

The Company He Kept: Victor Neuburg and The Order of Woodcraft Chivalry

Sandy Balls, a rural campsite near the village of Fordingbridge, Hampshire, has an antiquarian name that raises a chuckle; it regularly appears in roundups of curiously-titled British places. Visitors to the present-day location, which offers large-scale catering and swimming facilities arranged picturesquely around sandy plateaus overlooking the Avon Valley, can partake in outdoor activities during relaxing family breaks in rented chalets. Deep in its woods, however, more intrepid explorers will find a fenced-off monument marking the grave of Ernest Westlake [1855-1922], purchaser of Sandy Balls in 1919, ancestor of the current owners, and founder of another curiously-titled organisation: the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry.

The Order (as current members call it), began as a splinter group from the Boy Scouts in 1916. Ernest, a geologist and anthropologist, and his doctor son Aubrey, were Quakers whose scouting interests was aligned more to the woodcraft inspirations of Ernest Thompson Seton, the British-born, US-based naturalist co-founder of the Boy Scouts of America, than the militaristic influence of battle veteran Robert Baden-Powell. Amid the Great War, the Westlakes set up a pacifist alternative, foregrounding outdoor education and campfire mysticism. They began with groups of London boys and expanded to girls and adults of both sexes. Sandy Balls gave them the permanent location to scale up their ambitions for wholesale cultural regeneration. The Order offered a new way of life: radical, joyful, even ecstatic. It would be chivalric in its models, but also Dionysian. The Greek god brought subversion and liberation.

Ernest died in a car accident in 1922; his son became the Order's Chieftan. Aubrey continued his father's disregard for convention (Ernest was often spotted in the village dressed in toga and sandals, the uniform of the Simple Lifer). He developed the Order in new directions, beyond outdoor skills for children and Quaker principles of organisation, adding food reform, nature cure and experiments in human relationships. From 1923, the Order's magazine, *Pine Cone*, brought its philosophies together, with a poem on the cover that encapsulated its world view:

*They called me never;
But Dionysos came,
Whence earth forever
Is lighted by my flame.*

The extract came from *Songs of the Groves: Records of the Ancient World*, published in 1921 by Vine Press, Steyning, and authored by Victor B. Neuburg. Its championing of nature worship and joyful living resonated deeply with Order members. Ernest had penned letters on similar topics in 1917, published posthumously in a 1927 pamphlet, *The Place of Dionysos*. Here, Aubrey listed *Songs of the Groves* among twenty-four books recommended for further reading. Amid works by Blake, Carpenter, Freud, Jung and Nietzsche, the six asterisked as 'more important' included Neuburg's.

The *Pine Cone* was initially edited by Harry Byngham, a journalist in natural health. His enthusiasm for Dionysos was so great that he changed his name to Dion. In the second issue of *Pine Cone*, October 1923, he printed two untitled poems under the initials VBN. The first read:

*We stript, and talking in the wood,
As far before in Plato's time,
We found anew how Good was good,
And how the world is one – a rime
That keys to all the multitude.*

*Anew the bare skin on the grass,
The free hair twisting in the wind,
Dark chilliads were forced to pass
Through the bright portals of the mind:
The swift world came, as pure as glass.*

*So we passed back to the old Hill,
And so re-learned the talking-trade,
Till certain Voices, merry-shrill,
Called us to toast and marmalade –
But the old time stayed with us still.*

As a paean to the revitalising effects of nudity in nature, and its associated feeling of escape from the modern world, the verses reveal shared interests between Neuburg and Byngham. The latter was the co-founder of the first nudist ('gymnosophist') club in Britain in 1924, a member of the British Society for Sex Psychology, which campaigned for liberal attitudes to open marriage and homosexuality, and a leader of the Men's Dress Reform Society, where he wore primary-coloured medieval tunics and tights of his own design. Derek Edgell, author of the authoritative book on the Order, interviewed Byngham in the 1980s and detailed his friendship with Neuburg; he noted that the two talked of poetry and the occult, but it seems to me that they were also united by experiments in sexual liberation and dress (Neuburg too, was known for an archaic sartorial style). At the end of the 1920s, when Byngham lived in the Utopian community, The Sanctuary at Storrington, West Sussex – and where he caused press outrage as he hiked nude with his girlfriend across the South Downs – he was nearly Neuburg's neighbour. From Sandy Balls to The Sanctuary, Byngham lived in a range of alternative communities, and he was a doyen of dozens of minority causes. He has appeared in all my studies of daring dreamers in interwar England. This was the company that Neuberg kept in the same years.

The Order of Woodcraft Chivalry had a niche back-to-nature offer which, in the 1920s, mixed in modernist poetry, experimental psychology and classical ritual. Neuburg's Dionysian raptures suited its ambitions of festivity and freedom. For all the Order's obscurity, it expanded Neuburg's audiences significantly. While Vine Press publications were issued in print runs of c.500, *Pine Cone* was produced quarterly by the thousand.

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