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'Wickedest Man in the World'

THE BEAST, By Daniel P. Mannix; Ballantine Books, N.Y.; \$35.

Aleister Crowley achieved the dubious distinction of being dubbed "the wickedest man in the world" by the judge of an English court. It was a reputation he sedulously cultivated with the aid of a strong constitution, a large fortune (until he ran through it), a powerful though disorganized imagination, and a compelling attraction for the lunatic fringe of both sexes.

Crowley was not quite a genius, not quite a charlatan and not quite a madman, but close enough to all three to rate him a permanent niche in the gallery of Peculiar People. The shock-value of a career in which the bizarre, the sinister, the sordid and the absurd jostled for attention was partly the result of his own efforts and partly of the social environment which made it possible.

New Religion

He set himself up as a diabolist, a master of black magic, and the god of a new religion, which was essentially an anti-religion, banding his followers into a society which was doctrinairely anti-social. This sort of fanatical rebellion depends on the stability, strength and general acceptance of the order from which it flies off at a tangent.

As his present biographer points out, devil worship implies belief in the devil; defiance of respectable middle class morality implies a clearly defined middle class moral code. Black magic is wicked and scarifying instead of silly only if you believe in black magic. "Today, no one would be shocked by Crowley's antics—he'd simply be put in a psychopathic ward and given electric shock treatments."

Crowley trailed his cult across Europe—with a couple of abortive ventures in the United States—with diminishing financial returns, from the latter years of Queen Victoria's reign till well past the end of World War II. His disciples had a sorry

time of it, being driven almost unanimously to drink, drugs, destitution, insanity and frequently suicide.

Perplexed

He outlived them all and survived to a ripe old age, apparently thriving on an incredible daily dosage of heroin, practising his incantations and enjoying his reputation among occultists as the last of the great magicians.

He did not vanish in a flash of red fire and smell of brimstone. He died quietly in his bed in a small provincial boarding house. His last words were, "I am perplexed." It really did seem a bit of an anticlimax.