

Book Review

HARRISON, David, *The Genesis of Freemasonry* (Hersham: Lewis Masonic, 2009), 224 pp., £19.99, Hbk, ISBN 978-08531-8322-8.

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The year 2007 was an important date in the academic study of British freemasonry since several people, including Andrew Pink, Mark C. Wallace and David Harrison were awarded with PhD degrees for their doctoral theses on different aspects of freemasonry in Britain. The title of Harrison's study, submitted to the University of Liverpool, was 'The Masonic Enlightenment: Symbolism, Transition and Change in English Freemasonry during the Eighteenth Century', which has now been published by Lewis Masonic without major revision. The publisher was not content with this long title so they decided to borrow the title of Douglas Knoop's excellent book *The Genesis of Freemasonry* (1947). On the one hand, this nod to an esteemed scholar of freemasonry should have been properly acknowledged in the introduction. On the other hand, the old/new title is misleading since the book hardly discusses the medieval and early modern background of freemasonry. Hence, it does not contribute to the debate about the English and/or Scottish origins of freemasonry, discussed in the works of Prof. David Stevenson and John Hamill.

Rather, this thesis/book is an attempt to demonstrate the development of English freemasonry from the late seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century. Harrison suggests three transitions in the history of the fraternity: (i) the shift from operative freemasonry to speculative (ii) the changes to the rituals and symbolism after the foundation of the *Grand Lodge of England* in 1717; (iii) the transition brought about by the rival Grand Lodges, which were finally resolved in the establishment of the *United Grand Lodge of England* in 1813. The author elaborates on these alleged paradigm shifts in three major parts of the book, focusing on ritualistic, architectural and political aspects of English freemasonry. He emphasizes the paucity of scholarly writings on the evolution and the ritualistic aspects of the society and offers case studies from the history of Warrington, Chester and York lodges, where one can trace the signs of original archival research. Another merit of the work is that it investigates some ignored masonic gravestones of the nineteenth century, though they were erected after the book's indicated terminus. Harrison also attempts to look at the key themes of the rituals from the perspectives of alchemy and magic. One of his major arguments is that 'the search for immortality within Freemasonry clearly drew upon the Rosicrucian links to alchemy and the search for the philosopher's stone' (p. 75), which is not underlined convincingly. When depicting the political aspects of the brotherhood, the author, heavily relying on the proclamations of contemporary masonic constitutions and orations, stresses that the neutral and apolitical lodges not only provided a haven for Whigs but also for Tories and Jacobites. It is clear from this

that substantial further research is required about the involvement and activities of Jacobite and Tory freemasons in eighteenth-century lodges.

I find it difficult to evaluate this work both as a thesis and as a typical Lewis Masonic publication. It is, in fact, rather a strange marriage since I am not sure if this publisher has ever issued a doctoral thesis before. The book lacks some *sine qua non* elements of a PhD thesis. For instance, it does not have a literature review of any kind and no method(ology) is introduced to answer the research question. The main arguments of the book do not reflect the current state of research in this field because the author seldom incorporates recent scholarly writings on his themes, which would have been fundamental for his concerns. This accounts for the number of factual and interpretive mistakes in the book. Apart from a single article on the neglect of research into freemasonry, the author did not take Andrew Prescott's relevant papers into consideration. Instead of again justifying the transition theory on operative and speculative freemasons, which has recently been highly criticized, the author could have revised his thesis by testing Prescott's periodisation of British masonic history in light of his source material. In the lengthy discussion of masonic ceremonies, no mention is made of Jan Snoek's writings on the evolution of rituals. Also, one wonders why Harrison uses Richard Carlile's *Manual of Freemasonry* (1825) to summarize and interpret the themes of eighteenth-century degrees when a number of catechisms and exposures are readily available from the actual period. In the 62 page long section on 'The Architecture of Freemasonry' James S. Curl's standard text on the subject appears merely in an endnote as 'see also' (p. 110). The book is full of 'mysterious' (the most commonly used adjective) rituals, figures and lodges, however, most of his so-called mysteries have been exposed and explored in the scholarly literature for quite some time.

As regards style this book is not an easy read. The author often tries to introduce and discuss general themes in 3-4 line paragraphs. The publisher should have devoted much more time to proofreading this work, which contains a number of stylistic and editorial inaccuracies. For example, well-known titles, including David Stevenson's work, are incorrectly cited, not to mention the odd minute Roman numerals of the endnotes. However, Harrison's work might appeal to the target audience of Lewis Masonic Publications, who would like to have a general, handy and relatively inexpensive introduction to the history of English freemasonry in the Age of Enlightenment.