

Submitted to The Journal of the Masonic Society
J.O. Diaz, PhD
(July 31, 2017)

From sacred spaces to political arenas:
Recent academic research on Freemasonry

The irrepressible conflict

Writing in 1969 British historian J. M. Roberts chastised his fellow British academics for their unwillingness to tackle the study of Freemasonry. “It is surprising,” he indicated, “that in the country which gave Freemasonry to the world it has attracted hardly any interest from the professional historian.” This omission, Roberts and others asserted, had serious consequences. Masonic antiquarians and cranks lost no time in filling the void ceded by trained historians, thus exacerbating an already troubled relationship between Freemasons and scholars.¹

Nearly half a century has elapsed since Roberts’ landmark admonition that Freemasonry’s unsettled origins, transcontinental appeal, and ability to earn great enmity from strange bedfellows such as the Papacy and Communist and Fascist regimes made it a subject worthy of serious research. Did Roberts’ rebuke fall on deaf ears? Did professional historians, in England and elsewhere, pick up the gauntlet so adroitly dropped by J. M. Roberts?

The answer is a cautionary yes. Beginning in the 1970s, professional historians began to explore the margins of social and cultural history and found in Freemasonry a topic worth their time. This investigative journey has resulted in a wealth of important scholarly works studying Freemasonry not in splendid isolation but as an actor in the creation and maintenance of civil society. In short, there is plenty of scholarly chatter about Freemasonry and a lot of excellent Masonic scholarship.²

Some critical questions, however, remain unanswered. Have Freemasons noticed that there is life beyond the ritual? Have they taken the time to approach this nascent, and admittedly narrow, literature? Have they noticed that as a genre the expansive and fanciful histories of

Freemasonry are not occupying the scholar's mind? The purpose of this article is to point modestly to where the academic literature of Freemasonry appears to be heading. It aims at encouraging Freemasons to move beyond the traditional timelines of Masonic history and view the Craft through newer analytical frameworks such as sacred spaces, political involvement, and friendship. Finally, this piece also hopes to serve as a discreet yet useful current awareness tool for those seeking competent works on a subject matter much talked about yet poorly understood.

The scholarly approach

Studying the Craft is a complicated endeavor. It entails the analysis of a longitudinal and cosmopolitan phenomenon. One that covers multiple disciplines and nations. Additionally, Masonic scholars deal with an unparalleled wealth of primary sources ranging from aprons to jewels, pictures to banners, and musical scores to printed rituals. Far from deterring researchers, these hurdles have invigorated them.

From its inception, the study of Freemasonry has centered on large sweeping themes. Scholars interested in the field have viewed Freemasonry as a window to the larger issues of society. For example, academics know that Freemasonry contains secret handshakes, passwords, and signs. What intrigues them, however, is not these modes of recognition *per se* but the idea of secrecy. When a Freemason talks about concealing and never revealing, what is he saying? Why is this important? Is it important? What is the connection between secrecy and power? What does the average Freemason obtain from keeping secrets? The Craft's answer is simple: is all about the measure of the man and the biblical teaching that "He who reveals secrets is a talebearer, but one who is of faithful spirit conceals a matter."³

From an academic viewpoint, that answer is wholly inadequate. Could a more satisfactory answer be to argue that secrecy enhances one's prestige within a particular social hierarchy and

that is why “secrets” are attractive? That would also serve to explain the proliferation of Masonic orders and degrees. More orders and more degrees translates into more “secrets” and more putative influence. In other words, what interest scholars is secrecy as a societal phenomenon *not* the secrets of a particular entity.⁴

Recently, some scholars took the road less traveled. They tackled Freemasonry through sources that had remained hidden in plain sight for far too long. An historian and a geographer took the unusual and welcome approach of taking the observant Freemason into the realm of sacred ritual spaces.⁵

Sacred spaces

Ritual spaces are interesting because Freemasons spend a great deal of time in them but perhaps rarely think about their meaning and power. Moreover, Masonic space represents a social network solely dedicated to the initiated. In *Masonic Temples: freemasonry, ritual architecture, and masculine archetypes*, Professor William D. Moore approached Masonic spaces in accordance to their ritualistic currency. He concluded that these ritual spaces define singular facets of masculinity. He analyzed the design and construction of Masonic structures around four distinct sets of Masonic ritual spaces: the Blue lodge, the armory and drill room of the Knights Templar, the Scottish Rite Cathedral, and the Shriners’ mosque. He detailed Masonic ritual and explored the Lodge’s aesthetic appeal. He argued that its ornamentation makes the lodge seem sacred just as churches are sacred. Moore’s excellent analysis, however, does not answer the critical question: what *makes* a space, in this case Masonic space, sacred?

This was the job of geographer Olaf Kulhke. Professor Kulhke’s work offered a fascinating exploration of sacred spaces in the context of the Masonic lodge. His book *Geographies of Freemasonry Ritual, Lodge, and City in Spatial Context* analyzed Masonic space within the

framework of historian and philosopher Mircea Eliade's theory of *hierophanies* or the fragmentation of the human experience of reality into sacred and profane space and time. Professor Kuhlke did a convincing job of showing that the "act of placing a lodge building into a community can be understood as the symbolic consecration of the community as a whole." In other words, when Freemasons erect new buildings, Kuhlke argued, they are "ritually" reordering the world and leaving the chaos of the profane behind. The center of this newly ordered world is the Masonic lodge.⁶

The interested Freemason cannot underestimate the importance and usefulness Moore and Kuhlke's analysis. Creating a respectful environment within the context of the Lodge is only possible if ritual participants understand the physical and metaphysical separateness of a Masonic lodge from the ordinary world. Moore's *Masonic Temples* explained the roles Freemasons should play at any given time and how the space they inhabit shapes those roles. Kuhlke's *Geographies of Freemasonry* clarified why these roles, and the setting in which they unfold, command respect, knowledge, and seriousness of purpose.⁷

Friends and Enemies

The meaning and purpose of Freemasonry are always topics of debate. What is Freemasonry all about? The question, albeit unpretentious, retains its currency. For some the answer is straightforward. Freemasons insist that the Craft is about the creation and nurturing of male bonding, life-long friendships, and camaraderie. Some non-Masons see a dark conspiracy centered on world domination and the formation of a one-world government. Others probably have reached different conclusions.

To argue, as Masons do, that friendship is at the heart of the Masonic experience is cozy yet glib. What is friendship? How is friendships created and nurtured? What is it about the common

space of Masonic lodges that makes the spark of friendship ignite and shine? Answering these questions is the task Kenneth Loiselle took on in his book *Brotherly Love: Freemasonry and Male Friendship in Enlightenment France*. In it he argued that just as friendship “laid at the heart of Enlightenment preoccupations with sociability,” it also rested at the core of French Masonic lodges in 18th century France.⁸

In *Brotherly Love*, Loiselle claimed that Freemasonry is an ideal arena in which “to explore the changing nature of male friendship in Enlightenment France.” Freemasonry was the largest and most diverse voluntary organization in the decades before the French Revolution. Its membership extended across the social spectrum from artisans to nobles. Men, Loiselle propounded, were attracted to Freemasonry because it enabled them to cultivate enduring friendships that were “egalitarian and grounded in emotion.” Loiselle’s conclusions rest comfortably on scores of private letters, rituals, the minutes of lodge meetings, and the speeches of many Freemasons. His analysis reveals the thought processes of these early Freemasons, the manners in which its members maintained and nurtured friendships, and the place women occupied within this male-dominated world.

For those of us untrained in the complexities of French history and its archival methods, *Brotherly Love* is an acquired taste. However, Freemasons will find Loiselle’s discussion of the Scottish-born Jacobite Chevalier Andrew Ramsey’s famous speech quite informative. Ramsey is noteworthy among American Freemasons because he allegedly insinuated a Masonic-Templar connection. (He did not!) That historical controversy aside, what really matters is that Loiselle widened his lens and interpreted Ramsey’s *Essai* as a departure from the pessimistic views of philosophers and social contract theorists Thomas Hobbs and John Locke. According to Loiselle, Ramsey’s true message is that friendship and sociability are “the glue that keeps society together

not Hobbs' compelling state or Locke's individual greed." In other words, friendship, not force is the mortar that binds us all.

Modern-day Freemasons would do well in internalizing Loiseau's notion that friendship was the beating heart of early French lodges. They should understand and take pride in the idea that the then radical notion that free men could meet, enjoy each other's company, and seek truth away from the Church hierarchy and the State apparatus was, and remains, Freemasonry's foundational belief.

Among American Freemasons is a truism that personal politics and the business of the lodge belong in separate spheres. This arrangement has allowed the Craft and the State to coexist in relative harmony. However, the private and political often combine with peculiar, and in some cases, deadly consequences. That is partly the argument Professor Hernán Vidal advanced in his important *La Gran Logia de Chile, 1973-1990: su comportamiento ante el fin de la democracia y las violaciones de los derechos humanos (The Grand Lodge of Chile, 1973-1990: its response to the end of democracy and the violations of human rights)*. In it, he expertly chronicles how Chile's Grand Lodge responded to the advent of military dictatorship and the widespread violations of human rights that followed.⁹

Vidal's story line is well known. In the fall of 1973, a group of disgruntled Chilean officers, following an extended period of social and political unrest, overthrew the elected government of socialist President, and Freemason, Salvador Allende Gossens. The military headed by General August Pinochet Ugarte, whose Masonic connections remain unsubstantiated, deposed Allende's Popular Unity government and later established a junta that suspended all political activity in Chile and repressed so-called left-wing movements. The United States government, which had worked to create the conditions for the coup, promptly recognized the

junta and supported it in consolidating power. Pinochet's military regime left in its wake over 3,000 dead or missing, tortured thousands of prisoners, and forced 200,000 Chileans into exile.¹⁰

The destruction of Chilean democracy left behind a series of important questions centered on the role of the nation's civic institutions. Chief among these institutions was the Grand Lodge of Chile. Founded in 1862 in Valparaíso, Chile, the Freemasons had a significant role in the history of Chile as promoters of independence, builders of the system of republican government, and promoters of the nation's political and socio-economic development. Several Chilean Presidents had belonged to the fraternity including President Allende. Published only in Spanish this book goes into excruciating detail to explain the brief disruption of Masonic activity in Chile and the creation of a lodge in exile known as El Gran Oriente de Chile en el Exilio (The Grand Orient of Chile in Exile).

From Vidal's research, it becomes clear that the Chilean Grand Lodge threw its support behind the coup almost from the start. Within days of the takeover, The Grand Lodge of Mexico condemned both the military action and the murder of fellow Mason Allende. Chile's Grand Lodge responded by quietly severing fraternal relations with Mexico's Federation of Regular Lodges. In the face of the illegal and violent actions that followed the coup, the silence of Chile's Grand Lodge was, and remained, deafening.

For American Freemasons, the thought of Masonic partisan politics must seem weird and un-Masonic. The issue for them, however, is moral and not legal. How could Chile's Grand Lodge have passively supported Pinochet's murderous regime? How should an institution, often referred to as the Enlightenment's first born, react in the face of widespread human rights violations? Based on Freemasonry's chartered principles, should a spirited defense of freedom and democracy be its default position? Was Chile's Grand Lodge more concerned with its own

survival than with democracy and liberty? *La Gran Logia de Chile, 1973-1990* allows American Masons to examine a different and consequential side of “Masonic politics.”

Concluding thoughts

For scholars, Freemasonry is fertile ground. The reason is simple: when it comes to Freemasonry, there are no neutral parties. It does not matter that the average person has never purchased, let alone read, a Masonic book or that he/ she received “Masonic training” from Hollywood movies or anti-Masonic propaganda. The fact remains that to acknowledge membership or even professional interest in a Masonic body is to listen often to the false dichotomy between religion and Freemasonry and to endure an endless barrage of obtuse and outlandish conspiracy theories. The good news is that thanks to the academy’s renewed interest in Freemasonry and, its willingness to dig deeper, eternal damnation or world supremacy are not the only reading choices the student of Freemasonry now faces.

Scholars and academics have rediscovered the richness and potential of Freemasonry. American Universities have produced approximately 50 Masonic-related dissertations in the last 10 years. Their topics include, among others, Russian and Prince Hall Freemasonry, Scottish Rite theatrical productions, and the Craft’s role in constructing a global society. Freemasons should go beyond this essay and consider reading Michael Homer’s *Joseph’s Temples: the Dynamic Relationship between Freemasonry and Mormonism*, Professor David G. Hackett’s *That Religion in Which all Men Agree: Freemasonry in American Culture*, and Joy Porter’s *Native American Freemasonry: Associationalism and Performance*. These, and many other titles, are slowly becoming part of a growing and important Masonic canon. 11

¹ John M. Roberts, "Freemasonry: Possibilities of a Neglected Topic," *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 84, No. 331 (Apr. 1969) 323; Steven C. Bullock, "Masons, Masonic History, and Academic Scholarship," in Arturo de Hoyos, S. Brent Morris (eds.) *Freemasonry in Context: History, Ritual, Controversy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), [ix].

² It is safe to say that although the number of academic books and dissertations is on the rise, courses centered on Freemasonry continue to be a rarity in American colleges and Universities. Programs such as the one at UCLA <http://freemasonryandcivilsociety.ucla.edu/> and Brock University <https://dr.library.brocku.ca/handle/10464/3146> are rare. For a case study on Freemasonry and civil society see: Hoffmann, Stefan-Ludwig. *The Politics of Sociability: Freemasonry and German Civil Society, 1840-1918*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007.

³ Proverbs 11:13. The Complete Tanach with Rashi's Commentary. (Hebrew Bible Online) <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs+11-13&version=NIV>

⁴ For an example of this approach see: Urban, Hugh. "The Adornment of Silence: Secrecy and Symbolic Power in American Freemasonry." *Journal of Religion and Society*. 3:1-27 (2001)

⁵ See Moore, William D. *Masonic temples: Freemasonry, ritual architecture, and masculine archetypes*. Publication: Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006 and Kuhlke, Olaf, *Geographies of Freemasonry: Ritual, Lodge and City in Spatial Context*. Edwin Mellen Press, 2008). It is worth mentioning that Moore's book is a case study centered in New York State over a sixty-year period from 1870 to 1930.

⁶ See Eliade, Mircea's *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987.

⁷ For a similar approach see: Mackintosh, Phillip Gordon and Forsberg, Clyde R. "Performing the Lodge: Masonry, masculinity, and nineteenth-century North American moral geography," *Journal of Historical Geography* v. 35, Issue 3, July 2009, Pages 451-472.

⁸ Loiselle, Kenneth. *Brotherly Love: Freemasonry and Male Friendship in Enlightenment France*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2014.

⁹ Vidal, Hernán, *La Gran Logia de Chile (1973-1990): Su Comportamiento Ante El Fin de La Democracia y Las Violaciones de Los Derechos Humanos*. Santiago: Mosquito Comunicaciones, 2006.

¹⁰ Constable, Pamela and Valenzuela, Arturo. *A Nation of Enemies: Chile under Pinochet*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993. ¹⁰ Salvador Allende Gossens's grandfather, Ramón Allende Padín, had served at Chile's Grand Master. Allende Gossens was an active Freemason, visiting lodges in Chile and abroad while serving as president of Chile.

¹¹ The number of Masonic-related dissertations comes from a cursory look at ProQuest Dissertations and Thesis database. <http://www.proquest.com/products-services/pqdtglobal.html>; Homer, Michael. *Joseph's Temples: The Dynamic relationship Between Freemasonry and Mormonism*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2014; Hackett, David G. *That Religion in Which all Men Agree: Freemasonry in American Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014; Porter, Joy. *Native American Freemasonry: Associationalism and Performance*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011.