Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements

# Kindred of the Kibbo Kift

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## Introduction

The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift was a British camping and campaigning organization founded in 1920. With over a thousand participating members and a raft of high-profile cultural supporters, it lasted for just over a decade. Established in the aftermath of World War I, its founding aims for cultural reconstruction were ambitious, including the complete overhaul of industry, education, and economics. Its covenant required members to commit to the delivery of a world currency, a world language, a world council of representatives, and world peace. The methods by which these grand aims would be achieved were highly idiosyncratic, incorporating hiking and handicraft alongside campfire ceremony and occult ritual. The organization's founder-leader, John Hargrave (1894–1982), was a former Boy Scout Commissioner and a commercial artist. His organization united outdoor living and artistic practice with mystical beliefs and practices informed by Hargrave's interests in non-Western religion and hermetic traditions. As such, Kibbo Kift's propositions were more radical than those of other postwar social reform organizations. In its apocalyptic language, its preparations for the expected collapse of civilization, and its expected leadership of a new age, it sought to create a 'magico-political' fraternity of deified beings.

## Origins

The founding of Kibbo Kift: The Woodcraft Kindred, as it was first known, took place on 18 August 1920 in London, with the first formal covenant launched by Hargrave and six other signatories. The roots of the organization, however, can be found several years earlier. John Gordon Hargrave was born in 1894 to Gordon Hargrave, a professional landscape painter and Quaker, and Babette (née Bing), of Hungarian Jewish descent. He was the only one of three children to survive beyond his second decade. His education was limited due to ill health and the need for his family to move to wherever his father could find a living selling paintings; he was thus schooled in the interests of his father, including in art and world religion. Hargrave was the first generation to experience Scouting; he joined a Boy Scout group in 1909, only a year after the organization's founding in Britain. With a charismatic personality and skills in writing and illustration, he quickly became a leading member and later leader, penning books on Scouting skills while still a teenager and rising up through the ranks to become official Scout Artist by 1914 (Pollen 2015, 24–26).

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Following the outbreak of World War I, Hargrave signed up to a non-combatant position in the Royal Army Medical Corps and, as a stretcher-bearer, was at the frontline of the disastrous and bloody Dardanelles campaign. Invalided out with malaria in 1916, he returned to Scouting but was forever transformed by what he had seen. For Hargrave, the mystical and romantic aspect of camping and nature had been Scouting's original allure. Its militaristic marching and drilling aspects seemed evermore inappropriate for a pacifist under conditions of war, and Hargrave began to turn against the organization. By 1917, in his newly created position of Commissioner of Woodcraft and Camping, Hargrave was in charge of all outdoor aspects of the organization under Lord Baden-Powell, but he was also engineering a schism from within (Pollen 2015, 27–29).

In his 1919 book, *The Great War Brings it Home: The Natural Reconstruction of an Unnatural Existence*, Hargrave developed a political and spiritual philosophy. Arguing that the Great War had shown that 'civilization' was in terminal decline, Hargrave proposed solutions, physical and spiritual, that would restore meaning and strength to what he saw as an effete culture. He proposed learning from the so-called savage. Perceived as being closer to nature and practically skilled, the figure of the imagined primitive was positively compared to the weakened state of the city dweller. As Hargrave saw it, 'civilisation is bound to "crack up". Even now it is far gone into decay. When the Great Smash comes', he declared, 'people may suddenly be forced to live a primitive life with no machines to help. Many will seek to live that life, and shall not be able' (Hargrave 1919, 306). He saw the crisis as an opportunity. 'Nothing,—no social reform, no philosophic preaching, no religious revival, no educational experiment—could ever have achieved the result which this war has wrought in the lives and minds of the people' (1919, 49–50). The time was ripe to construct a new line of 'Barbarians' to overthrow the old order.

Hargrave claimed to have no interest in establishing his own organization; he argued that existing groups, including an eclectic range of outdoor, educational, and socialist efforts, should be brought together to bring social change (1919, 363). As a result of his increasingly outspoken political beliefs and his public critiques of Scouting, however, his position in the organization became untenable. The Scout members and leaders he had gathered around him with shared interests in woodcraft outdoor skills and campfire rituals, and those with socialist and pacifist leanings, followed him into the beginnings of Kibbo Kift when he was expelled for gross disloyalty in 1920 (Pollen 2015, 28–29).

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Kibbo Kift Boys and Men in the Touching of the Totems rite, Althing 1925. © Kibbo Kift Foundation, courtesy of London School of Economics Library. Photograph by Paul Knight.

## Philosophies and Beliefs

Kibbo Kift's strange name came from an antiquarian dictionary of Cheshire colloquialisms and meant 'proof of strength' (Pollen 2015, 11). Physical, mental, and spiritual strength was required to found the new world. This new vision was underpinned by social reform agendas but was performed through outdoor practices and rites. At hikes, camps, and other Kibbo Kift meetings, colourful ceremony provided the structure. Members—mostly white-collar civil servants and teachers living in suburban London—gave up conventional names and took a totem woodcraft identity, usually as a plant, animal, or mythical character. Conventional clothes were replaced with flamboyant costumes. The ordinary world was left behind, at least for the weekends.

In public, Kibbo Kift produced promotional literature to attract new members and spread its message. Its curious name and the members' original appearance created an attractive mystique, but its purpose needed explanation. As members peppered their language with Anglo-Saxon and the new international language of Esperanto, and communicated through cryptic medieval–modernist insignia on their ceremonial regalia, their beliefs were not widely understood. In an early leaflet from around 1924, the

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group was framed in terms of spiritual practice. ‘Is it a religious movement?’ was among a series of frequently asked questions. The answer was ‘Yes’ but little detail was given (Pollen 2015, 145).

In private, select Kibbo Kift members, particularly those in Hargrave’s inner circle, the Kin Council, operated as a secret society. For those initiated into the deeper aspects of the group’s philosophy, an illuminated manuscript of mystical rites and teachings, styled as *The Lodge of Instruction*, provided an inside view into the group’s beliefs. These scripts, styled as revelations, were informed by occult systems of knowledge and showed how seemingly mundane acts of camping and fitness were integrated into the pursuit of a spiritual oneness that united all things, animate and inanimate. Kibbo Kift’s practices were shown to be grounded in this essential unity, and its fundamental belief was explained as the spiritual core of parallel systems:

> *It is the prescription of the Elixir of Life.*
>
> *It is the hidden formula of the Great Arcanum.*
>
> *It is the recipe of the Philosopher’s Stone.*
>
> *It is the Pearl of Great Price.*
>
> *It is the Lost Word of the Kabala.*
>
> *It is the Plan of Solomon’s Temple.*
>
> *It is the One Primordial Substance of Science.*
>
> *It is the Secret of the Hidden Tradition.*
>
> *It is the Unknown? of all Faiths.*
>
> *It is the Sancgraal Itself.*
>
> *It is the No-God of the Atheist, and the All-Father of the worshipper in the holy place.*
>
> *It is the Golden Fleece of the Heroes.*
>
> *It is the ultimate goal of the Research Magnificent.*
>
> *It is the X of the mathematician, and the IAO [Isis-Apophis-Osiris] of the Gnostic.*
>
> *It is the Great Tao of Lao Tze.*
>
> *It is the Eightfold Path of the Buddhist and Pure Reason of the Rationalist.*
>
> *It is the Nameless, which can only be written thus:*

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> *It cannot be written or pronounced.*
>
> *It has no symbol, for it is all symbols. (Kibbo Kift script, The Lodge of Instruction, c. 1924–25, MOL 2012.72/9, Museum of London)*

For this spiritual revelation to be fully known, members of the inner order must commit to a complete alteration of mind. As the instructions put it:

> *We demand The Honourable Company of Thinking Builders of the Temple. Whoever you may be, a great deal of you must fade away ere you claim to be Kibbo Kift. … If you can kill that part of your self which is Kibbo Kiftically useless, you will do. '(Lodge of Instruction c. 1924–25)*

This transformation involved breaking 'that dead husk of the old Self' to emerge as 'Imago'. The metamorphosis was viewed as a resurrection, and surviving Kibbo Kift rituals show how a born-again status was achieved through symbolic death and burial rites (Pollen 2015, 146–50).

While these revelations were never shared outside the membership, in 1927 Hargrave published *The Confession of the Kibbo Kift*, which circulated his philosophies for a public audience. In the seven years since Kibbo Kift's inception, many of the organization's principles and personnel had shifted, with some significant ruptures. In 1924, for example, many of the socialist and cooperator members, including three of the original seven founders, had walked out following a vote of no confidence in Hargrave as an unelected leader who refused to run the organization democratically (Pollen 2015, 36–37). This split created a significant dent in membership numbers but enabled Hargrave to reposition himself as the leader of a selected and superior few.

This elite narrative ran through *The Confession*, where Kibbo Kift was likened to 'magico-political fraternities' across time and place, which had each brought change to an unthinking majority. Hargrave argued:

> *During critical points of history, when drastic action alone can preserve human association, a group of ideopraxists will come together capable of an attempt to put an idea into action, and so, according to their judgement, put an end to the crisis and reform the dislocated human association upon a 'better' or different social basis. (1927, 12)*

Hargrave listed the forms that such groups of 'deified men' had previously taken, including Samurai and Spartans, Knights Templar, and Illuminati. The Rosicrucians were highlighted in particular and the title of Hargrave's book made reference to the 1615 *Confession of the Fraternity of the Rosy Cross*. Hargrave cited the seventeenth-century scholar Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, who had noted, 'We had need of some general visitor in our age that should reform what is amiss—a just army of Rosie-cross men—for they will amend all matters (they say) religion, policy, manners, with arts, sciences, etc.' (Hargrave 1927, 46) Hargrave saw that need unaddressed in the twentieth century, and positioned Kibbo Kift as a 'society of operative philosophers' intent on bringing 'the Universal and General Reformation of

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the Whole Wide World' (Hargrave 1927, 48).

Hargrave aligned Kibbo Kift with historical mystical traditions but he also emphasized its newness, drawing as it did on new technologies and new ideas from biology and psychology. It was described as a result of current conditions where solutions were urgently sought. He noted:

> *In a post-war atmosphere, an atmosphere which allows of active developments on different lines, an atmosphere in which people begin to look round in every direction for a sign, a hint of something—something on which to fasten new hopes for the future, The Kindred takes shape. (Hargrave 1927, 61)*

Kibbo Kift was posed as the sole solution and the only organization with the imagination to survive civilization's 'possible, if not probable, collapse' (1927, 113).

Although Hargrave and his followers did not write explicitly about an apocalypse, their thinking and action could be deemed apocalyptic in the broad sense. They were training their bodies and minds to lead a new way out of an existential crisis and, moreover, one that might take material form. Members trained in survival skills by taking long hikes with limited provisions and sleeping out in all conditions. They were expected to be able to construct their own clothes, tents, and rucksacks to understand essentials of food, warmth, and shelter. Comfort and luxury were 'taboo'. Not only were these the hollow characteristics of a glittery, glamorous metropolitan way of life that was seen to be overly sophisticated and shallow, but they also made modern life too soft and weak. Kibbo Kifters would be the ones to make it through. These plans were outlined by Hargrave as a 'Noah's Ark Policy'—that is, as a means 'to survive the flood of a disintegrating period of human association, in which chaotic conditions make it difficult for the individual to obtain essential supplies, by coming together as a self-supporting group' (Hargrave 1927, 113). It was a policy that was never needed; a few years later, Kibbo Kift ceased to exist.

## Decline

Hargrave's *Confession* is a bewildering if sometimes beautiful text, as sprawling and undigested as *The Great War Brings it Home* had been before it. It was unlikely to clarify for the confused what Kibbo Kift was as it had little internal coherence. However, in some aspects the organization's principles were approached more precisely, particularly when Hargrave claimed there were two central focal points in Kibbo Kift: the 'restoration of spiritual values to a material age' and the 'reorganisation of social economics on the basis of the Just Price' (Hargrave 1927, 152). In the latter statement Hargrave displayed the new interest that was to consume him: economic reform.

The redistribution of wealth had been an early founding ideal in the Kibbo Kift covenant but in the mid-1920s Hargrave became enamoured with an economic system called Social Credit, which would eventually become the dominant ethos of his organization. It proposed more equitable pricing of goods based on their production value and also argued for a national dividend payment for all citizens regardless of means. To Hargrave this new system was compatible with his utopian ambitions as it would institute a world of creative leisure and optional labour. It also helped to provide a pragmatic basis for achieving

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some of Kibbo Kift's ambitious ends (Pollen 2015, 43).

To those who had joined Kibbo Kift due to its artistic aspect, its woodcraft pleasures, or its mystical messages, the increasing dominance of economics in the organization was hard to swallow. While occult rites in the old English landscape coexisted with the more hard-line political turn at the end of the 1920s, the early 1930s saw a fundamental shift in focus. In 1931 all woodcraft rites were removed. All elements seen to be arcane, from ceremonial costume to mythical names for members, were straightened out as Hargrave aimed to shape a more mainstream political organization, with a single method and message: marching the streets of British cities demanding Social Credit for all. Hargrave's followers were again split and many departed. Many more joined, however, from the massed ranks of the newly unemployed in the wake of the financial crisis (Pollen 2015, 46–49).

The new organization was initially named Kibbo Kift: The Green Shirt Movement for Social Credit but by 1933 Kibbo Kift as a term had been wholly dropped. What became the Social Credit Party of Great Britain and Northern Ireland was informed by pageantry and mysticism—the green-shirted group marched three times widdershins around the Bank of England in one memorable ritual—but adopted conventional parliamentary methods to meet a crisis perceived as more economic than cultural (Drakeford 1997; Ross and Bennett 2015). Hargrave's thinking was still idiosyncratic and he remained committed to occult beliefs outside the organization. His Social Credit efforts petered out with the banning of political uniform in the 1936 Public Order Act (Pollen 2019a). World War II took whatever energy and membership remained.

## Reception and Interpretation

Hargrave wrote in 1927:

> *The Kindred changes, its forms change, illogically, inconsistently, as it may seem, with the non-logical forces of Life and Death. What it was yesterday it is not to-day; and what it is to-day it cannot be tomorrow. Its continuity and stability are here, in the cradle-bed of the emotions. (Hargrave 1927, 112)*

Kibbo Kift went through many changes in philosophical and practical direction in its short life and its public profile shifted accordingly. As such its legacy has been shaped in particular ways.

In its first phase, Kibbo Kift received endorsement from a range of high-profile figures in art, culture, and politics, including Nobel Prize winners for literature (Rabindranath Tagore and Maurice Maeterlinck), Liberal and Labour members of parliament (Norman Angell and Herbert Dunnico), eminent scientists (J. Arthur Thomson and Julian Huxley), and progressive thinkers more broadly (Havelock Ellis and Patrick Geddes). Perhaps the most impressive of all the names was H. G. Wells, but Kibbo Kift also came to the attention of D. H. Lawrence and W. H. Auden (Pollen 2015, 29, 41). Few, if any, of this list donned ritual costume and camped under the stars, but former suffragettes Mary Neal and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence were both active participants in the early 1920s.

Pethick-Lawrence's interests in Theosophy aligned with some aspects of Kibbo Kift's spiritual smorgasbord,

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and Hargrave drew these connections out in order to create new membership opportunities. He made these claims explicit to Theosophist audiences, stating, 'The Kibbo Kift can claim to be the latest and most practical expression of Atma-Buddha-Manu springing direct from the thought wreckage of the Western civilisation' and 'Kibbo Kift will be recognized as one of the Signs in the West which forebode the coming of a new sub-race' (Hargrave, 'The Propaganda Lecturing Department: K.K. to Theosophists', 28 November 1928, 32, YMA/KK/72, London School of Economics; Pollen 2015, 148). Although Hargrave courted a range of external organizations to achieve legitimacy, Kibbo Kift's spiritual connections and ambitions are key to understanding its purpose.

## Historiography

Hargrave's alignments with occult networks were first explored by James Webb in *The Occult Establishment* in 1976. The work was written while Hargrave was still alive, and founder was described throughout as 'illuminated'. Kibbo Kift appears as a historical footnote in accounts of British interwar cultural and political life but lacked a dedicated study until Mark Drakeford's 1997 *Social Movements and Their Supporters: The Green Shirts in England*. Based on Drakeford's sociology PhD and informed by interviews with surviving members in the 1980s, it focused on the economic phase of the organization and paid little attention to the group's magical beliefs. Cathy Ross of the Museum of London, which holds a large collection of Kibbo Kift's costumes and regalia, produced a valuable illustrated chapter on Kibbo Kift in her 2003 exhibition catalogue *Twenties London*, putting the organization into social and cultural context; this informed her 2015 illustrated biographical study of Hargrave, coauthored with journalist Oliver Bennett.

The early 2000s saw the establishment of the website of the Kibbo Kift Foundation, which had formed after the 1977 creation of a rock musical by Maxwell Hutchinson and Judge Smith. The event gathered surviving members and led to the deposit of Kibbo Kift papers and artefacts in library and museum collections; these now exist as the Youth Movement Archive at the London School of Economics and the Kibbo Kift collections at the Museum of London. Smith, who befriended Hargrave as a result of the musical, oversees the foundation and acts as Hargrave's literary executor. He is, not coincidentally, the author of published works on supernatural phenomena including reincarnation.

Pollen's 2015 book *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians*, and the accompanying 2015–16 exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery, London, explored key aspects sidelined in previous studies. Pollen's extensive survey of private and public collections showed the diversity and distinctiveness of the group's visual and material culture, and revealed further knowledge about Kibbo Kift's spiritual aspect. These investigations continue (Pollen 2018, 2019a, 2019b).

The organization's archival documents underscore that revelation is central to understanding Kibbo Kift. Previous authors have considered mystical aspects of other interwar woodcraft groups, such as the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry, considering their possible prehistory for British Wicca, founded by Gerald Gardner in the mid-twentieth century. Woodcraft's broader connections with British occult networks have been identified by scholars and enthusiasts such as Ronald Hutton in *The Triumph of the Moon* (1999) and John Michael Greer in *The New Encyclopedia of the Occult* (2003), although Hargrave did not receive much, if any, attention in these studies.

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Following the decline of Kibbo Kift, Hargrave reestablished himself as a psychic healer, a role that included the painting of 'therapeutic psychographs' (Ross and Bennett 2015). He continued to write on occult topics, including in a 1951 book-length biography of Paracelsus, the sixteenth-century alchemist. Along with Gardner and Ross Nichols, the founder of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, Hargrave was closely connected to the occult Atlantis Bookshop in London in the mid-century. Pollen (2015, 2018) has taken this aspect of Kibbo Kift seriously, showing how its rituals and ideas intersect with those of Henri Bergson, Aleister Crowley, James Frazer, and Jane Harrison—and, indeed, endure.

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