



THE OCCULT WEBB

An Appreciation of the Life and Work of James Webb

Compiled by

John Robert Colombo



T H E O C C U L T W E B B

**An Appreciation
of the Life and Work of James Webb**

Compiled by John Robert Colombo

**With Contributions from
Colin Wilson Joyce Collin-Smith Gary Lachman**



COLOMBO & COMPANY

Second Enlarged Edition

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Printed in Canada.

ISBN 978-1-894540-79-7

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P R E F A C E

The idea of Tradition has been made familiar by poets and philosophers, and disreputable by occultists of every description.

J.W., *The Harmonious Circle*

This monograph is an appreciation of the life and work of James Webb. It is a form of homage.

I never met the author (hereinafter J.W.). Indeed, had there been an occasion for us to meet and speak, I am uncertain what I would have said to him. At the same time I am certain that I would have been able to appreciate him as a researcher, author, and scholar. So what motivated me to research, write, compile, and publish this monograph is the continuing curiosity that I have about J.W. the man.

Expressed otherwise, the primary motivation that has led to the appearance of this monograph is my curiosity, my inquisitiveness. That is the primary motivation. But there is a secondary motivation, and that is my resolve to do something about the paucity of reliable and detailed information – biographical, bibliographical, descriptive, interpretive, etc. – about those men and women whom J.W. described as “historians of ideas.” This is a field of continuing interest but one that is illuminated by few reliable reference publications. There are some exceptionally useful works – I am thinking now of such specialized publications as the *Biographical Dictionary of Parapsychology* (1964) and *Encyclopaedia of Occultism and Parapsychology* (4th ed., 1996) – but I also know that there is the cultural need (though possibly not the commercial demand) for a

series of monographs devoted to collecting and preserving information about men and women and associations important or interesting in the fields of psychical research, parapsychology, and the history of occult thought. To this end I have devoted a monograph titled *Conjuring Up the Owens* to the ongoing contributions to parapsychology made by A.R.G. Owen and his wife Iris M. Owen. Underway is a monograph on the life and work of R.S. Lambert (who is principally known in the United Kingdom as the founding editor of BBC's *The Listener* and for his involvement in the Case of the Talking Mongoose, but who is also the author of the first book – a fine one indeed – to be devoted to the supernatural in Canada).

Little information is available to the general reader about the lives and works of researchers and writers who elect to study “rejected knowledge.” Yet it could be argued that but for the contributions of these researchers and writers, there would be no general awareness of these matters and these materials. To express it boldly, biographies of Harry Price reveal as much about Borley Rectory as do Price's books on Borley Rectory. In a similar vein, for our knowledge of “traditional thought” – which J.W. memorably defined as “rejected knowledge” – we are indebted not so much to the power of the ideas themselves as to their communicators, instructors, regenerators, teachers, transmitters, vehicles ... even their initiators.

A major appreciation of J.W.'s books (should one be attempted) would necessarily need to draw attention to the man's accomplishments as a prodigious researcher (examining rare primary source materials), a linguist (commanding the Romance languages as well as German and Russian), a presenter with showmanship (delighting in the sheer novelty value of the *outré* ideas he uncovered), and a theorist (originating or popularizing phrases like “historian of ideas” and “rejected knowledge,” “occult underground,” “occult establishment,” “harmonious circle,” etc.). Finally, a major appreciation of the man's life would need to examine the attraction of these ideas to humankind in general and to the author in particular and then consider the role

that these ideas played in his life – and death. In the words of the folklorist Leslie Shepard, quoted elsewhere in these pages, J.W. was “a haunted man.” He was a man haunted by a peculiar set of ideas. He got caught up in an occult web partly of his own design and making.

I am content to limn a number of these ideas and influences because they were so meaningful to the man who inspired this monograph and because they remain meaningful to researchers and writers at other times and in other places. In the realization of this endeavour, I am honoured to have received the support of Colin Wilson and Joyce Collin-Smith. I will now move aside and allow others to accomplish more.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

I am an independent researcher with an omnivorous curiosity and a particular interest in Canadiana, Poetry, Literature, Occultism, Mysteries, Fourth Way, etc. Since 1960, I have written, compiled, or published over 222 books, some with major publishers (Oxford University Press, Penguin Books, Doubleday), some with major Canadian houses (McClelland & Stewart, McGraw-Hill Ryerson Press, Dundurn Group), and some through my own imprint (Colombo & Company). Decades ago, employing the technology of instant printing, I began to issue a series of celluloid-covered, cerlox-bound, photocopied pages of books that I named Quasi-Books.

QuasiBook Editions could be produced in limited editions both rapidly and inexpensively with no capital investment. Yet the finished product looked more like a business report than it did a book, though not being mass produced, it was not cheap to produce. Over the decades (roughly from 1991 to 2008) I issued seventy-five such publications, mainly written by me but also by like-minded authors who like myself were free of “writer’s block”

but who from time to time suffered the occasional bout of “publisher’s block.” In the early 2000s I moved away from the format, except for annually issuing editions of my own volumes of poems, because by then I had established a working relationship with Dr. George A. Vanderburgh, founder of The Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, a print-on-demand publisher located on Lake Eugenia, Ontario, who had a taste in genre literature as well as for offbeat Canadiana.

The Occult Webb appeared in 1999 and it met a personal need (to goad myself to research the life and work of James Webb) as well as a perceived, wide-spread need for reliable information on Webb and his writings. It was not the QuasiBook that sold the most copies. (The compilation called *666 Canadian Jokes* may claim that honour. Following my guest appearance in 1996 on Peter Gzowski’s CBC Radio’s *Morningside*, with no advertising or promotion, there were direct sales of almost 300 copies.) But orders for “the Webb book” resulted in single-copy orders from individual buyers, not institutional buyers, from “around the world” and from almost “all the continents,” etc. The Canadian joke book sold well in Canada. The Webb book had and probably still has international appeal, with students of his writings who live in Cambridge, Tokyo, Amsterdam, London, Millbrook, and Tyringe, to name but six divergent locales.

I researched, wrote, and published the book to compensate for the absence of available information on the writer and his work. In the twenty years since its original publication, the situation remains the same. Still there is no biography, not even a monograph, to celebrate “poor “Jamie.” I probably sold 150 copies of various reprintings of this book at marginal profit and major labour. I see my humble QuasiBook Edition as a “holding action,” one that to this day “holds the door” (in John Buchan’s memorable phrase).

So the present volume is an instance of my general undertaking to document (initially for myself) the lives and writings of other unusual and neglected writers, including (in no special order) Maurice Level, Algernon Blackwood, Leslie A.

Croutch, Denis Saurat, George and Irish Owen, and R.S. Lambert.

Aside from a few corrections here and there, the text of this second edition is the same as that of the first edition, except for the inclusion of one new item. I am now able to reprint “The Strange Death of James Webb,” an article written by Gary Lachman who is noted for his knowledge of the occult and his Colin-Wilson like talent in describing it. In addition, the new edition includes a sketch of the subject which I commissioned from the caricaturist and writer Don Evans, a resident of Orillia, Ontario, who signs his work “Isaac Bickerstaff.” The reason why it did not appear in the first edition is Joyce Collin-Smith felt that it did not correspond to her memory of the man. She particularly objected to my description of James Webb as “mercurial” or “electrical,” and she may have been right in doing so. She died in 2011 at the age of ninety-one. The Bickerstaff pen-drawing reproduced here corresponds to the image of the man that I have and that I believe Jamie had of himself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

J.W. first caught my eye the day I bought and read paperback editions of *The Occult Underground* and *The Occult Establishment*. This was shortly after they were originally published. I read them with a sense of wonder but also with a sense of disbelief. How was it, I asked myself, that a scholar, who is still in his thirties, is able to conjure up and command so much detail and display so much mastery of so arcane a field? I had asked myself a rhetorical question which required a rhetorical answer. My answer was that the author of these books was a man of intuition and insight but also a man who was being driven by the relentlessness of his subject, a kind of “all or nothing” response. I was confirmed in my view when I bought and read one of the first copies of *The Harmonious Circle*, J.W.’s remarkable analysis and synthesis of the elements of the work groups associated with G.I. Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky. Such mastery! But at what cost? (Perhaps an indication of the cost is the fact that one early draft of the work was titled “The Harmonious Circus”!

So I began to file away the little information that came my way on J.W. and his books – editorial references, reviews, notes in correspondence, comments in other authors’ books, etc. Soon I had a thick file-folder and then a thin computer disk. What would I do with the information, the data? Then I had occasion to spend a sunny afternoon with Joy and Colin Wilson who came to Toronto as guests of the International Author’s Festival. On Tuesday, 24 October 1998, I showed them some of the city’s literary sites (Marshall McLuhan’s coach house, Northrop Frye’s Victoria College, Robertson Davies’s Massey College, among others). Along the way we talked about occult personalities, and I was able to steer the conversation in the direction of J.W. and his sad end. Colin rewarded my hospitality and friendship by

conveying to me his vivid sense of the man, despite the fact that they had never met face to face, for they lived at opposite ends of Britain. Colin also conveyed his appreciation of the enduring value of J.W.'s books, comparing and contrasting them with his own books, principally the volume titled simply *The Occult*.

Then and there I resolved to proceed with my tribute and said as much to Colin. He kindly offered me the right to reprint his rejected "Introduction" to *The Occult Establishment* and to send me the names and addresses of people who had known J.W. It was in this way that I began to correspond with Joyce Collin-Smith. Joyce's name was known to me, if only through my interest in the books of her brother-in-law Rodney Collin, which I had read, and I had a notation to read her memoir *Call No Man Master*. I have now read that lively book, so sadly out of print, and I feel its pages show particular emotion when she describes her friendship with Jamie. In the present monograph I am not reproducing any passages from the memoir, but through Joyce's courtesy and generosity, I am including here three of her own moving tributes.

One of the surprises of employing the Internet and the World Wide Web (I almost typed Webb!) for research purposes is that one encounters a plethora of sound-alikes and look-alikes. For instance, if you keyboard "James Webb" into a search engine, expect hundreds of references to that name and its variations. There are all those "web pages" created by families named Webb. There is James Webb, the novelist; James Webb, the former U.S. Secretary of the Navy; James E. Webb, former head of NASA; James W. Webb, specialist on William Faulkner, etc. There is also the advertising agency executive James Webb Young – whose name is sometimes extended even further through the addition of Fund (James Webb Young Fund) which exists to further the cause of advertising. (Wasn't J.W. working as a copywriter at the end of his life?) I even learned that the World Wide Web also offers the full text of Joyce Collin-Smith's *Call No Man Master* through the Glastonbury Archive.

*

In the preparation of this monograph I am pleased to acknowledge the assistance I received from my researcher, Alice M. Neal, who over a decade and a half enjoyed the services of the Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library where she was assisted by its cadre of knowledgeable and dedicated librarians.

I also wish to acknowledge the special assistance that was graciously offered by a number of men and women, among them the following: Joyce Collin-Smith, Norwich, Norfolk, England; Ted Davy, Calgary, Alberta, Canada; Rosemary Dickson, Blair Drummond, Stirling, Scotland; J. Walter Driscoll, Courtenay, British Columbia, Canada; Joscelyn Godwin, Earlville, New York, U.S.A.; Gary Lachman, London, England; W.E. Mann, Aurora, Ontario, Canada; Vincent O'Neil, Ogden, Utah; Leslie Shepard, Blackrock, County Dublin, Ireland; Jonathan Smith, Trinity College Library, Cambridge, England; Diane Smyth, Marshall Cavendish Limited, London, England; David Ramsay Steele, Open Court Publishing Company, Peru, Illinois, U.S.A.; Marcello Truzzi, Grass Lake, Michigan, U.S.A.; Sophia Wellbeloved, Cambridge, England; Colin Wilson, Gorran Haven, Cornwall, England.

1. BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

James Webb

* Born James Charles Napier Webb, 13 Jan. 1946, Edinburgh, Scotland.

* Accepted at Harrow School, Harrow, England.

* Admitted from Harrow to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1964, where he studied History, and “came out with a 2:1” in 1967.

* Employed as ghostwriter, tv producer-trainee, schoolmaster.

* Worked from 1969 as a full-time writer.

* Contributed to the “partbook” periodical *Man, Myth & Magic* (1970), thereafter issued in a multi-volume set.

* Contributed to the *Encyclopedia of The Unexplained* (1974).

* Married Mary Thomas on 27 April 1974 in Hampstead, London.

* Served as Advisory Editor for two reprint series launched by Arno Press in 1976: “The Occult” and “Perspectives in Psychical Research.”

* Died “in tragic circumstances,” Dumfriesshire, Scotland, 8 May 1980, age thirty-four.

* Inspired the memorial in his name which was established by friends and family during the academic year 1982-83 at his “old college,” Trinity, Cambridge.

James Webb Prize

“The emolument established in honour of [James] Webb was not a scholarship, but a prize. In the academic year 1982-83 the family and friends of Webb gave over £7,000 to establish a fund to sustain a prize for the best essay on the subject in the field of history of ideas. I am unable to say when the prize was first awarded, but presumably shortly after it was established. It is still competed for yearly.”

From a letter from the Manuscript Cataloguer, Trinity College Library, Cambridge CB2 1TQ, England, dated 8 Dec. 1998.

Additional Information

Excerpts from a letter, dated 6 Dec. 1998, received from Rosemary Dickson, Craighead House, Blair Drummond, Stirling, Scotland.

Thank you for your letter regarding my son James Webb. I think I can fill in the details you require.

Jamie was born on the evening of January 13th, 1946, in a Nursing Home in Edinburgh at 39, Palmerston Place, just a fortnight after his father took his own life while still serving in Germany. He was christened James Charles Napier Webb. He was brought up here in what was then Perthshire and was first educated at home by Miss Greta Cairns the governess who had also taught me and my sister.

When Jamie was 7½ he went away to a Preparatory School called Belhaven Hill at Dunbar in East Lothian. The school still flourishes under the headmaster of an old boy Michael Osborne who was a friend of Jamie's both at prep school and later at Cambridge.

He went on to The Park, at Harrow, I think, when he was thirteen and a bit. I still have a Harrow Speech Day programme

dated 22nd June 1962 which records that he won the August Fleet Prize for English Literature, the Augustus Fleet Prize for English Verse, the Sir Winston Churchill Upper Fifth Prize for English Essay and the Spicer 1st Prize for Divinity. He would then have been sixteen.

When he left Harrow – I am afraid I cannot quite remember the exact date – he spent six months with a family in Vienna to try and learn a bit of German. He enjoyed that and learnt to love opera which was odd as he was very “unmusical” and had no ear!

When he went to Trinity College, Cambridge, he had a marvelous time and made a tremendous number of very good friends. It is my belief he should have stayed there safe in an academic life and atmosphere.

I hope this information will be of some help to you in your research. Of course I am interested in anything to do with my son’s work, but I must admit that it all became too complex for me and much above my head!

2. BIBLIOGRAPHY

In this Bibliography will be found references to the principal publications of J.W.

Everyone who has ever prepared even a short bibliography will appreciate the fact that the bibliographer's work is never done either to his own satisfaction or to anyone else's. Although J.W.'s bibliography is not extensive, it presents a problem or two. So the present listing of his books should be regarded as a prelude to better things to come.

BOOKS

Note: J.W.'s first two books complement each other and comprise a set. I will call that two-volume set "The Occult Series" and refer to the individual books as *The Occult Underground* and *The Occult Establishment*.

These two volumes were published during the author's lifetime in various editions under a variety of titles in the United Kingdom and the United States.

An edition that has been examined first-hand is identified with an asterisk (*).

The Occult Underground

1a. *The Flight from Reason:*
Volume 1 of The Age of the Irrational

London: Macdonald & Co. (Publishers) Ltd., 1971.*
Later issued in the U.S., first as *The Occult Revival* and then as *The Occult Underground*.

1b. *The Occult Revival*:
The 19th Century Flight from Reason
New York: Library Press, 1973.
Later issued in the U.S. as *The Occult Underground*. This occurred the following year, when Library Press was acquired by Open Court.

1c. *The Occult Underground*:
The 19th Century Flight from Reason
La Salle, Illinois: Library Press / Open Court, 1974.
Revised version of the book issued earlier in the U.K. as *The Flight from Reason* and then in the U.S. as *The Occult Revival*.

1d. *The Occult Underground*.
La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1988.*
“First paperback printing 1988.”
“A revision of the author’s *The Flight from Reason*.”

The Occult Establishment

2a. *The Occult Liberation*.
London: Alcove Press, London, 1973.
Later issued in the U.S. as *The Occult Establishment*.

2b. *The Occult Liberation*.
New York: Library Press, 1973.
Later issued in the U.S. as *The Occult Establishment*.

2c. *The Occult Establishment*.
La Salle, Illinois: Library Press / Open Court, 1976.
Later issued in the U.K. under the same title.

2d. *The Occult Establishment*.
Vol. II, The Age of Irrational [sic]
Glasgow: Richard Drew Publishing, 1981.*
Earlier issued in the U.S. under same title.*

2e. *The Occult Establishment*.
La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1985.
“First paperback edition 1985.”
“Second printing 1988.”*

The Harmonious Circle

3a. *The Harmonious Circle*:
*The Lives and Work of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky and
Their Followers*.
New York: Putnam's, 1980.
Simultaneously published by Thames and Hudson in the U.K.

3b. *The Harmonious Circle*:
*The Lives and Work of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and
Their Followers*.
London: Thames and Hudson, 1980.*
Both the U.S. and U.K. editions were printed in the U.S.

3c. *The Harmonious Circle*:
*The Lives and Work of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky and
Their Followers*.
Boston: Shambhala, 1987.*
Facsimile reprint of the Putnam / Thames and Hudson edition.

EDITIONS

4. Advisory Editor

The Occult: An Arno Press Collection.

In 1976, Arno Press / A New York Times Company launched a series called *The Occult* with J.W. as its Advisory Editor. This was a series of thirty-three facsimile reprints of out-of-print and out-of-copyright books so chosen as to illustrate the origins and development of modern occultism. These reprint editions were designed for specialist and library use; copies were sold through trade bookstores on the basis of special orders.

In addition to selecting the titles, J.W. contributed introductions to five titles in the series (see below), four of which he specially compiled for inclusion in the series.

A complete list of the titles in the series follows. The list is reproduced from the last pages of *A Quest Anthology*. Some liberties have been taken with capitalization, etc. The series was in print in 1999.

Adare, Viscount

Experiences in Spiritualism with Mr. D.D. Home. 1869.

Anonymous

Five Years of Theosophy. 1894.

Atwood, M.A.

A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery. 1920.

Benson, Robert Hugh

The Necromancers. 1909.

Blood, Benjamin Paul

Pluriverse: An Essay in the Philosophy of Pluralism. 1920.

Bonwick, James

Irish Druids and Old Irish Religions. 1894.

Britten, Emma Hardinge

Nineteenth Century Miracles: Or Spirits and Their Work in Every Country of the Earth. 1884.

Cahagnet, L.A.

The Celestial Telegraph: Or Secrets of the Life to Come Revealed through Magnetism. 1850.

Capron, E.W.

Modern Spiritualism: Its Facts and Fanaticisms, Its

- Consistencies and Contradictions*. 1855.
- Davenport, Reuben Briggs
The Death-Blow to Spiritualism: Being the True Story of the Fox Sisters, as Revealed by Authority of Margaret Fox Kane and Catherine Fox Jencken. 1888.
- Dupotet de Sennevoy, Jean
An Introduction to the Study of Animal Magnetism. 1838.
- Du Prel, Carl
The Philosophy of Mysticism. Two volumes in one. 1889.
- Hinton, C.H.
The Fourth Dimension. 1912.
- Hinton, C.H.
Scientific Romances: First and Second Series. Two volumes in one. 1886, 1922.
- Hitchcock, Ethan Allen
Remarks upon Alchemy and the Alchemists. 1857.
- Home, Mme. Dunglas
D.D. Home: His Life and Mission. 1888.
- Jennings, Hargrave
The Rosicrucians: Their Rites and Mysteries. 1907.
- Kieswetter, Karl
Der Occultismus des Altertums [Occultism in Antiquity]. Two volumes in one. 1895.
- Kieswetter, Karl
Geschichte des Neuen Occultismus: Volume I and Volume II. / Die Geheimwissenschaften. [A History of Modern Occultism: Volume I and Volume II. / The Secret Sciences]. Two volumes in one. 1891, 1895.
- Lacuria, P.F.G.
Les Harmonies de l'Etre Exprimees par les Nombres. [The Harmonies of Being Explained by Numbers]. Two volumes in one. 1899.
- London Dialectical Society
Report on Spiritualism of the Committee of the London Dialectical Society. 1871.

- Moses, William Stainton
Spirit Teachings through the Mediumship of William Stainton Moses. 1924.
- Myers, Frederic W.H.
The Subliminal Consciousness. 1976.
- Nichols, T.L.
A Biography of the Brothers Davenport. 1864.
- Oliphant, Margaret Oliphant W.
Memoir of the Life of Laurence Oliphant and of Alice Oliphant, His Wife. 1892.
- Rivail, Hippolyte Léon Denizard [Allan Kardec, pseud.]
Spiritualist Philosophy: The Spirits Book. 1893.
- Sinnet, A.P. Editor
Incidents in the Life of Madame Blavatsky. 1886.
- Society for Psychical Research
The Society for Psychical Research Report on the Theosophical Society. 1876.
- Solovyoff, Vsevolod Sergyeevich
A Modern Priestess of Isis. 1895.
- Underhill, A. Leah
The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism. 1885.
- Webb, James. Editor
The Mediums and the Conjurors. 1976.
- Webb, James. Editor
A Quest Anthology. 1976.
- Zöllner, Johann Carl Friedrich
Transcendental Physics. 1888.

The following volumes were introduced and edited by J.W.:

4a. Webb, James. Editor. *The Mediums and the Conjurors*. New York: Arno Press, 1976.

This is an original collection with contributions by J.N. Maskelyne, G. Smith-Buck, George Smith, with an introduction by J.W.

4b. Webb, James. Editor. *A Quest Anthology*. New York: Arno Press, 1976.

This is an original collection of contributions to the magazine *The Quest* (1909-1927), with an introduction by J.W.

4c. Society for Psychical Research. *The Society for Psychical Research Report on the Theosophical Society*. New York: Arno Press, 1976.

This is a report originally published by the Society for Psychical Research in 1885, with an introduction by J.W.

4d. Myers, Frederic W.H. James Webb, editor. *The Subliminal Consciousness*. New York: Arno Press, 1976.

Introduction by J.W.

4e. Hinton, C.H. *Scientific Romances: First and Second Series*. Arno Press, 1976.

Introduction by J.W.

5. Advisory Editor

Perspectives in Psychical Research: An Arno Press Collection.

J.W., continuing his association with Arno Press, selected thirty-four titles for the series titled "Perspectives in Psychical Research" which appeared in 1976. The Advisory Editor is identified as Robert L. Morris.

A complete list of the titles in the series follows. The list is reproduced from the last pages of Harry Price's *Fifty Years of Psychical Research: A Critical Survey*. Some liberties have been taken with capitalization, etc. The series was in print in 1999.

Carrington, Hereward

Laboratory Investigations into Psychic Phenomena. 1939.

Colquhoun, J.C.

Report of the Experiments on Animal Magnetism. 1833.

- Coover, John Edgar
Experiments in Psychical Research at Leland Stanford Junior University. 1917.
- Cumberland, Stuart
A Thought-Reader's Thoughts. 1888.
- Doyle, Arthur Conan
The History of Spiritualism. Two volumes in one. 1926.
- Driesch, Hans
Psychical Research: The Science of the Super-Normal. 1933.
- Ehrenwald, Jan
New Dimensions of Deep Analysis. 1952.
- Esdaile, Jame
Natural and Mesmeric Clairvoyance. 1852.
- Fukurai, T.
Clairvoyance and Thoughtography. 1931.
- Garrett, Eileen J.
My Life as a Search for the Meaning of Mediumship. 1939.
- Geley, Gustave
Clairvoyance and Materialisation. 1927.
- Gregory, William
Animal Magnetism. 1909.
- Gudas, Fabian. Editor.
Extrasensory Perception. 1961.
- Haddock, Joseph W.
Somnolism and Psycheism. 1851.
- Hilbert, S.
Sketches on the Philosophy of Apparitions. 1824.
- Mulholland, John
Beware Familiar Spirits. 1938.
- Murchison, Carl. Editor.
The Case for and against Psychical Belief. 1927.
- Myers, Frederic W.H.
Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death. Two volumes in one. 1954.
- Podmore, Frank
The Newer Spiritualism. 1910.

- Podmore, Frank
Studies in Psychical Research. 1939.
- Price, Harry
Fifty Years of Psychical Research. 1939.
- Price, Harry, and Eric Dingwall
Revelations of a Spirit Medium. 1922.
- Prince, Walter Franklin
The Enchanted Boundary. 1930.
- Richet, Charles
Thirty Years of Psychical Research. 1923.
- Roll, William G.
Theory and Experiment in Psychical Research. 1975.
- Salter, W.H.
Zoar: Or the Evidence of Psychical Research Concerning Survival. 1961.
- Saltmarsh, H.F.
Evidence of Personal Survival from Cross Correspondences. 1938.
- Saltmarsh, H.F.
Foreknowledge. 1938.
- Sidgwick, Eleanor Mildred
Phantasms of the Living: Cases of Telepathy Printed in the Journal of the Society for Psychical Research during Thirty-five Years including Phantasms of the Living by Edmund Frederic Gurney, F.W.H. Myers, and Frank Podmore. Two volumes in one. 1962.
- Thomas, John F.
Beyond Normal Cognition. 1937.
- Tyrrell, G.N.M.
Science and Psychical Phenomena. 1938.
- Von Schrenck Notzing, A.
Phenomena of Materialisation. 1920.
- Wallace, Alfred Russel.
Miracles and Modern Spiritualism. 1896.
- Warcollier, René
Experimental Telepathy. 1938.

6. Contributor

J.W. was a contributor to *Man, Myth & Magic: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion, and the Unknown*, edited by Richard Cavendish.

Man, Myth & Magic has enjoyed two incarnations. The contents first appeared as a magazine with each issue devoted to a single theme. Then the contents appeared in its present guise as an encyclopedia with bibliographies, reading lists, thematic lists, and general index.

The sets of magazines and books were first published in 1970 in the United Kingdom by Marshall Cavendish Corp., a division of Times Publishing Limited. Marshall Cavendish Corp. is described as the originator of “collectible magazines” or “partworks.” A total of 112 issues of the magazine appeared; these were sold on newsstands in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and presumably in other English-speaking countries. Each issue is numbered but undated.

For the series of hardbound volumes, the contents were rearranged so that the illustrations and articles would appear in a general alphabetical arrangement. Each time the encyclopedia has been reissued the number of volumes has changed. The series remained in print in 1999.

It is not known whether the publisher Marshall Cavendish and the editor Richard Cavendish are related. The latter is the author and / or editor of numerous illustrated books on religions and other belief systems.

Contributors of major entries are identified by initials. The contributors of minor entries are not identified. J.W. contributed many articles and is identified in the contributor’s note as J.C.N. Webb.

6a. *Man, Myth & Magic: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion, and the Unknown*. London: Marshall Cavendish Corp., 1970. Edited by Richard Cavendish. Copyright

B.C.P. Publishing Limited, 1970. Twelve volumes.

6b. *Man, Myth & Magic: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion, and the Unknown*. London: Marshall Cavendish Corp., 1983. Richard Cavendish, Editor in Chief. Edited and compiled by Yvonne Deutch. Copyright Marshall Cavendish Ltd., 1983. Twelve volumes.

6c. *Man, Myth & Magic: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion, and the Unknown*. London: Marshall Cavendish Corp., 1985. Richard Cavendish, Editor in Chief. Edited and compiled by Yvonne Deutch. Copyright Marshall Cavendish Ltd., 1985. Twelve volumes.

6d. *Man, Myth & Magic: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion, and the Unknown*. London: Marshall Cavendish Corp., 1995. Richard Cavendish, Editor in Chief. New edition, edited and compiled by Richard Cavendish and Brian Innes. There is an eight-person Editorial Board. Copyright Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 1995. Twenty-one volumes. This edition, which comprises 2,976 pages, was in print in 1999.*

7. Contributor to “Encyclopedia of The Unexplained”

J.W. was a contributor to *Encyclopedia of The Unexplained: Magic, Occultism and Parapsychology*, edited by Richard Cavendish.

Encyclopedia of The Unexplained first appeared, like *Man, Myth & Magic*, in magazine form. There were 157 thematic issues, undated but numbered, brought out in 1974. The magazines' contents were then reconfigured to create the encyclopedia which remained in print in 1999. The original work was designed and produced by George Rainbird Ltd. As well, it was copyright in 1974 by Rainbird Reference Books Ltd. The single-volume edition appeared that same year.

J.W. contributed innumerable articles, both major and minor, which refer to the Work. Contributors of minor entries go unidentified. Initials identify contributors of major entries. In the list of contributors, J.W. is credited as the author of the following major articles (with page numbers):

Atlantis and the Master Race, 45-8
The Flat Earth, 67-9
Andrew Jackson Davis, 73
Jung and Freud, 98-9
Georgei Ivanovitch Gurdjieff, 107-9
Hermetica, 110-3
Hypnosis, 114-21
Carl Gustav Jung, 126-9
Lemuria and Mu, 132-3
Wincenty Lutoslawski, 136
Masters, 139-40
Rosicrucians, 215-8
Synchronicity, 241
Theosophical Society, 248-54

Even though this encyclopedia has gone through many reprintings, if not editions, the editor has allowed one oddity to stand uncorrected. Is this a mistake or is it wishful thinking? J.W. was nothing if not meticulous. Did he wince when he read the following information in his contributors note on page nine?

James Webb, historian of ideas: author of *The Flight from Reason*, 1971, and *The Occult Liberation*, 1973, which together form a history and analysis of the modern occult revival, and a forthcoming book on Gurdjieff, *The Harmonious Circus*.

The splendid title of the work-in-progress is *The Harmonious Circle*, but the use of “*Circus*” is a truly inspired reference to the Gurdjieff-Ouspensky “circle”! [The present editor half-believes

that J.W. toyed with the notion of titling his mammoth work *The Harmonious Circus*.]

7a. Cavendish, Richard, editor. *Encyclopedia of The Unexplained: Magic, Occultism and Parapsychology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1974. J.B. Rhine is identified as the Special Consultant on Parapsychology.

7b. Reprinted in paper, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1976.

7c. Reprinted in paper, London: Arkana, distributed by the Penguin Group, 1989.

7d. Reprinted in paper, London: Arkana, distributed by the Penguin Group, 1990.

8. Occasional Contributions

J.W.'s contributions to journals and magazines are far from numerous. So far only one contribution has been found.

8a. "Thomas Mann and the Occult: An Unpublished Letter." *Encounter*, April 1976, pp. 21-4.

3. REFERENCES

The occult is rejected knowledge.

J.W., "Secret Traditions," *The Occult Underground*

References to J.W.'s life and reviews of his books appear in mainstream literature and in occult literature.

I have included here the most important or interesting of these references. Some are published; a few are unpublished impressions and observations.

1977

Anonymous, "The Underground Background," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 26 November 1971.

Unlike most writers on the occult, James Webb is not concerned primarily with a compendium of oddballs. He has a thesis

*

... and though most readers will find much that is familiar, few will fail to discover some that is new. It is to be hoped that having finished volume two Mr Webb will in his next undertaking devote his undoubted abilities to the intensive study of a particular field, so that he can realize how complex even the simplest oddity is.

1977

Norman Cohn, "In Pursuit of the Irrational," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 17 June 1977.

Such lapses are regrettable – but they do not alter the fact that this book performs an important task. It offers the most vivid portrayal yet given of that hydra, modern irrationalism; and leaves one waiting, with curiosity if not with trepidation, to see what the next head will look like.

1977

Goronwy Rees, "Making Friends with Darkness: Gurus Galore," *Encounter*, August 1972.

Yet, as Mr Webb shows, the nineteenth century, which witnessed the death of God and the triumph of the scientific outlook, also gave birth to an astonishing variety of sects and movements dedicated to the proposition that the only real world is the World Beyond. Their very profusion and eccentricity reveal how far established religion had failed to meet the need which they satisfied. The hungry sheep had not been fed and were forced to find new pastures. They were offered very strange nourishment.

*

Behind their varieties of mystical and magical experience there lay an ancient tradition and doctrine whose roots ran as far back as Plotinus, Pythagoras and the Pyramids, as far apart as the Ganges, the Euphrates and the Nile, and which has persisted, evolved and decayed over centuries in response to one of the most powerful of human needs: the need for contact with, and if possible control over, a world that lies beyond the world of the senses. This was the great Secret Tradition, which underlies all modern magical systems

*

Mr Webb's book gains a real distinction from the temper of mind, at once sceptical and sympathetic, in which he approaches this vast amorphous and ambiguous subject, in which what is most

ancient and most modern is so inextricably confused. It is not easy to keep ones head in a world in which nothing is what it seems and everything is a symbol for something else, part of a universal system of correspondences which, if properly understood, will give us both knowledge of, and power over, the unknown.

Mr Webb keeps his head admirably.

*

Mr Webb develops his theme with great persuasiveness and with a wealth of illuminating examples. Indeed, reading his book, one sometimes feels that the very absurdity and extravagance of some of the beliefs he describes are the best possible evidence for the depth and intensity of the need they satisfied and the fear they relieved. *Credo quia impossibile* is as true for magic as it is for religion.

1980

Graham Hough, "The Shaman of Fontainebleau," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 13 June 1980.

In the byways and back alleys of twentieth-century cultural history one is always running into Gurdjieff.

*

An immense amount of research has been done, undoubtedly with complete integrity, and the book has the trappings of a work of scholarship – index, bibliography and a generally responsible air in the treatment of evidence. But on examination much of this comes to pieces in the hand.

1980

Paul Zweig, "Cosmic Freedom," *The New York Times Book Review*, 30 March 1980.

A snake-oil salesman of the highest order, or something more?

Mr. Webb cannot make up his mind, and his story wobbles from investigative zeal to awe, as if he had trouble believing his own evidence. I don't exactly blame him

*

Perhaps the problem is in the point of view. Mr. Webb seems so intent on deciding whether Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, and even Orage possessed "higher powers" that he forgets to ask whether they were also men in the normal sense. He asks the lawyer's question about truth and appearance but not the biographer's question about presence, character and motivation; and in the end, he answers neither.

1980

Rosemary Dinnage, "The Great Mystifier," *The New York Review of Books*, 23 Oct. 1980.

James Webb (author, says the jacket, of *The Occult Establishment* and *The Occult Underground*) is by no means dismissive; he stands in various positions on the fence, not unamused by his story but often – rather too often – giving it the benefit of the doubt.

1981

Jacket copy, back-flap, *The Occult Establishment* (Glasgow: Richard Drew Publishing, 1981).

James Webb died in tragic circumstances on 8 May, 1980, at the age of 34. His many friends decided that a fitting memorial would be to endow a book prize at his old College, Trinity, Cambridge. That this prize was over-subscribed in a very few weeks is an indication of just how much James Webb's memory is valued.

1982

Joyce Collin-Smith, "An Appreciation of James Webb," *The Astrological Journal*, Vol. XXII, No. 4.

[Reprinted in full elsewhere in this volume.]

1982

Colin Wilson, "James Webb and the Occult," *Light*, Summer, 1982.

[Reprinted in full elsewhere in this volume.]

1982

Joyce Collin-Smith, "A Precognitive Dream: James Webb," *Light*, Summer, 1982.

[Reprinted in full elsewhere in this volume.]

1982

Editorial entry in *Contemporary Authors* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1982), Volume 103. The editors offered, in addition to the standard bio-bibliographical information, the following overview:

Sidelights: Webb has made a special study of the complex historical and cultural background of Western occultism, and has documented its relationship to extremist political movements. His in-depth surveys of the ideas and personalities preceding a renewed interest in the occult present an overall view of the problem of the twentieth century as a battleground between reason and unreason.

1985

Michel de Salzman, "Footnote to the Gurdjieff Literature" (1980, revised 1985), *Gurdjieff: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985) by J. Walter Driscoll and The Gurdjieff Foundation of California.

Books "about" the Teaching ... Finally, under the heading of peripheral studies, I will cite the prodigious and no doubt sincere effort of James Webb, who attempted through his would-be systematic inquiry *The Harmonious Circle* to puzzle out the whys and wherefores of the Gurdjieff phenomenon. However, this impressive tome, when all is said and done, will be just one more "canard" in the swamp of misunderstanding.

1985

Leslie A. Shepard. Editor. *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology* (Gale Research, 2nd ed., 1985). Bio-biblio entry.

Webb, James (C.N.) (1946-1980)

Webb's major contribution, however, came from the special study he conducted of the historical and cultural background of Western occultism, with special reference to its relationship with extremist political movements The scholarly surveys by Webb of the ideas and personalities preceding the occult revival of the 1960s and 1970s constitute an overview of the problem of the twentieth century as a battleground between reason and unreason. He started his writings with a somewhat skeptical viewpoint, but in the course of time experienced unusual visions and insights, sometimes associated with hallucinations and a nervous breakdown. He died May 8, 1980, in Scotland.

1988

Jacket copy, back-flap, *The Occult Underground* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1988).

James Webb, from Perthshire, Scotland, was schooled at Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge. He was a ghost-writer, television producer-trainee, and schoolmaster before turning full-time to writing in 1969. He specializes in all aspects of the irrational, especially in Celtic areas. He says he is addicted to opera and is a part-time water gypsy. He is a member of the American Society for Psychical Research, and has contributed to *Man, Myth and Magic*, and *The Encyclopaedia of the Unexplained*.

1988

Joyce Collin-Smith. *Call No Man Master*. (Bath: Gateway Books, 1988). With an Introduction by Colin Wilson.

The publisher describes the content of this book in these terms: "Fifty years of spiritual adventures, in praise of teachers but wary of gurus." It is a remarkable memoir, candid, at times confessional, even confrontational, and concerned with the waywardness of gurus as well as the integrity of the "way." Along the way the author describes encounters with Dr. Frank Buckman of Moral Rearmament, P.D. Ouspensky, Rodney Collin (she married Rodney's brother Richard), Pak Subuh, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and James Webb, "historian of ideas." The section on Webb who died so young is particularly poignant. Colin Wilson concluded: "I don't have the least doubt that it will still be read in a hundred years from now." *Call No Man Master* has long been out of print. The full text is available through the Glastonbury Archive.

1989

Kathleen Riordan Speeth. *The Gurdjieff Work* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1989).

Yet the attempt to keep the tradition free of distortion has inevitably led to confrontations between various leaders of the Foundation and those outside the fold. Those who wished to preserve clashed head on with those who sought to elaborate or even to explore the work objectively. James Webb, author of *The Harmonious Circle*, a history of the movement after Gurdjieff, was obstructed by the Gurdjieff hierarchy from publishing material. Though not devotional, his book was certainly not antipathetic. Eventually reason prevailed and the book appeared in print. Webb's suicide soon thereafter remains an enigma.

1989

Leslie A. Shepard, private correspondence, 23 October 1989.

Webb was a brilliant writer. He began as a conscientious sceptic, but finished up with visions and hallucinations. He was clearly psychic, in spite of his intellectual opposition, and it was too much for him. Sad that he committed suicide.

1990

Colin Wilson, *Access to Inner Worlds: The Story of Brad Absez* (Berkley, Calif.: Celestial Arts, 1990).

One of my literary chores during the earlier part of the year had been writing an introduction to *The Occult Establishment* by the late James Webb. Webb, one of the most brilliant minds of his generation, had committed suicide the previous year, after a two-year mental illness. In the latter part of his illness, he had kept up a correspondence with Joyce Collin-Smith, which she

allowed me to read. It was clear that he had gone through a rather more severe version of my “panic attacks,” complete with delusions and hallucinations. He had allowed himself to be “taken in” by the depressions and, as a result, had been drawn far deeper into “negative feedback.” Yet he fought back, and in those final months seemed to be regaining his balance, and recognizing that he had achieved completely new insights into the problems that interested him so deeply – the hidden powers of the mind. The suicide seems to have been due to a momentary regression into pessimism. The Introduction remained unpublished, because his wife disagreed with my view of his illness – she preferred to believe that it was ordinary insanity. But my study of Webb’s last letters made me more aware than ever of the nature of this problem. We “identify” with our emotions. When I have a pain, I say, “It hurts,” not, “I hurt.” Yet when I experience happiness I say, “I am happy”; and when I experience depression, I say, “I feel gloomy.” Writing about James Webb made me more convinced that feelings – particularly negative feelings – are an irrelevancy. The “central ego,” the “unit of pure thought,” must learn to recognize that it remains the final arbiter. Feeling, like perception, is intentional.

1998

Marcello Truzzi, sociologist and writer, email to the present editor, 31 October 1998.

I thought I had mentioned knowing Jamie Webb to you earlier. My wife Pat and I met him through Ellic Howe, as I recall. Jamie and I corresponded and met once in London. He took us to his club (the Travellers) for lunch, and Pat particularly liked him, and they spoke about Scottish history (as I recall, he had already written a book [I think his first one] about the battle of Culloden). He was red-haired and very Scottish-looking, Pat thought. As I recall, we also went to some book store where he briefly introduced us to Francis King, another writer on the history of the

occult.

In addition to his *Occult Establishment* and *Occult Underground* works, his book on Gurdjieff is special, and he had much help from Ellic on that one.

We were very shocked to learn of his suicide. Ellic told us his father had also done away with himself, so there may have been a genetic factor in his depression or whatever drove him to it.

Pat recalls that he lived in an old priory he (and Pat thinks with his wife, but we never met her, and I do not recall his being married) that he had renovated. If Pat's memory is right about his being married, his wife may still be about.

Unfortunately, Ellic died some years ago, and he would have been a good resource for you. I probably should check my correspondence with both Ellic and Jamie for you, since I should have files with those letters.

Don't know how familiar you might be with Ellic Howe who wrote great historical books on the Golden Dawn, black propaganda, and astrology and Hitler. I think Jamie saw Ellic as his mentor as well as a major informant on occult stuff. I think Ellic knew his family, etc.

4. JAMES WEBB AND THE OCCULT

Colin Wilson

Colin Wilson's essay "James Webb and the Occult" is a wide-ranging and thought-provoking discussion of a number of influences that affected J.W.'s life and writing. It offers an insight into the forces at play near the end of his life. I am grateful to Mr. Wilson for permission to reprint this essay from *Light*, Summer 1982. *Light* is the journal of the College of Psychic Studies Ltd., 16 Queensberry Place, London SW7 2EB, England.

This was written as an introduction to *The Occult Establishment* by James Webb (Richard Drew Publishing Ltd., U.K., 1981, £9.50) but not used.

The death of James Webb on May 8, 1980, went almost unnoticed by the English literary establishment. This was understandable, for he was the kind of writer the English are inclined to ignore: a historian of ideas. The fact that he was one of the most brilliant historians of ideas in the present century made no difference. The English have always felt that thinking for its own sake is a slightly discreditable form of self-indulgence, rather like smoking hashish through a hubble-bubble, and that anyone who makes a habit of it is bound to come to a bad end.

In fact, Webb's end, although it was by his own hand, was in some ways impressively good. For two years, he had shown signs of mental instability, with symptoms of schizophrenia and paranoid hallucinations. After a full-scale nervous breakdown in

1979, he wrote to a friend, Joyce Collin-Smith (whose brother-in-law, Rodney Collin, figures largely in Webb's last book, *The Harmonious Circle*), telling her something of his experiences. The many long letters he wrote to her between then and his suicide reveal that his mind was as brilliant and keen as ever, and that the balanced, logical part of himself was determined to regain control and rise above the emotional storms that had caused so much anguish. Webb came, I believe, very close to regaining his mental balance by sheer strength of will. It seems to me, therefore, that his death contains the elements of genuine literary tragedy. These letters suggest that Webb would have gone on to become something far more than a historian of ideas. He was moving into a new and immensely fascinating stage of development.

I bought Webb's first book, *The Flight from Reason*, when it appeared in 1971, and found it at once absorbing and irritating. To begin with, I thought the title badly chosen. The title page declares that it is Volume One of *The Age of the Irrational*, which makes it sound as if it is one of those rather dreary attacks on "the occult," with titles like *Cults of Unreason* or *Delusions of the Supernatural*. In fact, it proved to be an immensely readable and erudite history of 19th-century Spiritualism and "occultism," written by a man obviously fascinated by human eccentricity. And in this curious contrast between the title of the book and its contents we confront the paradox of James Webb's attitude to these twilit realms of the human soul. If he really feels that all this is merely a flight from reason, a sign of the age of the irrational, then why has he read so widely and deeply in the history of French, German, even Russian "occultism"? I was impressed by Webb's scholarship; I had just completed writing an enormous study of "occultism," and was getting very tired of reading books by journalistic hacks with titles like *Weird World of the Supernatural*. Somebody once remarked cynically: history repeats itself; historians repeat one another. But Webb's book was full of original research on all kinds of half-forgotten figures of 19th-century occultism.

What I found disappointing was that he seemed to make no real distinction between charlatans, crank-Messiahs, would-be necromancers and genuine religious teachers. Where fact was concerned, Webb was dazzling; but his judgment seemed to me thoroughly superficial. Nevertheless, *The Flight from Reason* became one of the most valued reference books on the period.

In late 1977, I went to have lunch with Ellic Howe, the author of a remarkable history of modern astrology, *Urania's Children*, and a study of the Golden Dawn. On Howe's bookshelf I found a book by Webb that I had not seen: *The Occult Establishment*, published in America in 1976. This was even bigger than *The Flight from Reason*, and a brief examination made it clear that this was the second volume that Webb had announced. When I asked Ellic about it he talked affectionately about "Jamie," and told me that he believed that Webb would develop into a major historian of ideas. He offered to lend me the book, but I could see at once that it was the kind of thing I would want to consult repeatedly; so I declined his offer, and instead made a note of the publisher's address; I later obtained a copy from America. I also made a note of Webb's address; Ellic had made him sound so delightful that I felt I wanted to meet him. We exchanged a couple of letters in 1978; but the problem was that I lived in Cornwall, and Webb lived in Scotland, some five or six hundred miles away. So, regrettably, the meeting never came about. Webb did ask me, in a letter of January, 1978, to let him have any comments or criticisms on *The Occult Establishment*; but by the time the book arrived in May, our correspondence had lapsed. When I read it, I could see why Macdonald's (the publishers of *The Flight from Reason*) had not taken up their option to publish it. It was, if anything, even more fascinating than the first volume. But it was also about twice as long. Moreover, it was the kind of book that would not readily find an English audience. The American publisher had changed the title of his first book to *The Occult Underground*, wisely aiming it at the enormous audience for books on "the occult" in the United States. But since the British title announced it as a "sceptical" study, it would hardly appeal to

British occultists. On the other hand, the British academic establishment would certainly wonder why a serious scholar should write with such immense gusto about the byways of 19th-century nuttiness. With the best intentions in the world, Jamie had managed to fall neatly between two stools. If luck had been on his side, both books would have been published in a single large volume, would have attracted widespread attention for their brilliance and zest, and would have made him famous. As it was, he managed to seem a sceptic to the believers and a believer to the sceptics.

Fortunately, Webb's natural exuberance and optimism seem to have carried him past his disappointment at the rejection of the second volume by Macdonald's. In the early seventies he was newly married, and was teaching at Harrow. He had met his wife Mary in 1965, when he was 19 and Mary was 17; she was an Englishwoman, daughter of a surgeon of York; she tells me that they were attracted to one another because they were "both zany people." (All Webb's friends talk about his flaming red hair and his exuberant vitality.) In another sense, it was the attraction of opposites. Mary was interested in dogs, gardens, horses, and when they first went out together, they were at cross purposes for some time until they realized that the Durrell he was discussing was Lawrence while she was talking about Gerald. She admits she was "silenced by his intellectualism" and didn't understand the vocabulary. But both were, in different ways, intelligent and ambitious, and Mary had soon become a photographer working for *The Field*, then a features writer on *Harper's* and *Queen*. Jamie, meanwhile, was absorbed in his researches into the mages and sages of the late 19th century, and was becoming increasingly interested in Gurdjieff. Because there was so much mystery surrounding the life and background of this enigmatic man of genius, Webb decided to devote a full-length book to him.

In 1972, Joyce Collin-Smith, a novelist who had been personal assistant to the Maharishi, had given a talk about her brother-in-law Rodney Collin, author of *The Theory of Celestial Influence*, and a major follower of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky.

Webb attended the lecture (at the National Liberal Club) and introduced himself to Joyce, explaining that he was working on a biography of Gurdjieff. She describes him as a tall young Scot wearing a Lindsay kilt, “sociable in rather a diffident way, not very confident,” but adds that the depth of his intelligence and his scholarship were both obvious. Jamie visited her at her home many times, and attended the Astrological Conference in Cambridge as her guest. “We talked for some hours, and a delightful sense of kinship and common purpose united us across the great gap in our years.” But Jamie pursued his quest for Gurdjieff in Persia and the East, and the two never met again.

The Harmonious Circle was finished in 1976 – by which time the Webbs were living in Hampstead – but it encountered the same difficulties as the second volume of *The Age of the Irrational*. It was huge – about a quarter of a million words long – and its general approach to Gurdjieff could hardly be expected to appeal to his followers and admirers. It was finally accepted (by Thames and Hudson) in 1978 and appeared, shortly before Webb’s death, in 1980. I reviewed it for *Now* magazine (although it collapsed before my review appeared) and stated my own basic feelings about it: that from the biographical point of view, it was brilliant and exhaustive, jammed with totally new information, but that Webb’s understanding of what Gurdjieff was trying to do was deficient. The opening of the final chapter conveys something of its general tone: “The reader will ask: why, if the pupils of the Fourth Way are in effect taken for a ride by their teachers, are there not more open denunciations of their real methods? The most obvious reason is that the victims are afraid of looking ridiculous; although as every individual is ridiculous at almost every minute of the day, there is really no reason why exposure should be feared.” I have never been connected with any Gurdjieff (Fourth Way) group and certainly hold no brief for his disciples; but this *Time Magazine* approach to Gurdjieff seems to me simply to fail to do justice to the depth and importance of what he had to say.

In 1976, the Webbs decided to move to Scotland, into a house

that had been an old church, near Durisdeer. He must have been feeling rather discouraged. Like all brilliant young men, he wanted to become known, to hear his voice raised in the intellectual debates of our time. He had, in fact, become a minor establishment figure, having done work for the BBC, *Encounter* and *Man, Myth and Magic*. But in England, he was still known simply by *The Flight from Reason*, and his major work had not found a publisher. He had a small private income from stocks and shares, but it was not large enough for them to live in London while he tried to make a living as a writer, so the decision to return to Scotland may have struck him as something of a defeat. But he was becoming increasingly fascinated by Scottish history – particularly the battle of Flodden, and the damaging blow it inflicted on Scots intellectual life – so the move could not be considered entirely a retreat.

While Mary worked as a journalist in Dumfries, Jamie stayed at home and wrote. For a young man of his energetic and sociable disposition, this seclusion may have been something of a strain. I can still recall my own move to Cornwall, the year after the publication of my first book *The Outsider*; while I found the countryside delightful, there was something a little unnerving in the sudden peace after the uproar of London.

In January, 1980, he wrote a letter to Joyce Collin-Smith in which he said: “My own life has just emerged from two years of nightmare I had a full-scale nervous breakdown, with hallucinations, visions and a fine repertoire of subjectively supernatural experiences.” He adds ironically: “Hoist with my own petard, some might say, but not an experience I would wish on my worst enemy.”

Now it may be that it would be best to gloss over this part of Jamie’s life. Neither his wife nor his best friend Richard Drew (the publisher of *The Occult Establishment*) wanted to discuss it, and Mary Webb’s attitude was that mental illness is like any other kind of illness, and hardly worth dwelling upon. I remain convinced otherwise, and a sentence in Webb’s letter of January 31, 1980, explains my reason: “Despite the undoubtedly hallucinatory

nature of many of my experiences, a residue remains which I simply have to take seriously, although I can't fit all the altered states of consciousness into one system. Gnosticism and some of the Indian systems seem to provide the best framework." And in another letter he says: "Orthodox medicine would simply say the mind becomes deranged, but there are patterns to the derangements, and certain experiences which suggest possible modes of consciousness that one hadn't had an inkling of before"

The solidly "sane" person who has never had a glimpse of these interior earthquakes may wonder how such things can come about in the first place. I think I can answer this question from personal experience. In *Mysteries*, I have described how, in 1973, during a period of heavy overwork, I began waking up in the middle of the night and experiencing "panic attacks." These attacks are basically a build-up of fear, and they flood the system with adrenalin, causing the heart to pound, and opening up a sudden vision of futility and meaninglessness. During everyday life we are always encountering problems that make us feel, for a moment, more or less inadequate; but we make an effort and overcome them, or they go away, or life simply moves on. But in the silence in the middle of the night, when your physical biorhythms are at their lowest point, the anxieties may "gang up" on you, and suddenly produce an awful temptation to turn and run, to abandon all responsibility and duty. At these negative signals from the intellect, the body and emotions become chaotic; you feel sick and frightened and totally alone, overtaken by an awful sense of disaster. The fact that this disaster has no counterpart in the outside world makes no difference.

Now the physical explanation of panic attacks is quite simple. The purpose of adrenalin is to make us alert and capable of facing danger. But, as everyone knows, it can have the opposite effect; the feeling of alarm produced by adrenalin has the effect of worrying you and making you feel worse still – as in "stage fright." So the hormone that is designed to increase your sense of urgency only gives you a "sinking feeling" and makes you feel

like rushing to the lavatory. You tend to react to the feeling of fear with yet more fear, and the result is a kind of “negative feedback,” a build-up of alarm that can turn into a full internal rout.

The trouble with such attacks is that they build up a habit response, a nervous revulsion, so that the mere thought of the attack causes the “sinking feeling” and starts another internal landslide. This can quickly lead to a permanent state of emotional fatigue and nervous breakdown.

It is, of course, an absurdity – a silly misunderstanding. There is an episode in one of Grace Metalious’s novels in which an inexperienced young girl has a car crash because the accelerator jams in the down position; the narrator comments that she was unaware how easy it was to put a foot under the accelerator and pull it up again. The same applies to these nervous attacks. In this case, the answer is to recognise that the feeling of panic is a simple response to an “injection” of adrenalin, just as sleepiness is a response to an injection of anaesthetic; it is purely physical, and has no objective validity. This recognition stops the panic from triggering more panic, and arrests the “inner landslide.” But someone who encounters panic attacks for the first time is likely to be bowled over by them, and to go into a terrifying emotional nosedive. This, I believe, is what happened to Webb. (The problem may have been compounded by the fact that his own father had committed suicide quite abruptly, and apparently without reason, at the end of the war.) Going around for days, for weeks on end, with a feeling that the bottom has fallen out of his world, the real problem for the panic-depressive is to struggle out of this swamp of negative emotion and back on to the dry land of objectivity. People who have never tried to discipline their emotions, or who are naturally inclined to self-pity or pessimism, may well find this almost impossible without the aid of drugs. But people like Webb, who have become accustomed to trusting the mind, are in an altogether better position. Provided a part of them can look down on the convulsions of the “emotional body” (for that is what it amounts to) while refusing to be convinced by its

misery, they stand a very good chance indeed of total recovery. And the experience brings a degree of self-knowledge and control that could never have been learned at second hand.

At the same time, it must be admitted that, for intellectuals, panic-attacks can be far worse than for non-intellectuals – particularly if they happen to have a tendency towards pessimism. If the intellect allows itself to be affected by the vision of misery and futility (instead of calling its bluff), the result may be a sense of universal meaninglessness and chaos – a feeling that “all is vanity,” that life is a trap, that human beings are little better than lambs condemned to slaughter. In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James describes such a “breakdown” that occurred at an early stage in his life; he entered a room at twilight, and suddenly recalled a catatonic patient he had seen recently in a mental home, gazing blankly into space, and was overwhelmed with the thought: “There but for grace of God go I. If the hour should strike for me as it struck for him, nothing could save me.” And he experienced an inner collapse into despair and panic that lasted for a long time, so that he woke up every morning with a dreadful feeling of emptiness and foreboding in the pit of his stomach. But it is significant that James admits that his “vastation” occurred at a time of depression about his future prospects. So although the vision seems “meta-physical” in nature, it has a strongly personal foundation. It seems to me significant that Jamie was worried about his future prospects, and irrationally anxious about his finances, convinced that he could not afford to try to go on struggling to write for a living. (His will seems to have proved that his finances were in a fairly healthy state; certainly, he was not on the verge of bankruptcy.)

In his letters to Joyce Collin-Smith, he described some of his “visions,” and they seem to me to be – as he realised himself – of extraordinary interest. “The two things which happened to me and which are positive in context as well as being clear-cut experiences were an extraordinary experience of slotting in and out of time, and a shattering vision of the “Wheel of life – the sight of my previous incarnations set up like a great silver wheel

.... This vision was physical in its impact I am now convinced that there is in the human being a principle of consciousness which is not merely the result of a congerie of experience, that this principle is independent of time, and that if my horrific vision of what Marcion called '*haec cellula Creatoria*' is possible at all, there is (as so many people familiar to both you and me have kept saying) a way out."

It is important to recognise that these experiences are common to mystics, and that there is a striking similarity between what Webb here describes and experiences that have been documented by visionaries over the past four thousand years or so. At the age of sixteen, the Frenchman René Daumal made a determined attempt to descend into his own unconscious mind by means of a handkerchief soaked in ether, which he held against his nose (so that when he started to "go under," his hand would fall and he would begin to recover while the "glimpse" was still fresh). Like Webb, Daumal had a vision of being outside time, in "an instantaneous and intense world of eternity," and emphasises that "ordinary consciousness" is contained in this intenser consciousness, as dream consciousness is contained in waking consciousness and not vice versa. There was a sense of being beyond time, and of being involved in some strange geometrical arrangement of circles and triangles, moving in harmonic motion. (Webb also writes, "For three days ... I saw 'molecules,'" and quotes Gerard Manley Hopkins to the effect that Nature is a Heraclitean flux.)

What I am trying to establish here is that Webb's strange visions, brought on by a kind of breakdown between the conscious and unconscious mind, cannot be dismissed as the delusions of a madman; his letters make it clear that he himself remained sane enough to distinguish between delusions and a glimpse of some larger reality. Like Daumal, he experienced a conviction of a "something else, a beyond, another world, or another form of knowledge." R.H. Ward, whose *Drug Takers Notes* describes similar visions as a result of experiments with psychedelic drugs, speaks of entering "into a state of con-

sciousness already far more complete than the fullest degree of ordinary waking consciousness.” A modern Hindu mystic, Gopi Krishna, experienced similar insights as a result of experiments in meditation; a curiously pleasant sensation seemed to rise up his spine, then “with a roar like that of a waterfall, I felt a stream of liquid light entering my brain.” But these ecstasies were followed by deep nervous depression, and strange geometrical visions when he closed his eyes. “Each morning heralded for me a new kind of terror, a fresh complication in the already disordered system.” “My consciousness was in such a state of unceasing flux that I was never certain how it would behave within the next few minutes. It rose and fell like a wave, raising me one moment out of the clutches of fear to dash me the next into the depths of despair.” And this, unfortunately, is one of the chief characteristics of this experience: one’s inner world suddenly becomes unstable, and what seemed a solid and reliable surface turns into something like a stormy sea. It is the body and emotions that cause this turmoil; provided the intellect has the courage to hold firm, it gradually subsides into a new kind of control.

Webb undoubtedly arrived at important insights through his own experience of “terror.” “One result of my own experiences is that I now separate the ‘Life Force’ in the sense of motor force, tied up with sex energy, from the principle of consciousness The result would be a diagram like Robert Fludd’s pyramids intersecting in the human body. In short, I am something of a Manichee.” That is, he begins to make a sharp distinction between body and “soul” (a notion he would certainly have found very dubious in his earlier days) with the soul, the *atman* of Hindu philosophy, using the body, “poor old Brother Ass (who got well-nigh disintegrated two years ago) to manoeuvre around in this very soupy environment – of which Brother Ass is a part. It is rather like being in a deep-water submarine and using pincers, grabs, television cameras and artificial lights to make contact with the strange world of the seabed ” He adds: “Things are very frightening when one is made to see face to face.” Yet he has the courage to recognise that he has to go

forward. “But could the breakdown, terrifying and chaotic as it is, not be a positive, almost ‘evolutionary step in the individual’s progress’?” The answer is yes; not “almost,” but a definite evolutionary step. If he could have recognised this with total self-confidence, I believe, there could have been no question of suicide. His problem was that he remained, to some extent, intellectually pessimistic. “I have my private mythology, that we are most of us participants in something that is a cross between a great adventure and a grand primeval tragedy.”

This is, to some extent, understandable, for the essence of his vision was something like Nietzsche’s “eternal recurrence.” “The sheer horror of discovering that one is imprisoned in the coils of cyclical time is impossible to convey. The part of me which was ‘outside’ could hardly bear the prospect. The impact was physical – I collapsed, tingling in all my extremities ” Yet further analysis might have revealed that such a response is unnecessary. There are hundreds of well-authenticated examples of glimpses of the future – detailed, precise glimpses. These suggest that, in some odd sense, the future already exists, or has already taken place. (Webb describes how, at the age of sixteen, a series of precognitive dreams had interested him in this whole problem of the “hidden reality.”) Yet it seems clear that we do possess “free will” in some odd, limited way – perhaps rather like an actor, forced to perform the same play, yet able to alter his lines, even to improvise. This clearly implies that there is a part of us “in” time, and a part of us “outside.”

If Webb had had nothing to do but wrestle with these problems and write about them, all might have been well. But he was also convinced that he had to find a job. In fact, he found a job as an advertising copy-writer in Newcastle, which involved driving two hundred miles to Newcastle, then back three days later, once every week. Mary Webb feels that this “contact with reality” was a benefit, and I have no doubt that she was, to some extent, correct; activity of any kind stimulates the vital forces. But his attitude to such a job was bound to be ambivalent, and the sheer physical strain must have been considerable. His letters to

Joyce Collin-Smith continue to discuss Gurdjieff – the tone is no longer as sceptical as in *The Harmonious Circle* – Buddha, the Cabala and Christian mysticism. He also began to read a great deal of Christian theology. He tells her on April 18: “For myself, I’m recovering some robustness. I feel like shouting ‘A pox on the Eleusinian Mysteries!’ and giving philosophy a rest for a while.” Like T.S. Eliot, he was growing weary of “those matters that with myself I too much discuss, too much explain ” In early May, Joyce and her husband Derry were due to drive to Scotland for a holiday, and to stay a night with the Webbs. He promised to telephone her when he got back from Newcastle on Friday, May 8, 1980. He did not do so. On the previous day he had been in high spirits, and cooked a gourmet meal for himself and Mary. By the following day he was deeply depressed after a sleepless night; he took Mary out to lunch, in a restaurant, but found it too much, and began to cry. At home, he decided to go and lie down, leaving a note on the door saying, “I’m asleep, come and wake me.” He also left a note for Mary before he turned on himself the shotgun whose licence he had recently renewed.

All three of James Webb’s published books are very good indeed, and I suspect that *The Flight from Reason* and *The Occult Establishment* will achieve a kind of classic status. They combine the journalist’s eye for the fascinating anecdote with a scholar’s determination to explore every nook and cranny of the subject. And he writes it all with the gusto that reminds me of H.G. Wells.

What emerges very clearly is that Webb was a thorough-going romantic, a person who felt most at home in a world of the mind, of the imagination, and who found it very difficult to come to terms with the world of everyday reality. His mother, Rosemary Dickson, remarked in a letter to me that “the Occult was a bad subject for someone of Jamie’s sensitive nature to get involved in,” but I find that hard to accept. Quite plainly, he reveled in it; it fascinated him; yet a Scottish hard-headedness caused him to maintain a certain aloofness, an attitude of irony. Yet if he is really so sceptical about it all, why should he write about it at such length? He was too sharp-witted, too intelligent, to become

a “believer”; at the same time, an obsessive urge to explore the mysteries of the human psyche caused him to return to it again and again. I felt surprised that his attitude towards Gurdjieff was so detached and satirical when I read *The Harmonious Circle*, but re-reading his first two books makes me aware that this was not because he found Gurdjieff too “mystical” or esoteric. He says in one of the letters to Joyce: “Also, I find I keep coming back to Gurdjieff ... with the realisation that some idea I have just formulated has been voiced by him.” Then occurs the strange comment: “But generally speaking I find him too fundamentalist.” Gurdjieff was too pragmatic to appeal to Webb’s romanticism.

It is this romanticism that explains why I find both his work and his personality so interesting. Jamie and I seem to have spent our lives exploring the same areas. My *Outsider* was also basically a study in romanticism, in men who experienced a sudden curious conviction that men somehow possess more freedom and strength than they usually recognise. The “occultists” and the romantics of the 19th century were saying the same thing: Life is not dull, brutish and short, man is not merely a social animal or a product of the survival of the fittest. In some odd, incomprehensible way, the inside of the human mind is as vast as the external universe. But while I am a typical Anglo-Saxon, basically pragmatic, Jamie was a typical Celt. His mother mentions that he bore many resemblances to his Irish grandmother, who had his quick brain, red hair and fiery temper; his grandmother was also a Spiritualist and a friend of Geraldine Cummins. His maternal grandfather was a Highlander “with quite a bit of the Sight”; she seems to be suggesting (and I agree) that Jamie himself probably possessed it to some degree. (I am “ESP-thick.”) When a student at Harrow, Jamie took the Winston Church Essay Prize for an essay on “Witches and Warlocks,” and his mother mentions that “he used to rush around the country looking for standing stones and Druid circles.” In short, Jamie conforms closely to the type I have labelled the “romantic Outsider.” (He was also bad at games, psychically clumsy and accident-prone.) Another odd link between us emerges in his last

letter to me, two months before his death. I had also written a book on Gurdjieff for the Aquarian Press, and Jamie and I agreed to swap books. The publisher had also asked me to write a book (in the same series) on Rudolph Steiner, and I had tentatively accepted. But when I settled down to a systematic reading of Steiner, I found myself irritated by the woolliness of his prose, and regretfully told the publisher I just couldn't do it. In his letter, Jamie mentions that he has accepted the commission to write the book on Steiner – obviously unaware that I had been considering it. It is the book of Webb's that I would have liked to have read most of all. After the experiences of 1978 and '79, it could hardly have avoided breaking new ground.

So to introduce *The Occult Establishment* – which stands on its own, quite independent of the earlier volume – is for me more than a mere literary chore. I salute with immense sadness and regret an intellectual voyager and a fellow spirit who was shipwrecked before the end of the journey. When someone like Jamie Webb dies, I feel sharply the meaning of Donne's words that the death of any human being diminishes me. Every serious and bold thinker adds to the continent of human knowledge, or what Karl Popper calls "World 3" – the world of intellectual discovery.

What the present book makes apparent is that Webb was no short-sighted rationalist. He was interested in the world of "occult philosophy" for precisely the same reason that Yeats or "AE" were interested in it: because he felt it contained an important clue to human potentialities. The last two paragraphs of this book make that quite clear. "The historical development with which this book has been concerned contains the most inspiring and the most dangerous of visions. The flight from reason, by departing from certain fixed categories and opening the floodgates of the imagination, may contain within itself the potential for expanding the limits of human existence." And although he recognises the danger of shipwreck – the shipwreck he himself was to suffer – he still has the courage and optimism to say: "Let us go consciously but cautiously in search of new possibilities."

The above sentence ended my original introduction to Webb's book. But it saddened me to leave out certain fascinating material provided by Joyce Collin-Smith: her notes on a sitting with the Bournemouth medium, Mrs. Wheeler-Hopkins, on October 16, 1980. They would hardly have been directly relevant to *The Occult Establishment*, and, I suspected, might have been vetoed by Mrs. Webb, who had the final say. In the event, she vetoed about 60% of the introduction anyway, so there seems to be no good reason why I should not discuss the *séance* in this context.

The medium began by speaking of a gentleman in khaki. Joyce speculates that this could be Jamie's father. "He may be saying: 'I'm taking charge. He makes sure conditions will be good.'" Then she says: "There's a young man. There are difficulties. He is thirty-ish ... Anguish. He is saying guilt, intolerance, cruelty March. The month of March. May was important too." March was the date of publication of the Gurdjieff book; in May he committed suicide.

"Is his name Johnny? He is very close to you There was a fleeting moment when he wished he hadn't taken this way out His wife is still on earth."

"Is there a Jane? Janie? Would it be anyone's first name? He's Scottish His mother's in Scotland Did he write? Write music? I see beautiful sculpture. I see books everywhere, books, books, books."

"His marriage wasn't very happy, but he doesn't want to lay blame there ... not the real cause. He was a very unhappy disturbed man, mentally and physically. I don't think he intended "

"Was he reddish in colour? Fair? A figure rises up, fair, golden auburn in colour. Red hair! That's it. Beautiful auburn hair!"

"Going back, he may always have been emotionally disturbed. Not a lot of contact with males in early life. He was sexually unhappy. This contributed to the condition. He wants you to know and understand this."

"Early contacts in London now, shown strongly. Early

twenties ... oh, a lovely figure, happy, handsome, aged 24 or 25, drawn into a busy stream. But go ten years on, then its very distressing. He says 'In Hell.'"

"He fought against his Christian upbringing. He travelled abroad, mixed with people of different cultures, linked up with other ways of thought. He wrote He says philosophy of life. He says: 'I was so interested in what came out of man. He enjoyed going back in time. He was a researcher'"

"He's not unhappy any more When he passed over there was nothing mental left. He says the mind just went. In the end there was no mind left "

The notes occupy seven foolscap pages, so are too long to quote at length. Some references to family background are also too personal. What seems clear is that the medium had a remarkable number of "hits" – the red hair, the book, the research, the travel abroad. She also mentioned seeing people talking German; he had studied at Vienna University after Cambridge. There are also a fair number of misses; or at least, references that mean nothing to Joyce. There was a reference to someone called Arthur or Arnold, and others to a Rosie; these were unknown. The same goes for an address: 30 Hanover Square, or Place. (A check revealed that one of these was non-existent.)

There is, of course, always the possibility that the medium was picking up the information telepathically from the sitter. But I personally find one fragment of the transcript oddly convincing. The medium asks: "Was there any link with Churchill?" He says, "Winston Churchill and laughs." Joyce Collin-Smiths marginal note reveals bafflement; but she was unaware, until she read my introduction, that Webb had won the Churchill prize. Then, in the next sentence, the medium gets the name:

"Jamie! That's his name! Jamie. Oh, he is pleased! He says: 'Jamie, that's me.'"

And she adds what are, for me, some of the most intriguing remarks in the transcript:

"I shall incarnate again. Not yet, but there's a duty." The medium comments: "The period of time that he would have lived

out his life must go by. Next time, it will be fulfilled When he returns, I think he will be a spiritual leader. Not a Messiah. He laughs and says: ‘But not a Messiah.’”

5. A PRECOGNITIVE DREAM: JAMES WEBB

Joyce Collin-Smith

Joyce Collin-Smith, a confidant of J.W., wrote a tribute titled “A Precognitive Dream: James Webb.” It appeared in *Light*, Summer 1982. Ms. Collin-Smith has kindly permitted me to reprint this memoir. It is particularly valuable because it offers the reader a glimpse of J.W. from an extraordinary perspective.

The first time I saw James Webb I thought: My God, there’s “the Schoolmaster”! I was standing at the end of a lecture hall in London waiting to begin a talk on the life and work of my brother-in-law Rodney Collin, author of *The Theory of Celestial Influence*. As I talked to the chairman up by the high table I had an eye on the growing audience and was acknowledging friends. Then the tall red-haired young man came in. Even down the length of the large hall I knew him instantly. My stomach lurched and tightened in recognition and fright.

“The Schoolmaster” was a character in a dream that I used to have as a little girl, forty years back. Between the ages of nine and about twelve I experienced it four or five times, always the same in every detail. It terrified me. I would wake sitting up in bed drenched in sweat, silently screaming.

In my dream we convent school girls were on the Ascension Day picnic: the nuns always used to take us into the country on that day. But instead of the veiled school mistresses, we were in the charge of this tall, red-haired young master. We were all standing round him. He was pouring lemonade or something out of one of those big enamel jugs that were used in those days, and

the little girls were holding out their mugs to be filled. When he came to me he asked: "Where's your mug?"

I realised I was empty-handed. I answered: "I left it at the top of the tower." In my mind's eye I could see it on a stone seat on an open turret under the sky.

"Go and fetch it then," he commanded in an authoritative voice. I looked up into his face and asked timidly: "Alone?"

"Yes, of course alone."

I then saw that the tower was behind him. It was a sort of folly, ivy-covered with a church type doorway. Steeling myself, I entered and began to climb the spiral staircase, coming out shortly into an empty room half way up, where leaves blew about the door. The staircase continued from the other side of the room.

Before I had stepped forward into the room I heard a terrifying sound. It was wild, maniacal laughter, accompanied by the thud of footsteps running down from the next staircase. In a minute reeling out into the room emerged the Schoolmaster. Instead of the strong, authoritative face, he was completely mad. He ran across, but stopped in front of me because his further descent was blocked by my presence in the doorway.

At this point I always simply stood my ground and screamed. My screaming – though I think it was not audible since nobody ever came – awakened me in my bedroom at home.

Although the dream ceased when I entered my teens, I never forgot it and always remembered the Schoolmaster's face. (It was one of several precognitive dreams and psychic experiences of my childhood.)

On the evening that I saw him enter the lecture hall and move across and sit down in the back row, I knew that something would happen afterwards. When the lecture was over, I was surrounded, as speakers usually are, by people wanting to say things and ask further questions. I noticed the young man waiting, letting others press ahead of him. When everyone had moved off and I could turn to him and look closely into his face, I got a curious impression. It was the same face all right, the same eyes. But the expression was quite different, shy and diffident, seeming to be

without authority. I thought – he has forgotten who he is!

James Webb introduced himself, told me he was writing a book about Gurdjieff, and asked if he might visit me at home to get further material from me.

In the friendship which gradually developed between my husband and myself – both over fifty – and Jamie who was then twenty-four the picture of “The Schoolmaster” gradually faded and was overlaid by the growing familiarity with the nice, exceedingly intelligent, humorous, and very hard-working and disciplined young writer who frequently came to our house. He had in fact been a schoolmaster for a while at Harrow, his old school, before he settled to full-time writing. I saw the “Schoolmaster’s” remembered expression of confident maturity and heard authority in his voice on two separate occasions in the couple of years in which he was a frequent visitor at our home and we met continually. Each time I jumped, remembering the dream. But I never told him of it.

We lost touch before his breakdown. I have always recollected with grief that he telephoned me just at the beginning of his collapse, asking to see me and sounding upset over something concerning his book *The Harmonious Circle*. But I was ill, and we had complicated family troubles, and unfortunately I didn’t respond effectively – I didn’t ring him back in a few days as I half-promised. Two years later when he got in touch again I learned he had felt I had rebuffed him.

When he wrote and a lengthy correspondence began, a few months before his death, he told me horrific stories of the breakdown. He had suffered hallucinations, uncontrollable states of fear and despair, the impression of being on an eternally revolving wheel of recurrence from which there was no escape, and the sense of being surrounded by beings, entities, whose clutch and demands he could not evade. I learned from his parents and his wife that he had been at one time “certifiably mad” and had once run wildly across country, seeming “as though possessed.”

But he seemed to be regaining balance, and the experience

had left a residue of understanding of altered states and levels of consciousness, other worlds.

Obviously any recognition of the dream in childhood about the mad schoolmaster assumed greater significance and interest. My feelings that in the circumstances I ought to have been quicker to realise what was coming and to try to help, added much to my deep sorrow after he took his own life. In my dream I had at least stood my ground in the doorway, preventing his further descent.

He had a very fine mind, perhaps too delicately balanced to sustain the enormous pressures he put upon it. I don't think death has destroyed him entirely. I am confident that we shall meet again.

6. “THE CURIOUS NATURE OF THE HUMAN MIND”: AN APPRECIATION OF JAMES WEBB

Joyce Collin-Smith

It is a reflection on the curious nature of the human mind that the immediate reaction to a tragic event can often be an upsurge of apparent trivia, the significance of which is not always seen at the time. When his wife telephoned me in Scotland with the very distressing news of James Webb’s sudden death at the age of 34, I had been expecting to see him in a few days at our lochside cottage. I thought, now I shall never tell him the story of the Sacred Bird of Tir-nan-Og which I had held in readiness, to teach an idea of his about the Hebrides.

The reaction brought up with it from the depth of memory the visual image of a tall, spare young figure eight years ago, red hair flaring in the sea wind across the skerries to the rocky shore of Harris, face raised to the isolated church on the headland of Rodel, as a mysterious and solitary cuckoo called in that improbable bare landscape. Always thinking of himself in those days as a “rationalist” Jamie was drawn to the strange, the illogical and the apparently magical like the moth to the proverbial candle. The cuckoo at Rodel remained in his mind as though it had some significance for him.

James Webb was born in Edinburgh at 6:30 p.m. on 13th January, 1946. His father, who had a distinguished wartime career, died in a tragic way before he was born. His mother remarried, giving him two devoted half-sisters.

A highly intelligent, very lively boy, he was educated at Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge. His interest was mainly

in the development of ideas underlying the outward trends of life. After graduating, he began to write about the occult and the mysterious, seeking to find the reason behind the semi-esoteric movements that sprouted in Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries. He returned to Cambridge, bought a small house in Portugal Place and a modest boat on the River Cam, was given a research grant, and settled down to write professionally.

Rejected Knowledge

His first important book was *Flight from Reason* (Macdonald, 1972). In this he described the whole body of occult and mystical thought as “rejected knowledge” (p. 182). He suggested that throughout the 19th century there was a “discernible opting for rejected knowledge, especially on the part of the artistic, literary and articulate worlds It means a rejection of the Establishment It springs from an inability to accept the bleak findings of the scientific method about man’s place in the universe The flight to the Secret Traditions represents an escape from insignificance The whole burden of Traditional thought ... is that man is divine, capable of divinity ... a re-assertion of man’s cosmic relevance Men of action could mobilize ... political parties, the occultists by virtue of their peculiar temperament, could manufacture nations out of dreams”

He then published *The Occult Establishment* (1976), and began to contribute to the *Scotsman* and *Encounter*. His work was also used in *Man, Myth and Magic*, the *Encyclopedia of the Unexplained*, and by BBC Radio.

His magnum opus, *The Harmonious Circle* (Putnam U.S.A., and Thames and Hudson), was nearly eight years in the making and was in the London bookshops, and on particular display in Watkins, at the time of his death in May this year. This enormous volume is the most learned, scholarly, deeply considered analysis of the work of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky and their followers that has yet appeared. It covers in great detail the entire field of outer activity and inner development of the movement known as “The

Work,” from Gurdjieff’s mysterious beginnings and his Caucasian boyhood in the 1880s, through to the death of my brother-in-law Rodney Collin in 1956. It will probably remain for many years the definitive history of one of the most interesting and extraordinary experiments to try to raise Man’s consciousness, to help him to understand his own situation and control his own destiny, that have ever taken place. The rag, tag and bobtail of the Work is still to be found in splinter groups and sects all over Europe and America. James Webb searched them all out painstakingly, charmed his way into getting access to a great deal of unpublished material, made many friends, and then set to analyse what he had acquired in the way of knowledge.

His diligence, his width of learning and his deepening interest gradually narrowed down towards an intense absorption with what Gurdjieff called “The Ideas.” The outward life faded, the mind began to delve into its own core; the hours of self-driving, disciplined work became longer and more unrelenting. And with horrific inexorability, the shadows began to close in on Jamie’s mind. By late 1977 he was in a state of complete nervous and mental breakdown, apparently through sheer overwork.

No Price too High

It appears to me that there was a great similarity between both the inner purposes and the outer life of James Webb and Rodney Collin, whose main book *The Theory of Celestial Influence* is his only true monument. Both belonged to that stream of men who want knowledge so deeply and so desperately that in the end no price seems too high to pay for it. Both drove themselves to the limit of endurance in steady application to their self-imposed tasks of writing what they knew, or understood, of the nature of life. Both ultimately entered states of complete exhaustion during which there were experiences of altered states of consciousness. And after the main work was done, both seemed to run down as towards an inevitable end. Life was terminated in both cases by choice, before a normal span of years had been completed.

Rodney fell from a cathedral tower in Peru. Jamie loaded his sporting gun, at his home in Dumfriesshire, on the afternoon of 9th May this year, and placed it to his head.

The grief of his death in this manner hit me with all the greater sense of shock because we had been in close correspondence for some months. To my added distress, letters to me were found crumpled in his waste paper basket after his death. He had not posted them because, feeling that his enormously long and frequent screeds were growing too intense, I had gently discouraged him. In April I had suggested the need to quieten his mind in more peaceful contemplation of the world about him. I felt it to be enough that we were to see him in Scotland soon. I imagined walking the Highlands in the natural friendship that had existed between us for eight or nine years. He had said he longed to discuss his ideas, and apart from his developing philosophical thoughts and theories, I expected to hear about the books he was planning: one on Flodden and the Renaissance in Scotland for Thames and Hudson, and three others in embryonic state.

I failed entirely to see that the increasing urgency of his requests for help sprang from a genuine agony, a travail of the spirit, that needed a much more immediate response. His last writings intended for me were not entirely rational. He spoke of “explosions in my head,” and “the paranoia is coming back.” And in between working or writing letters, he would weep from exhaustion.

A Mundane Job

Because he had earned little from his books, and his private resources were running out, earlier this year (March 1980), he took a dull and soul-destroying job copy-writing in Newcastle. His wife Mary felt this was an excellent thing, for it got him out of the house and into the world again after a long period of breakdown and resultant depression. But it involved a drive of nearly 200 miles twice a week, for the three-day job, and clearly he had not yet got much stamina or reserves of energy. He seemed

reasonably philosophical about the need to do mundane work that would earn money. But he had to do what he called his “real work” in his spare time. He came back each week from three days of putting commercial ideas into slick words for his employers, to the much deeper job of putting serious ideas in order for his next book. There were also other demands on his time, of a social and domestic nature. “If it were left to me,” he wrote, “I would have liked to get back into an academic life. But I have responsibilities now.” The stress gradually mounted again to a level that could not be sustained for long. He began to play with thoughts of impending death.

I first set up Jamie’s chart for him in 1972, at a time when things were going very well. He was confident and cheerful. He was interested in everything and came to a number of lectures at the Association conference at St. John’s College, Cambridge, as my guest. He knew one or two other members of the Association already, and in his sociable way, had parties at his house a short distance away.

“Bring lots of lovely astrologers!” he said one evening. He was a good cook, quite a gourmet, and in his bachelor establishment prepared some sumptuous meals. I rather expected a successful-looking horoscope, for he had enormous alert intelligence and ambition. He was also very likable, with a disarmingly shy and diffident manner until he got to know you, and a delightful sense of humour.

A Stressful Chart

He first introduced himself to me when he came to hear me talk to the Association about Rodney Collin in 1971. Our friendship knew no “generation gap” – though he was a good deal younger than my own offspring. He often visited us, and the two of us talked our heads off and laughed a lot. But with Leo rising and Suns within two degrees of each other in Capricorn, the contact was always harmonious.

But his chart, when I had set it up in detail, caused very

obvious disquiet. I prevaricated in my analysis, in the way one does, not to discourage the aspiring soul. The T-squares, with Jupiter so badly afflicted, and those unpleasant-looking oppositions from 6th to 12th looked ominous health-wise, and especially mental health-wise, I thought. Not that there was the slightest sign of mental instability then.

Where in that chart was the worldly success, so dearly desired at that time? The Capricorn Sun conjunct Venus certainly drove him on, and the cheerful Leonian Ascendant showed up happily in the thick reddish hair, the large handwriting. The boisterous still slightly undergraduate-ish wit. But the impediments, the stresses and the strains seemed rather great. Mars, Saturn and Pluto, all in the 12th, indicated his preoccupation with the inner things of the mind, and indeed, a little later on, with death itself. Saturn as Sun ruler in detriment, afflicted and afflicting on the Capricorn / Cancer axis, gave me a sense of foreboding. Moon quincunx a badly aspected Venus made me wonder about his coming marriage – though in fact it took place under reasonably good transits and with Sun progressed into the 7th house. Both luminaries comparatively afflicted, the Sun being the ruler, with just the one trine, Moon to Neptune, to lighten the load and deepen the emotional content – though possibly in a rather self-delusive way. Mercury, so important to the professional writer, placed where one likes to see it in the 5th, but aspected only by a square to deceptive Neptune. Those little sextiles from Pluto in the 12th to Uranus in Gemini and Neptune in Libra: would they help or hinder the artistic and creative side of him? Five planets were natally retrograde, including the whole grouping in the 12th. Of course I did not look then for early death – there was no reason to think of it. But in the light of events, one notes the Part of Fortune at 26° Sagittarius, one of Charles Carter's pointers for suicide.

Cautious Analysis

My analysis written in September 1972 (my file No. 188 /72) advised him guardedly of the problems of this subtle, complex and difficult chart, while adding that people who make a mark in life usually have difficult rather than “all clear” charts. I mentioned rather cautiously the possibility of the 12th being “the house of self-undoing,” and suggested that his preoccupation with the occult, with the unconscious, with the inner and spiritual life was very strongly indicated, while the outer life, social contacts and friendships of a material or worldly kind seemed rather understressed. “The inner life is so much more powerful. I should have thought you to be sociable, but the chart suggests, not much. Fairly solitary inwardly, anyway. You may need to try to counteract and balance this, because although you seem to be reasonably light-hearted, the indications are that you could get progressively more intense. I think you could make yourself unnecessarily unhappy as a result.”

He read it all seriously. “Hmmm,” he said, not really accepting it. Then: “Not much success or recognition, then?”

“Oh, I should think so – later,” I told him hopefully. “With Capricornians the second half of life is often best.”

“Oh, damn, damn!” he answered, “I want everything now!” Neither of us suspected for one moment that for him there was only “now” in which to live

After Jamie married, he and his wife, whose interests and ideas were of quite a different kind, went off on extended travels in which his researches into the origins of the Work played some part. He wrote good letters, then sent postcards from various romantic-sounding places, but eventually the correspondence faded. On his return he telephoned once or twice, wanting to check facts or references for *Harmonious Circle*, and sounding rather despondent. “Things are not going well. I suppose you know that?” he said crossly. “It’s sure to be all in my horoscope, I suppose.” I answered with the consultant astrologer’s customary dose of soothing syrup, tempering the wind to the shorn lamb.

“Well, Saturn is transiting over its radical degree area. It happens to everyone at about your age.” He was not much comforted. After that there was silence, lasting for over two years, and I thought he had left my life for good.

Two Years of Nightmare

When he wrote in January this year, it was to say that *The Harmonious Circle* was at long last coming out and where should he send my copy, as I had moved? He added: “My own life has just emerged from two years of nightmare. I had a full-scale nervous breakdown, with hallucinations, visions, and a fine repertoire of subjectively supernatural experiences. Hoist with my own petard, some would say. Despite the undoubtedly hallucinatory nature of many of my experiences, a residue remains which I simply have to take seriously. I can’t fit all the altered states of consciousness into one system. Gnosticism and some of the Indian systems seem to provide the best framework. Now all I am interested in is philosophy and religion.” He described certain experiences in detail and I was able to answer that I recognised them, having had a bit of a crack-up myself many years ago.

My letter of sympathy drew an immediate long response, based on his hunger to communicate thoughts that doctors, psychiatrists and his immediate circle could not easily grasp or help him with. In the next four or five months we exchanged somewhere near 20,000 words in constant correspondence. We discussed all the forms of religious or philosophical thought that either of us had touched upon and produced a mass of mutually acceptable ideas. He was much more learned and scholarly than I, but my greater span of years gave me much more experience to draw upon. I think it would be true to say that in intelligence we were equals though I would argue with no-one who thought him to be my superior.

He spoke of “a shattering vision of the Wheel of Life, the sight of my previous incarnations set up like a great silver mill

wheel.” He had become convinced that there is in the human being “a principle of consciousness which is not merely the result of a congerie of experience.” He imagined his “individualized consciousness” using “poor old Brother Ass (who got well nigh disintegrated two years ago) to manoeuvre around in this very soupy environment, of which Brother Ass is part. It is rather like being in a deep-water submarine and using pincers, grabs, television cameras and artificial light to make contact with the strange world of the seabed.”

He agreed with me that, as he put it, “there is no reason to think that the pilgrims of the pit have knowledge which is in essence any different from the riders in the chariot of the spirit.” He wondered if his breakdown, “terrifying and chaotic as it was,” might not be a positive almost evolutionary step in his progress? He felt he had been a rationalist all his life and had suddenly been catapulted into a larger universe.

The Principle of Consciousness

“I like your idea that God might be Consciousness,” he wrote. “At least two people over the past three years have said to me, ‘God is the life force.’ How little they can have looked about them! Nature red in tooth and claw, energy prone as you say to become either love or war, the brute nature of mere impulse for survival – how can this life force be God? It may bear some relation to the Old Unprintable of the Old Testament, that ‘savage God’ who as Zaehner says, ‘raves within each of us,’ but it is unacceptable to our consciousness. I think that in certain people the principle of consciousness is in revolt against the conditions of existence (determined by the life force) from a very early age ... I think you are probably right in thinking that consciousness exists in its own right, independent of any human carrier.”

Next time he wrote: “Over the past four or five months I have been changing positions so rapidly that I haven’t known whether I was on my head or my heels. I would go to bed a Manichee and rise from it a Buddhist. The day after I would be convinced by

Cabala or Gnostic Christianity. The symbol of the Celtic Cross has come to mean a great deal to me – the circle of reincarnation transformed by the symbol of redemption.”

He thought he had enclosed his thoughts about different religious and philosophical systems in a lot of small boxes and didn't know what to do with them. He could not find any system or way that really suited him. Only bits and pieces fitted. I made a tentative suggestion. He answered: “Your idea that the various boxes of thought are in some sense a ‘Way of their own’ had occurred to me too. It certainly seems purposive at times.”

But intellectually what Gurdjieff called the Terror of the Situation remained with him. He was still much preoccupied with the “sheer horror of discovering one is imprisoned in the coils of cyclical time.” He said: “I am convinced there is a way out, but we probably only find it in death. I think Rodney Collin was quite right about the importance of dying properly, and I have revised my opinions about the manner of Ouspensky's death.” He wrote that he did not think it possible to contract out by committing suicide. He returned more than once to this theme, as though a yearning towards death was coming more and more to the forefront of his thoughts. Mary told me that around this time, March or April, he said to a friend who owned the estate adjoining their Scottish home: “May I be buried on your land?”

At the end of April he wrote to me: “Are there any astrological indications of accident proneness?” I thought, not in his chart, with Mars held in check by Saturn and that mild-looking Uranus. (His mother has since said that she regarded him as both clumsy and accident prone at home, however, so perhaps inattention and absent-mindedness played their part.) I formed the impression he might think he had not long to live, and would die an apparently “accidental death,” perhaps on that long road along the Roman wall, returning very tired from Newcastle. I warned him to take care.

A Private Mythology

One day he wrote: “I have my private mythology, that we are most of us participants in something which is a cross between a great adventure and a grand primaeval tragedy. My myth puts it in science-fictional terms – the crew of a splendid space ship which crash-landed on an alien planet. Immediately they were enslaved by the local inhabitants, and now have forgotten who they were or whence they came. But occasionally something jogs their memories and they remember the times when they flew through the galaxy on high adventures, or something plucks their heart strings and they recognise, only for an instant, their trapped comrades. Coupled with this is an indescribable happy-sad feeling. Something is calling. And in their hearts is an aching memory of home And permeating everything is the impression of infinitely long periods of time. The tragedy is infinitely far distant, the adventure infinitely long. And we are ageless – simply ageless”

He followed with: “I accepted the world completely until I was about sixteen, then a series of precognitive dreams and an isolated religious experience began waking me up. At Cambridge I wrote poems replete with esoteric symbolism. I knew nothing of esotericism and didn’t know what the poems meant until recently – they were just a nice noise. One’s unconscious is often a good guide.”

During all this correspondence I had no reason to doubt Jamie’s mental state. He had a fine mind, of which his books give public evidence, and his letters a more private testimony. He was essentially good. But he was clearly struggling deeply with his ideas, and had been in some lonely areas of thought. “It’s lovely to know I’m no longer alone in the wilderness,” he wrote to me.

Soon after he began the to-ing and fro-ing connected with the three-day-a-week job, I noticed an agitated and stressful tone creeping in. He changed his tack. “God is not Consciousness, God is Meaning,” he said, echoing his own words in *Harmonious*

Circle (p. 33) that “meaning is the fuel without which life itself flickers out.” Fatigue, renewed inner distress and uncertainty, were at the base of the now enormously long attempts to analyse a series of new speculations about the nature of life. “But is this progression or regression?” he asked.

He discussed Jung’s *Septem Sermones* written semi-automatically after his own breakdown and commented: “I have never seen why magicians and others wanted to be possessed by the powers. You lose your humanity that way My own criterion has come to be – ‘that which tends towards the Integer.’”

It was here that I suggested he needed to rest his mind more, not write so much just now, but to try to be at peace when he came home from work. There is time for everything I thought. To give a quiet form of contemplation of the Godhead I quoted for him:

“In the Field of the square foot,*
In the House of the square inch,
In the Temple of jade,
Dwells the God of utmost Emptiness
And Light.”

*The head.

The letters written and never sent were heart-rending cries of despair. I quote only: – “I have no-one to whom I can talk about these things Your last wise letter You are probably right in thinking too much talk is not necessarily a good thing at this stage ... but it has been immensely helpful to have your reassurance and support when I needed it Your magnificent quotation about the ‘field of the square foot.’ Where do the lines come from? I keep pondering them. Apart from their intrinsic beauty I am sure they contain a profound truth So few people will talk about the really important things, and those who will are usually peddling a proprietary brand of solution not applicable to everyone.”

He wrote and posted a final letter to me on 5th May, saying he would telephone on Friday about the holiday arrangements. It was

as though there were two versions of himself existing in those last weeks – the one still planning the future, and the other knowing the days were running out.

The Death Chart

When Jamie died, on Friday, 9th May, 1980, at approximately 3:00 p.m., his Moon had progressed conjunct to Pluto in the 12th.

The transits showed that the Moon itself was passing through Pisces in the 8th, and came quincunx to Pluto in the 12th at the supposed exact time of suicide. Mercury was semi-sextile Uranus; Venus was conjunct the North Node; Mars was exactly square the Moon; Jupiter was also applying to a square to the Moon though this was not exact until the 24th of the month.

Saturn, the Sun ruler, was well aspected with successive contacts from March to May: sextile Mars 17th March, trine Sun 20th March, sextile Saturn 25th April. This covered the period when both the English and American editions of *The Harmonious Circle* were published.

Uranus, not natively strong anyway, made no aspects during this period. Neptune had been quincunx Saturn exact on 15th January, stationary retrograde 25th March, applying again in May and exact in fact on 11th June. Pluto was within the orb of a square to Saturn and a square to Venus (these being natively part of the double axis of a Cardinal T-square, of course), throughout the period under review (the first six months of the year).

The lunar and Plutonian contacts seem the most indicative of the situation that developed, and it is noteworthy that similar (though not the same) aspects occurred in Rodney Collin's chart at the time of death. (See my article, "Beloved Icarus," *Astrological Journal*, Vol. XIII, No. 4, Autumn 1971.) The actual transit of the Moon pinpoints the exact time in both cases.

When my husband and I visited Mary shortly after the tragedy, we found that she had made great efforts to protect and help Jamie during his months of breakdown. In recent months she had felt he would be better if encouraged to get out and about, dig

the garden, go shopping, help with domestic affairs, resume a normal social life – and persevere with the copy-writing job, “although he hated it.” She did not care to see him reading philosophy and “considering the state of his soul,” as she put it. “He couldn’t talk to me about things like that,” she said. Her sturdy common sense suggested it would be best to divert his attention to more mundane matters, and she tried with determination to wean him away from mysticism.

In his scholarly, book-lined study we gazed bleakly at each other, each conscious of a separate, private grief, of helplessness and loss. Between us stood the big box of copies of *The Harmonious Circle*, once so eagerly awaited. He had not even found the time and energy to dispatch them to his friends. It was as though he had accomplished his life’s work in that enormous project, and once it had appeared, his interests in this world gradually completely faded out. Perhaps the secondary progressions gave an indication that the work was indeed done. The Sun was trine to Jupiter this year, and Mercury and Venus together made their sextile with the Mid-heaven of the chart.

Because he had died a few days before our planned meeting, I never saw the face exhausted and ravaged by illness and suffering that was his family’s last sad memory. I knew his mind and heart, but not his latter-day countenance.

To me, he wears always the alert and eager visage of the young Scotsman who once strode the Highlands and the Isles. Who wore the Lindsay kilt as though descended from Ivar the Jarl of the Uplanders, Norse founder of that clan: who lay in the heather on a hilltop in Skye all one Summer night, and whose heart leapt with joy at a ship in full sail in the Sound of Raasay on a misty morning. His letters tell of all these things: and of the moment when the cuckoo called at Rodel.

It is the cuckoo that is the Sacred Bird of Tir-nan-Og, says the Hebridean legend. Its call heralds the coming of The Shining One along the old stone avenue of Callanish at sunrise on midsummer morning. And it leads the souls of the blessed home to the Celtic paradise, the Land of Eternal Youth, far out in the Western Sea.

7. “SO I’M PAUSING FOR A MOMENT”: AN APPRECIATION OF JAMIE

Joyce Collin-Smith

Like Rodney Collin, Jamie Webb seemed to belong to that stream of men who want knowledge: who feel the pursuit of it to be man’s highest aim: and who are prepared to pay almost any price.

Both men worked towards their objective without regard for personal safety, went on to the limits of endurance without rest, and ultimately drove themselves into a state of complete exhaustion.

There is a curious similarity in their lives, both being writers who completed one important book among a number of minor ones, and both seeming to run down thereafter. And there is of course similarity in the manner of their death, by choice, before a normal life span had been completed.

I first met Jamie in 1972 when he introduced himself to me at the National Liberal Club where I had given a talk on the life and work of Rodney Collin. He told me he was writing a book about Gurdjieff and Ouspensky and asked to visit me at home and find out more about Rodney. A friendship developed, and he came to our house a number of times in the next two or three years, sometimes alone and sometimes with others.

I remember him most happily at his house in Cambridge. He had been at Harrow and Trinity, had graduated, been given a research grant, and was working on what he called “the history of ideas.” He had already published *Flight from Reason*, which was to have been Volume One of *The Age of the Irrational*.

A tall young Scotsman, he wore the Lindsey kilt, the clan which is traditionally descended from Ivar the Jarl of the Uplanders. He was sociable in a rather diffident way, not very confident, but the depth of his intelligence and the width of his scholarly knowledge was apparent. In looks he seemed to show the blood of his Norse forebears. He had slept out in the heather under Highland skies, explored the Outer Isles of the Hebrides, been down to the little church at the remote tip of Harris where cuckoos call among the rocks and skerries, rejoiced at the sight of a ship in full sail in the Sound of Raasay on a misty morning. We shared appreciation and knowledge of the same good places where not many people go. My best memory is sitting outside a riverside pub in Cambridge with him one warm September lunchtime during the Astrological conference which he attended as my guest. We talked for some hours, and a delightful sense of kinship and common purpose united us, across the great gap in our years.

After his marriage to Mary Thomas I never saw him again. He wrote spasmodically on their travels in Persia and the East. Eventually his correspondence ceased and I had no more news of him.

In January this year (1980) I received a letter from him and learned that he had had a nervous breakdown. I replied with sympathy and concern, and mentioned my own experience. He wrote then at great length. There began a correspondence in which we exchanged about 15,000-20,000 words, between January and May. These personal letters appear to show the state of his mind and the trend of his thought during the last months of his life. I give you the following extracts from his letters to me:

—

Freekirk, Durisdeer, Dumfriesshire

31st January 1980

... I owe you a copy of *The Harmonious Circle* which is at last

out in the spring It took four years to write and I've had to wait four years for publication

My own life has just emerged from two years of nightmare I had a full-scale nervous breakdown, with hallucinations, visions and a fine repertoire of subjectively supernatural experiences. Hoist with my own petard, some would say, but not an experience I would wish on my worst enemy

Despite the undoubtedly hallucinatory nature of many of my experiences, a residue remains which I simply have to take seriously, although I can't fit all the altered states of consciousness into one system. Gnosticism and some of the Indian systems seem to provide the best framework, but I pick up little bits in many different philosophies and religions

Warren Kenton recognises one episode ... as recorded in Cabbalistic tradition One doctor said that Siddha Yoga (Kundalini, etc.) produces by meditation effects similar to my spontaneous experiences

One day I shall write about it, but at the moment I have other responsibilities.

I can no longer afford to go on writing My private resources are running out I have to change my course before it is too late It's a bitter pill Perhaps I'll be able to get back to my real work later in life

9th February 1980

I was delighted to get your letter. Your messages help a great deal

The sensation of the flux I know only too well. For three days at one stage I "saw molecules"! Do you know Gerard Manley Hopkin's poem "That Nature is a Heraclitean Flux and of the Comfort of the Resurrection"? I think of it a lot. I ... got suicidal. I am now in good heart

I quite agree with you about the extraordinary impression that is left of the capacities of the human mind. Orthodox medicine would simply say that the mind becomes deranged, but there are

patterns to the derangements, and certain experiences which suggest possible modes of consciousness that one hadn't even an inkling of before

The two things which happened to me and which are positive in content as well as being clear-cut experiences were an extraordinary experience of slotting in and out of time, and a shattering vision of the "Wheel of Life" – the sight of my previous incarnations set up like a great silver mill-wheel. This "vision" was physical in its impact I am now convinced that there is in the human being a principle of consciousness which is not merely the result of a congerie of experience, that this principle is indeed independent of time, and that if my horrific vision of what Marcion called "*haec cellula Creatoria*" is possible at all, there is (as so many people familiar to both you and me have kept saying) a way out

Emotionally, I find the literature of the Mandaeans strikes a real chord – they are the only surviving Gnostic secret, located in Iraq

Now all I am interested in is philosophy and theology

One result of my own experiences is that I now separate the "Life Force" in the sense of the motor force, tied up with sex energy, from the principle of consciousness

The result would be a diagram like Robert Fludd's pyramids intersecting in the human body. In short, I am something of a Manichee

The question about whether or not one has attracted "outside power" is very broad. One cannot really say where the human organism has its boundaries, what is inside it and what is outside it. I think of my *atman* using poor old Brother Ass (who got well nigh disintegrated two years ago) to manoeuvre around in this very soupy environment – of which Brother Ass is part. It is rather like being in a deep-water submarine and using pincers, grabs, television cameras and artificial light to make contact with the strange world of the seabed

The problem is Kantian of course, as Ouspensky recognised in *Tertium Organum* – an irritating book, in which much remark-

able stuff is buried in bad argument

You put your finger on it when you compare the experience to Dante's Inferno. The one consolation is that the Inferno leads on to the Purgatorio and ultimately to the Paradiso

Things are very frightening when one is made to see "face to face"

I have been trying to get into advertising up here. I'd really like to be an academic, but it would take three years to do a doctorate

If it were left to me I'd otherwise relapse quite contentedly into being a schoolmaster or librarian

I write at such length Thanks for your encouraging words

I'm sure I'll get my oomph back soon We must meet and talk soon

Lovely to be in touch again. Yours ever, Jamie.

22 February 1980

... You have experiences which are most important to me. Discussion is important to me for two reasons:

First, it is a final step in putting my own ideas in order. I have no one to whom I can talk about these things

The second reason is that I intend to write about the experience – not directly or autobiographically but as part of a general study

I think anyone who is articulate has something of an obligation to do what he can

I am convinced there are many varieties of mystical experience, and question whether all the accounts are referring to the same thing

Perhaps there are various "modes of God." Yet I agree with you that there is no reason to think that the pilgrims of the pit have knowledge which is in essence any different from the ecstasies and riders in the chariots of the spirit

I wonder whether breakdowns may in some senses serve a

useful purpose – of course there are psychiatrists, from Jung through E. Graham Howe to R.D. Laing who have said that they do

The organism becomes overloaded and explodes or collapses. Materialist opinion would see nothing but a broken down machine. But could the breakdown, terrifying and chaotic as it is, not be a positive, almost “evolutionary” step in the individuals progress? ...

If there is a consensus on matters mad or mystical, this is at least significant

I very much like your statement “God is Consciousness.” At least two people over the past three years have said to me, “God is the Life Force.” How little they can have looked about them! Nature red in tooth and claw, energy prone as you say to become either love or war, the brute nature of mere impulse for survival – how can this “life force” be God? It may bear some relation to the Old Unprintable of the Old Testament, that “savage God” who as Professor R.C. Zaehner says, “raves within each of us,” but it is unacceptable to our consciousness

I think that in certain people the principle of consciousness is in revolt against the conditions of existence (determined by the Life Force) from a very early age Surely the correct response of a soul to the perpetual disappointments of the universe is “I will not co-operate”

You rightly take me to task for using the term *atman*. By it I meant the individualised consciousness present in each human being. I think you are probably right in thinking that Consciousness exists in its own right, independent of any human carrier. We are probably only the individualised forms of Consciousness with a capital The Hindus say, don’t they, that “*atman*” is identical with Brahman, but I don’t know that they make any provision for the denser elements of creation, what Gurdjieff called “matter without the Holy Ghost.”

This has a bearing on what you say of reincarnation The Jains believe in an atomic monad, but that seems unlikely. Perhaps the Buddhists come closer. From what I understand they

believe in the continuity of something very like a “carrier wave” – but not precisely in the continuity of the individuality

The sheer horror of discovering that one is imprisoned in the coils of cyclic time is impossible to convey. The part of me which was “outside” could hardly bear the prospect. The impact was physical – I collapsed, tingling in all my extremities. I groaned loudly, “Why did I ever want to know?” – much to the astonishment of the assembled BBC personnel working with me on my radio series

But intellectually, the conviction of what Gurdjieff called “The Terror of the Situation” remains. And with it, a conviction that there is a way out. But we probably only find it at death. I think that Rodney Collin was quite right about the importance of dying properly, and have revised my opinions about the manner of Ouspensky’s death

The symbol of the Celtic Cross has come to mean a great deal to me – the circle of reincarnation transformed by the symbol of redemption. But the idea that redemption was accomplished once and for all is of course a farce

I think “Mother Nature” in whom you place reliance is Circe, and has power to transform us all into swine and send us back to the sty from whence we came! ...

I could not go along with much of what Rodney Collin wrote – my views were somewhat different then of course – but the quality of his story caught my imagination. In that may lie a measure of the quality of the man

I have my private mythology, that we are most of us participants in something which is a cross between a great adventure and a grand primeval tragedy My myth puts it in science-fictional terms – the crew of a splendid space ship which crash-landed on an alien planet. Immediately they were enslaved by the local inhabitants, and now have forgotten who they were and whence they came. But occasionally something jogs their memories and they remember the times when they flew through the galaxy on high adventures; or something plucks their heart strings and they recognise, only for an instance, their trapped

comrades. Coupled with this is an indescribable “happy-sad” feeling. Something is calling. And in their hearts is an aching memory of home Of course this is an ancient mythology. The Gnostic Hymn of the Pearl is probably the best expression of it – or the Mandaean literature Like is calling to like. And permeating everything is the impression of infinitely long periods of time. The tragedy is infinitely far distant, the adventure infinitely long. And we are ageless – simply ageless

I’ll end on a pedestrian note. I’ve got a three-day-a-week job copy-writing in Newcastle. This means that I have to be away two nights a week, but I’ll have the other four days to write in, and the cash may be just enough to do. Perhaps the luck is changing

14th March 1980

I knew I was right to write to you. I just had an intuition that you would be able to help me sort things out

Over the past four or five months I have been changing positions so rapidly that I haven’t known whether I was on my head or my heels. I would go to bed a Manichee and rise from it a Buddhist. The day after I would be convinced by Cabala or Gnostic Christianity. The trouble is that if one has been a rationalist and is suddenly catapulted into a larger universe, one is liable to believe anything

Ever since I began reading again I have been hoping that somewhere I should find some system which would make sense of my various experiences. This hasn’t happened. I keep finding pieces here and there, fragments of the truth embedded in the most absurd settings, and for a time I adopt the belief in which the fragment of truth occurs. Then I see that it won’t do and move on again. I have enclosed my thought in so many small boxes that I have at last come to see the sequence of boxes as a natural progression

You remember the passage in *In Search of the Miraculous* where Gurdjieff spends all night dictating a dervish song to Ouspensky

God is everywhere in all forms.
When men see him
It depends on their qualities
Which part they touch ... etc.

I know now what this means. Coupling it to your phrase “God is consciousness” it gives me the key Of course it is true that – as you wrote – “God is in the Life Force also.” I was insisting on a Gnostic emphasis because my experience of the Wheel of Life had come to dominate my thinking. “God looking at himself,” said Warren when I told him about it. I accept this now as – as it were – God-consciousness in the reflective mode. For indeed there are, as I suggested to you a couple of letters ago, many modes of God, or of consciousness. If my experiences have taught me anything it is that William James was quite right when he wrote that surrounding our normal modes of consciousness lie potential modes of consciousness entirely different. (This, incidentally, is why Zaehner is so important – he recognises the existence of different kinds of mysticism – these different kinds are experiences of different modes of God.)

The coincidences which occur, I’m sure you recall, are quite beyond any previous imagination

So you see that I am gradually moving towards a synthesis and have made a big step forward. Having reached this point I now find myself doubtful about occult theories of the structure of the universe. Books like Arthur Young’s ... (*The Reflexive Universe*) ... are of course just theories. Rodney Collin recognised this, I think

As you say, one recognises things from other people’s experiences, and it’s always good to know that one isn’t alone. I quite agree with you that it’s clearly not possible to contract out by suicide I’ve been pretty near it though.

One hopes indeed to come across other survivors of the shipwreck or spaceship crash – but that again is clearly a mode of being and thinking that will have its place in the economy as a

whole

“You begin to know,” you write, “slowly, what you are about, and what tools you have to work with.” I hope to find you are right. Certainly progress seems to be made in that direction

Do you know Joseph Campbell’s *Hero with a Thousand Faces*? A remarkable success in doing something with those intangibles

When I wrote *The Harmonious Circle* I thought that a “survivor’s attitude” was what Gurdjieff in fact taught, although I didn’t take it on a metaphysical plane. I now don’t know what I believe there. But it must be significant that the major religious syntheses are Janus-faced: they have one side directed at attaining union with God and another related to the good life in the world. One attitude has clearly got to take account of both facts

Unlike you, I haven’t any memories of being an “alien” as a child. I accepted the world completely till I was about sixteen. Then a series of precognitive dreams (I did Dunne’s *Experiment with Time* with positive results) and an isolated religious experience (I suddenly understood “the problem of pain”) began waking me up. I wrote a strange series of poems. One, written at school, described the Wheel of Life, had I known it. I remember it causing a great stir among the masters. Then at Cambridge, more poems, replete with esoteric symbolism. I knew nothing of esotericism and didn’t know what the poems meant until recently – they were just a nice noise. One’s unconscious is often a good guide

Thinking about this the other day, I decided to try an experiment. Sitting at my desk I thought I would write a short poem to see if it could help me through the various perplexities I have been tackling. A couplet came up quite unconsciously and was down on paper almost before I had time to register it. It was:

Within this little room of consciousness
I hide, the better to myself express.

At least I am beginning to understand our extraordinary situation....

Jamie's letters grew longer and longer, up to about 2,000 words close typewritten about once a week.

Although he made no complaint to me about it, I realised that to drive 100 miles or so to Newcastle each week, and back three days later, and to tackle the thankless and soul-destroying job of writing advertising copy, must have been very tiring and difficult for him at that stage. He was at a low ebb still, and the mental efforts and physical stamina needed would be considerable. The very lengthy screeds (of which I have been giving only brief extracts that appear to me to show the developing situation) were growing increasingly stressful, anxious, and not always lucid. I felt that his mind was swinging and gyrating in the aftermath of the storm. I thought he needed peace and quiet rather than more words.

Each letter suggested to me that he was more and more tired, but that he was driving himself on with an ever-increasing sense of urgency.

I suggested the need to rest, to quieten himself inwardly, to rest assured that he was not alone in the universe, but not to talk so much.

The result of this was that for several weeks Jamie did not post any letters to me. But as it transpired later, he continued to write to me, but crumbled the letters up and threw them in his waste-paper basket. Mary gave me two of them after his death, and these extracts come from them: –

4th April 1980

Thank you very much for your last wise letter. Yes you are probably right that too much talk is not necessarily a good thing at this stage – but it has been immensely helpful to have your reassurance and support when I needed it. So few people will talk about the really important things, and those who will are usually

peddling a proprietary brand of solution not applicable to everyone

I have never come across a printed description of the wheels of reincarnation I wonder if it is an instance of the phenomenon – the intrusion of higher consciousness into lower levels, concealing itself? ...

When I was going through ... [the papers of Jean Toomer]...Oranges No. 2 in the USA I found an extra-ordinary and very bitter poem called “To Gurdjieff Dying” ... signed with the initials HB. It referred to Gurdjieff as “snake and seducer, Son of the Elder Liar,” and described him as “knowing the Buddhist Law but to pervert / Its power of peace into dissevering fire.” Then came an appeal to the “Lords of the Shining Rings, skilled in white magic,” to “save even Gurdjieff from his Hell forthright.” ... It was a weird poem. I didn’t realise until recently what it referred to.

Yes, again you are quite right about the brain racing along in some accelerated fashion. It seems to have slowed down recently and perhaps I will simply be left with various things to investigate. I’ve clearly got to learn a great deal more about Buddhism (and Jainism too, I think). The Buddhist psychology seems incomparably the most sophisticated analysis of consciousness that I am aware of. But I’ll probably find, as you say, that there are countless other “boxes” waiting to be explored. Its only a beginning. I plod on my way

Some “ways” are probably mere regressions

Buddhist descriptions of enlightenment seem mere annihilation and dispersal, not evolutionary as in the Jewish and Christian traditions G., Jung, Barfield and so on

A temporary conclusion on the coincidences, etc., is that we seem to be “being thought” by something and that “reality” is a transaction between higher, lower and projected states. We seem to be a sort of channel through which “it” is conscious

I do very much like the lines about the “field of the square foot.” Apart from their intrinsic beauty I am sure they contain a profound truth. Where do they come from? ... They will certainly

take much pondering (In the field of the square foot, in the house of the square inch, in the temple of jade, dwells the god of utmost emptiness and light.) Anyway, thank you very much for letting me pour out my troubles to you and for answering so helpfully and good-naturedly. It has been a tremendous help at a time of great perplexity

When you and Derry come up to Scotland we shall love to see you for two or three nights

I find (the copy-writing job) OK, although I lack the slickness as yet to make me really good at it I have some hopes of a friend who is starting a small publishing business in Glasgow and may one day be able to provide me with a more congenial niche.

Although certainly a very young soul – obstreperously so probably – I can feel nothing but affection for the older soul who has been doing me such a very good turn by listening and replying. And so I end with the only possible salutation – Love

18th April 1980

I delayed writing until I could send you your copy of *The Harmonious Circle*. I dislike being “possessed” by things and it is good to feel the ego-function reasserting itself. One damn well needs it. One of the many sensible things which Warren said to me

The idea that the various boxes of thought are in some sense a “way” of their own had occurred to me too – there’s a book there, you know, and it could be interesting

Anyway I seem to have come to the end of another of the many phases I have had to go through – and I’ve ended up with fairly definite results as well as a good deal of reading to do

I come back again and again to Jung. He helped greatly when *in medias res* and I find time after that that he went to the same sources as I have been looking into – in particular the Gnostics, whose cosmological system he inverted and by so doing imparted to it rational qualities. (Reason is God’s voice on earth, said Al-Ghazzali. Right on!) There’s a lot in the various Gnostic sects

and in their modern interpreters. I also find myself deeply interested in Buddhism Also I find I keep coming back to Gurdjieff – not surprising when I spent four years on that one – with the realisation that some idea I have just formulated has been voiced by him. But generally speaking I find him too fundamentalist

My emerging synthesis is troubled by a couple of questions. The first is the appalling confusion that can result between regression and progression of consciousness. I like Jung here. Do you know his *Septem Sermones*, written semi-automatically after his own breakdown? He describes the Gnostic *pleroma* and then enunciates the “principle of individuation” from it. I have never seen why magicians and others wanted to be “possessed by the powers.” You lose your humanity that way, and it's never easy to tell what is some form of regressive participation mystique and what might conceivably be superior. My own criterion has come to be – “that which tends toward the Integer” – for freedom resides in unity, not diversity, and it's man's business to integrate, not to diffuse. “Freedom from” seems to be connected with detachment from the Many (competing dust-motes, whose rival attempts to assert their own “freedom to” prevent any freedom at all). And “freedom to” has connotations of the ordering function of the universe (God or the Monad, ultimately) attempting to control – in effect create, a process which I believe to be continuous – the horrendous flux of which you and I are both aware. The fall into matter is thus a species of continuous Incarnation of the Word and the redemption a continuous ascent into purer – more integrated – Meaning. But I'm worried about the confusion in many otherwise interesting systems, between unconscious and superconscious functions

Another scepticism I have is about the reality of such structures as the Sephiroth. Aleister Crowley used apparently to say that it didn't matter whether or not they existed. The point was that by certain actions certain events followed. They seem, I think, merely to be a way of imposing order on the flux

I am coming to the conclusion that Consciousness cannot be

said to be God. I mean that Meaning is God, consciousness merely a vehicle for Meaning. Of course in the upper reaches pure Meaning would be indistinguishable from pure awareness, and the Meaning itself would be the simple statement "Am."

Altered states of consciousness don't interest me much as such. I've had to endure plenty of them unwillingly, and while some are clearly pointers in a vertical ascent others are pure "fairylane," – "and aye at every seven years they pay the teind to Hell." I've been in a variety of hells and I've no wish to visit any of the others.

I've been thinking a lot about your magnificent quotations about the "field of the square foot." I didn't know it.

Joyce, I can't tell you how much our correspondence has helped me. It is / has been immensely helpful to have your reassurance and support when I needed it in this period of enquiry

....

I am convinced, like you, that there are different wares on the market, and all the talk about the "transcendent unity of religions" while containing a grain of truth, fudges important issues. All our choice may be only under which set of laws we are able to live. Is that Gurdjieff? It sounds rather like him!

For myself, I'm recovering some robustness. I feel like shouting, "A pox on the Eleusinian Mysteries!" and giving philosophy a rest for a while. Another phase, no doubt, and probably a very necessary one.

... Meet when we have the opportunity If you and Derry make your Highland Jaunt ... spend a couple of nights here It's very pretty and a useful staging post Love, Jamie.

I did not of course see the two preceding letters until after his death. I had not heard from him for some weeks when I wrote at the beginning of May to give him the dates and itinerary for our Scottish holiday, and to say that we would be near Dumfries on the weekend of the 25th. Most of the holiday we should be 200 miles to the north, on Loch Awe. He replied by return, on May 5th.

Bank Holiday (You see how disorganized I am.)

... You wrote that “the Way is very long” and I’m sure you’re right, but occasionally one travels by express train! I was reluctant to send you yet more “interim reports,” and the result was that I sent nothing at all. I have had copies of the book for some time and will send you one at the end of this week when I’ve got some book bags – this absorption in what for want of a better word one must call “philosophy” can play merry hell with everyday life. I hope you’ll forgive me, anyway I feel sure you’ll understand.

You were certainly right when you suggested that the brain was racing along in some accelerated mode. It was doing a bit more than that, however. And your idea that the various “boxes” of thought are in some way a “way” of their own had occurred to me too. It certainly seems purposive – at least at times

My ideas have gone liquid again and I need to lie fallow for a period

For what it’s worth, the background of my thinking goes like this: we contain a paratemporal component which has become enmeshed in process (not matter as the Manichees thought, but constantly circulating process – of which passing time is one aspect). During the breakdown we become aware of process – as you graphically describe in your last letter. In all its aspects this is horrible because our nature – both in its paratemporal form and in its workaday “normal” consciousness (which I believe to be a reflection of the paratemporal state on a lower level) desires permanence. We achieve limited degrees of permanence and stability in relation to the worlds below us through the exercise of rational thought, (the “magic” of science etc.). But we are still enmeshed in process and yearn for the paratemporal condition. The trick would be to learn how to span the elements of process in the worlds above us and penetrate the paratemporal. Systems such as Cabala impose rational patterns on the flux which may make the journey possible. It doesn’t really matter whether the Sephiroth exist or not

But of course all such theories may be stemming from insufficient evidence. It seems to me that there are certain experiences it is possible to have which can be connected by different people in different manners, thus creating different systems. Who knows the rules? I don't, and I don't know how to judge who has most of the facts at his or her command. So I'm pausing for a moment making musing noises and will leave matters to incubate. I look forward to discussing things through when you are in Scotland. I can't tell you how helpful this correspondence has been. It has been immensely reassuring to have your support when I needed it. I'm very glad to hear you are coming North

There then follows a long paragraph about dates, etc., for us to visit Durisdeer, followed by: –

...Or if this doesn't fit I could drive up to you at Loch Awe. I'll telephone you on Thursday or Friday when I'm back from Newcastle to find out how these suggestions fit in with your plans All news when we meet. Affectionately, J.

Jamie did not telephone on Thursday or Friday (8th-9th May). We left for Scotland on the 10th not knowing what had taken place.

This (his last letter as it turned out) was very irrational in parts. The promise to send the book at the end of the week, coupled by the expectation of seeing us so soon that it would not have been worth posting it anyway: the wish to drive up to Loch Awe which was a very great distance, and yet seemed to be preferred to his other rather complicated plans: The mention of "interim reports," the suggestion that he had been helped in a period of time which had now ended: all combined to make me very uneasy about him.

I therefore wrote to him on arrival at Loch Awe, giving him a telephone number to reach me if he wanted.

Mary telephoned on Wednesday the 14th on receipt of the letter.

Jamie had shot himself at about 3:00 p.m. on Friday, May 8th.

The unexpected taking of his life struck me with a profound sense of shock. It now seems to have a kind of reality and inevitability which followed the manner of living.

Nevertheless, his references to temptations to suicide in the past – apparently now banished: and his evident expectation of continuing his life for a long time ahead, with immediate plans for our meeting, suggested to me that he had made no conscious decision in advance. But opinion changed after long conversations with Mary.

Some weeks previously, while walking with a friend who owns a private estate above Durisdeer, he asked: “May I be buried on your land?” The request was taken lightly at the time; but within the month his desire had been granted.

Around that time he spoke of getting his gun again and relicensing it – a comment to which Mary attached no importance at all, as it was solely used for sporting purposes. It was to hand when the moment of decision came.

Mary felt that when his health began to break down two years previously, she slowly lost the man she loved and in fact “the Jamie I knew died then.” He had been in and out of the care of doctors and psychiatrists, and at one time she was told he was “certifiably mad.” She told us many detailed stories. She had clearly taken him home, protected him and cared for him, at a time when doctors advised that he should be “shut away” as she put it. We had the impression that she had genuinely done her best and had endured a great deal for his sake. But she did not know the man who was emerging from the chaos and there appeared to be no meeting point of their two minds.

She was undoubtedly in a state of shock when we visited her at Durisdeer a week later, and the contradictions in her story of the last two days may well be attributed to this.

In her own words, she found that in recent months he had “grown more and more introspective,” “always had his nose in a book, reading mysticism, considering the state of his soul and all that sort of rubbish. I wouldn’t let him talk about it – he couldn’t

talk to me about things like that. I told him he could be all right if he wanted to: he must make efforts: use his will, have more self-discipline.

“The copyrighting job was doing him a lot of good. He hated it, of course, and he did look tired, but it was better for him to have something to think about instead of just drifting about at home.

“I don’t do much about the house myself. Im not much good at that sort of thing and Jamie used to do it. But lately he wouldn’t.” (Mary works as a sub-editor on the *Dumfries Standard*.) “Perhaps if I had been willing to settle down and have children and that sort of thing, it might have helped,” she said. But clearly this was not in fact the major issue, although Jamie apparently wanted children, at least at one time.

Mary spoke very freely over the telephone, expressing her grief and saying, “He depended on you, Joyce. You were able to comfort him and make his last months easier.” But a week later she was less free with her words, and I give the story as it came to me then: –

On the Thursday, for some reason that she did not understand, Jamie was in high spirits. He came shopping with her. He insisted on buying a large quantity of expensive food, with which to cook a very special meal. He was, of course, something of a gourmet, and a very skillful and sophisticated cook who took pleasure in his culinary arts when fit and well. But clearly he had not indulged in them for a long time, and she was pleased but puzzled by this sudden festive occasion.

There was some obvious omission or evasion over something that occurred that evening, but she passed on to: “That night he came to bed in our room at once.” Again there was an obvious omission in the story, of something of importance that occurred that night, and did not discover whether this concerned their private relationship or whether it was an exchange of words that caused Jamie some distress. The idea that the good spirits, the special preparations of food, etc., were a lead-in to his intention to discuss his wish to come to Loch Awe (knowing that Mary

might object to a plan to talk philosophy with me) has obviously occurred to me. The matter might have become a subject of dispute, I now felt. Or he might have been unable at the last minute to face a possible battle of wills, or to face some possible implications of it in his own mind. I may be wrong and this could be irrelevant.

“In the morning,” she said, “he was very miserable. He had hardly slept at all. He just sat reading and wouldn’t do anything. I told him he ought to dig the garden. I wanted him to do some shopping. He said he was too tired. He looked dreadful.”

She went to her job, and he arrived at the office later saying he had come to take her to lunch. During the meal in the restaurant he was very unhappy and eventually began to cry. They left, and he “drove as though he didn’t know where he was going.” Mary had difficulty in making him stop and let her go back to the office.

Mary did, I think, tell two slightly differing versions, in one of which they returned home together, and he said he would take a sleeping pill and lie down for a while, and she should wake him later. She then went out again. But in the other telling of these events, I understood that she told him, in the car, to go home and take a sleeping pill. She added: “When he was like that he usually did exactly what I told him, and I thought he would do just that.”

On returning home, there was a note pinned to the door, to friends who were to come later, saying: “I’m asleep. Come in and wake me.”

There was a note to her inside. Jamie had a Spring spaniel who had six young puppies, and the note was among the puppies. Mary did not wish to disclose its contents, but said: “I don’t remember. The police have taken it. It said ‘love, love, love.’ He adored me.”

She then explained that she had gone upstairs and found the curtains drawn in the bedroom but he was not there. She had entered another room upstairs where I suspect, though this was not said directly, he had been accustomed to sleep apart from her, and possibly to work. He was lying on the bed. He had shot

himself in the head, and she was witness of the horrifying results of death from a shotgun to the temple.

When Mary took me to his downstairs study I felt that this scholarly, book-lined room had not been used for some time past. The big box containing the copies of *Harmonious Circle* for his friends still awaited attention. He had not sent them off after all. It was as though he had just hung on for the long-delayed, long-awaited publication, and there his interests in the world had died. He had accomplished his life's work with that enormous project – a much more important book than I had dreamed of from his pen, a few years ago.

His grave is among the low hills that had been home. Before his breakdown, he had been very happy at Freekirk, a converted church, stone-built and sunny with an outlook across open fields to the south and the small village of Durisdeer rising just above it. I gave him the benison of many tears up there: and the hope that he takes the wings of a new morning. I shall remember him through all my remaining days with fondest love.

J.C.-S.

17th June 1980

8. THE STRANGE DEATH OF JAMES WEBB

Gary Lachman

This article originally appeared in the magazine *Fortean Times: The World of Strange Phenomena*, September 2001. It is being reproduced with the kind permission of Gary Lachman and will additionally appear in the author's collection titled *Revolutionaries of the Soul* (Quest Book, 2014).

The Damned: The Strange Death of James Webb

On the afternoon of 8 May 1980, after two years of a deep, paralysing depression and at least one psychotic episode, a brilliant young Scots historian of “the occult” put the barrel of his shotgun to his head and blew his brains out. He was 34. Gary Lachman investigates the strange death of James Webb.

In the 1970s, James Webb made a name for himself with his fascinating, if sceptical, histories of occultism, *The Occult Underground* (1974, first published in Britain as *The Flight from Reason*, 1971), and *The Occult Establishment* (1976). His most recent book, *The Harmonious Circle* (1980), a critical study of the enigmatic Russian “teacher” Georges Gurdjieff, his disciple P.D. Ouspensky and their followers, had just been published and Webb's career was looking good. He was a regular contributor to *Encounter* as well as to the encyclopædia *Man, Myth and Magic*, and his performance at Trinity College, Cambridge, was so stellar that a biennial James Webb Memorial Prize is awarded there in his honour.

Webb's books combine a painstaking research into “the occult” and an ironic dismissal of it, the kind of “know-it-all”

rationalism we'd associate with a Cambridge graduate. But at the time of his suicide, Webb had changed his mind about the kinds of experiences he had chalked up to delusion, fantasy and a post-Enlightenment craving for "the irrational." In his last days, Webb was convinced that the nervous breakdown that cast him into suicidal madness had also revealed dimensions of reality that could only be called "supernatural." He found himself "catapulted into a larger universe" filled with altered states of consciousness and profound visions of "cyclical time."

But the experience was not all "revelation." Webb also showed the classic signs of paranoid schizophrenia. His publisher, he claimed, was "persecuting" him. Worse still, he was convinced that a certain group of French Freemasons "had it in for him." Such remarks suggest Webb's change of heart about the "supernatural" was nothing more than the pathetic result of his tragic breakdown. Yet the circumstances surrounding his death were unusual and raise the suspicion that the dividing line between madness and 'occult revelation' may not be as clear-cut as we suppose.

How and when Webb's madness began are unclear; even as a schoolboy at Harrow he was considered brilliant but perhaps a little unstable. After his death, his widow – even more sceptical of the supernatural than he – refused to discuss the matter, preferring, perhaps understandably, to forget the tragic business. By all accounts, Mary Webb was a "no-nonsense," practical woman who loved her husband but had little insight into his brilliance, and even less into his obsessions. It's a fair guess she felt his interest in the occult was responsible for his death. That Webb married a woman with little of his intellectual spirit and whose insensitivity to his experiences may have contributed to his final breakdown is one of the curiously strange things about the affair. It does account, however, for his relationship with another woman, Joyce Collin-Smith. Many an unsympathetic wife has driven her husband into other arms but, in Webb's case, the attraction of the other woman wasn't sexual, but psychic.

Webb first encountered Joyce Collin-Smith in 1972. At the

National Liberal Club in London, she gave a lecture to the Astrological Association on the life and work of her brother-in-law, Rodney Collin. Webb was interested in Rodney Collin because, as one of the main followers of P.D. Ouspensky, Collin would feature prominently in Webb's book on Gurdjieff. Webb had come to the lecture, intending to ask Joyce for an interview about her brother-in-law.

By the time she met Webb, Joyce Collin-Smith had run the gamut of spiritual teachings. In the 1950s she practiced the Gurdjieff "work" with Rodney Collin at his commune in the suburbs of Mexico City. Before this she had been involved with Dr Frank Buchman, founder of Moral Rearmament. She was also a follower of Pak Subuh, the Indonesian mystic and founder of the Subud movement which included J.G. Bennett among fellow "work" members. And, in the early days of the 1960s, she had been chauffeur and Girl Friday to the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, before the Beatles discovered meditation and made the giggling guru a spiritual superstar. A former Fleet Street journalist, novelist and ex-WAAF officer, Joyce was old enough to be Webb's mother; at the very least, an unusual candidate for spiritual adviser to a brainy twenty-six-year-old who found most of her pursuits pure hogwash.

And yet, at that very first meeting, Joyce knew Webb would play a large role in her life. She also knew he was fated for some strange destiny. As she recalls in her autobiography, *Call No Man Master* (1988), the minute she saw the tall, red-haired young man enter the auditorium, her "heart leapt." It was not love at first sight; on the contrary, in Webb Joyce recognised a sinister, terrifying figure from a repeated nightmare of her childhood. In her dream, a tall, red-haired young schoolmaster asked Joyce to fetch something from a forbidding tower. Frightened of entering the tower alone, she nevertheless obeyed. Halfway up, in a desolate, empty room, the schoolmaster, raving mad, charged in and threw himself at Joyce. She woke each night, sweating and terrified. Now more than forty years later, the 'mad schoolmaster' had come to her lecture.

Joyce watched as he took a seat in the last row. She then gave her lecture, speaking, she recalls, almost solely to him. At the end of her talk, as she spoke with some of the audience, Joyce half expected the “schoolmaster” to erupt into maniacal laughter. But when the shy, diffident young man approached and explained that he was writing a book on Gurdjieff and wanted to speak with her about her brother-in-law, Joyce was surprised at his gentle, almost apologetic manner. They developed an immediate rapport. In Joyce’s house, in Sussex, they talked for hours about philosophy, religion, history and about Joyce’s experiences with “the occult.” Precognitive dreams, visions, strange states of consciousness while practising “transcendental meditation” and “self-remembering”... even communication with the dead. Webb was impressed. A brilliant scholar, his encounters with “the occult” had been strictly “arm-chair”; but it’s clear from Joyce’s account that he was also attracted to something else.

Webb’s family was well off. Had he lived, Webb would have inherited a large estate at Blair Drummond, in Perthshire. But relations with his parents soured because of Mary. Class may have had something to do with it, but Webb’s mother and step-father were certain she wasn’t right for him; when the couple did marry, it was against their wishes. Estranged from his parents, finding little in common with Mary, Webb took refuge in his studies. His brilliance threw him far ahead of his contemporaries. Few could keep up with his discoveries; fewer still talk intelligently about them. And now he had met someone who seemed to know all about “the occult” from the inside, someone who also took an immediate liking to him and gave him approval and encouragement. Joyce quickly became a kind of surrogate mother for Webb. He welcomed the ease and naturalness in her household, so different from the tension around his “real” parents. Later Joyce would claim that they had known each other in previous incarnations; this time they had met as a sort of mother and son.

Inevitably, Joyce compared their astrological charts; both were Capricorns with Leo Rising. The points of contact among

their stars suggested to Joyce that James could indeed have been her son – had she had one – and the association with the “mad schoolmaster” faded from her consciousness. Their rapport deepened; her affection for the young scholar grew. More and more, Joyce was reminded of her relationship with Rodney Collin – who, as we shall see, also died in mysterious circumstances. As their philosophical conversations continued they began to experience a kind of telepathy; each knew the gist of the other’s thought before a word was spoken. Their rapid exchange developed into a kind of verbal shorthand. Repeatedly, Joyce felt a curious sensation of *déjà vu*. At one point, during tea on a summer afternoon, Webb asked Joyce for “another piece of cherry cake.” Immediately Joyce was reminded of another childhood dream, this one involving a Tibetan backdrop, a fantasized “brother” and cherries. Increasingly she felt that they were indeed “two beings who had incarnated within reach of each other many times in different roles.”

Several months later her husband’s ill health forced Joyce to sell their Sussex house and they moved to a cottage in the New Forest. Money was scarce; Joyce had to take what work she could find, mostly lecturing and doing horoscopes. Not long after, she got a call from “Jamie”; he wanted to double check some material for the Gurdjieff book. He and Mary had married recently and had just returned from a honeymoon in the Orient. Joyce was glad to hear from him, but thought he sounded “strange,” “rather low and glum,” unlike his usual cheerful self. Webb wanted to visit, but Joyce put him off – her husband’s health would make things difficult. But she promised to ring him soon about lunching with him in London.

Something in Webb’s call made Joyce check his chart again. She saw the familiar qualities, “fiery, vigorous and tenacious,” so much like her own. But there was something else; Webb’s stars indicated a depressive tendency, an inclination to withdraw deeper into himself as he grew older. She didn’t know it at the time, but Webb had done just that. He had amassed an incredible library and spent more and more time alone, immersed in his

research. Friends and literary acquaintances saw less and less of him. His marriage, too, seemed shaky. Webb worked well into the night, often falling asleep at his desk amidst volumes of Jacob Boehme, Raymund Lully and other occult writers. What had been an admirable dedication to work now seemed a full-fledged obsession. Joyce warned Jamie of the dangers but, like any good Faust, he ignored them.

The next time they spoke, Joyce felt certain something had happened. It was then that Webb told her of being “persecuted” by his publishers and raved about the French Freemasons. Ill with flu, Joyce urged him to relax. But Webb’s mental deterioration had begun. He didn’t ring again and, to her later regret, Joyce’s own affairs prevented her from telephoning him. The next time she heard from him, Webb had already plunged into madness. “My life has just emerged from a nightmare,” Webb wrote some time later. “I had a full-scale nervous breakdown, with hallucinations, visions and a fine repertoire of subjectively supernatural experiences. Hoist with my own petard, some would say.” The cool rationalism that called occultism a “flight from reason” seemed helpless before the kinds of experiences he had gone through. “Despite the undoubtedly hallucinatory nature of many of my experiences,” he wrote, “a residue remains which I simply have to take seriously.” He tried to fit what was happening to him into some system, calling on Gnostic notions of “æons” and Hindu accounts of ‘kalpas’. But the visions were too vivid and extraordinary to be neatly filed into some metaphysic. The gist of them had to do with time; the world had become a kind of Heraclitean flux. He had “seen molecules.”

Webb’s letter was postmarked Durisdeer in Dumfrieshire. He and Mary had left London and had moved into an old, renovated kirk. Joyce wrote back immediately. Webb replied at great length; he thought she had rebuffed him in his hour of need. His account of his breakdown was harrowing; he had been in and out of various hospitals, had been in the hands of several psychiatrists, was doped on Largactil and had only just escaped electro-shock therapy. He had given up writing and was just barely keeping his

sanity. Joyce berated herself for not responding sooner. She soon made up for this. During the next five months she and Webb exchanged a lengthy and extraordinary correspondence. Two or three times a week several pages of Webb's increasingly wild account reached her door.

He wrote of "a shattering vision of the wheel of life." He saw his previous incarnations. He became convinced that there is a "principle of consciousness which is not merely the result of a congerie of experience" – what Ouspensky had called the *Linga Sharira*, the "long body" that extends through countless lives. But the worst was that there seemed to be no stability. Things would not "stand still." No sooner did he look at something than he saw its entire history, its present, past and future. An oak was an acorn, then a rotting mass of mulch. Although he believed there was a "way out," Webb shrank from the knowledge that we are all "imprisoned in the coils of cyclical time."

Finally, Joyce could offer something more than sympathy. She was familiar with these visions. During her time with the Maharishi, she had experienced the same phenomena, the result of too much "transcendental meditation." It had brought her to the brink of suicide. She suggested exercises to keep his mind focused in time. These helped for a while but, increasingly, Webb's thoughts turned to death. He wrote to Joyce that "Rodney Collin was quite right about the importance of dying properly." He also said he had "revised my opinion about the manner of Ouspensky's death." Strange deaths were indeed quite common among professors of Gurdjieff's "work." When Gurdjieff died in 1949, the doctor performing the autopsy declared his internal organs were in such bad condition that he should have been dead years ago; Gurdjieff had apparently "willed" himself to stay alive. Ouspensky's death was even stranger. He was obsessed with time; his particular fascination was "eternal recurrence," the notion that, with slight variations, our lives repeat, over and over. The only possibility of "escape" is in becoming more conscious. In his last days, a sick and dying Ouspensky visited various favourite sites, fixing them in his mind, in order to "remember"

them in his next recurrence. Weird psychic phenomena occurred; in his efforts to “die consciously,” witnesses report that Ouspensky had become telepathic.

And when, on 2 October 1947, Ouspensky passed away, Rodney Collin, his closest disciple, locked himself in the room next to his master’s and did not emerge until a week later. He told his wife – and Joyce – that he had been in “communication” with Ouspensky the entire time. Nearly ten years later, on 3 May 1956, Collin himself would die after falling from a tower in Cusco, Peru. He was found in a position curiously resembling the crucified Christ; earlier he had prayed that a crippled peasant boy be cured and told his wife that he had offered God his own body in exchange. There is some suspicion that he too had attempted to “die consciously.” Webb had written sceptically about the events around Ouspensky’s and Collin’s deaths. Now he had reason to change his mind.

Joyce considered the possibility that Jamie was going through some kind of self-inflicted initiatory process. She knew their conversations had opened him to the “reality” of “the occult.” His armour of sceptical rationality had cracked; in his letters he spoke of curious precognitive dreams and of a kind of “gnostic” personal myth. He had long fantasized that he was a member of a crew whose space ship had crashed on an alien planet. Enslaved by the natives, they soon forget their past. But occasionally a dim memory stirs, the crew members recognise each other, and they recall their mission. “The tragedy,” he told Joyce, “is infinitely far distant, the adventure infinitely long. And we are ageless, ageless.”

Had Webb been allowed to explore these intuitions, it’s possible he may have survived. But after several months of having him around the house, Mary forced him to take a job. They didn’t need the money; understandably, Mary felt some kind of work might give Webb some ballast. But she really had no insight into his plight and little patience for his talk about his “soul,” later telling Joyce she considered all that sort of thing “rubbish.” A copywriting job for an Edinburgh advertising agency

was not quite what Webb needed. The uncongenial atmosphere had the opposite effect, throwing him deeper into alienation. His letters to Joyce became wilder. He was researching a book about esoteric movements in Scotland, but couldn't "get the pattern of it anymore." More and more, he believed, someone was after him because he knew too much.

Finally, Joyce decided she had to see him. By this time their telepathic link had increased. She had visions of him at his desk in the kirk and could feel a pain in the back of his neck, a vulnerable spot he shared both with herself and Rodney Collin. She could hear him crying at night, and in her mind reached out to comfort him. Although she had never been there, she had images of the grounds around the house; later, after Webb's death, she saw these had been accurate. In a few weeks, she and her husband would go to Scotland for their holiday. She decided, then, to see Jamie.

It was too late. On the afternoon before their trip, Joyce heard Webb's voice calling her name. "I'm coming," she replied mentally. Then something like an enormous explosion went off in her head. At once she told her husband: "Something is wrong with Jamie." He said it was her imagination. Incredibly, Joyce didn't telephone. When they arrived at their holiday cottage there was a message to ring Mary. At three o'clock the previous day, Webb had shot himself. Joyce later discovered the immediate cause was a domestic quarrel. Visiting Webb's parents, Joyce discovered the full extent of his madness. One night, he crouched before the fire at their estate, repeating the Lord's Prayer over and over, and muttering repeatedly, "What is it all about?" On another occasion, he ran out into the winter night in a state of hysteria. He waded waist-deep across a river to reach Dunblane Cathedral twelve miles away, where he banged furiously on the door. Oblivious to those around him, for a few weeks the "mad schoolmaster" was certifiably insane.

Inevitably, Joyce blamed herself for not seeing him sooner. Jamie had plunged into a dark night of the soul and she wasn't there for him. Her sense of guilt then may account for what

followed. She began to feel Webb's presence. First he asked her to visit his mother. Then he wanted her to carry on his work. Two visits to a medium convinced her that some part of Jamie had survived. Material emerged unknown to her that later proved unsettlingly accurate. The voice told her that he "would come to her," asking that she get his books from Mary, who "doesn't understand them." "Make a replica of me," it said. At first Joyce was thankful for these messages. But then she felt there was something "not right" about them. This was not the "whole" Jamie, merely bits and pieces of him. As in the film *The Sixth Sense*, Jamie, or some part of him, didn't know he was dead and wouldn't "move on." Joyce began to feel she was being "taken over." Eventually, a clergyman friend of spiritualist persuasion offered to say a requiem to help Webb relinquish his attachment to the world. Satisfied that the rite would not interfere with them "finding" each other in the next incarnation, Joyce agreed. As they read the prayers in the candle-lit chapel, she felt something lift up from her consciousness and take flight. Jamie had "moved on."

There was one other curious phenomenon. During her first wave of grief, Joyce found herself crying aloud: "Why didn't you help him?" In the depths of her anguish she heard a voice that said, "I did." At the same time she saw a face, dark-haired, dark-eyed, with a deep, penetrating gaze. She thought it might have been the esoteric teacher Rudolf Steiner. At the time of his suicide, Webb had been commissioned to write a book about Steiner – a task which later went to Colin Wilson. Wilson remarked that if Webb's earlier books were anything to go by, his book on Steiner would surely have been sceptical. Considering Webb's strange and tragic death, had he survived, I wonder if Wilson would have been right.

L'ENVOI

The end of mystification
Is not the end of mystery

These two lines are taken from the poem that appears on the last page of the closing chapter “Of Masters and Men” in *The Harmonious Circle*, J.W.’s final book.

The Occult Webb is an appreciation of the life and work of James Webb (1946-1980), the Scottish researcher and author who devoted his considerable talents, wide learning, and prodigious energies to a study of the forces of reason and unreason in Western culture. He demonstrated the coherence and continuity of what he referred to as “rejected knowledge,” revealing how the “underground” of the 19th century rose to the surface to become the “establishment” of the 20th century. *The Occult Webb* includes biographical notes, a short bibliography, and some published and unpublished considerations of his life and work contributed by fellow writers Colin Wilson, Joyce Collin-Smith, and Gary Lachman.

John Robert Colombo is known in his native Canada as the Master Gatherer for his innumerable compilations of Canadiana including *Other Canadas*, the country’s first anthology of fantastic literature. He has also been called “Canada’s Mr. Mystery” for the three dozen books that he has devoted to the country’s anomalies, notably *Mysterious Canada*, *UFOs over Canada*, *Haunted Toronto*, and *Mysteries of Ontario*. Among his volumes of tribute are ones devoted to Algernon Blackwood, Leslie A. Croutch, R.S. Lambert, Maurice Level, George & Iris Owen, and Sax Rohmer. Colombo is a Member of the Order of Canada, the recipient of a honorary D.Litt. from York University, Toronto, and a former Fellow of the Northrop Frye Centre, Victoria College, University of Toronto.

