

# Short Talks on Masonry

Joseph Fort Newton

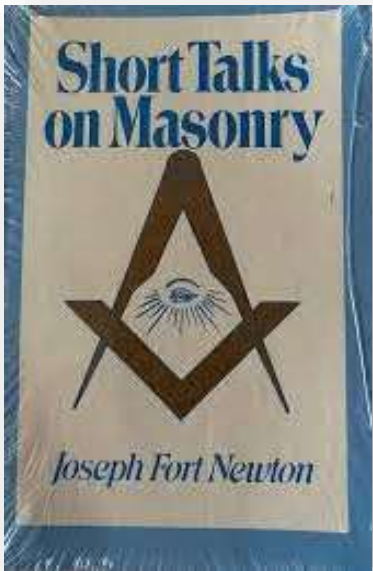
Reviewed by: Dan M. Kemble

A compelling case may be made that the Rev. Joseph Fort Newton was the most significant writer in American Freemasonry in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

His works of that era include *The Builders: A Story and Study of Masonry* (1914) and *The Men's House* (1923). In 1928, he published the subject of this review, *Short Talks on Masonry*. *Short Talks* is a *tour de force* of Newton's understanding of, and vision for, Freemasonry.

*Short Talks* is exactly what its title implies. It is a collection of 34 essays written by Newton, divided into two sections. The first section, given the heading, "Symbolism," consists of 20 essays which can best be described as "good and wholesome instruction" related to the most elemental symbols of Freemasonry. The second section, labeled, "Service," is an exploration of the mission of Masonry. In a

slightly off-topic sketch, Newton included in this section a brief review of the life of American actor and Freemason Edwin Booth.



Newton, whose theological journey led him to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church, wrote eloquently of the Masonic altar. After quoting the portion of the Old Charges related to Freemasonry and religion, Newton, a universalist at heart, wrote, "...the Altar of Masonry is an Altar of Freedom – not freedom from faith, but freedom of faith. Beyond the fact of the reality of God it does not go, allowing every man to think of God according to his experience of life and his vision of truth." In the context of the largely Christian and Protestant Freemasonry found in the United States in the 1920s, Newton took a firm stance in proclaiming the inclusiveness that Freemasonry offered.

Newton devotes several of his essays to an explanation of the working tools of the symbolic lodge. He writes of square, level and plumb as being representative of absolute truths. These working tools remind us of the necessity of recognizing and following standards of conduct consistent with their use. Newton wrote,

"...inevitably, a society without standards will be a society without stability, and it will one day go down." Although written nearly 100 years ago, Newton's words carry a clear resonance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Newton recognized that the lesson of the level was misunderstood, even in his era. In writing about the level, he wrote, "What, then, is the equality of which the Level is the symbol? Clearly it is not identity, or even similarity of gift and endowment. No, it is something better; it is the equal right of each man to the full use and development of such power as he has, whatever it may be, unhindered by injustice or oppression." The



## William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Kentucky

key to successfully understanding Newton here is his use of the word, “development.” He believed that lodges were places where men were free to develop such skills as their abilities permitted. While that places an obligation on the part of the lodge to provide such an environment, it also implies an obligation on the part of the individual Mason to utilize the lodge in such a manner. Newton never deviated from the idea of merit being the ultimate measure of advancement in Freemasonry. He did, however, clearly advocate that the lodge should be a place that nurtured individual growth and development, and thereby identified and rewarded merit.

In his essay, “The Rite of Destitution,” Newton reminds his readers that Masonic charity is not a question of alms-giving, but a matter of tending to the needs of our Brothers (and their families) who may be in need. He writes quite movingly that the greatest destitution that a man may face may be the absence of faith, hope or courage. Newton encourages Masons to be charitable with their time, to share their faith and hope for the future, and to stand in unison in the face of uncertainty and doubt.

Newton returns to the theme of Masonic charity in his essay, “An Erring Brother.” He recognizes the fact that humans, even Masons, continue to be fallible. He writes that a fallen Brother should be treated with “pity, patience and loving kindness.” Newton, ever the pastor, sought ways to restore the errant Brother to fellowship within the lodge. The spirit of Masonry, he wrote, “softens what is hard and strengthens what is weak.”

Newton closes the first section of the book, “Symbolism,” with an essay title, “So Mote It Be.” Much like the title phrase, the essay is a benediction on instruction in Freemasonry’s most recognizable symbols.

Among the 14 essays that comprise the second section of the book, “Service,” there is one that shines far more brightly than the others, and, which, is perhaps the most valuable of all of Newton’s writings. The essay, “Masonic Education,” is a call for structured orientation and education as a candidate moves through the Degrees of Masonry.

Newton related his own frustration with being inadequately instructed as he progressed through the Degrees, and after he had completed the three Degrees of Masonry. He then recounted his visit to the home of Scots Mason Andrew Sommerville MacBride, which occurred while Newton was pastoring London. MacBride shared with Newton the Scots tradition of appointing intenders to instruct new Masons not only in the required memory work, but in the meanings of the Craft’s rituals and symbols. Based on Newton’s understanding of his conversation with MacBride, he began to seek ways to instruct men in the meaning of Masonry, going beyond the mere delivery of ritual.

Of a structured education program, Newton wrote, “It takes a young man at the time when he is ready and eager to know; it links the study of Masonry with the Ritual, as it should be; and it is done in an atmosphere in which not only the facts, but the spirit, the ‘feel’ of Masonry, can be communicated.” He went on to say, “Surely a Grand Lodge ought to be as eager to have at least an elementary knowledge of what Masonry is imparted to its young men, as it is to have them know the Ritual.” Newton concluded his remarks by saying, “Such a plan is neither impossible nor impractical, if we really mean business in the matter of Masonic Education.”

Newton’s final essay included in *Short Talks* is titled, “The Opportunity for Brotherhood.” To Newton, Masonry was synonymous with brotherhood and friendship. In this last essay, Newton called for an end to parochial thinking, stating that we are all “citizens of the world.” Recall that *Short Talks*, and this particular essay, was written in the turbulent period between World Wars I and II. It is in that context that Newton poses his final three questions: “How will Masonry meet this marvelous age and measure up to its opportunity? Is it a progressive science as it claims to be? Can Masonry itself unite in a common undertaking for the common good, in service to mankind?”

## William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Kentucky

The most striking quality of Joseph Fort Newton's *Short Talks on Masonry* is the fact that a book written nearly a century ago remains so timely in its message to contemporary Freemasonry. In *Short Talks*, Newton reveals the fullness of his understanding of Freemasonry. Although written in prose, there is a poetic tone to *Short Talks*, attributable to Newton's mastery of language and the subject about which he wrote. *Short Talks on Masonry* speaks to Freemasons in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as clearly and eloquently as it did when first published. It is a work both inspired and inspirational.

*Short Talks on Masonry*, first published by the Masonic Service Association of the United States, remains available from online booksellers.