

THE BOOK OF THE LODGE

By: Rev. George Oliver, D. D.

Reviewed by Dan M. Kemble, Past Master William O. Ware Lodge of Research

George Oliver is one of Freemasonry's most prolific writers. Widely read and respected in most of the 19th Century, his reputation suffered in the last quarter of that same century and such diminished assessment of his work continues through the present time. A fresh look at one his later works, *The Book of the Lodge*, may warrant a reconsideration of the opinion in which Dr. Oliver is held.

George Oliver was born in Nottinghamshire, England, in 1782. He was the eldest son of Rev. Samuel Oliver, who was also a Freemason.

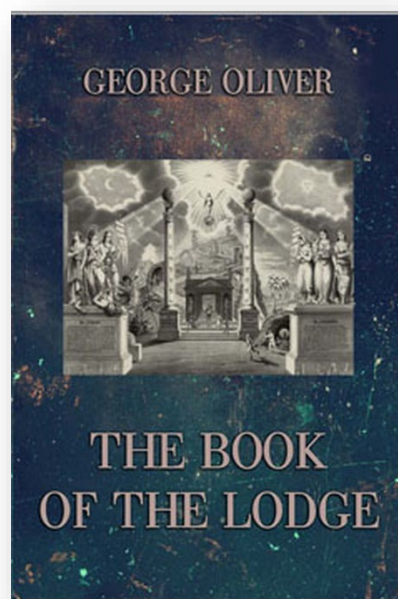
George Oliver followed closely in the footsteps of his father. By virtue of a dispensation granted due to his status as a lewis, George Oliver was initiated into Freemasonry in 1801 at the age of 18. His father performed his initiation. It should be noted that at the time of his becoming a Freemason, the Great Schism had not yet been resolved by the consolidation of the Antients and the Moderns into the United Grand Lodge of England.

Educated at Nottingham, he was the second headmaster of a grammar school at the age of 21. After subsequently serving as headmaster of a grammar school, he entered Holy Orders in the Church of England in 1813. By 1838, he had been awarded the degree of Doctor of Divinity. Rev. Oliver served as rector of several well-known parishes and was recognized as an authority on theological antiquities. His work in that field remains highly regarded.

It was his writing on antiquities that ultimately brought ridicule to Dr. Oliver's scholarship as a Mason. Dr. Oliver attempted to apply his skills as an antiquarian in writing a history of Freemasonry. Influenced by Rev. James Anderson, and other prominent Masons of that time, Dr. Oliver's history of Freemasonry was "fanciful," to put it most kindly. Subsequent Masonic historians have dismissed Dr. Oliver's contributions to the written history of Freemasonry as having no credibility. While that is, in all likelihood, an accurate assessment of his abilities as an historian, it should not overshadow his other notable contributions to the Craft.

First published in 1849, his *The Book of the Lodge* saw three additional editions, to each of which he added new material.

The Book of the Lodge is an early manual that provides descriptions of basic procedures for the formation, construction, furnishing and dedication of Masonic Lodges. Further, it provides guidance for the selection and installation of officers.



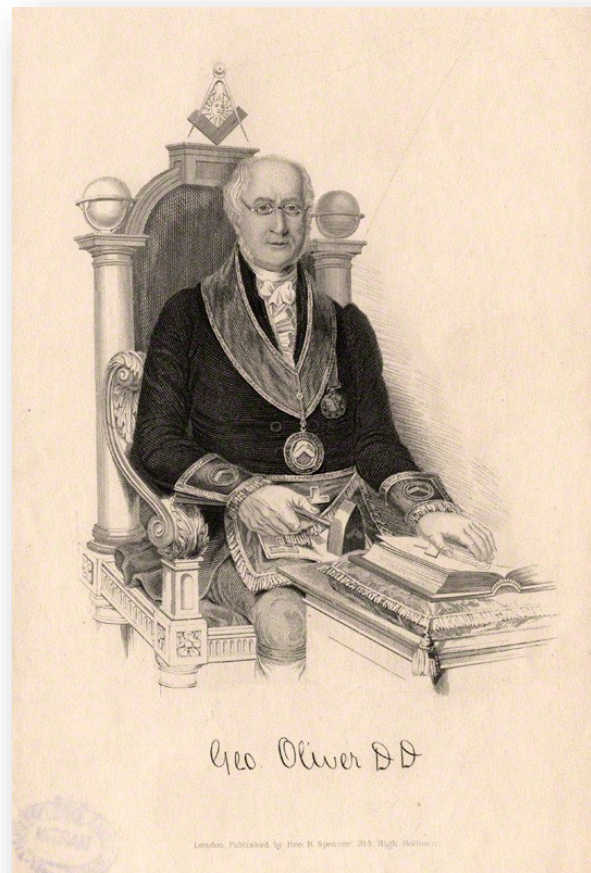
Dr. Oliver opens his work with a chapter titled, “What is Masonry?” In this chapter, he provides ten statements which, in his opinion, define Freemasonry. As might be imagined, given his clerical background, Dr. Oliver leans heavily on definitions of Freemasonry that point to its spiritual and philosophical nature. His definitions of Freemasonry also include several references to learning, knowledge and science. While he calls Freemasonry a “benevolent Order,” he places little to no emphasis on the charitable works of a Lodge. Dr. Oliver ends this chapter by pointing out that the concept of Freemasonry is too large to be fully captured by any definition.

The next several chapters address the physical design and construction of Lodges. Dr. Oliver points out that Lodges occupy “Holy Ground,” and are set apart for a special work. He is precise in his instructions regarding the cornerstone laying and later dedication of Masonic Temples. He is equally precise in his descriptions as to the design of the interior of the Lodge. One of the more interesting chapters is his treatment of the name of the Lodge. Dr. Oliver relates how, in many circumstances, the name of the Lodge fixes its personality, and, thereby, its future. He warns that if disharmony is found in “Harmony Lodge,” that particular Lodge has opened itself, and all of Freemasonry, to charges of hypocrisy. He includes in this chapter a discussion on the appropriateness of selecting pagan names for Masonic Lodges. Dr. Oliver concludes that the use of such names is “lawful.”

In the second edition of *The Book of the Lodge*, published in 1856, Dr. Oliver added “A Century of Aphorisms.” These one hundred aphorisms, or maxims, are statements by Dr. Oliver, drawn on his experience as a Mason, that have proven to be true and accurate over the course of centuries. Dr. Oliver’s aphorisms draw heavily on the Old Charges, Anderson’s Constitutions and common sense. Examined in the context of the 21st Century, they hold up quite well, and continue to serve as sound advice to Masons and Freemasonry.

Following his aphorisms, Dr. Oliver briefly discusses the duties and responsibilities of the various Lodge officers. In an interesting glimpse into the time at which the book was written, the United Grand Lodge of England had not formally provided for the office of deacons in its Lodges. Dr. Oliver notes that certain Lodges, having grown large, were in need of additional officers, and so the office of deacon was established.

The Book of the Lodge concludes with a review of the Tracing Boards of each degree. These chapters include much of what we incorporate into our lectures in contemporary degree work.



While *The Book of the Lodge* was written primarily for Masons and Lodges working under the aegis of the United Grand Lodge of England, it does, on occasion, mention Freemasonry in the United States, and notes several of the cultural and philosophical differences in the manner in which Freemasonry was practiced. Interestingly, Dr. Oliver did not approve of the manner in which Freemasonry in the United States embraced the temperance movement. His comments on that subject are quite interesting.

The Book of the Lodge, though now dated and obscure, was a ground-breaking work at its time. One can easily see how it influenced what became *Macoy's Worshipful Master's Assistant*, a revised edition of which remains in print at this time.

George Oliver's reputation faded in the last quarter of the 19th Century, as his historical writing about Freemasonry failed to withstand the scrutiny of more stringent researchers of fact. In the 20th and 21st Centuries, he has been relegated to the list of former Masonic authorities whose works are now disregarded. Notwithstanding, his *The Book of the Lodge* deserves more prominent recognition as one of the early works that addressed the organization, function and governance of Masonic Lodges.

Long out of print, *The Book of the Lodge* is available in print-on-demand versions from most online booksellers. An original edition from the 19th Century may occasionally be found after searching antiquarian book sites, a fact that, one suspects, would cause Dr. Oliver to smile.

