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## THE HIEROPHANT'S APPRENTICE PRESENTS BUILDING A FORTEAN LIBRARY

### 11. BLOOD AND TEARS

The byways of fortean literature are long and sinuous, not to say tortuous, and oftentimes criss-cross in unexpected places. One of the major routes to one such tangle of lanes is signposted: 'The truth about things everyone's been wrong about until we came along'. Leading off the main drag one finds lanes to such catastrophist re-assemblers of cosmic history as Velikovsky, Comyns-Beaumont, and the recently published improbabilities propounded by Gary Gilligan (*Extraterrestrial Sands, Matador*). History, whether concerning the life of the Solar System, the death of Marilyn Monroe, the secrets of the pyramids or the wanderings of the Jews – and everything in between – seems particularly prone to this kind of wide-eyed revisionism. It finds its highest expression in the most elaborate conspiracy thinking, the simpler notions of conspiracy and cover-up being in any case but a step away from drastically unconventional history. If it weren't, after all, why weren't we told all this in school? In any case, your bookshelf should not be without the exposure of what the blurb calls "The most shattering secret of the last two thousand years", if only as an object lesson in how careful promoters of radical reinterpretations of history need to be. But it's still loads of fun to read.

*Holy Blood, Holy Grail* landed on a suitably astonished world in 1982. Authored by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln (hereafter BL&L), it built on a number of television documentaries written in the 1970s by Lincoln about the mysteries allegedly surrounding the Aude, France, village of Rennes-le-Château and its *abbé*, Francois-Berenger de Saunière [sic] (1852-1916). It is difficult to lay out the route the authors take from there to their concluding hypothesis, because they dart about somewhat over 300-plus pages before announcing it, but they start with de Saunière's unexplained and seemingly sudden accumulation of wealth, and speculate that this may have something to do with the long-since disappeared, and reputedly fabulous, wealth of the Knights Templar, suppressed by the Pope in 1312. Not long after, the last leading Cathar was executed, ending an heretical Gnostic movement that the Church had been trying to eradicate for over a century. Rennes is in the heart of formerly Cathar country. Our authors become convinced that

both Templars and Cathars had a far greater secret to hide than unorthodox beliefs and immense wealth, assisted in their belief by de Saunier's reported discovery of some ancient parchments in his church. Was he being paid off in order to keep quiet about their contents?

Hereafter the plot thickens. BL&L become aware of various papers found in the Bibliothèque Nationale, which they refer to as the '*Dossiers secrets*'. These reveal the existence of the Priore de Sion, and its shadowy control of the Templars. We are given a remarkable list of its Grand Masters (*Nautonniers*, or helmsmen), starting with Jean de Gisors in 1188, ending with Victor Hugo (1844-85), Claude Debussy (1885-1918) and, from 1918, Jean Cocteau. The list includes Nicolas Flamel, Leonardo da Vinci, and Isaac Newton. BL&L produce more-or-less plausible reasons for each individual being so honoured, although those who were but children when appointed stretch their justificatory imaginations somewhat, along with the reader's credulity. In exploring their idea of this secret society's history, the authors take a weird veer off-piste to consider the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This grotesque antisemitic tract, they conclude (flying yet further in the face of all orthodox scholarship), started life as an authentic *Masonic* masterplan for gaining power. It was thereafter doctored to become the nasty piece of work that we know today.

The authors' detection of sundry Masonic traces ("anomalies") in the text shows a strange, although perhaps revealing, - ignorance of the conflation of Judaism and Masonry among Russian antisemites in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But the *Protocols* are still, they say, "of paramount importance to the Priore de Sion" today (i.e. the early 1980s). In due course, we'll suggest why they may have come to entertain such an eccentricity.

Next, we have an outline of the Merovingian dynasty of French kings, whose line ended when Pope Zachary deposed Childeric DI in 752. But not according to the *Dossiers secrets* and additional documents the authors call the 'Prieuré papers'. The Merovingian line (which they duly trace) continued in secret, reaching one apex in the crusader Godfroi de Bouillon (1060-1100), who for his trouble became King of Jerusalem – although (BL&L don't tell us) he refused to adopt the title. De Bouillon, they establish to their own satisfaction, was also a descendant of Lohengrin and Parsifal, keepers of the Holy Grail – which was said to have been brought from Judea to southern France by Mary Magdalene. BL&L puzzle over the nature of the Grail and realise that the word *sangraal* can be interpreted as *san graal* (holy grail) or *sang réal* (holy

blood). So, goes their leap of insight, the Magdalene brought not a holy relic but the blood of Jesus, in the shape of one or more children, to France, and therein lie the roots of the Merovingian dynasty, who thus have a claim to the French throne. One of these, they duly discover, is alive and well and the (then) present *Nautonnière* of the Prieure de Sion.

BL&B's exposition of the likelihood that the Nazarene was married, and the actual identity of the Magdalene, is based on reliable scholarship and is the best part of the book. Particularly noteworthy is their clear exposition of why, in the New Testament, the Jews get to carry the can as 'Christ-killers' and the Romans, who actually did the dirty work, get a good press – an elucidation not well-known at the time outside those familiar with Jewish accounts of the era.

Various authors had written on the apparent mysteries of Rennes-le-Chateau (smile even dragging legs into their musings), the Merovingians, Templars, Cathars, and the intriguing nature of Mary Magdalene and her relationship with Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed some of the ideas floated in *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* bear a distinct resemblance to those of Nikos Kazantzakis in his novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1955). Even so, it would be fair to say that the book kick-started a cottage industry in the English-speaking world, which continues in production to this day. In 1996, having published a sequel in 1986 (*The Messianic Legacy*, reviewed **FT51:77-78**), BB&L produced an updated edition. Then in 2003 Dan Brown had a huge bestseller with his spectacularly badly written *The Da Vinci Code*, and in 2006 Leigh and Baigent rashly decided to sue Brown (for £140 million) for plagiarising their work (see **FT209:4-5**, **210:5**. Lincoln declined to join them in the suit. In the Channel Five documentary *Revealed... The Man behind the Da Vinci Code*, he said the ideas behind *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* were not original, and Brown had been no more than “a bit naughty” in relying on them. (It also so happens that an earlier novel had already used a similar theme: *The Dreamer of the Vine* (1980), by Liz Greene. Greene was Leigh's sister and also Baigent's girlfriend at the time, and was not sued for anything.) The claim was doomed from the start, since BB&L presented their work as a justifiable hypothesis based on actual historical facts. You can't plagiarise even a tenuously proven *fact*: the writing of history, let alone of historical novels, would grind to a halt overnight. (Cf. Georgette Heyer's *The Spanish Bride* (1940) and the *Autobiography* of Sir Harry Smith (1901) – both good rollicking non-foretan reads.) Baigent and Leigh duly lost their case, and faced £3 million in legal costs.

The dreadful irony of this foreseeable disaster is that the key foundations of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* are themselves mostly fiction. To judge from remarks *passim* and their bibliography, the authors are quite capable of reading French and know how to conduct basic research, whatever their eccentric conclusions. Yet they launched their quest in the apparent belief that l'Abbé François-Bérenger de Saunière [sic] had suddenly and mysteriously gained access to enormous wealth. Not too exhaustive an investigation would have alerted them to the real source of de Saunière's curiously large income. By 1901 he had already been warned twice by his bishop about his promiscuous sale of Masses. This was a peculiar practice of the kind satirised centuries before by Chaucer: cross a Catholic priest's palm with some cash, and he would say a Mass (or a hundred of them) for you, your dead grandma, possibly even Robespierre if you coughed up enough.

The Church tolerated this, but de Saunière took to advertising for custom in parish magazines, not just in France but globally. He ended up with more Masses (and the wampum that went with them) to say than several pious lifetimes could accommodate. The official limit was three per day, and de Saunière was suspended from duty – one stop short of excommunication – in 1909. This was reported in contemporary newspapers and again in 1967. The source of de Saunière's [sic] wealth was also revealed in René Descadeillas' *Mythologie du trésor de Rennes*, published in 1974 – well in time for BB&L to have come across it – the title alone should have caught their eyes.

As for the Prieure de Sion. Fairly early on in their research BB&L came across Pierre Plantard by way of their contacts with Gérard de Sède, author of *Le Trésor Maudit de Rennes-le-Château* (1977), the paperback that first set Henry Lincoln on his great quest. Not too much research – no more than they put into the more obscure corners of French history – should have revealed to them precisely who he was, and a greater degree of logic and caution should have at least have made them suspect that the *Dossiers secrets* and other 'Prieuré papers' on which BB&L rely so heavily are – often quite cleverly crafted – forgeries by de Sède, Plantard, and Philippe de Chèrisy [sic]. It is a bit of a giveaway that the first of these, *Le Serpent Rouge*, was deposited in the Bibliothèque National a few days after its authors' death, by hanging. BB&L do not elaborate on who hanged them or why, but the curious fact is that their families insist that they were unknown to one another. BB&L did not look too closely into other documents in the *Dossiers secrets* either: for example, a 1960s letter purporting to be from the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association was disowned in a 1972 letter by Martin G. Hamlyn, the Association's

president, who pointed out that the letterhead of the one found in the *Dossiers* had not been used by them since 1950, and that ABA had departed the address therein in 1948. BB&L's efforts at authentication seem to have been just a little relaxed.

Whether or not they were in a position to discover everything relevant about Plantard's life, it might have emerged from sedulous research how often he changed his name, his sundry pseudonyms, and his fantasy life as an inventor of 'secret' societies that never actually did anything, and often bore the names of distinguished individuals who had no idea they had been dragooned as officers.

Particularly revealing is a letter released in 2015 written under the name – there is no handwritten signature – of 'Varran de Verestra' (the Paris police seem to have known this was Plantard) to Marshal Pétain, Head of State of Vichy France, on 16 December 1940. Plantard opens by begging Pétain to “put a stop to a war started by the Jews”, and goes on: “Sir, your life is in danger, the revolution is already underway... In just eight days it may perhaps be in full swing. YOU MUST ACT! Immediately upon receiving this letter you must issue strict but totally confidential orders. You must put an immediate stop to this terrible 'Masonic and Jewish' conspiracy in order to save both France and the world as a whole from terrible carnage.”

Which may give us a clue as to why our authors made the deviant effort they did, the way they did, to rehabilitate the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. As throughout their book, they would have been wise to have been a little more circumspect. Or even tasteful.

Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, Jonathan Cape 1982; revised edition, Arrow Books 1996.