

Masonic Fibble-Fable

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The word "fib" extends back to the 1400s or so. At that time, the word fable had its first appearance in the English language and had two meanings: a pleasant narrative or a downright lie. We still use that word in either sense.

About 300 or 400 years ago, some unknown parent decided to soften the blow of the word by accusing their child of telling a "fibble-fable" when the child was caught telling a story the parent knew to be utter nonsense. This term caught on as an expression for a slight falsehood. Wordsmiths surmise that the term was too long to use as a name for a "slight sin," so it soon shortened to "fib."

Apart from organized religion, more well-intentioned fibble-fable has been told about Masonry than perhaps any other subject. We must, however, take into consideration the context in which the fabrications were told and why. By doing so we can understand how men of the era believed it imperative to construct a time immemorial history of

Freemasonry that carried all the earmarks of an ancient fraternity.

This brings up a question. *How did men who were of mature age, sound judgement and strict morals invent well-intentioned fibs. Furthermore, how could men of sound judgment have been deceived by them?*

Some Masonic writers perceive it not a sin to invent traditions to make Freemasonry appear more ancient than it is, and others deem it even a merit to create fibs for the purpose of proving the Craft has the earliest of lineages even though such heredities challenge rationalism to its maximum extent. Some writers and certainly many members never challenge, of course, because they have no ambition to come into conflict with those who were or are considered Masonic luminaries or leaders in the fraternity - some of whom we know today simply shared a surplus of well-told tales, filling them with imaginary inferences and erroneous conclusions.

Masonology?

Awarding academic status and academic legitimacy to the history of Freemasonry is the dream of the Masonologist. French Mason Alec Mellor coined the word *Masonology* in the 1960s reportedly proposing it with a defining meaning the study of Masonry *beyond* ritual. The term was generally accepted, but there was a problem. Many seemed to think the term meant research of Masonic history that was conducted by scientific methods requiring a logical and rational order of steps through which researchers could defend and come to conclusions about their topic of inquiry.

Misunderstood, the term turned into the belief that if a writing was called or referred to as Masonology, it came with credibility. It does not. The bulk of what masquerades as Masonic history literature falls short of adherence to the scientific method of research.

The early writings of what we think of and have largely accepted as Masonic history is tormented with a legion of problems. Evidence was not always the pillar and rubric upon which James Anderson and others chronicled or presented the history of the institution. In the world of Freemasonry, writing and theorizing about the past is not confined - it is open to all who take an interest in it.

Masons are entirely free to consider the past and form their own conclusions and

so is everyone else, but this has one significant disadvantage since “popular history” and “good history” are rarely the same thing. There is a considerable gulf between the historical understanding by the public and the history constructed by Masonic historians – or those who call themselves such because they write about the topic.

A wealth of generalizations, myths, and nostalgia fill the early copious writings about the fraternity. Most were conspicuously shy on evidence and teemed instead with a unique level of piety and glorification of the *idea* of Freemasonry. This left a trail that would later distress professional historians who expected to find the same rigors and standards of research for which they were trained to study and evaluate in Masonic history

The fact is, 150 years or so ago, the best-informed Masons knew only about Masonic history what they learned from James Anderson, William Preston, and George Oliver causing the more informed Masons to later refer to that period as the Dark Ages of Masonry. Albert Mackey, Cornelius Moore, and other writers of that variety took the place of Anderson and his early explainers to become venerated as great Masonic oracles when they arrived on the Masonic scene. Much of what they wrote at the time was embraced by many Masons as absolute truth. Since their time, additional and valuable

information on Masonic history from the writings of Robert Freke Gould, Joseph Gabriel Findel and William J. Hughan, and others changed a lot of old opinions and made many of the early writings seem even more preposterous.

Published in 1886, Robert Freke Gould's *History of Freemasonry* required six years of his time to write. He brought that work up to date in an abridged edition in 1903. Gould's massive volumes stand today as the most credible work by a Mason about the history of the institution for many reasons; foremost is the fact that he concerned himself through all four volumes with the development of Freemasonry as we know it, which marks him the first Masonic historian of the Scientific School. In his 905-page work, Gould establishes how the legitimate approach to the accurate history of Freemasonry is based on documentation and stood upright in his strong feeling that before you believe that Masonry was tied to movements in antiquity, *you must prove it*.

In *History of Freemasonry*, he wrote and discussed various theories being put forth in his day, describing in their turn certain Egyptian customs as described by the Greek historian, Herodotus; Greek fraternal and mystical societies as mentioned in William Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography*; rumors of a Dionysian (a philosophical concept based on certain features of ancient Greek mythology) architectural fraternity

which resembled Freemasonry and in addition to numerous others; quotes passages from H.A. Gile's *Freemasonry in China*.

He talks about several other rites and concludes there is indeed a connection between modern speculative Masonry and these cults and movements in antiquity. However, the relationship, he explained, is that some group of 17th-century philosophers of the Craft and writer of his own period "ransacked antiquity to discover a model for their newly born Freemasonry."

Proving the two plus two equals ten in the mind of some of those philosophers and writers to which he refers, and members of the fraternity, he writes about H.A. Giles's research that reported Mencius, an avid student of the teachings of Confucius, taught men the value of applying the square and compass figuratively to their lives. This gem, used by some to "prove" Freemasonry's pedigree, extended back to the days of Mencius and Confucius (551 to 479 B.C.), is sheer fiddle-fable. In the same line of thinking, we can safely say there were architects in biblical days, and they created great works, Solomon's Temple included, but that didn't make them Freemasons in the modern sense of the word any more than it made Confucius or Mencius Freemasons.

The influence of Gould's "prove it" approach to the history of Freemasonry

altered the way many Masons started to think about the history of the institution. His message corresponds with many Masonic writers today who endorse the idea that the sooner we put all these antiquity claims into the proper context (allegorical ritual designed to teach moral truths) and get on with the business of being better men and more informed Masons, the better off the institution and its votaries will be.

In the world of reality, it does not follow that Masonry must remain in utter darkness of its factual history because those through whom much of it was and is passed embrace it without the benefit of rational thought and context. The same stands true and applies to the later essayists, commentators and those considered Masonic luminaires and leaders of their day.

There were numerous Masonic periodicals and journals in the latter part of the 19th century, which is where many Masons (at least those who bothered to read about what was going on in the Masonic community) got their information. These publications today are often overlooked as a source of words, images, thoughts, and varied interpretations of Freemasonry by earlier Masons and the men characterized as luminaries of the Craft. These works remain an incredible wealth of primary materials for the researcher.

The premier *American Masonic Magazine*, *Free-Mason' Magazine*, and *General Miscellanea* (Philadelphia 1811) stood as premier publications of their day. *The Freemason's Monthly Magazine* (Boston 1841), *American Masonic Record* (Albany 1827), *Masonic Review and Keystone* (Baltimore 1867), *American Tyler* (Detroit (1890), *Masonic Mirror* (Philadelphia 1852) were considered by many to be in the same league. Many others with names Masons readily recognized, like *The Cable Tow*, *The Gavel*, *The Square and Compasses*, and *The Lambskin* are among only a few of the many.

The early periodicals evolved into Masonic bulletins, local state and lodge newsletters and eventually grand lodge sponsored magazines, and by reviewing them one can see the unfolding of Freemasonry in America, its literature, and bibliography. A total of 674 of these styled publications is chronicled in Larissa P. Watkins' *American Masonic Periodicals 1811-2001*.

Interestingly, it was common in many of the periodicals for brothers to challenge the writings of other brothers leading to back and forth exchanges of what we think of today as Letters to the Editor. A brother might write a rejoinder to an article, then the author of that original article might write one back as another response to appear in the following issue. Some exchanges went back and forth over the course of several issues, and

some were even turned into articles. In many of these exchanges, the writers were expressively coarse and even resorted to name-calling.

In the August 1892 *Masonic Review*, an example of such vitriol is exemplified. The stern disagreement was not masked. This dispute also illustrates a hatefulness toward those who demanded proof - not opinion or flimsily manufactured props as evidence.

The Review reprinted such response to a paper written by Joseph Gabriel Findel, the European Masonic writer and publisher equal in stature and scientific school research to Robert Freke Gould.

American writers, infected with the obsession to establish evidence of the antiquity and who subscribed to parts or all of James Anderson's imaginary story of the origins of the Craft, had little patience with the likes of Findel. He had rebuked the "evidence" that feebly supported the Henry VI. or John Locke Masonic Manuscript, as it has become known, infuriating the old school thinkers, and fueling their anger.

The manuscript had been written about in the unsurprisingly invented style so employed by James Anderson and later, George Oliver which easily led those writing about it to claim (with excitement) that King Henry VI in the 13th century, was a Freemason. The "Masonization" of King Henry and the famous John Locke in the writing was the

validation the old school was seeking, however, as Findel showed, it was fible-fable in the first degree.

The Gentleman's Magazine was a monthly digest of news and commentary topics. The publisher thought the educated public might be interested in this "the King was a Freemason" story, so in 1753 the magazine first printed an account of the manuscript as "fact." The story had been given to them by a man only identified as "Mr. Collins" who discovered it in Germany where it had been printed in 1748. That version contained an account of a conversation between Henry VI. and learned Masons of his time - a conversation supposedly written by King Henry himself.

The text of the manuscript ended up reprinted in the Preface of the English Masonic Constitution; also, in William Preston's 1772 *History of Masonry* and many other Masonic publications. Preston, in true Masonic style of the day, improved the story by not only adding that the King was initiated into the fraternity in 1442 but that the King himself presided over lodges and nominated William Waynfleet, Bishop of Winchester, as Grand Master.

The fallacies put forth claiming the story was authentic were disassembled piece by piece by Findel. He explained through reason and logic why the discovery was fraught with a deficit of unsubstantiated evidence that precluded any rational

thinking man to accept, much less embrace it as authentic. The first reason he gave was that the manuscript was reportedly copied verbatim from the alleged original and the original was never produced. His other reasons made it equally as easy for the rational minded to dismiss the entire claim.

Regardless of Findel's reproof, so desperate was another Masonic writer of the time, Peter Goras, to rehabilitate the notion the Henry VI manuscript was proof of antiquity that he wrote a rejoinder saying, "It was not impossible to accept, it must, therefore, be true." Gores had not attended a single day of class at the school of rationalism, twisting the logic of Occam's Razor to the point of absurdity.

Goras' statement led to what is the often the final cry from those who've had the rug pulled out from under them: name calling. Old school Masonic luminaries began to surrender their position on the manuscript, but not pass up the opportunity to slap Findel.

C.W. Moore, an Orthodox American Masonic luminary, wrote his rejoined to

the matter which appeared in the 1871 edition of the *Philadelphia Keystone* on page 146. He wrote: *We have always had great misgivings of this Findel. From what we have read by him he appears to us a guttural, empty, self-conceited blockhead. This Findel is a first-class fool, and we advised him to give up writing and plant potatoes.*

Divergent understandings of Masonry and its history may be inevitable, but that does not give carte blanche to anyone to write whatever they want.

The accepted practice of writing or just saying whatever one wants about Freemasonry without the concern or compliance with at least some of the rigors of academic standards or an ounce of rational thought makes the work of study and researching Freemasonry and its history more than troublesome for professional historians.

It may also be one of the causes behind the question of why it has been ignored so long by legitimate academics.

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- Occam's Razor is principle established by the Franciscan Friar and logician William of Ockham in the 14th century. The theory states that one should not make unnecessary assumptions and that the answer to a problem is often the simplest. It is the basis of methodological reductionism. Occam's razor can be summarized as such: Among competing hypotheses, the one with the fewest assumptions should be selected. In even simpler language, Occam's razor states that the simplest solution is correct. (Occam's Razor, *Learning Theories*, <https://www.learning-theories.com/occams-razor.html>, accessed January 3, 2018).
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