**MOUNT SINAI Lodge No. 8993**

United Grand Lodge of England

Beyond the Masonic Veil

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and *Past Master of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge No 2076 E C*

It has always been fascinating to me to consider that at any one given moment there are tens of thousands of masons meeting in lodge rooms, familiar to us all. Along our own Meridian, at the very time we hold our own lodge meetings in Freemasons' Hall or another English venue, there are Freemasons just like us sitting in lodges stretching from Scandinavia and Turkey to Kenya and South Africa. Men as diverse in intellect and culture as you can imagine. Judges and dustmen, bus drivers and city mayors, doctors, butchers, bakers, teachers, accountants, clergymen and royalty. Jews and Christians, Muslims and Buddhists. White, Black, Yellow and Brown! All surrounded by furniture and decor readily identifiable to a Freemason, all wearing aprons just like ours, all practising, in essence, the same ceremonies, sharing the same pleasure and pride.

WHY? What is the magnetism in Freemasonry that draws such diversity of people to form one single world-wide compelling fraternity?

*RITUAL*

It could be that we are bound to each other because each one of us has experienced the same initiation ceremony,a ceremony you have to participate in if you wish to witness it.

For 350 years or more great men of history have gone through a similar ceremony, just like we have: members of Royal families in Sweden, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and England. H M King George the VI was an active Mason and accepted the Rank of Past Grand Master on his accession to the throne in 1937.

Nearly 200 years earlier in 1752 George Washington, first President of the United States of America, was made a freemason in Virginia. Twelve other Presidents have followed in his footsteps, as well as ......Winston Churchill... Mozart....Houdini...the Duke of Wellington.. Robert Burns and Rudyard Kipling, even Oscar Wilde and Casanova...to mention just a few, all masons and all having experienced the same initiation as each one of us has.

There is irrefutable evidence that the earliest initiation was that of Elias Ashmole. He was initiated as a freemason at Warrington in Lancashire at 4.30 in the afternoon of the 16th of October 1646. We can be that precise because there is an entry in his diary,in his own handwriting recording the event. It is definite that he had nothing whatsoever to do with stone masons in their operative or working sense. Thus the importance we place on his initiation as evidence of our own antiquity as an institution.

# ORIGINS

There are innumerable theories and no final conclusion as to when, where and how freemasonry began. It would make sense to reach the conclusion that we are descended directly from operative, that is working, stone masons of Medieval times. Today we use as our own laws, the same ancient charges and regulations that applied to operative masons as far back as the late 14th century. This *transition* theory visualises a situation where the operative working stone masons invited non-masons to their ceremonies. These guests would be, for instance, members of the clergy and/or men of finance who were directly involved in financing the building. They could be officers of the civic authority and other members of the community may have also been invited to dine and enjoy the after proceedings (i.e. after a hard day's work).

On completion of their project, their work on a cathedral or castle or other stone building, so the *transition* theory continues, the operative stone masons would have moved on to their next undertaking. Those non-masons who remained behind, who had participated over decades, perhaps, in pleasant and convivial ceremonies, may have decided to continue regular social meetings using, now symbolically, all the implements and ritual they had witnessed in practice among the operative masons. Thus may have been born the speculative or symbolic masonry we practice today. We don’t know.

What we do know beyond a shadow of a doubt is that on the 24th of June 1717 four Lodges in London met together at the Goose and Gridiron Tavern in St Paul’s Churchyard. They formed the Grand Lodge of England, the first Grand Lodge anywhere in the world and that was the beginning of *organised* freemasonry.

*SUCCESS*

If the opposition to its existence can be judged the success of an organisation, then freemasonry began as a successful institution long before its formal launch. In 1698, nearly two decades before Grand Lodge was formed, a pamphlet was distributed warning Londoners

..*of the Mischiefs and Evils practised in the sight of God by those called Freed Masons...They are the Anti Christ....*

Could this then be the secret as to what has kept freemasonry a strong and successful fraternal organisation through the centuries? Those same criticisms that began three centuries ago continue today in almost identical form and wordings but have never been backed by fact. Samuel Prichard, who in 1730 claimed to reveal the secrets of the Freemasons, in his book *Masonry Dissected.*

*BLESSING IN DISGUISE*

Prichard’s ‘exposure’ - as these publications disclosing Masonic ritual came to be known – is, however, a blessing in disguise for the student of freemasonry today. The only available contemporary Grand Lodge information is to be found in Anderson’s *Constitutions of the Free Masons* published in 1723. As a source of historical information, it is considered to be quite unreliable. It is here that Prichard’s *Masonry Dissected* serves a useful purpose to the historian. It gives us a detailed account of the ceremonies practised in England in the 1730s.

*EUROPE*

Prichard’s success coincided with the spread of freemasonry into Europe where many similar exposures soon began to appear. The first illustration we have of a Lodge in session was published in Germany 1742. The 8 illustrations are known as the Gabanon prints.

The greatest fascination that outsiders seem to have with freemasonry is the detail of our initiation ceremony. Because we state that we treat our ceremonies as private, there have been many extraordinary insinuations as to how a mason is initiated. In 1721 the anonymous Hudibrastic Poem was published with clever though highly offensive insinuations of the activities of freemasons. This led ifrom the 1760s, to a seriues of satirical illustrations depicting candidates being branded with the letters FM on their posterior.

*SATIRE & FUN*

Not all of the satirical depictions of freemasons show them in a negative light. The most famous engraver of the eighteenth century, William Hogarth, himself a freemason, depicted in a print published in 1738 the Master of his Lodge, drunk after an obviously successful meeting, being escorted home by the Tyler. The print is entitled *Night* and is one of a series of four known as *The Times Of Day*. They are a wonderful reflection of freemasonry of the period. The Master has been identified as Thomas de Veil, a local magistrate, known not to be in total amity with Hogarth. That is why the content of the chamber pot is being poured onto his head. Lawson Wood also drew a series of masons in his well known *Gran pop* series.

We now come to the crossroads in English Masonic History: enter Laurence Dermott, one of the most extraordinary Masonic personalities. Under his auspices a competing Grand Lodge was formed in 1751 styling itself as *the Antients.* It successfully dubbed the Premier and older Grand Lodge as *the Moderns.* The competition between the two was fierce and continued for over half a century.

It was only by the grace of the Duke of Sussex that a union between the two rivals was finally achieved in 1813. That is why today we are known as the *United* Grand Lodge of England.

## *FINALLY*

So we come back to my original question. What is it that has made freemasonry such a successful and long lasting institution world-wide? Is it its antiquity? Its resilience? or maybe its exclusiveness or the air of secrecy associated with it.

Its universal appeal may lie in every man being able to find within freemasonry some satisfaction in his own field of interest, be it ritual, history, theatricals, mysticism or just plain social contact. There is no simple answer. If you were to ask me now the straightforward question: what is freemasonry? I would reply in one single word: Charity. Not merely the charity of our pockets, as important as that is, but the charity of our hearts: the genuine and sincere shared sentiments of brotherly love, relief and truth.

To end, I will quote one short paragraph from the closing ceremony as practised in most of our lodges. It states:

*...you are now about to quit this safe and sacred retreat*

*of peace and friendship and mix again with the busy*

*world. Midst all its cares and employment forget not the*

*sacred duties which have been so frequently inculcated*

*and strongly recommended in this Lodge.....that by*

*diligence and fidelity to the duties of your respective vocations,*

*by liberal beneficence and diffusive charity,*

*by constancy and sincerity in your friendship, by*

*uniformly kind, just, amiable and virtuous deportment,*

*prove to the world the happy and beneficent effects of*

*our ancient and honourable Institution.*

How wonderful this world would be if we could all put into practice such splendid sentiments, outside the lodge room as we do inside..