

This article appeared in Realta in 1996

A Brief Overview Of The Astrological Work Of Cyril Fagan

by

Kenneth Bowser

The main point at issue in contemporary astrology devolves onto the zodiac itself: whether trait characteristics derive from the tropical signs, invented by the Greeks or the sidereal signs discovered by the Babylonians. The entire controversy is the consequence of the work of Cyril Fagan (1896-1970), astrologer extraordinary, and beyond question the best Irish astrologer of his day, perhaps any day.

He is not well known in Ireland because the bulk of his most important work was published in American magazines, as there was strong opposition to his work in similar English publications. So, as with the Great Famine, America was again the beneficiary of Irish talent. While he encountered some stateside opposition (*Dell Horoscope* still will not print any sidereal article), in general, the American love affair with the Irish caused his work to be examined by most, and embraced by some, while the entire subject was reinvigorated. In fairness, it should be said that he and Charles E. O. Carter (1887-1968), the best English astrologer of his day, were close friends, and several other prominent English astrologers held Fagan in high regard.

Fagan was born in Dublin May 22, 1896 at noon, Dunsink Time. The local mean time of the Dunsink Observatory was the time standard then in the area. It is 25 minutes, 21 seconds slow of Greenwich, so that noon Dunsink Time is equivalent to 12:25:21 GMT. In a letter to Arthur Blackwell, the brightest light of the second generation of modern siderealists, dated February 20, 1963, Fagan wrote, "My mother repeatedly informed me that I was born at 12:00 o'clock noon.

She said she remembered the occasion well, as my father, in his tall silk hat and frock coat came into the room at that moment." Fagan's father was a medical doctor, a field into which Cyril could not go due to near deafness from scarlet fever which he contracted as a child.

He was educated at Belvedere and Castlenock Colleges, and took up astrology in 1916 near the close of his formal education. Actually, his education was a lifelong pursuit. With the Moon in sidereal Virgo, he was an inveterate reader, and he spent virtually the whole of his life immersed in study, either in libraries and archives or at home at his desk. Yet in stark contrast to his studious nature and insatiable intellectual curiosity, Fagan was a flamboyant personality in speech and dress. That is not to say that he was a loose cannon or favored garish combinations, rather, he had a brilliant and unpredictable sense of humor which everyone heard because he almost shouted in order to hear himself (until good hearing aids were developed), was as fashionably well dressed as he could afford, and enjoyed the night life. He married an Irish beauty seventeen years his junior with whom he produced two children. His wife, Pauline, was a woman from the old school, fiercely devoted to her husband. They were together until his death. She recently passed on herself at San Francisco, California.

Fagan's penetrating curiosity also translated into wanderlust. He lived in Wales, London, Morocco, Spain and several places in the United States, travelling extensively from these base camps du jour, when he could.

While, invariably charming, he was also frightening to some because of "the gift," which manifested as the sort of specificity in his astrological interpretations that seemed to go well beyond what the planets could convey. I have been told that some people experienced this quality about him in non-astrological contexts as well. Most people, however, experienced him as a complete delight. The only person with whom he repeatedly crossed swords in print was Dane Rudhyar.

Fagan was the president and founder of the Irish Astrological Society, to which W.B. Yeats belonged. They were friends. Fagan was a Fellow of the American Federation of

Astrologers, a Fellow of the Federation of British Astrologers and a Komandoro of the Universal Order of Antares (Trieste).

Fagan began to publish articles extensively in the 1930's. As the best modern astrologers have come to understand, he realized that to speak with authority on the history of astrology, one must become competent in history, languages, geography, mathematics and astronomy, especially the latter because in the ancient world astrology and astronomy were bound up together.

When the Cuneiform script was deciphered in the nineteenth century, Babylonian astronomical/astrological materials became available to scholars who laboriously translated and published them beginning in the 1880's. Early on it was recognized by three German Jesuit scholars, Joseph Epping (1835-1894), Franz Xaver Kugler (1862-1929) and Johann Nepomuk Strassmaier (1846-1920), that the longitudes in Babylonian ephemerides were reckoned from stars, not the equinoxes or solstices. The bulk of the Babylonian astronomical/astrological translations and commentary appeared in the irregular but massive journal begun by Kugler, "Sternkunde Und Sterndienst In Babel" (Starlore and Starwork in Babylon) from 1907 until completed in 1935 by Joseph Schaumberger S.J. Almost surely Fagan read at least some of this work, but it is not known exactly when he began to investigate this sort of material, although his study of it must have been well underway by the 1940's, because by 1944 he was confident that the entire Babylonian tradition was sidereal, not simply the Hellenistic period material. He has subsequently been borne out, although there is not enough evidence extant to tell just when the transition to a twelve-fold equal division occurred. It is established that during the second millenium B.C. the Babylonians used seventeen unequal sidereal constellations: the twelve we use now but with Pisces split into two as the eastern and western fishes, as well as Orion, Auriga, Perseus and the Pleides. The earliest horoscope for an individual dates only to 410 B.C. It is twelve-fold, sidereal and Babylonian. There are no tropical horoscopes extant until the first century B.C., and very few of those until the first century of the Christian Era. Conversely, there

were no sidereal astrologers in the West before Fagan's apostasy, which was compelled by evidence.

Most of us think of the first degree of Aries as the first day of spring, although in the southern hemisphere it is the first day of autumn. Presently the background of stars on which the sun is overlaid, on March 21, is in the constellation Pisces. That fact is totally discounted by the advocates of the tropical school, who contend that astrological influence, whether causal or symbolic, derives from equal length signs reckoned from the vernal equinox, even though the constellation Aries no longer has a relationship with the vernal equinox. What Fagan realized was that the Babylonians did not regard the sidereal signs as simply a way of measuring things in the sky. Their astrology was anchored to the stars, not the equinoxes that move a degree of arc every seventy one and $\frac{2}{3}$ years in relation to the sky. In 380 years when the Age of Aquarius opens, the displacement between the signs and the constellations will be fully thirty degrees.

When Fagan began to write about this in the late 1940's he encountered intense, vituperative reaction from almost the entire astrological community, although a few bright lights among the English ranks were won over such as Cecil Nixon, Rupert Gleadow and Roy Firebrace. Since then the sidereal school has always been manned mostly by the intellectuals in the field because the technicians grasp the arguments readily and find it easier to commit the heresy.

The mechanism that is central to understanding the difference between the tropical and sidereal zodiacs, and what the astrological ages are about, is one of the earth's orbital motions: precession. If a torque is applied to a rotating body, that body will respond at a right angle to the applied torque and begin to precess about its spin axis, if the torque is great enough. A good illustration is a child's spinning top as it begins to spin down to a stop. It will start to wobble at a rate far slower than its spin rate, but as the wobble becomes a larger component in the total motion of the top, the wobble becomes bigger as the spin becomes slower. Unless the "equator" of the top is exactly parallel to the floor, gravity will nibble away at the slight imperfection in the

top's spin, hence the low point in the top's rotation gets pulled down toward the surface on which it spins. The top's resistance to being pulled down is what precession looks like; it's the wobble. A good way to actually feel the resistance to an applied torque on a rotating body is to hold a spinning gyroscope, another common toy. As you hold it and turn your wrist as it spins, you will experience what happens to the earth in the large. The torque applied on the earth is the gravitational attraction of the sun and moon to the earth's equatorial bulge, which attraction, unresisted, would pull the equatorial bulge into the plane of the earth's orbit. Because the earth is massive and spinning, its reaction is at a right angle to the applied torque: it precesses about its spin axis describing a cone.

The wobble is extremely slow. It takes 25,800 years to go through one cycle of it. This is why the pole stars change from era to era, and why positions of all bodies in the sky change their positions vis-a-vis the calendar. What Claudius Ptolemy saw in the sky at the vernal equinox, during the second century A.D., is not what we see today. When Ptolemy wrote in the *Almagest* that the first degree of Aries coincides with the equinox, it was a true statement. Tropical and sidereal reckonings coincide once during every precessional cycle. It was an astounding coincidence that just before western civilization became a virtual backwater, the greatest astronomical/astrological, mathematical and cartographic mind of the era wrote his magnum opus when the two forms of reckoning were virtually aligned. With the disintegration of the Roman Empire a state of desuetude overtook all matters technical in the West, made worse by the admonitions of the Catholic Church against the study of the things of this world. Ptolemy's works became institutionalized, unquestioned and heavy with the inertia of tradition, not even critically examined until the fifteenth century by Johann Müller (Regiomontanus).

The outside date for Ptolemy's death is assumed to be 180 A.D. In 720 years, the vernal equinox will display a section of sky ten degrees to the west of its earlier position regardless of the calendar convention, due to precession. So by 900 A.D. the equinox held 21° Pisces (exact alignment of the tropical and sidereal was in 221 A.D., so ten degrees displacement between

them occurred in approximately 940 A.D.) But the *Almagest*, written in Greek, was not even translated into Latin until 1160 A.D. There was nobody in the West to contest Ptolemy's claim that the beginning of Aries and the vernal equinox were coincident. The Arabs took note of the discrepancy but did not take issue with the tradition. By the middle of the seventeenth century A.D. the equinox held 10° Pisces; by 2376 A.D. the sidereal sign Aquarius will begin to rise at the vernal equinox. 11,000 years later the tropical zodiac will be completely upside down with respect to the constellations. Ptolemy's argument is predicated on the assumption that the earth is fixed in space and that the sky is moving in relation to it. Discounting the proper motion of the stars themselves, which is virtually nil during the entire historical era of Western Civilization, the reverse is true, i.e. the earth is moving with respect to the sky, due mainly to the effect of precession.

The essential point is that the sky changes from year to year with respect to the same civil date and time. The change is not appreciable except over a period of several lifetimes. Yet if one reckons the signs from an equinox which is a terrestrial instead of a stellar fiducial, trait characteristics will begin to be attributed over time to the wrong dates because they will refer to a section of the sky that is no longer where it used to be for the date in question. Notwithstanding all the convoluted arguments and psycho-babble about astrology, it is still divination by the sky.

It was Fagan's contention that astrology cannot stray from that principle and remain valid.

In 1949, Fagan made what many consider his greatest discovery. There is a tradition in astrology about certain parts of the zodiac, called the exaltations, that have special significance for particular planets. Already in Ptolemy's time their origin was lost. There are certain degrees associated with these places as well. The exaltation of the Sun is 19° Aries, the Moon is exalted in 3° Taurus, Mercury in 15° Virgo, Venus in 27° Pisces, Mars in 28° Capricorn, Jupiter in 15° Cancer and Saturn in 21° Libra. These places represent the optimal positions for the expression of the intrinsic natures of the respective planets. Fagan discovered that these positions are the

heliacal phenomena for the planets Mercury, Mars, Saturn and Jupiter for the parallel through Babylon for the lunar year 786-785 B.C.; the Sun, Moon and Venus degrees are the positions at the first of Nisan, the first Babylonian month, April 3, 786 B.C. Julian at Moonset. These heliacal positions have not repeated either tropically or sidereally since the beginning of recorded history circa 3100 B.C. The exaltations represent the "hiding places," i.e. the places where planets appear for the first time after having been invisible for weeks or months, or their longitudes at last appearance before becoming invisible. Horizon phenomena were more important to the Babylonians than meridian transits. The longitudes for the exaltation solution are purely sidereal and make no sense in a tropical context. Ptolemy stated that the earliest astronomical records available to him were from the era (first regnal year) of the Babylonian king Nabonassar: 747 B.C. Good astronomical data don't appear ex nihilo. The records from 747 B.C. suggest an established tradition to which the exaltation solution, only thirty nine years earlier, lends support.

Fagan's first book, Zodiacs Old And New was published in 1950 which recounts the exaltation solution among other things. Naturally it was anathema to the tropical school which unofficially closed ranks tighter against the Irish heretic, although Cyril was made a fellow of the American Federation of Astrologers in 1948. He had published articles in *American Astrology Magazine* in the 1930's, 1940's and a few more in the early 1950's, when in 1953 he began a monthly series in that magazine called Solunars, which he wrote until his death. This series, more than any other effort, disseminated the sidereal zodiac throughout the American astrological community via the huge readership of *American Astrology Magazine*.

When Fagan retired from the Irish Civil Service Patent Office in 1956 after thirty five years, he devoted himself full time to astrology. His Solunars series was submitted thereafter from Tangiers, where the cost of living was much lower than the British Isles, until he moved to the United States, partly because his son had emigrated to Canada. He published several minor works, chief among them, The Symbolism of the Constellations, until his masterwork

Astrological Origins, appeared in 1969. This last book and Zodiacs Old And New are the flesh and blood of the western sidereal movement, which still remains a distinct minority in the States, but a very high powered one. Cyril's Solunars Handbook, an anthology of the series put together by *American Astrology Magazine*, is also widely sought after by both tropicalists and siderealists for the depth of its scholarship and the clarity of his style.

He had other plans, but as happens so often when the task for which one is intended is completed (here with the publication of Astrological Origins), his body began to fail him. Fagan suffered a heart attack and died at 5 a.m. MST on January 5, 1970 at Tucson, Arizona. His influence in the sidereal community is still pervasive, however, and the work goes on; and it is still fought tooth and nail by tropicalists who refuse to accept that the constellations are legitimate purveyors of astrological influence except as individual stars. While many have contended that both ways of reckoning the zodiac are true, a close examination of the material makes clear that you can't have it both ways.

July 1996 for REALTA

