

Masonic Perspectives

A Second Look at Aspects of Controversial Topics In American Freemasonry



ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Masonic Perspectives is a project created by Past Masters John W. Bizzack and Dan M. Kemble intended to bring the writings about controversial topics of the past in American Freemasonry and provide readers a second look and contemporary perspective on the topics to serve as a catalyst for further discussion. This project is a joint venture of Lexington Lodge No. 1, Lexington, Kentucky and William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Covington, Kentucky.



In this edition, a second look at Joshua Gunn's 2005 essay,
Death By Publicity: U.S. Freemasonry and the Public Drama of Secrecy.



COMMENTARY ON PAPER

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There's No Such Things as Bad Publicity...

Are We Dumbing Down the Mysteries of Freemasonry?

P.T. Barnum, the 19th century American showman and circus owner, is often credited with saying, "There's no such thing as bad publicity," although hard evidence to link that quotation to him is difficult to establish. The Irish poet and playwright, Oscar Wilde, is cited as saying, "The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about." The notion that no publicity can do harm, however, is certainly open to question – especially when it comes to Freemasonry.



Commentary

In 2005, Joshua Gunn, an Associate Professor of Communication Studies and an Affiliate Faculty with the Department of Rhetoric and Writing, both at the University of Texas at Austin, wrote about publicity and Freemasonry. His essay, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama Secrecy in the Twentieth Century*, was published in *Heredom*, Vol. 15., in 2007. A version of his essay appears again in the Summer 2008, *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, Michigan State University Press under the title *Death by Publicity: U.S. Freemasonry and the Public Drama of Secrecy*.

Gunn contends that Freemasonry has marketed itself to the public in such a way as to marginalize, perhaps diminish the mysteries of the Craft, and argues, that it is the mysteries of the Craft that has and continues to draw men to the fraternity. His essay is an important catalyst for further discussion

He offers examples from the past as well as today to defend his analysis. Two of the most interesting stems from comments made by Albert Pike and Rex L. Huchens. Pike expressed his worry that the philosophical mission of Freemasonry was increasingly eclipsed by Masonic sociability and charity.¹ Rex R. Huchens, author of the 1990 *Bridge to Light*, published by The Supreme Council Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, wrote his concern about the Scottish Rite steadily moving away from instruction on philosophy and continues to place a greater emphasis on its charitable endeavors.²

Gunn expands his examples of “too much publicity” in his analysis of such later writings such as, Christopher Hodapp’s, *Freemasons for Dummies and The Complete Idiots Guide of Freemasonry* from

¹ Albert Pike’s *Esoterika: Symbolism of the Blue Degrees*, Scottish Rite Research Society, 1888, reprint 2005.

² Rex R. Huchens, *Pillars of Wisdom: The Writings of Albert Pike* (Washington, D.C.: The Supreme Council, 33°), 1995, p. 57

S. Brent Morris, asserting both (and books by other authors) represent the “antithesis of the mystery-effect of the strange symbol. Each book attempts to evaporate the aura of mystery that surrounds the Craft in the language of transparency and contemporary argot.” Furthermore, he writes that such offerings “downplays the centrality and function of mystery central to Masonic philosophy.”

To support his thesis, he writes the difference between privacy and secrecy this way: *A promise is a private thing, a concern that which can be made public, but is not done so out of respect. A secret remains private, however, because one is obliged to keep them that way.* Gunn believes the strategy of transparency that seems to have been adopted by the fraternity more than a decade ago in hopes of revitalizing interest in the Craft fails “to think more carefully about the function of the secret in relation to the most important ritual practice that sustains the Order: the Masonic obligation.” He ends his essay by noting:

Because the secret is so central to our bond, Masons need to seriously reconsider the guiding assumption of recent publicity: that an increase in membership will lead to a stronger, more robust fraternal order. Because of the way in which the ideology of publicity seems to work, perhaps a smaller, more dedicated membership would be better for the fraternity and its philosophy? Regardless of one’s position on the size of the Order, this essay nevertheless urges Masons to think twice about disowning secrecy or insisting that Masonic secrecy is merely privacy. In this age of the drama of publicity and surveillance, our obligation to secrecy—and therefore to each other—is all that we have.

Gunn’s points are worthy of notice, of course, and while he is correct in his observance of an absence of wide-spread critical thinking in Freemasonry, that absence is not found in the authors of particular books that, as he contends, “evaporate the aura of the mystery that surrounds the Craft.” He is certainly correct in to point out Pike’s and Huchen’s concerns for that is exactly what has and continues to happen. In fact, Pike’s concern was addressed with Masonic scholar Robert Freke Gould in 1889, about the requisites for perpetuity of mainstream American Freemasonry being questionable even at that time.³ One can only wonder if he and Gould were including in their shared concern that so few Masons read about and actually study their Craft if that was also part of their concern beyond the conspicuous drift at the time from a philosophical and educational institution toward a club check-full of programs and projects.

If it were not for past exposures and books like the ones Gunn contends provide too much transparency, it may be there were would be even less interest in Freemasonry today by not only the public but its members.

The double-edged sword of Internet has taken Freemasonry where no Mason in the later part of the 20th century could imagine it would have gone, much less earlier Masons. The surplus of drivel found there about Freemasonry can easily outdistance the valid information and legitimate research. Although distinctly muddled, there is certainly a “transparency” already by virtue of the freedom of anyone posting anything about any thought or any interpretation they may have about the fraternity, its operation, philosophies, and yes, even its “secrets” – awash with images and illustrations. If anything, it

³ William H. Upton, “A Plea for the Teachings of Freemasonry,” in L.S. Myler, ed., *Jewels of Masonic Oratory*, (Akron, OH: self-published, 1898), 78.

is the Internet that has erased any aura of mystery about Freemasonry for the serious -minded researcher or student of the Craft, and fueled the antics of the loosely confederated, conspiracy-minded blockheads who can type.

Of all Masonic related ironies, the fact that early exposures from 1724 through around 1827 provided more history about the fraternity's workings than did its own official writings or those of the earliest writers, with the exception of Andersons Constitution and the Ahiman Rezon, it is difficult to believe presenters, films, documentaries and authors of particular Masonic books in the 21st century have given away all the mysteries of Freemasonry.⁴

The transparency of Freemasonry these days, whether from books, opening lodges for tours, public installation ceremonies or the result of even the often shuddering nonsense found on the Internet, chat rooms, blogs, and social media (often posing as knowledge), about it has not damaged the institution more than the of Masonic illiteracy and unenlightened level of too many if its members. This is not a condition recent to the fraternity. The consequence of such has been written and complained about since at least the mid-1800s, and warnings abound of its consequences. Besides, there is little to no valid evidence the loss of interest of the public in Freemasonry or that Masonic members is related to a level of loss of esoteric tradition that existed at some imaginary point in the 19th or 20th century.

The problem stemming from the fate awaiting the fraternity is coming to a head this century in American Freemasonry. We have become, since the early 1800s, too accustomed to the false standard of measuring the success of Freemasonry in this country by counting the number of names of membership rosters. Today, and in the coming decades, we stand face to face with the troubling result of the continued loss of our philosophical and educational mission by allowing the intended design of institution to be increasingly eclipsed by projects and programs rather than dissemination of Masonic ideals.

⁴ Christopher Kylin. *A Partial List of the Exposures of Freemasonry*, 1994. "To compile this list the following were consulted: "History of Freemasonry", by Robert F. Gould, Volume III, page 475, ff., "Encyclopedia of Freemasonry", by Albert G. Mackey, et al., and "Those Terrible Exposures!", Short Talk Bulletin Series, Masonic Service Association, Vol. XXX, No.7, July 1952, Washington, D.C.; also used personal collections and the National Union Catalog "A Mason's Examination" in the "The Flying Post or Post Master", April 11 & 13, 1723. "The Grand Mystery of Freemasons Discovered" London, 1724. "The Secret History of Freemasonry" London, 1724 "The Whole Institution of Free-Masons Opened" ?, 1725. "The Grand Mystery of the Free Masons Discover'd, Wherein are the Several Questions Put to Them at Their Meetings and Installations, also Their Oath, Health, Signs, Points to Know Each Other by, etc." London: (A. Moore?), 1725. "The Grand Mystery Laid Open, or the Free Masons Signs and Words Discovered" ?, 1726. "The Mystery of Freemasonry" in the "Daily Journal of London", Aug. 15 & 18, 1730 in the "Pennsylvania Gazette" Dec. 5 to 8, 1730. "Masonry Dissected" by Samuel Pritchard, London, 1730, several later editions, German translation, 1736, French translation, 1737. "The Secrets of Masonry Made Known to all Men by Samuel Pritchard, London 1737. "The Mystery of Masonry, London, 1737. "The Mysterious Receptions of the Celebrated Society of Freemason London, 1737. "Masonry Further Dissected" by Samuel Pritchard (?) London, 1738. "Le Secret des Franc-Macons" par l'Abbe Perau, Geneve, 1742. "Catechisme des Franc-Macons" par Leonard Gaganon (Louis Travenol) Paris, 1745, several editions, under different titles "L'ordre de Franc-Macons Trahi et le Secret des Mopses Revele" Amsterdam, 1745, German translation, Dutch translation, several subsequent editions. "La Macon Demarque"?, 1751. "The Freemason Examin'd" by Alex Slade, London, 1754. "The Secrets of the Free Masons Revealed" by "a disgusted brother" London, 1759. "A Master Key to Freemasonry"?, 1760. "The Three Distinct Knocks"?, 1760. "Hiram, or the Grand Master Key" London, 1764. "Solomon in All His Glory" ?, 1766. "The Freemason Stripped Naked" by Charles Warren, London, 1769. "Receuil Precieux de la Maconnerie Adonhiramite" by Louis Guillemain de Saint Victors, Paris, 1781. "Ritual der Verbesserten Freimaurerei, Enthaltend die Ceremonien bey der Aufnahme" von Johann Joachim Christoph Bode, Weimar, 1788, expanded edition, Weimar 1792. "The Master Key" by I. Brown, London, 1794. "A Masonic Treatise, with an Elucidation on the Religious and Moral Beauties of Freemasonry, etc." by W. Finch, London, 1801. "The Cat Out of the Bag" London, 1824, 1825. "Manual of Freemasonry" by Richard Carlisle, ?, 1825. "Illustrations of Masonry, by One of the Fraternity Who Has Devoted Years to the Subject." by William Morgan, Le Roy, New York, 1826. "Illustrations of Masonry, by One of the Fraternity Who Has Devoted Years to the Subject, with an Account of the Kidnapping of the Author, "second edition., <http://web.mit.edu/dryfoo/www/Masonry/Misc/exposures-list.ht>, accessed May 2017,

To rephrase Oscar Wilde’s “The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about,” we might say, when it comes to the issue of Masonic publicity and transparency, *the only thing worse than members not knowing our philosophical and educational mission, is not talking about it.* That certainly appears to be what we have not collectively done for multiple decades even though all the information to learn more about Freemasonry and practice it has been widely available for more than just in recent years.

How many generations of Freemasons has there been who thought nothing at all could be said to or about Freemasonry to anyone except another member? We can see how staying mum worked out, can’t we?

~ John W. Bizzack, PM