

# John Dee

## A Short Biography

### Early life

Dee's ancestors, a Welsh Merchant family, arrived in London in the wake of Henry Tudor's coronation as Henry VII in 1485. John's father, Roland, entered into lower nobility when he married Jane Wilde; John was born three years later in 1527. Roland rose to wealth through his trade in textiles and his position as a gentleman sewer at the court of Henry VIII. In this latter capacity, he superintended table arrangements and seated guests at King Henry VIII's lengthy feasts. He was eventually rewarded with the position of 'King's Packer' and was responsible for the taxing of cloth exports by foreigners.

John's schooling began in 1535 at Chelmsford Catholic School in Essex and in 1542 he began attending St. John's College, Cambridge, receiving his Bachelor's degree in 1546. In December of 1546 Henry VIII made Dee a junior founding fellow of his newly created Trinity College where he would graduate Master of Arts two years later.

Roland was deprived of his powerful patron when Henry VIII died in 1547, and quickly lost his position and the accompanied large income. This loss of family status coupled with England's aversion to teaching advanced mathematics led John to study math, astronomy, and civil law abroad in Belgium and France until 1551. He studied in Louvain with Gemma Frisius and Gerald Mercator, who showed him how to use various astronomical devices they had invented. They also taught him astrology, which would lead to a life long fascination with charting the positions of the heaven and their relation to earthly events.

While studying abroad he also went to Brussels to meet the mathematicians working there. He also traveled to Paris where he lectured on Euclid's Elements and was offered an appointment as professor of mathematics which he declined, opting instead to return to England with his newly acquired collection of astronomical instruments, where he perhaps thought his reputation would earn him a position in court. While in Paris Dee also met Guillaume Postel who would spark Dee's interest in Kabbalah and the occult.

After the death of King Edward VI, there were some questions in regards to the line of succession. Edward had left a will that appointed to the throne Lady Jane Grey, a fervent protestant whom Roland actively supported. When the Catholic Mary managed to take the throne, he was arrested in August of 1553 and was shortly released deprived of his remaining financial assets. Several months later, John was ordained a Catholic priest, taking all six degrees in a single day, which required explicit approval from Bishop Bonner with whom he had become a close friend.

In April of 1555, Princess Elizabeth employed John and several others to engage in astrological queries regarding the future of the throne. They were arrested by agents of the crown only a month later 'for suspicion of magic' and within the next month all had confessed to 'lewd and vain practices of calculating and conjuring'. In July of that year it became public that Mary had been experiencing a false pregnancy and shortly thereafter Dee was brought to the Star Chamber where they were 'discharged of the suspicion of treason'.



*D. Dee avoucheth his Stone is brought by Anglicall Min:try.*

Later that year Dee participated in Bishop Bonner's seventh examination of John Philpot, the former archdeacon of Winchester. Philpot smuggled accounts of his examinations to his supporters and in 1556 John Foxe published them. Though they were slightly favorable to Dee, in them Philpot referred to Dee as 'Doctor Dee the great conjuror'. This title would come back to haunt Dee again and again as Philpot's letters were included in Foxe's 'Acts and Monuments', a book so popular it would be republished four times throughout Dee's life.

In 1556, Dee presented Queen Mary with a plan for the preservation of old books, manuscripts and records and the founding of a national library. Previously Henry VIII had established a Royal Library, of roughly 1,000 books at its height, but upon his death privileged courtiers began to steal its contents. Dee's proposal was not taken up, instead, he expanded his personal library at his house in Mortlake. Dee's library eventually became the greatest in England; it was said to have as many as 2500 books and 1800 manuscripts. In comparison the University of Cambridge at the time had a mere 451 total books and manuscripts in their possession. Dee and his library were consulted about many things, from acoustics for the creation of the globe theater to Francis Bacon wanting to learn about Gematria. To help fund his collection he took up teaching at Mortlake on the subjects of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, navigation.

To supplement his teaching and rectory income Dee became a consultant to the Muscovy Company. Formed in 1555 by the navigator and explorer Sebastian Cabot, It was granted a monopoly of Anglo-Russian trade and had as one of its aims the search for the Northeast Passage. Dee prepared nautical information, including charts for navigation in the polar regions, for the company during the next 32 years. He instructed the crews on geometry and cosmography before they left for voyages to North America in 1576.

When Elizabeth took the throne in 1558, her enemies published documents describing prophecies of Nostradamus and other more recent occultists predicting ill-luck for England under her rule and even her death. To help counteract this, Dee was asked to draw up a horoscope for the day that had been chosen for her coronation, doubtless predicting a long and glorious reign. Over the next several decades Dee was consulted concerning various astrological and magical matters including a supernova, a comet, and several wax figures which were thought to be a curse against the Queen and her Privy Council. Dee often made note of audiences with the queen with an 'E' surmounted by a crown. Elizabeth promised to defend him against attacks on 'any my rare studies and Philosophical exercises'. In 1558 he also published *Propaedeumata Aphoristica* and presented the work to the Queen. Elizabeth was impressed and Dee gave her mathematics lessons to enable her to understand it.

In 1564, Dee wrote the Hermetic work *Monas Hieroglyphica* ("The Hieroglyphic Monad"), an exhaustive Cabalistic interpretation of a glyph of his own design, meant to express the mystical unity of all creation. This work was highly valued by many of Dee's contemporaries, but the loss of the secret oral tradition of Dee's milieu makes the work difficult to interpret today.

In 1565 Dee married Katheryn Constable, an old family friend. The Catholic Record Society would later warn against helping 'John Dee, a married priest, given to magic and uncanny arts'. She died ten years later without bearing children by Dee. In 1576 Dee's mother gave her house at Mortlake to him; she died the following year.

In 1578, Dee married the twenty-three year old Jane Fromandes, very much against the wishes of her father, despite his having obtained letters from Elizabeth and courtiers supporting such a union. Together they would have eight children. In accordance with Gemma's theories he carefully recorded his wife's periods and the times of their sexual intercourse, so he could calculate the planetary influences when their children were conceived.

### **Later life**

By the late 1570s, Dee was growing dissatisfied with his progress in learning the secrets of nature and with his own lack of influence and recognition. He began to turn towards what he called 'optical science' as a means to acquire knowledge. Specifically, he sought to contact angels through the use of a 'scryer' or crystal-gazer, who would act as an intermediary between Dee and the angels. Dee believed that the hidden ray's which come from the stars could be focused and with the help of prayer God's messengers could be seen and heard. Throughout his life he would defend this sort of magic against claims that it was a conjuring of evil spirits, the sort of low magic he called 'vulgar necromantic mechanicians'.

Dee's earlier angelic workings would lead him to write the book 'General and Rare Memorials pertayning to the Perfect Arte of Navigation', a work that set out his vision of a maritime empire and asserted English territorial claims on the New World and in part Europe. Published in 1577, Dee believed that Memorials recorded what angels had revealed about restoring the British Empire. His arguments hinged on the idea that Elizabeth was a descendant of King Arthur who he believed had created settlements along the northwest passage to which she now had a claim. The book had a mixed reception; it was popular in court for a time, but eventually wound up on the wrong side of the political battlefield and resulted with Dee falling somewhat out of favor.

In 1582, he met Edward Kelley (then going under the name of Edward Talbot), who impressed him greatly with his abilities. Dee took Kelley into his service and began to devote a larger portion of his time to his magical pursuits. These "spiritual conferences" or "actions" were conducted with an air of intense Christian piety, always after periods of purification, prayer and fasting.

In 1583, Dee met the visiting Polish nobleman Albert Laski, who had been received as a Prince by the Crown. Laski witnessed a number of the spiritual conferences and invited the Englishman to accompany him on his return to Poland; with some prompting by the angels, Dee was persuaded to go. Dee, Kelley, and their families left for the Continent in September 1583, but Laski proved to be out of favor in his own country and proved to be a poor patron. Dee and Kelley began a nomadic life in Central Europe, finding hosts among fellow academics and various nobility, but always pursuing their spiritual conferences. He had audiences with King Stephen of Poland and Emperor Rudolf II of Bohemia in which he chided them for their ungodliness and attempted to convince them of the importance of his angelic communications. He was not taken up by either monarch. In 1586, Kelley and Dee finally found patronage in form of the wealthy Bohemian count Vilem Rožmberk. They settled in the town of Třeboň and continued their researches.

During these travels Dee and Kelley's exploits began to attract the attention of the Catholic church. At first it was only about proving their orthodoxy, but their actions with Stephen attracted the scrutiny of a Jesuit Priest who demanded that Kelley confess to the 'very great crime' of conversing with God and his angels. Further, once they settled down with Rozmberk they attracted the attention of a Papal nuncio. This Venetian ambassador reported that Dee and Kelley were creating 'a new superstition, not to say heresy' known 'to the Emperor and all the Court' and that though Dee 'did not profess a Christian life' he claimed angelic revelations around which 'he has a following'. This led to their banishment from Bohemia at the order of Rudolf at the behest of the Pope, however, this banishment was lifted only three months later and they returned to Bohemia.

In the years that followed Kelley's alchemy became increasingly more in demand and greatly overshadowed their spiritual work. So much so that in 1589 Rozmberk asked Dee to leave his estates so that Kelley could focus wholeheartedly on producing gold.

### **Final years**

Dee returned to Mortlake after six years to find his library ruined and many of his prized books and instruments stolen by creditors and acquaintances. He sought support from Elizabeth, who helped him to retrieve some of his property and continue his alchemical workings; she eventually made him warden of Christ's College, in 1592. During this time he also resumed his magical workings employing a scryer with whom he had previous experience.

Jane died during the plague in Manchester in 1605, along with a number of his children. He then left Manchester to return to London. By that time, Elizabeth was dead, and James I, unsympathetic to anything related to the supernatural, provided no help. Dee spent his final years in poverty at Mortlake, forced to sell off various of his possessions to support himself and his daughter, Katherine, who cared for him until the end. He died in Mortlake on March 26th 1609 aged 82.

# Edward Kelley

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### Birth and early career

A horoscope drawn up by Dee indicates that Kelley was born in Worcester on August 1, 1555. He began life as an apothecary's apprentice, and showed some aptitude for his calling. It has been stated that he studied for a short time at Oxford under the name of Talbot, but left abruptly under a cloud. A few years later, he was exposed in the pillory in Lancaster for having either forged ancient title deeds or coined base money. The next incident in his career is a charge of having dug up a newly buried "caitiff's" corpse in Walton-le-Dale churchyard, Lancashire, for the purpose of questioning the dead, or "an evil spirit speaking through his organs," respecting the future of "a noble young gentleman."

### With Dee in England

About a year after entering into Dee's service, Kelley appeared with an alchemical book (The Book of Dunstan) and a quantity of a red powder which, Kelley claimed, he and a certain John Blokley had been led to by a "spiritual creature" at Northwick Hill. (Accounts of Kelley's finding the book and the powder in the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey were first published by Elias Ashmole, but are contradicted by Dee's diaries.) With the powder (whose secret was presumably hidden in the book) Kelley believed he could prepare a red "tincture" which would allow him to transmute base metals into gold. He reportedly demonstrated its power a few times over the years, including in Bohemia (present Czech Republic) where he and Dee resided for many years.

### Apogee and fall

By 1590, Kelley was living an opulent life. He received several estates and large sums of money from Rožmberk. He convinced many influential people that he was able to produce gold. Rudolf made Kelley a 'Baron of the Kingdom', but eventually he tired of waiting for results. Rudolf had Kelley arrested in May of 1591 and imprisoned in the Křivoklát Castle outside Prague, other English agents were also imprisoned. Rudolf apparently never doubted Kelley's ability to produce gold on a large scale, and hoped that imprisonment would induce him to cooperate. Rudolf may also have feared that Kelley would return to England; as Kelley had certainly been in correspondence with Elizabeth, negotiating the terms of his return.

Around 1594, Kelley agreed to cooperate and produce gold; he was released and restored to his former status. Again he failed to produce, and was again imprisoned, this time in Hněvín Castle in Most. Kelley died in 1597 at the age of forty-two. A tradition has him dying while trying to escape: the story goes that he used an insufficiently long rope to lower himself from a tower, fell and broke his leg, and died from his injuries.



# Prominent Figures

## **John Dee** (1527-1608) and **Edward Kelley** (1555–1597)

- First received the material during the period between 1581 and 1585 at Mortlake, (South West London) and while traveling around Europe.

## **Thomas Rudd** (1583-1656)

- A practicing magician, published "The Treatise on Angel Magic", a compendium of magic, including some enochian materials.

## **Sir Robert Bruce Cotton**, 1st Baronet (1570 - 1631)

- An English politician, founder of the famous Cotton library.
- Acquired a copy of Dee's manuscript containing the material that Casaubon would later publish.

## **Meric Casaubon** (1599 - 1671)

- Published "A True and Faithful Relation of What Passed for Many Years Between Dr. John Dee and Some Spirits" in 1659.

## **Elias Ashmole** (1617 - 1692)

- English antiquary, was a politician, officer of arms, student of astrology and alchemy, and an early speculative Freemason.
- Dee decided to conceal his magickal records in a hidden compartment of a large cedar chest he possessed. After his death the chest was purchased from his estate and passed through several owners. The hidden documents were not discovered until around 1662, and found their way into the hands of Elias Ashmole in 1672. Mr. Ashmole's collection passed eventually to the British Library.
- According to Ashmole, about half of the hidden records were mistakenly destroyed by the discoverer's maid before efforts were made to preserve the rest.

## **Robert Hooke** (1635-1703)

- An English natural philosopher, architect and polymath who played an important role in the scientific revolution, through both experimental and theoretical work.

## **Kenneth R. H. Mackenzie** (1833-1886)

- Author of the Cipher MS, which includes references to the Table of Earth

## **William Wynn Westcott** (1848 - 1925)

- Co-founder of the Golden Dawn, Practicing Enochian Magician, Mason, SRIA
- Heavily modified portions of the Enochian System with permission from a German "Secret Master" named "Anna Sprengel" in 1891, who is then said to have died the following year
- Incorporated Enochian into the Golden Dawn Rituals and Cipher MS

## **Aleister Crowley**, (1875 - 1947)

- Published LIBER 777 SVB FIGVRA LXXXIV (84)
- Explored the thirty aethyrs (1900 & 1909), published in the Vision and the Voice (Liber 418)

## **Isreal Regardie**, (1907 - 1985)

- Member of Stella Matutina, a successor to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. When the group disbanded he acquired the bulk of the Order's documents and compiled the book, The Golden Dawn (published 1941), containing many order secrets including the use of Enochian.

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