

# Pathways in Modern Western Magic

*Edited by Nevill Drury*



Conrescent Scholars

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*Publisher's Preface*

# Welcome to Concrescent Scholars

*Pathways in Modern Western Magic* launches a new imprint in the Concrescent family of books. This imprint specializes in peer-reviewed works of scholarship in the fields of Esotericism, Pagan religion and culture, Magic, and the Occult. Concrescent Scholars present their views from within and without the Academy. Here will be heard the Voice of the Academic, and also the Voice of the Practitioner, the native of the sometimes alien, sometimes intimate, spaces of the Esoteric.

Paraphrasing the Buddhologist Stephan Beyer, we are mindful that Scholars of the Esoteric do not deal with Esotericism so much as they deal with Esotericists. Real lives are behind these words and each one has a voice to contribute.

Concrescent Scholars is dedicated to bringing together all who work, learn, and live in the Esoteric that they may flourish materially, intellectually, and spiritually.

And so it begins...





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## The Magical Life of Ithell Colquhoun

*Amy Hale*

Ithell Colquhoun is becoming recognized as one of the most interesting and prolific esoteric thinkers and artists of the twentieth century, and although she was known in her day, it is only in the 20 or so years after her death that her innovative spirit is being acknowledged. Although she gained her early reputation as a member of the British Surrealist movement, she has become better known as an occult artist, writer and theorist. Throughout each decade of her life, she engaged with various movements and individuals who shaped and also complemented the development of her worldview and the goal which drove nearly all of her projects: becoming enlightened. Colquhoun presents an amazing case study of a primarily Hermetically focused magician. Every area of her life and all of her achievements were ultimately driven by her spiritual pursuits. Through her work we can see an interplay of themes and movements which characterizes the trajectory of certain British subcultures ranging from Surrealism to the Earth Mysteries movement and also gives us a rare insight into the thoughts and processes of a working magician.

## Colquhoun and Surrealism

Colquhoun was born in India in 1906, as her father was serving in the military there, and from her own account she had an unusual childhood marked by freedom, exploration and unconventional spiritual leanings. When she was 13 she began study at Cheltenham Ladies School, and later studied art at the Slade. She took a very early interest in biology, and many of her early notebooks were filled with highly detailed representations of flowers and plants. The study of plants and flowers was a theme to which she returned many times during her life, in her painting and drawing and in her writing, frequently using plants as visual metaphors for eroticism. Her exceptionally representational visual style formed the basis for her early artistic work and also her segue into Surrealism in the mid 1930s.

Colquhoun is generally identified with the Surrealist movement, and while she claimed artistic identity as a Surrealist for the entirety of her life, her formal associations with British Surrealism were quite short-lived. Ithell first encountered Surrealism when she studied in Paris from 1931-33. She later visited the International Surrealist Exposition in London in 1936, and it was clear within the next two years that Surrealism was starting to impact her work more directly, primarily influenced by her exposure to Salvador Dalí. In 1939 she visited André Breton in Paris, and started working with automatic techniques in her writing and painting. By the late 1930s she was exhibiting with other Surrealists in Britain in prominent Surrealist spaces such as the Mayor Gallery in 1939, and she self-identified as a Surrealist for the rest of her life. In 1940 there was a rift in the British Surrealist movement. The Belgian Surrealist Edouard Mesens, who promoted the career of René Magritte and who published a feature on Ithell in his *London Bulletin* magazine, took over as figurehead and organizer of the British Surrealists, and decreed that no one involved with the British Surrealist movement would publish or belong to any group that was not in service of Surrealism, nor would they hold opposing political positions (Levy 2003). Ithell refused to sever her occult ties and relinquish her interests, and as a result she publicly separated from British Surrealism. Unlike many of her Surrealist counterparts in Britain, Ithell did not view Surrealism as part of a wider political or socialist agenda, although she clearly believed in its revolutionary capacity, specifically in her portrayals of sex and gender.

In 1943 Colquhoun married the charismatic artist Toni Del Renzio. Very little is known about their marriage, aside from the fact that it was rather short-lived, but it seems from their efforts at the time that Del Renzio was the publically dominant partner. Together the couple set out to promote Surrealism in Britain in opposition to Mesens' group through

a series of poetry readings and publications, featuring their own original works and also those of founding Surrealists such as Breton. Their performances attracted the attention of Mesens and his cohort, however, which came to their performances to mock them. This incident had a devastating effect on Ithell (Levy 2005, 22). Her marriage with Del Renzio came to an end in 1947 under circumstances which are not exactly clear, but which may have been the result of an affair by Del Renzio. Although Colquhoun had romantic liaisons following her divorce, in many ways she never fully recovered from that relationship, and it also marked the end of her public engagement with the wider Surrealist movement.

Despite the short length of her engagement with the British Surrealists, Colquhoun's Surrealist body of work was wide-ranging and extensive. Although Surrealism tends to be associated most frequently with the visual arts, particularly those of a type which are highly representational and fantastic, it is important to stress that Surrealism was initially a movement expressed through writing. Surrealism was and is not a style, it is a philosophy, and a worldview. Most Surrealists enacted their experiments in poetry, prose, visual arts, and performance. As such, to consider Colquhoun primarily as a visual artist, would be to diminish her own personal Surrealist project. She was prolific with just about everything she did. She created thousands of pieces of visual art, wrote, published and performed hundreds of poems, wrote several novels (two of which were unpublished), three travel guides (one of which was unpublished), radio dramas, commentaries, and quite a large number of esoteric-related essays. Although not all of her work would be identified as explicitly Surrealist, she would have identified that as a primary current within her life, and most important to her was the link between the Surreal and the Fantastic.

Colquhoun frequently claimed throughout her life that she was the only true Surrealist left working in Britain (Colquhoun, "Autobiographical Notes"). She may have made this claim because the ways in which her own work reflected the automatism and the preeminent position of the unconscious that was key to the works of André Breton and many other Surrealists, notably Dalí. However, much of her visual and written work diverged from the Surrealists and should be considered primarily esoteric art, because she does not emphasize chance and open interpretation to the same degree. Colquhoun used both automatic methods and Hermetic methods to create works which simultaneously drew on subconscious elements and dream imagery, yet also were primed with specific intent, coded by the artist according to Hermetic principles.

The degree to which genuine occultism was an influence in the wider Surrealist movement is debatable. There is a difference between employ-

ing occult tropes and symbols in artistic creation and having a commitment to a sustained esoteric practice. The primary connection between Surrealism in general and occult processes is to be found in automatism, which was a key feature of Ithell's work, and according to André Breton's first Surrealist manifesto the defining feature of Surrealism itself (Polizzotti 1995, 209). Automatism was somewhat inspired by, yet different from, mediumistic automatism. The source of automatic images in Surrealism was not believed to be spirits, but the psyche itself releasing repressed desires and impulses. Automatic writing was in many ways close to stream-of-consciousness, while automatic art techniques were based on seemingly random applications of paint to canvas or paper to see what emerged. Other forms of automatism included collage, found objects or found poems, frottage or rubbings, and a number of other techniques designed to incorporate elements of chance and play into the creative process. Surrealists also embraced the works of Freud, dream states, hysteria, games of chance and madness. They looked for freedom from logical processes and direct, unmediated access to the unconscious. Surrealists believed that automatic processes would generate a sense of randomness out of which one could explore the workings of the subconscious. In 1941, Breton noted that the two primary visual forms of Surrealist expression were based either in automatism or the recording of dream like images, but said that automatism was closer to true Surrealist method.

Additionally, Surrealists drew on a variety of occult symbols. André Breton's references to alchemy in the 1929 *Second Surrealist Manifesto* and also to the 'occultation' of Surrealism are sometimes interpreted by art historians as examples of the adoption of a Hermetic position, and Colquhoun herself believed this to be the case according to an unpublished article she wrote on Surrealism and Hermeticism (Polizzotti 1995, 325, *Colquhoun, Surrealism and Hermetic Poetry n/d*, 6). It is evident that a number of individual artists had occult, mystical and mythological themes in their works. Leonora Carrington and Max Ernst, for example, frequently used alchemical symbolism such as eggs and alembics in their paintings and written work, while the image of the hermaphrodite was seen as a Surrealist ideal, as well as an occult ideal (Warlick 2001). For the core of male surrealists in the movement the hermaphroditic ideal was to be gained through the channel of the Muse, or conjunction with the female creative principle. We can hypothesize that women associated with Surrealism had their own interpretation of the hermaphrodite, and the work of Claude Cahun might be of interest in this regard (Ades, *Surrealism, Male-Female* 2001). We also know that Surrealists were reading writers of the French occult revival, notably Eliphas Lévi, and of

course had a love of Tarot cards, of which Surrealists created a variety of decks over the years.

A primary question then would be the degree to which Colquhoun's interest in the occult and her use of occult symbols and techniques in her Surrealism was similar to other Surrealists, and the ways in which it was different. Because she considered herself to be engaging in magical acts, and because she believed in the objective reality of the figures and concepts with which she was working, her use of them was both divinatory and ritualistic. She was consistently working with otherworldly realms, and although she was using automatic processes, she was also directing the symbolism and the colours for specific ends. Dawn Ades has argued that Colquhoun's primary method of Surrealist working was the highly representational dream image, mostly inspired by her interest in Salvador Dalí, but Colquhoun would most likely argue that automatic processes were at the basis of her Surrealist practice, and for that reason she remained consistent with the directives and programs of the early continental Surrealists (Ades, *Notes on Two Women Surrealist Painters: Eileen Agar and Ithell Colquhoun* 1980) (Colquhoun, *Letter to the Editor* 1981). This is not to suggest that Colquhoun did not derive an exceptional amount of inspiration for her art from her dream states. Dreams were a very important source of imagery for her, but most of her visual art was simply not highly representational.

What seems to be a primary difference in Colquhoun's use of Surrealist techniques is that her conception of the spaces one would contact using automatic processes would be inhabited by specific beings, and reached using a variety of esoteric languages. She did not just use these techniques to see what came of them with her mind in a state unfettered by logic and rationality, or to explore subconscious desires. These other planes had things to communicate to her and as such her art was part of her road to enlightenment and served as invocation and ritual. For instance, she interpreted the four major automatic processes as corresponding to the four elements: Fire to *fumage* (which is developing figures from a canvas or paper which has been previously smoked), Water to *parsemage* (which is when charcoal or pastel are floated on water and then gently apply to paper), Air to techniques where things are blown on paper, such as charcoal, paint or pastel, and *decalcomania*, where prints are either transferred or superimposed from one surface to another, to Earth. Therefore, when she chose which process she would use, she was in some way prescribing intent or focus into the artistic outcome (Colquhoun, *The Mantic Stain* 1949).

Although many of the early Surrealists promoted the idea that their works were created by chance, randomness, and pure access to the unconscious,

of course that is not completely true. Any of Breton's works which may have been guided by automatic principles were also guided by aesthetics and, in the end, editing. Words went together because they sounded good, or the imagery was intriguing. The automatic process may have started off a painting, but it was later shaped by the creator to bring out more of a recognizable meaning for both artist and audience. Colquhoun worked the same way, but she frequently would use as her starting point colours from a palette with specific magical associations or a text which already had some sort of personal esoteric meaning to her, and would be useful for further contemplation for invocation. For instance, she developed a set of 'found poems' from Sir E.A. Wallace Budge's translation of the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Colquhoun, "Gods of the Cardinal Points" n.d.). On reading them, they are not so much found poems as invocations and rituals to be done at cardinal points using Egyptian symbolism, and reflected her love and abiding interest in the Golden Dawn system of magical practice. These poems were not random—nothing ever is—but what she was doing was using her conception of the mental and psychic space one opens up to create something sacred from the profane. Similarly, she wrote a series of poems designed to reflect the polarities of male and female and to emphasize duality. They were titled 'Poems of He and She', and they were lists of masculine and feminine nouns taken from a Gaelic grammar (Colquhoun, "Poems of He and She" n.d.). The idea of her automatic poetry was to bring the order from the random, but order that was ultimately instructive about the nature of the universe and, in this case, alchemical duality.

## Sex and Gender

Ithell Colquhoun's treatment of sex and gender was nothing short of radical and these were important themes in the first stages of her career as an artist. Some of her earliest pieces explore Biblical and classical stories featuring powerful women, and there is good reason to believe that she may have found inspiration in the Italian Renaissance artist Artemisia Gentileschi, a student of Caravaggio, who depicted scenes of female violence and also violence against women. In 1929, Ithell tied for first place in the Slade Summer Composition with *Judith Showing the Head of Holofernes*, which may have been an homage to a similarly titled piece by Gentileschi, as most likely was her 1930 composition entitled *Susanna and the Elders*. By the late 1930s, however, Ithell progressed into much bolder depictions of the male form, some so bold that one gallery refused to display *Gouffres Amers* (1939) (Moore April, 1941). Several of her pieces from the 1930s deal both metaphorically and quite literally with male genitalia, such as *Double Coconut* (1936) and *Sardine and Eggs*

(1940/41). Castration and male impotence was also an early theme in a number of important works, such as *Gouffres Amers*, *Cucumber* (1939) and *The Pine Family* (1940). These may have a reference to the myth of the fallen and resurrected god made so popular by the work of the religious scholar Sir James Frazer, but it was most likely not an overall comment on her view of men; it may represent studies of an archetype. In fact, *The Pine Family* depicts a castrated male, female and hermaphrodite where all genitalia have been removed. Art historian Dawn Ades once suggested that Colquhoun's explicit portrayals of the male body could be read as a parody of the ways in which the men of the Surrealist movement objectified women. Colquhoun responded directly to Ades' comments by stating that her work in this regard needed to be taken at face value and that she was not satirizing, or commenting on the works of male surrealists. In this way, Colquhoun states very directly that her work is not to be seen as derivative, but that it stands on its own, and that she was not afraid to confront the societal expectations of women artists and their relationship with the male body (Ades, *Notes on Two Women Surrealist Painters: Eileen Agar and Ithell Colquhoun* 1980) (Colquhoun, *Letter to the Editor* 1981).

Often, though, Ithell's early depictions of sex were positive and inviting. Visual metaphors of sexuality inundate her work, and even the simplest sketch of a cake or a spoon in a glass can easily take on a very explicit character. Colquhoun's celebrated piece *Scylla* (1938) features a view of a woman's knees in the bath with a small boat gliding not so innocently between them. These works date from the height of her public involvement with Surrealism. Sketches from her archives include other lighthearted watercolours of bathing women, and also more explicit depictions of a woman birthing a variety of complex esoteric symbols. Some of her decalcomania pieces such as *Alcove* (1946) appear to represent the folds of a vulva. As discussed below, in some cases Colquhoun's focus on gender was emblematic of her preoccupations with the integration of duality as a magical act, and the symbolism involved worked on a number of levels for the viewer. Although Colquhoun explored issues of sex and gender throughout her life, her more challenging and celebrated visual works on this theme came from the earliest stages of her career. She did, however, produce some quite radical essays and poems ranging from diatribes on the restrictions caused by women's clothing in the 1960s to poems about condoms in the decade before her death (Colquhoun, "My Ideas About Clothes" c. 1961).

## The Hermetic and Alchemical Current

Colquhoun demonstrated a very early interest in the occult and in alchemy, and it was probably this that made her interest in Surrealism a very natural match. Her cousin was Edward Langford Garstin, who was Cancellarius of the Alpha Omega chapter of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, wrote extensively on alchemy and theurgy, and was friends with MacGregor and Moina Mathers. Garstin was also the secretary of G.R.S. Mead's Quest Society that Colquhoun joined in 1928 (Colquhoun, "Sword of Wisdom Draft Notes" n.d.). Although Colquhoun only developed her friendship with her cousin as an adult through their membership in the Quest Society, Garstin had a remarkable impact on her occult development, and it was through him that she was introduced to the Golden Dawn. It would be no underestimation to argue for the pre-eminence of the occult in Ithell's body of work. It was very clearly an overriding preoccupation from a relatively young age and her earliest writings on alchemy, Kabbalah and Enochian magic, dated from the 1920s. In 1926 she completed and performed a play called *Bird of Hermes* based on alchemical themes, some of which may have formed the basis for her alchemical novel *Goose of Hermogenes* (Colquhoun, "Bird of Hermes draft script" 1926). In 1936 she painted a watercolour of Allan Bennett, a Golden Dawn adept and magical teacher of Aleister Crowley and she was experimenting with alchemical themes in art from the late 1930s.

Although Ithell clearly showed Hermetic and alchemical influences in her art from a very early age, her involvement in occult organizations really emerges in the 1950s, after her divorce from Toni Del Renzio in 1947. Until this time, Ithell was much more integrated into both Modernist and Surrealist art and literature communities in London, but by the 1950s her focus had shifted. Not only did she begin joining occult and magical organizations, but her investigations into witchcraft began in earnest, and she relocated permanently to the west of Cornwall. From the beginning of the 1950s, Colquhoun's visual work seems to take on more of a private and contemplative nature and her painting output decreased for nearly a decade, while the public focus of her art switched more to poetry and essay writing. Her strictly magical essays proliferated and she also had success in publishing her spiritual and mystical travel guides, *Crying of the Wind* (1955) an experiential guide to Ireland, and also *The Living Stones* (1957), which is probably one of the first Earth Mysteries guides to Cornwall. A third travel guide to Egypt was drafted in the 1960s but was never completed. Some of her earliest work in occult journalism was completed for a local London paper called *The London Broadsheet*, where she wrote profiles of Gerald Gardner (1954) and Austin Osman

Spare (1955), as well as more theoretical material on *Thelema* and divination. Later in her life she wrote a number of esoteric articles for *Prediction* and *Quest* as well as several other publications.

Colquhoun then emerges as a nexus of all of the major occult currents of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What follows is a very short resume of her esoteric interests: she was very firmly entrenched in the Western esoteric tradition, but was also well read in Asian traditions, including Buddhism and yoga. Kabbalah and alchemy were probably the most consistent references throughout her body of work, followed by her interest in Druidry and Nature religion. She was an initiate of a wide variety of different orders representing Hermetic and Pagan traditions, including the Ordo Templi Orientis, Co-Masonry, the British Circle of the Universal Bond, the Golden Section Society, and in later years the Fellowship of Isis. Although she was unsuccessful at her attempts to become an initiate of Golden Dawn at an early stage, the Golden Dawn system of magic was clearly one of her guiding principles, and she wrote the influential account of the Golden Dawn magicians, *The Sword of Wisdom*, published in 1975. She was also a key member of a Golden Dawn-type organization, The Order of the Pyramid and Sphinx, founded by Tamara Bourkhoun in the 1960s with a heavy emphasis on Enochian magic. It remains unclear to what degree this order was established in its initiatory process, but it is very clear from her notes and the art work which remains in her archives that she was working on Second Order-level Golden Dawn material (Colquhoun, *Magical drawings and diagrams 1950s-1970s*). She was also affiliated briefly with Dion Fortune's group, the Society for Inner Light, but the organization did not suit her and she did not continue on with them (Colquhoun, "Sword of Wisdom Draft Notes" n.d.). She had deep interests in and knowledge of both traditional and contemporary witchcraft, met with Gerald Gardner more than once, yet did not become a member of any Wiccan organization. Although she was not a spiritualist, she had knowledge of and correspondence with folk healers around Britain and Ireland, and made extensive use of remote healing services (Castle 1971).

### **Ithell's Magical Art Experiments**

Throughout her life, Colquhoun produced an extensive and impressive body of esoteric visual art in addition to her poems and essays. But while it is no stretch to say that many of the works which she created with the intent to display or sell throughout her life were based on esoteric principles, there is a large collection of her esoteric work dating from the 1930s onward which clearly formed the basis for personal experiments regarding colour and shape which were most likely never intended for

display. These works were obviously created to progress her own theories and personal magical work. It is also obvious that some of the visual experiments which remain in her archives were actually much larger projects, sometimes to be coupled with text. Sadly, many of these had little commercial value for the time, and some of these projects would have simply been too radical for public consumption.

Despite Colquhoun's fortunes with various Hermetic organizations, it is very clear from studying her entire corpus of material that it was the Golden Dawn system which held the most interest for her and underpinned the symbolism of her work until a very late stage of her life. Colour was a very important aspect of her work. She took a very precise interest in ensuring that the colours she used for invocations were correct, and she theorized about the magical use of colour in a number of essays throughout her life. Her interest in the precise use of colour and her affinity for the Golden Dawn system may well have been supported by her work with Amédeé Ozenfant in the mid 1930s. Ozenfant was responsible for progressing colour theory in Britain and his influence can most likely be seen in Colquhoun's focus on scientific blending of colour and the effects of colours in proximity to one another.

For Colquhoun, the Golden Dawn's 'Complete Symbol of the Rose Cross' was a very detailed colour wheel, and in her notes and poems there were frequent references to colour formulas and colour mixing. The more perfect the colours, the more one could be assured of success in creating 'flashing tablets', visual invocations of angels, deities and intelligences, and of course Tarot cards. Within the final decade of her life, she worked on enamel colour fields inspired by various Golden Dawn and Kabbalistic colour systems. In 1977, she developed a pack of Tarot cards. She had used Tarot images previously as stand-alone works, but this was her own set of divinatory materials. They are based purely on Golden Dawn systems of colouring, and in the accompanying essay she states that they were created using the 'psycho morphological' technique of colour placement used by other Surrealists. It is clear that Colquhoun believed in the power of colour as sufficient communicators with otherworldly interlocutors. In her deck one does not require images to create stories—the colours alone provide the necessary psychic link and shape the narrative for the reader. Another colour-based project, the *Decad of Intelligence*, was created in 1978 and 1979 featured a series of poetic *sephirotic* Kabbalistic meditations paired with abstract enamel colour studies of each *sephirah*. However, Colquhoun did not limit herself to Golden Dawn or Kabbalistic colour schemes; she also experimented with a number of palettes including ones with Asian and Sufi attributions.

Like many esoteric practitioners, Ithell had a near obsession with

sacred geometry, but there were several themes that she explored most often over a 40 year period. Colquhoun worked quite frequently with cubes, and grids within cubes, envisioning figures and temples within three-dimensional and four-dimensional spaces. It is clear that she was influenced by Charles Hinton's theorizing on the *tesseract* and the general dimensionality of the Platonic solids, about which she wrote an essay which is currently not precisely dated (Colquhoun, "Dimensional Interrelation: a Meditation on the Platonic Solids" c.1950s). These ideas were current in the esoteric network of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it is hard to know exactly at what point these entered her visual repertoire because she does not cite her influences. Internal references from sketches suggest that she was working with the idea of fourth-dimensional space as early as the 1940s. In 1978 she constructed a very simple piece called *Towards the Tesseract*, which featured colour schemes that were similar to those she was using in her sketches of cubes 30 years earlier.

Some of her geometric studies were clearly done in service of Enochian experimentation and other aspects of Golden Dawn work including the 'cube of space' which the tesseract material probably illustrates. There are some very highly polished pieces using sacred geometry which were clearly to be used within a Golden Dawn temple as they reflect aspects of the grade curricula, but in her archives there are also notes and cuttings where she would take these same geometric forms, crosses, pyramids and swastikas, build them up into a three-dimensional figure, and then reduce them once again to a two-dimensional space. It was her belief that the more times she could build up and reduce the figures, the more potential they would have for opening up a fourth-dimensional portal (Colquhoun, "Dimensional Interrelation: a Meditation on the Platonic Solids" c.1950s). In the end, she concluded that the cube and the cross are the most stable forms for fourth-dimensional reflection. Colquhoun was not the only artist to work with these ideas—the same exact principles are found in Salvador Dalí's 1954 *Corpus Hypercubus*, which was constructed on the principle of a crucifix extending into the fourth dimension based on its spiritual power. While critical discussion of Dalí's work frequently focuses on his relationship to the science of the period, he attributes the principles behind the painting to the alchemist Raymond Lully, which reinforces the concept of the extra-dimensional potential of solid forms which was being played with by the esotericists of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Colquhoun never references Dalí within her own work, although she would obviously have known of this piece.

Colquhoun also used a technique of crosses and grids to serve as invocations of angels or elements. They seem to be a combination of automatic techniques, and highly controlled artistic invocations. She

would start the process with colour schemes drawn from either alchemical works, or from Golden Dawn texts. She frequently applied grids to her figure drawings, starting from the base using Kabbalistic attributions and correspondences for the body and times of day working up through the figure. She would then overlay the designs with colours taken from particular schema. She also describes gridded images very similar to this in a section of *Goose of Hermogenes*. Some of her gridded drawings from the 1950s were inspired by sections from Francis Barrett's 1801 magical instruction guide, *The Magus*.

She also used colour in capturing alchemical processes. Meditations on the creation of the hermaphrodite through the union of polarities were an important theme in both her private studies and also in her more public works, although in those the couplings were somewhat more disguised. She created numerous studies in watercolour of the hermaphrodite, using red and blue on conjoined figures seen from the side. For the most part her colour imagery in these exercises was drawn from the King scale for Chokmah and Binah on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, representing the most evolved of the two polarities before their unification into a philosopher's stone. It frequently appeared as though the paint was applied using what would be considered an automatic technique, but in other instances the paint was more carefully applied, accompanying sketches of both human and angelic lovers. Red and blue also appear in her poetry as continuing themes, showing the hermaphrodite being generated through an alchemical process (Colquhoun, "Union Pacific" n.d.). Many of these sketches were very explicit and were almost certainly inspired directly by Japanese erotica (*shunga*). Interestingly, there were homoerotic couplings among these studies, suggesting that her theories about the union of energy polarities may not have necessitated the embodiment of two different genders for completion. One sketch, *Grand Union Canal*, simply depicts what appears to be *kundalini* energy rising in the body of the woman during intercourse, but all Colquhoun represented was the energy itself without the supporting bodies.

A number of her experiments fused the themes of sacred geometry and energy polarities with studies of the human body. From the 1930s onward, Colquhoun created a number of sketches of the human form with the internal organs displayed in different colours. Some of these were titled *Alchemical Figure*, and the colours of the organs correspond to various classical and Kabbalistic attributions. A 1940 piece titled *the Thirteen Streams of Magnificent Oil* relates to the theosophical notion of various openings in the body into which divine energy can flow, and in this case, the work is centered around a woman, as Colquhoun argued that women have one more opening than men, who have twelve. Colquhoun frequent-

ly depicted the flows of energy around and throughout the human body, and sometimes featured figures in the center of a tesseract, or receiving the energy from interaction with a sacred site.

Hermetic and alchemical themes were also features of her creative writing and many of her poems mirror the visual themes she addressed. Colquhoun's Surrealist novel *Goose of Hermogenes* was published by London-based Peter Owen in 1961, but was started several decades earlier and shows themes which she depicts in her 1920s play *Bird of Hermes*. It is a difficult work, but is a fine example of the ways in which she combined Surrealist and esoteric art principles. Here, Colquhoun creates a narrative through highly coded alchemical tracts, but even without that background the tale can be read on a number of levels. It is loosely a story about a girl who has been lured by her uncle to his strange island, to help him in some way in his pursuit of the Philosopher's Stone (Colquhoun, *Goose of Hermogenes* 1961). The book is replete with alchemical imagery, each chapter of the book representing a stage of alchemical processing. Much of the work is an amalgam of alchemical visual images set on paper. One of the chapters directs the narrative through the images of the 1625 *Book of Lambspring* by Nicholas Barnaud. It also features explicit passages of sado-masochistic practice between the main character and her uncle, again demonstrating that Colquhoun was not afraid to confront a number of sexual taboos. Colquhoun penned two other pieces of magical fiction, *I Saw Water* and *Destination Limbo* which were rejected by publishers as unmarketable.

## Paganism and Celticism

Ithell's love of the Celts started early with her own ancestral researches and eventually caused her to settle in Cornwall in the late 1940s after her divorce. Ithell believed that her Scottish ancestry predisposed her to the type of second sight and 'Celtic sensitivity' that would make her Surrealism more successful (Colquhoun, *Autobiographical Notes* n.d.). So in tandem with her Hermetic pursuits, Ithell also investigated witchcraft, Druidry, and other Celtic orders, culminating in her initiation into the Fellowship of Isis towards the end of her life. There is a persistent theme of the relationship between women and Nature in her work long before there was anything like a cohesive or coherent Goddess movement. Her interest in Celtic spirituality focused on the land itself and on sacred sites, and also with the transmission of tradition embodied in a location.

The line separating Paganism and ceremonial magic is a difficult one to discern, and in the 1950s and 1960s the cultures were not as separate as some might think them to be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, yet one can see in Colquhoun's magical life distinctive themes emerging from her magical interests and associations which would eventually develop into modern

Paganism. Her interest in Paganism and her love of things Celtic were inexorably intertwined. Although there were Celtic themes in her creative work dating from the 1950s, the concentration increased dramatically in the 1970s, coinciding with the second Celtic Revival of that period.

W.B. Yeats, who also combined the Hermetic and the Celtic, was a primary influence on Colquhoun's life and work, and although she met Yeats in both Dublin and London toward the end of his life, the nature of their interactions is not quite clear. She was interested in Yeats' attempts to create a Celtic Hermetic order similar to the Golden Dawn, and she studied his correspondence and journals to try to understand the details of this project. In the 1960s she elaborated on Yeats' work, fusing the Kabbalah and Celtic deities, and published two essays on this in *Prediction* magazine in 1970. Colquhoun supported Yeats' bold rejection of Christianity, and was ultimately inspired by his Traditionalist views on Celtic culture and the redemptive power of its Pagan past (Colquhoun, "The Importance of Yeats' 'A Vision'" Draft c.1940s).

In pursuing her Celtic interests Ithell took initiations with, and studied with, a number of organizations. However, she had a common pattern of studying the curriculum earnestly, only to be frustrated by the lack of knowledge displayed by senior members of the order in question. She was frequently found to be difficult or argumentative, and too challenging in her questions on the curriculum. For instance, in the 1960s she was a member of the Druidic order, The Circle of the Universal Bond, also known as *An Druidh Uileach Braithrearchas*. Although she engaged in a very vigorous discussion about the Order's first level of work, she told officials she was not interested in taking initiation beyond that ("Rebecca" n.d.). She was an associate of Colin Murray from the 1950s, and a very supportive member of his Celtic-based Golden Section Order until very late in her life, being most active in the 1970s.

Within Celtic spirituality, her participation in Druidry probably had the most significant impact on her work, but it was more of an influence on her poetry and her essay writing than on her visual work, which continued to be more significantly marked by her alchemical and hermetic symbolism. One could theorize that this was so because of the emphasis on the Bard and divine revelation within Celtic traditions, which would have been consistent with her Surrealist practice. As a result, there are many Celtic topics covered within Ithell's so-called 'found poems'. She visited Brittany several times with her Druidic order and became a member of the Breton Goursez, most likely due to a reciprocal arrangement between these Druidic orders. However, despite her residence and commitment to Cornwall, she was never made a Bard of the Cornish Gorseth, most likely due to her esoteric leanings. Still, her interests in Celtic cultures

were not limited to the esoteric dimensions and she was also supportive of Celtic political movements for cultural recognition. She wrote essays on Cornish culture and took an interest in the history and survivals of the Cornish language. Her small 1973 poetry collection, *Grimoire of the Entangled Thicket*, contains images and works related to Celtic myth and was clearly inspired by Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* and the Celtic tree alphabet which he popularized (Colquhoun, *Grimoire of the Entangled Thicket* 1973).

Her visual art demonstrated a belief in ley-lines and Earth mysteries before such concepts became more prevalent in British alternative spirituality. She had a number of depictions of sacred sites among both her major display pieces and they were also frequently subjects of more casual study. A couple of pieces in particular indicate very developed beliefs about how megalithic sites functioned. Her 1942 oil painting, *Dance of the Nine Opals*, shows the Merry Maidens stone circle near Penzance, where each of the stones is revealed to be an opal—the stone of Mercury and the alchemical process. Each stone is linked in a geometric pattern of energy, fed from the ground, turning the site into a center of energy (Colquhoun, “Dance of the Nine Opals” c.1942). Additionally, each stone contains red, blue and yellow, which suggest that they function as alchemical crucibles where the mingling of the polarities create the Philosophers' Stone. Given that the belief in magnetic earth currents was not a widely accepted feature of British esoteric culture for over another two decades, this painting alone demonstrates the degree to which Colquhoun was ahead of her time in synthesizing diverse strands of occult belief. There might be an indication that Colquhoun believed sacred sites to also be dimensional portals, as some of the colour sketches she did of the Merry Maidens and the *Men an Tol*—an unusual stone site in West Cornwall—show the sites as existing in a cubic space with a similar colour scheme to the tesseracts that were a persistent source of interest.

Ithell Colquhoun died in Cornwall in 1988. Although she had always been a solitary woman, toward the end of her life she suffered more from depression and anxiety and found it difficult to find help and support. Still, despite what many people would consider an isolated and lonely existence in a hard-to-reach village in West Cornwall, Colquhoun remained in close contact with artistic and esoteric colleagues and was active and innovative until the end of her life. Even then she challenged perceptions about the themes and activities proper for an older woman, and continued to pursue an uncompromising vision. Colquhoun's most enduring commitment was to the principles of enlightenment, which she pursued in her own idiosyncratic way throughout her life. What we have left in her writings and art is the record of that journey.

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