

WILLIAM O. WARE LODGE OF RESEARCH

Book Review –November 2020

Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930

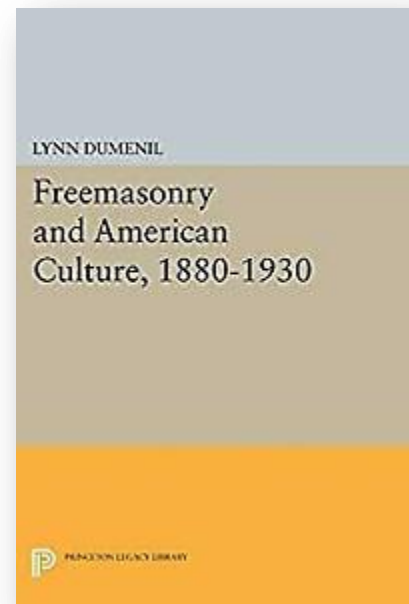
Dr. Lynn Dumenil

Motivational speaker Les Brown famously said, “You can’t see the picture when you’re in the frame.” American Freemasonry has grappled with that reality since it first arrived in the colonies in the 1730s. The fraternity has been institutionally disinclined to engage in any deep introspection as to the path it has taken over its nearly three centuries on the American Continent. Perhaps it is incapable of doing so in any event. Persons outside the frame, however, have a clearer perspective of the devolution of American Freemasonry from a spiritual and philosophical society to an organization resembling little more than a service club.

One such person is Dr. Lynn Dumenil, Robert Glass Cleland Professor of American History at Occidental College in Los Angeles. In *Freemasonry and American Culture 1880 – 1930*, Professor Dumenil recounts how, during the period known as “The Golden Years of Fraternalism” American Freemasonry all but completely shed its spiritual and contemplative nature and adopted an activist persona intent on performing community improvement projects and “having fun.”

Dr. Dumenil’s work is important to the serious student of American Freemasonry for several reasons. Published in 1984 by Princeton University Press, it is among the first instances of academia taking notice of Freemasonry and making it the subject of serious study. Carefully footnoted and containing several intriguing tables, *Freemasonry and American Culture 1880 – 1930* not only provides an accurate portrait of Freemasonry during the period it describes, but also provides the proper context in which the analysis of contemporary Freemasonry may begin.

For example, Dr. Dumenil addresses the matter of Lodge attendance. One of her more interesting tables (Appendix C) reflects the decline of Lodge membership from a high in 1880 of about 22% to around 5.6% by 1928, a trend and an average with which 21st century Freemasons can certainly relate. Interestingly, the



research shows that even at a high point in the 1880s, only about one in five Masons actually bothered to attend Lodge.

What Dr. Dumenil makes clear is the extent to which American Freemasonry has been influenced by the changing values of the American middle class. As Victorian sentimentality and spirituality gave way to consumerism, nationalism and secularism, Freemasonry followed along in tow. Ironically, an institution founded on principles that it promotes as timeless, proved incapable of remaining anchored to such principles during a time of rapid social change.

In the book's initial chapter, "Masonry Revealed," Professor Dumenil introduces the concept of "goal displacement," which she describes as being a natural tendency of voluntary associations. Describing goal displacement as being evidenced by, "increased bureaucratization, formalization and conservatism," she describes how Freemasonry entered its era of building massive Masonic Temple and Grand Lodges entrenched themselves in their particular practices and procedures. Freemasonry's original goal, that of being a spiritual and philosophical organization, was displaced by its new emphasis on physical structures and the implementation of scores of rules and regulations for the governance of the Craft.

Tellingly, two of the chapters in the book are titled, "From Ritual to Service," and, "From Temple to Club." Just as the respective titles foreshadow, the chapters trace the migration of the Fraternity to the service club orientation that it retains to this time. Touching again on the theme of goal displacement and using Lodge attendance as an example, Professor Dumenil examines the period of rapid expansion just before the Great Depression. During that time, she argues, Freemasonry's focus was primarily on making new members and thereby expanding "the club." Unsurprisingly, her research indicates that as Lodge membership rapidly grew, actual attendance at Lodge correspondingly declined.

Professor Dumenil writes insightfully about the reasons that men were attracted to Freemasonry during the period of her study. A common thread is that membership in Freemasonry was perceived as a mark of respectability. Since the Fraternity, at least superficially, embraced the characteristics of spirituality and morality, a man could point to his acceptance within the ranks of Freemasonry as evidence of his good character. As the nature of Freemasonry changed, the prospective member still found respectability in being identified by his fellows as being one who shared, and could contribute to, the values of good fellowship and service.

Echoing Albert Pike, Dr. Dumenil asserts that Freemasonry is, in part, a victim of its own success. As its membership grew, its ability to claim to be an exclusive

organization declined. No longer being perceived as exclusive, membership in its ranks became less attractive.

Writing with the perspective of an outsider, Professor Dumenil attributes the change in the nature of Freemasonry to a modernization of the Fraternity that mirrored the modernization of American society. She writes that the study of Freemasonry during the period of her study provides “a window on the middle-class world and the process of modernization.” Her analysis reveals a fraternal society that, in its effort to adapt to a changing society, became unmoored from its founding principles.

Professor Dumenil ends her study in 1930, the first full year of the Great Depression. Her work makes no predictions about the future of Freemasonry (although she notes that it continues to exist), nor does it link issues in contemporary Freemasonry to those existing within the Fraternity as of the end of her study. It is for the contemporary reader (and Freemason) to follow the course that the Fraternity has taken over the last one hundred years, arriving at the institutionally debilitated place where it currently exists. The reader need not necessarily be discouraged, however. The ideas and philosophies of Freemasonry as originally expressed retain their tremendous promise, just as they always have. It is the method and manner of the delivery of that promise that calls for restoration to a contemplative and reflective society.

American Freemasonry has no hope of addressing its future successfully until it comes to a thorough understanding of its past. Lynn Dumenil’s *Freemasonry and American Culture 1880 to 1930* is an important key to gaining such an understanding. Masonic leaders, including those who wish to become such, should invest their time in reading and digesting this important work.

Freemasonry and American Culture 1880 – 1930, although out of print, remains available from online booksellers, both in its original version and in print-on-demand editions.

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