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978-1-108-04531-5 - The History of Free Masonry: With an Account of the Grand Lodge of Scotland from its Institution in 1736 to the Present Time

David Brewster

Excerpt

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THE
H I S T O R Y
OF
FREE M A S O N R Y.

WHEN men are in a state of barbarity, and are scattered over the surface of a country in small and independent tribes, their wants are as small in magnitude, as they are few in number. It is in the power, therefore, of every individual, to perform, for himself and his family, every work of labour which necessity or comfort requires; and while, at one time, he equips himself for the chace or the combat, at another, he is rearing a habitation for his offspring, or hollowing his canoe to surmount the dangers of the sea. But as soon as these tribes associate together, for the purposes of mutual protection and comfort, civilization advances apace; and,
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in the same proportion, the wants and desires of the community increase. In order to gratify these, the ingenuity of individuals is called forth; and those, who, from inability or indolence, cannot satisfy their own wants, will immediately resort to the superior skill of their neighbours. Those members of the community, who can execute their work with the greatest elegance and celerity, will be most frequently employed; and, from this circumstance, combined with the principle of emulation, and other causes, that distinction of professions will arise, which is found only among nations considerably advanced in civilization and refinement.

ONE of the first objects of man, in a rude state, is to screen himself and his family from the heat of the tropic sun, from the inclemency of the polar regions, or from the sudden changes of more temperate climates. If he has arrived at such a degree of improvement, as to live under the dominion of a superior, and under the influence of religious belief, the palace of his King, and the temple of his Gods, will be reared in the most magnificent stile, which his skill can devise, and his industry accomplish*, and decked with those false ornaments, which naturally catch the eye of unpolished men. From that principle, which impels the lower orders to imitate the magnificence

* Robertson's America, vol. 2. page 316.

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magnificence and splendour of their superiors, a foundation will be laid for improvement in the art of building; and it is extremely probable, from the circumstances, which have been mentioned, as well as from others, which the slightest reflection will suggest, that architecture will be the first profession, to which men will exclusively devote their attention; and for which they will be trained by an established course of preparatory education.

NOR is it from this ground only, that Masonry derives its superiority as a separate profession. While many other arts administer to our luxury and pride, and gratify only those temporary wants and unnatural desires which refinement has rendered necessary, the art of building can lay claim to a higher object. The undertakings of the architect, not only furnish us with elegant and comfortable accommodation from the inclemency of the seasons, from the rapacity of wild beasts, and the still more dangerous rapacity of man; they contribute also to the ornament and glory of nations, and it is to them that we are indebted for those fortresses of strength, which defend us from the inroads of surrounding enemies. Nor can the works of the architect be ranked among those objects which furnish amusement and accommodation for a few years, or at most during the short term of human life; they descend unimpaired from generation to generation; they

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acquire additional grandeur and value from an increase of age; and are the only specimens of human labour which, in some measure, survive the revolutions of kingdoms, and the waste of time. The splendid remains of Egyptian, Grecian, and Roman architecture, which, in every age, have attracted the attention of the learned, and excited the astonishment of the vulgar, are standing monuments of the ingenuity and power of man; and, in ages yet to come, they will reflect a dignity on the art of building, to which no other profession can arrogate the slightest claim.

BUT there is still another consideration, which entitles architecture to a decided pre-eminence among the other arts. It is itself the parent of many separate professions; and requires a combination of talents, and an extent of knowledge, for which other professions have not the smallest occasion. An acquaintance with the sciences of geometry, and mechanical philosophy, with the arts of sculpture and design, and other abstruse and elegant branches of knowledge, are indispensable requisites in the education of an architect; and raise his art to a vast height above those professions, which practice alone can render familiar, and which consist in the mere exertion of muscular force. It appears, then, from these considerations, that there is some foundation, in the very nature of architecture, for those
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extraordinary privileges, to which Masons have always laid claim, and which they have almost always possessed---privileges, which no other artists could have confidence to ask, or liberty to enjoy ; and there appears to be some foundation for that ancient and respectable order of Free Masons, whose origin we are now to investigate, and whose progress we are soon to detail.

BUT, that we may be enabled to discover Free Masonry under those various forms, which it has assumed in different countries, and at different times, before it received the name which it now bears, it will be necessary to give a short description of the nature of this institution, without developing those mysteries, or revealing those ceremonial observances which are known only to the brethren of the order.

FREE MASONRY is an ancient and respectable institution, embracing individuals of every nation, of every religion, and of every condition in life. Wealth, power, and talents are not necessary to the person of a Free Mason. An unblemished character, and a virtuous conduct, are the only qualifications which are requisite for admission into the Order. In order to confirm this institution, and attain the ends for which it was originally formed, every candidate must come under a solemn engagement never to divulge the mysteries and ceremonies of the Order, nor communicate to
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the uninitiated, those important precepts, with which he may be entrusted; and those proceedings and plans, in which the Fraternity may be engaged. After the candidate has undergone the necessary ceremonies, and received the usual instructions, appropriate words, and significant signs are imparted to him, that he may be enabled to distinguish his Brethren of the Order from the uninitiated public; and convince others that he is entitled to the privileges of a Brother, should he be visited by distress or want, in a distant land. If the newly admitted member be found qualified for a higher degree, he is promoted, after due intervals of probation, till he has received that Masonic knowledge, which enables him to hold the highest offices of trust, to which the Fraternity can raise its members. In all ages, it has been the object of Free Masonry, not only to inform the minds of its members, by instructing them in the sciences and useful arts, but to better their hearts by enforcing the precepts of religion and morality. In the course of the ceremonies of initiation, brotherly love, loyalty, and other virtues, are inculcated in hieroglyphic symbols; and the candidate is often reminded, that there is an eye above which observeth the workings of his heart, and is ever fixed upon the thoughts and the actions of men. At regular and appointed seasons, convivial meetings of the Fraternity are held in lodges constructed for this purpose: Temperance, harmony,

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ny, and joy, characterise these mixed assemblies. All distinctions of rank seem to be laid aside, all differences in religious and political sentiments are forgotten; and those petty quarrels which disturb the quiet of private life, cease to agitate the mind. Every one strives to give happiness to his brother; and men seem to recollect, for once, that they are sprung from the same origin, that they are possessed of the same nature and are destined for the same end.

SUCH are the general features of an institution, which has of late produced so great division in the sentiments of the learned, respecting its origin and tendency. While a certain class of men*, a little over-anxious for the dignity of their order, have represented it as coeval with the world; others, influenced by an opposite motive, have maintained it to be the invention of English Jesuits, to promote the views of that intriguing and dangerous association †. Some philosophers, among whom we may reckon the celebrated Chevalier Ramsay, have laboured to prove, that Free Masonry arose during the Crusades; that it was a secondary order of chivalry; that its forms originated

* Anderson's History and Constitutions of Free Masonry, p. 1. Desagulier's Constitutions, p. 1. Smith's Use and Abuse of Free Masonry, p. 27. Preston's Illustrations of Masonry, p. 6. 10th edition.

† Manuscript of Bode of Germany, in the possession of M Mounier.

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ginated from that warlike institution; and were adapted to the peaceful habits of scientific men* Mr Clinch† has attempted, with considerable ingenuity and learning, to deduce its origin from the institution of Pythagoras. M. Barruel‡ supposes, that it is a continuation of the Templars; while others, with a degree of audacity and malice, rarely to be found in the character of ingenuous men, have imputed the origin of Free Masonry to secret associations, averse to the interests of true government, and pursuing the villainous and chimerical project of levelling the distinctions of society, and freeing the human mind from the sacred obligations of morality and religion.

WITHOUT adopting any of these untenable opinions, or attempting to discover the precise period when Free Masonry arose, it may be sufficient to show, that it can justly lay claim to an early origin, and that it has existed from that period to the present day, under different forms, and different appellations||. In the execution of
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* Leyden's Preliminary Dissertation to the Complaynt of Scotland, p. 67, 71.

† Anthologia Hibernica, for January, March, April, and June 1794.

‡ Memoirs of Jacobinism, vol. 2. p. 377, 378, &c.

|| M. Mounier observes, that if the order of Free Masons existed among the ancients, it would have been mentioned by contemporary

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of this task, the candid enquirer will be satisfied with strong and numerous resemblances, as the nature of the subject excludes the possibility of rigid demonstration. Every human institution is subject to great and numerous variations; the different aspects under which they appear, and the principles by which they are regulated, depend upon the progress of civilization, upon the nature of the government by which they are protected, and on the peculiar opinions and habits of their members. If, therefore, in comparing Free Masonry with other ancient associations,

contemporary authors. This argument, however, for the recency of their origin, is far from being conclusive. A secret association unconnected with national affairs, would seldom come under the consideration of contemporary writers, who could only tell their readers that such an association existed. They who believe that the Eleusinian mysteries were those of Free Masonry, under a different appellation, will deny the premises from which Mounier's conclusion is drawn. These mysteries existed in the eighth century of the Christian æra, and have been mentioned by contemporary authors, on account of their connection with the history of the times, and the religion of their country. From the eighth century, to the revival of learning in Europe, Free Masonry must have been in a very languishing condition, and could not engage the attention of writers, when but few lodges, and still fewer authors existed. The minds of men were then bent upon less noble pursuits. Science and common sense were nowhere to be found; and those amiable propensities of the heart, upon which Free Masonry is founded, were smothered under that debasing superstition, which characterised those ages of ignorance and iniquity.

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tions, we should find it coincide with them in every circumstance, there would be strong reasons for suspecting, that the imagination of the writer had counterfeited resemblances when destitute of authentic information; or that the Order had adopted the rites and ceremonies of antiquity, to cloak the recency of their origin, to command the veneration, and excite the notice of the public. Against Free Masonry, however, this charge cannot be preferred: We shall have occasion to consider it when connected with the idolatry of the heathens, when devoted to the church of Rome, and when flourishing under the milder influence of the reformed religion.

As men in the early ages of society, were destitute of those methods of diffusing knowledge which we now enjoy, and even of those which were used in Greece and Rome, when the art of printing was unknown; the few discoveries in art and science which were then made, must have been confined to a small number of individuals. In these ages, the pursuit of science must have been a secondary consideration, and those who did venture to explore the untrodden regions of knowledge, would overlook those unsubstantial speculations, which gratify the curiosity of philosophic men; and would fix their attention on those only which terminate in public utility, and administer to the necessities of life.