

John Dee | Encyclopedia.com

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Renowned sixteenth-century mathematician and astrologer most remembered for his numerous experiments with **crystal gazing**. He was also a scholar, a fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, [England](#), and the author of 49 books on scientific subjects. His delving into the occult made him a person of strange reputation and career.

Born in London July 13, 1527, Dee is said to have descended from a noble Welsh family, the Dees of Nant y Groes in Radnorshire. He claimed that one of his direct ancestors was Roderick the Great, Prince of [Wales](#). Dee's father appears to have been a gentleman server at the court of [Henry VIII](#) and therefore affluent and able to give his son a good education. So at age 15, [John Dee](#) went to [Cambridge University](#) and after two years there took his bachelor of arts. Soon afterward he became intensely interested in **astronomy** and decided to leave England to study abroad. In 1547 he went to the [Low Countries](#) (modern [Belgium](#), Luxembourg, and the [Netherlands](#)), where he consorted with numerous scholars. He returned to England with the first astronomer's staff of brass and also with two globes constructed by geographer Gerard Mercator (famed for his cartographic projection).

In 1548 he traveled to [France](#), living for some time at Louvain. In 1550 he spent several months in [Paris](#), lecturing on the principles of geometry. He was offered a permanent post at the [Sorbonne](#), but declined, returning in 1551 to England, where on the recommendation of [Edward VI](#) he was granted the rectory of Upton-upon-Severn, Worcestershire.

Dee was now in a delightful and enviable position, having a comfortable home and assured income, he was able to devote himself exclusively to the studies he loved. But he had hardly begun to enjoy these benefits when, on the accession of Queen Mary in 1553, he was accused of trying to take the new sovereign's life by means of magic and was imprisoned at Hampton Court.

He gained his liberty soon afterward, but he felt that many people looked on him with distrust because of his scientific predilections. In a preface he wrote for an English translation of [Euclid](#), he complains bitterly of being regarded as "a companion of the hellhounds, a caller and a conjuror of wicked and damned spirits."

During the reign of Queen [Elizabeth I](#) his fortune began to improve again, and after making another long tour abroad (going on as far as St. Helena), he returned and took a house at Mortlake on the Thames.

While staying there he rapidly became famous for his intimate knowledge of astronomy. In 1572—on the advent of a new star—people flocked to hear Dee speak on the subject; when a mysterious comet appeared five years later, the scholar was again granted ample opportunity to display his learning. Queen Elizabeth herself was among those who came to ask him what this addition to the stellar bodies might portend.

First Crystal Visions

The most interesting circumstances in Dee's life are those dealing with his experiments in crystallo-mancy. Living in comparative solitude, practicing astrology for bread, but studying **alchemy** for pleasure, brooding over Talmudic mysteries and **Rosicrucian** theories, immersed in constant contemplation of wonders he longed to penetrate, and dazzled by visions of the **elixir of life** and the **philosophers' stone**, Dee soon reached such a condition of mystic exaltation that his visions seemed real, and he persuaded himself that he was the favored of the invisible world. In his *Diary* he recorded that he first saw spirits in his crystal globe on May 25, 1581.

One day in November 1582, while on his knees and fervently praying, Dee became aware of a sudden glory that filled the west window of his laboratory and in the midst of which shone the bright angel Uriel. It was impossible for Dee to speak. Uriel smiled benignly upon him, gave him a convex piece of crystal, and told him that when he wished to communicate with the beings of another world he had but to examine it intently, and they would immediately appear and reveal the mysteries of the future. Then the angel vanished.

Dee used the crystal but discovered that it was necessary to concentrate all his faculties upon it before the spirits would obey him. Also, he could never remember what the spirits said in their frequent conversations with him. He resolved to find a fellow worker, or a neophyte, who would converse with the spirits while he recorded the interesting dialogue. He found the assistant he sought in Edward Kelley, who unfortunately possessed the boldness and cunning for making a dupe of the amiable and credulous enthusiast.

Kelley was a native of Lancashire, born, according to Dee, in 1555. Nothing is known of his early years, but after having been convicted at Lancaster of coining, he was punished by having his ears cropped. He concealed the loss of his ears by a black skullcap. He later moved to Worcester and established himself as a druggist. Carnal, ambitious, and self-indulgent, he longed for wealth; and despairing of getting it through honest work, he began to seek the philosophers' stone and to employ what secrets he picked up in taking advantage of the ignorant and extravagant.

Before his acquaintance with Dee, he obtained some repute as a necromancer and alchemist who could make the dead utter the secrets of the future. One night he took a wealthy man and some of his servants into the park of Walton le Dale, near Preston in Lancashire, and alarmed him with the most frightening incantations. He then exhumed a recently interred corpse from the neighboring churchyard and pretended to make it utter wisdom.

Dee is believed to have employed a scryer, or seer, named Barnabas Saul before he met Kelley. He recorded in his *Diary* on October 9, 1581, that Saul was strangely troubled by a "spiritual creature" about midnight. On December 2 he willed his scryer to look into the "great crystalline globe" for the apparition of the holy angel Anael. Saul looked and apparently saw, but when he confessed the following March that he neither saw nor heard spiritual creatures any longer, Dee dismissed him. Then came Kelley (who was also called Talbot), and the conferences with the spirits rapidly increased in importance as well as curiosity.

The Visions of Edward Kelley

In his work with Kelley, Dee saw nothing. The visions seemed to exist solely in Kelley's fertile imagination. The entities who reportedly communicated through Kelley bore names such as Madini, Gabriel, Uriel, Nalvage, Il, Morvorgran, and Jubanladace. Some of them were said to be **angels**.

A record of the séances held in 1582-87 was published in Meric Casaubon's *A True and Faithful Relation of What Passed between Dr. Dee and Some Spirits; Tending, Had it Succeeded, to a General Alteration of Most States and Kingdoms in the World* (1659). The spirits offered occult instructions—how to make the elixir of life, how to search for the philosophers' stone, how to involve the spirits. They also gave information on the hierarchy of spiritual beings and disclosed the secrets of the primeval tongue that the angels and Adam spoke, which was corrupted into Hebrew after [the Fall](#). This original speech bore an organic relation to the outer world. Each name expressed the properties of the thing spoken of, and the utterance of that name had a compelling power over that creature. Dee was supposed to write a book in this tongue under spirit influence. He was later relieved of the task, however. The prophecies that were given through the crystal mostly failed. The physical phenomena were few—occasional movements of objects, **direct writing**, and **direct voice**.

In light of Kelley's low moral character the séance records must be considered dubious documents, but the extraordinary detail and scope of these claimed visions (including the complex angelic language) seems to go beyond mere fraudulent invention. Kelley's later activities, however, were undoubtedly suspect.

Dee and Kelley acquired a considerable reputation for the occult, which spread from Mortlake to continental [Europe](#). Dee declared that he possessed the elixir of life, which he claimed to have found among the ruins of **Glastonbury** Abbey, so the curious were drawn to his house by a double attraction. Gold flowed into his coffers, but his experiments in the transmutation of metals absorbed a great portion of his money.

At that time the court of England was visited by a Polish nobleman named Albert Laski, Count Palatine of Siradz, who wanted to see the famous "Gloriana." Queen Elizabeth received him with the flattering welcome she always accorded to distinguished strangers and placed him in the charge of the earl of Leicester. Laski visited all the England of the sixteenth century worth showing, especially its two universities, but was disappointed at not finding the famous Dr. Dee at Oxford. "I would not have come hither," he said to the earl, "had I wot that Dee was not here." Leicester promised to introduce him to the learned philosopher on their return to London, and so soothed his discontent.

A few days afterward Laski and the earl of Leicester were waiting in the antechamber at Whitehall for an audience with the queen when Dee arrived. Leicester embraced the opportunity and introduced him to Laski. The interview between two genial spirits was interesting and led to frequent visits from Laski to Dee's house at Mortlake. Kelley consulted the "great crystalline globe" and began to reveal hints and predictions that excited Laski's fancy. He claimed to see in the globe magnificent projects for the reconstruction of Europe, to be accomplished with Laski's help. According to Kelley's spirit revelations, Laski was descended from the Anglo-Norman family of the Lacies and was destined to effect the regeneration of the world. After that disclosure the two men could talk about nothing but hazy politics.

A careful perusal of Dee's *Diary* suggests that he was duped by Kelley and that he accepted all his revelations as the actual utterances of the spirits. It seems that Kelley not only knew something of the optical delusions then practiced by pretended necromancers, but also may have possessed considerable ventriloquial powers, which assisted him in deceptions.

It did not serve Kelley's purposes to bring matters too suddenly to an end, and hoping to show the value of his services, he renewed his complaints about the wickedness of dealing with spirit and his fear of the perilous enterprises they might enjoy.

He threatened to abandon his task, which greatly disturbed Dee. Where indeed could he hope to meet with another scryer of such infinite ability?

Once when Kelley expressed his desire to ride from Mortlake to Islington on some business, the doctor grew afraid that it was only an excuse to cover his escape. Following is Dee's only account of the events:

"Whereupon, I asked him why he so hasted to ride thither, and I said if it were to ride to Mr. Harry Lee I would go thither, and to be acquainted with him, seeing now I had so good leisure, being eased of the book writing. Then he said that one told him the other day that the duke (Laski) did but flatter him, and told him other things both against the duke and me. I answered for the duke and myself, and also said that if the forty pounds annuity which Mr. Lee did offer him was the chief cause of his mind setting that way (contrary to many of his former promises to me), that then I would assure him of fifty pounds yearly, and would do my best, by following of my suit, to bring it to pass as soon as I possibly could; and thereupon did make him promise upon the [Bible](#).

"Then Edward Kelley again upon the same Bible did swear unto me constant friendship, and never to forsake me; and moreover said that unless this had so fallen about he would have gone beyond the seas, taking ship at Newcastle within eight days next.

"And so we plight our faith each to the other, taking each other by the hand, upon these points of brotherly and friendly fidelity during life, which covenant I beseech [God](#) to turn to his honour, glory, and service, and the comfort of our brethren (his children) here on earth."

Kelley then returned to Dee's crystal and his visions and soon persuaded Laski that he was destined by the spirits to achieve great victories over the Saracens and win enduring glory. To do so he needed to return to [Poland](#).

Adventures in Europe

Laski returned to Poland, taking with him Dee and Kelley and their wives and families. The spirits continued to respond to their inquiries even while at sea. They landed at the Brill on July 30, 1583, and traversed Holland and Friesland to the wealthy town of Lubeck. There they lived sumptuously for a few weeks, and with new strength set out for Poland. On Christmas Day they arrived at Stettin, where they stayed until the middle of January 1584. They reached Lasco, Laski's estate, early in February.

Immediately work began for the transmutation of iron into gold, since boundless wealth was obviously needed for so grand an enterprise as the regeneration of Europe. Laski liberally supplied them with means, but the alchemists always failed on the very threshold of success.

It became apparent to the swindlers that Laski's fortune was nearly exhausted. At the same time, ironically, the angels Madini, Uriel, and their comrades in the crystal began to doubt whether Laski was, after all, the great regenerator intended to revolutionize Europe.

The whole party lived at Cracow from March 1584 until the end of July and made daily appeals to the spirits in reference to the Polish prince. They grew more and more discouraging in their replies, and Laski began to suspect that he had been duped. He proposed to furnish the alchemists with sufficient funds for a journey to [Prague](#) and letters of introduction to Emperor Rudolph. At that very moment the spirits revealed that Dee should bear a divine message to the emperor, and so Laski's proposal was gladly accepted.

At Prague the two alchemists were well received by the emperor. They found him willing to believe in the existence of the famous philosophers' stone. He was courteous to Dee, a man of European celebrity, but was very suspicious of Kelley. They stayed several months at Prague, living on the funds Laski had supplied and hoping to be drafted into the imperial service.

At last the papal nuncio complained about the tolerance afforded to heretical magicians, and the emperor was obliged to order them to leave within 24 hours. They complied, and so escaped prison or the stake, to which the nuncio had received orders from [Rome](#) to consign them in May 1586.

They traveled to the German town of Erfurt, and from there to Cassel. Meeting with a cold reception, however, they made their way once more to Cracow. There they earned a scanty living by telling fortunes and casting nativities.

After a while, they found a new patron in Stephen, king of Poland, to whom Kelley's spirits predicted that Emperor Rudolph would soon be assassinated and that the Germans would elect him to the imperial throne. But Stephen, like Laski, grew weary of the ceaseless demands for pecuniary support. Then came a new disciple, Count Rosenberg, a wealthy nobleman of Trebona, in [Bohemia](#). At his castle they remained for nearly two years, eagerly pursuing their alchemical studies but never coming any closer to the desired result.

Dee's enthusiasm and credulity had made him utterly dependent on Kelley, but the trickster was nevertheless jealous of the superior respect that Dee enjoyed as a man of remarkable scholarship and considerable ability. Frequent quarrels broke out between them, aggravated by the passion Kelley had developed for the doctor's young and beautiful wife—which he was determined to gratify. He concocted an artful plan to get what he wanted.

Knowing Dee's dependence upon him as a sayer, he suddenly announced his intention of resigning, and only consented to remain when the doctor begged him. That day, April 18, 1587, they consulted the spirits. Kelley pretended to be shocked at the revelation they made and refused to repeat it. Dee's curiosity was aroused, and he insisted on hearing it, but was extremely upset when Kelley said that the spirits had commanded the two philosophers to have their wives in common.

Dee rebuked the spirit Madini for such an improper proposal, but eventually reluctantly consented to the arrangement. Accordingly Dee, Kelley, and their wives signed an agreement on May 3, 1587, pledging obedience to the angelic demand.

Soon afterward, Dee requested permission from Queen Elizabeth to return to England and left the castle of Trebona after finally separating from Kelley. The latter, who had been knighted at Prague, proceeded to the Bohemian capital, taking with him the elixir found at Glastonbury Abbey. He was immediately arrested by order of the emperor and imprisoned.

Kelley was later released and wandered throughout [Germany](#), telling fortunes and propagating the cause of **magic**. He was again arrested as a heretic and sorcerer. In a desperate attempt to avoid imprisonment he tried to escape, but fell from the dungeon wall and broke two ribs and both his legs. He died of his injuries in February 1593.

Dee's Final Years

Dee set out from Trebona with a splendid train, the expenses of his journey defrayed by the generous Bohemian noble Count Rosenberg. In England he was well received by the queen and settled again at Mortlake, resuming his chemical studies and his pursuit of the philosophers' stone.

But nothing went well with the unfortunate enthusiast. He employed two scryers—a rogue named Bartholomew and a charlatan named Heckman—but neither could discover anything satisfactory in the "great crystalline globe." He grew poorer and poorer; he sank into indigence and wearied the queen with his importunity. At length he obtained a small appointment as chancellor of [St. Paul's](#) Cathedral, which in 1595 he exchanged for the wardenship of Manchester College. He served in this position until age and failing intellect compelled him to resign it about 1602 or 1603.

He then retired to his old house at Mortlake, where he practiced as a fortune-teller, gaining little in return but an unenviable reputation as a wizard, "a conjuror, a caller, or invocator of devils." On June 5, 1604, he petitioned James I for protection against such calumnies, declaring that none of the "very strange and frivolous fables or histories reported and told of him (as to have been of his doing) were true."

Dee was an exceptionally interesting figure, and he must have been a man of rare intellectual activity. His calculations facilitated the adoption of the [Gregorian calendar](#) in England, and he foresaw the formation of the Historical Manuscripts Commission, addressing to the Crown a petition on the desirability of preserving the old, unpublished records of England's past, many of which were kept in the archives of monasteries. He was a voluminous writer on science, his works including *Monas Hieroglyphica* (1564), *De Trigonon* (1565), *Testamentum Johannis Dee Philosophi Summi ad Johannem Guryon Transmissum* (1568) and *An Account of the Manner in which a Certayn Copper-smith in the Land of Moores, and a Certayn Moore Transmuted Copper to Gold* (1576).

It is usual to dismiss Kelley as a rogue and Dee as his dupe, but if the angelic visions were purely for money, they both could have done better for themselves. Dee seemed to be an honest man of unusual talents, devoting his life to science and the pursuit of mystical knowledge. The angelic language called Enochian, which Dee and Kelley used when invoking spirits in the crystal, is a construction of great intricacy, far beyond the capacity or the requirements of simple **fraud**. It combines magic, mathematics, astrology, and cryptography. An intriguing suggestion is that the angelic conversations were a system of codes to convey secrets, and that Dee and Kelley's visits in Europe were for purposes of espionage. In later times, Enochian rituals were revived by the magical Hermetic Order of the **Golden Dawn** and became a common element in **ceremonial magic**. Some Enochian rituals were adapted by [Anton LaVey](#) and the **Church of Satan**, which he founded.

Dee's reputation suffered much from the scorn of Meric Casaubon, who published some of the angelic conversations and represented them as delusive. The scholar **Theodore Besterman**, however, in his book *Crystal-Gazing* (1929), adopted Dee as a pioneer Spiritualist, and contemporary magicians have seen him as one of their ancestors.

Dee was miserably poor in his last years and was even obliged to sell his precious books in order to sustain himself. He was planning a journey to Germany when he died in December 1608; he was buried in the chancel of Mortlake Church. The seventeenth-century antiquary [John Aubrey](#) assembled an interesting character description of Dee:

"He had a very fair, clear, sanguine complexion, a long beard as white as milke. A very handsome man.... He was a great peacemaker; if any of the neighbours fell out, he would never lett them alone till he had made them friends. He was tall and slender. He wore a gowne like an artist's gowne, with hanging sleeves, and a slitt. A might good man he was."

One of his crystals used for scrying was supposed to have been given to Dee by an angel. It is on display in the [British Museum](#), London, which also houses some of the mystical cakes of wax consecrated by Dee for his ceremonies and some of his manuscripts in the Cottonian collection.

Several centuries after his death, on April 18, 1873, Dee supposedly communicated via **automatic writing** through the mediumship of **Stainton Moses**. The communications gave some evidential details of his life that were verified by research at the [British Museum](#) Library, but his signature was found to be dissimilar to the one preserved there.

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