

**THE SUNDAY TIMES
LONDON, ENGLAND
18 NOVEMBER 1951**

Devilish Silly

The Magic of My Youth. By Arthur Calder-Marshall. (Hart-Davis. 12s. 6d.)

The Great Beast: The Life of Aleister Crowley. By John Symonds. (Rider. 21s.)

By RAYMOND MORTIMER

In his volume of memoirs Mr. Calder-Marshall is sometimes frankly romancing. Like Mt. Nicolson in "Some People," he starts with real experiences and persons, then proceeds to improve them. The result is most delectable. His ear for dialogue, his ease in narrative and his sense of character are all exceptional. I wish only that the book were twice as long.

He recreates for our entertainment persons who caught his imagination in his salad days, a minor poet, a middle-aged woman in revolt against convention, and a socially ambitious, fraudulent fellow-undergraduate—all of them "arty," absurd, pathetic. He writes of these with sympathy, of his father and elder brother with affection. The tone of the book is no less pleasing than the style.

There is—or there used to be—something specially exciting to an adolescent imagination in the elaborate arcane cults left over from the Nineties, St. Rose of Lima sharing with Pan the incense purchased from Messrs. Mowbray: weirdly beautiful and, besides, such fun! The classic account of this phase in growing up is to be found in Mr. Compton Mackenzie's "Sinister Street."

A figure who, of course, excited young Mr. Calder-Marshall's curiosity was Aleister Crowley, and he invited him to read a paper at Oxford. Did not the popular Press assert that he was the wickedest man in the world? Rumour spoke of "strange" drugs and "nameless" orgies in the "Abbey" at Cefalù to which he lured his innocent victims. He had sacrificed a goat to a youth, or was it only a youth to a goat?

To Mr. Calder-Marshall he looked like a stockbroker. I met him once, and also found him anything but sinister. He might have been a bookie who had retired because he had grown too

fat to welsh; nor did the kilt he was wearing make his person more enigmatic. I expected to be touched for ten bob. His literary executor, doing his best to take him seriously, recounts his life in "The Great Beast," in which some comical details relieve a long tedious and occasionally disgusting tale of mumbo-jumbo.

Crowley was the son of a rich Plymouth Brother, and the puritanical rigours of his childhood left him, in his own words, a mental and moral weakling," consumed with hatred for all restraint and for the God in whose name his childhood had been made a misery. So he took to black magic. Its fatuous jargon and nasty practices not only satisfied his romanticism but brought under his influence other weaklings and neurotics, thus gratifying his itch for power and sexual promiscuity. He gave his disciples habit-forming drugs, several went mad and killed themselves. I suspect that they became his disciples because they were deranged already.

The young Crowley could be quite entertaining. (This hardly emerges in his biography, but there is a portrait of him in an early, most uncharacteristic novel by Mr. Maugham, "The Magician.") He seems to have had gifts also as a mountaineer. He was, however, too second-rate to succeed in anything even in his strenuous attempts to be very, very wicked. Muttering hocus-pocus, he would baptize a frog (how could anyone be so humourless?), then crucify it and eat the legs—cooked but apparently not *meunière*. I doubt whether this performance, meant to impress the Powers of Darkness, would greatly interest even the R.S.P.C.A. Nor, in a period defiled by the authentic evil of the SS and Ogpu, can we be expected to shudder at Crowley's unhygienic carryings-on with loose and hysterical women.

He doted on fancy dress (vaguely Oriental) and fancy names. He called himself Brother Perdurabo, Baphomet, Ipsissimus, The Great Beast 666 and Sir Alastor de Kerval; his friend Miss Leah Faesi, was known variously as Alostrael, Babilon, the Contessa Léa Falkland and the Ape of Thoth; Mrs. Ninette Shumway (née Fraux) became Sister Cypris, while Frater Omnia Pro Veritate was the name preferred (who can blame him?) by poor Mr. Norman Mudd.

The whole crew, including Crowley, excite more pity than indignation. They had no defence against their own silliness, debility and bad taste. Unable to find consolation in traditional religion, in reason or in art, they had to take refuge in the vilest make-believe.