

SAMUEL PRICHARD'S MASONRY DISSECTED - 1730

Exposures of Freemasonry predate the founding of the Grand Lodge of England. Early Masonic catechisms made their way into private collections in the late 17th century. With the formation of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717, though, and in the years following in which Freemasonry grew in popularity among the populace of London, the floodgates for exposures opened.

The year 1723, a mere six years after the founding of the Grand Lodge of England, saw the publication of *A Mason's Examination*, in which some snippets of early Masonic ritual appeared.

In 1730, an author known only to posterity as Samuel Prichard, published *Masonry Dissected*, which, among exposures, remains of great interest to contemporary Freemasons. The study of Prichard's *Masonry Dissected* has its own history.

In 1970, two Illinois Freemasons, Alphonse Cerza and Louis Williams, founded The Masonic Book Club. Over the next forty years, The Masonic Book Club would reprint many significant historical Masonic works which otherwise would have been unavailable to the modern Masonic scholar. The Masonic Book Club disbanded in 2010, to be reconstituted in 2017 by The Scottish Rite, Southern Jurisdiction.

In 1977, The Masonic Book Club published *Masonry Dissected, by Samuel Prichard, 1730*, a reprint of the original 1730 exposure, edited by Harry Carr. In 2021, The Masonic Book Club, as resurrected, reprinted Carr's edition, with additional editorial comments by Arturo de Hoyos and S. Brent Morris. Once again, Samuel Prichard's historic publication is available for review by students of Freemasonry.

Masonry Dissected is of intense interest to the student of Freemasonry far more for contextual reasons than for its actual content. The proliferation of the Master Mason Degree did not arise from an act of the Grand Lodge of England. It did not exist at the founding of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717, or at the time of the publication of Anderson's Constitutions in 1723. Sometime in the middle 1720s, the degree was introduced to English Freemasonry and its acceptance was widespread and immediate. By 1738, Anderson's Constitutions needed to be revised to include the Master Mason Degree. *Masonry Dissected* was the first Masonic exposure which included the Master Mason Degree. It is the fact that *Masonry Dissected* provides some otherwise absent information as to when the Master Mason Degree began to be a part of the degree system of Freemasonry that causes it to retain its interest to the Masonic researcher.

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To say that *Masonry Dissected* was a best seller is an understatement. An advertisement for its sale was first printed in London's "The Daily Journal" on October 20, 1730. The small book, only 32 pages and measuring roughly 7 x 4 ½ inches, sold out entirely in one day. A second edition was printed on October 21, 1730 and a third edition was in print by October 31, 1730. By 1800, there had been at least thirty-eight different printings of *Masonry Dissected*. Ironically, Prichard's work became popular, in part, as a result of its use by Masons during a time when printed monitors and other study guides approved by Grand Lodges were either non-existent or unavailable.

The text of *Masonry Dissected* consists of what contemporary Masons would think of as the proficiency work of each of the three degrees of Masonry. It includes the oath and obligation of the Entered Apprentice Degree, but not those of the Fellow Craft or Master Mason Degrees.

But who was Samuel Prichard? The identity of the author, beyond the name given, remains unknown. A man named Samuel Pritchard was on the rolls of King Henry VIII Head Lodge in London, but all mention of that Lodge (and Pritchard) disappears after the annual returns of 1730. The names Prichard and Pritchard could be easily confused, but regardless of the spelling of the name, there is nothing to suggest that Prichard (or Pritchard) would have been in a position to write an exposure of Freemasonry that captured so much of its essence as did *Masonry Dissected*.

As the editors point out, the writer of *Masonry Dissected* made references to Freemasonry in such a manner as to indicate that he would have had access to, or been in correspondence with, the highest leadership of the Grand Lodge of England. Prichard, whoever he was, possessed a level of information not readily available to the average Freemason or 1730.

Prichard included in *Masonry Dissected* an oath that the contents of the publication were accurate, and that the description of the Masonic ceremonies contained therein reflected what could be found in the English Masonic Lodges of the time. Curiously, Prichard dedicated his work to the Craft. In the final pages of the book, which he styled as "The Author's Vindication of himself from the prejudiced Part of Mankind," he provided what may be the greatest clue as to his motivation for publishing an exposure, complaining that the right of visitation had been denied in certain Lodges.

Was Prichard the pseudonym for a Mason who had been offended by being denied admission as a visitor to one of London's Masonic Lodges? In all likelihood, we will never know. But his work immediately caught the attention of the Grand Lodge of England, whose minutes from December of 1730 include the following language:

"The Deputy Grand Master took notice of a Pamphlet lately published by one Pritchard who pretends to have been made a regular Mason: In Violation of the Obligation of a Mason wch he swears he has broke in order to do hurt to Masonry and expressing himself with the utmost

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Indignation against both him (stiling him an Impostor) and of his Book as a foolish thing not to be regarded. But in order to prevent the Lodges being imposed upon by false Brethren or Impostors: Proposed till otherwise Ordered by the Grand Lodge, that no Person whatsoever should be admitted into Lodges unless some Member of the Lodge then present would vouch for such visiting Brothers being a regular Mason, and the Member's Name to be entred against the Visitor's Name in the Lodge Book, which Proposal was unanimously agreed to."

On December 15, 1730, the "*Daily Post*" announced the publication of a reply to Prichard titled "A Defence of Masonry, occasioned by a Pamphlet called *Masonry Dissected*." Noting the sting of *Masonry Dissected*, this rejoinder was actually included and reprinted in Anderson's *Constitutions* of 1738.

It is unlikely that Samuel Prichard, whatever his identity, had any conception of the manner in which his exposure, *Masonry Dissected*, would have lasting impact on the Masonic Fraternity. First as an item of curiosity, later as a study guide, and, finally, as a key element in the story of the historical evolution and development of Freemasonry, *Masonry Dissected* has been of significant interest to successive generations of Freemasons, as well as the merely curious.

The Masonic Book Club editors, both in 1977 and 2021, have rendered valuable service to the student of Freemasonry by again making Samuel Prichard's *Masonry Dissected* widely available.

The 2021 edition of *Masonry Dissected* is available through The Masonic Book Club and through other on-line booksellers. Older versions may be found on-line as well.

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