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## Issues in Accessing a Gurdjieffian Tradition

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**Issues in Accessing a Gurdjieffian Tradition: Lessons from a Study of Maurice Nicoll  
(1884-1953)**

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**Abstract**

The first named author has experienced ambiguous responses when he has approached persons associated with groups taught by, or in the lineage of Maurice Nicoll (1884-1953). As is well-known, Nicoll participated in Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man near Paris in 1922-3, thereafter studied with P. D. Ouspensky in London and Surrey, and subsequently taught his own groups from around 1931, producing at least two publicly known successors in Beryl Pogson and Ronald Oldham. In this article we discuss a series of personal enquiries, some of which involve named public figures previously associated with the 'Work', and others who are not publicly identified. Responses (where received) have typically been noncommittal. We reflect on problems in attempting to research, as academics, participants in a tradition which fights shy of academic enquiry despite its creative influence in fields such as psychology, literature and new forms of 'spirituality'. By locating our case within the discussion on problems in studying 'secret' or 'hidden' traditions, we explore possible reasons for this ambivalent reception, ranging from principled rebuff to the provision of a 'test' of the motives of the enquirer. At the same time, other scholar-practitioners have recently put unpublished Gurdjieffian texts into the public realm: for example, Maurice Nicoll's writings have been brought back into print and his archive at Yale University has been publically available for some time. In light of these conflicting data between guarding access on the one hand and freely disseminating information on the other, we reflect on issues in accessing Nicollian and Gurdjieffian traditions and address the tension we detect between a movement preserving its integrity, assimilating to the post-1960s 'new spirituality' culture, or simply dying out.

**Keywords**

Maurice Nicoll; G. I. Gurdjieff; the Work; Fieldwork; Archives; Secrecy

## Introduction

When the first author says casually that he is writing a dissertation on Maurice Nicoll (1884-1953), this usually draws a blank stare. Further elucidation, that Maurice was the son of William Robertson Nicoll (1851-1923), evinces some recognition from those familiar with literary history or late nineteenth century Scottish theology. The names G .I. Gurdjieff (1886?-1949) and P.D. Ouspensky (1878-1947), of whom Nicoll was a disciple, are sometimes also met either with blank looks, or some recognition from those familiar with what are perceived to be forms of ‘occultism’ or even ‘New Age’.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the target is hit, as when, for instance the first author set out his stall to two visitors on the Scottish island of Iona in September 2013, using the ‘I don’t expect you’ve heard of him’ line as introduction, to be met with the response that ‘we are members of the Gurdjieff Society’ and that yes, they knew the writings of Maurice Nicoll; or when a noted Gurdjieffian whom both authors met in May 2016 does not refer to Nicoll in his writings but nevertheless acknowledged during discussion that Nicoll’s ideas form a significant part of his intellectual background. These remarks are anecdotal but they do confirm that the world of Gurdjieff and his associates and followers is an elusive phenomenon, especially in respect of access for interviews or fieldwork participant-observation, but also when exploring the possible existence of written sources not in the public domain. In this article we explore a number of issues for academic research which arise from this situation with specific reference to the first author’s doctoral research on Nicoll and wider reference to the Gurdjieff Society in the UK.

## Researching Maurice Nicoll

After a conventional Church-of-England upbringing the first author, initially led by an interest in the myths and legends underlying Wagner’s operas, read most of the work of Carl Jung (1875-1961). In 1980 he was introduced to Gurdjieff and Ouspensky by being given *In Search of the Miraculous* (Ouspensky 1950) as a parting gift from a pupil who had been stimulated by his exposition, as a school-teacher, of Jung’s ideas. Reading it some time later but not at first understanding it, the first author was, nevertheless, thanks to the influence of Jung, open to an accident or a synchronicity that can determine the course of a life. In this case it was the off-hand and unknowing generosity of the mother of a colleague, a widow of a

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the substantial entries on Gurdjieff in Colin Wilson’s paperback bestseller, *The Occult* (Wilson 1973) and in Theodore Roszak’s *Unfinished Animal: the Aquarian Frontier and the Evolution of Consciousness* (Roszak 1976), and the historical role assigned to Gurdjieff in Paul Heelas’ *The New Age Movement* (Heelas 1996). See Sutcliffe (2014) for a wider discussion of literature on the Gurdjieff movement.

Church-of England Priest who, not understanding Nicoll's books herself, lent him in 1983 *The New Man* (Nicoll 1950) and *The Mark* (Nicoll 1954). He thus 'came to Nicoll', 'recognis[ing] something [he] knew to be true but had forgotten', as Beryl Pogson (1895-1967), Nicoll's secretary and biographer says of 'the Work', in the sense that 'all knowledge is but remembering, as Plato taught' (Pogson1961: 114).

Though no contact with Gurdjieff or Nicoll people was then made, many years of reading Nicoll and Ouspensky became the groundwork of the first author's ongoing PhD thesis on the life and work of Maurice Nicoll (1884-1953) begun in 2013. Research for this was conducted at first purely from printed sources, in particular Pogson's biography (Pogson 1987) and Nicoll's own publications, including *Dream Psychology* (Nicoll 1917), *Living Time* (Nicoll 1952), the five volumes of *Psychological Commentaries on the Teaching of G. I. Gurdjieff and P. D. Ouspensky* (Nicoll 1957), *The New Man* (Nicoll 1950) and *The Mark* (Nicoll 1954). Literature on Nicoll that grew up in the shadow of these writings was also consulted, including work published under Pogson's aegis (Nicoll 1995a; Nicoll 1995b; Nicoll 1997; Pogson 2000), Lewis Creed's anthologies of Nicollian and related fragments issued under Pogson's name (Pogson 1994; 1995), and recollections by other pupils of Nicoll such as Sam Copley (1989) and Bob Hunter (2000). Visits to the archive of Nicoll's father William Robertson Nicoll at Aberdeen University in February 2014 and to Nicoll's archive at Yale University in August 2015 yielded further, unpublished material.<sup>2</sup>

Contacts with members of the Nicoll family yielded little material not already seen, although many anecdotal family memories were shared.<sup>3</sup> For example, the first author talked separately in January 2013 with William Robertson Nicoll's two twin granddaughters, half-nieces of Maurice Nicoll, who each proudly showed him a pile of Maurice's books, the psychological 'family silver' as it were. Neither said that they had read any of them, except for in each case one only (*In Mesopotamia* and one of Nicoll's 'Martin Swayne' novels)<sup>4</sup> in expectation of his visits. Though they said that they are 'not followers of Maurice', the daughter of one of them is very interested in what her great-uncle achieved, though as she writes 'As my grandparents [Maurice's half sister Mildred and her husband Grange] were

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<sup>2</sup> Aberdeen University Special Collections – Robertson Nicoll – MS 2540, 2588, 3241, 3517-8; Yale University Library Manuscripts and Archives – Maurice Nicoll papers – MS 1348.

<sup>3</sup> Contact was established in January 2015; a number of communications took place over the following two months.

<sup>4</sup> Nicoll wrote a number of novels and short stories under the pseudonym 'Martin Swayne' between 1911 and 1924, which pseudonym he also used for the publication of the articles that make up his account of his world war one experiences, *In Mesopotamia* (Swayne 1917).

Anthroposophists I am more familiar with the Steiner *Weltanschauung*, and though not a fully paid up Anthroposophist ... he [Steiner] is really my touchstone on esoteric matters'.<sup>5</sup> After the first author sent her rough drafts of his doctoral chapter on Nicoll's *Living Time*, she replied 'My generation of the family do have some objective observations on the "family inheritance," and on Nicoll's assigned place in the family mythology'.<sup>6</sup> While not elaborating on this, her tone was generally encouraging.

### **Issues in Fieldwork**

The contacts described above suggest that memory of Nicoll is alive if understated, but that even for family members this memory is now distant and appears to give little idea of what interacting or working with him had been like. And though it appears that members of Nicoll's groups joined Gurdjieff Society groups after Nicoll's death, the groups that continued under the leadership of Beryl Pogson, and then Ronald Oldham (1888-1980), seem to have disappeared as an independent lineage. Thus in the mid-1990s Andrew Rawlinson, who included a lengthy entry on Gurdjieff groups in *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions*, wrote: 'I do not have an address for any independent Nicollian groups; they do not make such things public' (Rawlinson 1997: 301). Initial attempts by the first author to make a field visit or to conduct interviews with a Nicollian group were not successful. In addition to the contact with descendants described above, he approached a known practitioner who had previously been an active publisher of Pogson's writings and a former Nicollian group member, and who donated material on Nicoll that he had inherited from the Pogson-Oldham successor groups to the Yale University library in 1994-5, but obtained an elusive response. It would seem that, as Rawlinson found, 'the [Nicollian factions] have kept themselves to themselves' (Rawlinson 1997: 301). However, although the noted Gurdjieffian James Moore (b. 1929) has remained equally unresponsive when approached, Sophia Wellbeloved (b. 1940), a former group member and author of *Gurdjieff: The Key Concepts* (Wellbeloved 2003), has offered encouragement.

If this seems to bear out what James Webb, in writing his historical and biographical study *The Harmonious Circle*, found, that 'a biographer in search of the authentic Gurdjieff begins by suspecting a campaign of mystification' and appears to encounter from some practitioners 'a deliberate policy of obstruction' (Webb 1980:11), this was belied when events took a dramatic upward turn when the first author made contact with members of the Scottish

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<sup>5</sup> Pers. Comm, e-mail to first author 25/03/2015

<sup>6</sup> Pers. Comm, e-mail to first author 05/04/2015

branch of the International Gurdjieff Society. Though his earlier attempts through e-mail contact had elicited no response, three members attended his talk on Nicoll in the Religious Studies seminar series at the University of Edinburgh in February 2016. He was told that the Society, though not anxious to invite the interest of those engaged purely in research, was open to those showing an appropriate personal interest.

These members put the author in touch with the daughter of Sam Copley, biographer of Nicoll (Copley 1989) and a member of his groups. She has a large amount of unpublished material by Nicoll. The first author visited this collection in March 2016, was most hospitably received and assisted, and his hopes of finding material that he believed to exist (on the basis of internal evidence in the Yale archive, and in Creed's compendia) were more than fulfilled; he revisited the collection in August 2016. It consists in a large number of hard-covered exercise books (mostly foolscap) containing transcripts of Nicoll's group meetings from 1930-1953, diaries (usually records of reveries and dreams) from 1913-1921 and 1940-1953,<sup>7</sup> and fair copies of many of Nicoll's published books, supplemented by a large number of loose-leaf typescripts, letters, rough drafts, notes and galley proofs. Much of the script in the books is in fair copy, either in Nicoll's own hand,<sup>8</sup> or in the fair copy of others of uncertain identity who worked for Nicoll as amanuenses. Much else is in Nicoll's almost illegible hand and will need to be patiently transcribed. A very personal part of this oeuvre, the 'dream' diaries of 1913-1921, features people significant in Nicoll's life. Chief amongst these is Jung, at one time Nicoll's teacher and also arguably a father figure, and these writings show another light on Nicoll's relationship with Jung from that conveyed in Pogson's biography. Nicoll's father also appears in these diaries, as do significant figures in the contemporary medical and psychiatric worlds: for example, Nicoll's friend James Young (1888-1950), who worked with him in Harley Street and went with him to Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at Fontainebleau in 1922 (Young 1927); Kenneth Walker (1882-1966), one of Nicoll's best friends who became the President of the Royal College of Surgeons and wrote several accounts of Gurdjieff's teaching (for example, Walker 1957); Ernest Jones (1879-1958), President of the English branch of the International Psychoanalytic Association and Freud's mandated biographer; and H. G. Baynes (1882-1943), Jungian

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<sup>7</sup> Dream Diaries from 1921 to 1940 are missing. There are Dream Diaries for the period 1940-47; but though 'ordinary' diaries from the Second World War certainly existed, since they are quoted extensively in *Maurice Nicoll: a Portrait* (Pogson 1961) the material quoted there is not in these Dream Diaries. These 'ordinary' diaries – unless destroyed or otherwise missed – were presumably part of the material bequeathed through Pogson to Lewis Creed; they are, however, not to be found in the Yale Archive.

<sup>8</sup> As identified to the first author during his visit in March 2016.

analytical psychologist, Jung's assistant in Zürich, and translator of Jung's *Psychological Types*. Other more peripheral figures who appear include people significant for Nicoll's personal life (for instance, his wife, sister and brother-in-law), others for whom first names are presented but whose identity we are less certain of, and others still who may or may not be fictional, as well as those who undoubtedly are, such as Salome and Philemon who also appear in the dream and vision sections of Jung's 'Red Book' (Jung 2009).

This material was given to the present custodians in the 1980s by a member of one of Nicoll's groups, on the death of her husband. The amount of it dwarfs the archive in Yale University and contains significant items hitherto not in the public domain. This material has not been available to the general public and the first author was told that one request to use it in order to write a biography of Nicoll was turned down because the custodians felt the biographer would not have been sympathetic. We are in process of arranging accession of this material to Edinburgh University Library special collections in order to make it available for scholarly consultation. Also revealed through this contact was the existence of a second and hitherto unrecognised Nicollian lineage separate from Pogson's, consisting in a line of teachers who supposed that Pogson, though identified as Nicoll's successor due to her biography and her publications on the 'Work', nevertheless followed her own ideas, whereas members of this lineage felt they remained more faithful to Nicoll's teaching. This second lineage, based in London, led by such names as Samuel Copley, Peter Gloster, Stella Kent and Laurie Goodman, has now been subsumed into the Gurdjieff Society. While almost everybody who had anything to do directly with Nicoll must at the time of writing be in advanced age or dead, the first author's hosts in London personally remembered him, and it may be possible to record their memories. Indeed, during his five-day visit the first author discussed 'Work' matters constantly with his hosts. He formed the impression that his hosts considered his knowledge of Nicoll to be impressive, but his understanding of Gurdjieff to be too influenced by his views of Nicoll.

His hosts conveyed to him that they had the greatest respect for Nicoll but felt that he had in their view misunderstood certain issues, particularly the importance of the physical body as a means of working. At the same time they placed great importance in freeing the attention in the practice of quiet work. The hosts are long-term members of the Gurdjieff Society and introduced the first author to their understanding of a proper appreciation of Gurdjieff's music. This led to some intense discussion, and his host asked him pointedly why he was not 'in the Work', particularly because without this entry he did not have the opportunity to

practise the Movements, something that his host felt was a very important means of working. There is a digital record of the exact form of the movements as handed down by Gurdjieff through the Gurdjieff Society. A discussion ensued in which the first author entertained misgivings as to whether this was the best way to transmit a tradition. Willmetts was shown photographs, and reminiscences of life with Nicoll were shared. Copley's daughter remembered Nicoll from the time during the Second-World-War she spent in Birdlip, the village in Gloucestershire where Nicoll then lived, whereas her husband had only come to know Nicoll later during special outings to Great Amwell with his work group (then led by Stella Kent) when Nicoll was at the very end of his life.

This enormously significant discovery of both new archival material and a seam of oral memories concerning Maurice Nicoll has been supplemented by the possibility of conducting some fieldwork. The Gurdjieff Society in Scotland attendees at the first author's seminar invited him to lunch during a 'Work' weekend held in former farm buildings in southern Scotland, which are in the process of being renovated. This includes a newly-built dance studio for the performance of Gurdjieff's movements, which suggests the desire to establish something permanent and the means to do so. Members of the Gurdjieff Society in Scotland<sup>9</sup> meet for several weekends each year at these premises. During his day visit in March 2016 the first author noticed people pursuing activities such as art work, fabric design and creation, and guitar lessons, with the Gurdjieff/de Hartmann music for the movements lying open on the piano in the dance studio. He was able to discuss his personal position with the *de facto* leader who had travelled from London; on being asked 'what do you want?', he suggested that he wished to explore the possibility of entering 'the Work' if that were felt to be appropriate. After further discussion, during which his articulation of his view of his personal situation in Nicollian terms was dismissed as 'mere words', the group leader concluded that he would be better pursuing his studies by himself. It was suggested that when he found himself in unfortunate circumstances would be the correct time to make another approach, since he presently seemed, according to the group leader, not to be in need of anything that the Society felt able to offer. Over lunch with the assembled group a spontaneous and lengthy discussion on 'Work' matters arose amongst the company of some thirty people, particularly his interest in and research about Nicoll; again, he was impressed by the importance attributed to the performance of the movements which was affirmed by several members. In a discussion on the way the New Testament is taught in University Divinity departments,

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.gurdjieffscotland.org/>, accessed 24 August 2016.



following his statement that the chief topic of his thesis would be the connection between Nicoll's experience of 'the Work' and his view of the Gospels, he explained that his views on Nicoll had made him feel an outsider in the University courses he had attended before studying for his doctorate, and that in his view the average Divinity academic was impervious to a view of religion or the New Testament that was concerned with the perennial tradition or open to a mystical, esoteric or psychological interpretation. Also discussed over lunch was a planned open meeting to generate interest in the Gurdjieff Society, and how the interest of young people might best be attracted. The first author expressed the opinion, which found widespread agreement round the table, that young people would find the whole idea of 'the Work', insofar as it was concerned with the development of the inner life of the individual, too remote from the overriding passion for 'peace and justice' issues that consumes 'concerned youth' in contemporary society.

In light of the above, there seems to us no evidence for a 'wall of silence' on the part of current practitioners. As with many 'secret' or 'hidden' or simply 'private' groups, there appears instead to be a practical policy in place to safeguard important knowledge: what Anthony Blake (2012: 238) calls 'know how, an understanding of how things work'. This is an understandable position from the perspective of the need to create conditions to support a level of concentration necessary to master a subtle discipline such as 'the Work'. At the same time, a great deal on 'the Work' by its chief proponents – Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, Orage, Bennett, de Salzmann, to give just a few key names – has been published and republished prolifically. Nicoll is no exception: for example, a full catalogue of his writings (and those by other 'work' figures) is easily available from Eureka Editions in Utrecht in the Netherlands<sup>10</sup> and new titles analysing the 'movement' and its figures are regularly appearing from other publishers - for example, records of meetings and talks by Gurdjieff himself.<sup>11</sup> While it might appear from the above narrative that some practitioners have withdrawn from interaction with identifiable 'outsiders' (such as the present authors), the hospitality and helpfulness encountered by the first author in London in connection with the surviving Nicoll material, and his meeting with the members of the Scottish branch of the Gurdjieff Society, showed that current practitioners were interested in what at least the first author, writing academically, has to say. However, it is clear to him that further access will only be granted

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<sup>10</sup> See [www.eurekaeditions.com](http://www.eurekaeditions.com), accessed 28 August 2016.

<sup>11</sup> For example, the three edited volumes of transcribed talks and meetings (Anon 2009; 2012; 2014).

when a sufficiently personal rather than academic interest, to which the Society feels it can minister, can be demonstrated.

### The Issue of ‘Secrecy’

There is relatively little non-confessional scholarly historiography of the Gurdjieff movement (Sutcliffe 2014). Nicoll in particular has been overlooked and his archive in Yale seems to have remained largely undisturbed<sup>12</sup>. In terms of fieldwork or interview, attempts by academics to engage with the Gurdjieff Society for purely ‘academic’ reasons are, as has been shown, not welcomed by current practitioners, though there are academics who have personal experience of ‘the Work’ and who also pursue scholarly research.<sup>13</sup> On the basis of the evidence advanced here, as well in wider debates, we think that the guardedness that attends ‘traditional’ Gurdjieff groups (that is, those which trace their lineage more or less directly to Gurdjieff, especially through the International Association of the Gurdjieff Foundations),<sup>14</sup> including those discussed above is not primarily for purposes of preserving the content of teachings, since as we have shown these are abundantly available. Primarily it is a functional barrier that has to be surmounted by the serious ‘seeker’ who, in following an established *modus operandi* of ‘secret’ or ‘hidden’ traditions in the history of religions, must undertake various ‘ordeals’, and offer tokens of sincerity and integrity, in order to be able to access the ‘know-how’ (Blake 2012: 238).

There is an established discourse in the primary sources on the nature and function of secrecy in Gurdjieffian traditions, especially on Gurdjieff’s early teachings (Ouspensky 1950) and on Ouspensky’s position in the 1920s and later (Hunter 2006, Nott 1978). Summarising the picture, Wellbeloved writes: ‘Gurdjieff’s teaching was sometimes strictly secret and at other times more open’, both for ‘practical reasons’, by which she means conditions of war in Russia and later in Paris, and also ‘for reasons of school discipline’ (Wellbeloved 2003: 184); these latter concern us more here, although the distinction is arguably fluid. *In Search of the Miraculous* (Ouspensky 1950), an acknowledged source on the early teachings, describes

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<sup>12</sup> For brief references to Nicoll in the secondary sources, see Webb (1980: 73 and *passim*, especially 399-400), Rawlinson (1997: 298-301), Wellbeloved (2003: 237-238) and Petsche (2013: 55-56).

<sup>13</sup> For example Azize (2012), Adie and Azize (2007) and Beekman Taylor (2012). The Gurdjieffian group leader James Moore has published academic articles and dictionary entries (Moore 1986; 1994), and the standard biography of Gurdjieff (Moore 1991).

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.iagf.org/>, accessed 24 August 2016. There are four societies in London, Paris, New York and Caracas.

Gurdjieff's position as '*the way of the sly man*' in which the 'sky man' is someone who by definition 'knows some secret which the fakir, monk and yogi do not know' (Ouspensky 1950: 50). Thus an 'indispensable condition' was established for participation in the early groups: namely that members 'must keep secret everything they hear or learn in the group' (*ibid*: 223). This position was unpacked to imply that 'in this there is no attempt whatever to make a secret of what is not a secret, neither is there any deliberate intention to deprive [members] of the right to exchange views with those near to them or with their friends' (*ibid*: 223).

The result nevertheless was a 'general rule' in which 'nobody under any circumstances had the right to write even for his own use anything connected with him [Gurdjieff] or his ideas, or any other participants in the work, or to keep letters, notes, and so on, still less to publish anything' (*ibid*: 384). In Ouspensky's groups in London in the 1920s a condition of membership was that 'they not talk about the ideas with anyone outside the system, unless it was someone who might be worth introducing' and that 'they were not even to discuss the Work among themselves unless they were in an appropriate state of mind' because 'chatting idly about the principles would devalue them' (Hunter 2006: 143). Hunter explains the persistent focus on secrecy in Ouspensky's method, even when Gurdjieff's position had become more relaxed, on the need for group members to 'not risk lowering their force by gossiping or romancing about [the ideas]' (Hunter 2006: 229). However Nott identifies Ouspensky's cultural background as a significant factor: 'it was as if one were associated with a Russian secret society – the hush-hush and the precautions; pupils were constantly on the watch as to whom they spoke and what they said; as if the police might be expected at any time' (Nott 1978: 103-104).

To interpret this Gurdjieffian discourse on 'secrecy' we follow the argument in the secondary literature, first made by Georg Simmel (1906) and more recently discussed by Hugh Urban (1998) and Kocku von Stuckrad (2010), on the importance of form rather than content in understanding the nature of appeals to 'secret' knowledge. Simply put, the argument is that seeking to isolate a particular substantive content to that which is declared secret is less fruitful for comparative enquiry than examining the formal conditions whereby secrecy is advertised as both a lure and a condition to access a certain text or practice. In this way, a degree of power and authority is secured for the group offering the 'secret' and at the same time symbolic capital – of both an epistemological and social kind – accrues for those who fulfil the conditions of access to these 'goods'. As Hugh Urban puts it:

Secrecy ... is better understood, not in terms of its content or substance – which is ultimately unknowable, if there even is one – but rather in terms of its *forms* or *strategies* – the tactics by which social agents conceal or reveal, hoard or exchange, certain valued information. In this sense, secrecy is a discursive strategy that transforms a given piece of knowledge into a scarce and precious resources, a valuable commodity, the possession of which in turn bestows status, prestige, or symbolic capital on its owner (Urban 1998: 210)

In a similar way, von Stuckrad (2010: 243) argues that ‘esoteric’ knowledge is produced by means of a ‘dialectic of concealment and revelation’ which is played out as a ‘structural element’ within a wider field of social interaction. In this way we can understand the appeal of the ‘sly man’ as a role model for a person who ‘knows some secret’ that few others do, who works on this knowledge with like-minded others, and as a result accrues symbolic capital as a possessor of a distinctive ‘know-how’.

However, it is a moot point whether Gurdjieffian groups of the kind described here can be classed as ‘secret’ in any wider sociological sense, since they possess buildings, websites, publishing houses, books and audio recordings which disseminate both the content and in many cases the practice of ‘the Work’ in plain sight. As such they are (to varying degrees of understanding) eminently accessible to public enquiry. Nevertheless Urban has plausibly identified the formal conditions which allow access to superior ‘know-how’ (Blake 2012: 238) in the sense that the teaching may be offered in the public realm, but learning how to ‘do it’ requires the authority of oral transmission through the ‘secret’ group.

We can accept the analysis of form over content in understanding the *modus operandi* of Gurdjieffian groups as broadly correct, yet adjust our terminology from ‘secret’ to ‘hidden’. Sutcliffe argues for use of the latter term to explain the appeal of a Rosicrucian group in the 1930s:

Although a ‘secret’ transmission logically obviates evidence-based enquiry, and the ‘esoteric’ demands a special hermeneutic, a merely ‘hidden’ transmission signals that the act and place of transmission, however elusive or camouflaged, can in principle be empirically verified by a dogged enquirer ... The ‘hidden’ is therefore still constructed via rhetorical appeal, but unlike related terms such as ‘secret’ or ‘esoteric’, it [is] empirically tractable (Sutcliffe 2013: 426).

In the 1930s the ‘dogged enquirer’ would have to work hard even to hear of the group in question, and would do so by reading genre journals, frequenting specialist bookshops, and making relatively arduous journeys to a specific venue to receive instruction. By contrast in the internet era Nicoll’s entire published output (and more) can be acquired via the internet, and addresses and web pages for Gurdjieffian groups are abundant, so only the physical leg-work required to reach a local centre remains from an earlier period. If ‘hidden’ is an improvement on ‘secret’, then ‘private’ might be an even more accurate descriptor for contemporary groups. Thus, when introducing her biography of Nicoll, Beryl Pogson explains:

what I have not written of in this volume is the *private teaching* which he gave to those of us who were close to him, which included his interpretation of our dreams and his sharing with us of his own inner life. The *real teaching* is always *oral and secret* (Pogson 1987: xiii; emphasis added)

Overall Pogson’s representation of her teacher’s method fits Edward Shils’s definition of privacy as ‘characterised by the voluntary concealment of information or behaviours’. This is in contrast to secrecy which ‘is characterised by ... obligatory concealment’ and as such incurs sanctions if breached (cited in Urban 1998: 212, fn. 9). Although sanctions are possible in the Gurdjieffian tradition, a group cannot prevent an excluded individual going on to create his or her own lineage and thereby continuing to transmit the ‘know-how’.<sup>15</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The main point arising from our research is to argue that access to ‘know-how’ is available to anyone who accepts the formal conditions we have described.<sup>16</sup> However we suggest that

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<sup>15</sup> As in the case of James Moore, who after being a member of the Gurdjieff Society in London since 1956, in 1994 ‘reluctantly broke away to work independently’. See <http://www.jamesmoore.org.uk/1.htm>, accessed 24 August 2006. The break apparently turned on Moore’s critique of recent developments within the Gurdjieff Society as described in his article ‘Moveable Feasts: The Gurdjieff Work’ (Moore 1994). See especially the section ‘Amazing Grace’, pp. 13-15.

<sup>16</sup> Compare Moore: ‘How would one find access to a genuine group? We have to concede to some extent that accident and fate enter into that. But if I read in a given direction and if I’m sensitive to other people’s search also, maybe sooner or later I encounter someone who is already in a group and from then I get some kind of entrée and I write a letter and so forth. I think it would be possible to exaggerate its difficulty. It’s not like the Masons, I can’t give a secret handgrip - or if I can, I don’t know it’. From a video interview conducted in 2002 (copyrighted 2006) posted on Moore’s website, [jamesmoore.org.uk](http://www.jamesmoore.org.uk), accessed 19 August 2016. Compare Saunders’ summary of the Gurdjieff Society in his contemporary survey of ‘mystical’ groups: ‘Small self-awareness groups ... in private homes ... They believe that they are not for the masses and that the few who should be in contact with them will find them spontaneously’ (Saunders 1970: 92). In 1986 Moore estimated for the United Kingdom ‘at most 1000 committed Gurdjieffians, 75% aligned with the Gurdjieff Society’ whose ‘responsible nucleus is even tinier’ (Moore 1986: 3-4). We do not know of a more recent estimate.

relatively few individuals are likely to be willing to make the necessary effort to join the Gurdjieff Society, especially when so many texts, recordings and videos are publicly available, including in this case the entire published *oeuvre* of Maurice Nicoll as well as various compilations by his successors. In other words, the level of commitment required to participate in the prescribed manner means that ‘traditional’ Gurdjieffian groups are likely to remain the preserve of a minority of ‘seekers’ who make it the principle or even exclusive informer of their lives. This is what, on the evidence presented here, traditional groups appear to demand. In light of the age cohort noticed in relation to the Gurdjieffian and Nicollian groups described here, their continuation into the future appears to be delicate.

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