



## Last Word Society - 2017

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### LW4 Investigating Death or Raising the Dead? The Saga of William Wynn Westcott: A 19<sup>th</sup>-Century London Coroner

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After attending this presentation, attendees will gain an appreciation of the role of 19<sup>th</sup>-century coroners in the development of an effective public health system in England and will gain insight into the narrow path those in public life tread between fame and infamy.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by reminding them, in particular, of the need to keep confidential papers confidential.

*Martindale: The Complete Drug Reference*, now in its 38<sup>th</sup> edition, was first published in 1883; William Wynn Westcott collaborated in its production with the principal author, William Martindale. Then, as now, Westcott's name can be found on its frontispiece. This, apart from several books on esoteric topics such as the Rosicrucians and numerology, is his legacy.

Born in 1848, Westcott graduated in medicine from London University in 1871. He spent ten years as a general practitioner in rural Somerset and became a Freemason in 1875. He progressed rapidly up the Masonic ranks, becoming interested in the more esoteric aspects of ceremonial Masonry.

Westcott moved to London in 1878, working first as a deputy coroner, then from 1894, as Coroner for North East London. He published extensively on death investigation in the medical literature and his occult interests were hinted at in an 1890 *British Medical Journal* paper on mandrake root.

Westcott's parallel life in occult studies developed apace. He was a member of Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, a society with membership restricted to Master Masons, rising to become its general secretary, and was also involved with the Theosophical Society. Both societies were interested in the theoretical study of "high magic" ritual, but not in its practical application. To further an interest in practical magic, Westcott, with others, founded the Order of the Golden Dawn in 1888. Its structure was derived from a likely forged, ciphered manuscript, translated by Westcott. Alleged to have originated with the original Rosicrucians, this document was used as the basis of a pseudo-Masonic structure for the new organization.

Because membership did not require a Trinitarian Christian belief and was not restricted to males, it attracted an eclectic membership from the glitterati and intelligentsia, including artists, actresses, scientists, and doctors. Prominent members included W.B. Yeats, Algernon Blackwood, Constance Wilde (Oscar Wilde's wife), and Alistair Crowley; however, all did not go smoothly, particularly after Westcott had to resign from the Order in 1897.

Westcott gave this reason for his resignation: "It somehow became known to the State officers that I was a prominent official in a society in which I had been foolishly posturing as one possessed of magical powers – and if this became more public it would not do for a coroner of the crown to be made shame of in such a mad way." Allegedly, this was due to him leaving papers relating to the order in a taxi, which were then forwarded to the Home Office, the ministry with oversight of coroners. Crowley's take on this was that Westcott had been told by the Home Office, "That he was paid to sit on corpses not to raise them; and that he must choose between his coronership and his adeptship." Another possible reason is that at around this time, allegations surfaced that Westcott knew that



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some of the documents used to develop the constitution of the Order were forgeries. There may also have been family pressures on Westcott. The Order schismed, notably with Crowley splitting to develop the thelemic system of magic.

In 1901, two American adherents were tried and convicted at the Old Bailey of rape. By this time, Westcott was no longer associated with the order and was less prominent in public life.

In 1919, Westcott traveled to Natal and remained there, resigning his coronership in March 1920. His wife may not have joined him there, as she died after a fall from a house in Tunbridge Wells in 1921.

Westcott died in South Africa in 1928. While he had a fulsome, if sanitized, obituary in the *Lancet*, his death was only mentioned in passing by the *British Medical Journal*, to which he had contributed greatly, in a review of the 19<sup>th</sup> edition of *Martindale*.

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### **Coroner, Necromancy, Scandal**