

William O. Ware Lodge of Research Book Review

SPECULATIVE MASONRY

ITS MISSION ITS EVOLUTION AND ITS LANDMARKS; BEING A SERIES OF LECTURES DELIVERED AT THE LODGE OF INSTRUCTION IN CONNECTION WITH LODGE PROGRESS, GLASGOW, NO. 873

Andrew S. MacBride

D. Gilfillan & Co., Glasgow, Scotland, First Edition 1914

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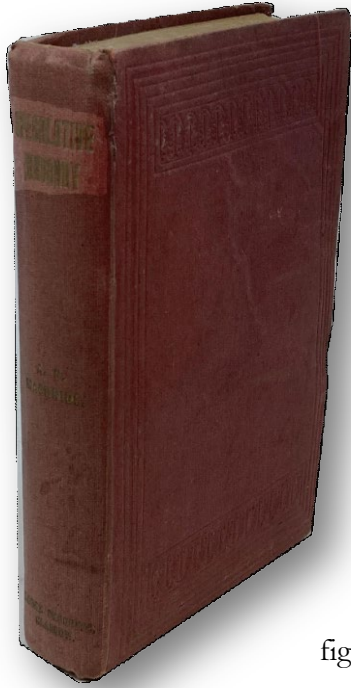
Books about Masonry are often judged under the epoch in which they were written. Andrew S. MacBride's, 1914 *Speculative Masonry* can be judged that way too. Doing so, however, would be glaring injustice to MacBride, as well as to Freemasonry and the institutions that surround it.

This book is by no means an attempt to rewrite any history of Masonry, or to situate its history in the rosiest (frame as is often the wont of many Masonic writers). MacBride's writing is clear, brutally and unflinchingly honest, and leaves the serious-minded Mason wanting him to explore more about Masonry. In fact, he may be one of the best, if not the best lede¹ writer of his or any other era of Masonic literature. MacBride's ledes exist throughout his writing — not just at the beginning of each new section or chapter.



¹ The meaning of *lede* is the introductory section of a news story that is intended to entice the reader to read the full story. The 'lede' is a deliberate misspelling of 'lead' to prevent confusion in the days when printing was done with lead type.

What establishes his writing as head and shoulders above many other Masonic authors of his period are his impeccable credentials. Not only does MacBride strike the heart and inspire the reader to consider the design, aim, and intent of Masonry, but also to consider the soul of the purpose of the Craft. His influence on the writings of other Masonic scholars like Joseph Fort Newton, H.L.



Haywood, Carl Claudy, and W. L. Wilmshurst is a worthy testament of the impact of his commitment to the meaning of Masonry for men who choose to make more of their opportunity than being a mere member of the Fraternity.

Speculative Masonry vividly expresses in words the feelings and thoughts of his experience and study of Masonry. He eloquently arranges his exploration and explanation and leave us in no doubt about the meaning of meaning symbols, phrases, lectures, and underlying philosophies that can make a man not only a better man, but a Mason who thinks.

MacBride has been referred to as the “greatest figure in Scottish Masonry.”² Regrettably, awareness of his influence and writings is under-celebrated in American Freemasonry and his work continues to fade from the consciousness of contemporary Masons with each generation.

We have to ask what it was that made him such an honored Masonic figure in Scotland.

He was initiated as a member in July 1866 in Lodge Leven St John No. 170, Renton, West Dumbartonshire, Scotland. Three months later, he was elected secretary of Lodge Leven St John. A year later, he was elected Master and remained in office until 1874. He was re-elected Master again in 1879 through 1884. In 1887, he was elected Master once more and occupied the chair until 1896. In all, MacBride was Master of Lodge Leven St John for 21 years.

Until approximately 1870, the ritual enacted in Lodge Leven St John was based on *Preston's Illustrations of Freemasonry*, which was originally published late in the 1760s. This ritual had been copied down in a large notebook approximately three quarters of an inch thick and passed on, coming into MacBride's hands when he became Master.³

MacBride is reported to found much to criticize regarding the course and vulgar methods creeping into Masonry due to the failings of previous members to study the symbolism deeply enough, “and them having but small conception of its real beauty and meaning.” His criticisms of the ritual and under-instructed members brought him into conflict with other Masons, but “by his tact and patience he was able to modify and influence those views adverse to his conception and so gain the

² John Agnew, “MacBride - “A Biography Of His Life And Work, Lodge Leven St John 170 Under Charter from The Grand Lodge of Scotland, The <https://l1stj170.masonic-lodge.org.uk/?pagelid=34343338gd3e0b03cfff9fb53e31b9d7fcae5a16e>, accessed November 2022.

³ Agnew.

respect and admiration of those who initially opposed him.”⁴ MacBride's revised ritual would teach what it was meant to teach, without ever departing from the spirit and truth of Masonry.

In revising the ritual his "first care and attention" was directed to the officers under him. He believed that every officer had to be a leader, as was "fit and proper," and insisted that together they study the ritual, the symbols and the ceremonies of the Craft. In later years, this teaching was extended to other members of the lodge and over thirty or so years, Lodge Leven St John, Renton and Lodge Progress, Glasgow were renowned for their high standard of work and knowledge of Masonry.

In this period, MacBride published his *Masonic Instructor* essay, which the secretary of Quatuor Coronati Lodge, after comparing it to those used in England, declared it in all respects as "superior."⁵ Next MacBride's "specification" books for the various Masonic degrees were published, these enabled not only his own, but other lodges to "beautify and adorn" their work. These books of Specification have ever since been known as the "MacBride Ritual," and are used by McBride lodges worldwide to teach their members and new entrants the beauty and symbolism of Masonry.

Speculative Masonry represents the culmination of MacBride's Masonic work. The book is divided into three parts:

“Speculative Masonry – Its Mission:”

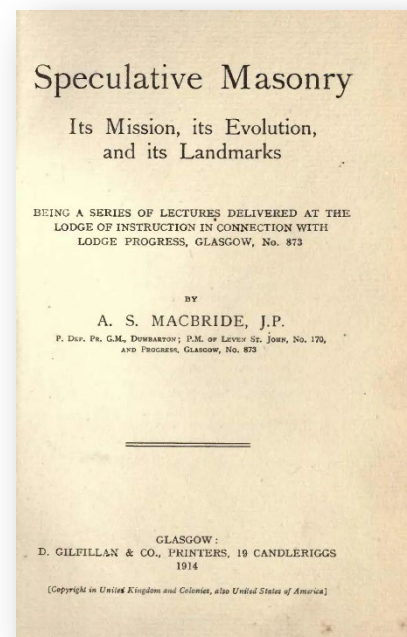
“Speculative Masonry – Its Evolution;” and

“Speculative Masonry – Its Landmarks.”

In the portion of the book devoted to the “Mission” of Masonry, MacBride dwells at length on the Law of the Square and the application of natural law to Freemasonry. He writes, “The Mission of Masonry was declared to be the building of an Ideal Temple, and that Mission was to be accomplished by each and every Mason working and living true to the Square.”

The section of the book devoted to “Evolution” is exactly what its title implies – a history of the development of Freemasonry into the organization that we know today. In many ways, MacBride's account of the evolution of Freemasonry echoes that of Joseph Fort Newton in *The Builders*.

The third and final part of *Speculative Masonry* is devoted to an exploration of the Landmarks of Masonry. It is, perhaps, here that MacBride is at his finest. He writes: “Within the Masonic Order the devotees of the letter constantly use the phrase ‘the ancient landmarks’ as a fetish. They demand the observance of a certain routine without regard to progress; the use of a certain form of expression without reference to sense and even sometimes to grammar; and the repetition of certain



⁴ Agnew.

⁵ Agnew.

statements without respect to historical truth or to the real plan of Masonry.” MacBride goes on to say, “In the second degree we are told that Masonry is ‘a progressive science.’ How can this be if everything in it is fixed and unalterable?”

MacBride uses *Speculative Masonry* to advance his perceptions as to Masonry’s harmony with natural law, its continuing evolution and its ultimate progression to the construction of a Temple of Brotherhood and Peace.

McBride’s work is a timeless Masonic book, and the earnest-minded Mason will return to it time and again because of its power and uniqueness. McBride’s writing never grows tiresome.

There are no lines to read between in *Speculative Freemasonry*.