

Book Review

Dion Fortune & the Inner Light, by Gareth Knight. Loughborough, Leicestershire, U.K.: Thoth Publications, 2000. Paperback, 344 pages. US\$29.95.

Dion Fortune was one of the most enigmatic figures of 20th-century western esotericism. Many of us studied *The Mystical Qabalah* (1935) or were fascinated by the vivid imagery of her occult novels. But who or what she was, remained largely a mystery until Gareth Knight published the biography, which is the subject of this review.

Fortune's real name was Violet Mary Firth, and she was born in 1890 in Llandudno, Wales, the daughter of upper middle class parents who embraced Christian Science. Violet was an imaginative, headstrong child, given to daydreaming of far-away, magical places. When she was 20 her parents enrolled her in a women's residential college that specialized in horticulture. In addition to caring for the college's poultry, she began writing plays for the students to perform. Firth left the college after an emotionally devastating encounter with the domineering warden. In an attempt to understand her trauma she briefly studied psychotherapy, but the outbreak of World War I brought those studies to an end. She was drafted into agricultural work before securing a more congenial government job in London. There she discovered the library of the Theosophical Society and the works of Annie Besant.

Firth's intuitive gifts were evident from a young age, but came to full bloom when she was 26. Her first esoteric teacher was Dr. Theodore Moriarty who became "Dr. Taverner" in one of her most successful novels. In 1919 she was initiated into the Alpha et Omega Lodge of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The lodge was headed by Moina Mathers, widow of MacGregor Mathers, autocratic co-founder of the original

Golden Dawn. Firth's initiatory name was *Deo non fortuna* ("[Trust in] God, not luck"), which evolved into the pseudonym, "Dion Fortune," she used for the rest of her life. Her relationship with Moina Mathers deteriorated, and the latter allegedly mounted a violent occult attack on Firth/Fortune, leaving her with physical scars. Nevertheless, the training in the rituals of the Golden Dawn laid the groundwork for Fortune's Hermetic work in her own organization, the Fraternity of the Inner Light.

The Fraternity provided Dion Fortune's principal base of operation from 1927 until her death in 1946. The greater part of its activities was ceremonial in nature, with a pre-Christian focus. Fortune developed the Rite of Pan and the Rite of Isis, both of which are described in her novels. The Fraternity offered in-house training with graded initiatory levels resembling those of the Golden Dawn. Although others rose through the grades, Fortune retained the leadership role, serving as magus in the most important rituals of the Greater Mysteries. Correspondence courses offered training in the Lesser Mysteries. The Fraternity also had an esoteric Christian agenda, which was derived from the work of the Christian Mystic Lodge of the Theosophical Society. Eventually the Christian practices, which included regular Sunday services, were moved to a separate organization, the Guild of the Master Jesus, later renamed the Church of the Graal. Fortune always viewed Jesus Christ as the master of masters, but esoteric Christianity was not her main interest.

In addition to her ritual work Fortune was a gifted medium, though she spurned popular spiritualism. Viewing herself as a "cosmic medium," she focused on channeling teachers from the inner planes. The teachers sometimes identified themselves as masters: for example the "Master of Medicine." More frequently they gave their names, and we find "Socrates," "Lord Thomas Erskine," and "David Car-

stairs.” At least the first two were well-known historical figures, but Dion Fortune warned that one could never be totally sure who the contacts were. Her biographer comments:

These are the principal agencies behind Dion Fortune’s mediumship. Whether their identities be taken at face value, or regarded as convenient stage names for archetypal models, or complexes from the medium’s subconscious, can only be speculative theories. [p. 88]

Israel Regardie, who also came from the Golden Dawn tradition and who wrote influential books on ritual, became scornful of the whole notion of channeling the masters. In later life he treated all occult work as being confined to the individual’s own psyche.

No matter where the teachings came from, Dion Fortune used them as the basis for *The Cosmic Doctrine*, *The Esoteric Orders and Their Work*, *The Training and Work of an Initiate*, and other books. She also wrote numerous articles, which appeared in her organization’s journal, *Inner Light Magazine*.

Initially Fortune’s mediumistic work was conducted in conventional trance. Two or more collaborators recorded the communications while she lay on a couch. But over time, she gradually acquired powers of telepathy that enabled her to receive information in waking consciousness. That was how *The Mystical Qabalah* came to be written:

I would be sitting in my accustomed chair, conscious of the sounds of the house, the touch of the clothes on my limbs, and all that makes up the total impressions that keep us in touch with the external world... Then I would commence my mental rehearsal of the sacred names, and would suddenly find that I was aware of mental pictures only, to the entire exclusion of physical sense impressions. Nevertheless I retained full co-ordination of consciousness, for I knew that I was conscious of the pictures and that the physical impressions would return unless I maintained my concentration on the images ... and did not allow [my consciousness] to wander. [p. 213]

Dion Fortune’s life can be compared and contrasted with that of Alice Bailey. They were born within 70 miles of each other. Bailey was 10 years Fortune’s senior but outlived her by three years. Both had early contacts with the Theosophical Society, and both went on to form their own training organizations. Both wrote books based on information from higher sources. Both married men who collaborated in their esoteric work. Dion Fortune married physician Dr. Penry Evans, who worked for a time with the Master of Medicine, though the marriage eventually ended in divorce. Bailey married Foster Bailey who was her dedicated co-worker for more than 30 years and continued the work of the Lucis Trust after her death.

Their ray influences evidently were not the same. Bailey emphasized teaching and discipleship, while Fortune emphasized teaching and ceremonial ritual. The Golden Dawn tradition included some unsavory characters, and some of its work strayed off the right-hand path. Dion Fortune was never accused of occult misconduct, and in personal and professional life she conducted herself with propriety. Nevertheless, critics might feel that Fortune was tainted by her associations. No doubt students of Alice Bailey would also see a distinction between Bailey’s work as amanuensis for the Tibetan and Fortune’s mediumistic work with the inner-plane teachers. The content of *The Cosmic Doctrine* is not incompatible with Bailey’s teachings, but the latter are much more extensive and on a higher spiritual level.

Be that as it may, Dion Fortune played a significant role in modern esotericism, and we are indebted to Gareth Knight for this intriguing biography. Knight was inducted into the Fraternity in 1953, seven years after Fortune’s death. Despite the fact that they never met, he is often regarded as her protégé. His *Guide to Practical Qabalistic Symbolism* (1965) formed a continuation of *The Mystical Qabalah*. In 1998 he returned to the Fraternity, after many years, to edit and republish several of her other books and to conduct research in its archives. The biography is an important product of that research.

Dion Fortune & the Inner Light is enthusiastically recommended to anyone interested in the western esoteric tradition and in the colorful individuals who contributed to it over the last 100 years.

John Nash
Johnson City, Tennessee

Creating a World Without Poverty: Social Business and the Future of Capitalism, by Muhammad Yunus. Public Affairs paperback (second edition), 2007. 261 pages.

Most people know of Muhammad Yunus as the founder of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, the originator of the concept of microcredit as a means of fighting poverty, and as the winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize (along with Grameen Bank) for this successful and innovative solution to one of the world's most devastating problems. What this book reveals is that Grameen Bank is only the tip of the iceberg; Yunus shows how the same principles can eliminate all poverty worldwide if people have the will to implement his proven techniques. The practicality and common sense behind his arguments make one want to slap the forehead and exclaim, "Why didn't I think of that?!"

Capitalism has often been blamed for creating and promoting the poverty that plagues half the world's population. Yunus gives a colorful account of his early struggles against "the system" when he was trying, in the 1970s to establish a bank-sponsored credit union for the poor so that they could begin to lift themselves out of poverty. But no bank would participate, as they did not consider the poor a good credit risk. Thus Grameen (meaning "Village") Bank was born in 1983 and became the world's first "social business." Yunus defines the term *social business* as a regular business in every respect, except that the owners and investors do not receive dividends. Those go back into the business; that way prices can be kept low enough to be within reach of the very poor. Social business is opposed to "profit-maximized business," the only currently accepted model in the view of the business world.

Since the beginnings of Grameen Bank, Yunus and his partners have been developing social businesses under the umbrella of "The Grameen Family of Companies." By now this includes more than 25 different businesses, all owned by the poor of Bangladesh; they include Grameen Telecom, Grameen Knitwear, Grameen Healthcare, Grameen Star Education, and so on. By means of these and other businesses, many thousands of poor people, most of whom are women (Grameen's activities are targeted at the most disenfranchised segment of the population) have raised themselves and their families above the poverty line. Credit risk? More than 99% of the microloans are repaid on time.

Part of the book is devoted to the interesting story of how the concept of social business "went international." In 2005, the CEO of the French corporation Groupe Danone, which owns Dannon Yogurt, expressed an interest in co-founding a social business with Yunus. The result was the establishment of Grameen Danone in 2007, which supplies vitamin-fortified yogurt to the malnourished poor all over Bangladesh for pennies a cup. This business, like all social businesses, is designed to make a profit and to be financially independent of the parent corporation. The company's concern with reducing waste and improving the product has led to the invention of "edible cups," along the lines of ice cream cones.

Yunus postulates that capitalism today is a "half-developed structure." This is because the businessperson is, in the current model, a one-dimensional being, dedicated to one mission only—to maximize profit. All fulfillment, growth, and the solution of the world's problems will naturally result from maximized profit.

But this is obviously not the case, as the richest entrepreneurs of the past and present have demonstrated by turning away from the game of profit and establishing foundations in order to make their greatest contributions. Certainly foundations help in dealing with poverty issues, but the size and depth of the problem dwarfs the amount of money available—money that needs to be renewed through investment and donations.