

Gurdjieffian Confessions: a self remembered.

by

James Moore

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Review by J. Walter Driscoll

Followed by excerpts from James Moore's memoir, on pages 5 to 10, herein



An Outsider's 'Life Inside the Gurdjieff Work'

This is the third impressive, in depth biographical study by the noted independent scholar, James Moore. His trail breaking study, *Gurdjieff and Mansfield* was published in 1980 and his magisterial biography, *Gurdjieff: the Anatomy of a Myth*, in 1991.

Between 1956 and 1994, Moore was a member of London's Gurdjieff Society Ltd. – one of four groups established in the early 1950s, in Paris, London, New York and Caracas, by Jeanne de Salzmann. After her death in 1990 Michel de Salzmann led these groups until his death in 2001. While a great deal—some would even say *too* much—has been written interpreting Gurdjieff and his ideas, there has been little documentation published about the key groups, orthodox and unorthodox, that claim to represent his legacy. Anecdotal reports *have* emanated from participants in conventional Gurdjieff groups, particularly at the aspirant, postulant and novitiate levels, of tight-lipped secretiveness, almost sacramental coyness, and anonymous *work-faced*, funereal solemnity.

Now we have Moore's *Gurdjieffian Confessions*, an unprecedented, eloquently human memoir of a dedicated Gurdjieffian life. He also writes in homage to Mme Henriette Lannes. Jeanne de Salzmann appointed her as England's overall Work responsible, in early spring 1950. In October 1957, Mme Lannes became Moore's Gurdjieffian teacher for 21 years. She retired to France in 1979 and died there the following year.

Long an irrepressible advocate for "an autonomous history of the Work", Moore writes with candour about his life as a sceptical true believer among "devotees who insisted that Gurdjieff was a high altar on the march." His memoir is deeply personal yet non-sectarian; it is a clever, convincing, multi-faceted, and refreshingly candid account of fifty years of Gurdjieffian practice, nearly four decades of that, deep within the hermetic "little Vatican" of a major Gurdjieff group.

Moore's first chapter, "Origins" provides a brief, lively account of his 1929-1939 childhood in Deal, Kent – a seaside garrison town of the Royal Marines, in South-Eastern England, near the Cliffs of Dover.

My parents' own beginnings had scarcely been 'Roses! Roses!'. From quasi-Dickensian depths they had clambered up, rung by rung, scholarship by scholarship, through the educational escape hatch. [p 1]

Moore reminisces affectionately at several points of the book, about his decent Good-Householder parents, characterising them as sensitive and intelligent – a worrisome, literate, military schoolmaster father, to whom beer spoke more eloquently than scripture; an ice-capped, emotionally volcanic mother, a Spartan "in perpetual service to her nearest and dearest." Between 1940-1945, James and his brother, Bob—along with thousands of other British children—were evacuated through the Nazi U-boats surrounding England. The Moore boys ended up with foster parents in the little South African dorp of Dundee near Zululand. Returning to post-war London, Moore's scowling, angry-young-man's search for outer prospects, led him, during the prosperous early years of the Cold War, to a 1954 posting at one of the British Admiralty's corner desks in Portsmouth.

All the while, Moore found himself increasingly under:

the burden of dark oppressive thoughts... Who was I intrinsically? The big predicting factors (insolently thrust on me as on everyone else) seemed so chancy. Why British? Why male? Why of the twentieth century? Why indeed of the planet earth? My mania for probing my 'selfhood', as a child's tongue painfully and perversely explores a wobbly tooth, ran smack up against the world's dismissive empiricism (not least Mother's conversation-stopping "I just get on with things.") In Portsmouth I found no confidant; my Departmental peers pursued their career-centred agendas within received values, ideologically chloroformed by a hook-line-and-sinker acquiescence. Even the scary doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (i.e. fraught atomic stand-off between the USSR and the West) aroused in my colleagues no glimmer of existential question... They drank in the 'Keppel's Head'.¹ [p 13]

A self-confessed non-conformist, Moore settled into what proved a life-long, discontented career as a Civil Servant drudging daily in the Admiralty offices. His outsider's dissatisfaction with ordinary life, his burning quest for inner prospects (that might lead to his "own answers flowering inwardly . . . [into] a lifelong spiritualising factor"), as well as his voracious reading and research² -- all combined to draw Moore to such Eastern

¹ The Keppel's Head Hotel and Bar, in Portsmouth, established in 1779, was named after Admiral Keppel (1725-1786). Its website <http://www.keppelsheadhotel.co.uk/history.html> assures us that their bar is still "a favourite haunt of the Sub Lieutenants studying at the Naval Education College in the dockyard."

² James Moore is a dedicated bibliophile with "a flair for stumbling on novel Work material." He was a leading member of the Gurdjieff Society's bibliography team in the early 1980s when they contributed enormously to *Gurdjieff: An Annotated Bibliography* (Garland, 1985), which I co-authored with the Gurdjieff Foundation of California. 2

classics as the *Mathnawi*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Tao Te King*. “Yet, how was I to render the wisdom of the East accessible?” he pondered.

A providential 1956 encounter in the Portsmouth library, with P. D. Ouspensky’s *In Search of the Miraculous* and Dr Kenneth Walker’s *Venture with Ideas*, hinted possibilities that brought Moore to the threshold of *The Work*. The Gurdjieff Work that is, then manifested in London by Dr Kenneth Walker’s group.

I coped gamely with the Gurdjieff Work’s entrapments for the sake of its emancipating power: I bowed before its fundamental grandeur but could not suppress a few laughs at its all-too-human corollaries... Although I was committed to opening inwardly, I remained socially very much on guard. [p 34]

Moore placed himself ‘unreservedly at the service’ of decades of oral teaching, inner exercises, Movements, and group work, as personified by Henriette Lannes.

As to the institutional milieu which frames my memoir, I am not so Quixotic as to tilt against that sturdy and still rotating windmill. Let history be its final judge. Faith in institutions has never been my strong suit: I am interested in millers not in windmills. My priceless Gurdjieffian benefaction was Henriette Lannes herself, not the apparatus which she countenanced.

[p xiii]

“You are not here being jollied along towards yet another watery reprise of Gurdjieff’s ‘system’ “, Moore assures us. Instead, for fifteen chapters, he treats the reader to a zestful, “unapologetic celebration of a nominated, populous, cast, in their full-blooded Dickensian humanity”; each appears in striking individuality. Until 1979, this expeditionary band of “advance-payment-deferred-reward types”, were guided on their “quest for the higher while embroiled in the lower”, by the singular Mme Henriette Lannes.

Moore’s Epilogue telescopes the years since 1980. During this time he rose to the position of group leader, developed as a writer, and published several articles as well as his two key books about Gurdjieff. In 1994, when he authored a six-page scholarly critique, questioning some radical shifts in practice by the international Work hierarchy, Moore was cast out of The Gurdjieff Society.³ Since then, he has fostered independent Gurdjieff studies centred in London. ⁴

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³ [Moveable Feasts: The Gurdjieff Work](#), *Religion Today* (London) IX (2), Spring 1994, pp. 11-16. Moore’s study—in a respected academic journal—critiques innovations that commenced across Europe and North America in the early 1980s. These entailed a shift away from the canonical ideal of effort towards one of grace, emphasis on lengthy supervised communal ‘sittings’ redolent of Kundalini Yoga, and the 1992 adoption of an ‘improved’ American English-language revision of Gurdjieff’s *Beelzebub’s Tales*, (more than 40 years after his death).

⁴ James Moore can be contacted through his publisher Gurdjieff Studies Ltd – < <https://www.gurdjieff.org.uk/> >. 3

James Moore is an 'old school' man of letters, with a virtuoso command of narrative and biographical prose. Hailing Canadian satirist Stephen Leacock's humour (1869-1944), and the droll ironies of British biographer Lytton Strachey (1880-1932) as stylistic inspiration, Moore applies his self-confessed, "irresistible penchant for situational and verbal irony", to adroit metaphoric characterisations of friends (fondly remembered) and strained relationships or foes (sagaciously measured and charitably fled after apt portrayal). He is unflinching yet light-hearted in the application of these same skills to his own talents, foibles, and regrets. Moore readily acknowledges that "some people warm generously to my style and others hate it." In fact, his writing can be difficult fare for those who dislike intense metaphoric allusion, those without adequate general knowledge or reference skills and those unfamiliar with or intolerant of Britishisms. Many find him compulsively readable.

Throughout Moore's densely packed narrative, cultural, political, historical and literary trends and tides during his life are ironically caricatured and deftly interwoven with wry glimpses of his personal life and of the company he kept at many levels of the Gurdjieff Foundation. We are privy to unprecedented participant-observer sketches of his group's dynamic, attention and effort demanding exercises and projects, their isolation-by-dedication, and their "quest for sensation and presence", underscored by the travails of group work, inner work, and internecine power struggles. Moore also provides a unique intermittent account of the secretive, disillusioning contention that percolated behind the scenes during preparation, filming and screening of the Peter Brook Jeanne de Salzmann collaboration on their 1979 "good-bad film" adaptation of Gurdjieff's *Meetings with Remarkable Men*; "I had seen the future and it did not work." (pg 226, 254-55)

Gurdjieffian Confessions is an eloquent, cautionary tale about the perils of elitism and group-think. Like Karapet of Tiflis, in Gurdjieff's Gargantuan cosmological epic *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, Moore, with tonic irreverence, blows a whistle to awaken the Gurdjieff establishment to historicity. He offers an engaging, well-told story that is sure to elicit deep chortles of recognition from readers who have participated in groups such as the one he describes. *Gurdjieffian Confessions* is essential reading for anyone committed to—or even lightly considering membership in—*any* Gurdjieff group. Scholars of Western esotericism and general readers interested in a representative history-in-miniature, of the worldwide Gurdjieff movement, will also benefit from this unique and persuasive memoir.

J. Walter Driscoll

April 2006



Excerpts from James Moore's *Gurdjieffian Confessions*

ENTER MME DE SALZMANN AND MME LANNES (pp 31-33)

[23 September 1957]

My basic faith that the Work could furnish 'magic' was undimmed - a trust marvellously vindicated on Monday 23 September 1957, when the new studio was formally opened... The night was warm; the room breathless. Around the studio's periphery (with all but the grandest grandees bugged together cross-legged on the floor), England's mainstream Gurdjieffians waited in stoic expectancy. I collected many interesting new faces, young ranged with old - a movement's unforbidable future issuing from its undeniable past. Poised at the piano sat Mrs Adie, a fine looking woman with long black hair... The very air awaited some singular event.

Suddenly, emerging from the studio's small ante-room, two impressive women, neither young, entered quietly but decisively. Doubtless the older one was Madame de Salzmänn herself (whom Bernard Kay, with more metaphorical percipience than *politesse*, called "The Queen Bee"): Jeanne de Salzmänn, a founder member of the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, who had sustained 30 years intimate contact with Gurdjieff and in effect become his successor.

Mrs Nott stepped forward and welcomed the two notables, exchanging warm amities with Mme de Salzmänn. Madame, centering herself beneath the studio's shallow dome, took in the room North, South, East, and West; and eventually - to happy relief - pronounced "One could work here". Before an alien smile could encroach on Mr Adie's face, she called on everyone to stand and extend their arms sideways, palms down. Minutes now passed. An inordinate time. As fatigue elided into discomfort, and discomfort into downright pain, Mme de Salzmänn moved amongst us, encouraging₅

some to persevere, and releasing others. At a certain point, the women were excused *en masse* (all but a handful of the calibre of Joanna Haggarty and Ann England).

Then, one by one, Madame singled out those men who were weakest, oldest, or in most trouble. She quickly spotted me from afar; walked straight up; looked at me squarely; and (discerning, I suspect, a suffering on the cusp of fanaticism and panic), told me to let go. Slowly and remorsefully I lowered my arms to my sides, while the sensory memory of their extension hung in the air like invisible wings. The absolutely last man persuaded to let go was Chris Yates; he possessed a bull-like strength but God knows what he experienced. If I close my eyes, I can see his face now.

Yet the imprint of a very different face, a woman's face, was my golden prize from that dramatic evening. Immediately this singular woman had entered the studio, side by side with Mme de Salzmann, some elective affinity committed me to her. I cannot here remotely do justice to her unaffected regality. I will simply say that, on my pigmy scale, this image was no less predicating than Dante's first glimpse of Beatrice... Forty years or more have passed like a dream. I am no longer young. It is time to acknowledge the eclipse of many shining hopes; time to salute a dusk which, in any case, will not be denied. But, day by precious day, whatever is defeatist in my nature is confronted dialectically by the radiance of that woman's being - she who became my benefactress; she who became for me 'the proof of the Work'.

Her name was Henriette Lannes.

Excerpts from James Moore's *Gurdjieffian Confessions*

PIONEERING DAYS AT THE GUILD FOR RESEARCH INTO CRAFTSMANSHIP (pp 80-1)

[October 1963]

The White Ladies Poultry Farm, as I first glimpsed it at 9.45 a.m. on Wednesday 2 October 1963, was not exactly the abomination of desolation but neither was it "Roses! Roses!" The low clapboard and asbestos huts, disciplined over five acres, vaguely recalled R.A.F. Bridgenorth, except for the briars and nettles and the stink of stale chicken shit exuding from hundreds of smashed windows. I shuddered for the undemobilisable battery hens who had ovulated their lives away in this cheerless place *en route*, presumably, to some Indian restaurant chain or the Kentucky Fried Chicken counter. *Arbeit macht Frei* but not in their case.

Julian Keable smiled at me - that positive, ever-so-slightly parsonical, "fight-the-good-fight" smile which tended to unnerve people. We two were the advance guard of the advance guard, tasked to survey and boundary-stake a collateral strip of land reserved by the vendor Messrs Lyons.

"Sharpen them like this," counselled Julian, sawing gravely at our first wooden marker. "One clean cut at 35 degrees".

"I follow you," I said.

But as he peered down his theodolite, extrapolating our demarcation line, I malletted my markers square and uncut into the moist, agreeable earth. Wham! Bamm! The Thames-valley mist, notorious for its chill tenacity, sullenly and slowly dematerialised until at last the sun surprised us like a jolly red aniseed ball stuck at the bottom of a white paper bag... Our new age had dawned.

Rita Thorburn, two years into her widowhood, had found the White Ladies on the Fifield Road midway between Windsor and Bray. This ungainly, upper-crust person, with her expensive toupee, pots of money, and vaguely artistic leanings, well deserves her appreciative mention in British Gurdjieffian records. As a 'hearth' for our craft activities and a gymnasium for 'super-effort', the White Ladies took some beating - big but not overwhelmingly big; derelict but not irremediably derelict; austere but not insupportably austere. It was cheapish too. With an unsecured loan from 'Sam Copley and others', we picked up the whole shebang for £15,750, using an expressly contrived vehicle, The Guild for Research into Craftsmanship Ltd. (which, like The Society for Research into the Development of Man Ltd., deferred to Henriette Lannes).

"If you will be with me," Madame Lannes promised, "I will be with you." And so, weekend by weekend, we all wintered stoically together. Today, when this place has acquired - relatively speaking of course - a 'Bray Hilton' ambiance, only a confusion of uncatalogued photographs and amateurish film footage hint at conditions we grappled with in 1963. We started from scratch, in effect from Year-Zero. We had no heating, no stove to cook on, and minimal sanitation, but set dynamically to work. In three over-subscribed teams we rostered our way right through Saturdays and Sundays, especially prizing the dramatic all-night shift. By day our forced breath plumed white in the cold hostile air. Our handful of electricians worked like demons but when, outstripping their contrivance, the impatient seasonal darkness overtook us in some God-forsaken corner, we opposed our torches, Tilley Lamps, and even candles... Conferring, arguing, compromising; hammering, sawing, digging, welding, glass-cutting; sharing techniques and sandwiches; adjusting our idiosyncratic hats and woollen Balaclava helmets; unfreezing our chapped hands around mugs of hot soup - we knocked off one 'insoluble' problem after another.

Excerpts from James Moore's *Gurdjieffian Confessions*

ENTER MALCOLM GIBSON (pp131-2)

[May 1970]

A single figure however - the dearest to me - is earmarked for our movement's history: Malcolm Milne Gibson. Though some special 'chemical affinity' had existed between us from the first glance and though 14 ensuing years had deepened and elaborated our friendship, I claim no symmetry in this relationship. Malcolm was decidedly the elder brother: ahead of me in life experience, in group, in Puppets, and, above all, in Movements. We men gauged him, actually, the most compelling of all our Movements teachers. His preliminary immobility was elemental (as starkly definitive as Australia's folkloric 'Black Stump', boundary marker between known and unknown worlds.) And when, without a syllable, he moved into some dervish exercise, he inhabited the evolution like a hand inhabits a glove. Nevertheless, the admirable women teachers (Marthe de Gaigneron, Annette Courtenay-Mayers, Joanna Haggarty, and Natasha Jobst) imperfectly concealed a frisson of unease whenever Malcolm was out in front. Their technique and commitment were at least equal, their repertoire surely wider, but never, never would they match Malcolm's natural gift or gender-modulated spiritual pheromones - and they knew it. I sometimes wondered where this tension would end.

To Malcolm and his button-bright daughter Anna, as of course to her mother Pamela Harden, I am indebted for my little taste of surrogate fatherhood - the rendezvous at the school gate, the worried visit to the hospital, the recovered magic of Christmas. I was seeing more and more of Anna because Malcolm (now Export Manager to an outfit called Expanded Metal Ltd.) was busy to the point of 'five Fridays in a week' and Pamela was sporadically unwell.

There is a crisis point in Madame Lannes' puppet play 'The Equipage' when the over-confident driver is violently hurled from the carriage and stretched shattered on the hard earth: such a horrible moment eventuated in May 1970... It was early one morning that Madame Lannes phoned Bray from Woodcote with news of Malcolm's dangerous heart attack at the Milan Trade Fair. She spoke only with a handful of his intimates including me. She absolutely required that we work that day as never before, visualising Malcolm from afar and bringing to bear all the presence we could muster. Even today I can evoke her voice.

"Depending on your work he may live... but we cannot say how long."

My God what a thing!

Excerpts from James Moore's *Gurdjieffian Confessions*

BASIL TILLEY AT THE FORGE (pp160-1)

[13 January 1973]

It was the bulldog which clinched it - the bulldog medallion centred in the Union Flag which Basil Tilley eccentrically draped outside the forge on 13 January 1973. No ironic swipe at Work political correctness could more have tickled me or better confirmed my luck in transferring to his blacksmithing team.

Make no mistake, Basil was a big man. In his bravery, his force of character, his self-confidence, his surefooted blundering, his culinary ineptitude, his universality and his parochialism; in his wisdom and his naivety; his kindness and his acerbity; his humility and his obsessive determination to be top dog; in his practicality, his genuine solicitude for the sick and dying, his genial yet sardonic paternalism; in his love of gardens, his foggy Anglicanism, his quelling prefectorial eye, his partiality to horse-raddish, and his repeatedly deferred intention to retire to Norfolk and take up bee-keeping - the stock imperial figure of the District Commissioner lived again.

Basil instinctively construed abstractions as self-referential. The baroque complications of 'Eternal Recurrence' did not exist for him. The whole thing was simplicity itself: it boiled down to the glorious fact that he had been - and always would be - born too young for embroilment in the First World War and too old for the Second. At seventy-odd, he cut a virile manly figure, almost heraldic in leather apron and leather gloves. The forge itself was modestly proportioned (virtually as small as the nearby den where, in a steamy miasma, Cecil Lewis's daughter Celia, ran the wool-dyeing activity.) Yet the drama we amateur smiths re-enacted every weekend was mock-heroic. I pungently recall the antiquated hand-pumped bellows answering loyally but asthmatically to our dogged rhythm; the coke fire contending day-long with subversive clinker; and our home-made tongs approximative and never just right; and the scrounged iron stock, as moody under question as a moody adolescent. Above all, I remember the moments of passionate activation, when - severely tested between hammer and anvil - our hopes of crafting candlesticks and ornamental grates fit to exhibit in Skill Gallery were bullied into realisation or throwaway cock-up. Spice all this with the real and present danger of burns, and punctuate with the surprised hiss of outraged metal discourteously tempered in cold filthy water... Such was life then.

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<http://www.jamesmoore.org.uk/index.htm>