In Modern Wicca: A History from Gerald Gardner to the Present, Michael Howard examines the question of whether the Wiccan religion is an extension of ancient traditions, or, rather if it is a religion that was originally created by Gerald Gardner, from various religious and occult sources. Tracing the development of the religion from the 1930s to the present, Howard clearly connects the development of Wicca with changes in Euro-American culture during the 20th century. The author explores numerous perspectives on the practice and philosophy of the religion and shows the reader that whether or not Wicca is based on ancient traditions, the strength of contemporary Wicca is its adaptability and inclusivity. This book is a valuable source for anthropological research or for anyone interested in learning about the history and contemporary Wicca.

As a practitioner of Wicca with over 40 years of experience in the neo-Pagan community and long-time editor of the The Cauldron, a respected neo-Pagan magazine, Howard has a unique perspective on the development of this religion. Like any good historian, Howard is steadfast in his discussions of the lives and actions of the major movers in the development of Wicca. He does not paint an overly idealized picture of the past or the present, but instead investigates the various developments of the religion and critically analyzes the arguments both for and against change to religious practice. Howard does this in such a way that both Wiccans and non-practitioners can understand. By tracing historical developments, he also discusses much of the foundational philosophy and practice and how this has changed over time.

In order to understand contemporary Wiccan belief and practice, Howard discusses the life and beliefs of Gerald Gardner, the controversial founder of the Wiccan religion who worked to increase accessibility and knowledge of witchcraft. As Gardner and his followers claim, he set down the rules governing covens and synthesized the practices and beliefs of ancient Celtic witchcraft into the religion of Wicca. Of primary interest to Howard is the claim that Gardnerian Wicca is a faithful recreation of a prehistoric European witchcraft.

Howard begins his inquiry into Wicca ancestry by exploring Gardner’s privileged beginnings and his many travels and experiences with different cultures and religions. Howard paints a picture of Gardner as a magnetic and compelling character who was initiated into many different cults and covens. According to many of his own initiates, Gardner was prone to attention-getting behaviors and stretching the truth (Howard 2009: 9, 58). Howard unfailingly portrays Gardner as a product of his time. Even though he brought a religion that focused on a Goddess as well as a God into the public eye and was responsible for initiating and training many High Priestesses, there was still a great deal of sexism in the structure of covens and within the religion itself (Howard 2009: 146), which was not changed until the feminist revolution of the 1960s and 70s (Howard 2009: 229).

In the 1950s, during the early stages of the religion, there was a great deal of argument and turmoil over who defined what Wicca was and how it should be portrayed to the world. Gardner viewed himself as the champion and public voice of an ancient and besieged religion. Publicity grabbing was a major part of these early stages and Howard provides a nuanced examination of the benefits and costs of these early attention-getting tactics. Howard describes the 1950s through the 1970s, after the repeal of the anti-witchcraft laws in the United Kingdom, as a time when many of the main figures in the religion were actively engaging the public and seeking initiates by writing books about the religion, founding museums, participating in interviews, and even televising rituals.

However, there were negative repercussions to this increased public attention. During this period, the media almost universally portrayed witches as evil satanic practitioners (Howard 2009: 138-139, 143). Wicca was often described as a conspiracy that was threatening to British (or American) ways of life. Socially