

THE NEED FOR INFORMED EXPLANATION OF MASONRY

YOU CANNOT TELL THE DEPTH OF THE
OCEAN BY LOOKING AT A PICTURE OF THE SHORE

John W. Bizzack

History provides a real grasp of how the world works. To know why something happened, we must look for factors that took shape earlier—sometimes centuries ago.

The low-hanging fruit of history can be easy to harvest. However, doing so overlooks large amounts of data. No one has found a way to pick only the history they like and agree with, reject the parts they do not, and then walk away with a clear picture or understanding of events.

We justify our actions in the present through our understanding of the past. History must serve, however imperfectly, as our laboratory, and data from the past must serve as our most vital evidence in the quest to understand why the Fraternity surrounding Freemasonry performs as it has and does. We do not always get that understanding from popular history. Popular history and factual history are not always the same thing.

There is no isolated strand in the factual history of anything. Each thread is interwoven with many others in a mingled network that must be patiently and carefully untangled to follow particular things through their winding course. When left untangled, histories assume the characteristics of stories that stress an appeal to emotions, imagination, and an absence of careful reasoning.

But through exposure to and understanding the process of factual historical inquiry and its application, we can become more disciplined and rigorous thinkers and independent-minded analysts. It is difficult to argue against anyone seeking to use more careful reasoning and improve their ability to interpret facts more thoughtfully, independently, and meaningfully.

Historical inquiry poses questions, analyzes sources, and uses evidence from valid sources to develop an *informed explanation* of the past. In the application of the process, we see that by questioning how and why things change, who and what drives those changes, and whose interests are served by them, we better understand that decisions have a variety of consequences that can ripple through generations. Indifference to these things, especially the interior history of the scaffolding surrounding Freemasonry that we call the Fraternity, causes boundaries to blur and disappear. Once that begins to happen, we see American Freemasonry becoming whatever the majority of its votaries wish it to be. Intimately linked to the society of its time, it is impossible to separate the Fraternity and Freemasonry from the surrounding external society without turning them into something manufactured.¹

¹ Charles Porset, "Masonic Historiography," Chapter 8, *Handbook of Freemasonry*, Brill, 2014, 118.

Even the best understanding of the internal history of the Fraternity requires separating and examining the model in the context of what was happening in the rest of society simultaneously. This involves mining facts, not just taking popular history as the whole story.

The map is wrong when it does not agree with the ground. Too often, the map the Fraternity uses does not agree with the ground it covers when it comes to reliably providing an *informed explanation* of our ritual and workings to candidates. The belief and claim that Masons, from generation to generation, transmit the historical intent of Freemasonry (and all its aspects) in a pure and unimpaired form is inflated.

While organized Freemasonry has brought men together who otherwise may have remained at a perpetual distance, and many members have found their Masonic experience rewarding, evidence is scant that the Fraternity always accomplishes what Freemasonry is designed to do. Critical inquiry is essential in analyzing history, and the nature of that historical inquiry is not criticism as we generally understand the word. Critical thinking is necessary to see a thing clearly and examine it fairly.

Henry W. Coil tells us the question, *What is Freemasonry?* must first be answered by asking another question: *When, where, and what phase of it?*²

The usual presumption of many Masons that Masonic history is entirely apart from ordinary history is not new. Masonic history is a branch of social history to be investigated in the same way as the history of other social institutions. To arrive at anything close to a logical conclusion about the history of the American fraternity, we must know something about the conditions of an emerging nation when Masonry arrived in the colonies and how the Fraternity unfolded, at times in contrast, with the backdrop of the larger changing society in which it's existed for over 290 years. Much of what we know about that has been left to academics, social science researchers, and trained historians³— those who are not inside the frame, so to speak, and can better see the picture and more properly analyze it with balance.

When it comes to the cavalcade of early writing about the history and evolution of Freemasonry, we see Masonic authors reporting from “inside the frame” with little regard for the influence of events that occurred outside of the Fraternity. For example, many Masonic writings about the origins of Freemasonry are little more than conjecture. A legion of problems torments these works; the evidence is not always the pillar upon which such writings are based.

No matter, we find that in the Fraternity and the surrounding world, facts do not always take the place of a good story—evidence-troubled or not. Such is the case of members and non-members alike who believe that high membership alone is evidence of the success of Freemasonry or that every card-carrying member in good standing studies, is knowledgeable, practices, and is actively involved in Masonry.

The love of the *idea* of Freemasonry and what the brilliant system promises to those who would learn, practice, and follow its principles created an overwhelming zeal in many members to rapidly expand membership. This irrepressible compulsion resulted in repeated clear-headed warnings from many Masonic

²Henry W. Coil, *A Comprehensive View of Freemasonry*, Macoy, 1973

³*i.e.*, Jan A.M. Snoek and Henry Bogdan, “The History of Freemasonry: An Overview,” *Handbook on Freemasonry*, Henrick Bogdan and Jan A.M Snoeke, Editors, Brill, Lieden/Boston, Vol. 8, 2014, Alexander Piatigorsky, *Who's Afraid Of Freemasons? The Phenomenon Of Freemasonry*, Harvill Press; 1st ed edition, 1997, Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1920*, Princeton University Press, 1984, ³ Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe*. York, Oxford University Press, 1991, John Dickie, *The Craft: How Freemasonry Made the Modern World*, Public Affairs, 2020, Douglas Knoop, Gwilym P. Jones, *Genesis of Freemasonry, An Account of The Rise and Development of Freemasonry In Its Operative, Accepted, and Early Speculative Phase*, Manchester Univ Press; First Edition January, 1947, Stephen C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840*, University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

leaders (and later scholars) as early as the 1840s regarding the predictable consequences and penalties of unfettered growth. Most went unheeded then and today.

This summary is not a popular view in many Masonic circles where the more “romantic” version that applauds, celebrates, congratulates, and rides laurels has become the regular diet. However, a sea of laudatory and favorably disposed opinions is insufficient to cloak the reality that the Fraternity could have and still can do better at transmitting the historical design of Freemasonry in a purer and less impaired way. That design is found in ritual, no matter the variations in which we see and hear it today. As such, our ritual represents the official doctrine of Freemasonry. The doctrine is compromised when its delivery, as a matter of course, is botched and left largely unexplained or discussed.

One would think that, at the minimum, most of those in elected positions would devote the time and labor required to become acquainted with our factual history, in addition to all aspects of the Craft and its administration. If they did, their leadership would reflect more than a fleeting acquaintance with whatever was passed on to them. Freemasonry deserves that attention from every man in positions of formal leadership. Every member seriously pursuing Masonry by being active, involved, and engaged in the life and care of their Lodges also deserves such leadership.

The behavior of the Fraternity, in terms of its reaction and response to the unbridled expansion of members from 1943 through 1959, shows misreckoned reasoning. The rapid expansion following the anti-Masonic years in the early 1800s happened again during and after the decades that followed the Civil War and led into the twentieth century. These rapid expansions against an ever-changing larger society exhibit a pattern and a constellation of poor reasoning by much of the Fraternity leadership that has repeatedly diluted the historical design and intent of structuralized Freemasonry.

It has been said that no sailor learns the ocean's depth by looking at a picture of the shore. Many members of the Fraternity are exposed to and only look at a picture of the shore. Over time, conveying only pictures of the shore to members and the public has led to a smog of subjectivity, opinion-driven decisions, and a poverty-stricken vacuum of situational awareness about Freemasonry in the United States.

Understanding why this took place and carried forward is critical if, in the future, we are to circumvent the consequences of the kind of unclear thinking that has taken place too many times. Unless we know where and why the Fraternity has strayed and drifted, we risk repeating the same mistakes and cycle. That has already happened four times. Critical and historical thinking are our primary shields against that cycle.

While there is no shame in being wrong or making mistakes, there is shame in refusing to correct ourselves when we get things wrong.⁴ The Fraternity should at least strive to be less wrong or at least to fail better.⁵

Seeking *and* understanding factual history in a context driven by careful reasoning is a matter of no small urgency in today's American fraternity.

⁴ David Robert Grimes, *Good Thinking*, Simon and Schuster, UK, 2019.

⁵ Samuel Beckett *Worstword Ho*, (Full quote, “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better”), Grove, 1984.