

WILLIAM O. WARE LODGE OF RESEARCH

BOOK REVIEW

A Radical In the East: S. Brent Morris

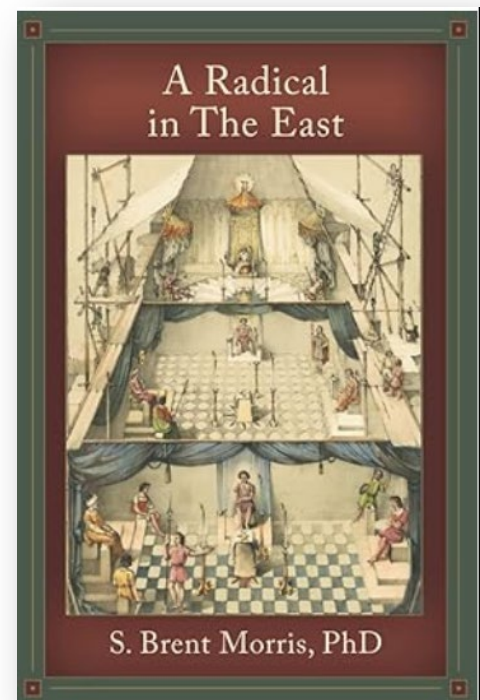
Reviewed by: Dan M. Kemble

Worshipful Brother S. Brent Morris is one of the most prolific Masonic writers and publishers of the last forty years. Among Freemasons who read, W. B. Morris simply needs no introduction. He is a member and Past Master of Patmos Lodge No. 70 in Ellicott City, Marland, and is a highly decorated member of both the Scottish Rite and the York Rite.

In 1993, Iowa Lodge of Research No. 2 published a collection of papers written by W. B. Morris under the title, *A Radical In the East*. The book consists of fourteen brief essays, in which Morris addresses an assortment of topics ranging from collapsing membership numbers to the eternal debate over the adoption of Landmarks. A revised edition was printed in 2022. This review is based on the original edition of the book.

The book opens with an essay title, “Trends Affecting American Freemasonry.” In this essay, W. B. Morris tackles the demographics involved in the shrinking membership rolls of American Freemasonry. He correctly notes that Freemasonry, as an institution, has not been alone among fraternal organizations in watching its membership diminish over the last third of the 20th century. He notes the paradox that as membership in fraternal organizations became more and more, the perceived social capital derived from membership in such organizations became less and less. While that is not the sole trend that explains the decrease in Masonic memberships, it helps explain the environment in which such decreases occurred.

The first essay nicely introduces the second, “Boom To Bust In the Twentieth Century.” In this paper, W. B. Morris takes a much deeper dive into the conditions that accounted for periods of soaring membership, coupled with an analysis of the ensuing period of plummeting membership



numbers. The reader should bear in mind that this work was published in 1993, after roughly 33 years of numerical decline in Masonic membership. As of this writing, another thirty years have passed, and each of those years has brought additional attrition to the fraternity. Morris wrote that fraternities have a difficult time realistically evaluating the effectiveness of their behaviors because they are frequently unable to distinguish form from substance. His conclusion is no less valid today than it was thirty years ago.

The third essay, “Masonic Membership Myths,” debunks four commonly held attitudes that have allowed institutional Freemasonry to bury its head in the sand when confronted with the reality of declining membership numbers. Those myths are”

1. Our current losses are part of the cyclic nature of Masonry;
2. Masonry flourishes during times of war and crisis;
3. The Depression was the only thing that stopped our growth before 1959; and
4. If we just keep doing business as usual, everything will get better.

One by one, Morris debunks each of these myths. His writing is a call for Freemasonry, as an institution, to be more introspective in examining the reasons for its numerical decline. He closes by saying, “Change is coming to American Freemasonry; the only question is whether it will be planned or accidental.

As a coda to the first three essays, the fourth essay is titled, “The Public Image of Freemasonry.” Here, W. B. Morris takes on the way in which Freemasonry’s inherent characteristics have contributed to a near invisible presence in American society. Although occurring some thirty years later, W. B. Morris’s observations were confirmed during the emergence of the “Not Just A Man, A Mason” campaign offered by the Scottish Rite, Northern Jurisdiction.

The fifth essay is titled, “On Masonic Research,” and was given at the time W. B. Morris became president of The Maryland Masonic Research Society. In this writing, Morris relates how he became interested in Masonic research, and offers the most sound advice to anyone with a desire to engage in research projects: start digging!

This particular essay serves as a roadmap for the person just setting out to perform Masonic research. W. B. Morris lists the various national, state and local sources that may be accessed, both inside and outside of Freemasonry, which may be useful in one’s research. Morris writes that there is no limit to what one’s research may find, a truth that he has demonstrated over and over again in his own career as a Masonic author.

Essays six and eleven, “Masonic Toasts” and “Table Lodges,” respectively, are complementary and offer insights into the traditions of Masonic dining and toasting.

The ninth essay, “The Siren Song of Solicitation,” is exactly what its title implies – a warning about the temptation to invite men to become Freemasons. Returning to familiar themes, W. B.

Morris states that the continuing decrease in Masonic membership numbers has resulted in the willingness of more Masonic leaders to reexamine our long-standing no-solicitation policy. He writes, "The national debt cannot be retired by printing more money, nor can our problems be cured by opening the floodgates of solicitation."

The tenth essay, "Landmarks and Liabilities," takes dead aim at one of Freemasonry's most sacred cows, Albert Mackey's list of Landmarks. Here, W. B. Morris uses quotes from Masonic scholars including Robert F. Gould, Roscoe Pound, Henry W. Coil and Dwight L. Smith to illuminate the fact that Mackey's 25 Landmarks are neither ancient, nor are they unchangeable. Morris calls the debate over Landmarks the source of "confusion in the Temple." He points out tellingly that the premier Grand Lodge, the Grand Lodge of England, has never seen fit to adopt any list of Landmarks.

The fourteenth, and final, essay is, "A Radical In the East," from which the book takes its name. This particular essay was written by Morris in contemplation of his term as High Priest of his Royal Arch Chapter. It is clear to the reader that Morris defines a radical as someone who dares to think unconventionally with respect to devising new approaches to the delivery of Freemasonry. He writes, "Surely we can preserve and transmit our teachings by some more flexible method." While his observations were specifically directed to Royal Arch Masonry, they are equally applicable to Blue Lodge Masonry as well.

A Radical In the East provides an early and revealing look into the thoughts of our esteemed Brother, S. Brent Morris. W. B. Morris's contributions to Freemasonry have been many, and all of them have contributed to elevating the discourse found in Freemasonry and adding to its rich store of literature. *A Radical In the East* is informative, a bit provocative, and leaves the reader with a desire to learn more about each of the essay topics. It is an important addition to any Masonic library.

A Radical In the East is available from on-line booksellers.