

# Sins of Our Masonic Fathers

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*This STB by Bro. Hamill, Librarian and curator, United Grand Lodge of England, is from his paper (of the same name) published in ARS Quartuor Coronatorum, Vol 101, 1988 The paper talks about the situation of Freemasonry in England and how it got that way. As you read the STB, ask yourself "Is he not also describing Freemasonry in the United States?." – Editor*

## ***Conspiracy Theory***

If one accepts the thesis of Bro. Alec Mellor (Our Separated Brethren – the Freemasons, London 1964) Freemasonry first entered the realms of conspiracy theory with the publication of the first Papal Bull in 1738. Brother Mellor believes that the Bull was issued not only because of religious objections to Freemasonry by the Papacy but also because of fears of the supposed political aspirations of continental Freemasonry. Certainly it came to the forefront of conspiracy theory with the works of two non-masons, the Abbe Barruel (Memoires pour servir a l'histoire du Jacobinisme, London 1797-8) and John Robison (Proofs of a conspiracy against all the Religions and governments of Europe carried on in the secret meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati and Reading Societies, Edinburgh 1797) both of which claimed that the French Revolution had its origins and much of its support in lodges under the then regular Grand Orient of France.

So far no problem, but one arose when over-enthusiastic masonic writers failed to distinguish between the masonic precepts of equality and fraternalism and the political revolutionary ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality, another example of confusing similarities with actual links. That some of those who were involved in the French Revolution, the American War of Independence and the South American liberation movements of the early nineteenth century were Freemasons is undeniable. To move from that position to state that because Freemasons were involved, the events were masonic actions or masonically inspired actions is nonsense and is also to ignore the equally well established fact that in all those events there were Freemasons on both sides.

The actions of those writers only gave fuel to those paranoid critics of Freemasonry who revel in the conspiracy theory that Freemasonry is a plot for world domination, perhaps the nastiest manifestation of which is the notorious forgery The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion

which claims to be an exposure of masonic documents showing that Freemasonry is a Judeo-masonic conspiracy for world domination, the reverberations from which are still echoing today (see Stephen Knight's *Jack the Ripper: the final solution*).

### ***The Public Face***

In dealing with the public face of Freemasonry we must remember that we are not dealing with realities but with received impressions. There is a wide spectrum of attitudes to Freemasonry. At one end are the members who know what Freemasonry is and what its purposes are. At the other end are Freemasonry's intractable critics whose minds are closed and who will never be persuaded that there is another opinion than their own, let alone that their views might be wrong. Between these two ends of the spectrum is the great mass of the non-masonic public, some of whom, through family connections or friendships, will be favorably disposed; others of whom, from reading anti-masonic works, will be ill-disposed; and the great majority for whom Freemasonry has no meaning or interest until the media force the subject before their eyes.

As the majority of the British public do not read books the media have had a great deal of power in forming public attitudes towards Freemasonry. Until 1984, when Grand Lodge altered its traditional policy of no comment to one of limited comment and the correction of factual errors, the power of the media in forming public attitudes was immense. Regrettably, the less scrupulous in the profession of journalism over the last twenty or so years realized the power that they possessed, in particular that, provided they observed the laws of libel and defamation, they could say whatever they liked about Freemasonry without any fear of a challenge from masonic authority.

It can be argued that in the climate of the 1940s to 1960s the policy of 'no comment' on specific issues (e.g. the attempt to debate Freemasonry in the Church of England in 1951) and the refusal to cooperate in programs concerned with Freemasonry (e.g. the 1960s BBC Television exposure of Freemasonry) was effective in that it turned those events into a 'ten day wonder' soon forgotten by the public. Indeed, there are those who would argue that unofficial answers did potentially more harm than the lack of official comment (e.g. the anonymous answer to Hannah's *Darkness Visible*, London 1951, *Vindex's Light Invisible*, London 1952). As has already been stated, however, the official policy, combined with a clamp-down on general masonic information and the lack of a public masonic presence were not helpful in that they deprived the general public of sound, authoritative general information against which to measure what they learnt from the media.

In the last two decades the world has radically changed. Old virtues have been challenged, with the media leading the challenge. A polite 'no comment' and a failure to correct or comment upon factual errors combined with a desire for privacy are now taken as evidence that allegations are true and that there is something to hide-the 'no smoke without fire' reaction. It was partly a realization that this change had taken place and partly a growing awareness that public

ignorance was beginning to affect brethren in their employment that caused Grand Lodge to reconsider its traditional policies. Despite the need for change, and the effects that change is already beginning to have, there are still those in the Craft who would prefer to return to the pre-1984 position. I would argue that there is no going back and that if the policy was reversed it would be a certain way of diminishing the Craft and beginning its gradual decline to extinction. In the modern world any organization, no matter how noble or impartial it be, must take notice of public attitudes towards it if it wishes to survive in any strength.

### ***The Current Problems***

The current problems can be broken down into three main areas: accusations of secrecy; a misunderstanding of the relationship between Freemasonry and religion; insinuations of corruption, malpractice, etc. through misuse of membership by Freemasons. As I hope this paper has shown, the principal reason for those problems having taken root is ignorance of the principles and practices of Freemasonry on the part of the general public. In the area of religion there have always been individuals within the various denominations of the Christian Church who have chosen to misinterpret the rituals of Freemasonry and read into them a theology which is not and never has been present and to confuse reverence for God and the offering of prayers with liturgical worship. Accusations of secrecy are not new in the sense that, from the earliest days, there has been a healthy public curiosity concerning masonic ritual. What is relatively new is the concept of Freemasonry as a secret society which, to the best of my knowledge, in England is very much a post-1800 idea, despite the deliberate exclusion of Freemasonry from the terms of the Unlawful Societies Act of 1799. Indeed, the suggestion that Freemasons are plotting in secret cabals in England is very much a twentieth century idea, and in any forceful way a post-World War II concept. Similarly the suggestion of Freemasonry being a set of men totally bound to aiding each other regardless of the laws of God and man is very much of the present day and, to my mind, has only come about because of public ignorance of the facts. It seems significant that when Freemasonry was a highly visible part of English life such suggestions did not take root.

That said, we are left with the question of why, in the 1980s, Freemasonry has come under what appear to many to be concerted attacks from a number of sources? To suggest that it is all part of a plot of either the political left or right is to play the conspiracy theory game. I would suggest that it is a result of an unhappy coincidence of general dissatisfaction within society; of anti-establishment views-Freemasonry being considered as a bulwark of the establishment; of a search for a whipping boy for the ills of modern society fostered by the pre-1984 policy of not answering criticism; and the public's lack of knowledge of Freemasonry.

## ***Conclusion***

Have the sins of our masonic fathers been visited upon us? I think that the answer must be yes. By following a policy of intense privacy and therefore separating and obscuring the Craft from the society in which it exists Grand Lodge, acting in what was then thought to be the best interests of the Craft, cleared the ground but did not tend it and allowed the rank weeds of anti-masonic writers to gain a firm hold in the public consciousness. In not countering criticism it allowed the falsehoods to become rooted as uncontested facts in the minds of the general public. Grand Lodge was not alone in this, however, and much can be laid at the door of those masonic writers who gave free rein to their imaginations and, in some cases, produced work diametrically opposed to the general understanding of what Freemasonry is. Nor is the Craft in general free from blame. Individual members, by being secretive about their membership and by refusing to discuss Freemasonry in even the most general terms with their families and friends, greatly helped to create the climate in which the critics and enemies of Freemasonry were able to persuade an ill-equipped public that Freemasonry was something to be feared and not to be trusted.

It is to be hoped that by reversing its traditional policy in 1984 Grand Lodge will be able to stem the process and gradually return us to those days when Freemasonry was an acknowledged part of everyday life and was seen as an institution for the good of society.

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