

Book Reviews

The Compass of Light, Vol. III: The Sense of Direction in The Great Invocation, by Starling David Hunter, III. 144 pages.

Download from <http://tinyurl.com/thegreatinvocation/>.

More than half a century has passed since the Great Invocation was given to the world as the prayer and mantra for the new world religion—a religion of self–forgetfulness, harmlessness, and service. The three Divine aspects that this prayer’s words refer to—Light, Love, and Power—are nowadays invoked solemnly all over the world by millions of human beings from all paths of life who use it as their daily source of inspiration, force, and horizon.

Undoubtedly, the Great Invocation is for many a compass giving a sense of direction to our human and spiritual lives. Such is precisely the central, significant discovery that the author makes in *The Compass of Light, Volume III*. This is the latest sequel in a series of books released yearly since 2006. The reader may remember that volume I, which was reviewed in *The Esoteric Quarterly* in Winter 2007, analyzed 24 figures of speech (addition, omission, and change). Volume II studied the etymology of each word used in the Invocation and demonstrated that many of them were either related by, or shared, the same roots. These first two volumes nicely demonstrated that the Great Invocation expresses—and veils—a potentially infinite number of meanings and powers. With his first research work, the author concludes that this multiplicity of meanings is achieved with such sophistication, and in such a condensed yet perfect fashion, that we may have only begun to unfold the tremendous implications of reciting this Invocation. In this new volume, Hunter goes further into the Tibetan’s exhortation to meditate on the significance of the Great Invocation’s “amazing” words, and suggests three conclusions. First, the main underlying, abstract idea is indeed embodied in the wording of the Invocation and can be accessed with study and medita-

tion. Second, the formula of the Invocation embodies the sense of *direction*. Third, its symbol is a compass composed of light.

When interviewed, Hunter clarified that this is an ongoing project that will comprise, in total, five volumes. The fourth volume will address the matter of polysemy and sentence structure, while the fifth volume will examine the strictly grammatical properties of the Invocation. Further, Hunter has already written more than twenty essays on the Great Invocation, which are accessible through the webpage.

Clearly, the implications of Hunter’s fine study are multiple. Chief among them is polysemy itself, or the capacity of words to have multiple meanings. In social sciences and the humanities, this has been a central, indeed revolutionary, concept behind every single contemporary research paradigm. It implies the idea that human beings have agency, or the power to read and remake the meaning of every event or circumstance affecting us. The Great Invocation may, therefore, be read as an invitation to meditate upon, evoke, re-create, and distribute all of its related and meaningful forms for the purpose of serving the world.

We are told that the Great Invocation is recited by aspirants, disciples, Initiates, Masters, and even the Christ, and that it means different things to each group. In fact, a second conclusion of the book is that this Invocation is indeed a divine masterpiece, of such perfection and complexity that no human mind could indeed completely unfold it in one lifetime. A third conclusion, related to the previous one, is that the wording of the Invocation should not be changed. The reader is, in this regard, invited to read the fine perspectives Hunter has to offer regarding the thorny subject of translations and rewording of the Great Invocation. A final, yet crucial, conclusion is that this Invocation strongly reorients the human Soul. This is a true compass of Light Divine showing us the right

direction. A fine, thorough, and scientific study no student of the Ageless Wisdom should miss.

Miguel Malagrecá

***The Magus of Freemasonry*, by Tobias Churton.** Inner Traditions, 2006. Paperback, 303 pages. US\$16.95.

By the end of the 17th century, the Royal Society of London was already a bastion of reductionist science, insisting on rigorous application of the scientific method and the highest standards of empirical support for scientific theory. For the past 300 years the Society's fellows, individually and sometimes collectively, have thundered against "superstition" and "pseudoscience"—notably esotericism. However, such restrictive attitudes were rare when the Royal Society was first established, in 1660. Indeed, the founding fellows included men who represented the epitome of Renaissance "natural philosophy," comfortably combining mathematics or the hard sciences with magic, alchemy, and astrology.

One of those founding fellows was Elias Ashmole, whose biography is the subject of this review. In *The Magus of Freemasonry*, Churton gives us a delightful portrait of a man whose mindset spanned the ages. Professionally, Ashmole was a lawyer and antiquarian. He amassed a huge collection of historical artifacts, now housed at the museum named for him in Oxford—the first public museum in the world. But his greater passion was esoteric studies. The numerous letters he wrote to associates and his detailed diary entries provide invaluable insights into the life of a man of affairs in the 17th century.

Churton traces Ashmole's growth from an unhappy childhood through his studies at Oxford University to his legal practice in the Middle Temple in London. A staunch royalist, Ashmole fought in the English Civil War on the side of the ill-fated King Charles I. Between skirmishes he read works in mathematics and physics, and these interests led to a lifelong fascination with astrology and alchemy. In 1646 he became a Freemason, at a time when operative, craft Ma-

sonry was slowly giving way to modern speculative Masonry. A diary entry and his "acceptance" certificate, issued by a lodge in Warrington, Lancashire, provide one of the earliest records of speculative Masonic activity in England. He sought to join the Fraternity of the Rose Cross but, like other seekers, was unable to locate them. In 1669, Ashmole received a Doctorate in Medicine from Oxford.

Elias Ashmole's difficult childhood and the political turmoil of his young adult life left a permanent mark, at least indirectly helping to mold his esoteric interests. Moreover, his interest in alchemy—shared by many other prominent people in the 16th and 17th centuries—is well placed by the author in the context of the religious and philosophical movements of the times.

Ashmole knew that success in the alchemical quest—however that was to be defined—demanded moral purity, and he was conscious of his own lapses. He also believed that discovering the Philosopher's Stone was an initiatory secret, passed on from generation to generation in an unbroken lineage. In 1651 he entered into a master-disciple relationship with one William Backhouse, whom he subsequently referred to as "Father." The following year he published his most famous work, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, an extensive compilation of English alchemical texts. Whether Ashmole achieved the "Great Work" is not known; his commitment to secrecy would have precluded any acknowledgement of success—or failure. What we do know is that, from poor origins, he became a wealthy man and generous benefactor to Oxford University and his hometown of Lichfield.

The Magus of Freemasonry, written in a fast-moving journalistic style, is a rare page-turner among biographies. Churton has brought to well-deserved prominence a gentlemen-scholar who made a considerable contribution to 17th-century esotericism. The book is strongly recommended to anyone interested in the history of the western esoteric tradition.

John F. Nash
Johnson City, Tennessee

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