

Masonic Encyclopedias

The Source Of Masonic Knowledge

By Allen E. Roberts

Accurate information about Freemasonry is absolutely essential to anyone seriously interested in the subject. The MSA thanks Allen E. Roberts, a well-known Masonic author, for preparing this Short Talk on the history of Masonic encyclopedias and the tremendous effort required in their preparation.

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he Masonic Service Association recognized the need for a current Masonic encyclopedia in 1925. Frederick W. Hamilton, Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, was engaged as the Editor-in-chief for the project. But the job was never completed.

It didn't take long for all concerned to realize compiling an encyclopedia isn't an every day task. The vast amount of knowledge required about an uncountable number of topics is stupendous. It takes a special breed of writer, historian and, literally, slave to bring such a project to completion.

This job is even more difficult where Freemasonry is concerned. The Craft's history goes back to antiquity. There are millions of facts, legends and myths floating around. Thousands of books and an uncountable number of articles have been written on or about Freemasonry. Most can be charitably termed imaginative. An encyclopedia is no place for fiction, fabrications, fanciful prose, poetry and unsubstantiated "facts."

This is what far too many of the histories, articles, speeches and early reference books of the Craft contained.

Then came encyclopedias, or what purported to be encyclopedias.

About 1870 Robert Macoy (1816-1895) published A General History, Cyclopedia, and Dictionary of Freemasonry. It served its purpose for a time and went through several editions.

The history of the longest active and best known American Masonic encyclopedia is indeed interesting. Albert G. Mackey (1807-1881) and Moss & Co. held the first copyrights of 1873 and 1878. Subsequent copyrights were held by L.H. Everts & Co. (1884-1906); The Masonic

History Company (1909-1946); Macoy Publishing & Masonic Supply Co., Inc., bought the latter company and with it its copyrights. Macoy continued to reprint Mackey's revised work.

In 1929 a "New Edition – revised and Enlarged" of Mackey's work received a copyright. The revising and enlarging was done by Robert I. Clegg, a professional reviser of several works of history. His able helpers were William J. Hughan and Edward L. Hawkins, both members of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076, London, England.

The work was again "Revised and Enlarged" (for the last time) and a new copyright obtained in 1946. The reviser was Harry Leroy Haywood.

Mackey, in his original preface, said he had found "the character of the Institution was elevated in every one's opinion just in proportion to the amount of knowledge that he had acquired of its symbolism, philosophy, and history." Books were expensive so he wanted to produce one book that would serve the purpose of many. Consequently Mackey furnished the Masonic world with an encyclopedia. And he made it clear that he had written every word himself.

Silas Shepherd said Mackey had succeeded: "If a Mason would have one book on Masonry, this would be the most useful one to choose." Other reviewers and critics agreed. But as the years went by the compliments decreased. Clegg's revisions eased the criticism for a time, but again objections surfaced. The next revision didn't fare well. Critics universally condemned it. Noted one critic: "The less said about Volume III...the better."

E.L. Hawkins' A Concise Cyclopedia of Freemasonry was published in London, England, in 1908. Lewis B. Blakewood liked it, but he and others felt the subject matter was too limited.

Arthur Edward Waite (1857-1942) published in London what is now called the New Encyclopedia of Freemasonry. He was one of the leading occultists of his day, and this came through in his work. The Masonic critics were unanimous in condemning it. Today it can be purchased on the remainder market at an absurdly high price.

The Freemasons' Pocket Reference Book by Fred L. Pick and G. Norman Knight isn't an encyclopedia, but it's close. It was first published in 1953. Revisions were made with each edition. In 1966 Pick died and Frederick Smyth was called on to take his place. This little book is a valuable addition to the American Mason's library as well as it is for our English Brethren.

Robert Freke Gould's mammoth The History of Freemasonry is an indispensable companion for any encyclopedia. It expands on the many facets of the Craft that an encyclopedia, of necessity, can merely touch upon. It was published in three volumes between 1882 and 1887. The last revision was made by Herbert Poole and contained four volumes.

Also not an encyclopedia, but certainly mandatory for the Masonic writer, author, historian and researcher is 10,000 Famous Freemasons. This four volume publication was the creation of William R. Denslow and published originally in the late 1950s and early 60s by the Missouri Lodge of Research. It is now published by Macoy. Denslow's work, as always, has saved many

hours in writing this story. Sad to say, many writers quote Denslow verbatim and never mention within their text what they have done. Denslow's work ends in 1961 and desperately needs to be updated.

In the late 1940s Vee Hansen, the new owner of Macoy Publishing & Masonic Supply Co., wanted to publish an excellent Masonic encyclopedia. The author for such a project was allimportant, so she turned to Henry Wilson Coil, a California Freemason and lawyer. He agreed to use his vast knowledge of Freemasonry and tackle the job. He also enlisted the aid of three other Masons who had written extensively about the Craft. William Moseley Brown of Virginia, Harold Van Buren Voorhis of New Jersey, and William Leon Cummings of New York agreed to work with Coil.

Early in 1961 Macoy proudly made COIL'S MASONIC ENCYCLOPEDIA available to the Masonic world. It was acclaimed immediately by Masonic historians, writers, researchers and individuals. Today, almost 30 years later, it is still considered the best by far of any Masonic encyclopedia.

Harry Carr reviewed Coil's work for the Transactions of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge for 1961. Carr was never overly-generous in his praise of other authors, however, in this encyclopedia he liked what he found. Carr said the make-up of COIL'S MASONIC ENCYCLOPEDIA contained "virtues. . .we are fully entitled to expect in a well-produced modern book."

Carr continued: "The book claims one characteristic which would distinguish it from some of its predecessors. After a brief reference to'. . .the ancient myths and mysteries. . .' which have always featured over-strongly in Masonic history, Bro. Coil says: 'A major endeavor of the present work has been to refrain from telling too much, that is, more than is known to be true. A great deal that has been written about Freemasonry never happened. . .'

"It must be agreed that Bro. Coil has made a wholly praiseworthy effort to avoid this pitfall. Indeed, this is one of the rare cases in which it may be said that occasionally the author errs on the side of caution, and that is perhaps a result of his legal training."

Carr closed his review by writing: "I have found the work well-written, in a pleasantly informal style, full of well-presented detail, and covering an enormous range of subjects in a workmanlike and interesting fashion."

With this base to work from, and after a year of contemplation, I agreed to revise Coil's work of 30 years ago.

Change is all around us. Even as we read this brief item thousands of changes have taken place. Communism, for example, when Coil's work was published controlled much of what had once been a free world. This situation has changed dramatically within the past months. The beneficiaries are those who love freedom, and especially those Freemasons who believe in the Brotherhood of Man under the Fatherhood of God.

Coil enlisted the aid of three men; I'm pleading for assistance from hundreds of Freemasons. Each of us knows something no one else knows. By pooling our knowledge we can build on Coil's foundation and produce a volume that will stand the test of time.

Freemasonry deserves the best we have to offer.

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We at MSA strongly support the project of revising Coil 's Masonic Encyclopedia and urge all Freemasons to encourage and provide input to Allen Roberts.

Suggestions for change may be sent to Allen E. Roberts,

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