Magical Libraries: What Occultists Read

This book has been concerned so far with the traditions, individuals, and to some extent the literature that were influential in shaping the revolutionary form of British occultism emerging at the end of the nineteenth century. The examination of textual sources, however, has so far been restricted to those produced by late-Victorian occultists. We must now turn our attention to what informed the creative process behind these primary sources. An investigation into the history of magic in any period would be incomplete without considering the texts that enlightened the individuals involved. Ceremonial magic had long been an elitist branch of magic and one requiring literacy. It is rare to find a magician, in history or fiction, without an accompanying magical book. Books had long been deemed crucial to the transmission of occult knowledge and the Victorian period was no exception. In fact, the Golden Dawn’s institutionalization of magical learning ensured that the written word’s place of importance was enshrined. We have seen which rituals and texts occultists used in their actual magical practice; what remains is an examination of the written sources these adepts used to inform and construct this unique brand of magic.

Occultists’ libraries are treasure troves for such an investigation. It is here where we can identify which texts were held dear and regarded as vital enough to collect and preserve. By uncovering what topics were of most interest and made up the bulk of these collections, we can also reaffirm which individuals and traditions held sway over nineteenth-century magicians. In doing so we see the Victorian magical revival as part of a continuous invented tradition and we can further solidify the connections of certain individuals with the Golden Dawn itself and their role in revitalizing and repackaging British magic. The topics covered in these magical collections will delineate how Victorians
differentiated between the various esoteric subjects and even between broader fields, namely those of science and magic. The occult libraries to be examined are two of the more prestigious ones of the century: the personal library of the mid-century occultist Frederick Hockley and the Golden Dawn’s own library, the Westcott Hermetic Library.

As we have seen, some sources from Hockley’s library were consulted by several members of the Golden Dawn, including A.E. Waite, Florence Farr, W.A. Ayton and Percy Bullock. Hockley’s role in influencing the magic developed by the Order has already been clearly established. By examining his collection we can determine what books were deemed relevant and desirable by mid-century occultists and we can then compare these to the holdings of the later Golden Dawn library to see if there is any duplication and what the significance of this might be.

Hockley’s personal library contained hundreds of books and manuscripts on topics such as astrology, mesmerism, cabala and magic. After his death, the library was catalogued by Covent Garden bookseller and publisher, George Redway, who acquired the massive collection. This catalogue lists more than a thousand books and manuscripts, many of which ended up in the collection of another occultist, Walter Moseley, who was also a member of Kingsford’s Hermetic Society. Kingsford and Maitland both made use of Moseley’s ‘admirable library of old and rare books’. Some of the more interesting magical works in Hockley’s collection were manuscripts that he had personally transcribed on ceremonial magic, cabala and divination. Several of these works are now in the Harry Price Collection at the University of London, including works on witchcraft, alchemy, and demon and ghost-lore.

While the original catalogue listed more than a thousand entries, the only copies I have discovered are incomplete and contain only 662 of the items. The title of the catalogue, *List of Books Chiefly from the Library of the Late Frederick Hockley, Esq., Consisting of Important Works relating to the Occult Sciences, both in print and manuscript*, makes it somewhat doubtful that all of the books are from Hockley’s collection. There is no way, however, to identify those which do not come from the occultist. The word ‘important’ is in bold and underlined in Redway’s catalogue making it clear that this was perceived to be a significant collection. The list itself is arranged in a confusing manner. The organization is not alphabetical nor is there any particular order to the headings. Some books are introduced by the author’s surname, some by their general topic and others by title. As this arrangement is likely the result of Redway’s organization and not that of Hockley’s, we cannot make any conclusions concerning how Hockley viewed his collection. As a publisher specializing in esoteric