

ARADIA'S HIDDEN HAND: THE UNTOLD LIFE OF ROMA LISTER

*By Andrew D. Manns, edited by Kazim. Hexen Press. 174 pp. Hardback
(limited edition, 250 copies)*

Experts are almost unanimous in holding that a particular role at the roots of the modern Wiccan movement was played by *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches*, a text published at the end of the 19th century by the American writer and folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland (1899). According to Leland, the work had been written by—or otherwise obtained from—a fortune-teller in Florence who had served for several years as his informant and then ‘disappeared’ shortly after delivering the manuscript to him. In reality, the Gospel, which outlines a utopian society dominated by female power and contains descriptions of pseudo-religious pagan rituals, appears more elaborate and sophisticated than one might expect from a poorly educated woman writing on her own. This circumstance, together with the scant information regarding the alleged author’s identity, has turned the text into an intriguing cultural and editorial enigma.

Among those who have attempted to clarify the true origins of *Aradia*, Andrew D. Manns has recently stood out. When re-examining the individuals who surrounded and helped Leland during his years in Italy, Manns realized that a significant role may have been played by Roma Lister. She was a little-known expert in ‘traditional knowledge’ who, between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, invigorated various occult circles active on the Italian and European scene. Lister was of English origin, but lived in Italy from childhood and was raised by women belonging to rural traditions, becoming deeply imbued with their customs and alternative systems of thought. These influences fostered in her a fascination with the occult that led her, throughout her life, to engage in esoteric, mediumistic, and witchcraft-related experiences. An early echo of this inclination emerged in 1893 when, still young, she was invited to publicly present a survey of ancient popular beliefs widespread in the area of the Castelli Romani—the territory south of the city of Rome where she had lived for a considerable period. The partnership between Leland and Lister had begun earlier and would continue until the beginning of the new century. It has recently attracted renewed interest, and her early work has been republished (Lister, 1893/2024).

Lister was at the centre of a varied network of encounters and associations with intellectuals and aristocrats of different nationalities who were fascinated

by the occult and frequented Italy at that time. Lister not only witnessed mysterious and ‘magical’ events produced by others, but was herself the author of mediumistic manifestations, particularly in the form of direct writing. This appears to lend support to the possibility that she may have ‘channelled’, while in a trance state, at least part of the text of *Aradia*.

Unfortunately, despite extensive research, Manns has not found the proverbial ‘smoking gun’ to prove his hypothesis; nevertheless, he has succeeded in presenting evidence that makes it highly plausible. In the first part of this volume he recounts, with agility and fluency, his exploration of the past, allowing us to discover the marvels and the enchanted occult atmosphere that for many decades permeated Florence; writers and wealthy individuals fascinated by occult and esoteric practices as much as by political tensions and family affairs; and representatives of the dominant culture who were simultaneously patrons and benefactors of artists, intellectuals, mediums, and seers—individuals often marked by double or even triple identities. Figures such as Lilian Whiting and Baroness Rosenkrantz, devoted to mediumistic experiences, re-emerge in this volume alongside the Italian theosophist Decio Calvari and the spiritualist and Freemason Giovanni Hoffmann, capable of magical-witchcraft practices, mediumistic evocations, and alchemical studies. At the centre of a complex web of subtle and mysterious reciprocal influences stands Roma Lister herself, who, in contact with those personalities, both inspired them and was in turn inspired.

The second part of the book, no less interesting than the first, consists of a collection of about a dozen writings by Lister (together with one text by another author). They are extremely difficult to obtain today and may still hold considerable interest for historians, anthropologists, and all scholars of occult practices. Apart from the 1893 report on the traditions of Castelli Romani—translated here into English for the first time—the remaining pieces are carefully selected excerpts from the two volumes of her personal *Reminiscences* (often, however, confused and imprecise) published by Lister (1926, 1927), as well as from an early 20th-century Italian journal that had only limited circulation. Some of these writings still describe magical and divinatory beliefs and practices handed down in areas of the Castelli Romani, while other passages concern the ‘adventures’ and evocations of immaterial entities and powers experienced by Giovanni Hoffmann, who emerges from these testimonies as a magician capable of mastering occult forces. The information contained in this second part of the volume is also abundant, offering a faithful representation of Lister’s attitudes and convictions.

One of the distinguishing features of Manns’s book is his effective and evocative approach to the subject. On the one hand, he succeeds in portraying with light and reliable tones the atmospheres and personal relationships among figures retrieved from a shadowy oblivion; on the other, he peppers the text with information and observations that can suggest new connections and insights

to the reader. Many examples could be offered. I found myself repeatedly interrupting the reading in order to investigate or verify sudden doubts or intuitions—but I shall limit myself to one, concerning Lister’s mediumistic experiences, which Manns describes by noting how she tended to adapt herself to the individuals with whom she ‘worked’ (pp. 46–50). This brought to my mind an observation I made while attending the séances of the Italian medium Corrado Piancastelli, characterized by a relatively shallow trance in which an ‘entity’ answered the participants’ questions, every time aligning itself in perfect harmony with the tone and intellectual level of the questioner.

I was pleasantly struck by the amount of ‘new’ material contained in this book. Although (I believe) I possess a reasonably solid knowledge of the occult currents in Italy of that historical period, spanning the late 19th and early 20th centuries, I encountered numerous unexpected confirmations, especially regarding figures such as Giovanni Hoffmann, Lilian Whiting, and Baroness Rosenkrantz, about whom I had previously only found fragmentary traces. Not to mention Roma Lister herself, who finally assumes the historical and psychological importance she deserves, which has never truly been recognized before. Until now, it would have been unthinkable to retrieve further information about all of them, except in the unsuspected publications that Manns has now skilfully extracted. The result is that, as one turns the pages of this book, one enters a ‘nocturnal’ and elusive world, seemingly alternative to the ordinary one, which nevertheless did not remain beneath the surface of dominant history but, rather, ran alongside it and constituted a significant portion of it. Manns deserves recognition for having brought back to our attention much data and intellectual stimuli that may prove further inspiring.

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