

The Origins of Freemasonry. Facts and Fictions

Review Number: 517

Publish date: Monday, 1 May, 2006

Author: Margaret Jacob

ISBN: 0812239016

Date of Publication: 2006

Price: £17.50

Publisher: University of Pennsylvania Press

Place of Publication: Philadelphia, PA

Reviewer: David Stevenson

Professor Jacob's book is the latest of her several notable contributions to masonic history, which have included *The Radical Enlightenment* (1981) and *Living the Enlightenment* (1991). The book's title presumably owes something to my book of the same name (1988), while the subtitle derives from Henry Sadler's remarkable *Masonic Facts and Fictions* (1887). The new *Origins of Freemasonry* is inspired by the wave of interest in freemasonry aroused by the sensationally successful thriller by Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*. Jacob is inspired by the laudable feeling that at a time when so much nonsense about freemasonry is being written (with the gullible taking the novel's fictions to be facts), it is about time that a historian sought to present more reliable evidence and arguments.

The results are disappointing, however. The book shows signs of being hurriedly thrown together to meet the *Da Vinci* bubble of publicity, and as a result it is incoherent, at times self-contradictory and plain inaccurate. The bulk of the book consists of four essays on eighteenth-century freemasons in Continental Europe, and thus has nothing to do with the title's origins of freemasonry. There is no attempt to develop arguments correcting 'fictions'. The opening chapter, 'Origins', does address the book's supposed main subject – but it is the shortest in the book, and reveals that Jacob's knowledge of British masonry is limited.

It is asserted that lodges of freemasons emerged in seventeenth-century England and Scotland out of medieval guilds of stonemasons. These she identifies as the official guilds (called incorporations in Scotland) that regulated the crafts and gave them roles in urban government.

In reality, virtually nothing is known of England's seventeenth-century lodges – only scattered references to them survives, and most (if not all) were not lasting institutions but 'occasional' lodges – ad hoc gatherings of initiates to admit new members. In Scotland on the other hand there is copious evidence, and the picture is different from that presented by Jacob. Official craft guilds existed and were part of the formal structure of local government. Permanent masonic lodges also existed. But they were (with one exception) not the same things but separate institutions. In the guild structure, masons were lumped together with other crafts relating to building (as in Edinburgh's incorporation of Masons and Wrights, which also included a number of minor trades). The masonic lodges existed alongside such builders' guilds. In some ways they look very like the official guilds, and they perform many guild type functions. They might, indeed, be described as 'unofficial guilds,' or perhaps 'counter-guilds', and they existed because stonemasons found the official guilds inadequate and incompatible with their traditions. Stonemasons were determined to have their own exclusive organisations because they had unique traditional lore, initiation rituals and secrets. Therefore they created

organisations separate from other trades and free from the control of urban authorities. Through their lodges stonemasons asserted the autonomy and the outstanding status they claimed for their craft. Moreover a number of early lodges could not have descended from official guilds as they met outside towns where there was no guild structure, and it seems likely that choosing to meet in such places was linked to desire for autonomy.

Most rules have exceptions, and there is a single exception to the generalisation that lodges in towns were separate from official guilds. In Dundee the masons were allowed their own society or guild within the structure of urban government, without being mixed in with other trades. In these circumstances, a hybrid institution developed, a guild lodge, in which masons could both take part in urban government and rehearse their secret lore and literature.

As fate would have it, Dundee is the only early lodge in Britain whose early records Jacob has studied. The material she has produced is of much interest. But she has then extrapolated, from this single case, generalisations about the origins of all early British lodges. A glance at a few of the published histories of masonry or histories of individual lodges would have shown her that there was something very odd about Dundee. Basing generalisations on a sample of one is pretty dangerous, and here has led to invalid conclusions.

Turning to evidence of events in England, Jacob also gives cause for concern. Dating the initiations of Sir Robert Moray and Sir Elias Ashmole to 'the 1650s' (pp. 12–13), may be passing sloppiness (the correct dates being 1641 and 1646), but few will share her confidence that a Grand Lodge existed in London before 1716–1717. Apart from the Dundee records, the only early British masonic manuscript evidence that Jacob analyses is a mythical history of masonry, with a section on initiation into the 'mason word' or secrets. This manuscript is dated 1659 (though it is in fact a later copy), and Jacob first referred to it in 1991, having found it in the library of the Royal Society. Here she hails it as enshrining ideas from the English Revolution of the 1640s, which had seen 'the birth of constitutional government bound by laws and rules' (pp. 13–14). What she does not say (though she mentions it later in the book) is that this manuscript is not an isolated survival. It is just one of the many surviving copies of the 'Old Charges' or 'Old Constitutions' of masons, a number of which date from before the 1640s but which have their origins in the Middle Ages. Therefore trying to analyse a version of this traditional text in search of 1640s ideology simply because it dates from the 1650s is bound to be a disaster. She cherry-picks individual words and attributes great significance to them as indications of advances towards ideologies of representative government. Mention of an early king of France having been 'elected' rouses her excitement. Why? And why is a mention of parliament of such interest? Everyone knows that there were parliaments in the Middle Ages. Most remarkable of all is the claim that the way the document uses the word 'constitutions' to indicate rules or statutes has 'few if any precedents before the 1650s'. In support of this she cites the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but her consultation has been perfunctory. The *Dictionary* cites, for example, the 1164 Constitutions of Clarendon issued by Henry II. The word had been used for rules or regulations for centuries.

Jacob leaves the seventeenth century with relief. It does not have the kind of masonry that really interests her. Scottish masonry suffered from something mysteriously called 'clan governance', and anyway 'The freemasonry of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment did not exist in seventeenth-century Scotland'. Well, obviously not, for these unfortunates were stuck in the wrong century.

Moving on to her preferred territory, the eighteenth century, it is accepted that freemasonry originated in Britain. That the 'Scottish rites' which appeared in France 'had nothing to do with Scotland' is asserted (p. 105), and few would disagree. But a few lines later she writes of the Scottish rite being 'exported to France (possibly by Jacobite refugees)' which seems to contradict this – unless by some extraordinary coincidence only English and Irish Jacobites brought to Scottish rite to mainland Europe.

Jacob provides an interesting and informative essay on the masonic almanacs or diaries that became common in the later part of the eighteenth century. A chapter on 'Schools of Government' studies European

lodges as places in which men got used to ideas of self government, of electing officials, agreeing on 'taxes' (payments due to the lodge), of discussion and decision reached by voting. They even sent representatives to national assemblies, their Grand Lodges. The case is argued that masonic structures paralleled those of emerging states, and provided significant experience in government. In some states (Sweden, Brandenburg) masons co-operated with and influenced rulers. Masonic lodges, indeed, 'have left the most remarkable records we possess for tracing the prehistory of nationally identified formal institutions of representative government' in continental Europe (p. 47). Few will be ready to go that far. Moreover, who were these men that lodges schooled for government? Where social analysis is provided for some French lodges (p. 117–18) they turn out to be filled with members of the older nobility of blood (the nobility of the sword), the service nobility of government officials (the nobility of the robe), army officers and merchants. These were educated men used to debate and making decisions. It is true that emphasis on equality in lodges was a novelty, but these masons were by no means ordinary folk being introduced the idea of having influence on affairs for the first time. Perhaps other lodges had different social make-ups, but we are not told of them.

Moreover, the ideas of brotherhood and equality Jacob rightly sees core principals in freemasonry, were quickly corrupted on the Continent. No sooner was 'simple' two or three degree British masonry introduced to the continent than (as Jacob herself says) the invention of elaborate hierarchies of 'higher' degrees began. Conspicuous consumption became the order of the day for many, with higher degrees competing in elaboration of dress, regalia and ritual. European masons often revelled in aping social inequality, creating knighthoods and quasi-chivalric orders. In contrast to this type of masonry, even the present British honours system, with its arcane gradations of awards, seems restrained and simple. All Continental masons might be equal, but some – those with time and money – were determined to be a lot more equal than others, privy to higher grades of secrets. Lodges are described as seething with tension over matters of precedence and social rank in France in the 1780s (p. 105). Thus in many instances freemasonry was in no danger of subverting the rigid hierarchies of the societies in which it developed, rather these hierarchies subverted masonry. Jacob indeed accepts this when she states that masons sought to 'recreate hierarchy' – but then this is somehow seen as part of the fact that they 'rejoiced in the experience of brothers "meeting upon the level"'. How hierarchy and level were reconciled is not explained (pp. 71–2).

By far the most satisfying chapter in the book deals with 'Women in the Lodges'. In Britain freemasonry was exclusively male, reflecting the wider social tendency for clubs and societies to exclude women. The French in their salons, on the other hand, favoured institutions where the genders mixed. Therefore the fact that when freemasonry was adapted for French use women were admitted to lodges is understandable. As with hierarchy, freemasonry adapted to the society in which it grew. Sometimes it is hard to tell whether in writing of 'women's freemasonry' or 'freemasonry for women' (pp. 96–7). Jacob is referring to mixed lodges or entirely female ones, but it is clear that the latter came to form the main forum for women within masonry. In their own lodges, from the 1740s, they underwent the experience of self government shared by all masons, and soon adapted masonry to suit their tastes. The symbolism of builders' tools – trowels, compasses and so on – were found too coarse for refined female tastes, and new rituals were invented for them with symbolism derived mainly from the Bible. The emergence of these women's lodges (regarded as masonic in spite of abolishing masonic symbolism) is clearly fascinating for those studying gender history, giving glimpse of women running their own institutions. But these women were not entirely liberated in their lodges from assumptions of male domination. The women's lodges were known as 'Lodges of Adoption,' and each had to be sponsored by a male lodge (p. 117), which condescendingly (by today's standards) 'adopted' women as honorary men, for lodges were by nature places for men. In many, perhaps most cases, members of a female lodge would be the womenfolk of the men who formed the sponsoring male lodge. It is fascinating to see in these developments the origins 250 years ago of France's modern 'Grand Orient' of mixed freemasonry.

The book's Conclusion opens by discussing freemasonry's role in contemporary America, but it says little more than that numbers are in decline, and that gender segregation is a problem (though mixed and all-women lodges have emerged in some cities in spite of official disapproval). As is evident elsewhere, Jacob believes that reluctance to admit women lies behind the declining numbers of freemasons in America and

Britain. From my own contacts with British freemasons, I suspect that the admission of women would lead to the departure from the movement of large numbers of men, leaving it worse off than before. Racial segregation is also mentioned – though surprisingly there is no mention of the fact that black freemasonry (Prince Hall freemasonry) has existed since the late eighteenth-century. Its many lodges are now recognised as 'regular' by most of the mainstream American Grand Lodges. The book ends with the statement that masonic lodges 'may be said to have pushed European mores, at least at home, in a democratic direction'. After the rhetoric in earlier chapters about the importance of freemasonry as a school for representative government, this is pretty vague.

Freemasonry, in Britain and the rest of Europe, is complex and often contradictory. It could lead to radical developments, or it could serve to strengthen existing hierarchies. That Jacob is interested in stressing radical themes is justifiable, but it seems surprising that she does not seem to notice that at times

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/517#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/2911>

[2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>