

BOOK REVIEW

THE MEN'S HOUSE - Joseph Fort Newton, 1924

What is Masonry? What is it trying to teach? What does it seek to do? Above all, what can it do for the man who receives it into his heart, loves it, and lives in the light of it?

You get the answers to these questions from reading Joseph Fort Newton's 1924 book, *The Men's House*. And the answers come from a 20th century Mason who viewed Masonry through his faith and embraced a simple insight into the dignity and truths of its principles.

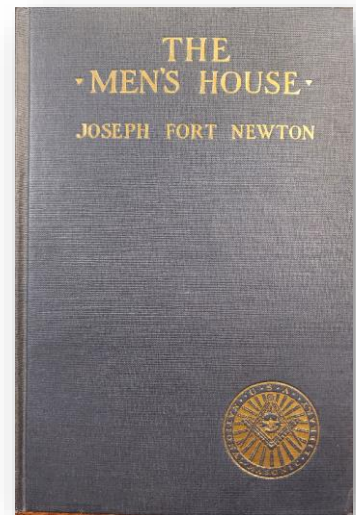


Author of one of the most lasting books in Freemasonry, *The Builders: A Story and Study of Freemasonry* (Cedar Rapids Iowa, The Torch Press, 1914), *The Men's House* is a collection of Newton's Masonic addresses and papers that carry forward themes matching his description of the Fraternity. He saw Masonry as rooted in the nature and need of humanity – an order of men initiated, sworn, and trained to uphold all the redeeming ideals of society, and the righteousness of the will of the Great Architect of the Universe to prevail.

Earning the distinction of Masonic scholar in a period with other fine Masonic authors like W.L. Wilmshurst and H.L.

Haywood, his fine writing makes clear what led him to his views about Masonry. The integrity of his writing can be trusted.

The years of World War I were a turning point in the perception of many Masons regarding the fraternity's relationship to the outside world. The view that Masonry as an institution should take an active part meeting the social problems of the day was growing. Newton promoted the view, but believed it best accomplished by educating the public about Masonry. His writings call for the instruction of its members in what he called the "principles of righteousness" found in the design and intent of Masonry, and then providing the consistent inspiration necessary in Lodges to inspire men to adhere to those precepts. Finding no conflict with his religious beliefs, his faith in the idea of Masonry, and his life-long encouragement of members to study the Craft and integrate the lessons of its noble ideas to a practical life, is Newton's footprint in American Freemasonry.



Newton, a Texan and son of a Baptist minister turned attorney, attended the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He studied at Harvard and held three doctoral degrees and was ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church in 1926. In 1914, he became the first editor of *The Builder Magazine*, a publication that is today considered by many to be the best Masonic periodical ever published.

Newton speaks to the rough and rocky road that Masons will travel in their laudable pursuit by exploring the Thomas Huxley quote: “It does not take much of a man to be a Christian, but it takes all there is of him.” Newton said that Huxley might have added that it also takes all his time. He goes on to point out that if one would be a Master Mason “in very truth, and not in name only or the wearing of a pin, he will find that it asks of all that he has of wisdom, and of wit, while he divides his time into labor, rest, and the service of his kind.”

In Chapter XII, “Masonry in American History,” he asks the question, What of the present and the future? Seeing the scale of change in America in just the first two decades of the 20th century, living through and serving in a world war, the emerging differences between rural and urban America, along with racial tensions, and the rise of Creationists arguing against evolution, Newton saw the changes that were taking place as an opportunity for Masonry to contribute to the continued building of America. In his view, Masonry’s mission was the building of men in spiritual faith and character enabling them to endure the “shocks of time: and create a nobler structure.” He wrote that what America needed “more than all else is better character, born of a sense of duties as well of rights; vigilance on behalf of liberty without holiday.” In a corresponding and foretelling closing, he wrote: “If America is ever injured, it will be by American’s themselves – by their ignorance, their indifference, their neglect – and here again, Masonry can do fundamental work in quickening the sense of citizenship.” Newton’s prescription is as applicable today as it was in the 1920s.

The Men’s House explores the genius of Masonry differently than Newton’s 1914 work, *The Builders*, and it is clear that in the decade between that writing and *The Men’s House*, he had further developed in his keen writing an even deeper appreciation for the power of Masonry. He sees the uniqueness of America in bringing all races and creeds together under one flag to learn fraternity and fellowship, and cautions that the country must not repeat “on a giant scale the blunders of the past” and do something that has never been done before by “creating a spirit free, friendly, and fraternal, to sweeten the bitterness of the world and heal its ancient hates.”

Reading *The Men’s House* makes it clear, too, that only Newton could write what has become one of the most revered and cited passages in Masonry. We find it as part of an address he gave in 1913 to the Grand Lodge of Iowa at its 70th Annual Communication. The passage appears in Chapter III “The Ministry of Masonry,” and today it is best known as, “When is a Man a Mason?” (Visit <https://bit.ly/WhenIsAManAMason> for a 2-minute moving film account and recitation of “When is a Man a Mason” that was created and produced by WB Brian T. Evans for The Rubicon Masonic Society’s Virtual Education Series.)

Appreciating the life-long work of Joseph Fort Newton as a Mason cannot be done by separating his religious ministry from his commitment to the principles of the Craft. Nor can reading his contributions to Masonry be studied with the bias of presentism. We must see Newton as a man produced and influenced by the period in which he lived. Doing so produces a new value to his works that are now over 100 years old, yet continue to ring true and stirring for serious Masons.

In the early pages of his work, Newton conveys the old story of the gods, who, having stolen from man his divinity, met in counsel to discuss where they should hide it. One suggested that it should be carried to the other side of the earth and buried; but it was pointed out that man is a great wanderer and that he might find the lost treasure on the other side of the earth. Another proposed that it be dropped in the depths of the sea; but the same fear was expressed – that a man in his curiosity might dive deep enough to find it even there. Finally, after a space of silence, the oldest and the wisest of the gods said; “Hide it in man himself, as that is the last place, he will ever think to look for it.”

As Newton says, man has wandered all over the world for ages searching in all the places before he thought to look within himself. A man can look within himself without Masonry, of course, but the path, when conveyed and instructed properly, is found readily in the principles and tenets of our Craft.

The story corresponds with something else relative to Masonry.

Many Masonic books, although Newton's are in the top portion of most serious lists, hold the key to exploring Masonry so that its noble ideas can be best understood, then applied to a practical life. We continue to find unfortunate the many members who choose not to read, study, and engage in serious reflection about Masonry, for in the unread books like *The Men's House*, lie hidden the answers to questions about how we can become better men through Freemasonry.

The Men's House is available through on-line booksellers

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