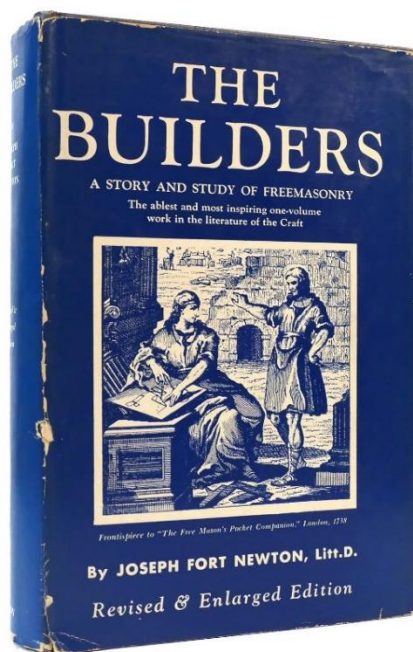


BOOK REVIEW

The Builders: A Story and Study of Masonry

Joseph Fort Newton, Litt. D.

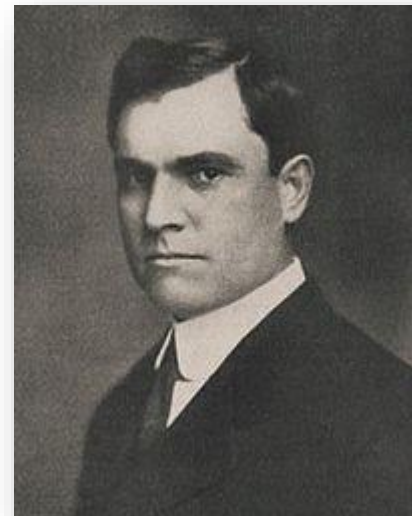
Reviewed by Bill Lorenz, P.M./Research Fellow,
William O. Ware Lodge of Research



The beautiful and true story of a Confederate civil war soldier taken captive by Union forces only to become seriously ill, then removed to the Union Commander's home to be cared for until the soldier could return home, would eventually lead to the writing of what many feel is the greatest Masonic book of all time. Such is the story of Lee Newton, minister, lawyer and father of Reverend Joseph Fort Newton (1880-1950) the author of *The Builders: A Story and Study of Masonry*. Lee Newton was made a Mason in a Confederate Military Lodge, and after capture and becoming deathly sick, was taken to the home of the Union Commander, a Brother Mason. The story is detailed in Allen E. Roberts's 1996 book *House Undivided: The Story of Freemasonry and the Civil War* and can be found in other books as well. Joseph Fort Newton would later state, "The fact that such a fraternity of men could exist, mitigating the harshness of war and remain unbroken, when

states and churches were torn in two, became a wonder, and it is not strange, I tried for years to repay my debt to it."

Joseph Fort Newton's most famous Masonic work, *The Builders: A Story and Study of Masonry*, authorized by the Grand Lodge of Iowa, was printed in 1914, and reprinted twelve times before his death. It has been translated into languages around the world. Shortly before Newton's death, he added a new chapter, "The Unknown Builders," and turned over the copyright to *Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Co., Inc.*, who began publishing the book with the new chapter in 1951. What makes *The Builders* so unique is that it is the first of its kind, and the author, Joseph Fort Newton was, himself,



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a brilliant man, Mason and minister. He was once named as one of the “top five protestant ministers in the world.” This gave him an insight into Freemasonry that few can accomplish. His genuine love for Freemasonry permeates the book throughout, as he paints a picture with words like no other Masonic author. Although the book was originally authored in 1914, very little would need to be altered to bring it current. It is from Macoy’s 1951 edition that this review is made.

The Builders begins with the dedication, “To all my Brethren of the gentle Craft of Freemasonry, of every race and rite, who have been the inspiration of my research, and whose fellowship is a consecration, I inscribe this final edition of my book, with love, honor and gratitude.” Throughout the book, the reader will find Joseph Fort Newton’s belief that Freemasonry’s role is to unite men of every country, sect and opinion; and the Freemason’s duty is to be gentle in controversy as well as harmony, to display brotherly love and honor to those around him, and then be grateful to God for the opportunity to do so.

The 1951 Macoy edition contains three ‘Forwards’ (two from previous editions). “The Anteroom,” from the 1914 original, states in 1900, upon the author being raised a Master Mason (one of the “most significant days” in his life), he inquired if there was a “little book to tell a young man the things he would like to know about Freemasonry -- what it was, whence it came, what it teaches and what it was trying to do for the world?” No one knew of such a book and, fourteen years later, it would fall upon him to be the first to author one.

The main text is divided into three parts. The first part, “**Prophecy,**” has five chapters. In Chapter 1, “*The Foundations,*” Newton observes how primitive man’s thought process centered on agriculture and architecture, the most important of man’s needs. Gathering and building would become associated with a religious experience for man, thanking the reasons behind his bounty and shelter, and the beauty of his stone monuments. Next, “*The Working Tools*” traces symbolism back to near prehistoric times. He describes man’s need for symbolism throughout history in a descriptive and captivating manner, and discovers to us that the working tools, and other symbols from the distant past, “were used as emblems of the very truths which they teach today.” As one of the many examples, Newton quotes Confucius, “A Master Mason, in teaching apprentices, makes use of the compass and square. Ye who are engaged in the pursuit of wisdom, must also make use of the compass and square.”

The third chapter, “*The Drama of Faith,*” deals with man’s obsession with death and gives several accounts of early religious practices concerning faith and death. He surmises that “the Greater Ancient Mysteries were prophetic of Masonry whose drama is an epitome of universal initiation.” Much of the fourth chapter, “*The Secret Doctrine*” is dedicated to gifted Masonic author and metaphysicist Arthur E. Waite. Newton observes the so-called “secret doctrine” isn’t secret at all, but is readily available for those who seek it. The “search for truth,” the search for the “holy grail,” the search for the “secret doctrine;” and the search for the “lost word” are all a search for a better relationship and understanding of God. One must seek it. He quotes Christ’s remark, “He that has an ear to hear, let him hear.”

“*The Collegia,*” the last chapter in this grouping, describes the many ancient societies akin to Freemasonry, including the Knights of the Crusades and the Comacine Masters. Not

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that Freemasonry is a direct descendent of any of the above, but there is an uncanny resemblance to many of their manners and thought processes.

The second section, "**History**," also has five Chapters titled: "*Freemasons*," "*Fellowcraft*," "*Accepted Masons*," "*Grand Lodge of England*," and "*Universal Masonry*." Here the author continues the story of the Comacine Masters in far greater detail, and leads into operative Masonry, first covering much of the old Manuscripts. The ancient charges defined how a Mason should live, act and perform his duties, and includes the story of Athelstan and the Assembly of 926 in York. Newton then writes of the guild era and the Church confirming the rights of Masons and also granting them privileges. Newton finds this the beginnings of today's Freemasons love of liberty. During the decline of architecture, we are told, Masonry likewise declined, the advent of notable men who were accepted into the Masons lodge, however, helped to sustain it, albeit in a different form.

There is no doubt that the author believed that operative Masonry contained much of the same that speculative Masonry of today holds. Newton quotes the Regius Poem (circa 1390) "Of speculative he was a master." He adds Gould's remarks in **History of Freemasonry** on the Regius manuscript and the Cooke manuscript. Both contain "intimations of thoughts above the heads of many to whom it was read." Newton adds to his proof the Limerick brass square of 1517 engraved, "strive to live with love and care – Upon the Level and by the Square," and follows with even more evidence. Perhaps one of the many ancient Masonic manuscripts, describing the operative masonry's long and elaborate history, would be the interest for men - not of the trade - to join or be "accepted."

From the Accepted Masons, the Grand Lodge of England was formed in 1717, by four old lodges. **The Builders** includes Newton's thoughts on those who made it happen, the conversion of two degrees into three degrees, and the accomplishments therein contained. He then adds to this section, a description of the spread of Freemasonry and Grand Lodges into countries around the world. He discusses the Gormogons and other antagonistic groups, ritual exposures, the "Ancients" and the "Moderns" and the 1738 Bull against Freemasonry by Pope Clement XII. He notes the work of Laurence Dermott, William Preston, Thomas Smith Webb, and others. Newton then enters into the Revolutionary War era with a discussion of George Washington and other American heroes.

On the subject of religion, Newton finds fault with sectarianism. He asks, "Where else, except in a Masonic lodge, could men of many religions meet, each praying for all and all for each one. It has taught me one Lesson: If ever there is to be a Religion of Brotherhood on earth, it must begin with a Brotherhood of Religions." He concludes poetically, "Truth will triumph; God's dreams will come true. Justice will reign from sun to sun, victorious over cruelty and evil."

The third and final section, "**Interpretation**," contains four chapters. The first is "*What is Masonry*." "A system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols," perhaps is the most popular response, but brief and varied answers are as plentiful as there are Masonic authors. Newton prefers the definition from **The Handbuch**, an encyclopedia printed in 1900, as the best: "*Masonry is the activity of closely united men who, employing symbolic forms borrowed principally from the masonic trade and from architecture, work for the welfare of*

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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.” Newton utilizes this chapter to expound upon this interpretation.

The second chapter is titled *“The Masonic Philosophy.”* Although I find it most interesting, it would be undesirable and unworthy to discuss Newton’s philosophy on Masonry in this brief paragraph. Newton attempted to set the matter of his philosophy in his short poem:

*No deep is deep enough to show – The springs whence being start to flow.
No fastness of the soul reveals – Life’s subtlest impulse and appeals.
We seem to come, we seem to go; - But whence or wither who can know?
Unemptiable, unfillable, - It’s all in one syllable
God! Only God. God first, God last. - God, infinitesimally vast;
God who is love, love which is God, - The rootless, everflowing rod!*

He also covers the difference between “faith” and “deep faith,” and expounds on atheism as an unrealistic alternative. So much more is in this chapter – too much to present here in a rational mode.

“The Spirit of Masonry,” the third chapter, defines Masonry as “friendship.” First, friendship with God, our companion, to help us through life, and friendship with all men that we may help each other through life, is not to be taken lightly. All mankind is included. This, Newton believes, is the true spirit of Masonry. He ends this chapter with “When is a man a Mason? When he can look out over the rivers, the hills and the far horizon with a profound sense of his own littleness in the vast scheme of things, and yet have faith, hope and courage – which is the root of every virtue.” This touching and expressive composition continues to the end of the chapter, the original end of the book.

“The Unknown Builders” is found in revised editions from 1951 forward. A little over two pages, it features the need for lodges to set a “Day of Celebration” to honor those brothers from the past, who have given so much to Freemasonry, but whose names may well be forgotten. These are the real heroes, the real builders of Freemasonry. Joseph Fort Newton does an excellent job eulogizing them.

This is a superb book, containing the history, philosophy and meaning of Masonry. The wisdom of the author, and the beauty of his expression, will motivate and strengthen the reader’s resolve to become closer to his God, and to love his fellow man, in other words, a better Mason. ***The Builders: A Story and Study of Freemasonry***, is a book that should be read by every Mason. I heartily recommend it.

William Lorenz, PM/RF - Wm O. Ware Lodge of Research

The Builders: A Story and Study of Freemasonry, authored by Rev. Joseph Fort Newton, is available through on-line book sellers, or at any good bookstore.