

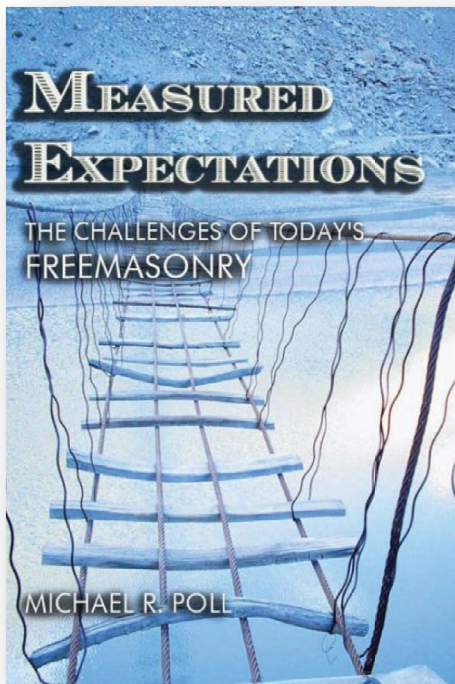
MEASURED EXPECTATIONS

THE CHALLENGES OF TODAY'S FREEMASONRY

BY: MICHAEL R. POLL

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Michael R. Poll's book, *Measured Expectations: The Challenges of Today's Freemasonry* published by Cornerstone Book Publishers of New Orleans, LA, in 2017, and reprinted in 2022, is a valuable collection of nearly two dozen wide ranging Masonic papers that direct the reader's attention to essential Craft tools that can enhance all Masonic experience. Indeed, at the outset of this review, my first—and lasting—impression was "This is such an informative and helpful piece of literature that it should be in every Mason's library." Yes, it is that good and serves as a guide when traveling our Masonic road. It reminds me of *The New Yorker* magazine format with separate—and captivating—articles, which encourages us to read every one of them.



To begin with, the following—only slightly edited—is a summary from the back cover of his publication:

"This down to earth book by Bro. Poll provides suggestions and advice on dealing with Lodge and Scottish Rite issues such as Masonic law, Lodge operation(s), visitors, poor degrees, meals, officer roles, poor attendance, Masonic philosophy and history, the future of Freemasonry, and so much more. It is written in an easy-to-read style with the goal of providing the new or seasoned Mason with useful information to help make their Lodge experience of greater value." In its opening pages, it soon becomes obvious why this informative book was honored as the **Book of the Year for Illinois Masonry** by that state's Grand Master in 2017.

The articles here, separate ideas as distinguished from linked chapters that I call essays, are wide-ranging and together provide an informative guide for both new and experienced Masons. The book leads off with a thoughtful *Introduction* that responds to the oft-mentioned complaint that "... everyone knows the basics of lodge operation, . . . either the books assume too much or are written in such a 'highbrow' manner that no one can understand them. The collection is designed to be something of a beginner's guide to 'doing things' in Masonry as well as a bit of plain talk regarding some of

our teachings. Included are thoughts that touch on the basics of lodge operation, laws, practices, and the nature of Freemasonry. I comment here on a selected few essays with brief comments added.

The first topics elected, each one identified by an asterisk (*), is entitled *A Young Man Joins a Masonic Lodge*. This essay covers—rather extensively--what an initiate experience when he proposes to enter our Craft. The essay concludes with the question, is Freemasonry of value? Value is a perception, and if you do not treat something as if it is special or valuable, it is not. This lead-off discussion establishes Poll's philosophy, and another entire book could be written on this single topic alone.

Another important discussion follows. (*)*Masonic Ritual in the United States*. The nature of this topic—ritual—scares many Masons; however, this topic focuses more on the history of Freemasonry and on the AASR, Bro. Poll's special focus, rather than on specific details of our Masonic ritual. As such, an understanding of our history and its development is important to all Freemasons.

Knowing from whence we came and our rich history—from the early 1700s to multiple Grand Lodges and a variety of Masonic rites—the Order of the Royal Secret, the French or Modern Rite, and the Egyptian Rite of Memphis, among others—is also important. Early Masonic organizations: the United Grand Lodge of England—the Moderns and the Ancients, for example—did merge in 1813 but, until then, both—like many other lodges—were highly competitive and tended to believe their rituals were superior to the others.

Returning to our history, Poll writes that Freemasonry, as best as we can tell, had existed in New Orleans since 1752. The population and inhabitants' disposition via the French language matched the composition of its members, but not everyone was French! Of course, the expansion of the country after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, created even more confusion and the possibility of having one Grand Lodge for the entire country was of concern and had been under heated discussion for years. When the dust finally settled, however, there was to be one Grand Lodge per state with one primary Craft ritual per state as well. It was important for every state to be considered independent, yet maintain a mirror image of its colleagues in organization and structure. While there are several rituals that can be used in lodge activities, there was one generally accepted Craft ritual, largely ascribed to Thomas Smith Webb and originally termed, of course, as the 'Webb Ritual.' This ritual, which was developed in the late 1700s, is also known as the 'American Rite' and was practiced as the primary Craft ritual; however, the Webb Ritual prevailed and is now known as such. Poll raises an interesting point when he states: "With different rituals stemming from the French influence in Louisiana, since we also know that more than one Masonic ritual exists in the world, does it matter at all if we limit our lodges to only one ritual? In my (Poll's) opinion, and from the standpoint of initiation it doesn't matter at all. The differences in rituals are all a matter of choice, a matter of preference, or even just what is available in the area. At best, it's all a matter of taste." Poll argues "The fact that Masonry in the U.S. does not utilize all of the different rituals available, can be viewed as a missed opportunity for variety in lodge meetings, but really, in itself, that is only a minor inconvenience." One may not agree with the author's position, but it certainly provides a

variety of options and points of discussion and is a highly debatable point from some corners.

We are then introduced briefly to ‘Allied Organizations,’ described on the informative art diagram presented in the Masonic Ritual essay, which includes the Shrine, Grotto, the Eastern Star, and others. Allied Organizations are outside the craft lodge, as Poll notes, and outside of the actual rites of Freemasonry, but are still affiliated with them.

The author then moves us to two separate Masonic Rites, which are dominant in the U.S.—the York Rite and the Scottish Rite (Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite)—both of which reflect continued degree-level Masonic Systems. The York Rite is often considered to be the very much older such rite, having roots in AD 923 in York, England, but more commonly recognized as being organized in the late 1700s in New York. The AASR was, according to Poll, created in Charleston, S.C. in 1801. These two Rites illustrate these systems via a wonderful diagram/artwork showing both as ‘complete systems,’ each with their own unique craft lodge steps, rituals and characteristics; the York Rite leading to the degree of Knight Templar; the AASR leading to the degree of Sovereign Grand Inspector General (33rd degree).

The ‘steps of Freemasonry,’ is a valuable tool that illustrates what can be a confounding series of degrees within Freemasonry’ by providing a wonderful visual map (albeit with very small print) that illustrates the various steps within each system. It is also important to realize that all stages of each Rite must begin after the Master Mason degree. This graphic work alone is worthy of acquisition!

Finally, while our history is long, deep and varied, this underlying understanding provides us with the working concepts essential for self-improvement. The ritual gives us the tools with which we can work to this end.

Moving on, the following summary will give the reader an idea of the wide scope of Poll’s essays. Specific points with a brief discussion for selected topics are identified by an asterisk and the selection of these comes from this reviewer’s likes and perspectives:

1. *A Young Man Joins a Masonic Lodge* * (text presented earlier);
2. *Masonic Ritual in the United States* *(text presented earlier);
3. *With the Goal of Helping the Masonic Legend of Hiram – Another Look* (This is a symbolic story worth retelling);
4. *The Scottish Rite Double Headed Eagle (Phoenix?)*(An examination of the AASR symbol);
5. *The Tactics of the Anti-Masons**(Clever salesmen and con artists whose time hopefully seems to have passed);
6. *The Ritual Trap** (It is essential to elect content-competent officers and not just those with long service);
7. *Burning the Candle at Both Masonic Ends* (Focus needed on the ability and the understanding of when to say ‘no’);
8. *Should we Allow EA’s in the Lodge Business Meetings?* *(This is one of the more interesting and debated topics concerning Lodge participation);

9. *When Masons Come Knocking - Visiting Masons* (A brief primer on attending to speakers and visitors);
10. *Who are you? Who am I?* (Electronic communications – think carefully before you hit ‘send’);
11. *When the Best Help is to Walk Away* (Sometimes Lodge and individual help is neither required nor necessary and may in fact result in doing more harm than good);
12. *Be the Scottish Rite* (A Southern Jurisdiction look at Scottish Rite symbolism);
13. *The Lodge Meal* (Food for thought and other cautions);
14. *Masonic Jurisprudence - the Laws of Freemasonry* (A thoughtful discussion of Masonic philosophy, laws and behavior for the individual Mason, through the Worshipful Master to the Grand Lodge);
15. *The ‘Four’ Bodies of the Scottish Rite* (In the Southern Jurisdiction: Lodge of Perfection, Chapter Rose Croix, Council of Kadosh, and the Consistory);
16. *The New Atlantis and Freemasonry* (A discussion of the terms: religion, spirituality, religious, and spiritual in the Masonic context);
17. *Words to the New Mason* (Three critical elements: desire to be initiated; the desire to initiate; and the proper setting);
18. *We Need Someone to Speak!* (A roadmap for (outside) Lodge speakers from the invitation to the final thank you);
19. *The Role of Music in Freemasonry* (Music in the Lodge from Mozart and Haydn to Jerome Kern and John Philip Sousa—one of the seven liberal arts in Masonry);
20. *The Cause and Effect of Freemasonry* (Masonic teamwork and coaching is critical; also know when to double back when you’re on the wrong path);
21. *Esoteric Initiation* (Masonry and the Rosicrucians--first cousins?); and
22. *About the Author* (A brief biography)

Of the many pertinent essays presented, these five attracted my attention; two of them have been discussed previously:

- *A Young Man Joins a Masonic Lodge;
- *Masonic Ritual in the United States;
- *The Tactics of the Anti-Masons;
- *Should We Allow EAs in Lodge Business Meetings; and
- *The Ritual Trap

While our Craft history is long, deep and varied, the underlying philosophy and its understanding, provides us with the working tools to improve ourselves. The ritual gives us the blueprint, which guides our work. It is not without criticisms though, as there will always be a few attacks on our work.

The Tactics of the Anti-Masons. While anti-Mason attacks have diminished over the past two or three decades, the ‘internet age’ has provided conspiracy theorists with a vehicle available to anti-Masons everywhere; thus, it is wise to be alert and aware of these concerns. Of course, this technology also provides intelligent defenses to be used as well.

As Poll notes in this essay, there is an ‘absolute gold mine of information on anti-Masons, their techniques and the charges that are commonly put forward by them. The following is an extremely helpful website for obtaining verifiable information and clearing up the smoke created by the anti-Mason crowd. It was developed by Worshipful Brother Ed King of Maine and is entitled ‘Anti-Masonry: Points of View.’ (<http://www.masonicinfo.com>). The website was last updated in 2014; however, the reader may find useful and more current updates.

Fortunately, anti-Mason numbers seemed to have shrunk over the past decade, and part of the reason of course may be due to the current COVID-19 problems or to the pandemic (among others). But ‘real Masons’ should still be aware of this issue and be prepared to deal with it should it reoccur.

While the author spends a good deal of time on his work with the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite (AASR)--with five separate references plus additional content, the value of our ritual cannot--or should not be--underestimated. And therein lies the problem. Much of our ritual has been structured primarily in memory work and thus tends to lose emotion and spontaneity when working with the initiate. The feeling and intent of our lectures should be both emotional as well as specific. As a colleague stressed, ‘it’s the emotion you put into your comments that carries the meaning; not just the words used.’ The words themselves are critical, of course, and have been long distilled from ancient wisdom. However, it is the true and deep meaning of the lecture that is essential. When all is said and done, we will long remember the emotion and content of the lecture when it is given with fire and passion. Let us err on the side of enthusiasm rather than on exactness and still retain the essence of the lecture.

Should We Allow EA’s in Lodge Business Meetings? The first degree of any Masonic initiation must be at the Entered Apprentice level. But including the Entered Apprentice Mason at the lodge business meetings, traditionally held on the Master Mason level, is a cause of debate with two points of view—would their presence, even passive, provide them with an extensive learning experience for future lodge effectiveness or would their activities at this level muddy the lodge waters by their physical presence? A review of the effectiveness of this activity is yet to be definitively measured and evaluated, but controls on participation have been instituted where this decision has been implemented.

Poll’s essays also include a discussion of Masonic structure, introduced earlier. While there are many modifications to the traditional degree structure, most have similar characteristics. For example, the two Masonic Rites, which are dominant in the U.S., are the York Rite and the Scottish Rite. Mentioned previously the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite (AASR), is a 33-degree Masonic system, having its roots at the turn of the 19th century in South Carolina. The rituals used by this Rite come from older systems and rituals via France. The other major Masonic rite in the U.S. is commonly known as the York Rite and concludes with the degree of Knight Templar. Albert Mackey earlier used the term ‘American Rite’ rather than ‘York Rite’ as he felt the system was distinctly an American creation and to avoid confusion with systems and degrees of a similar name in the UK. Mackey was not successful in affecting this change and York Rite has become the accepted name. The author has been

deeply involved in the Scottish Rite over the years, thus one of the foci of his book leads the reader in this direction.

The Ritual Trap. This final segment is often viewed with mixed emotions as many Masons internalize the concept of ‘ritual’ very differently; some focusing on various approaches to this topic while others shy away from it as esoteric or meaningless. As Poll points out, “I have long believed that within our ritual is the core of our Masonic teachings.” I think that for most of us, this position is quite accurate. Generally, the experiences of our Masonic ritual fall into three broad categories:

1. I care about the ritual as I believe it’s the cornerstone of our Craft and is deeply meaningful. It’s appreciated and worthy of study.
2. The ritual is an OK vehicle in our lodge meetings, and I often learn something from each presentation. However, I can take it or leave it.
3. The ritual gets in the way of our social gatherings at lodge meetings.

Obviously in this reviewer’s opinion the first option should be our primary objective but how do we make it so for all? Raising the quality level of lodge performance through our officers’ attention to involving our ritual content in their work would certainly help. Our membership would mimic effective performance and making the ritual ‘second nature’ and a matter of course in lodge work—even a bit at a time—would probably go a long way in removing potential objections to memorization issues.

In addition to the importance of member attire and ‘dressing the part’ where ritual and lodge participation is involved is also the attitude toward ritual. He says, “In my experience, a common thread in all casual or social club lodges is the apparent disregard (or fear) that they have for learning the ritual.” Especially important is his instance that “On the other end of this spectrum is where the ritual is viewed as the cornerstone of the lodge.” Thus, the ritual is not only practiced by the officers, but its meaning is also taught in the lodge via a variety of methods: by mimicking leadership practices, providing guest lectures, offering current and retired officer presentations, essays for distribution (as with his book), and even prepared or ‘canned PowerPoint lectures’ as examples. Within our ritual are very important symbolic teachings and these teachings should be stressed and passed on to all of the membership."

Poll summarizes his writings with his reference to *The Old Charges of a Mason*, which reinforces ritual competence as an honored requirement by citing that “. . .no Master or Warden is chosen by seniority, but for his merit.” Merit is earned by performance, and we understand that the ritual is an essential component of that performance. He reinforces this by stating bluntly that “. . . not everyone has to be a lodge officer.”

While providing these essays and in his conclusion, Poll also acknowledges that “. . . not every lodge can be, wants to be, or needs to be, a highly structured and formal Masonic lodge. A successful lodge can be one where its members simply enjoy each other’s company. Everyone needs to be completely honest with themselves in order to get the most out of every Masonic experience. We need to know ourselves, know who we are, what we are and

always strive to be better tomorrow than we are today—by whatever standard we use.” This is our Masonic cornerstone by which to live.

I heartedly recommend Poll’s book! It is full of useful, thought-provoking, and philosophical insights that will make novice through senior Masons think. And isn’t that what we’re all about?

Measured Expectations: The Challenges of Today’s Freemasonry is available from online booksellers and through the author. It is 166 pages, softcover, one black & white illustration; ISBN: 9781613422946, published by Cornerstone Book Publishers, New Orleans, LA

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