

PRE-HISTORIC FREEMASONRY.

by
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We live in a progressive age; the achievements of science and the developments of art give daily emphasis to this assertion. In many particulars we have outgrown the ideas of our ancestors, and in the intellectual advancement of the last twenty five years this fact is nowhere more apparent than in the marked departure from the methods formerly employed in the treatment of historical subjects. Indeed, a new theory of history has been evolved, based upon the principle that nothing is now to be gained to the world's progress by concealment; that presumptions and opinions, from whatever source emanating, do not constitute facts, and that the duty of the historian is to display the past as it was, and not as he thinks it should have been or might have been, in order to fit the views, theories, or beliefs of today. The force of tradition, so long exerted, has lost its effectiveness; the unverified legend no longer passes current as authentic data; critical inquiry has superseded complacent credulity, and in the reaction many a time-honored myth has been destroyed. The entire complexion of modern historical investigation has been changed through the unearthing of old documents and records, the opening of closed archives, and the publication of long-suppressed evidence; and as one after another the hitherto inaccessible avenues of knowledge are laid bare to our inspection we are arriving at clearer conceptions and more distinct views of the past than was permitted to our predecessors.

In no department of archaeological research do these remarks apply with greater force than to the antiquities, customs, traditions, and ceremonial observances of the Freemasons; and while the past has yielded up but a moiety of its hidden stores of learning, sufficient has already been obtained to cause a revision of our old beliefs and a practical rewriting of the history of the Craft.

It was the policy of the men who guided the destinies of Freemasonry at, and for many years subsequent to, the revival of 1717 to envelop its origin with an air of mystery, and to conceal, rather than make known, the facts immediately antecedent to that event. The early commentators and historians of the Craft, disregarding the means within their reach, all sought to invest it with a romantic glamour by showing a descent from the learned and mystical societies of the ancient world, and a fabulous history was constructed to support the theories thus advanced. Its genealogy was traced, with ingenious details and lucid explanations, from the commencement of time, and imagination filled the gaps and bridged the chasms during the long ages that were supposed to have intervened. In a few instances some gifted seer, more wise than his fellows, with retrospective vision pierced the ever deepening shadows of the past and revealed the actual time and place of its birth; others, less bold but equally imaginative have been content with finding it already in active life in the ancient mysteries of the far East, but, as a rule, the veracious historian has silenced cavil and carefully concealed his own lack of knowledge by ascribing to it an origin which "is lost in the dim mists of antiquity."

It is not strange that in this enlightened age the repetition of these old tales should have produced in many a feeling of revulsion and a general tendency to discredit all claims of ancient lineage and descent. Indeed, I have frequently heard it asserted, by many of the more sceptically inclined, that the assembly of 1717 was not a revival, but a birth; that the four old London lodges were but a pleasant fiction, and that from the fertile brains of Anderson and his confreres was evolved a social club, which unforeseen circumstances subsequently developed into a vast, far reaching fraternity; and so, between the Scylla of blind credulity and the Charybdis of open scepticism the student of Masonic history must carefully feel his way with but little, I regret to say, to guide his steps or throw light upon his investigations.

Yet, notwithstanding the assertions of the sceptics on the one hand, and despite the fairy tales of the writers of imagination on the other, Freemasonry has a past; it has, to some extent, an authentic history, and its existence does extend to a time "whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary."

There are few subjects of historical inquiry that present to the investigator at any one period or point of time so wide and well defined a line of demarcation between the unquestioned and authentic and the doubtful or unknown, as that afforded by the so called revival of Masonry in 1717. Since that time a fairly well established line of evidence supports the general features of an accepted history, and but little room is left for disputation, but beyond it lies the debatable land.

For nearly two centuries Masons of all rites and degrees have been exploring this terra incognita, penetrating its concealed recesses and sounding its abysmal depths; but the sum total of all the discoveries thus far reported, exclusive of those graphic delineations drawn wholly from the inner consciousness of the writers, are a few manuscript constitutions of uncertain age, with here and there a casual reference in contemporary documents. But if the direct line of search has yielded little to reward the efforts of the seeker after facts, collateral inquiry has thrown upon the meagre data thus far obtained a strong side-light that goes far to clear the mists of the past and enable us to form some adequate ideas of Masonry as it existed prior to the historical revival. And one of the most significant of the lessons taught is, that we shall seek in vain for the lost records of a former grandeur or the missing evidence that shall connect us with an illustrious past; and while the proud boast of a noble ancestry may still be made, it is yet the nobility of labor, and our highest titles came to us through the long heritage of toil.

I have no desire to pose as an iconoclast, nor to parade my humble opinions in opposition to those of the wise and the great who have preceded me; therefore I do not say that Masonry has not existed in unbroken continuity for countless ages; that the Dionysian artificers were not our progenitors; that the Roman Colleges were not of our Fraternity in the direct line of succession, nor that we are not legitimately descended from them. Indeed, a positive denial of these statements does not lie in the mouth of any man, but I can safely assert that no proof to sustain this pedigree has ever been produced, and that the tendency of modern discovery leads to a contrary conclusion. Our views and opinions with respect to

the antiquity of the Fraternity must, in a large measure, be shaped by the old manuscript constitutions to which I have alluded and of which at least sixty are now known to be in existence. These are the only authentic memorials that have come down to us from the early Freemasons, and from the internal evidence which they afford much of our present knowledge is derived. These constitutions are all similar in general characteristics, and consists in the main of two parts, the first being a recital of legendary history, now called (for want of a better name) "the legend of the Craft," and the second consisting of what are popularly known as the "Ancient Charges," or the general regulations of the Craft. They are written on strips of parchment or vellum, and are of various dates, known or surmised, from 1390 until the commencement of the eighteenth century.

The majority of these interesting documents show signs of long and active use, and would seem to have been actually employed in the work of the pre-historic lodges, and to have been read to candidates at the time of their initiation. They prove beyond a doubt that the Society, during the three hundred years which preceded the revival of 1717, was not an ordinary guild like the livery companies or other strictly operative associations, but professed to teach, and bound its members to the practice of high morality, obligating them to be true men, not only in their relations to one another and those around them, but also in the observance of their duties to God, the Church, and the King. They contain much that unmistakably stamps them as emanating from an operative society, however, and the conclusion now generally accepted is that they represent the transition period, when Masonry was passing from a strictly operative to a purely speculative condition.

The internal evidence so presented has itself been the subject of much speculation and widely-differing opinion.

Thus these parts, which, by way of introduction to the charges, recite the so-called "legend of the Craft." have been seized upon by the fiction writers as fully substantiating the traditions of our esoteric ceremonies, and to the casual observer this assertion may not seem altogether unfounded. The legend in question purports to be a history of the manner in which "this worthy Craft of Masonry" was founded and afterwards maintained, commencing with the sons of Adam and continuing down to the times of the later Saxon kings of England. But this "history," as will be seen on closer inspection, does not purport to be that of a society or guild, but is rather a summary -- and not a very accurate one at that - of the general course of the building art or geometry, and attempts to describe its vicissitudes in much the same manner as might be done in the case of music, astronomy, or any other of the seven liberal arts and sciences.

Indeed, it is not claimed in these old chronicles that a formal institution of the Masonic guild was effected until the time of King Athelstan, who, at the traditionary assembly at York, in the tenth century, is said to have given them a charter, and at which time the charges and rules for the government of the Craft were formulated.

Here, then, is the genesis of Masonry as revealed by its own writings. Whether it be true or false I do not now assume to decide, but can only say that secular history verifies the time, if not the manner, of its institution. From the tenth to the fourteenth century it remained a working man's guild, differing, probably, in no essential feature from the other Craft guilds of the period, and with nothing of an esoteric character, so far as known, except its trade secrets. During all these years it left no sign, and for all our information concerning it we are dependent on general history.

In 1356 was enacted the first Statute of Laborers, which forbade the congregation of artisans, who, it was alleged, were thereby incited to unjust and illegal demands, contrary to the spirit of the English Constitution. At this time, then, must be dated the first change in the character of the guild, and the earliest written memorial which we possess - the Regius Poem - is ascribed to a period about forty years later. It was not until 1424, however, that effective measures were taken to suppress trade organizations or assemblies of workmen, and from, this period may be observed the speculative character and the growing tendency towards that system of symbolic philosophy which culminated in the formation of the Grand Lodge of 1717.

There are those - and their learning and ability command for them the highest respect for their opinions - who, while repudiating the traditionary origin of the Craft, nevertheless contend that the old constitutions clearly point to the existence of a symbolic or speculative society at the earliest date from whence they assume to speak. According to the theory of these savants, it would seem that as early as the fourteenth century (the date of the earliest known manuscript), there was a guild or fraternity commemorating the science, but without practicing the art, of Masonry; that such guild was not composed of operative Masons; that the persons to whom the text of these manuscripts was recited were a society from whom all but the memory or tradition of its ancient trade had departed, and that certain passages may be held to indicate rather the absorption of a Craft-legend by a social guild than a gradual transition from operative to speculative Masonry by a craft or fraternity composed, in the first instance, of practical builders. It must be admitted that there is something very fascinating about this theory, but the view is not considered tenable by the majority of Masonic students, and finds its adherents mainly among those who seek to avoid the very evident plebian birth of the institution.

But whatever may have been the origin or anterior purpose of this fraternity, matters but little at this time. Whether in its rude and primitive form it fulfilled the merely utilitarian purposes of a trades union, or whether rising to a higher plane it taught the workman that the tools with which he wrought were endowed with a symbolic significance in the shaping of his own life and character, is, after all, of but a trivial inquiry compared with the momentous question, What is Freemasonry to-day? The pre-historic age lies far behind us, never to return; the present is ours, and the future will be, and the record which we make today will itself become history tomorrow.

So let us live and act, that by the Masonic application of the tools our art we shall raise for ourselves an imperishable monument of virtue and morality, and when this living present shall have become the dead and distant past, the student of Masonic lore, standing as I do now, and discoursing to the generations yet unborn, shall find in us an example worthy of all imitation, and derive a new inspiration from the contemplation of the faded but not forgotten glories of an historic past.

- Voice of Masonry.

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