

Review of *The Origins of Freemasonry*

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***The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's Century 1590-1710*, by David Stevenson (Cambridge University Press, 1988) xvii, 246 pages, index.**

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In this study of long neglected Scottish evidence, Stevenson, a Reader in Scottish History at the University of Aberdeen, pushes the history of freemasonry back a century earlier than standard accounts. The effect is to de-emphasize the English 18th century developments, such as the founding of the Grand Lodge in London in 1717, and place the genesis of this secret fraternity in the context of the Scottish Reformation and the struggles of the Covenanters. Even further, the fact that the most interesting Mason of the 17th century, Sir Robert Moray, was a Covenanter general, and that one stream of influence on freemasonry was the hermetic Lutheranism of the Rosicrucians (which was present in the military arm of German protestantism) should make us reexamine the goals and methods of this generation of reformers.

First responsible for the transformation of what was still basically a trade guild into an esoteric society was the royal master of works William Schaw, apparently a “moderate”, i.e. unprincipled, Roman Catholic. “Apparently” is a key word here as much of what Stevenson’s can discover about him is inferential. His office of Master of Works put him in charge of all royal castles and palaces, and acting in that capacity and as warden of the craft of “maister maissounis within this realme” (p. 34) he issued statutes regulating the mason’s guild. The first Schaw Statutes in 1598 tightened admission requirements, excluding semiskilled workers and emphasizing record keeping and procedure. The Second in 1599 not only expanded lodge government procedure but also specified that lodge wardens were subject to presbyteries for discipline of their members, although the lodge actually carried out the trials and accepted the fines. Here also appeared the presumed first reference to non-trade secret lore as a test of admission: “the art of memorie and science thairof”. Stevenson notes:

Indeed, one of the most extraordinary features of the emergence of the masonic lodges and their rituals and secrets in seventeenth-century Scotland is that the church, not noted for its tolerance, did not denounce them as subversive and inconsistent with true religion—in spite of the fact that the founder of the movement, William Schaw, was a Catholic. Yet 50 years were to pass before any sign of worry about masonic activities is recorded in

church records, and even then the matter was soon forgotten. (pp. 50-51).

Readers of Otto Scott's *James I: The Fool as King* will recall the great expectations which Protestant Europe held for the new ruler when he assumed the throne in England. By these hopes Scott measures the Stuart failure. Stevenson places these expectations in the context of the occult craze in Germany at the time. The Rosecrucian order, supposedly founded by Christian Rosencreutz (probably actually an allegorical figure), drew its name partly from Luther's coat of arms with its rose from which a cross emerges. Arising from Lutheran mystics and a partly cleaned up Hermeticism (believed to be the secrets of the Ancient Egyptians) the Rosecrucians expected the dawn of a great new age.

Soon the aspirations of the supposed Rosicrucians became closely associated in many people's minds with hopes for a protestant crusade in Europe. Frederick V, the Elector Palatine, emerged as a protestant champion, and in 1613 (just before the Rosicrucian excitement burst on Europe) he had married Elizabeth, daughter of James VI and I whose greatest kingdom was England, the land of the red cross [of St. George] and the red rose [the Tudor symbol]. (p. 100)

But Protestant hopes were to be frustrated in the 17th century. One wonders how pure they were, or if these aberrations were more on the order of those of a Hal Lindsey than of modern occultism.

Stevenson's chapter on the Renaissance contribution to masonry is a good introduction to the Renaissance pursuit of magic and the occult. Here also the theme of special interest to us, how Neoplatonic occultism was integrated with Christianity, is sketched out. The Hermetic Egyptian religion was linked to Christianity by its alleged prophecies of the coming of Christ and by as many parallels as could be found, thus giving it the aspect of an imperfect forerunner of Christianity.

In a time of intense and dangerous religious conflict Hermeticism also provided an escape religion.

Protestant reformers claimed to be bringing new purity of religion to Europe, and in seeking pure religion in the distant past (early Christian times) their outlook can be related to the Renaissance appeal to the past in general, and to the Hermetic search for ancient spiritual wisdom in particular.... Faced with endless conflict between Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and with deep splits within protestantism, leading to widespread religious persecution and bloody religious wars, some turned their back on fanatical conflicting dogmas and retreated into intensely personal religion which required no outward form through public ritual or worship.... The insane world of religious conflict could be rejected in favor of personal piety based on works thought to be far older, and therefore arguably purer, than protestantism or Catholicism. (p.84)

We need not detail Stevenson's speculations on the specific route by which Hermetic speculation entered freemasonry, whether through a disciple of Geordano Bruno, or the alchemy endemic to the court of James VI. But even here the church issue presses forward. Alexander Dickson, a supporter of Bruno's was called before the general assembly of the Church of Scotland, not for his Hermeticism, but for attending mass. He seems later to be in the camp of the radical Protestants.

The chapter on the career of Sir Robert Moray is a fascinating study of the personal faith of the most important early mason. Moray, the quartermaster-general of the covenantor army, along with the artillery general Alexander Hamilton, joined the Edinburgh lodge in 1641. Moray later served with the French and was captured by imperial forces, spending his captivity in Bavaria studying science and Hermeticism under Jesuit tutelage. Firmly on the King's side by now, he involved himself in royalist plots against the parliamentary forces. He married the daughter of Lord Balcarres, a collector of alchemical and Rosicrucian manuscripts. Following the restoration Moray became a fixture in court, helped found the Royal Society of London in 1660 and served as its first president.

In 1649 some concern about the secret Mason Word was evident in the Scottish Kirk and the presbyteries were consulted by the general assembly, with what result is unknown. A mason, James Ainslie, was chosen as minister by the session of Minto in Roxburghshire in 1652 and the presbytery felt it necessary to consult the neighboring presbyteries. Kelso presbytery replied

that to their judgment ther is neither sinne nor scandale in that word because in the purest tymes of this kirke maisons haveing that word have been ministers, that maisons and men haveing that word have been and daylie are elders in our sessions, and many professors haveing that word are daylie admitted to the ordinances. (p. 127)

How the lodges and the churches arrived at this state of coexistence Stevenson can only speculate. He theorizes that the reformers had driven symbols and rituals out of the Kirk, and not only from the Kirk but from the medieval guild brotherhoods whose religious aspect was extirpated. A substitute for the felt need for communal ritual and symbol developed and was tolerated in the lodges where there were no elements of Roman worship or religious symbols which the church would identify as subversive.

Religion being "off limits" to the masons, if this argument is accepted, they were left with Christian morality and ideals of brotherhood. Thus the emergence of freemasonry in seventeenth-century Scotland as a system of morality illustrated by symbols, allegories and rituals does not indicate any precocious deistic or tolerant attitudes to religion, but simply acceptance that the lodge was not a valid place for masons to indulge their (orthodox) religious inclinations in. But of course, in the long term, this exclusion from the lodge of open commitment to any one brand of religion opened the way for the adoption of heterodox ideas and the admission of members with divergent religious beliefs. (pp. 123-124)

A parallel holds, Stevenson argues, to civil government functions, where ritual, pageantry, musical instruments and visual arts, all banned from the church, were allowed to continue.

“Second sight”, the ability to know future events through visions of them, was attributed to Scottish highlanders, but also came to be associated with masonry. In view of the widely credited prophetic gifts of John Knox (see David Chilton’s article on Knox in *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Vol. 2, Winter 1978-1979, p. 205), did the church leaders feel they needed to go lightly on this topic?

Stevenson’s book makes evident the need for a parallel study of Scottish church leaders and theologians to uncover elements of their views bearing on Hermeticism, secret fraternities, oaths, clairvoyance and other matters where the modern Reformed are in clear opposition to freemasonry. Have we failed to notice serious flaws in the theology of the period, or did the church of the Covenanters compromise its avowed principles in this area? Can such a study help us to understand the larger historical problem of the failure of the Reformation in the seventeenth century—its losses to the Counter-reformation and its internal collapse to heresy, secularism and infidelity?