

Anderson's Freemasonry, the true daughter of the British Enlightenment

Based on French historian Cécile Révauger's blog
(<http://revaugercecile.over-blog.com/article-24706237.html>) .

Just as some historians question the specificity, and even sometimes the real existence of a British Enlightenment, scholars of freemasonry sometimes tend to consider freemasonry as a long tradition, immune to changes. Both attitudes reflect the concern for the long term and tend to underplay the importance of evolutions and revolutions. Asserting the perfect continuity between "operative " and "speculative" masons amounts to forgetting the fact there was a Glorious Revolution which left its imprint on 18th century institutions, political as well as religious culture. Another pitfall awaits scholars of freemasonry: it is at worst a fallacy and at best wishful thinking to consider freemasonry as a strong component of radical Enlightenment. For the most part, Freemasons have condemned social revolutions and rejected atheism. It will be contended therefore that freemasonry should neither be considered as the offshoot of tradition nor as the spur of social and political change, but that it appeared in the wake of the English as well as the Scottish Enlightenment. First, it will be argued that freemasonry is not simply the heir of operative freemasonry , although it would be ridiculous to claim there was no connection at all, especially in Scotland. Conversely freemasonry should not be portrayed as more radical than it was: this will be the second point raised in this paper. Finally it will be contended that freemasonry is first and foremost the daughter of the Enlightenment and more specifically of the British Enlightenment.

1- 18th century freemasonry is a new phenomenon which owes little to tradition.

The terms "operative" and "speculative" have long prevailed among historians of freemasonry. They are not entirely satisfactory, first because only specialists of freemasonry can have some insight into what they might refer to, second because they seem to classify masons into two distinct categories but in fact do not meet any historical or scientific criteria. Denying the novelty of the Masonic institution which emerged in 1717 in England and in 1736 in Scotland is equally unsatisfactory.

Of course nobody denies the fact that some form of masonry existed previous to 1717. Yet the situation was different in Scotland from what it was in England. One should not forget that 100 lodges were instrumental to the foundation of the Grand Lodge of Scotland in 1736, against only four in London when the Grand Lodge of England was founded. The Journeymen Lodge of Edinburgh in particular can claim 17th century roots and a continuous membership of masons by trade, throughout the 18th century. Nevertheless, the Grand Lodge of Scotland very soon endorsed the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment and started looking forward rather than backward, providing the city with a significant number of Provosts who were eager to contribute to the embellishment and development of Edinburgh from an architectural as well as from a social point of view.

Discussing English masonry before 1717 is yet another matter. Numerous guilds and masons' companies existed. A special issue of Cahiers de l'Herne was devoted to the study of the Old Charges which prevailed among ancient masons. Elias Ashmole has often been given as an example of a member joining a lodge of masons by trade. It seems that a lodge existed in Warrington in 1646 . Yet evidence is scanty. Contrary to Scottish freemasonry, which besides the Schaw Statutes, could claim structural links and a real continuity between the 17th and 18th centuries, with lodges such as the Journeymen Lodge No. 8 , evidence concerning the existence of English freemasonry previous to 1717 rests mostly on the Old Charges. Yet a close analysis of the Old Charges points at major differences with Anderson's Constitutions as well as the practices developed in 18th century English lodges.

It is argued here that those differences stem from the historical context. The Glorious Revolution informs the Masonic background as well as the Enlightenment. The differences highlighted by the comparison of the Old Charges and Anderson's Constitutions are threefold, social, political and religious.

Clearly the Masonic lodges which were regulated by the Old Charges were composed of "apprentices" and "fellowcrafts" working for the benefit of an employer or master. The masons were given rules of conduct, regulating both their private and professional lives, which were closely related: for instance they were taught that they should neither covet their fellow's wife, nor gamble nor use coarse language. Anderson only

stipulated that members of the lodge should be honest men, neither slave nor woman, but no further regulated professional relations. Members of different walks of life joined the English lodges, from small artisans, craftsmen and merchants to aristocrats.

Whereas all the Old Charges required masons to be good Christians, to believe in God, the first article of Anderson's Constitutions, "Concerning God and religion" is written in the latitudinarian spirit of the time: "tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that religion in which all men agree, leaving their particular opinions to themselves; that is to be good men and true, or Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguished; whereby Masonry becomes the centre of Union, and the Means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons that must have remained at a perpetual distance."

Whereas allegiance to the King was specifically required from operative masons, Anderson's Constitutions only made it necessary for masons to respect the laws of their country. More, a lodge could not exclude one of its members simply for rebelling against the State if "convicted of no other crime" and providing the lodge did not "countenance his Rebellion". Contrary to the Dumfries MSS which demanded that any mason hearing about a plot should immediately report it to the King, Anderson's Constitutions did not even impose the eviction of a rebellious member...the answer to this question is probably to be found in the Whig views of the time which discarded the Tory theories of "passive obedience" and "non resistance". On the contrary Locke had shown that the people were entitled to rebel against the King if the latter had misbehaved, i.e. placed himself in a "state of war" against his people and therefore made himself guilty of a breach of contract. Anderson and his companions did not urge "passive obedience" from subjects and clearly endorsed Locke's views, taking care not to be associated to Tory theories.

Nevertheless the claim to inherit modern practices from ancient masonry was made by Anderson himself. Nobody today can seriously deny that the pseudo historical account is entirely mythical. The new institution needed legitimacy and in the days of the Battle of the Books, claiming affiliations with Solomon and the ancients was more prestigious than quoting "modern" philosophers such as Locke or Newton. The need to refer to tradition, in spite of the novelty of the institution accounts for the moderation of the founders of modern freemasonry. It would be just as inaccurate to pretend that Anderson's freemasonry was typical of the radical Enlightenment as to assume it was a pure product of tradition and to claim there was a perfect continuity between the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries .

2- English masonry is not indebted to radical Enlightenment either, with a few exceptions.

There is not a single definition of the concept of Enlightenment. For Gertrude Himmelfard, only the English and American peoples were enlightened and the French Jacobins betrayed the good intentions of Montesquieu, thus giving up the values of the Enlightenment. For Eric Hobsbawm the Enlightenment amounted to a conspiracy led by white aristocrats.

We owe the concept of "radical Enlightenment" essentially to Jonathan Israel and Margaret Jacob although Margaret Jacob quite rightly disagrees with Israel's focalization on Spinoza: Israel has granted paramount importance to Spinoza's thought and consequently considered as "radical" all the thinkers who have been influenced by his ideas. Thus Toland and Collins are considered as true figures of the "radical Enlightenment" while Locke is deemed more banal. Margaret Jacob's approach is more political as she examines the influence of the Dutch republic and societies which were close to freemasonry such as the Knights of Jubilation. She quite rightly thinks that the Glorious Revolution, the Dutch Republic and the birth of modern freemasonry were related. She is quite right to point at the constitutional habit of freemasons: because they developed an interest in writing rules and regulations, therefore in behaving in a more democratic way than most of their contemporaries, masons influenced political life as they encouraged democratic habits in their own spheres of influence.

This was certainly the case during the American Revolution, when a number of masons took part in the writing of the Articles of Constitution, in the Declaration of Independence and in the writing of the constitutions of each new state.

Yet when it comes to studying English masonry as a whole during the 18th century one has to admit that those who really supported radicalism were a minority, whether one takes the concept of "radical Enlightenment" in reference to religious convictions as Israel, or in a more political sense as Margaret Jacob. Very few masons

condoned Toland's pantheism or Collins' freethought. Needless to quote again the famous article written by Anderson and his followers concerning the impossibility for a mason to be an "atheist" or an "irreligious libertine". Not all dissenters were welcomed : Anderson himself wrote a pamphlet condemning Anti-Trinitarians. His religious tolerance did not extend to those who refused to acknowledge the Holy Trinity and were therefore considered with great suspicion by the Church of England and the political authorities. Few masons at the time acclaimed Newton, even though his most unorthodox writings were not yet known to the public. The Grand Lodges had their own Grand Chaplain, most of the time a member of the Church of England or Scotland. The only writing on freemasonry which can be considered as an offshoot of radical Enlightenment was produced by Thomas Paine, the friend of Nicolas de Bonneville, a French mason who supported the French revolution and condemned the influence of the Jesuits in freemasonry. In his *De l'Origine de la franc-maçonnerie*, Paine was telling the masons that they were wrong to claim allegiance to the Christian dogma, that they should look back to the Druids and draw their inspiration from their symbolism rather than advocate the Bible. Yet Paine was probably never a mason...How could he have been one in England or America? Neither were the British masons typical of the radical Enlightenment from a political point of view. There were exceptions such as the Sheffield Masons who supported the Sheffield radicals, the Journeymen Masons of Edinburgh who lent their premises to the Friends of the People (but were rebuked by the Grand Lodge of Scotland for doing so), some Irish Lodges which seem to have condoned the United Irishmen (but were likewise severely criticized by the Grand Lodge of Ireland), masons who were friends of John Wilkes and joined the Society for the Bill of Rights.

Generally speaking however the lodges and Grand Lodges were eager to please the authorities. This can be seen both in the Masonic press and in the official declarations of the Grand Lodges; several articles were devoted to the French revolution, all pointing at the horror of Jacobinism. I have already studied at some length the articles published in the *Sentimental and Masonic Magazine* or in the *Freemasons' Magazine*. From 1793 onwards the English, Scottish and Irish Grand Lodges made official declarations to support the government and, more or less implicitly to condemn the French revolution and the spirit of reform. No wonder the British freemasons were the only associations to be allowed to pursue their activities under the seditious Meetings Act. Provided they submitted the lists of members and did not create new lodges, their meetings were tolerated.

In 1800 the Grand Lodge of Moderns officially expressed its concern for the King after the murder attempt. The Grand Secretary apologized for the delay of the letter addressed to the Prince of Wales: the Freemasons, he explained, were discreet people who hated to interfere with politics. However they deemed it necessary to express their support of the monarchy under the circumstances.

It seems therefore difficult to consider British freemasonry as a strong component of radical Enlightenment. However it is perfectly representative of the English Enlightenment such as Roy Porter defined it or of the Scottish Enlightenment and the Moderates of the Church of Scotland.

3- Freemasonry is the daughter of the English/Scottish Enlightenment

Neither James Boswell, nor Sir William Forbes of Pitsligo, the Grand Master and friend of Johnson's biographer, nor Dugald Stewart, nor at the end of the century Robert Burns are considered as radicals. Yet those freemasons are fairly typical of the Scottish Enlightenment. None of them advocated radical political change, none of them was influenced by Spinoza's pantheism or freethought or even deism. Yet they all advocated religious tolerance, bewareing of the rigidity of religious dogma and strongly believed in man's potentiality to improve himself and discover the world. Roy Porter pointed at an important difference in the English and French approaches of the Enlightenment. When one speaks of the Enlightenment in France, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot and a few big names immediately come to mind. The British summon Locke and Hume, and sometimes even Hobbes, but according to Porter the English Enlightenment does not point at a few philosophers only but encompasses politics, science, and society at large. Rather than speaking of The Enlightenment, he preferred to call his major work "Enlightenment", pointing at a general spirit rather than specific theories, preferring an empirical approach and studying the impact of Enlightenment in all walks of life.

Coordinating the biographical dictionary of 18th century freemasons has been very fruitful as so many entries point at the involvement of so many men in the major religious, cultural and political evolutions of their time. Several masons have been forgotten today yet they played their part quite convincingly and contributed to the Enlightenment, such as Porter defined it. They were not necessarily great philosophers or politicians but

they were representative of the major evolutions of their time in politics, religion, access to education and science. In France, although lodges almost disappeared during the Revolution and masons gave up their Masonic activities, individuals went on playing a major role in the revolutionary institutions. In England freemasons endorsed the prevailing latitudinarian views on religion, supported the new balance of powers and later condoned colonial expansion. 18th century freemasons embraced the values of the Enlightenment: sociability, religious tolerance, and thirst for knowledge.

English people were clubbable and the first lodges were essentially convivial places enabling men to meet and spend a pleasant evening together. Although the social mix was rare, and birds of a feather tended to flock together, the emerging middle-class also found the possibility to encounter aristocrats, at a time when the landed elite was becoming a little more open and to a certain extent encouraging the middle class to mimic the aristocrats. The emergence of the Grand Lodge of Antients in the 1750s allowed a significant number of Irish immigrants like Dermott to join the lodges along with local artisans and men of lower extraction than members of the Moderns.

John Locke vindicated the Glorious Revolution and paved the way for a more secular society, in so far as he made a distinction between the interest of the Church and the interest of the State and considered freedom of worship as a natural right. After the Glorious Revolution, religious quarrels were avoided as much as possible and theological dispute lost its power of attraction. Most philosophers insisted on the beneficent effect of religion but were indifferent to religious dogma as such. Similarly English freemasons referred to the Creator or to a general guiding principle gradually making way for the term "Grand Architect of the Universe" which was vague enough to unite men of different religious persuasions. Most masons endorsed Shaftesbury's or Goldsmith's views, advocating religious tolerance and being on the whole quite indifferent to theological issues. "Brother" Hogarth perfectly reflected the views of masons when he engraved his famous "Enthusiasm delineated" (1760) and "Credulity, superstition, fanaticism" (1762). There was no need for the British masons to be as anticlerical as their brother Voltaire as the Church of England itself endorsed the values of the Enlightenment; perhaps Hogarth was a little more conservative than the majority of masons as rejecting "enthusiasm" allowed him to make fun of dissenters and the Methodists in particular.

It is a well known fact among scholars of freemasonry that the early Grand Lodge and the Royal Society were closely connected. The friendship between Newton and Desaguliers largely accounts for the links between the two institutions. Newton had invited his friend Desaguliers to join the Royal Society while he was presiding it, in 1714. Desaguliers became Grand Master in 1719. Desaguliers was probably instrumental to the aura of freemasonry among members of the Royal Society. It seems that many members of the Royal Society started joining lodges, while a few masons were also admitted within the Royal Society. From 1719 to 1741 thirteen Grand Masters out of 22 belonged to the Royal Society, an enormous proportion which tends to prove that the Royal Society granted admission to members on honorific as much as scientific criteria at the time...The important fact however is that, even though they were not great scholars themselves, Grand Masters should have felt honoured to belong to the Royal Society and eager to promote scientific discovery : in that respect they contributed to "the marriage of science and Enlightenment", to the "culture of science" so well described by Roy Porter.

Masons were also eager to take part in cultural life. They contributed to the prologues of many plays. Thus, actor Garrick befriended Boswell, the deputy Grand Master of Scotland, better known as Johnson's biographer. A great number of musicians were masons, as Andrew Pink has shown: Bach, Angel, Geminiani... They were all typical of the Enlightenment in so much as they allowed culture to extend to other sectors of the population than the traditional landed elite. Hogarth's work is significant of a new approach of culture, more popular than aristocratic. He promoted an academy at St Martin in the Fields' which was meant to protect and encourage poor artists and to some extent counter the weight of aristocratic patronage.

Freemasons were involved in the press. Thus biographical entries of the dictionary will be devoted to Franklin, but also to John Dunlap, a publisher in Philadelphia and to Osmand, a much less famous publisher in Barbados who thanks to his association with Dunlap launched a newspaper in Port of Spain. Several masons contributed to the development and freedom of the press.

With hindsight, the Enlightenment has been stigmatized for its contribution to colonization. Indeed the thirst for knowledge and discovery combined harmoniously with economic and military interests. It is pointless either to idealize or stigmatize the Enlightenment. It was a period full of contradictions but it represented a significant departure from what has been called the "Ancien regime" in England as well, a static society totally

in the hands of the landed elite ruled by Church and King. Quite significantly masons were also eager to discover the world, and like their compatriots took part in colonization. They were extremely present in the American colonies among the first governors. A great number of officers and governors who conquered the West Indies and India were also masons : to quote but a few among those who will be in the dictionary : general Ralph Abercromby who colonized Trinidad, Commissioner Fullerton, also in Trinidad and an abolitionist as well, General Wolfe, Governor Hastings in India... Military lodges often accompanied those men who seldom joined the local lodges who appeared in the wake of colonial expansion.

Denying the novelty of 18th century freemasonry partakes of the same attitude which consists in denying the existence of a British Enlightenment , whether in the wake of historians such as JCD Clark who consider the long 18th century and prefer to speak in terms of continuity with the Ancien regime or whether in the wake of those who consider 18th century Britons were aristocrats and racist colonialists who did not promote any significant social change. Awarding grades to the Enlightenment seems equally ridiculous: thus Gertrude Himmelfarb prefers the English and American Enlightenment because religion was never really challenged and violent revolutions never urged contrary to what the nasty French Jacobins did. Although the Enlightenment promoted universal values such as religious tolerance and the end of despotism, yet the cultural specificities of each country remained. In that respect the French Enlightenment differed slightly from the English one or the Scottish one. French freemasonry likewise differed from English and Scottish masonry because the contexts were different.

Claiming that freemasonry was radical enough to bring about significant social and political changes is not valid either. At best it turns the masons into early revolutionaries, ingratiating the wishful thinking of XIX century well-meaning historians such as Louis Amiabile in France, at worst it allows the emergence of the ridiculous conspiracy theories put forward by Barruel and Robison. Masonic lodges disappeared from revolutionary France, with a few exceptions, and masons remained active individually, either supporting the nobility, the clergy or the Third Estate.

In Britain Freemasonry was typical of the English and Scottish Enlightenment, with its strong points and foibles, no more, no less.

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Cécile Révauger and Charles Porset are currently editing "Le Monde maçonnique au XVIIIe siècle", a biographical dictionary to be published by Éditions Champion. This involves about a hundred scholars of freemasonry.

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