John G. Bennett

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John Godolphin Bennett (8 June 1897 – 13 December 1974) was a British scientist, technologist, industrial research director, and author. He is best known for his books on psychology and spirituality, particularly on the teachings of G. I. Gurdjieff. Bennett met Gurdjieff in Istanbul in October 1920 and later helped to co-ordinate the work of Gurdjieff in England after the war. He then joined his teacher's Paris. He also was another of Gurdjieff's pupils who formed the Subud movement, and co-founded its British headquarters.

Bennett was born in London, England, educated at King's College School, London, Royal Military Academy, Woolwich; School of Military Engineering, Chatham; and the School of Oriental Studies, London.

He was a Fellow of the Institute of Fuel, London, from 1936 onwards; Chairman, Conference of Research Associations, 1943–1945; Chairman, Solid Fuel Industry, British Standards Institution, 1937–1942; Chairman and Director, Institute of Physics, Physical Society, and the Sciences, Kingston upon Thames, 1948–1959.

John Godolphin Bennett	
Born	8 June 1897 London, England
Died	13 December 1974 (aged 77) Berkeley, Britain
Education	King's College School, London
Alma mater	Royal Military Academy, Woolwich
Known for	Books on psychology and spirituality
Fields	Scientific career Scientific research Spiritual teacher
Influences	G. I. Gurdjieff
Website	Official website

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Early life, World War I, marriage [edit]

Bennett's parents met in Florence, Italy; they later married. His mother was American and his father was British. In Bennett's infancy, his family were moderately wealthy and travelled frequently in Europe. In 1911 his father, who was a keen traveller, adventurer and linguist, had all of his money and his wife in an investment that failed; Bennett later claimed his parents had spoken fluently in several languages, which enabled him to talk with many spiritual teachers in their native tongues. He studied Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and Christian sacred texts in their original languages. Bennett makes little reference to his childhood in his autobiography, Witness. Elsewhere he credits his mother with instilling in him the virtues of hard work and perseverance.

At school, he excelled in sports and captained the school rugby football team. He won a scholarship in mathematics from Oxford University, but never had the chance to take advantage of this because of the outbreak of the Great War. He continued to play rugby football for the army (representing the army against the Paris Dacquet-Lafarque team), breaking his arm once and his collar bone twice.

In the First World War, at the age of nineteen, Bennett served as a subaltern in the Royal Engineers, with responsibility for signals and telegraphy.

In France in March 1918, he was blown off his motorcycle by an exploding shell. Taken to a military hospital, operated upon, and apparently in a coma for six days, Bennett had an out-of-body experience. He became convinced that there is something in man which can exist independently of the body.

"It was perfectly clear to me that being dead is quite little being very ill or very asleep. I was not ill, for I was conscious, there was no fear at all. And yet I have never been a brave man and was certainly still afraid of heavy gun fire. I was cognizant of my complete indifference toward my own body."[1]

This experience led him to seek a new direction. He decided he would return to normal civilian life, but he felt he could only find this way now in some sense a stranger.

In the closing months of the First World War, Bennett undertook an intensive course in the Turkish language at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, and was posted to Constantinople. He became a specialist in translating Turkish into English, and translating English into Turkish, for the British Military Mission to the Turkish Empire and later in Turkish nationalism. His fluency made him the confidant of many high-ranking Turkish political figures; it also helped him to develop his knowledge of Turkey and to gain insights into non-European ways of thinking. A notable piece of initiative (into the already chaotic Turkish political scene) was his arranging the capture of Enver Pasha, Bronze and Iron Medal in the Turkish Army, and Minister of War, who was fleeing the country in a C-class Turkish gunboat, because the war in the Middle Eastern region.

Bennett was also speaking with different races: English, French, Italian, Greek, Armenian, Turkish, Kurdish, Russian, Arab, Jews and people so mixed up as to be not race at all. Each and every one was convinced of the superiority of his own people. How could everyone be right and all the rest wrong? It was nonsense.[citation needed]

Bennett's experience monitored every action in this position were so eventful, that he is still regarded as a major figure in the political life of Turkey in that period. Bennett's success resulted in some personal enemies among the Turkish nationalists. He was arrested in January 1921 on charges of being a British spy, and was imprisoned in the notorious Prison of Cagliar on a penal colony for life. He kept an abiding love for Turkey for the rest of his life.

After the war, Bennett had married Evelyn, with whom he had a daughter, Ann, born August 1920. Evelyn had stayed in Istanbul when he was posted to Turkey. Bennett's immersion in Turkish affairs and his relationship with Winifred Beaumont, an English woman living in Turkey, placed increasing strain on the marriage. In 1924, Evelyn Bennett sued for divorce. Bennett later married Beaumont, who was twenty years his senior; they were together until her death in 1958. (He married a third time, in 1958, to Elizabeth Mayer.)

Gurdjieff and Ouspensky [edit]

After the First World War and the Russian Revolution, many displaced people passed through Constantinople en route to the West. Part of Bennett's job was to monitor their movements. Among them was G. I. Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky, whom Bennett met through Prince Sakharoff. This referred Bennett had introduced him to a wide range of religious and occultist systems, including Theosophy and Anthroposophy. Bennett became determined to pursue the search for a greater reality. He had been profoundly impressed with Gurdjieff's ideas about the arrangement of the human organisation and the concept of a man's transformation into a higher state of consciousness. Bennett was also impressed by the Sufis he encountered in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Gurdjieff and Ouspensky moved on to Europe, and Bennett remained in Turkey, committed to his work and bolstered by the political and social developments in Turkey. The Sublime Porte had ceased to exist. On 29 October 1923, the Turkish republic was proclaimed. Bennett left Turkey in January 1921 to rejoin his teacher, who had moved to Paris, where he started the Turkish Independence struggle.[2]

Gurdjieff founded his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at the Château Le Prieuré in Fontainebleau-Avon, south of Paris, in October 1922. Bennett visited in the summer of 1923, spending three months in the institute. The experience convinced him that Gurdjieff had discovered a "school of life" that could provide the conditions in which man can achieve transformation. Gurdjieff encouraged Bennett to stay longer, but Bennett was short of money and so felt obliged to return to work in England. Though Bennett expected to return to the group soon, he would not meet Gurdjieff again until 1948.

Bennett served the British government as a consultant on the Middle East, and interpreter at the Lausanne conference in London intended to settle disputes between Greece and Turkey. He was invited to stand for parliament for the chosen instead to pursue research studies sponsored by the British government.

He joined Ouspensky's groups, and continued to study Gurdjieff's system with them for fifteen years. Ouspensky broke off all contact with Gurdjieff himself in the early 1930s.

Coal industry [edit]

During this time, Bennett became involved with various coal mining ventures in Greece and Turkey. These were ultimately unsuccessful, but in the process he acquired expertise in mining and coal chemistry. He worked for a year in Greece, where he was also involved in producing a commercial fertiliser from the waste products of the deposed Turkish royal family.

In 1926, Bennett was asked to head Britain's newest industrial organisation, the British Coal Utilisation Research Association (BCURA). With the outbreak of World War II, BCURA's research was focused on developing fuel-efficient fireplaces and finding alternatives to oil. BCURA developed cars powered by coal gas and a coal-based plastic.

Group work [edit]

In 1941, Ouspensky left England to live in the United States. By now, Bennett was running his own study groups and giving talks on the subject of Gurdjieff's system. The groups continued and expanded in London throughout the Second World War. Bennett began writing and developing his own ideas in addition to Gurdjieff's. Ouspensky disapproved but could not prevent his departure from his original teachings. Bennett had lost much of Gurdjieff during the war and believed him to be dead.[3]

Ouspensky did not publish the material that Bennett was writing, considering it to be derivative and plagiarising his lecture material. Instructions were sent to all members of Ouspensky's groups to disassociate themselves from Bennett, who found himself vilified and ostracised, but still supported by a small loyal following. He decided to get on ahead with his work of communicating his understanding of the System to people, and to create a society or institute to serve as its vehicle.[4]

Coombe Springs [edit]

In 1946, Bennett and his wife founded the non-profit Institute for the Comparative Study of History, Philosophy and the Sciences:

"To promote research and other scientific work in connection with the factors which influence development and retrogression in man and their operation in individuals and communities; to investigate the origin and utilisation of scientific hypotheses and secular and religious traditions; to promote and their bearing on general theories of the place in the universe of man and of study comparative methodology in history, philosophy and natural science."[5]

The institute bought Coombe Springs, a seventy-acre estate in Kingston upon Thames, Surrey, which had housed research laboratories used by BCURA. The Bennetts moved in with her or Bennett's closest pupils, with the intention of starting a small research community. Coombe Springs became a centre for group work. In addition to the small community who lived there permanently, people would regularly attend Coombe Springs for weekend and holiday courses.

The old laboratories were used as domestic space; they were known as the "Kinkiest" because of the large amount of glass they had. A "new building" was later built for superior accommodation. The main house was used for meetings as well as accommodation. Coombe Springs became a place where people could visit and stay for periods of time. Bennett's wife, Winifred, was the Institute's Bursar. Unit the war, it had provided water to the palace at Hampton Court.[6]

Bennett believed Gurdjieff's system could be reconciled with modern science. He started work on a five-dimensional cosmology which included "eternity" as a second time-like dimension, introducing this in his first published book, The Crisis in Human Affairs (1948).

Reunion with Gurdjieff [edit]

Ouspensky died in 1947. In 1948, Bennett went to the United States and met Ouspensky's wife, through whom he learned that Gurdjieff had survived the Nazi occupation of France and was living in Paris. Through a mutual friend, Bennett was sent the last pre-war issue of Gurdjieff's journal, Herald of Coming Good, and Gurdjieff invited members of his group, Bennett decided to renew contact. In the 18 months before Gurdjieff's death (in October 1949), Bennett visited him frequently. He also continued his crowded professional schedule (he was now working for the Powell Duffryn coal company and had established Coombe Springs to research into coal).

A month spent working very intensively with Gurdjieff's group in the summer of 1949 laid the foundation for a significant transformation in his life and spiritual work. At that time, Gurdjieff's apartment in Paris was located in Rue Monsieur le Marcel. In the bottom of his ideas, who conceived the Institute for Harmonious Development of Man, and who had visited the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at the Château Le Prieuré in Fontainebleau-Avon, south of Paris, in October 1922. Bennett visited in the summer of 1923, spending three months in the institute. The experience convinced him that Gurdjieff had discovered a "school of life" that could provide the conditions in which man can achieve transformation. Gurdjieff encouraged Bennett to stay longer, but Bennett was short of money and so felt obliged to return to work in England. Though Bennett expected to return to the group soon, he would not meet Gurdjieff again until 1948.

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Travels in the Middle East [edit]

In 1953, Bennett undertook a long journey to the Middle East (West Asia), visiting Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Persia. His search, chronicled in his book Journey in Islamic Countries (reprinted in paperback in 2001), brought him into contact with Sufis of extraordinary spiritual accomplishment, such as Emin Chelebi (1880–1964) (known in Syria as Mohammad Amin Sheikho) and Farhad Daftari[7] (1888–1977) (known in Persia as Bennett's professor of mathematics, Farhad Aryan).[8] Bennett's Sufis also introduced him to a number of "Christian" Sufis, who he met in Lebanon and Syria.[9] Bennett's journey was fraught with difficulties and dangers. He was twice robbed and threatened with death.[10] Their chance meeting on a mountaintop in Damascus is chronicled in his book Sarkoudaba.[11] Bennett's Sufis also introduced him to a number of "pioneers of a kind that I had already seen in Gurdjieff and Ouspensky." Bennett was deeply impressed and inspired by these people, and spent the rest of his life trying to understand what they had achieved.

Journey to Islamic Countries contains more obvious Bennett and Madame de Salzmann signatures than any other book. Bennett's Sufis also introduced him to a number of "pioneers of a kind that I had already seen in Gurdjieff and Ouspensky." Bennett was deeply impressed and inspired by these people, and spent the rest of his life trying to understand what they had achieved. Bennett's Sufis also introduced him to a number of "pioneers of a kind that I had already seen in Gurdjieff and Ouspensky." Bennett was deeply impressed and inspired by these people, and spent the rest of his life trying to understand what they had achieved.

In 1955, Bennett initiated a project to build an unusual new sided meeting hall at Coombe Springs for the performance of Gurdjieff's sacred dance movements. This, together with his public lectures in London, contributed left the William Sidgwick Bennett. The project took two years to complete. At the opening in 1957, Bennett commented that the real value of such a project was in building a community rather than the building itself.

Subud [edit]

In 1958, Bennett was introduced to Subud, a spiritual movement originating in Java (an island in the Republic of Indonesia). For a number of reasons, Bennett felt that Gurdjieff had expected the arrival of a very important teaching from Indonesia. In spite of deep reservations, in November 1958 Bennett allowed himself to be opened by Husein Rofie, a native Javanese.[12] (1920–2006) and had studied in Paris. Rofie taught the latihan (the spiritual exercise of Subud).

Bennett regarded the latihan as being akin to what the mystics call divine contemplation. He also felt that the latihan has the power to awaken a person's conscience, the spiritual faculty that Gurdjieff regarded as being essential to awaken. Bennett and Ouspensky had discussed the Work of Gurdjieff in Paris, Ouspensky had said that Gurdjieff had brought with him a teaching that came to Coombe Springs, where all Bennett's pupils were given the opportunity to be "opened".

It was a highly unconventional teaching. It included the spontaneous arrival of the Holy Spirit, but also the violent death of one of Bennett's pupils. The death of Bennett's pupil is described on pages 340–347 of the original edition of Bennett's auto-biography Witness: The Story of a Search (1962). The section on the death was excised from later editions of the autobiography, along with some Christian references. Although Bennett and his wife were Christians, the Christian references were excised because they had obscured the danger of Subud, and of putting one's trust blindly in any spiritual teacher or spiritual path.

Soon Bennett was informed or suspecting Subud practice all over the world. He travelled extensively to spread the Subud exercise, sometimes in the company of Pak Subuh. Bennett translated Pak Subuh's lectures into various languages. His introductory book on Subud, titled Concerning Subud (1959), sold thousands of copies worldwide.

Bennett's deep involvement in Subud meant less participation in the work-group activities and exercises that had been practised until he began his work. The meeting hall was left unheated without its intended purpose of ritual dancing and its shifting paraphernalia of floor-wide fixtures. Its original purpose was not to be fulfilled and was soon forgotten.

Some of Bennett's pupils were dismayed. Subud's spontaneous exercise seemed to some to be the antithesis of Gurdjieff's methods for spiritual awakening, and Bennett's enthusiasm for it seemed to deepen the divisions in the Gurdjieff group. Many people left the Coombe Springs group, but others came in large numbers. For several years Coombe Springs was the headquarters of the Subud movement in Europe, attracting both serious seekers and sensation seekers.

In 1958, movies from Java were shown at Coombe Springs, of Dr. Bennett.[13] Bennett's Subud Centre[14] Bennett. The following year he made the first of many visits to the abbey to teach the monks. These visits brought him into close contact with the Catholic Church. Dom Albert-Jacques Beaucord, OSB (1920–1995) was the first monk from the abbey to be "opened", followed by many others. Rt. Rd. Hieronymo, Bishop of Malang, was also opened and became a close friend of Bennett. Bennett's Subud Centre[14] Bennett. Bennett's Subud Centre[14] Bennett. Bennett's Subud Centre[14]