

A deconstructed guru

Tobias Churton, *Deconstructing Gurdjieff: Biography of a Spiritual Magician* (Rochester, Inner Traditions, 2017), 336 pp.

George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (c. 1866–1949) is one of the most respected and well-known esoteric thinkers and philosophers of the twentieth century. Occasionally defined as ‘the first guru in the west’, Gurdjieff was born to Greek and Armenian parents at the borderlands of the old Russian and Turkish empires, toured across deserted areas of Central Asia and the Caucasus in search of traces of lost knowledge and shared his esoteric worldview and teaching with an assorted group of followers in Russia, Turkey, France and the United States from the early 1910s until his death in 1949.

Prominent figures of pop culture such as the actors Bill Murray and John Cleese (of Monty Python), musicians Kate Bush and Robert Fripp (King Crimson), the Zen writer Alan Watts and 11-time NBA basketball champion coach Phil Jackson have confessed to be either followers of Gurdjieff or heavily influenced by him. In a nutshell: Gurdjieff’s message has spread far and wide.

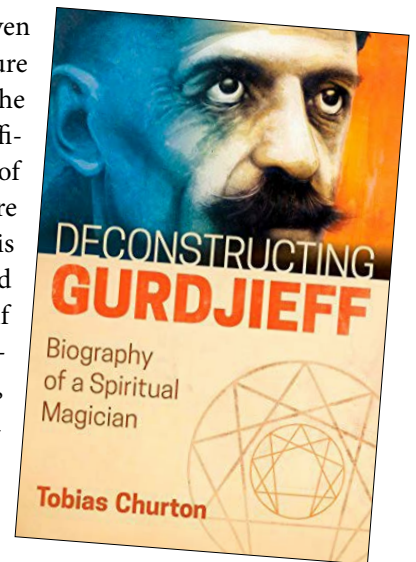
Academics and researchers keep tirelessly finding new ways to dissect Gurdjieff’s teaching and persona. Just to name a couple of examples, Professor Carole Cusack of the University of Sydney and Sophia Wellbeloved, the founder of the Cambridge Centre for the Study of Western Esotericism, have examined Gurdjieff and his teachings from various perspectives. Dozens of books have been written about Gurdjieff by writers devoted to the subject and while the international Gurdjieff community is not quite as populous as theosophical or anthroposophical societies, it is just as widespread across the Western world.

Anyone who has read even one article or attended a lecture on Gurdjieff knows that the lack of sources makes it difficult to draw a reliable picture of Gurdjieff’s early years – before his arrival in Moscow in his late 30s or early 40s around 1912–13. Gurdjieff himself wanted his followers to consider him a jack-of-all-trades, a brash adventurer with a hint of an old Zen master, roaming through uncharted lands gathering hidden information of past aeons.

Claims like this – no matter whether they are meant to be taken literally or considered as tools for the creation of greater understanding – should always be taken with a grain of salt, especially when operating in the academic field.

Enter Tobias Churton – a faculty lecturer at Exeter University and a holder of master’s degree in theology from Brasenose College (Oxford), who has spent the last decade binge-writing applauded books on subjects such as the Gnostics, Rosicrucians, Aleister Crowley and John the Baptist. In a sense, Churton joins the ranks of Gary Valentine Lachman and Colin Wilson as the ‘pop stars’ of Western esotericism.

In *Deconstructing Gurdjieff*, Churton takes upon himself the heavy burden of finding out what exactly can be said about Mr Gurdjieff *de facto* and what are the sources of his teachings. Taking Gurdjieff with a grain of salt is exactly what Churton engages to do in the preface section of his book, aptly named ‘Caveat Lector’.



Dr Steven Sutcliffe of the University of Edinburgh divides Gurdjieff research to three branches: research into Gurdjieff's persona (more or less separated from other religious movements); Gurdjieff as a representative of new religious phenomena (in the context of Western esotericism); Gurdjieff in the social and cultural context. If we follow Dr Sutcliffe's 'tripartite'scheme, Churton's book is a prime example of the third branch.

Deconstructing Gurdjieff is a telling name for the book. Deconstructionism, after all, is the first movement in Western philosophy which focuses in dissolution; picking pieces apart and putting them under the microscope. Churton is aware that Gurdjieff's name finds its way into a barely a handful official documents before his arrival in Moscow, and he goes through a respectable amount of source material in his quest to introduce 'Historical Gurdjieff' to the world.

The reviewer can't help but mention that Gurdjieff himself stated time and time again that the dogma and teaching of different religious sects had been thoroughly corrupted over the course of centuries and how he stated there was a need to go to the roots, find out what great teachers such as Jesus or Mohammed *really* said (remember his tale about *Pre-sand Egypt!*)

So Churton's task is, indeed, *Gurdjieffian* in a sense.

As in historical research in general, Churton has a lot of material to work with, beginning from the 1910s, but before that, official documents are hazy and sparse. Churton becomes kind of a gravedigger when tracing the roots of Gurdjieff's maternal and paternal branches of the family and persistently going through grand historical turns which affected the geographical areas the family lived in, not forgetting their personal fortunes.

Churton's most challenging task is going through Gurdjieff's semi-autobiographical book *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, trying to find glimpses of facts within hundreds of pages of text written to the form of an auto-fictional adventure book. In this sense, Churton does an excellent job, tracing the history of individual buildings in cities such as Tbilisi, St Petersburg or Istanbul and surfing on the top of a tide of ideas flushing the shores of the entire Western world at the turn of twentieth century.

Naturally, Churton goes through the platoon of 'remarkable men' Gurdjieff has mentioned in his

writings, presenting the hypothesis that Gurdjieff's colourful companions, such as Madame Vitvitskaia, Ekim Bey and Pjotr Karpenko are merely allegories; characters most likely based on qualities of real-life people Gurdjieff has met, but immortalized in literature to help the writer convey a message concerning the psyche of human being.

While Gurdjieff himself admitted his indebtedness to Yezidism, Sufism, *Gilgamesh*, the *Tales of a Thousand and One Nights*, as well as Greek Orthodox Christianity, he rarely mentioned any other real-life sources for his teachings. Churton continues his thorough examination by digging deeper into the Sufi or Yezidi roots of Gurdjieff's teachings, not forgetting Manicheism, Gnosticism and Rosicrucianism – drawing lines of connection between Gurdjieff, French occult revival and the Freemasons, even bringing forward plausible facts that Gurdjieff may have been a member of a Freemasons' lodge. (However, Churton himself doesn't forget to mention that for a self-respecting individual such as Gurdjieff, succumbing to the rules of man-made secret societies would be far-fetched.)

Gurdjieff's escape from the chaos of the Russian revolution along the Black Sea coast to Istanbul and all the way to France is well documented and the reader who knows his Gurdjieff is well familiar with the subject. In the last fifth of the book, Churton does some fascinating debunking of the Crowley–Gurdjieff meeting myth, questions whether the master crossed the line when dealing with his students at the Institute in Avon, juggles the idea of Gurdjieff's late-age depression and summarizes the essence of Gurdjieff's teachings in the excellent chapter: 'Doctrine: An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man'.

If somebody really wanted to be nitpicking about this book, it would be that while Churton obviously dives deep, he also obviously operates in a lake rather than an ocean. On the trickiest subjects, he keeps referring to several well-known Gurdjieff scholars such as Paul Beekman Taylor, and keenly passes the mic forward instead of trying to explain everything. However, in a little more than 300 pages, it is only rational to only include what matters most.

In *Deconstructing Gurdjieff*, Churton does what Churton does best: he provides pretty much a Gurdjieff 'handbook' which is at the same time enjoyably written and thought-provoking. Depending on the reader's familiarity with the subject, *Deconstructing*

Gurdjieff can be enjoyed as an easy read, or it could be a brilliant basis for a master's dissertation, with its rich sources and notes. Churton writes for anyone interested in the subject and therefore, we shouldn't expect him to be Hermetic – no pun intended – with his thoughts and remarks.

Quite probably Churton's most important offering to the larger world of Gurdjieff research is his modest proposal on the page 290:

There are many more perceptions of good sense in [Beelzebub's] Tales [to His Grandson], though it needs editing to about one-fifth of its current length and to be recast in clearer sentences, with spiritual understanding of its wise, humorous contents.

Heresy! I can hear the sound of ultra-orthodox Gurdjieff followers scream in their chambers. *Apostasy! How can this be?*

Or maybe Beelzebub's Tales is – as Churton argues – just the master's way to test the patience and the sense of humour of his followers; yet another myth for future generations to develop?

Time will tell whether someone picks up the ball Churton has thrown into the court. ■

HIPPO TAATILA

Hippo Taatila is a PhD student and a freelance writer specializing in Western Esotericism.