

Masonic Perspectives



**A Second Look at Aspects of Controversial Topics
In American Freemasonry**

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Masonic Perspectives is a project created by Past Masters John W. Bizzack and Dan M. Kemble intended to bring the writings about controversial topics of the past in American Freemasonry and provide readers a second look and contemporary perspective on the topics to serve as a catalyst for further discussion. This project is a joint venture of Lexington Lodge No. 1, Lexington, Kentucky and William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Covington, Kentucky.



In this edition, papers from 1920, 1930 and 1975 are reprinted and examined for the purpose of example that points out how the problems confronting American Freemasonry in those periods have not significantly changed - a fact that too many Masons find surprising today and once again illustrates the deficit of awareness about the depth of the issues confronting our fraternity today.



COMMENTARY ON PAPERS

John W. Bizzack, PM, Lexington Lodge No. 1
Dan M. Kemble, PM, William O. Ware Lodge of Research



FRATERNITY

Norman Broadwill Hickox, PM,

From The Master's Lectures Delivered in Evans Lodge 524, Illinois, 1923

No man ever grasps the full significance of the principles of Freemasonry simply by receiving the degrees. Because a great deal of our ritual has come down from the past—because there is much therein that is symbolical—because the circumstances under which the degrees are conferred are not conducive to clearness of thought—and finally because many lodges are all too careless in conferring the degrees, are only some of the reasons why every lodge should be a school for instruction on the subject of Masonic spirit and methods.

The results of our failure in this respect are manifest. First, we have what may be called Masonic illiteracy. There are a great many who have received our degrees who have no clear idea as to what a Freemason actually is. Surely Masonry either stands for something definite—or it does not. If it does mean anything distinctive, then every member of a lodge should have clear ideas on the subject.

The man who comes into Freemasonry takes up a life work, and this very fact emphasizes the necessity for making the lodge a school for Masonic instruction. Brotherhood is a profession, comprising both a science and an art, but who can acquire a profession in three brief evenings and by learning a few paragraphs of lectures?

At least four years of strenuous study, in addition to a considerable preparatory course, are necessary these days for a man taking up a profession such as law, medicine or engineer. Can we expect to turn out quailed Freemasons in the manner of some modern get-rich-quick advertisement? The impossibility of such a thing is self-evident, and the imperative necessity for persistent diffusion of Masonic intelligence among members of the Craft is no less apparent. It should also be emphasized that Freemasonry must do something in the way of spreading of its principles to the world at large.

When an institution acquires a certain cheapness and popularity it is usually declining or being ushered out of the world. Numbers have never made for quality, and the quantitative standard, so noticeable in Freemasonry today, must be repudiated, if what Freemasonry can do for the world is to be accomplished. The theory that the more members made, the better for the world, is a fallacy. Our institution cannot be greater than those of whom it is composed.

As may readily be observed from the attendance upon lodge, Freemasonry today, to some among us, does not even share the distinction of being in an eminently dignified club. The conception of Freemasonry that is worthy can only be attained as Freemasons turn seriously, of their own free will and accord, to question and discover for themselves the nature and mission of Freemasonry.

Freemasons themselves must change their attitude toward the fraternity. Their interest and devotion to the Masonic principle is by no means as great as it ought to be. Professions of brotherhood in a Masonic lodge are of no more value than professions of religion in a church, unless they are acted upon.

What possible excuse can we offer to posterity for an arrested development? While we can boast of our numbers, our wealth, and the character of our membership, why are two million of us, individually so strong, so impotent as a group?

Our greatest weakness is the failure of many Freemasons, through indifference, lack of time, environment, or opportunity, to familiarize themselves with the glorious history and traditions of our Order. Raised to the sublime degree, then hurried through the higher rites, many glean but the slightest knowledge of the meaning of Freemasonry. They proudly wear the emblems, with some dim conception that they stand for something intangible—that they demand a respect—and cannot but give them a superior standing in the mass.

But ask these brethren to explain the symbolism of the emblems, or put to them a few pointed questions: What does Freemasonry stand for? What is it doing today? What has it ever done? and they are lost for reply. They do not know.

Let me give you a definition which has been selected many times by eminent Freemasons as best answering such questions:

"Freemasonry is the activity of closely united men, who, employing symbolical forms borrowed principally from the mason's trade and from architecture, work for the welfare of mankind, striving morally to ennoble themselves and others, and thereby to bring about a universal league of mankind, which they aspire to exhibit even now on a small scale."

Other dangers which threaten us today are not far to seek—they lurk at our lodge room doors. Their remedy involves no profound wisdom, no revolutionary measures.

Trooping through the doors of our preparation rooms we find an ever-increasing company composed of those from whose Faces is missing the stamp of high intelligence, in whose eyes the torch of education has lighted no fires, and whose halting steps are led by friendly suggestion or quickened by the hope of gain.

Have committees forgotten to report whether these have sufficient education and intelligence to understand and value the doctrines and tenets of Freemasonry? Was it demanded of them if they

came unbiased by improper solicitation and uninfluenced by mercenary motives? When they answered the inquiry did, they know that truth is a divine attribute and the foundation of every virtue? Has not bitter experience yet taught us that it is better that no work man be added to the roll than ever one unworthy foot allowed to cross the threshold.



TAKING STOCK IN AMERICAN FREEMASONRY

J.A. Evans, M.D., P.M.,

Address Given to the Toronto Society for Masonic
Study and Research, 1930

Ex nihilo, nihil fit – Latin: Out of Nothing Comes Nothing

The world flatters itself that it has improved greatly over past generations and gives numerous undebatable examples to prove the contention. It may be true. It undoubtedly is true in some cases. But it may not be in all.

No man can gain an adequate knowledge of any business unless he has spent years of patient study and consideration of the basic principles and details of that business. In this connection, we know that every well-managed business concern, at stated periods, usually once a year, stops its operations for a brief period to do a little inward searching. This process is called "stock-taking" and it would prove of inestimable value if every person, institution and even the world itself, if such were possible, were to "take stock." The Craft is no exception.

Freemasonry of to-day is not exactly what it was two centuries ago. This no person can deny. Has the change been a true advance or has it been a retrograde movement? Masonry should "take stock" and make an honest attempt to answer this question fairly and frankly, and then be guided accordingly. But before this Herculeanean task can be undertaken, there are certain factors and conditions that must be given due consideration.

Masonry can give, to a still greater degree, instruction, and it must be admitted frankly and fearlessly that in the one thing in which it is possible for Masonry to excel, it has failed, and failed dismally at that. This is not a pleasant thought but there is no use in playing ostrich, when there

is work to be done. The whole argument boils down to one basic truth, *Masonry, to fulfil her mission, must educate here members.*

We hear it said, on all sides, that the Craft is clamoring for instruction. Actual experience proves this to be scarcely in accordance with the facts. Masons are no more clamoring for instruction than is the average healthy schoolboy on a perfect summer's day. Those who have no mental appetite or whose mental stomachs rebel against this nourishment are in the wrong place and would be better out, for Masonry can do little for them. While Masons are not clamoring for instruction, the necessity for instruction is being shouted from the housetops and he must indeed be deaf who does not hear it.

Merely passing the required examinations in a school, college or university does not constitute real education any more than being walked through a Masonic ritual. Work is the duty of the Mason; he is presented with the working tools and he must use them. No one else can do it for him. And it depends upon how conscientiously he uses those implements, how perfectly he will shape his ashlar. The rough ashlar will forever remain a rough ashlar, if the Mason sits idly by and does not use those tools in the manner in which they are intended to be used. By no other means than by work can the Mason prepare his stone for the building.

Candidates must be made to undergo real initiation not merely symbolic initiation as so many do, and which accounts for the long and growing list of suspensions and demits seen each year. The governing bodies are worried over this growing number of demissions, and well they might because it shows unequivocally the failure of initiation as practiced. The cause is clear, the solution as definite, failure to accept and act accordingly will simply mean a continuance of the disease which is eating at the very vitals of the Fraternity. Banquets and song, platitudinous speeches and hurrahs never made anything, and cannot make Masonry. Work, and lots of it, work properly directed, work along educational lines, educate the membership, make Masonry really mean something and a new day will dawn. But to educate the members, educators must be found. Education, like charity, must begin at home, the uneducated officer cannot instruct the new initiate. There is an apt though trite saying, "To train a dog it is necessary to know more than the dog." And do not forget the old Latin proverb: "Ex nihilo, nihil fit." [The phrase ex nihilo also appears in the classical philosophical formulation ex nihilo nihil fit, which means "out of nothing comes nothing". When used outside of religious or metaphysical contexts, ex nihilo also refers to something coming from nothing]

One of two things often happen, or worse still, both. The ceremonies may be run through by officers whose elocution is, to say the least, faulty to an extreme, and as expressionless. The ceremonies, through pressure of time, are not given "in extenso," for the banquet waits. There are speeches to be made, toasts to be honored and music. Our brother is attracted in spite of it all and realizes dimly how beautiful it could be. On the other hand, the rendition may be excellent. The candidate is unquestionably impressed, and he feels that there is a reasonable hope of his finding that of which he is in search. He gets up his work and is given the remainder of the degrees, often rushed through at an emergency or called meeting. Still hope leads him on, he is willing to work.

The sublime degree is rushed through and he is finished, graduated, a full-fledged Master Mason, able to look after himself and left to his own devices, no instruction, no advice, no help given.

He flounders, he becomes discouraged, feels disillusioned and fails to attend the meetings. But at some later date we find this same brother a very active member of some other organization, devoting those same energies he would so gladly have devoted to Masonry. He should never have been lost, the fault is with the lodge. Many dozens are lost in this manner, the best types of men, the very men Masonry cannot afford to lose. A little Masonic education given right at this time would act almost as a specific for this malady. Back slapping won't cure it.

What then is Masonic education?

Many Masons appreciate the value of knowledge but lack the necessary energy to knuckle down to the hard work necessary to acquire it. These rush through degree after degree, hoping that by some magical means, supreme knowledge will be given to them as a gift from the gods, and thus enable them to reap the full benefits of knowledge without having to subject themselves to exertion of any kind. But the receiving of degrees does not necessarily mean development. True a man must be mentally poverty stricken if he does not receive some benefit from witnessing the beauty of the various degrees found in Masonry, but that is not real education because there is not sufficient effort put forth by him to give rise to any development. Such persons are mentally lazy.

No man can become a champion boxer from merely reading a book on the art. Personal effort is necessary, and that is just where people fail by the thousands, that is where the leadership has failed. Masons must be compelled to put forth a personal effort and any Mason who is unwilling to make this effort can never obtain any development. This compulsion must come from the governing bodies. They will become very unpopular, at least temporarily, but if any governing body is going to evade its duties on the plea of unpopularity, then that organization can immediately proceed to the Mortician and make arrangements for its own interment. The danger to Masonry is from within, a dry rot, not from outside sources. These latter need not cause us one moment's trepidation, but the former is a very real source of apprehension to every intelligent Mason. The results are already becoming unquestionably manifest.



FREEMASONRY'S NUTS AND BOLTS

Walter M. Callaway, Jr.

Short Talk Bulletin was written by Worshipful Brother Callaway, Editor of The Masonic Messenger, official publication of the Grand Lodge of Georgia, in fulfillment of the requirements for admission into the Society of Blue Friars, an honorary association of Masonic writers in 1975

The fraternal machinery of Freemasonry is made up of many component parts including nuts and bolts. From time to time the machinery requires inspection.

There are many Masonic mourners going about the streets today who are singing sad songs about the impending demise of our ancient Brotherhood. We are being warned that Freemasonry must adapt its philosophy and its ways to fit the times, that we must be relevant to the world today. Some claim that "in the interests of time" the ritual must be shortened to the point of emasculation; some of the lectures should be abolished because they are time-consuming.

Lodge and Grand Lodge officers, with some exceptions, became enamored of the sheer force of numbers of new members, there has been almost a mystique about the size of membership. One may read all the written material on the philosophy of Freemasonry ever printed without once finding that size of membership is a laudable goal of the Craft, or that a Lodge with one hundred members is necessarily a better Lodge than one with only fifty members. The energy expended by those who moan over our losses of membership would be put to better use if those mourners made an in-depth study of why we lose so many members we already have.

Why do so many permit themselves to be suspended for non-payment of dues? Why do so many members never return after they have been raised? Why do so many Entered Apprentices never return after that degree? Such an investigation, I think, could produce facts which might be embarrassing to the Lodge and its leadership.

If there is a heel of Achilles in the structure of Freemasonry, or in the practice of Freemasonry, I should say that it lies in the failure of the Lodge to hold the interest or to educate the newly raised candidate in the degrees of Freemasonry. From the time he is raised, he is given a few instructions on the floor of the Lodge and is then dismissed to the sidelines by the Master with a perfunctory parting shot, "Come back as often as you can. You'll get out of Freemasonry only what you put into it!"

Such a statement is not true and tends to mislead the new Brother into thinking that Freemasonry is a sort of tit-for-tat arrangement. The Master should inform the new member that he must stand his examination on the Master's catechism; then he should inform him that there exists out there a great wide world of Freemasonry and that he, the new Brother, should learn all he can about his Fraternity, that he should participate in it, that he can profitably spend the rest of his life learning a little at a time something about the Craft and what it stands for, that it extends far beyond his Lodge, his state or his own country. He should be informed that the Ritual is a necessary means to an end and should not be regarded as the sum total of Masonic knowledge.

It is my personal view that it is quite impossible for a man to advance in Masonic knowledge without at the same time becoming a better and more useful member of the craft. Can a citizen study the lives and times of our founding fathers without becoming a better patriot?

All this is not to say that it is to be expected that each Freemason who reads Masonic books will become a Masonic scholar. But at least he should read enough to know some of the basic facts of the origin and general philosophy of Freemasonry. He should learn to tell the difference between fiction and fact in Masonic literature.

There are many component parts in the whole system, all of them important. But let us not forget the common nuts and bolts; they too are important.



COMMENTARY

Flogging a Dead Horse?

~ John W. Bizzack, PM

Hickox 1923 message, “The theory that the more members made, the better for the world, is a fallacy. Our institution cannot be greater than those of whom it is composed,” was not talking about American Freemasonry in just the year he wrote it but the decades previous. His entire lecture tells us that even prior to the 20th century, the problems facing the institution was the lack of Masonic literacy among its members – a message corroborate by an abundance of writings about the same thing found in Masonic journals and periodicals from around 1870 and well into the 1900s. It is reasonable to believe Hickox hoped his message would constructively influence the direction of Freemasonry.

In 1930, when J.A. Evans said, “This is not a pleasant thought but there is no use in playing ostrich, when there is work to be done. The whole argument boils down to one basic truth, Masonry, to fulfil her mission, must educate her members.” Like Hickox, Evan’s previous twenty-years of Masonic experience that told him Masonry had not fulfilled her mission, much less had taken stock of the fact it had not. It is reasonable to think he too was hopeful his message (one he gave often) would take root and constructively influence the direction of Freemasonry.

Forty-five years later, Callaway’s 1975, paper came when American Freemasonry was beginning to feel the loss of 590,533 members – a steady decline that started fifteen years earlier. He said, “The energy expended by those who moan over our losses of membership would be put to better use if those mourners made an in-depth study of why we lose so many members we already have.” The fraternity has yet to take stock of itself in a valid and balanced way to sufficiently, much less convincingly, answer that question. Was Callaway hopeful his message would constructively influence the direction of Freemasonry? Of course.

Some in the fraternity today believe all the presentations, writings, and discussion about the issues confronting Freemasonry over the past thirty-years alone (not to mention those of the past 150 years or so – if they are even aware of them) is mere grumbling or complaining. Others believe such writing are a waste of time producing no outcome - like flogging a dead horse. Considering the repetitiveness of so many writings in the past and today on the same matters confronting the Craft, it does appear the outcome of the efforts to paint the picture, generate interest to address what begs confronting and spurring action has not been worth it since the same issues continue to exist.

I suspect; however, Hickox, Evans and Callaway knew their labor was not going to lead to a major re-adjustment in American Freemasonry to any further extent than those before or after them who wrote about the same thought their labors would. The labors of all who have pointed out what needs confronting has, however, provided historians a clearer picture of issues that explains, at least in part, many of the ups and downs experienced by American Freemasonry, and more.

Henry W. Coil, in his 1973 book, *Comprehensive View of Freemasonry*, ends by speaking to Freemasonry in its broadest sense. He notes, “Freemasonry despises ignorance but does not proscribe the ignorant; it fosters education but proposes no curriculum.” He also notes, “Members are free to express their own opinion, even as to what Freemasonry is and ought to be and invites him to improve it if he can.”

The “invites him to improve it if he can” part is not referring to or suggesting innovations to the principles of Freemasonry. Coil was talking about the passion a member may have to improve how Freemasonry is administered, operated, and can best deliver its promise to its members. Evans, Hickox, and Callaway were but a very few Freemasons in their eras and today whose labors were and are intended to improve Freemasonry by calling attention to the need to educate its members, confront issues and practices that lessen the exceptionalism of its principles, and point the fraternity in the direction of the fundamental mission of Masonry.

The writings, presentations and labors of men who share Coil’s insightful wisdom are far from grumblers or complainers. Some have been and are scholars, formal leaders, influential in their Masonic careers, and impossible to be thought of as casual in their membership. No matter their perch, then or now, these observers constructively contribute and offer more than those who seek to merely preserve the status quo of the administration, operation, and method of the delivery of Freemasonry to members, and therein lies a delicate balance.

Improving Freemasonry is not about changing or modifying its philosophies and tenets as many seem to think. Improving Freemasonry is all about finding ways that best ensure the manner in which the simple, yet profound principles is best delivered to its members. It is clear, if one takes the time to examine the true story of how the institution of Freemasonry unfolded in American and all that has and continues to influence it, that the fraternity has yet to adopt a way to accomplish an agreed upon “best way.”

As Evan’s strongly suggested 89 years ago, “stock-taking” would prove of inestimable value to the institution of Freemasonry. Assessing whether our approach is doing that today remains open to serious debate.

A Consistent Theme

~ **Dan M. Kemble, P. M.**

The themes of the messages presented by Bro. Hickox, Evans and Callaway are so consistent, and so timely, it would be easy to believe they were presented at a recent Masonic symposium. The writings of these men span a period of 52 years, from 1923 to 1975, and represent at least three generations of Masonic scholarship and thought.

Each of these Brothers wrote passionately about the failure of institutional Freemasonry to educate the rank and file members of the Craft. It is worth noting that each Brother wrote in the 20th Century, a time in which Masonic Education all but disappeared from Lodge meetings. Albert Mackey famously warned in the middle 19th Century that the fate of Freemasonry rested upon the intelligence of its membership. The deluge of members coming into the Fraternity in the Post World War I years, and again in the years following World War II, washed away any concerted effort to educate newly made members in the historical aim and purpose of Freemasonry. Lodges were simply too busy conferring degrees and teaching proficiencies to devote any time to the philosophical foundation of our Order. In the middle 1800s, a succession of Grand Masters of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky warned about the dangers of rushing men through the Degrees of Freemasonry with inadequate instruction before, between and after the several Degrees. Each of these men were aware that the result of such a hurried process would be to create “imperfectly made” Masons. Further, the practice was so widespread that it created the presumption among the lesser informed that such practices reflected the totality of the Masonic experience. As the “imperfectly made” Brothers then passed on their version of Masonry to men who joined the Fraternity, any vision of the historic aim and purpose of the Order grew more and more dim. Only the most highly motivated and self-actualizing members sought out the philosophical and spiritual lessons that form the foundation of Freemasonry.

Well-grounded and centered men like Bros. Hickox, Evans and Callaway were such men, and they saw the peril posed by leaving the fate of Freemasonry in the hands of the lesser informed.

J. W. Norwood, a Past Master of Lexington Lodge No. 1 in Lexington, Kentucky, and a noted Masonic writer of the early 20th century offered the example of a student who is sent to school and presented with a book which he is to study. The student cannot possibly know what is in the book unless he reads it and, further, reads it with understanding. Bro. Norwood went on to write that lodges present each aspirant with a “textbook.” If it is glanced over in a perfunctory manner, with little thought given beyond learning some signs, grips and passwords, the student will gain only superficial knowledge about the institution. Bro. Norwood then suggested that if a man’s purpose for entering Freemasonry was not to learn, then he had entered the wrong institution. It would, he asserted, be “better for him and far

better for the Masonic lodge if he would transfer his membership to some fraternal insurance company, or club of fun lovers, or some purely ritualistic order.”¹

If Bros. Bros. Hickox, Evans and Callaway, and perhaps even Bro. Norwood were writing the in the year 2020, they might notice something different about the overall state of the Craft today.

Our Brothers who wrote to warn us the consequences of “Masonic illiteracy” all wrote with the presumption that the men coming into the Fraternity would be both interested in and willing to learn the history and philosophy of Freemasonry, if they were only properly directed and instructed. One wonders if that presumption is valid in 2020.

Further, there is an underlying presumption that such men were capable of learning if properly instructed. Sadly, one glaring consequence of lowering the standards of admission into Freemasonry is that there is a significant percentage of our members who, even if they were so inclined to learn, simply lack the cognitive ability to do so. Bro. Hickox alluded to this in his essay. One can only imagine what his observation would be at this point.

Bro. Callaway quite correctly points out that men disengage themselves from Freemasonry because Lodges fail to educate their members. Bro. Callaway’s point is well taken. Freemasonry offers an infinite number of facets for study. We fail to lead our members to an area of Freemasonry that captures their interest and attention because, largely, Lodge leaders are unaware that these areas exist. In a certain grim sense, Bros. Mackey, Hickox, Evans, Callaway and Norwood would all find it somewhat affirming to see that the consequences that they predicted have come to pass as a result of the failure of Freemasonry to properly educate its members. It is likely that these Brothers would also be shocked at the extent to which the Craft remains uninformed. Given the writings of these Brothers, and the readily apparent further devolution of the intellectual effort invested in Freemasonry by most members, we can easily account for Freemasonry’s drift from an intellectual and philosophical society to its identity as a mere service club.

A time of crisis is also a time of opportunity. The lack of quality Masonic education available to most members in their home Lodges is an invitation for Lodges of Research or other Masonic study groups to fill the existing vacuum. Initiatives such as “Sowing Seeds of Freemasonry” sponsored by William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Ted Adams Lodge of Research and the Rubicon Masonic Society in Kentucky in 2018 stand as an example of what can be done to offer an account of Freemasonry’s history and traditions. Such events, while unlikely to cause overnight demand for increased Masonic education, can be a catalyst for further discussions, lectures, seminars and, perhaps, even a festive board.

Although capable Masons in the 21st Century have their work cut out for them in their efforts to educate the Craft, the attrition rates with respect to membership makes the task somewhat more manageable.

¹ John W. Bizzack, *The Lexington Experience*, BSF Foundation, Lexington, Kentucky, 2020

The equation that remains to be defined is, among the remaining members, what will be the proportion of those who are willing to invest the time and effort to learn the history and philosophy of Freemasonry and what will be the proportion of those who are content to remain “imperfectly made.” The answer to that question will determine the fate of Freemasonry.