

THOUGHTS ON W. L. WILMSHURST'S *THE MEANING OF MASONRY*

TIMOTHY C. AVEN, JUNIOR WARDEN, LEXINGTON LODGE NO. 1 AND MEMBER
OF THE RUBICON MASONIC SOCIETY

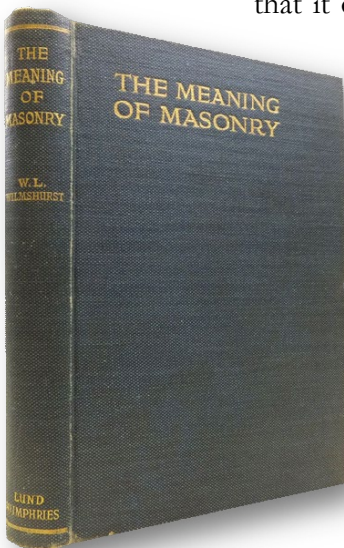
Imagine you are a member of the oldest and most storied fraternal organization in existence. You are gratified that members are becoming better informed about the intent and purpose of your fraternity, attributing its popularity and explosive growth to this increased focus on its methodology. You are Walter Leslie Wilmshurst, and in 1912 you write in the introduction to your collection of five essays titled *The Meaning on Masonry* that “The Masonic Craft has grown to dimensions undreamed of by its founders, and at its present rate of increase, its potential and influence in the future are quite invaluable.”



W.L. Wilmshurst

It is clear from those words that, despite the surge of public favor towards the Craft, he feared the implications of its rapid growth and the ability of its members – both present and future – to absorb, exemplify and inculcate its true purpose. Wilmshurst understood that a Lodge’s purpose is not to serve merely as a meeting place for men to enjoy a meal together, nor as an alms house, but rather as a university with a syllabus and curriculum designed to lead a man to his spiritual regeneration, equipped with the symbolic tools to assist in the quest for perfection. He recognized that most Masons in his time were as uninformed about the true purpose of the Craft as someone who has never even considered knocking at the West Gate or expressed any interest in what lies behind it. Wilmshurst wrote, “*The modern Mason is as little qualified to understand the subject as the man who has never entered the Lodge.*”

Wilmshurst wrote *The Meaning of Masonry* as a token of appreciation for the brotherhood, as well as for both the intellectual and spiritual benefits he gained from his membership. He hoped that it could assist in furthering the progress and growth of Masonry and its members, serving as a useful roadmap to assist the Craft with reaching its potential.



Envision Wilmshurst’s intentions here, and then imagine him transported to our age, the early 21st Century, and being directed to visit the website of the Lodge of Living Stones 4597 (located in the Province of Yorkshire, West Redding), a Lodge he established in 1927 to promote the esoteric teachings of Freemasonry. He would read the following on its landing page, “We have not had a Grand Orator since 2009, and the deeper interpretation of our rituals and ceremonies seems to be lost beneath the social and charitable aspects of our fraternity ... Now is the time when the Craft most needs a deeper appreciation of its latent teachings.”

If you can picture this scenario, and place yourself in the mindset of our imaginary, time-traveling author, it is difficult not to conclude that

Wilmshurst's fears have been realized – that not only despite (and, perhaps, assisted by) the substantial growth of membership during his era, the majority of the Craft has ignored its philosophical underpinning, resulting in a dramatic decline in its numbers.

Though both Wilmshurst and the Lodge of Living Stones directed their writings and concerns towards the Lodges constituted under the Grand Lodge of England, it is evident that American Freemasonry shares the same challenges of a declining membership and ignorance of its purpose, with our Brothers across the Atlantic. The website of The Masonic Service Association of North America recorded 3,077,161 Masons in North America in 1924, reaching a peak of 4,086,676 members in 1957. In 2023, it lists the number of North American members as 869,429, emphasized by the disheartening rejoinder, *Lowest Total*.

It would be a mistake to conclude that Wilmshurst's work was a failure because of the precipitous decline in Lodge membership. His writings show that he viewed the ever-ballooning Masonic membership growth of his time not as a true measure of success, but, rather, as a cause for concern – despite his brief passages where he tried to remain positive about it. Wilmshurst would never suggest that the achievements or declines of the Fraternity would depend on the power of *The Meaning of Masonry*, and neither should we. *The Meaning of Masonry* succeeds because it beautifully illustrates what can be gained by Masonic membership through a deep and earnest reflection on Craft Masonry's symbols. It is an elegant and inspirational treatise on the spiritual ascension possible through our heroic journey.

The five essays that comprise *The Meaning of Masonry* delve into the study and contemplation of the Craft's symbols, its historical significance within the Ancient Mystery schools, and the importance of the Holy Royal Arch degree, which he regards as the essential final chapter of the Master Mason degree. Each of these essays articulates Wilmshurst's belief that the true purpose of Freemasonry is to guide its votaries – through the study of its rituals and symbols – to an exalted consciousness, representing a pathway to our own divinity and a consequential reunion with the Great Architect of the Universe.

Wilmshurst argues that our study was never meant to be confined to the initiation of the Entered Apprentice degree, followed by the passing and raising to the higher degrees, but, rather, as a foundation to be elevated from an amorphous state to the heights of a divine consciousness. Wilmshurst describes man's immortal soul as a "ruined temple" that needs to be rebuilt upon the principles of "spiritual science."

The construction of our personal edifice begins with the initiate's desire for the restoration of that which is lost within himself; a crisis of spiritual loss that leads to him knocking at the West Gate. The First Degree's initiation symbolizes an opening door into a higher perception, where the initiate is given the tools to perfect his ashlar. Successive degrees demonstrate an expansion from that first blinding light of comprehension progressing to a deeper understanding. The Brethren and Lodge Officers act as living stones from which the speculative Mason measures himself, assisting him in the construction of his own spiritual edifice. Wilmshurst brilliantly and succinctly state, "*The human organism is the true lodge that must be opened.*" *The Meaning of Masonry* continues to build and refine this allegory in gorgeous, aphoristic prose, inspiring the reader to recommit to this inner calling toward redemption and rising above one's self. It's hard to better, or even comment on, lines such as, "Under the supervision of duly qualified Masters and adepts ... they would admit the candidate's liberated soul into its interior principle until it finally reached the Blazing Star or Glory at its own Center."

The Meaning of Masonry is more than a poetic argument for Masonry's true purpose of education in search of edification, but an almost holy text that lifts our spirit, causing our soul and mind to soar aloft to merge with God-consciousness. It's a seminal work of modern Masonic literature and needs to be read by any brother interested in reaching the exalted ranks of the seasoned Masons who have been instrumental to his journey. Or as another famous writer, H. G. Wells put it:

Sometimes, you have to step outside of the person you've been and remember the person you were meant to be. The person you want to be. The person you are.

Reading *The Meaning of Masonry* allowed me to step outside of myself and to remember who I really *am*. It's now my responsibility to complete the work that I've begun. I recommend this book to any Brother who is ready to take up the task of bettering himself and gaining a better comprehension of the true intent and purpose of our Craft.