

Women and Freemasonry
Three Centuries of a Masonic Family History

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It is a privilege to be the lead speaker at this year's symposium. The topic "Women and Freemasonry" is an intriguing one, and today you will hear about it from any different viewpoints. My task this morning is to provide an introduction to the topic, and to lay out some of the themes that will be considered in today's presentations and discussions. The title of my paper, "Three Centuries of a Masonic Family History," reflects my belief that the story of women and Freemasonry is more the story of a family history than it is the story of women who are in some way associated with what is otherwise a men's organization. The latter idea implies that the intrusion of women into the organization is somehow an aberration - something outside the norm - whose involvement must be seen as unusual or irregular, if not actually foreign to the nature of Freemasonry. I hope to dispel that idea this morning. Women have been a part of our family story in Freemasonry for a very long time, and although the current structure of mainstream Freemasonry is a male fraternal organization, I hope to show that studying Freemasonry only as such will not tell the whole story of who we are and what we do. There is much more to the story than the misleading picture of a "men's house" with women looking in from the outside, knocking at the door, or even occupying some of the rooms in the house.

The story that I will outline for you today has four major parts:

- Women and Freemasonry in guilds of stonemasons
- Women who became Freemasons by accident
- Women in parallel organizations with men's Freemasonry
- Women who are Freemasons

Women and Freemasonry in Guilds of Stonemasons

In order to properly address the question as to whether women were masons in the earliest of times we have to address the issue of the origin of Freemasonry itself. The origin - or origins - of Freemasonry is a disputed subject, and not everyone is in agreement that speculative Freemasonry grew out of the stonemasons guilds or the Middle Ages. If it did not, then whether women were members of these stonemasons guilds is irrelevant to the question as to whether women were Freemasons in earlier times. I will not be out of line to tell you that I am convinced that speculative Freemasonry owes its heritage to working stonemasons guilds of the Middle Ages, while admitting that we still have a lot of evidence to discover to show this linkage, particularly in England. In Scotland the linkage is clear and unmistakable, and to the extent that modern speculative Freemasonry is the same thing as the speculative Freemasonry which grew up alongside the operative stonemasons lodges in Scotland, then the operative ancestry of speculative Freemasonry is evident. And we know that there were women members of stonemasons organizations, at least in England.

In 1663, for example, Margaret Wild, a widow, was a member of the London Company of Masons - a position she apparently inherited from her late husband. And as late as 1713-1714 we find that Mary Banister, the daughter of a barber of Barking, was apprenticed to a mason for the term of seven years, with the fee of five shillings being duly paid to the London Company of Masons. And in 1696 the Mason's Court Book gives the names of two widows who were on the rolls of the London Company of Masons (Jones, p. 77-78). These are but a few of the recorded instances in which women were masons in the days of operative masonry. To the extent that these operative organizations or lodges had esoteric ceremonies of admission, and transmitted secrets to their members, women were certainly a part of the initiated organizations in the days before the rise of speculative Freemasonry.

Women Who Became Freemasons by Accident

When speculative Freemasonry shows up on the radar screen of history in its more or less modern format in the 17th Century, we find stories emerging about women who were initiated in speculative masonic lodges. It is evident from the stories that the lodges that were emerging were men's organizations, or otherwise the stories about how women were initiated after accidentally discovering the secrets of the masons would hardly be worth telling.

The most famous of the many stories about women who were made masons after they discovered the secrets of the masonic ceremonies is that of the Honourable Elizabeth St. Leger, the youngest child of the first Viscount Doneraile. Her claim to masonic membership is memorialized in a painting of her in masonic regalia in the Grand Lodge Building in Dublin, Ireland. As told by John Heron Leper and Philip Crossle in their *History of the Grand Lodge of Ireland*, the Viscount was holding lodge meetings at his country home when his daughter grew curious about these secret meetings, and hid herself in a room adjacent to the one where the lodge was meeting, and through a chink in the wall, witnessed a masonic initiation. She was caught, and after due deliberation, the members of the lodge decided that the only way to secure the secrets of the order was to initiate her. The episode may have occurred in 1710 (Hills, p. 63). Edward Condor, in his paper published in 1894 (Condor, p. 19) noted that she held Freemasonry in high esteem throughout her lifetime, and shortly before her death in 1773, said this about it:

".....she had such a veneration for Masonry that she could never suffer it to be spoken lightly of in her hearing; nor would she touch upon the subject, but with the greatest caution, in company with even her most intimate friends, whom she did not know to be Masons, and when she did, it was under evident embarrassment, and a trembling apprehension, lest she might, in a moment of inadvertence, commit a breach of masonic duty."

There are other incidents of a similar nature recorded. Robert F. Gould records in his *History of Freemasonry* that the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria visited a masonic lodge in 1751 disguised as a man to satisfy herself that it was a reputable organization, and that women were not present at the meetings (Gould, vol. iii, p. 287). Whether this is true or not, her husband, Francis I, was a Freemason, having been made a mason at The Hague in 1731 by the celebrated Dr. John Desaguliers, and she may have been curious as to what her husband was up to in his lodge meetings!

Another episode was published in the *Newcastle Journal* at Newcastle-Upon-Tyne in 1765, as follows:

"One evening this week, at a lodge of Free-Masons held at a tavern in the Strand, a sprightly young girl found means wittfully to introduce herself, disguised in men's cloaths, into the lodge, and when she had the happiness of satisfying her curiosity (so inseparable from the fair sex) and of being initiated into the sublime mysteries and arcana of that ancient and most honourable Society; she remained some time in the Lodge, but the awkwardness of her behaviour in her new apparel, and some other circumstances, created a suspicion, which occasioned the supposed gentleman to be taken into another room, where her sex was discovered. Some of the rigid old Moans were as much offended as the Roman Matrons were when Clodius was detected in a woman's dress at the feast of Cybele, to which none but females were admitted, but the younger Masons were much pleased with her spirit and adroitness, and, with great politeness, sent the lady away, highly satisfied with the novelty of the adventure."

Except for the story about the Empress Maria Theresa, the emphasis in these stories is upon the accidental discovery of masonic secrets by women who were where they shouldn't be, and as a result, became privy to what was going on in the lodge. There is nothing in these stories to indicate that these women were accepted as regular masons by the men, or that they got to attend lodge and participate in Freemasonry itself. That had to wait for a future time.

Women in Parallel Organizations with Men's Freemasonry

The next development of women and Freemasonry occurred in France in the 18th century. Freemasonry itself spread to France from England beginning about 1725, and from the start was quite a different organization than it had been in England. Freemasonry in England was largely a middle class organization which only subsequently became associated with the upper class and royalty through a series of noble grand masters. In France, Freemasonry found a home both with the merchant class, and with the nobility - but in separate masonic organizations and rites. And it was with the nobility or aristocracy that the first women's organizations associated with Freemasonry arose.

A French Masonic writer, The Abbe Clavel, as he is known, is our primary source for information about the formation of the earliest organizations for women along masonic lines, and associated with masonic lodges. In his history of Freemasonry in France, published in 1842, he states that some organizations for female relatives of masons were organized at Paris in 1730 - just five years after the first appearance of Freemasonry in France. We have little information about these early organizations, but the rituals of one which have survived dates from 1743, and was called the "Order of Felicity." It had nautical emblems and vocabulary, and in the ritual the sisters embark on a voyage from the fictitious Isle of Happiness on a ship piloted by their masonic brothers. In 1911 E. L. Hawkins wrote a paper for Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076 - the premier lodge of research - on this order, and stated that:

"The candidate was made to swear to keep the secret concerning the ceremonial that accompanied the initiation. If it was a man he swore 'never to take anchorage in any port

where a vessel of the order was already found at anchor'. If it was a woman, she promised 'not to receive a strange vessel in her port, so long as a vessel of the order should be there at anchor.' " (Hawkins, p. 6).

You might note the sexual allusions in this excerpt, indicating perhaps a less than serious purpose for the order. This fit well with the origin of these types of degrees amongst the idle members of the French aristocracy who were always in search of some new entertainment. This type of ritual reached a point of absurdity in 1747 when the "Order of Woodcutters" was created - a female version of the "Charcoal Burners" society popular among men at the time, and which had some rather lewd suggestions in its ritual. But out of this frivolity grew a serious expression of a type of Freemasonry for women, and eventually degrees of a serious nature were created which became the framework of an entire parallel organization called the Rite of Adoption.

The term "Rite of Adoption" came into existence in 1774 when the main masonic power in France - the Grand Orient - established a system whereby masonic lodges could "adopt" women's lodges practicing the rituals and degrees which came to comprise the rite itself. Today we would use the term "sponsor" instead of "adopt", but the idea is the same. The probity and regularity of these women's organizations would be guaranteed by a formal association with Freemasonry - an idea which is still a part of our understanding of the "Family of Freemasonry" today.

The Rite of Adoption was a women's organization, created for women and governed by women, but it had men as members. The men had to be Freemasons, and although most of the women were relatives of Freemasons, it was not restricted to relatives. Apparently it was sufficient to have these women's lodges under the "sponsorship" of a masonic lodge, and with only men who were masons as male members of the lodges, the connection with Freemasonry was assured. The rules governing the Rite of Adoption were designed to ensure that the work of the order was of a serious nature. Witness the following:

Rule 7: No one shall be received before the age of 18 years unless the Loge unanimously grant a dispensation.

Rule 8: The recommendation in proof of good life and morals shall be read in the Lodge by the Sister Secretary.

Rule 11: The Sister of Eloquence shall see that the Statues are observed. She shall inform herself accurately and secretly of the misbehavior of any of the Sisters, and advert to it with gentleness if the fault is light, but if the fault is a grave one, she shall report it to the Worshipful Mistress.

Rule 15: All meetings shall be closed with the collection of alms. The Sister Treasurer shall keep the amount collected and distributed to the unfortunates selected by the Lodge; and they shall give the preference in such cases as do not meet the public eye.

The samples from their rules indicates that the Rite of Adoption was harmonious with masonic principles, and that the degrees will be consistent with Freemasonry itself. An examination of the rituals shows that this is, indeed, so.

The ritual from which I am quoting was published by the Grand College of Rites in 1978, and is a reprint of a ritual from the collection of John Yarker, a 19th century masonic scholar. There are twelve degrees in this ritual. The rite is not practiced in this country, and I am therefore at liberty to share with you the excerpt which follows. The symbol being discussed is Jacob's Ladder, and the ritual quoted is in "question and answer" format - a format familiar to Freemasons:

- Q.: Are you [a] Mistress? A.: I have mounted the mysterious ladder.
Q.: What do its two sides represent? A.: The love of God and our neighbors.
Q.: What do the five steps represent? A.: Candour, Sweetness, Temperance, Truth, Chastity.
Q.: What do you understand by the first step? A.: Candour, the virtue proper to a refined soul, susceptible to all good intentions.
Q.: What do you understand by the second? A.: Sweetness, a virtue which I should practice to all mankind, but especially to my Brothers and Sisters.
Q.: What do you learn at the third? A.: Temperance, which teaches me to put a restraint on my feelings, and shun all forbidden pleasure.
Q.: How did you arrive at the fourth? A.: By truth, the beloved child of God.
Q.: How do you mount the fifth? A.: I hope to mount it by the practice of discretion and silence in all that may be confided to me under the seal of Masonry.
Q.: What does the fifth and last step signify? A.: Charity, subdivided into the love of God, and our neighbour.
Q.: Are there any steps between these? A.: There are others without number.

Contrast this excerpt with a similar one from the Lecture of the Entered Apprentice Degree in the ritual of the Masonic Grand Lodge of California:

The *Covering* of a Lodge is no less than the clouded canopy of star-decked heaven where all good Masons hope at last to arrive by aid of that theological ladder which Jacob, in his vision, saw, reaching from earth to heaven, the three principal rounds of which are denominated *Faith, Hope, and Charity*, which admonish us to have faith in God, hope of immortality, and charity for all mankind. The greatest of these is Charity; for our Faith may be lost in sight, Hope ends in fruition, but Charity extends beyond the grave, through the boundless realm of eternity.

You can see with this comparison how the Rite of Adoption uses some masonic symbols, and gives them an interpretation which differs from that in the masonic ritual, but which is no less an important explanation of the symbol. Throughout the rituals of the twelve degrees of the Adoptive Rite the masonic connection is clear. The ritual is beautiful, well stated, and perhaps even profound. It is certainly worthy to be a part of the Family of Freemasonry, even if it is not actively practiced in this country today.

Parallel organizations such as the Rite of Adoption are an important part of the Family of Freemasonry today in the United States. You will hear later from the Order of the Eastern Star, the largest and best known of these organizations. An important point to be made here is that although these parallel organizations are not "masonic" in the strict sense that they are degrees of

masonry by and for masons, they are repositories of the teachings of Freemasonry in a unique way. The members of these orders are not "second class" citizens, but have an importance to Freemasonry in their own right. Nor is this anything new to Freemasonry. The beginnings of these parallel organizations of women associated with Freemasonry are almost as old as speculative Freemasonry itself, and they continue to thrive today. When I was in Paris last December I had the privilege of visiting the headquarters of the Feminine Grand Lodge of France with a long time friend who was proud to show me the building where her masonic lodge meets and works. I was surprised to learn that the Rite of Adoption is still alive and active in France, as it was in 1774 when it was created, and is very much a part of the Family of Freemasonry in that country even today.

Women Who Are Freemasons

I have discussed, above, the "accidental" making of women as masons in men's lodges in the past. This last section, however, is about women who are Freemasons. You will learn more about them later today from women who belong to some of the orders which confer masonic degrees on women - sometimes in mixed orders of both men and women - and sometimes in orders whose membership is limited only to women. Before giving you some of the background about this, it is important to establish a few things about masonic "regularity" and the recognition of lodges and grand lodges by one another.

Mainstream Freemasonry is a men's organization. Only men may belong to it, and masons from these mainstream lodges and grand lodges cannot visit lodges which consist of both men and women, or which consist of women as masons. That rule applies only to the closed ritualistic sessions of these organizations - the degrees they confer and the meetings they hold in a ritualistic setting. That does not mean that mainstream Freemasons cannot associate with members of these organizations outside the ritual setting, nor does it imply that they do not respect these masons and the work that they do. Most of these non-mainstream lodges and grand lodges are "regular" in their practice of Freemasonry, that is, they have similar requirements possessed by mainstream Freemasonry. Most, if not all, require a belief in a Supreme Being as a condition for membership, and all accept as members only those whose reputation will be consistent with masonic principles. While members of mainstream lodges cannot sit in lodge with them, and thus cannot observe the rituals practiced in them, there is little doubt that the rituals are identical to or very similar to the rituals used by mainstream masonic lodges. The teachings therefore are consistent with the general teachings of Freemasonry, and we cannot but applaud anyone who makes a commitment to the ideals of an institution which we hold in such high regard.

This being said, how and where did masonic lodges arise that admit women, or - in some cases - both men and women? Where did the lodges and grand lodges in existence today which admit both men and women - or women only - get their Freemasonry. Let's take a look at what we know about them.

The French masonic historian, Clavel, records that he had information on a woman that was made a mason in a French lodge in 1797. A Madame Xaintrailles was a hero of the French Revolution, and as a reward for her service to France, was made a mason in a lodge in Paris. He

does not provide any other information, so we do not know the particulars. (as quoted in Hill, p. 74). We also have a report of the initiation of a woman in Hungary in 1875 - the Countess Hadik Barkoczy. The circumstances were somewhat unusual. In those days in most countries women could not inherit the property of their fathers simply because they were woman. According to the report, however, the countess won a lawsuit against the estate of her father, and the court declared that since he had no sons, she was entitled to inherit *as if she were a son*. Apparently this was good enough for a masonic lodge to initiate her since (as they put it) the court had decided that she was legally a *son*! Again, we know no more about the particulars than this. (Hills, *op. cit.*)

Apparently the number of women being initiated in masonic lodges was a growing phenomenon during the last half of the 19th century, not only in Europe, but in Latin America. Gordon Hills, in his 1920 paper published in the Transactions of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076, quoted this excerpt from a report from Minorca - in Spain:

"A Naval Brother afforded information of a curious experience of Spanish Freemasonry of a kind which occurred at Minorca in 1887. Being at Port Mahon with the British Fleet, he received invitation, in common with other Freemasons, to visit the Lodge ashore. Upon being ushered into the meeting, after usual ceremonies, the visitors were surprised to find several ladies seated in the Lodge and wearing the regalia of the Order. The ladies took equal share with the men in the Lodge work, and acquitted themselves most creditably, and, what is more, did not neglect charges more peculiarly their own, for two of the Sisters had their infants in arms with them. Our English Brethren were informed that a number of ladies on the Island were Freemasons, and the Order there appeared to be conducted as a benefit society more on the lines of Oddfellowship than of the Craft." (Hills, pp. 74-75)

Before his death in 1891, Albert Pike, Grand Commander of the Southern Jurisdiction of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, received a letter from the Grand Commander of the Supreme Council in Mexico City asking him if he could confer the Fourth Degree on a prominent woman who was a mason in Mexico. Pike, of course, haughtily informed him that women could not be masons, and that therefore she could not receive the Fourth Degree. However that had not occurred to the Grand Commander of Mexico when he made his original request. It is evident that there were women masons in Mexico at this time, and that even someone as prominent as the Grand Commander of Mexico didn't think it unusual.

However, the origin of most women's Freemasonry in Europe and in this country stems from the initiation of a woman in a lodge in France in 1882. Her name was Marie Desraîmes, and she was initiated in the Lodge *Les Libres Penseurs* at Le Pecq, north of Paris. The lodge held a charter from the symbolic Grand Lodge of France - an offshoot of the Scottish Rite Supreme Council - and the charter was subsequently suspended by the Grand Lodge for this initiation. Within a few years a new masonic movement had sprung up in France - lodges which included both men and women. It is from those lodges that both "co-masonry" and "women's Freemasonry" claim descent. You will hear more about these two movements and their subsequent organizational development later today.

The subject of women's Freemasonry today would not be complete without a statement about the position of the United Grand Lodge of England on the subject. The United Grand Lodge of England has long opposed masons belonging to masonic organizations composed of both men and women, and so it should be no surprise that they consider the Order of the Eastern Star to be clandestine. When the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of California writes to the United Grand Lodge of England for confirmation of the masonic membership of an individual mason for purposes of a woman applying for membership in the Order of the Eastern Star, he is frostily informed that the United Grand Lodge of England considers the organization to be clandestine, and will not provide the requested information. It may come as a surprise then to learn that their position on the Women's Order of Freemasons in England is different. Perhaps because no men can be members of this order, the threat of a mixed group is not present. Whatever the reason, in 1999 the United Grand Lodge of England published the following statement on their website:

Statement issued by UGLE - 10th March 1999

"There exist in England and Wales at least two Grand Lodges solely for women. Except that these bodies admit women, they are, so far as can be ascertained, otherwise regular in their practice. There is also one which admits both men and women to membership. They are not recognised by this Grand Lodge and intervisitation may not take place. There are, however, discussions from time to time with the women's Grand Lodges on matters of mutual concern. Brethren are therefore free to explain to non-Masons, if asked, that Freemasonry is not confined to men (even though this Grand Lodge does not itself admit women). Further information about these bodies may be obtained by writing to the Grand Secretary.

The Board [of General Purposes] is also aware that there exist other bodies not directly imitative of pure antient Masonry, but which by implication introduce Freemasonry, such as the Order of the Eastern Star. Membership of such bodies, attendance at their meetings, or participation in their ceremonies is incompatible with membership of this Grand Lodge."

It should be noted that the United Grand Lodge of England has declared that women's Freemasonry (there are two women's grand lodges in England at present) are regular, although intervisitation is not permitted. The position of the United Grand Lodge of England appears to have gone further in this regard than any other Grand Lodge in the English-speaking world.

Summary

This paper has endeavored to present an introduction to the subject of Women and Freemasonry in a historical context. The subject has been considered under four main headings:

- Women and Freemasonry in guilds of stonemasons
- Women who became Freemasons by accident
- Women in parallel organizations with men's Freemasonry
- Women who are Freemasons

Time will not permit an extended discussion of women who are Freemasons in this paper. However, the main purpose of the paper is to show that the subject of Women and Freemasonry has an extended history - hence the sub-title, "Three Centuries of a Masonic Family History." I have endeavored to show that parallel organizations within the Family of Freemasonry, such as the Rite of Adoption, and the Order of the Eastern Star, are not anomalies, but instead may be considered an integral part of the evolution of Freemasonry itself. And although some women have sought out actual masonic membership, not all those associated with Freemasonry have done so, and many find the rituals expressed in the parallel organizations to be of such great merit that they have no desire to do so. The American experience can be appropriately summed up in the words of the great masonic scholar, Henry Wilson Coil, when he said of the adoptive rites and orders associated with Freemasonry:

"The attitudes of Grand Lodges may vary from full recognition and control, such as that of the Grand Orient of France over its *Rite of Adoption* to that of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania which will have nothing to do with androgynous bodies, even to the extent of not allowing the use of Masonic halls by them. It even prohibits its members from belonging to them. [NB: this has changed since Coil wrote it in 1961.] Between these two extremes there is a great variety of treatment, so that a given Grand Lodge may, itself, have difficulty in defining how far it has recognized the Masonic standing of androgynous bodies. It must be observe, however, that the issue is not based primarily on sex, for virtually the same questions arise and the same treatment is meted out with respect to purely male orders of the so-called higher degrees, such as the Royal Arch Masons, the Royal and Select Masters, the Knights Templar, and the Scottish Rite.

Conditions with respect to mixed order of Masons and their female relatives are likewise lacking in uniformity. Sentiment has undergone a great change over the past century. Protests against "female Masonry" and both androgynous and adopted orders at the middle of the 19th century were vigorous and tinged with horror, it being feared that their spread would destroy Freemasonry. But, by the middle of the 20th century, we find Grand Masters speaking of the Eastern Star in the same tones that would be used with respect to Chapter or Commandery and, furthermore, urging their lodges to sponsor and encourage such girls' orders as *Job's Daughters* and the *Order of Rainbow for Girls*. "

Coil has said it well. And what he observed in 1961 is certainly all the more true in 2008. Women are honored and respected as a part of the Family of Freemasonry, and so are their organizations. Will that same respect be accorded to masonic lodges comprised of both men and women? Or of just women? Only time will tell. Because they are few in number, and not much of a factor of the usual masonic experience at present, it is difficult to predict what our relationship will be over the near term. But just as Freemasonry has accommodated changing conditions in the world at large - from the aristocratic conditions of pre-Revolutionary France to the modern world of business where women are full partners in most enterprises - we can expect change, if nothing else. But as the Family of Freemasonry has a history spanning some three centuries in the past, I am confident that it will have a history for centuries to come.

Selected References

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