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SHAI AFSAI

Thomas Paine's Masonic Essay

Thomas Paine was one of the most influential thinkers of the American Revolution. His writings, such as *The Age of Reason* and *Common Sense*, are still relevant today—but many do not realize that he also wrote about Freemasonry. Was he a member of the Craft? Shai Afsai addresses this question in a critical and scholarly way.



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One of the leading minds of the Age of Enlightenment authored an essay connecting Freemasonry to the ancient ways of the Druids. But was Thomas Paine an initiate?

Thomas Paine's Masonic Essay

AND THE QUESTION OF HIS MEMBERSHIP IN THE FRATERNITY

SHAI AFSAI ON THE ARGUMENT OVER THE MASONIC STATUS
OF THE MAN WHO GAVE THE AGE OF REASON ITS NAME

Thomas Paine (1737–1809) was among the most active and prolific radicals of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and perhaps “the first man to practice revolution as a sole reason for being.”¹ He wrote and fought for American independence from England, encouraged the abolition of slavery,² helped shape Pennsylvania’s constitution,³ advocated a restructuring of English government,⁴ argued for elimination of the death penalty,⁵ participated in France’s legislature,⁶ and “laid out the first design of a modern welfare state,”⁷ among other activities.⁸ While he lived, he directly influenced politics in America (perhaps even coining the name “United States”), in England, and in France, and long after his death his writings have continued to be primary documents in the struggle for freedom and human rights worldwide.¹⁰ But what connection, if any, did the famous — and, at times, notorious — author of *Common Sense*, *The Crisis*, *Rights of Man*, and *The Age of Reason* have with the Masonic Order?

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In *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, Jack Fruchtman writes that there is insufficient evidence to answer the question with certainty: “It has long been questioned whether Paine was a member of the Masons. There is no definitive proof either way. There is no specific date known on which he joined nor a specific lodge to which he was attached.”¹¹ Nonetheless, it has been common to ascribe Masonic membership to Paine. This is seen in the tendency of some American Grand Lodges, during the 1990’s, to publish brochures that placed Paine on the roster of famous Masons.¹² One such example, an informational brochure put out by the Grand Lodge of Oregon, states: “The pantheon of Masons holds George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine, among others.”¹³ Various Masonic websites continue to make similar claims about Paine and Masonry, as well.¹⁴

In *The Transatlantic Republican: Thomas Paine and the Age of Revolutions*, Bernard Vincent devotes a chapter to “Thomas Paine, the Masonic Order, and the American Revolution,” and explains several aspects of the inclination to consider him a Mason:

While working on my Tom Paine biography, I was intrigued from the outset by the fact that all of a

sudden, within just a few weeks or months, and as if by magic, Paine leaped from his obscure humdrum existence in England—where he had worked as a corset-maker and Excise officer—onto the American literary and political stage, there to become, at the age of almost forty, one of the leading lights of the Revolutionary movement.

How was it that a man who was little short of a failure in his native country became acquainted so rapidly with the most prominent figures in the Colonies, even becoming a friend of theirs in many cases? How can one account for the quickness of his ascent

and the suddenness of his glory?

One way of accounting for this, one hypothesis (which has several times been made), is to consider that Paine became a Freemason and that, as such, he enjoyed, first in America, then in England and France, the kindly assistance of certain lodges or of certain individual Masons.¹⁵

Vincent rejects this idea, however, due to a lack of corroborative evidence. It is certain that Washington and Franklin were Masons, but there is no equivalent support for such a claim about Paine.



Assertions of Paine's Masonic membership also rest on the fact that between 1803 and 1805, after returning to America from England and France, he penned the essay "Origin of Free-Masonry."¹⁶ For some, Paine's curiosity about Freemasonry, and his decision to write about it, have been, in and of themselves, sufficient proof that he was a Mason. However, Vincent rejects this line of reasoning:

Paine's interest in Freemasonry was such that toward the end his life, in 1805, he wrote a lengthy piece entitled *An Essay on the Origin of Freemasonry* But this does not prove, any more than any other detail or fact that we know of, that Paine was a Mason. There is indeed no formal trace of his initiation or membership in England, none in America, and none in France. Questioned about Paine's membership...the United Grand Lodge of England had only this to answer: "In the absence of any record of his initiation, it must, therefore, be assumed he was not a member of the order."¹⁷

Though not necessarily a Mason himself, Paine certainly had several close friends who were members of the Order.¹⁸ For example, while living in France after fleeing England in order to escape charges of sedition, Paine resided at the home of Nicolas de Bonneville and his family. Samuel Edwards depicts Bonneville as "[a]n active Freemason" who "was convinced that the principles and aims of Masonry, if applied to the world's ailments, would bring peace and prosperity to all nations."¹⁹ The bond between the two men was quite strong. Paine resided at Bonneville's Paris home from 1797 until 1802, and eventually, Bonneville's wife and their sons followed Paine to America.²⁰ Fruchtman suggests that during Paine's time in Paris, Bonneville introduced him to the philosophies of Freemasonry and Theophilanthropism.²¹

William M. Van der Weyde, in *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine*, also mentions Paine's Masonic associations, while at the same time emphasizing that these friendships are not evidence he belonged to the fraternity: "Paine was the author of an interesting and highly instructive treatise on the Origin of Freemasonry . . . but, although many of his circle of friends were undoubtedly members of that order, no conclusive proof has ever been adduced that Paine was a Mason."²² Likewise, Moncure Daniel Conway proposes that "Paine's intimacy in Paris with Nicolas de Bonneville and Charles François Dupuis, whose writings are replete with Masonic speculations, sufficiently explains his interest in the subject" of Freemasonry, even though he himself was probably not a Mason.²³

Bonneville's widow published Paine's "Origin of Free-Masonry" in 1810, after his death, although she chose to omit certain passages in it that could be seen as disparaging to Christianity. Most of these were restored in a later printing, in 1818.²⁴ Paine's central premise in "Origin of Free-Masonry" is that the Order "is derived and is the remains of the religion of the ancient Druids; who, like the Magi of Persia and the Priests of Heliopolis in Egypt, were Priests of the Sun."²⁵ The idea that Masonry derived from the Druids did not begin with Paine, and has been advanced by others after him.²⁶ According to Paine, however, this Druid origin is the true and deepest secret of Masonry, from which extend all the ceremonies and concealment Masons engage in:

The natural source of secrecy is fear. When any new religion over-runs a former religion, the professors of the new become the persecutors of the old [W]hen the Christian religion over-ran the religion of the Druids . . . the Druids became the subject of persecution. This would naturally and necessarily oblige

such of them as remained attached to their original religion to meet in secret, and under the strongest injunctions of secrecy. Their safety depended upon it. A false brother might expose the lives of many of them to destruction; and from the remains of the religion of the Druids, thus preserved, arose the institution which, to avoid the name of Druid, took that of Mason, and practiced under this new name the rites and ceremonies of Druids.²⁷

Masonic author Albert G. Mackey quips that Paine “knew, by the way, as little of Masonry as he did of the religion of the Druids.”²⁸ He calls the essay “frivolous” and Paine “a mere sciologist in the subject of what he presumptuously sought to treat.”²⁹ Indeed, it is evident from “Origin of Free-Masonry” that Paine was not very knowledgeable of the Craft—although that fact alone does not, of course, prove he was not a Mason when he wrote it.

Paine’s general tone, however, shows him to be an outsider trying to assess what is in the Order, rather than a member of it, and that, more than anything else, indicates that he was not a Mason at the time he composed “Origin of Free-Masonry.” For example, after referring to certain statements about Masonry made by the Provincial Grand Master of Kent, Captain George Smith, in the latter’s *The Use and Abuse of Free-Masonry* (1783), Paine concludes:

It sometimes happens, as well in writing as in conversation, that a person lets slip an expression that serves to unravel what he intends to conceal, and this is the case with Smith, for in the same chapter he says, “The Druids, when they committed any thing to writing, used the Greek alphabet, and I am bold to assert that the most perfect remains of the Druids’ rites and ceremonies are preserved in the customs and ceremonies of the Masons that are to be found

existing among mankind.” “My brethren,” says he, “may be able to trace them with greater exactness than I am at liberty to explain to the public.”

This is a confession from a Master Mason, without intending it to be so understood by the public, that Masonry is the remains of the religion of the Druids . . .³⁰

These are not the words of a man who is himself a Master Mason, but rather of one who is guessing at what secrets a Master Mason knows and may be inadvertently revealing. Paine, an outsider, mistakes Smith’s personal conjecture for an unintended confession. If he was not a Master Mason at the time he wrote the essay, could Paine have been an Entered Apprentice or a Fellow Craft? It is difficult to argue that Paine was curious enough about Freemasonry’s origin and philosophy to write seriously about the fraternity, and also to begin the Craft degrees, but that he did not wait until he had concluded them before finishing his essay. This is an especially difficult case to make since in “Origin of Free-Masonry” Paine contends that Master Masons have access to information concerning the fraternity’s origins that other Masons are ignorant about. His essay begins:

The Society of Masons are distinguished into three classes or degrees. 1st. The Entered Apprentice. 2^d. The Fellow Craft. 3^d. The Master Mason.

The Entered Apprentice knows but little more of Masonry than the use of signs and tokens, and certain steps and words by which Masons can recognize each other without being discovered by a person who is not a Mason. The Fellow Craft is not much better instructed in Masonry, than the Entered Apprentice. It is only in the Master Mason’s Lodge, that whatever knowledge remains of the origin of Masonry is preserved and concealed.³¹

The Druid Mystique in Early Freemasonry

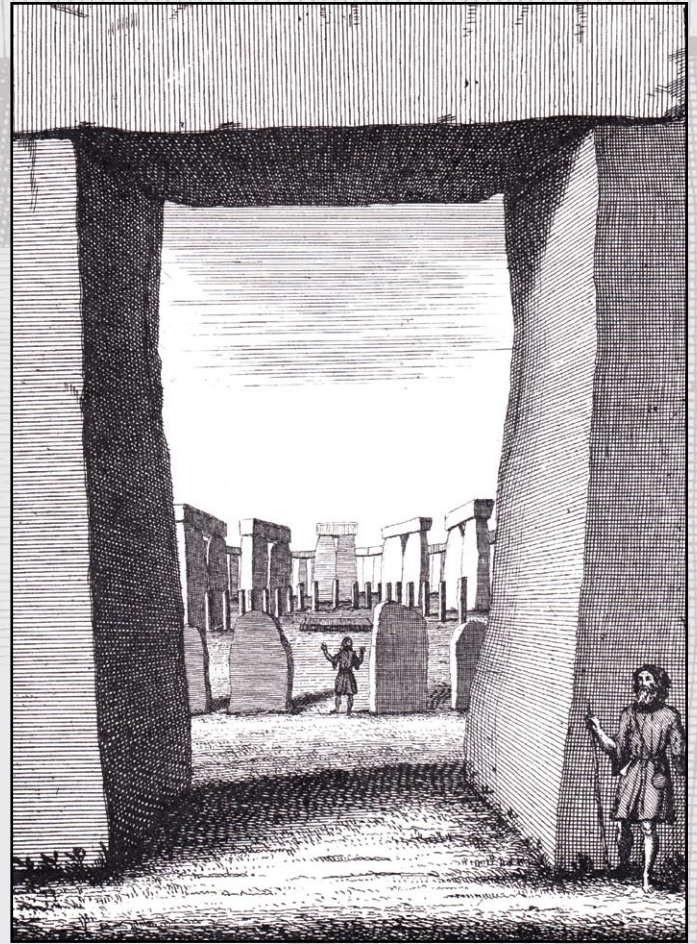
Although Thomas Paine's theory that Speculative Freemasonry was derived from the Druids may strike modern Masonic ears as outlandish and even offensive, it is best seen in historical context. First, it is important to remember that in England, the Druids have sometimes been idealized as the noble representatives of a pure and primordial Celtic culture that was misunderstood and wrongly maligned by the Romans.

Next, it is worth bearing in mind that early Freemasons frequently spoke of a cultural connection or affinity to the ancient Druid ways. A prominent example would be Dr. William Stukeley, a Fellow of the Royal Society and one of the Fraternity's most brilliant intellectuals. Stukeley devoted decades to the study of Stonehenge (at the time believed to be a relic of the Druids), and believed that Freemasonry, into which he was initiated in 1721, represented a partial survival of the ancient ways that were once practiced at the massive stone circle. Scholar Steven Bullock explains that "Learned gentlemen like Stukeley saw the Freemasons' histories, forms, and rituals as a direct link to the primeval world that loomed so large in the imagination of educated Britons, promising a deeper insight into the nature of God and the world."

Indeed, the Grand Lodge of England's *Constitutions of 1723* records that "some think there are a few Remains of good Masonry . . . raised by the original Skill [such] as the Celtic Edifices, erected by the ancient Gauls, and by the ancient Britains too, who were a Colony of the Celtes, long before the Romans invaded this Island." A 1730 Masonic treatise reprinted in the Grand Lodge's 1738 *Constitutions* argues that "with reasonable Allowance for Distance of Time," one may "discover something, at least, like Masonry" in the traditions of the Druids.

In 1769, Wellins Calcott invoked the Druids, who punished any who "published or profaned their mysteries," to justify the Masonic practice of ritualistic secrecy.

William Hutchinson proudly wrote in his 1775 *Spirit of Masonry* (published with official sanction and recom-



William Stukeley, *A Peep into the Sanctum Sanctorum*, 1724.

mendation of the Moderns' Grand Lodge) that "We . . . are bold to say, that we retain more of the ceremonials and doctrines of the Druids, than is to be found in the whole world besides; and have saved from oblivion, many of their religious rites, in our initiation to the first degree of Masonry, which otherwise would have slept in eternity." The same year, William Preston wrote, "The Druids are said to have retained many usages among them similar to those of masons; but of what they chiefly consisted, we cannot, at this distance of time, with certainty discover."

These are only a few examples. So, while recognizing the fact that historians must disregard the notion of any lineal, historical connection between Masonry and the Druids, Masonic scholars recognize that a significant number of early interpreters of the Craft expressed and appreciated a cultural affinity between the two traditions. Thomas Paine's essay, whatever its flaws, ought to be viewed in this context.—ED.

Presumably, had he begun the degrees, Paine would have wanted all the knowledge they had to offer, and would have waited until he had gained access to it before completing his essay. It is far more likely that he was not at all a member of the fraternity at the time of the essay's composition and was writing as an outsider, although one with close associates within the Order.

In his essay on Paine in *Freemasonry Today*, David Harrison speculates: "If Paine did enter into Freemasonry, it would have been during the period of the American Revolution, his life being at the epicentre of the social elite at that time, his closeness to Franklin, Washington, Lafayette and Monroe suggesting that he was undoubtedly aware of their Masonic membership."³² Paine's "Origin of Free-Masonry," however, indicates that despite his closeness to these men, he did not enter into Freemasonry at that time. Years later, around 1803-1805, he was still writing as an outsider.

Although he may not have been a member, facets of Paine's thought can be seen to correspond to Masonic principles. In *The Age of Reason* (of which "Origin of Free-Masonry" may have originally been intended to be a part),³³ for example, Paine explains his religious beliefs:

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life.

I believe the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy.³⁴

Such statements, which can be said to have a Masonic ring to them, prompted Masonic historian Joseph Fort Newton to write of Paine:

Thomas Paine... though not a Mason, has left us

an essay on *The Origin of Freemasonry*. Few men have ever been more unjustly and cruelly maligned than this great patriot, who was the first to utter the name "United States," and who, instead of being a sceptic, believed in "the religion in which all men agree"—that is, in God, Duty, and the immortality of the Soul.³⁵

Similarly, Vincent concludes in *The Transatlantic Republican* that while Paine "probably never belonged to any specific fraternity, he nevertheless actively sympathized with the Masonic movement and the philosophy it espoused."³⁶

Although Voltaire, for example, became a Mason shortly before passing away,³⁷ there is nothing to suggest that Paine became a Mason in the interval between composing "Origin of Free-Masonry" and his death a few years later, in 1809. As he was certainly not a Master Mason when he wrote the essay—and as there is no evidence he joined the fraternity after then—one may conclude, as have Mackey, Newton, and others, that Paine was not a Freemason.³⁸ Still, though the "pantheon of Masons" may not hold Thomas Paine, this influential and controversial man remains connected to Freemasonry, if only due to the close friendships he had with some in the fraternity, and to his having written an intriguing essay on its origins.

NOTES

1. Jerome D. Wilson and William F. Ricketson, *Thomas Paine* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 163.
2. Christopher Hitchens, *Thomas Paine's Rights of Man: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 28-29 & 43-44.
3. Isaac Kramnick, ed., *Common Sense* (London: Penguin, 1986), 31.
4. Kramnick, *Common Sense*, 33.
5. Hitchens, *Thomas Paine's Rights of Man*, 60.
6. Kramnick, *Common Sense*, 34-36.
7. Hitchens, *Thomas Paine's Rights of Man*, 109; see also

- p. 120. Bernard Vincent devotes a chapter to “Paine’s Agrarian Justice and the Birth of the Welfare State” in his *The Transatlantic Republican: Thomas Paine and the Age of Revolutions* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 125–35.
8. Kramnick (*Common Sense*, 28) believes Paine also supported women’s rights. Hitchens, however, disagrees: “he was not a notable advocate of the rights of women” (*Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man*, 98). So does Vincent, who considers Paine’s attitude toward women’s suffrage to have been pedestrian: “For once, Paine failed to be a prophet” (*The Transatlantic Republican*, 124).
 9. Hitchens, *Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man*, 8 & 36. Joseph Fort Newton, among others, believed this to be the case. See below, note 35.
 10. Hitchens, *Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man*, 141–42.
 11. Jack Fruchtman, Jr., *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1994), 491n.
 12. “Famous Non-Masons,” on the website of Anti-Masonry—Points of View, <http://www.masonicinfo.com/famousnon.htm>.
 13. “The Real Secret of Freemasonry,” published by authority of the Trustees of The Grand Lodge of A.F. & A.M. of Oregon (Still Associates, 1990).
 14. Examples: The Key West Masons website, <http://www.keywestmason.com>, which has a page of famous Masons, among whom Paine is listed; and the website of the Valley of Albany, New York, <http://www.valleyofalbany.aasmasonry.us>, where a quote from the opening lines of *The Crisis* is attributed to “Bro. Thomas Paine.”
 15. Vincent, *The Transatlantic Republican*, 35.
 16. Jennifer N. Wunder, *Keats, Hermeticism, and the Secret Societies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 37. Vincent (*The Transatlantic Republican*) cites 1805 as the year “Origin of Free-Masonry” was written, as does Fruchtman (*Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, 491n). However, William Van der Weyde places its writing in 1803. See “Chronological Table of Thomas Paine’s Writings,” on the website of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association, <http://www.thomaspaine.org/chron.html>.
 17. Vincent, *The Transatlantic Republican*, 36.
 18. See Wunder’s *Keats, Hermeticism, and the Secret Societies*, where she writes that Diderot, Joseph Priestly, and Paine were “associated so closely and with so many Freemasons that they were grouped, *de facto*, with the Masons in publications of the period.” (35)
 19. Samuel Edwards, *Rebell! A Biography of Tom Paine* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), 227.
 20. Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine*, 275.
 21. Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine*, 275 & 379–80.
 22. William M. Van der Weyde, *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine* (New York: Thomas Paine National Historical Association, 1925), 1:171.
 23. Moncure Daniel Conway, ed., “Origin of Free-Masonry,” in *The Writings of Thomas Paine* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 4:290n.
 24. Conway, *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, 4:290n.
 25. Conway, *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, 4:293.
 26. Albert Gallatin Mackey addresses these ideas in his chapter on “Druidism and Freemasonry” in *The History of Freemasonry* (New York: Masonic History Co., 1898), 1:199–216. See also Andrew Prescott’s lecture on “Druidic Myths and Freemasonry,” on the website of The Centre for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism at <http://freemasonry.dept.shef.ac.uk/index.php?lang=o&type=page&levelo=243&level1=387&level2=392&op=381>.
 27. Conway, *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, 4:303.
 28. Mackey, *The History of Freemasonry*, 1:199.
 29. Mackey, *The History of Freemasonry*, 1:216.
 30. Conway, *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, 4:294–95.
 31. Conway, *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, 4:290–91.
 32. David Harrison, “Thomas Paine, Freemason?,” *Freemasonry Today*, Issue 46, Autumn 2008, <http://www.freemasonrytoday.com/46/p11.php>. Arguing the possibility that Paine became a Mason during this time, Harrison continues: “Paine was certainly attracted to clubs and societies throughout his life, such as the White Hart Club which Paine attended when he was an exciseman in Lewes. He was a founding member of the first Anti-Slavery Society in America and he was involved in the society of Theophilanthropists and Philosophical Society” In contrast, Vincent argues: “A rugged individualist, Paine neither liked collective ceremonies nor secret practices Both his nature and the lessons of experience made him loathe the idea of regimentation. He never was a declared member of any party or sect or church, and it is highly probable that he never joined the Masonic Order.” (*The Transatlantic Republican*, 39)
 33. Conway, *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, 4:290n.
 34. Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* (Boston: Josiah P. Mendum, 1852), part 1, p. 6. These sentences are quoted, with slightly different wording, in Hitchens’s *Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man*, 126.
 35. Joseph Fort Newton, *The Builders: A Story and Study of Masonry* (Cedar Rapids, Ia.: The Torch Press, 1916), 225–26n.

THOMAS PAINE

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36. Vincent, *The Transatlantic Republican*, 35.
37. Vincent, *The Transatlantic Republican*, 38.
38. For another example, see Augustus C. L. Arnold's *Philosophical History of Free-Masonry and Other Secret Societies* (New York: Clark, Austen, and Smith, 1854), 204, second note. Arnold concludes that Paine was not "a member of the brotherhood." He reproduces Paine's entire essay in his *Philosophical History*, along with marginal notes, with the aim of, among other things, correcting what he considers to be Paine's mistaken assertions about the fraternity. See p. 204, first note. See also the entry on Paine in William R. Denslow's *10,000 Famous Freemasons*, vol. 3: "Although Paine wrote *An Essay on the Origin of Freemasonry*, he was not a Freemason Certain writers have made claims that he was a member of various lodges both in America and France."

ROBERT BURNS

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- Dumfries & Galloway Council is of animal skin and simple, ornamented solely with a letter "G" inside a triangle (DUMFM: 0198.419, see <http://www.scran.ac.uk/database/record.php?usi=000-000-026-813-C>).
36. Joanne Turner, email, 25 March 2009. I want especially to thank Ms. Turner and the Dumfries Museum for their helpfulness.
 37. Maurice Lindsay, *The Burns Encyclopedia*. 3rd rev. ed. (London: Robert Hale, 1980), 152.
 38. A.J. Morton writes, "With slight reluctance, I can reveal that Robert Burns was known as 'Rabbie' before the end of the 18th century and (very possibly) shortly before his death in 1796. The name 'Rabbie' was printed, with direct reference to the Bard, in an Epistle written for Burns and included in Robert Anderson's 1798 *Poems on Selected Subjects*. The name 'Rabbie' is used twice. It is alleged, by Anderson, that it was sent to Robert Burns in June 1796—shortly before his premature death in July." See A.J. Morton, comment, Internet Archive, May 2009, at http://www.archive.org/stream/TheMastersApronByRobertBurns/The_Apron_AJM_11.03.09_djvu.txt.
 39. Margaret C. Jacob, "The Past and Future in Masonic Scholarship," *Hibiscus Masonic Review*, 1 (2007), 1–4.
 40. Robert Burns, "To a Mouse," lines 39–48.

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8. *Bhagavad Gita* 2:23–25.
9. *Bhagavad Gita* 2:68–69.
10. *Bhagavad Gita* 7:26.
11. A. Parthasarathy, *The Eternities: Vedanta Treatise*. (Mumbai: Vedanta World, 2007).
12. Swami Vivekananda, "Conversation at Harvard, 1896." In *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), 5:299.
13. The Duke of Sussex, "The Lesson Taught by the Three Great Lights." *Masonic Monthly*, 1865.
14. *Ibid.*
15. See Albert G. Mackey, *An Encyclopædia of Freemasonry and its Kindred Sciences* (Philadelphia: Moss & Co., 1874), 789; and Pike, *Morals and Dogma*, 851.

THE PASSAGES OF A MASON

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has this kind of beginning to his life is steps ahead of most children. The home, church and school have their work cut out for them. And this is where our Craft makes a difference. Freemasonry changes the world one man at a time and ultimately makes the world a better place.

At a man's initiation into Freemasonry, he is encouraged with the ancient words of a blessing. All that is good and pleasant will be brought to bear so that this newly made brother will excel and grow into the man he can become. He is a brother among brothers, blessed with the promise that there are still good beginnings for himself, his family and his world.

NOTES

1. William Preston, *Illustrations of Masonry*. 2nd ed. (London: J. Wilkie, 1775), 61.
2. *Mishnah Sukkah* 5:4–5, *Mishnah Middot* 2:5. For more on the symbolism of the fifteen Psalms of Ascent, see A.C. Feuer, *Tehillim* (New York: Mesorah, 1985), 2:1499–1501.

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