

A.E. WAITE: REVOLUTIONARY MARTINIST

By Frater I.D.V.A.

You will all know of Waite as the author of the *Unknown Philosopher: The Life of Louis Claude de Saint-Martin* (1901), the first and still the best study of Saint-Martin in English. What you may not be aware of is Waite's involvement with the Martinist Order, or his own Order of the Unknown Philosopher. Your ignorance of these things will be quite understandable, for Waite ensured that neither of these activities was ever made known to the world at large.

He first encountered Louis Claude de Saint-Martin in 1877, when he bought – for one penny ! – an uncut copy of *Le Tableau Naturel*. At first he could make nothing of Saint-Martin's work, but after he had found a copy of the English translation of the *Theosophic Correspondence*, between Saint-Martin and Baron Kirchberger, there came understanding and delight. It was, he wrote, 'the loveliest book of letters which I had ever seen'.¹ And, having discovered Saint-Martin, Waite set out to find everything else that he had written, an exercise that became a twenty-year quest, culminating in his admission into the Martinist Order and in own biographical and critical study of 1901.²

In the course of this quest, Waite gained a very full appreciation of Saint-Martin's doctrines, and was eager to share his enthusiasm for this 'grandest of the French mystics'. He set out his personal view of Saint-Martin in 1893, in his book, *Azoth; or, The Star in the East*. (1893), the proper title of which is, *A New Light of Mysticism*. Aspiring mystics who 'become absorbed in the interior life, like Saint-Martin', he notes, have 'entered upon the way of life and benediction' (p20), for – and here he quotes Saint-Martin – 'there is not a man in possession of his true self, for whom the temporal universe is not a great allegory or parable which must give place to a grand allegory'. Thus for Waite, who was at that time absorbed in Spiritualism also,

The spiritual mind which has been illuminated even by purely external transcendental experience, and by such phenomenal testimony as can be obtained from the world of

¹ A.E. Waite, *Shadows of Life and Thought. A Retrospective Review in the Form of Memoirs*. 1938 p147. This translation, by Edward Burton Penny, appeared in 1863.

² *The Life of Louis Claude de Saint-Martin the Unknown Philosopher and the Substance of his Transcendental Doctrine*. Philip Wellby, 1901

the departed, will incline to the dictum of the Mystic. Now, as the doctrine enunciated by St. Martin is a fundamental philosophy which is common to all the Mystics, its acceptance is the first step towards becoming a Mystic. (p28)

Waite is here referring specifically to Christian Mysticism, although he was fully aware of Saint-Martin's unusual and unorthodox manner of setting out the path of the Christian mystic. Many years later, after his own spiritual path had led him, for a time, away from Saint-Martin and into his own, highly individual form of Rosicrucianism, Waite would write,

The Christ-Life is represented by Saint-Martin as a new life conceived and born within us. It was also - as in other witnesses - a restoration of that which had been lost by man when he passed into his fallen estate.³

It is thus clear that Waite espoused Saint-Martin's doctrines of regeneration and reintegration, and saw them as the crux of the Mystic Way. But whereas Saint-Martin had come to reject: the use of ritual and ceremonial to awaken the mystic consciousness in man, Waite eagerly embraced it – after a fashion.

Waite was a lapsed Catholic, who had served as an altar boy and was not only familiar with the ceremonial splendour of the Roman liturgy, but also adept in its performance. When he entered the world of esoteric ritual, with his initiation in January 1891 into the Isis-Urania Temple of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn⁴, he fitted easily, naturally and gladly into the practical progression of the Order's ceremonial Grades. But all the while that Waite was following the kabbalistic system of the Golden Dawn he did not neglect Saint-Martin.

By the mid 1890s Waite was editing a new esoteric journal, *The Unknown World*, 'a Magazine devoted to the Occult Sciences, Magic, Mystical Philosophy' and much else. In the issue for November 1894, there is a brief essay on Saint-Martin, written by Waite himself. It is an objective essay, but not uncritical. Waite praises Saint-Martin as 'the true seer' among the mystics of the French Revolution, yet he also notes that Saint-Martin 'founded that peculiar school of Gallic illumination whereof the Martinist rite of Freemasonry still presents a phantom pageant.' For a potential member of the Martinist Order, this was not quite the attitude that one might reasonably expect. And yet within two years both Papus and John

³ The way of Divine Union (1915) p178

⁴ Within the Golden Dawn, Waite's motto was *Sacramentum Regis Abscondere Bonum Est*. He was the 99th member of the Order to sign the Roll.

Yarker, who was his English representative, owed Waite a debt of gratitude and treated him with great respect.

The catalyst was the Leo Taxil affair – in which a mischievous French journalist, Gabriel Jogand-Page (‘Leo Taxil’ was his pseudonym) perpetrated a marvellous hoax. Taxil invented a mythical Satanic-Masonic Order, the Palladium, that was engaged in the wholesale corruption of morals, trafficking with demons, and undermining of the Roman Church. Taxil’s marvellous fictions were peddled by way of his monthly publications, in which – not content with pandering to the fears and prejudices of the credulous Catholic hierarchy, and enraging the pompous and self-satisfied French masons – Taxil also attacked English Freemasonry, especially its fringe degrees, *and* the Martinist Order.

The great defender of these bodies in England was A.E. Waite. At the time he was neither a mason nor a Martinist, but he was incensed by the injustice of the whole affair, and set out, with great success, to demolish Taxil’s nonsense, by mounting robust attacks upon it, in the course of essays in the journal *Light*, and through his book *Having exposed Taxil as a liar, and the Church as being criminally credulous*, Waite praised Papus for ‘his share in the unveiling of the great Palladian imposture’⁵, and for his magnanimity, because he is a man, who, ‘with the generosity of a mystic, can only speak well of the pious enthusiast [Jules Doinel] who has betrayed his cause and scandalised the school he represents’.⁶ And not only Papus was cleansed of Taxil’s smears: Waite also exposed the fantasies printed about John Yarker and his various rites and Orders for the lies that they were. The two men were not slow in repaying their debt to Waite.

Yarker published fulsome reviews of *Devil-Worship in France*, describing the book as ‘critical, scholarly and dispassionate’ and writing of Waite that, ‘though [he is] a non-Mason, [Freemasonry] has fallen into good hands, and owes him some gratitude.’⁷ Yarker, who at that time had begun actively to propagate the Martinist Order in Britain, showed his gratitude by beginning a correspondence with Waite that would lead to his reception within it.

⁵ See Waite’s review of the English translation of *The Tarot of the Bohemians* (*Light*, 8 August 1896).

⁶ *Devil-Worship in France* (1896), p185

⁷ See review in *The Freemason*, 31 October 1896, and Yarker’s article on ‘Freemasonry and Devil-Worship’, *The Freemason’s Chronicle*, 14 November 1896, from which this quotation is taken.

The earliest surviving letter is from Yarker⁸. In this he tells Waite how he can become a Martinist:

I found an objection in the *Masonic* branch of the Order of St. Martin to receive a non-Mason, and I have no doubt it would be found inconvenient both to you and them. however that need not interfere with my conferring the Order upon you as I had it myself from a non-Mason, the Baron Surdi of Prague. The Ritual is properly in 4 books - I enclose you the first, and you need only send me a short note that you Conform yourself entirely to carry out the OB When you have copied this [ritual] and returned [it] to me, I will send you the second, and so then the third - of course with your short obligation ... You can then proceed on your own account to form a non-masonic branch, and when you have done something I daresay you might get a Charter from "Papus", for a London body.

Waite accepted all of these conditions and thanked Yarker,

most cordially for the honour which you have done me in conferring upon me the Order of St. Martin. The fact that I am not a Mason makes that honour somewhat exceptional, and I cannot but value it the more highly in consequence. I entirely conform to the obligation required of the candidate, and I hereby pledge myself never to reveal the name of my Initiator to any body or to make it public in what manner soever. I have read with great interest and have carefully transcribed the MS. containing the first two books of the Ritual, and I return it herewith. I shall look forward to the receipt of the third. I trust that I shall prove useful, as I shall certainly endeavour to be active, in the diffusion of the Order among occult students who are not Masons.⁹

Waite was true to his Obligation and never revealed Yarker's name as his initiator, and he did live up to his promise of diffusing the Order, although not until many years later. As it happened, this was rather more than Yarker achieved, for the whole of Yarker's Martinist activities seem to have been conducted by post. His Lodge at Manchester, which had been chartered by Papus as No. 45, had members scattered about the country, but there is no evidence that they ever met as a body. Two years later, in September 1899, Yarker established

⁸ 30 January 1897, in reply to Waite's letter of 22 January.

⁹ Letter of 5 February 1897. Yarker's letter was formerly in the possession of Geoffrey Watkins, from whom it passed to his son. Waite's letter is in my possession.

a Grand Council for England. This body had the sanction of the Supreme Council of the Martinist Rite at Paris, but again, it seems never to have met.¹⁰

In the absence of any practical activity Waite promoted Martinist doctrines through his writing. His comprehensive study of Saint-Martin and his work, *The Life of Louis Claude de Saint-Martin, the Unknown Philosopher, and the substance of his Transcendental Doctrine*, which was the first English work on Saint-Martin, appeared in 1901 and Waite sent a copy to Papus, who was duly impressed and wrote a glowing review for *L'Initiation*. For Waite the surprise came in the tail: 'Aussi adressons-nous toutes nos felicitations a M. A.-E. Waite qui a été nommé docteur en hermétisme (*ad honorem*) par son beau travail.'

They had already corresponded about the hermetic doctorate in May 1901, when Papus asked Waite for a second copy of the book (perhaps for Sedir, who heaped further praise upon it in *L'Initiation* in the course of his article, 'L'Homme de Desir'). Waite was delighted that Papus approved of the book and pleased to receive the doctorate, as he told Papus in his letter of 25 May:

I learned with very sincere satisfaction that you had formed a good opinion of the book. There is no opinion that I could hold in such high estimation as you have every means of knowing and have done such admirable work yourself in the same direction. Please accept my best thanks for your kind offer to obtain for me the degree of Doctor from the Ecole Hermetique. I shall value the distinction highly. I trust also that my application to be admitted by the Ordre Kabbalistique de la Rose + will be successful through your generous help. Thank you also for your promise to send me your review of St. Martin which I should much like to see.¹¹

The review duly arrived, as did the Diploma, but Waite was not admitted to the Ordre Kabbalistique de la Rose +. This was not because Waite's Martinist and Rosicrucian credentials were suspect – after all, he was an Adept in the R.R. et A.C., and in 1899 Papus had conferred upon him the degree of S.I.. and made him an 'Initiateur Libre' – but almost certainly because of a looming rift in the fabric of Martinism.

¹⁰ Yarker's members included Westcott, Frederick Holland, Ferdinand Schnitger, R.S. Brown, and George Dickson, all of whom were prominent in esoteric and fringe masonic circles.

Papus was not alone in praising the book; G.R.S. Mead recommended it unhesitatingly, but pointed out that Waite was,

opposed, though courteously, to the view of the present Neo-Martinist groups in France, and looks to the permanent value of the transcendentalism of the “Unknown Philosopher”, rather than to the transient and questionable processes that may in early life have occupied Saint-Martin’s attention, under the powerful influence of Martinez de Pasqualez and his physical methods.¹²

Mead omitted to mention Waite’s subtle suggestion that he was more reliable as a scholar than was Papus, and that his readers should ‘bear in mind that upon historical questions the criterion of evidence is not invariably so rigorous in France as it is in England’¹³

The real question to be addressed, however, is why Waite should have turned against Martinist ceremonial at a time when he was becoming increasingly active in practical esoteric work. In 1901 he had been initiated into Freemasonry and within a very few years he was variously, and rapidly, exalted, advanced, admitted, installed and received into a wide range of masonic and quasi-masonic Orders, and had taken control of the larger part of the Golden Dawn. This was not for the sake of collecting degrees, but always with a greater goal in sight. To understand what that goal was we must look at Waite’s concept of what he called the ‘Secret Tradition’.

It is exemplified in his Independent and Rectified Rite of the Golden Dawn. This new rite differed from the original Golden Dawn, and from Felkin’s *Stella Matutina*, in that it eschewed practical magic and emphasised the essential Christian, Rosicrucian ethos of the Order. This approach was wholly consistent with Waite’s metaphysical world-view - his concept of the ‘Secret Tradition’, which he defined as, ‘the immemorial knowledge concerning man’s way of return whence he came by a method of the inward life’. Martinism had an obvious and powerful resonance with Waite’s ‘Secret Tradition’, which contained both ‘the memorials of a loss which has befallen humanity; and ... the records of a restitution in respect of that which was lost’. Moreover, the keepers of this tradition ‘perpetuated it in secret by means of Instituted Mysteries and cryptic literature’, and whatever their form these Mysteries invariably testify to,

¹¹ The original of this letter is in the municipal archives at Lyons. A copy was kindly provided for me through the good offices of the Revd. Robert Amadou.

¹² *The Theosophical Review*, 15 June 1901, p377

- (a) the aeonian nature of the loss
- (b) the certitude of an ultimate restoration in respect of that which was lost,
- (c) the perpetuity of its existence somewhere in time and the world although interned deeply
- (d) and more rarely its substantial presence under veils close to the hands of all.

In his published books and articles Waite was happy to define and describe the Secret Tradition, but the spiritual practices which would give access to its 'substantial presence' were reserved for the members of the rites and Orders that he directed, controlled or supported through a 'Secret Council of Rites'¹⁴ that he had set up for just such a purpose.

He had also by this time broken with Papus, although he maintained a personal affection for him, on the advice of Edouard Blitz, the head of the 'American Rectified Martinist Order'. Blitz had himself separated from Papus, after a very public row, because of growing disquiet in French masonic circles about the quasi-masonic activities of *L'Ordre Martiniste*. Waite had not, however, broken with Martinism.

The aim of Waite's Secret Council of Rites was the 'stimulation and nourishment of Mystic Aspiration, more especially in Freemasonry, towards the Great Work of Reintegration with the Centre, or Union with the Divine as the Supreme End of all research', and even though his Council was supposedly secret, Waite ensured that it would avoid any masonic censure by deliberately excluding 'any identification with social or political movements'. There were eleven specified 'Rectified Occult Orders and Masonic Rites', each of which was assigned to one of the Sephiroth (including Daath) on the Tree of Life. First among them was 'The Independent and Rectified Rite of Martinism', which was 'referred to Malkuth', and which was designed to 'act as a drag net for all the Rites, but especially for those of the Central Pillar'. This may have been the design, but no-one of either sex was caught in this drag net until it was activated twenty years later.

¹³ *The Life of Louis Claude de Saint-Martin*, p459

¹⁴ The Secret Council of Rites consisted only of Waite, M.W. Blackden and Robert Palmer Thomas. It was 'constituted on December 2nd, 1902', but did not draw up a formal constitution¹⁴ until the following May. Its crowning glory was the *Regime Ecossais et Rectifie* which Waite had entered at Geneva early in 1903, when he had been received as a *Chevalier Bienfaisant de la Cite Sainte*.

But Waite did begin to construct rituals for the Independent and Rectified Rite of Martinism. To each of these rituals he added preliminary notes that set out his own version of the history and purpose of Martinism in general and of his own Rite in particular. The legitimacy of the Rectified Rite is explained thus in the notes to the First Degree.

‘The Rectified Rite of Martinism derives from an earlier French Rite which was one of considerable activity and consequence in the country of its origin and had several important centres in different parts of the world. It so derives by a two fold method of succession: firstly, by direct initiation and affiliation with all the degrees through an autonomous English centre, in accordance with the mode of diffusion originally practised by the Order. In virtue of this affiliation the Supreme Superior of the Rectified Rite of Martinism has full and complete power to confer at his absolute discretion all degrees of the Rite: secondly, the Supreme Superior, governing from within the Headship, possesses a Charter of Transmission from the Supreme Council of the Martinist Order in France, with power to confer the Degrees outside all conditions and qualifications other than the fundamental Laws which at that time ruled the whole Order. The succession of the Rectified Rite of Martinism is therefore above dispute, and it is necessary to establish this facts, firstly, because the Order in England is not only autonomous but has long since severed official connection with the Governing Body in France, and, secondly, because the Degrees of the Order in England are worked by the present Headship in a manner peculiar to itself, while the Rectified Order [*sic*] is further governed by certain special Laws which are binding upon the members whom it affiliates. It is for these reasons that the Order is termed in England the Rectified Rite of Martinism’.

The introductory note concludes with a statement of the aims of the Rectified Rite:

In perpetuating the name of Martinism it remembers only that the distinguished French mystic was dedicated like itself to the highest object of research, being study and realisation of the correspondences between God, man and the universe, in the unity of inward being.

The nature of the three Degrees that comprise the Rite are explained as follows:

The First Degree is one of Dedication, and it is conferred, symbolically speaking, as if within the Porch of the Temple. The Second Degree is a Ritual of Entrance or Ceremony of the Threshold: it takes place - also symbolically - within the Doors of the Temple. The Third Degree involves an Art of Delegation or of Warrant, connected with a special Act of Consecration. It is in the nature of a sacred licence which gives

powers for the diffusion of the Order by the constitution of fresh centres of Initiation under the obedience of a Secret Council of Rites.

Waite's Secret Council of Rites finally materialised in 1922, at a time when he was again promoting saint-Martin in public.¹⁵ The Independent and Rectified Rite of Martinism was again presented as 'a "drag-net" for all Rites and Degrees under control of the S .: C .: R .: ', but this time the Rite *did* meet and candidates *were* initiated.

Styling itself the 'Order of Unknown Philosophers', and with Waite as 'the authorised Envoy and Ambassador of Unknown Philosophers', the Independent and Rectified Rite of Martinism finally began its work.¹⁶ The Minutes of the ten meetings that were actually held, between 6 December 1922 and 18 March 1924, list forty members, divided equally between men and women. Waite and thirteen others were treated as members *ab initio*, while twenty-six were admitted to the first degree.¹⁷ There is no record of the second or third degrees being worked and no further meetings seem to have taken place.

Because all of the members either had already entered the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, or did so later, it seems that Waite's Martinist Rite was absorbed into his Rosicrucian Order. Why then did Waite activate his Order of the Unknown Philosopher, indeed, why did he create the rituals for the Order, when the ethos of Martinism was more important to him than was its ceremonial? To this we may add the question, 'Do Waite's Martinist rituals have any spiritual merit?' Let us consider that additional question first.

The rituals have survived intact, although they have never been made public and will not be made public as long as they are in my possession. But a few brief extracts will give a sense of what Waite was trying to do. The intensely personal nature of the quest within Martinism is stressed at the outset:

¹⁵ In 1921 Waite gave twelve pages of his *New Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry* to Saint-Martin - with a further six to Pasqually and his Rite des Elus Cohens, and in the following year he published an excellent brief monograph, *Saint-Martin the French Mystic and the Story of Modern Martinism*.

¹⁶ At its head were Waite and three members of his Fellowship of the Rosy Cross (the Rosicrucian Order that he had founded in 1915), Alvin Langdon Coburn, Horace Gifford Burrows and Mary Rhys Rhys, who were warranted to 'open a Secret Sanctuary of the Holy Order and to work and confer therein the Independent and Rectified Grades, subject to the Laws of the Order and such approved Bylaws as they shall establish from time to time.'

The Great Research must be followed by every person in the unknown world which is within him, and it is given unto no man to explore the depths and heights within the heart of another. (I, p2)

The Initiator also explains to the candidate that,

The object of our Order is not the creation of dogmatic teachers and rulers, but on the contrary of humble and devout investigators of those divine mysteries in Man and Nature by which we may be led ultimately to a participation in the Higher Mysteries which have no external manifestation except under veil or sacrament in the world of time and space. Nor is it the intention of the Order to expound mysteries and to give instruction in secret things, but to prepare its members for greater initiations and real knowledge, by placing them upon the path of that progress which alone can lead man into truth.

This Waite sums up in two maxims, which represent the Faith of the Unknown Philosophers:

The Mystery of God is within us, and The Way of God is also the Inward Way.

From this one might reasonably deduce that ritual workings are of surface value only, and should be seen simply as the masks of a profound and intensely personal inner activity. Indeed, Waite points out elsewhere that the Mask of the Order is a mark of separation from the outward world, so that the initiate 'may be revealed to himself in himself'. Likewise, the Mantle 'teaches us that there is a very true and real sense in which the aspirant to spiritual advancement must learn to stand alone.'

The aim of this particular ritual process is also pointed out: 'we have entered upon the lineal way which shall at length bring us into the presence of the King in his Beauty'. The essential manner of attaining this can be summed up rather more briefly than the long-winded way in which Waite expresses it:

The recognition of the Brotherhood of man involves the great doctrine of self devotion. The uplifting of the community thereby, and, when needful, even by the sacrifice of intellectual individuality, constitutes, on this external plane, the end pursued by all initiations. ... The return into unity and perfection is by working out man's own salvation in and through his brethren till all that has been divided

¹⁷ The meetings were held variously at 60 Doughty Street, London, WC 1 (3); Cae Besi, Harlech - Coburn's home (2); and 9 Lower mall, Hammersmith (5). Three of the original members - J.S.M. Ward, Miss Jessie Page, and Miss A.M. Lockwood - subsequently left the Order, presumably by way of resignation rather than expulsion.

shall pass from the state of excommunication and separateness into complete and universal communion. Then shall the presence of God be manifested in the common consciousness of our restored nature, so that God shall be All in All.

Or, as I would prefer to put it, ‘Love God and love your neighbour as yourself’. Despite their wordiness, however, Waite’s rituals have their own power and grandeur, which can only be fully appreciated by acting them out. It is much the same with his books on the Secret Tradition. They are dense and difficult, but having ploughed through to the end the open hearted reader will find that he or she has ploughed a furrow straight towards God, which is always Waite’s purpose. Perhaps it is this rather than their performance on the material plane, that constitutes the underlying, and unstated, purpose of Waite’s Martinist rituals.

Waite didn’t need rituals and ceremonies in addition to those of his Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, and he makes it abundantly clear in his writings on Saint-Martin that he fully endorsed Saint-Martin’s response to his famous exchange with Pasqually. In the *New Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry*, he puts it like this:

Standing at that point where two strange paths of life and thought and research divide once and for ever, Louis Claude de Saint-Martin said to Martines de Pasqually, his theurgic teacher: “Master, can all this be needed to find God?” The adept in Transcendental Masonry and practical occultism answered: “We must even be content with what we have”; and I have regarded this always as a memorable maxim, the force and application of which are with us in most of our daily ways and continually in the world of thought. (Vol.II, p392)

All of Waite’s rituals are directed towards the attainment of the Kingdom that is within. They are also intensely and specifically Christian, and this is made absolutely clear in his Martinist rituals. Theurgy of Pasqually was rejected by Waite as it was by Saint-Martin, and it is probable that he was the better able to achieve this rejection precisely because he had never been exposed to the rituals of Papus worked in the material world, neither within a lodge or formation nor alone. As a consequence Waite was not fettered by blind obedience to a rigid set of ceremonies that had no place outside the era of their creation. He maintained a flexibility that enabled his Order to remain true to its wholly Christian ethos: it was never invaded or distorted by incursions from other, non-Christian, or even anti-Christian, spiritual paths.

He was aware, as we sometimes seem not to be, that rituals and ceremonies are man-made, and that it is we, not God, who put them in strait-jackets. Equally, he knew that robes and regalia are ultimately mere trumpery: what they symbolise is the essential matter, and we should never forget that fine feathers do not always make fine birds. Nor did Waite care for overblown hierarchical structures, seeing in them a propensity for self-destructive dissension over rank, precedence and pedigree.

Waite saw Martinism as a religious practice directed at one thing alone. Such rituals and ceremonies as we may use are simply an outward expression of our inward journey of return to our creator, to God. For him, as for all true Martinists, God is manifested fully and only in Christ. And just as there is only one goal, so, ultimately all practical work can be subsumed in one degree. In a pencilled note, c 1923, accompanying his manuscript rituals Waite states that his Rite 'should be reduced to a single Degree, held on the part of Apostles of Unity to draw within their circle those who are drawn to the conception of Uniat Life.' Whether we can emulate him, or indeed whether we can ever separate ourselves from the glamour of the occult and the magical, I cannot say. But we could try.

Here I will close. I am aware that I have not set Waite's Martinist work fully in the context of his Rosicrucian labours – and the two cannot really be separated. Nor have I given you enough of the words of his Martinist rituals to give you their full flavour. You may well dissent from Waite's approach; his words, and mine, for that matter, may be anathema to you. But I would repeat, that for Waite the path mapped out by Louis Claude de Saint-Martin was simply a retracing of the path by which we fell from God. It is also, by the Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, our path back to Him.