

THE TEMENOS ACADEMY

"John Michell 1933-2009"

Author: Joscelyn Godwin

Source: Temenos Academy Review 12 (2009)

pp. 250-253

Published by The Temenos Academy

Copyright © Joscelyn Godwin, 2009

The Temenos Academy is a Registered Charity
in the United Kingdom

www.temenosacademy.org

John Michell (1933–2009)

JOSCELYN GODWIN

‘But how shall we bury you?’ asked Crito. ‘In any way you like,’ said Socrates, ‘if you can catch me, and I do not escape you.’

Who could possibly catch John Michell, alive or dead? The Church of England, which buried him, or the Glastonbury pagans who celebrated his birthdays and wedding? The Forteanos on both sides of the Atlantic, knowing who was his favourite philosopher after Plato? The pilgrims whom he fluently guided around Holy Russia? The Old Etonians and the caste to which he was born? The old rock stars who knew him as pictured in David Bailey’s book of Sixties portraits, *Goodbye Baby and Amen*? Ufologists, honoured by his very first book? Ley hunters and earth mysteries folk? Students of crop-circles and other anomalous phenomena? Sacred geometers and ancient metrologists? Grown-up children who see through every emperor’s new clothes?

By common standards John’s life was mildly eccentric, his notions very peculiar. For one thing, he was nocturnal. The flat at the top of his Notting Hill house seemed a philosopher’s eyrie as one watched the sun setting over London’s roovescape. Then as the candles were lit, the curtains drawn, it was more of a hobbit smial, or Badger’s burrow. Papers and smoking apparatus were shoved aside to make room for a late supper, and a pleasant, mild intoxication ensued. You never knew who you were going to meet there, and some of them were far more eccentric than John, but you always felt at ease with them. John seemed to have all the time in the world for the arts of companionship, and the next day you wondered when he managed to study so deeply, write so much, and illuminate the 300 geometric figures of his last book (*How the World Is Made*).

As for his notions, there were enough to confusticate almost anybody. His opinions could turn on a sixpence as he switched from one Michellian self to another. He could play courtier and write a dedicatory poem to The Prince of Wales, then join the anarchists in fierce magazines like *The Fanatic*. One day he was supporting the *Gay News* blasphemer; the next, wagging a finger at Salman Rushdie. Perhaps, like Charles Fort, he conceived of ‘nothing in religion, science, or

philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while'. The concept of the 'radical traditionalist', coined in 1972 with his first Rad-Trad pamphlet, allowed for any and all positions to be held, with a generous dose of irony.

Already a fan of *The View over Atlantis*, I first met John in August 1981, at one of those occasions that give one a foretaste of the afterlife as described by Socrates, confident as he was 'that I should go first to other wise and good gods, and then to men who have died and are better than men are here'. Contributing to this Parnassus in the Colorado mountains were Christopher Bamford, Robert Bly, Chris Crilly, Keith Critchlow, Rachel Fletcher, Robert Lawlor, Anne Macaulay, Ernest McClain, Treasa O'Driscoll, Kathleen Raine, William Irwin Thompson (who organized the affair, a 'Homage to Pythagoras'), and Arthur Zajonc. Keith Critchlow's first masterpiece of sacred architecture, the Lindisfarne Chapel, was rising near by, and Kathleen's mind must have been on *Temenos*, whose first number appeared in the same year. It was an auspicious meeting for many present, and John became a regular contributor to that journal and to the present one.

Reviewers and obituary writers naturally focus on what is most odd and offbeat about John's work, but it is important to appreciate what lay at the heart of it all. Beyond his Fortean agnosticism and his Socratic admission of ignorance, John believed himself the recipient of a revelation: not a novel one, but one periodically restored to mankind, and as often lost. It centred around a geometrical figure he called the New Jerusalem Diagram, after the clues in the Book of Revelation that helped him reconstruct it. The basis of the diagram is cosmological, in that it accurately expresses the relative sizes of the earth and the moon. Its confirmation is metrological, in that the cosmic dimensions, given in miles, are replicated in smaller units at pre-historic sites (e.g. Stonehenge) and in medieval buildings (e.g. Glastonbury Abbey). It is also theological, for the same canonical numbers recur in the gematria (letter-number equivalents) of significant phrases of the Greek New Testament. Finally, to the delight of traditionally minded Britons, the ancient measures survive in the Imperial system of miles, feet, and inches: hence John's detestation of the 'atheistic French metre'.

John published his discoveries in *The View over Atlantis* (1969) and *City of Revelation* (1971), essentially a two-part treatise of which both parts were subsequently revised as *The New View over Atlantis* (1983)

and *The Dimensions of Paradise* (1988). He had come to the conclusion that the geometrical and numerical canon to which the New Jerusalem Diagram gave access had been revealed to mankind at some prehistoric time, for which the lost civilization of Atlantis was but a convenient metaphor. During that golden age, the regulation by the canon of all arts and sciences had helped to sustain a society in harmony with itself and with the earth. Never quite lost, the canon was revived by the Pythagoreans and slipped into the number myths of Plato. The Druids possessed a part of it, as did the esoteric circles that presided over the birth of Christianity, thus integrating the new faith with the primordial tradition. Later John developed sidelines of this theory with his studies of the many ancient societal divisions into twelve tribes; of the recurrent placement of sacred centres at the crossing-points of geographical axes; and of the 'perpetual choirs' whose chanting, emulating the harmony of the spheres, magically sustained the system.

Legend tells that the first of all Christian churches was built at Glastonbury by Joseph of Arimathea, who came there after the Resurrection. This had been a sacred site from time immemorial, and Joseph's wooden church observed the canonical geometry and measures, as did its grander successors in stone. In *New Light on the Ancient Mystery of Glastonbury* (1990), John traced the resonances of this foundation through King Arthur and the Grail Quest, local legends and cosmic myths, prophecies and the promise of the renewal of Albion. With an earnestness belied by his light touch and incomparable English style, he believed that if only people would pay heed and again regulate things in accordance with the canon, the dreadful situation in which we find ourselves today might be reversed. The world could become re-enchanted, and the New Jerusalem descend once again.

John's exposition of his revelation and its consequences was of course far more subtle and complex than this bland summary. Nor has it died with him, but created a new field of research whose pioneers include John Neal (author of the formidable study of metrology, *All Done with Mirrors*), the brothers Richard and Robin Heath, and John Martineau. Their work illustrates what John has always told us: that the cosmos is designed in a way quite contrary to the fantasies of positivist science, and that the ancients were perfectly acquainted with its principles.

As for the re-enchantment of Albion, let alone the world, John's hopes may seem impossibly quixotic (an apt parallel for many of his traits!). But it may be mistaken to defer them to the unattainable future. In *Heretic Visions* of spring 1979, John described the 'great tradition of English prophecies whose common theme is that in Britain will be made the first reformation leading to the enlightenment (details not specified) of the whole world'. Those who knew him in later life will remember how he determined to be 'content with perceiving the goodness of souls and the reality of paradise here and now' (letter of 24 September 1990), and his assurance that if you tried it, it worked. Maybe in the larger, timeless scheme of things Albion is already enchanted, thanks to the perpetual choir of peculiarly English figures, some famous, others obscure, in which John now takes his honourable place.