

FREEMASONRY AND THE LEADERS OF VICTORIAN ENGLAND

by
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Freemasonry has long been known in England and Scotland, some of the earliest records of Masonry in Scotland date from 1390 and in England from 1410. The institution was originally a craftsman's organization, however for a craft that was the elite of all those who must work for a living. Those men were the cathedral, temple, and palace builders. The architects and artisans, who were entrusted with the construction of an edifice that would take years to build and thousands of dollars to finance, must have been people who knew well their trade and how to construct. Training and skill were essential. Engineering problems were diverse, difficult, and complex (they are even for today's well educated persons). The architecture was required to be beautiful and satisfying yet on a scale that would suit both the finances and the visions of grandeur of those authorizing and paying the cost. It was both necessary and essential that those directing the work of the artisans, constructors, and architects be in fairly frequent contact with the nobles or high officials of the church so as to obtain instructions and approval as well as to consult about all the myriad problems that had to be resolved.

Nobles and church officials as well as to protect the trade knowledge and skills and to prevent proliferation of artisans, the masons organized themselves into societies. These societies of operatives were the precursors of the later Freemason lodges. Inasmuch as the aristocrats were in contact often with the builders, there came about a desire on the part of both the masons and the aristocrats for an intermingling of men of both classes in the lodges. There was a bit of mystery about the lodges - secret pass words, ceremonies known only to members, and the friendship, care, and concern that each mason appeared to have and practice about his brethren. Mystery attracts men of all areas and eras, no one likes to be an outsider. The Dionysian Rites of ancient Greece and Rome most probably won more converts because of the mysterious rites which were known only to the initiated than because of any desires for truly religious experience.

The operative masons found it advantageous to admit the aristocrats and upper middle class men, the contacts were beneficial from a work contractual basis, and those persons most certainly were not going to enter the labor market in competition for jobs. The aristocrats and upper middle class men found, in the lodges, a readily available source of knowledge of conditions, wants, needs, and desires of the operatives and inasmuch as the meetings were held behind closed doors, the possibilities of public criticism for their associations with the lower classes were greatly reduced. Those who joined the lodges but who were not operatives were given the name of "speculative masons," their participation in the lodges being only at the level of friendship and for the study of moral virtues. Thus it was that Masonic lodges came to contain a curious admixture of artisans and aristocrats, engineers and merchants, architects and tradesmen, and churchmen and laymen. Men who were linked together by the ties of sincere friendship and the desire to protect the interests of each other so long as moral codes and allegiance to country were

not violated. This set the stage for Freemasonry in England and for its stepson across the Atlantic,

Freemasonry in the United States.

Freemasonry in the United States was taken lock, stock, and barrel from its English antecedents. Ceremonies, titles, and constitutions followed those of England (and Scotland). The same kinds of people joined lodges in the new country as did in the motherland. Washington, the rich plantation owner, Benjamin Franklin, the poor boy become rich printer, Paul Revere, the poor apprentice become rich silversmith, and Collins Riddock, an unsung townsman from a small settlement in Virginia[1] were all members of Masonic Lodges.

It is well to note that in England public display of Masonic events and disclosure of Masonic affiliation is very infrequent. In England, one does not see the lapel pins and rings with Masonic emblems that one sees in the United States. The Englishman very zealously guards his privacy and considers his club, his lodge, his private life to be his own affair and cares not at all to have a public spectacle made of it. William Hogarth, the 18th century engraver and print maker, was a well known depicter of English society. His unflattering portrayal of a lodge officer in his 1738 engraving entitled "Night", from the series, "The Four Times of the Day,[2] struck a sour note among the Masons. There resulted much consternation and internal policing of their public activities for there is a dearth of publicity, either favorable or unfavorable, following Hogarth's print.

Despite the lack of public image, Freemasonry in England did not want for leadership. The Grand Master is the top level officer of Freemasonry and is its designated leader. A member of the aristocracy (nobility or royal family) was often found occupying this office. Installed as Grand Master in 1813 was His Royal Highness, Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex, sixth son of King George III. The Duke served as Grand Master until his death in 1843.

Of interest to Virginians is the Duke of Sussex's first marriage. He married in Rome (Italy) on April 4, 1793, Lady Augusta Murray, the second daughter of Lord Dunmore, who was the John Murray, 4th Earl of Dunmore, scourge of Norfolk in 1776 during America's revolutionary war. Prince Augustus had not had the approval of his father prior to the marriage and the marriage greatly displeased his father by what was reported as a Roman Catholic marriage, a patently illegal union for a member of the royal family, a violation of the Royal Family Act of 1782. Although a subsequent marriage ceremony was performed in England in December 1793, Lady Augusta was never recognized by the crown and consequently was never given the title of Duchess. The son born of this union, Sir Augustus D'Este, was permitted to attend his father's funeral but his was the last coach in the procession. The newspaper accounts of the funeral do not show the D'Este was the son of the Duke of Sussex. At the cathedral ceremonies, he was seated with the peerage in a section reserved for "personal friends" of the Duke. Included in this group of friends were Alexander Edward Murray, 6th Earl of Dunmore (the grandson of Norfolk's nemesis). Freemasonry was represented in the person of Thomas Dundas, 2nd Earl of Zetland, who was destined to become the next Grand Master of Masons in England.

A reader of the accounts in "The Times of London" of the death and funeral of the Duke of Sussex had to be diligent to find that he had been a Masonic Official. Near the end of the account, on an inside page, is reported: "By the death of the Duke several offices become vacant: his Royal Highness was President of the Society of Arts, Acting Grand Master of the Order of the Bath, Ranger of St. James and Hyde Parks, High-Steward of Plymouth, Colonel of the Mon. Artillery Company, Grand Master of Freemasons, Governor and Constable of Windsor Castle, and a Knight of the Garter.[3]

Thomas Dundas, 2nd Earl of Zetland, became Grand Master in 1844 and served in that capacity until 1870. Lord Thomas served as Lord Lieutenant of North Riding in Yorkshire. His father had been Lord Lieutenant, Vice-Admiral of Orkney and Zetland, and Lord Mayor of the city of York. The Masonic tradition of the Dundas family carries on into present times. Lawrence Alfred Mervyn Dundas, 3rd Marquis of Zetland, is currently the Junior Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of England and has been a Provincial Grand Master of North and East Yorkshire since 1956. In line with the traditional low key of Masonic publicity, "The Times of London" carried the following item on page 4 of the March 8, 1844, edition: The Earl of Zetland was on Wednesday night elected Grand Master of the Freemasons for the year ensuing. The Marquis of Salisbury was also put in nomination.[4] This was the whole coverage of an event that lasted several days and had several hundreds of Masons in attendance.

Though the Masons avoided publicity for the most part, they were not averse to publicity as it related to the good works they did. "The Times", on January 24, 1844, carried an article about "The Masonic Ball" held to raise funds to aid "aged and deceased masons." The event took place at Freemason's Hall on Great Queen Street in London. The "attendance was more numerous than on any previous occasion," there was dancing for many hours, done with a great amount of spirit, and the refreshments were liberal and elegant. "This festival, as a whole, was excellently conducted, and reflects praise on the stewards and directors of the festivities.[5]

On June 20, that same year, the Masons received some additional favorable reporting in "The Times". Under the heading, "Asylum for Aged and Decayed Masons," the eighth anniversary festival was celebrated in the great hall of Freemason's Tavern. Colonel Anson, Member of Parliament, was chairman for the event and was supported by a hundred members of the craft. There were many visitors and the gallery was filled with ladies. The orchestra, under the direction of Mr. C. Horn, provided the music. Toasts were drunk to Her Majesty the Queen, to Prince Albert, and to the Queen Dowager. The funds raised that evening amounted to 400 pounds sterling which together with funds already on hand, the account totaled over 4,000 pounds sterling. The building, to be used as a home for old and needy Masons, was to be started in the near future. "The evening was passed in the enjoyment of harmony and good fellowship, and it was not until a late hour that the company dispersed.[6]

The Masons, who were pledged to not discuss politics at their lodges, nevertheless permitted the use of their facilities for political purposes. "The Times" reported a meeting of the Anti-League Association at Freemason's Hall Tavern on Great Queen Street. This meeting was of craft and trade union representatives who were against the freedom of action and for the protection of

industry. The Anti-League had solicited support of the trades and the unions were against the Association. The meeting was well attended.[7]

But the reporting was not always such as to be beneficial to the Masons. In April, "The Times" had a short item: "Bishop Philpotts has refused to allow the Freemasons to go in procession and have a masonic service in Axminster Church.[8]

Succeeding the Earl of Zetland as Grand Master in 1870 was one of Masonry's controversial political figures, George Frederick Samuel Robinson, 3rd Earl de Grey. Lord George had been born at 10 Downing Street while his father was Prime Minister. In 1849 at age twenty-two, he was initiated into the Christian Socialist movement. Among the leaders of that movement were Charles Kingsley, F. D. Maurice, and Thomas Hughes. The movement supported the engineers' strike in 1852 in Lancashire and London. Robinson gave £500 to the Working Men's College in his efforts to promote advanced education for the laboring classes. He was the author of a plea for democracy, "The Duty of the Age," but the Publications Committee of the movement ordered the suppression of the manuscript. He was a strong supporter of the volunteer armed forces and was appointed honorary colonel of the First Volunteer Battalion of the Prince of Wales' West Yorkshire Regiment. Active in politics, he was a Member of Parliament for Hull in July 1852 but was unseated on the grounds of treating. In April 1853 he was elected a Member of Parliament from Huddersfield and held his seat for four years and, in 1857, was returned without opposition. In 1859, upon the death of his father, he assumed the title and occupied his seat in the House of Lords.

In Palmerston's administration, he was Under-Secretary of War in 1859 and on April 13, 1863, was appointed Secretary of War with a seat in the Cabinet and was admitted to the Privy Council. He succeeded Sir Charles Wood as head of the Indian Office in 1866 and under Prime Minister Gladstone in 1868 became President of the Council. He was selected in 1871 to head up the American/British commission to settle the claims resulting from the Civil War in the United States. The primary claims came from the action of United States and Confederate naval vessels upon British commercial ships. For his exceptionally fine work on the commission, he was honored by the Queen by being created Marquis of Ripon. During March 1873 he was appointed Lord Lieutenant of North Fiding. In August of that same year he resigned his cabinet post giving as his reason "urgent private affairs." "The Dictionary of National Biography" provides an explanation:

“Hitherto he had been a zealous Freemason, and on 23 April 1870 had become Grand Master of the Freemasons in England. That office he resigned without explanation in August 1874. Next month, on 7 September, he was received into the Roman catholic communion at the Brompton Orator. The step, which caused widespread astonishment, was the fruit of anxious thought.”[9]

It should be noted that under the law of the Roman Catholic Church, no Roman Catholic was permitted to be a member of the Masonic fraternity. Ripon's acceptance of that faith quite automatically meant that he must sever all associations with the fraternity.

On Gladstone's return to power in 1880, Ripon once again became quite active in public life. At a testimonial dinner at the Savoy Hotel given him in November 1908, about a year before his death, in his farewell address to his political friends he said, "I started at a high level of radicalism. I am a radical still.[10] During the first half of a long and active career in political life, Ripon had been a Freemason and it was only subsequent to his change in religion that he resigned his membership.

The royal family was again in the front ranks of British Freemasonry upon the resignation of the Marquis of Ripon as Grand Master in 1874. His Royal Highness Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, the eldest son of Queen Victoria, was installed as Grand Master in 1874 and served in that capacity until 1901. (In 1901, he became Edward VII, King of England.) In that year, His Royal Highness Arthur, Duke of Connaught and Strathearn, the third son of Queen Victoria, was installed as Grand Master and served until 1939.

Influence of Masons upon the leadership of England was indirect as well as direct. Dugald Stewart (1753-1828), a member of Lodge Canongate Kilwinning, was a well beloved and respected professor at the University of Edinburgh. A geometrician of exceptional ability, he was a professor of mathematics and also a professor of moral philosophy at the University. Among his pupils were many who rose to eminence in the British government and in influential intellectual circles. One, who during his undergraduate days had lived at Stewart's home, was Lord Palmerston, a future Prime Minister. Lord John Russell, Sir Walter Scott, and James Mill were counted among his students. Dugald Stewart was a close friend of the well known Scottish poet, Robert Burns, who was an active Freemason in Lodge St. David (renamed later, Lodge St. James) at Tarbolton.

Of the same family as Burns was Sir Alexander Burnes (1805-1841). Sir Alexander was Grand Master of Scottish Freemasons in India and Grand Preceptor (Knights Templar) of Southern Asia. He had distinguished himself by exceptional military skill in the India Department of the Royal Army, was knighted, and promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in 1839. A very promising career was suddenly cut short when he, his brother, and a subaltern, who were on a military assignment in Afghanistan, were set upon by a mob and killed on November 2, 1841.

The usual non-affiliate of Masonry does not make any connection between Freemasonry and its many appendant organizations. The Commandery of Knights Templar is a semi-military organization, membership in which has a prerequisite membership in some Masonic lodge. The Knights Templar were active in England, Scotland, and Ireland. The Duke of Sussex (who was also England's Grand Master of Masons) was the Grand Prior of Knights Templar in England. The Grand Prior for Ireland was Augustus Frederick (family name - Fitzgerald), 3rd Duke of Leinster. The Duke was a Privy Councilor, Lord Lieutenant of County Kildare, and also Grand Master of Masons in Ireland. His third son, Otho Augustus, was Member of Parliament for County Kildare from 1865 to 1874, Treasurer of the Household to Her Majesty Queen Victoria in 1866, Comptroller of the Household for 1866-1874, and a Gentlemen of the Bed Chamber to His Excellency the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland.

John George Lambton, 1st Earl of Durham, was Grand Prior of Scotland. The Earl of Durham was Ambassador at the Court of the Czar in St. Petersburg, Lord Privy Seal (1820-1833), Governor General of British North America, High-Steward of Hull, and a Privy Councilor. A Whig in House of Commons, he was a Member of Parliament from County Durham in 1813 and continued in Commons until elevated to the peerage in 1828. With Lord John Russell, Sir James Graham, and Lord Duncannon, he was given the task by Lord Grey (the Prime Minister) of preparing the first Reform Bill. He was a great speaker and debater in Parliament and at public events and a person of boundless energy and great high spirit. Counteracting his good qualities was an overwhelming vanity, irritable temper, a complete lack of tact, and poor health. His poor health carried him away at the early age of forty-eight.

The Grand Master of all Knights Templar from 1838 to 1840 was a very colorful Admiral of the Royal Navy, Sir William Sidney Smith (1764-1840). Sir William was famous for his defense in 1799 of St. Jean d'Acre against the forces of Napoleon Bonaparte which brought to him a vote of thanks from Parliament, an annuity of 1,000 pounds sterling, and a permanent place in the annals of British Naval heroes. He had served in the House of Commons as a Member of Parliament for Rochester. Upon his retirement from active naval service, he devoted himself full-time to the Knights Templar and lived most of the time in Paris.

With the passing away of Admiral Smith, the next Grand Master of the Knights Templar, His Grace, George Augustus Frederick John, 6th Duke of Atholl, was installed with a great show of pomp in the Music Hall in Edinburgh on March 11, 1846.

The Friendly Societies in England came into being early in the 18th century and grew by leaps and bounds in the 19th. From only a few societies in the early 1700's with several thousand members, the Poor Law returns of 1803 showed better than 9,550 organizations and over 700,000 members. By 1850 the membership was in the millions. In the latter 1800's the societies admitted women and by 1924 there were over 30,000 societies and a membership total of more than 32,000,000.

The Friendly Societies were benevolent societies for the protection of workers in time of ill health and old age. They paid death benefits, burial expenses, and made payments to widows and orphans. They were self-sustaining annuity type companies. They were not appendant bodies to Freemasonry nor was Masonic membership in anyway a requisite. Freemason lodges were not benevolent and protective societies and had no such payments as were made by the Friendlies. P. Gosden informs us:

‘An article in the "Oddfellows' Magazine" for 1829 stated that "The Order of Oddfellows was originally instituted on Masonic principles, the object of which is to cement more firmly the bonds of social feeling and sympathetic intercourse between man and man." The masons appeared to do two things, to enjoy a fair measure of prosperity and to stick together, surrounding their activities and contacts with a good deal of secrecy’.[11]

He adds further: "There was in fact a close connection with the masons in the early years of the Manchester Unity. The Grand Committee of the Unity on 15 March 1815, resolved 'that in

consequence of information received from the Masonic Grand Lodge, John Wood never be admitted into our Order.' On 25 September 1816, the Committee recorded that they had been in touch with the masons concerning one of the brethren and had agreed that he was not worthy of membership in any society." [12]

The Friendly Societies included in their ranks many organizations that are well known today, even in the United States. The greatest in Victorian England was the Independent Order of Oddfellows with the Ancient Order of Foresters following closely behind. Others included orders named Order of Druids, Loyal Order of Ancient Shepherds, Royal Standard, and Hearts of Oak. All to some extent aped the Freemason lodges in that they had secret passwords, grips, signs, and rituals.

Dorothy Lipson in her history of Freemasonry says, "Although the fraternity tended to emphasize the brotherhood of masons and kings, it was not equality they were extolling. Their goal was a Masonic meritocracy." [13]

Reflecting upon the moral straight jacket into which Victorians endeavored to publicly lace themselves, a comment by Lipson provides some interesting insights as to why membership in the fraternity was sought by many middle class and upper class men. She remarks:

"There is another dimension of Freemasonry that should be only mentioned here, and then not quite forgotten. Masonry was an expression of the "play element" . . ., which Johan Huizinga has described as a distinct and fundamental function of life in all societies. Ultimately incapable of exact definition, play is a free and voluntary activity, which Hunzinger suggests, adorns life because of its "expressive value" and its "spiritual and social associations." In play people create "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart": play proceeds by its own regular duties, and it "promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world." Ideas of "magic, litany, sacrament, and mystery" are all rooted in play . . . (I)t may appear that these characteristics also define Masonry: a game, most seriously and solemnly played by most of its members, until or unless the social stakes of Masonic membership became too high and spoiled the fun, or other uses of the fraternity made it mundane." [14]

During the period 1826-1838 there was a very strong period of anti-masonic feeling in the United States. The disappearance and assumed murder of a man, who was in the process of printing and offering for sale to the public a complete digest of all the secrets, ritual, and philosophies of the Freemasons, triggered a great hue and cry of disapprobation for Masonic societies, especially in the north eastern states.

Lorman Ratner speaking of anti-masonry says:

"Though Americans of the late 1790's experienced what seems to be the kind of extreme anxiety that so often provides fertile ground on which movements aimed at countering supposed subversion grow, no such movement took root. One may conclude from this that although a high level of anxiety may increase the likelihood of a society's being attracted to simplistic

explanations of and solutions for the problems of the time, such a development is not automatic. The crusade apparently must be sparked by some dramatic event or events to capture public attention. It must be well directed, and its leaders must offer some plausible grounds for the public to accept crusade as a cure-all. Finally the crusaders must have a sufficient organization to channel toward some specific objectives the excitement of those their cause attracts. The Antimasons of the 1790's had an anxious people to whom they could appeal. So, too, did the Antimasons of the 1820's. But unlike their eighteenth-century predecessors, that later group succeeded in promoting a crusade against the Fraternity. Anxiety appears to have been a prerequisite for an anti-masonic crusade but not the only, or perhaps even the primary, cause of it."[15]

The anti-masonic movement in the United States began dying in 1828, only two years after its commencement. It did not last beyond 1838, though in some localities it was active until then.

A review of British documents and newspapers of the same period - 1826 to 1838 - shows no comparable movement against the Freemasons in England. Surprisingly enough, the correspondents from America for "The Times of London" do not even mention the political discussions and squabbles brought about by the Anti-Mason Party in America. One can but speculate as to why. Most probably, the British were laughing at their crude and uncouth cousins in America for their ungentlemanly treatment of William Morgan (the murdered man), the alleged revealer of Masonic secrets. After all, Masonic exposures had been available at book shops in London and elsewhere in Great Britain for half a century. There was no need for anyone to be upset, now, about a long past 'fait accompli'.

Asa Briggs says of the Victorian men:

“Amid the broad ranks of "the middle classes," independent small men were the dominant group, not only in retailing, but in commerce and manufacturing. The virtues they prized were those to be acclaimed by Samuel Smiles - self-help, perseverance, duty, thrift, and character. They conceived of self-dependence not only as a ladder to individual success but as the mainspring of social improvement. All men could profit from it."[16]

The mason of the Victorian period would nod affirmatively to those words for they basically were the teachings of his fraternity. His ritual spoke of brotherly love and truth. The cardinal virtues - temperance, fortitude, justice, and prudence - were extolled at his meetings. The rewards of well spent time, industriousness, and improvement of the mind were often brought to his attention and strongly recommended.

Whether the strong moral inclinations of many of the leaders of Victorian England were a result of the teachings of Freemasonry with a burgeoning militant Christianity is impossible to say. Certainly a great many of the leaders were not Masons, some sects even forbade membership in the fraternity. However, the Mason could revel in the knowledge that his organization was in tune with the temper of the times.

NOTES:

- [1] William Moseley Brown, "Freemasonry in Virginia" (1733-1936), (Richmond, Va.: Masonic Home Press, 1936), picture opposite p. 28.
- [2] William Hogarth, "Night," in "Engravings by Hogarth", edited by Sean Shesgren, (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), plate 45.
- [3] News article in "Times of London", edition of 22 April 1843, p. 4, col. 5.
- [4] News article in "Times of London", edition of 8 March 1844, p. 4, col. 3.
- [5] News article in "Times of London", edition of 24 January 1844, p. 4, col. 5.
- [6] News article in "Times of London", edition of 20 June 1844, p. 5, col. 2.
- [7] News article in "Times of London", edition of 5 March 1844, p. 6, col. 4.
- [8] News article in "Times of London", edition of 24 April 1844, p. 2, col. 4.
- [9] The Dictionary of National Biography", Sir Sidney Lee, ed., (London: Oxford University Press, 1912, Reprint edition 1939), (Supplement, Vol 1), p. 218.
- [10] "DNB", (Supplement, Vol 1), p. 218.
- [11] P. H. J. H. Gosden, "The Friendly Societies in England" 1815-1875, (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1961), p. 127.
- [12] "Friendly Societies", p. 127-28.
- [13] Dorothy Ann Lipson, "Freemasonry in Federalist Connecticut", (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 41.

- [14] "Freemasonry in Federalist Connecticut", p. 11.
- [15] Lorman Ratner, "Antimasonry: The Crusade and the Party", (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 7.
- [16] Asa Briggs, "Victorian People: A reassessment of persons and themes, 1851-67", (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, c. 1955, revised edition 1972), p. 19.

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