man with other genuine practitioners of the Old Craft who taught him the 'secrets'?

S.O: Again, his legacy speaks for itself. His widow and his family may have had valid reasons for these comments, they may even be true. Certainly he'd received teachings from various contacts he had encountered throughout his short life. But he was also a gifted individual who was 'born knowing'. The fire burned brightly within him, dazzling all those who worked with him, and so who can say how he acquired it?

M.H.: Without straying into sub-rosa territory, can you indicate if what CTC practices today is exactly the same, similar or different to the praxis in Cochrane's old covine in the 1960s?

S.O: The core of any tradition remains the same. To survive it must be nurtured. To be strong it must have purpose and focus. These also remain a constant. John Jones desired that we shape CTC according to our needs and views, increasing and feeding the Clan egregore with elements that reflect our own magickal egress. This we have done. However, we have simultaneously explored and incorporated into our practice the founding principles of CTC from the works and known praxes of Robert Cochrane. Unless a tradition is saturated from dogma and bound up on atrophied liturgies some change is inevitable, especially over four decades. Perception, gnosis, occult awareness all move ever forward. There is no going back. We therefore perform the rites, express the form, invoke the force, but we are different and therefore the work is different.

M.H: Following on from the last question. In a letter to the Oxfordshire cunning man Norman Gills, Cochrane described how Lucifer, who he called the 'Angel of Light', appears when invoked. Is there a Luciferian element in the present-day CTC?

S.O: Unreservedly.

M.H: In his book *Witchcraft: A Tradition Renewed*, EJJ described the ritual use of a human skull for spirit contact. At the time some people said this was atavistic and had no part in the modern Craft. What is your view?

S.O: The Craft has always held dear many remnants from the archaic and medieval worlds that offend or make uncomfortable our modern sensibilities. Each tradition or group must therefore decide for themselves the parameters of their working ethic. Mysteries of the oracular head as the inspiration of divine power also involves the exploration of life and death as a cult of revelation of those mysteries. Contained within are the symbols of communion, sexuality, divine wisdom and ascension, all the fundamental praxes of the Craft as promulgated by Robert Cochrane. Hence, the oracular skull is a primary element within particular aspects of sorcery and divination intrinsic to the workings of the cunning traditions of the Old Craft. It is also probably one of the few remaining indigenous traditions (Old and New World practises notwithstanding) to which we may still lay claim. We support the validity of such atavisms within the Craft...some things we may lose along the way, but this should not be one of them.

M.H. Traditionally a witch can curse as well as cure. In his book EJJ said that in the Craft the powers of healing are balanced by the power of cursing. Under what circumstances do you think it is right that a cursing ritual should be performed?

S.O: Healing and cursing are one in truth and both must be cast with equal caution, responsibility and after due consideration of all other available options. John once advised me that mundane matters should be dealt with on this plane by manifest means; matters of spirit equally so. But, if all else fails, then one must make the 'shift' accordingly and be prepared for all the consequences. I have to agree with this. Changing 'fate' for personal reasons, however justified, generates temporary chaos until she (Fate) can pick up her thread and restore equilibrium. The deciding factor is therefore absolutely and crucially subjective. It is about discretion, I suppose, and maturity – when and where to enforce one's will, when and where to attempt control of a situation, when and where to interfere. More than defence or attack, these are the subtleties by which the truly wise are bound. There is no black or white, only intent. No one can say when they would 'feel' this to be right, all we can say for sure is that when the time arrives each of us will 'know' it.

M.H: Some modern witches see the God and Goddess as purely archetypal images or psychological aspects of the human psyche without any separate reality. How do you feel about that rather materialistic view of the deities?

S.O: Jung's collective unconscious theory is now under fire from modern critics, who now consider his archetypes not to be truly 'universal' at all and which are more typically ethnocentrist. This is clearly reflected in folklore, which underpins some witchcraft and folk magick and where the Gods were very 'real' and very separate. Nonetheless, reality itself is a subjective state and so all perceptions of deity exist in one form or another, and may appear tangible on one level of reality, but not another. It could equally be said that we are all products of 'Mind'. Each thought becomes a separate reality, accessible ultimately through the Mysteries. Humankind has always fashioned their Gods in the likeness of themselves; this is a truism, but that still does not make it true. Humans have always explored the dark side of the psyche, where lurks the realms of phantasmagoria. Considered 'illusions' by some, they are all conduits for a source that is pure, untainted by human corruption. Forces of chaos and destruction are not guided by choice or preference. In speculating the nature of the Deity, Philo aptly said: 'True knowledge is to recognise our ignorance – all that we know of God is that we do not know him at all.' All we can do is to make relative statements. However, if we accept that Deity is both immanent and transcendent, that is both within and without, both spirit and matter, then we also have to also finally concede that there is no dualism or polarity,

a unity - more, no less, - the final Mystery, the revelation of the hidden, the dark light within the light - the ultimate paradox is a Truth beyond all comprehension.

M.H: Most Wiccans follow a duotheistic system based on a divine couple - the God and Goddess - yet EJJ talked about the Goddess and the Old Gods. Does that mean that CTC has a polytheistic view of divinity?

S.O: CTC is not polytheistic, nor is it duotheistic. In strict accord with its Traditional Mythos, it follows the principle of a monolatrous practice. This effectively elevates an atavistic presence recognised in the tutelary god -Tubal Cain, with whom the Clan preserves a covenanted relationship. Beyond this singular preference for a mediating entity, we acknowledge the 'Father' and the triune Goddess and other deities of whom 'Tubal' is but one of a choice. Within the Craft of Tubal Cain, Fate as the manifold goddess of life and death and as the controller of 'life in time' is a force understood to be above the Gods.

M.H: What is your concept of Tubal Cain and how do you visualise him?

S.O. Tubal Cain, the 'Hairy One', is a mythical progenitor and benefactor of the human race, heir to an unknown and non-human race, archaic and primal. He is embodied in all things wild and all things tame, he is the master of the animals, yet the tiller of the earth. He forges metal for the corn and killing fields. He the ancestral priest-king imbued with the generative spiritual fire of the Elder Gods, he is the hunter and the hunted, the lover and the beloved. He is the alchemical serpent-king of wisdom and the sacred horned Ur goat of enchantments, might warrior and the champion of the individual, the pioneer, the recluse, the mystic, and the mage.

M.H: Cochrane said explicitly that witches are not pagans, although he did say that the Old Craft does contain elements of the ancient pagan mystery cults. Many modern self-styled traditional witches say they follow a 'pagan nature religion' and are involved in the neo-pagan movement. What do you think about this? In your view is the Traditional Craft 'pagan', a 'nature religion', or even a religion?

S.O: Traditional Craft, as a practising arte, is neither pagan nor religious. Religion is one of humanity's essential traits that distinguishes us from the animal kingdom. We are self-aware and we are aware of Deity. Paganism as a reference to divinity is humanity's natural state; all belief and magickal practice evolves from this fundamental premise. Atheism is not a natural state. Cults are by their nature sectarian; religion is not. Therefore it is perception and not belief that divides us. Perception separates us not only from the rest of humanity as individuals, but from Deity. Mysticism is the driving force within diverse religions that recognises this impedance and which seeks to elevate its adherents beyond these self inflicted boundaries. Truth is above all doctrine, and the Word is received by everyone with ears to hear it. Whether belief takes root in spirituality or religion is bound by magickal praxis and indulged in by the individual practitioner. Mysticism always remains the driving force towards Truth. And there is no religion higher than Truth. Magick is practised within and without the Craft. In fact the essence of all true religion is magick. In magickal terms the priest and the magus are one.

M.H: EJJ told me that after his death Robert Cochrane became one of the 'Hidden Company', those discarnated witches who elect to stay close to the earth plane to guide and teach. Also Some of those modern groups and individuals who are working the Cochrane tradition outside CTC say they have direct spirit contact with him as an 'ancestral spirit'. What do you think about such claims?

S.O: Robert Cochrane's discarnate form is indeed one among the 'Hidden Company' and is accessible to all seekers as a guiding principle. Death has oft been quoted as the 'universal leveller' and here it appears to be so. There are but few known spirits to whom we may call

upon and so to identify with his class of genius is a gift indeed. Such a guide is to be welcomed, yet caution prevails – he was ever the trickster!

M.H: You have said that the ethical standards of the Traditional Craft are judged by those of CTC. Can you explain what exactly you meant by that comment?

S.O: Any known body working or having a presence in public has an unwritten obligation to adhere to a particular 'code of ethics' that determines conduct, values, responsibility, behaviour and honour. These principles are self-aware and engender a professional etiquette and protocols by which others may model themselves. It presents an unspoken 'ideal' – rules of conduct transmitting justice and truth via acceptable means. It is the 'rightness' of things in accord with all aspirative arts and which ultimately determines our worth. How we act is how we are judged. We are expected to lead by example – if we err then others will follow. Even pirates and thieves were known to possess similar codes of practise for example – each determining accepted and expected behaviour among their own kind. Once broken, chaos ensues.

M.H: As you belonged to a Gardnerian coven before you joined CTC, do you think that neo-pagan Wicca and the Traditional Craft can be reconciled or are the differences between them too great to overcome? Should it even be attempted, as the late Andrew Chumbley used to say that traditional witchcraft has absolutely nothing to do with modern Wicca?

S.O: No-paganism, Wicca and Traditional Craft are as distinct from each other as they are from the other faiths, beliefs and religions. As they are not from the same root, they may not be reconciled. However, this does not mean they should not be tolerant or respectful to and of each other. This is not to advocate interfaith, which is an entirely different paradigm, but to accept without prejudice our differences, rather than seeking similarities. Traditional Craft has its roots in the post-witch-craze resurgence of the cunning folk traditions and folk magicks of the mid-1700s, a gritty and pragmatic craft at the popular level. Neo-paganism, conversely, was a middle-class, intellectual revival born of the Romantic Movement from around the same period. Wicca attempted to merge both paradigms in the mid-20th century, and all three have diverged yet further in principle if not in practice.

M.H: Have you any plans to write books yourself?

S.O: Yes, that is with all good intentions, of course. The Clan keeps me extremely busy and so things move more slowly than I should like. Currently, I have two books in working progress. The first of these is a compilation of my numerous articles, edited, revised and supplemented by a contextual Clan history and this will hopefully be ready by Yule 2008. The second book is a quasi-academic study of the 'Witches' Sabbat'.

M.H: How do you see CTC developing and evolving in the future?

S.O: CTC is growing exponentially, particularly over recent years. We remain a withdrawn group, an essential core whose evolution will traverse a tangential path to its marginal public face, where in we may be free to converse, share and stimulate the continuance of a vital aspect of indigenous folk and Craft traditions. It is hoped that it will continue to be a small beacon of hope for seekers of the Truth, and an inspiration for those who walk the path of One. In this our intent incurs with that of Robert Cochrane, who fiercely proclaimed this need to preserve, develop and expand the British Mysteries. Even so, they must of necessity evolve in accord with our ever-increasing awareness of ourselves as a divinely enhanced species within an ever expanding multiverse of realities and possibilities.

M.H: Following on from the previous question; how do you think the Traditional Craft will develop in the next five to ten years and what do you see as its benefits (if any) for our modern society?

S.O: Modern society suffers from a severe deficit of integrity, spirituality, reality, responsibility, and self-reliance. These are strengths fundamental to all Traditional Craft ethics that, if allowed to flourish, could inadvertently influence some areas of our society. However, I foresee two strands of influence over the next decade. One will retreat further into the shadows I feel in order to protect those ethics, even as another will rise to consume the public image of the Craft. Never the twain shall meet. The underground stream knows how to conceal itself from polluting or arid forces. The interest in traditional forms of witchcraft, folk customs and archaic beliefs and operative systems will continue to grow on both levels, returning once again to the esoteric and the esoteric forms once associated with this paradigm. The Old Craft has survived war, famine, pestilence, intolerance and persecution. It can probably survive the 21st century too.

M.H: Thank you for taking part in this interview and answering our questions in such a comprehensive and candid manner. I am sure it has helped our readers to more fully understand the Clan of Tubal Cain, the Cochrane tradition and modern Traditional Craft in general.

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Evan John Jones with Shani Oates