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Reference Section, The School of Instruction

by Thomas M. Savini

Was it a Freemason who first said, “Don’t believe everything you read!”? I ask this question because it’s the type of thing we hear on a daily basis at the Livingston Masonic Library. Our patrons, both Masonic and non-Masonic, visit, e-mail or call looking for verification of all kinds of pseudo-Masonic trivia. “Wasn’t every President of the United States a Freemason?” “Haven’t all the rulers of England been Freemasons?” “Didn’t the Freemasons build Madison Square Garden and Yankee Stadium?” The public perception of Freemasonry, and the Craft as we as Freemasons understand it, has frequently been characterized by a mixture of historical fact and flat-out legend. The recent publication of popular novels (you know the ones I’m writing about) and pseudo-histories (the ones that start out, “Isn’t it possible that...”) have further muddied the waters of Masonic history. The adage “Don’t believe everything you read” is a motto that should hang in every Masonic school of instruction.

We all know that Freemasonry is not a religion, but the study of Freemasonry has much in common with the study of religions. The study of a religion involves learning about the religion itself, its theology, philosophy and symbolism, and about what principles, tenets and practices it teaches to and expects of its adherents. A study of this sort focuses more on what has been written and said about the religion, often by its own practitioners, and what has taken place within the context of the religion. For example: what is its ritual; how has that changed or developed over time, and what are its customs and traditions?

Another major aspect of studying a religion involves its development and

actions in the context of the world around it—its history. What actions has the religion taken as an institution and as a movement, and how have these actions impacted the world around it? How have the beliefs and tenets of the religion influenced changes in the social structures and common practices in existence outside the context of the religion? And my favorite question: to what extent is there consistency between what the religion preaches and what it practices, and the actions and influences that it actually has taken, or continues to take, in the real world? Does it “Walk the Talk?”

This second aspect of study focuses on history, or what really happened. Historical fact is not opinion or supposition; it is a shared interpretation of a common reality, verified by independent and unbiased reliable sources. We often arrive at historical fact through supposition or opinion, as a physical scientist will begin with a thesis before progressing to an experiment and arriving at a conclusion. It can cause a lot of trouble when a supposition or an opinion is put forth as historical fact without documentation to support it as such. It can also cause a lot of trouble when the two areas of study described above cross boundaries, or when a study of a religion’s beliefs and philosophy is instead purported to be a statement of historical fact. Human history is full of examples of this confusion; consult your nearest history book or this morning’s *New York Times*.

The written history of Freemasonry is also full of examples of this type of confusion, where our philosophy, symbolism, ritual and legend has been presented or interpreted as our actual history. The first major written work of the historical institution of speculative Freemasonry, James Anderson’s 1723 *Constitutions*, includes a statement of practices for the conduct of Masonic Lodges and a listing of principles governing Freemasonry. It also contains a lengthy discourse on the history of Freemasonry, beginning with Adam of Eden as the first Freemason. I’m fairly secure in stating that we have no documented proof that Adam was the first Freemason, and that this portion of Anderson’s work belongs to the realm of legend rather than the realm of historical fact. I’m also fairly certain Anderson knew

that when he wrote the *Constitutions*, and he probably knew his writing would be appreciated by its readers as legendary or mythological writing, not interpreted as historical narrative. But I meet patrons on a regular basis who demonstrate difficulty in distinguishing between Freemasonry’s philosophical/symbolic tradition, and its documented history.

Masonic philosophy and symbolism has a rich tradition and incredible selection of written works from writers such as Albert Pike, Manly Hall, W. L. Wilmshurst, Allen Roberts, George Oliver, Kirk MacNulty, and many other Masonic and non-Masonic authors. These writers examine the symbols of the Craft and contemplate their meanings. They speculate on the origins and meaning of the Ritual, and take their readers’ minds on journeys of introspection and understanding. They apply the principles to philosophies which enhance our appreciation of the Craft’s teachings, and allow us to apply these principles to the conduct of our own lives. Freemasonry is enhanced and made better because of the existence of works in this area of study; but works of this type should not be read, interpreted or presented to the general public as documented accounts of Freemasonry’s actual history.

Masonic history is well-represented by works of writers including Peter Ross, Ossian Lang, Charles McClenahan, Robert Macoy, Robert Gould, Albert Mackey, and more recently, S. Brent Morris, Jasper Ridley, Margaret Jacob, Frances Yates, Mark Tabbert, Angel Millar, and Richard Vang. Masonic history and historiography examine the actions of Freemasonry and of individual Masons; the possible origins and influences of Masonry; the character and make-up of Masonic organizations; and the interactions between the institution of Freemasonry with the course of general history and historical events. Masonic history might study, for example, the influence that Masonic principles had upon the framing of the American Republic. Supporting evidence might include documented listings of Freemasons who contributed to the development of the American system of government, and specific examples of Masonic principles incorporated into colonial or early governmental structures. The study might also include



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an examination of possible shared influences upon Freemasonry and the United States republic, with the critical admonition that correlation does not necessarily equal causation. But hopefully, Masonic history, like general history, will be unbiased, objective, accurate, well-documented, and reflect a general consensus on reality as it happened (or as it is happening).

Masonic history has many points of pride. We Masons can be proud of the number of United States Presidents who have been Master Masons (fourteen, if you're counting). We don't have to inflate our history to include people who probably weren't or definitely weren't Freemasons. We don't need to take credit for or associate ourselves with every positive occurrence in the history of humanity. We've done and continue to do plenty of positive things for the Craft and for the world around us. We also don't need to be ashamed of our history, nor need we be afraid to examine our own history with objective eyes. Every human institution--religions,

governments, Masonic Lodges--has aspects of history that are not very pretty. We can present those aspects within the context of historical study, and learn from the obstacles and mistakes made in our own historical progress. We do ourselves and the general public a great disservice when we ignore or gloss over areas of our Masonic history, or overstate or outright propagandize Masonic contributions to the world.

It's challenging when speculations on Masonic history are presented as verifiable historical facts. Speculation is a valid stage of historical investigation. It may well be that there are valid connections between the crusading Knights Templar and contemporary Freemasonry. These possibilities are cheapened when they are presented by writers who self-validate their suppositions, and who cite conjectures and legends as historical sources. We turn ourselves and Freemasonry into laughingstocks when we confuse speculation with fact.

We face the added challenge of non-Masonic writers and public perception,

which often experience the confusion between Masonic history and Masonic legend, and portray us as the group originating from Atlantis, migrating to Egypt, founding western civilization, controlling the course of human history, hiding the infinite treasures, maintaining the genealogy of Christ, hoarding the secret of transmuting base metals into gold, and whatever other conspiracies Freemasonry has been blamed for or credited with. These tangents are the grist for fun fiction, depending on the skill of the individual writers who employ them, but they should not be confused with historical fact.

There's plenty to read about Freemasonry. Read all that you can, remembering that different writings belong to different areas of study. Fit what you read into your own frameworks of study, and seek further insight by reading and discussing what you've read. Just don't believe everything you read. ■

The Masonic Charitable Gift Annuity Program is Moving Forward!

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