

WILLIAM O. WARE LODGE OF RESEARCH

Book Review – September 2020

THE CRAFT

How Freemasons Made the Modern World

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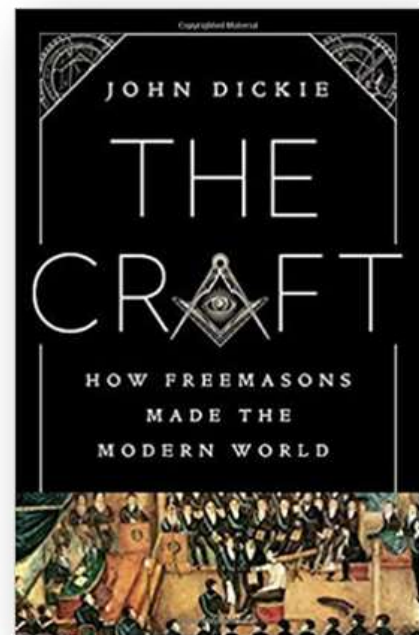
Freemasons's pride in their own history tends to produce many studies that are really identity narratives: their aim is less to discover the truth than to boost the Craft's, *esprit de corps*.

By the time the reader sees the preceding sentence on page twelve of John Dickie's, *The Craft, How Freemasonry Made the Modern World* (2020), it is clear Dickie is not writing a book to merely boost the Craft's group spirit.

John Dickie is not a Mason. He is a professor of Italian Studies at the University College of London and the author of other books on other topics. *The Craft* is a survey history written in a personal style and seasoned with the author's skill for storytelling. Importantly, it is one of the few books written about Freemasonry in the past two decades that has positively resonated with Masons *and* the public.

Dickie's approach to the story is different than most works about the topic. He begins with context and continues throughout his book to avoid presentism and strives to place the history of the fraternity in context with the society that surrounded it as it unfolded around the world.

Unlike many books written by Masons and non-Masons alike, *The Craft* is not marked by great or uncritical enthusiasm or excitement. Dickie addresses issues about religious influence on early organized Masonry, the source of Landmarks found in Anderson's Constitutions, how and why William Schaw and Christopher Wren were more important to the unfolding of organized Freemasonry than many earlier writers have credited. He aptly summarizes the rascality of Phillip Wharton, the sixth Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of England and how Dr. John Desaguliers and other founders of modern Freemasonry did indeed engage in "low-down, power grabbing, partisan politics," breaking one of the great Masonic taboos when they established the Grand Lodge. He goes on to explore why



women were excluded from the fraternity, again, elaborating and providing reasons in context with the times. His treatment of Prince Hall does the same noting, “the Masonic utopia is open to all. Except when it isn’t.”

By page eighty-one, the reader has a more dimensional perspective about the earliest years of organized Freemasonry in Scotland and England well beyond what is typically offered in many lodges and some contemporary books on Freemasonry.

He writes:

“... amid the hubbub of London’s taverns, modern Freemasonry was generated from an unstable compound of ingredients. A thirst for wine and ale. An excitement about the new social life of clubs. A hunger for the fruits of preferment. A mixture of snobbery and male fellow-feeling, of ambition and philanthropy. A fascination with ritual and mystery, married to a taste for rational discussion and a shrewd inclination toward political and religious compromise. A willingness to erase history in the interest of harmony – the brotherhood became the bearer of values that transcended its origins.

Thus, from improbable beginnings, Freemasonry began to reach every corner of the globe. But it had only crossed the English Channel when it ran into trouble.”

Dickie delves into how the Grand Lodge was unable to control the Masonic “brand” soon after it arrived in France and how the brand began to “spin out of control” as the Scottish Rite hyper-inflated the Masonic degrees. He addresses the birth and collapse of the Illuminati and how those interested in the imaginary Masonic command structure were also more interested in “ribbons and medals that meant nothing to the outside world,” and began to exclude anyone but the upper classes from the “higher degrees.”

His writing about American Freemasonry from the years prior to, during and post American Revolution examines, again in detailed context, how Masonry in the fledgling new nation, offered virtue – enough virtue not to slide into tyranny and how George Washington, among others who were members of the fraternity, led consciously and unconsciously the “campaign” to turn Freemasonry into what Dickie calls a “civic religion.”

His treatment of the disappearance of William Morgan (The Morgan Affair) in upstate New York in 1826 at the hands of Masons is a worthy synopsis that unravels the stance of many Masonic apologists and their interpretation of the regrettable event that has become embedded in history about what occurred (and why), and what its effect was on American Freemasonry. More should read Dickie’s review and analysis of the Morgan Affair before being consumed by the truly awful writing and purported historical accounts of this early era (much of it written by Masons and anti-Masons) if they seek balance and better understanding.

The same applies to another section of the book and Dickie's treatment of Joseph Smith, and the fraternity's existence within the Mormon Church.

His scrutiny of the Age of Fraternalism that began soon after the American Civil War and its glow of influence that lasted until the 1960s, contributes to the understanding of why so much of American Masonry ultimately splintered in the belief that the fraternity was supposed to be fun as opposed to a more serious pursuit than other fraternities of the time. He points out the influence that the emergence of the Shriners had on that thinking, as well as the impact of the huge expansion of membership because of the grandiose degrees of the Scottish Rite.

Dickie also makes note of how the growth curve of Masonic membership "tailed off" because of the cycle of generations and that to "some younger men, a grey-haired leadership made the air in the Lodges seem a little staid." The aftermath of World War gave rise to yet another period when membership passed three million in America. Dickie characterized how "being a Mason became a calling card of credibility and fair-dealing, for America's burgeoning legions of businessmen."

He then takes the reader through The Great Depression and low points of American Freemasonry.

Interestingly, he highlights how the World's Fair in Queens, New York in 1964 and the Masonic Brotherhood Center on display there may have marked the time in the history of Freemasonry in this country when its decline in popularity began. He provides six pages of reasons for his statement, "...the story of Freemasonry [after the World's Fair] in America became one of *managed decline*."

Dickie devotes over thirty-four pages of contextual history in his story about Prince Hall and Prince Hall Masonry, woven into his researched accounts of Albert Pike and Albert Mackey during that era – an important section of his book.

He moves on with detail about the incredibly successful hoax perpetrated on the Catholic Church by anti-Catholic polemicist, Leo Taxil in the late 1890s, and how that hoax became the source of so many nonsensical conspiracy theories about Freemasonry that remain alive today and subscribed to by the uninformed.

The Craft delivers an outline of the relevancy of Freemasonry in Germany, Spain, and Italy from the late 1800s through World War II, and beyond.

Fifteen pages of color images are included in the book as well as thirty-eight pages of bibliography with brief notes and citations Dickie used to formulate and substantiate his findings and arguments.

As American Historian David McCullough tells us, *history is who we are and why we are the way we are*. Dickie's book exemplifies that reality.

Many fine writings are available about Freemasonry. Dickie may have found a style that appeals more today to those who need most a dose of reality about the Institution's past, what it has done, is doing, and how it may continue to evolve through this century.

Masons and non-Masons alike who are genuinely interested in contextual history, not the fantastical, myth-based, or opinion laden tales that are merely passed on by many (including Masons), will find ***The Craft*** a journey through and accompanied by, logical consistency.

The Craft, How Freemasonry Made the Modern World is available from all major online booksellers.