

BOOK REVIEW
WILLIAM O. WARE LODGE OF RESEARCH

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**THE MASONIC WORLD
OF RAY V. DENSLOW**

SELECTIONS FROM HIS REVIEWS
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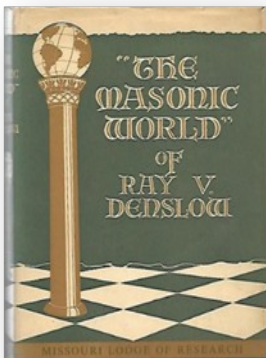
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ome Masonic books are gems. Some have been called reader chicken feed.¹ Some can be unintentional sleep aids, others make good door stops, and there are books that are just so-so. There are some Masonic books, too, whose pages call to be dogeared, passages underlined and highlighted, and the margins adorned with notes, questions, and other notations. *The Masonic World of Ray V. Denslow* is a book that fits the last description.

Ray Vaughn Denslow served as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Missouri in 1931-32. The book, *The Masonic World of Ray V. Denslow* is a tribute from the members of the Missouri Lodge of Research, a body he helped organize in 1941.² Denslow was founder of the *Royal Arch Mason* magazine in 1942, touted to be one of the most accurate and comprehensive Masonic magazines ever published. It had the largest circulation of any Masonic publication in the world with a paid subscription of more than 110,000.³



This paper appears with forty-eight
other Masonic writings and reviews
in
Men of Good Timber



¹ Charles Porset, "Masonic Historiography," Chapter 8, *Handbook of Freemasonry*, Brill, 2014.

² Missouri Lodge of Research, *The Masonic World of Ray V. Denslow: Selections from His Reviews Published in the Proceedings of Grand Lodge of Missouri*, A.F. & A.M., 1933–1960, edited by Lewis C. "Wes" Cook, 1964, Missouri Lodge of Research.

³ IBID.

Denslow was in the newspaper publishing business with his father in Trenton, Missouri. He later was assistant postmaster in Trenton, then national supervisor for the Order of DeMolay and Grand Secretary-Recorder of the York Rite Masonic bodies in Missouri in 1923—a post held until his death in 1960.

ne historian described Denslow’s contribution to Masonry like this: “[He was] in the field of Masonic research, and study—good, accurate, and provided detailed and documented research, by which every fact could be proved, and every doubt removed in the statements that [he] put forth.” He was considered “brilliant” and an “understanding Mason in his contribution to the literature of Freemasonry,” who was “an independent thinker, outspoken, and friend and foe alike felt the sting of his criticism, which did much to keep the rank and file of Masonic leadership from accepting error in place of truth.”⁴ One well-known Masonic writer from South Dakota at the time of Denslow’s death said that he was indebted to him for painful and necessary criticism.⁵ Furthermore, he noted that Denslow was a match for the vitriolic, bitter, narrow writers of literature antagonistic to Masonry, treating them with equal doses of scorn, laughter, pity, and thus reducing their attacks to proper proportion.⁶

We learn from this book that Denslow communicated with lodge secretaries and interested Masons around the world, exchanging views, probing, and pleading for “light and truth,” extending his personal help to those in need and enlisting the aid of other individuals and organizations. The book chronologically organized various excerpts from his writings covering the dominant issues and principal themes of his era.

The Masonic World was a report sanctioned by the Grand Lodge of Missouri to report annually on the general condition of Freemasonry and made available in the Grand Lodge Proceedings. Denslow coordinated that work from 1935 until his death in 1960. From 1962 to 1977, Bruce Harmon Hunt, Grand Master in Missouri in 1960, wrote and compiled some 1,300 pages of material he produced for *The Masonic Review*, which was the same kind of report as Denslow’s *The Masonic World*. Broken down into over eighty sections, the book was published by the Missouri Lodge of Research.⁷ Most of the writings were his own.

Hunt’s position was that what he called “counter attraction and interest of present day society” was “tampering with the constant attendance of the Mason at his lodge meetings” and that “complacency may become



⁴ IBID.

⁵ IBID.

⁶ IBID.

⁷ *The Masonic Review of Bruce E. Hunt*, Earl K. Dille, Editor, Missouri Lodge of Research, Ovell Bell Press, Fulton, Missouri, 1977.

Masonry's deadliest foe."⁸ He emphasized the need to make Lodge forums for discussion to explore and resolve the issues of the day and "free Freemasonry to do the job."⁹ He then declared an important conclusion to his inspections, and assessments of then current day Masonry. He says, "The attitude of the Fraternity toward its administrative structure must be regarded as unchanged as the great moral precepts it enjoins. This, therefore, must be the heart and core of its problem." Then he points out that in 1963, civilization had advanced perhaps more in the past fifty years than it had in the previous five hundred." And asks, "Can anyone, therefore, advance argument for retaining the same administrative procedures used by the Fraternity for more years than the memory span of the oldest members will admit?"¹⁰

There is no question that Denslow was Hunt's mentor.

Denslow's fifty-four-year Masonic career as a leader, researcher, and writer, made him a worthy provider of first-hand accounts and views of Masonry around the world during the build up to World War II and the social conditions in Europe as well as in the United States. The chapters titled "In Turmoil and War," and "Freemasonry in the War Zone" provide that glimpse that we often find in references regarding Europe in those years that is common in other Masonic literature in that period (including speeches and presentations in Grand Lodge Annual Proceedings that today seem like strong political commentary offering the world a remedy for much of what ailed it: Freemasonry.

Denslow tackles what few Masonic writers of his era addressed with such directness: a National Grand Lodge, the so-called Ancient Landmarks, and the quantity production of membership with little accent on quality, among others. In addressing the latter, he gave this example:

Everywhere we find the Masonic press and Grand Masters' addresses priding themselves on the net increase [of membership] shown for the year. We once had a patch of potatoes; we hoed them, we watered them, and we gave them every care that a potato could be given—and yet, when we started to harvest our crop, we found our potatoes to be all top. Just so with our 4,000,000 membership: beautiful figures but what have we to show?

He goes on to point out that in his lifetime, and suggesting even prior to it, that the Fraternity lacks men to speak for the Fraternity's customs and objectives and says that in doing so we do not need theological diatribes of juridical discussions, however good they might be. We need information as to how our Fraternity can build character, how to live, and how to die. And he makes the argument that Masonry at the time was being divided, not from without but from within. His six decade-old assessment may sound to the serious Masons as though it was written within the past decade or so.

⁸ IBID.

⁹ IBID.

¹⁰ IBID.

His 1953 section called, “Those Ancient Landmarks?” is a noteworthy read. He points out without parsing words that the Constitution of Freemasons in 1723 stated that changes could be made when approved by the Grand Lodge, implying that nothing is sacrosanct in our Fraternity. He contends that if there are Landmarks at all, they are quite simply, Faith, Hope, and Charity. And without a pause, he drills into the true definition of “charity” leaving no room for doubt that it is not the giving of money; it is the giving of one’s self. He then sneeringly writes that if these three tenets are not enough, then Masons should try the Ten Commandments.

Taking a swipe at Masonic authors in the 1850s, during his era, and even future members who continue to invent Landmarks, he writes that “the confusion as to Landmarks is more evident among those who have the most time to a study of Landmarks.”¹¹ His last jab on the topic is: “And yet some of our grand lodges continue to quote Mackey’s *Twenty-Five Landmarks* as if they were Blackstone. No one yet has ever seen an Ancient Landmark; it is a dodo bird, a sort of ogre, with which to impress ignorant brethren.”¹²

Denslow rips into other topics through to the conclusion of the book and once a reader digests them with balance and context of the period, it is difficult to find a margin of error in his thinking. Furthermore, he affirms for modern readers and researchers that many challenges he identifies—such as the deficiencies in leadership and education within the Fraternity during his time—persist in the present day.

In the closing section titled, “This is a Conclusion,” he writes, “And now we come to the section known as the Conclusion. To those who do not agree with us, it will appear as the finest feature of the report—for a report it is.”¹³

Nine years later, in 1959, which may have been Denslow’s final writing, he has two subtitles that fittingly end his report. “An Instrument for Peace,” and “Public Relations.”

He starts “An Instrument for Peace” writing “There exist a general conception of the character of Freemasonry. To the average member there is given little education as to why the Fraternity has an excuse for existence except to furnish a place for men to gather together, eat, and confer degrees, with little accent on the *degree* section. To a larger group, unfortunately, it is a necessary purgatory through which they have to pass in order to get to the hot sands of the Mystic Shrine. And there is another group which looks upon the Fraternity as a boon when old age comes, and when they have insufficient funds for their care, at which times the doors of Masonic homes will be thrown open and their worries will cease. To some, Freemasonry offers a chance to appear publicly, to be known as ‘worshipful master,’ to wear a big charm or lapel button, or to display patents and documents attesting Masonic knowledge (or lack thereof). And we find a large group of conscientious brethren, who may not attend lodge regularly, but who value their membership

¹¹ Denslow’s comments were his views after reading Roscoe Pound’s writings about Landmarks and Elbert Bede on the same subject.

¹² Missouri Lodge of Research, *The Masonic World of Ray V. Denslow*.

¹³ IBID.

because of the fine reputation the organization has had over the centuries; these are not the wealthy member, but the good substantial member that make up the great part of our citizenry. Finally, there are the very few, men of vision, who see in the Fraternity a chance to better the world, but too often these brethren lack the opportunity to engage in projects which might bring an ultimate peace to the world. Too, they may not have the knowledge of how to bring such a situation about.”¹⁴

He then returns to the earlier theme in the book about events during World War II, and says that Yalta, Geneva London, Paris, or Washington peace talks and conferences will never bring complete peace to the world. Some may want peace, but they want it *at the expense of the other fellow* and that giving away money does not make friends. It often makes enemies. Then Denslow concludes again, that the remedy is Freemasonry.

Readers of Denslow are not asked to agree with his positions. In fact, there exists no such suggestion in any of his writings. All Denslow asks is for readers to open their eyes and minds, think, and have meaningful conversations about what he offers and reports.

Another of Denslow’s most enduring books is *The Masonic Conservators*,¹⁵ published in 1931 by The Masonic Services Association of Missouri. His research and details about the topic are unparalleled today.

Most of Denslow’s writings are out of print today, but they can still be found in official Masonic libraries, select bookshops, and occasional reprints.

¹⁴ IBID.

¹⁵ Also known as the Conservator Movement, was an ill-fated, short-lived but significant attempt in American Freemasonry in the 1860s to standardize and preserve Masonic ritual.