

Dame Masons: Women and Freemasonry

Compiled and annotated by Philip Carter

Preamble

The information and arguments in this paper stand or fall on their own merits. The paper is presented solely on my own behalf and, while I am mason, it is not endorsed by any masonic organisation, particularly and explicitly not by the United Grand Lodge of N.S.W.

In an official history of the *United Grand Lodge of England*, we read:

In 1921 an approach was made to Grand Lodge for recognition by the 'Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Masonry'; in a reply starting for obvious reasons 'Dear Madam' the Grand Secretary made it plain that the admission of women was utterly foreign to the original plan of Freemasonry to which English Freemasons had adhered from time immemorial. He added that the Board would continue to take disciplinary action against any English Mason who violated his Obligation by being present or assisting in assemblies 'professing to be Masonic which are attended by women'. On both counts Grand Lodge gave the Board its full support. (Stubbs, pp. 163/4)

As recently as last August, the newly installed Grand Master of the *United Grand Lodge of N.S.W.* said in his inaugural address: "Our form of Freemasonry is based upon self-development for men and to introduce gender diversification into lodges would completely alter our product – it just cannot be done" (Curry, p. 15). His objection relies on certain assumptions, such as: That the self-development of men would, in a masonic context, be inconsistent with and even hampered by the presence of women or even the existence of female masons; and that masonic teachings somehow apply to men in a manner distinct from and incompatible with the manner in which they would apply to women. There have been sufficient exceptions to the rules excluding women from Freemasonry to demonstrate that these assumptions are mistaken (Wright, *passim*).

By comparison, we might consider objections to a hypothetical proposition that seeks to exclude those of other races and faiths by claiming Freemasonry is a system of self-development for white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. We might also try to imagine how we might feel as women being asked to accept our exclusion from a system which purports, as does Freemasonry, to depict a model of an ideal universe, which members are expected to foster and imitate.

H.R.H., the Duke of Kent, who since 1967 has been the Grand Master of the U.G.L. of England, gave a more equivocal answer when he was asked: "Sir, in 1986 how do you justify the exclusion of women?" (S.C.R.L., p. 13). He replied:

That is I think largely an historical affair. It's simply that Freemasonry as you may know stems right back into the Middle Ages, there were no practicing women Masons who operated on building sites as they were in those days, and it was from those origins that Masonry largely derives, and it is simply that this is the way it has grown up. I wouldn't say that this is a situation that will necessarily persist for ever, but certainly for the moment I don't think it is regarded as a live issue in Freemasonry (*ibid.*)

As H.R.H. did not rule out the future admission of women, he apparently saw no absolute objection to their eventual membership. However, thirteen years later, women are still excluded from what we term 'regular Freemasonry', as they have been now for nearly three hundred years. Further, despite H.R.H.'s

opinion, the exclusion of women is a live issue in Freemasonry. The question is often raised (R. Wells, side 2), especially by those who are not masons. However, discussion on the subject, while not prohibited, is discouraged among masons, so as not to endanger the harmony they value so highly. Moreover, the historical reason H.R.H. gave for the exclusion of women is mistaken. Even so, the duke may be excused as, with few exceptions masonic sources are silent on the involvement of women in the groups from which modern speculative Freemasonry has emerged. Comparative studies, especially those from a feminist perspective, reveal the involvement of women in those groups.

Ancient Landmarks

To understand the issues involved we need to first understand the deliberately conservative nature of Freemasonry. Freemasonry is intentionally archaic and Freemasons conscientiously seek to preserve it as a complex artefact, encompassing and expressing time-immemorial customs and usages. While there is some scope for variations on its theme, we strive to avoid innovations which would change its particular identity. Thus, masons aspire to practice what we call 'pure and accepted masonry' and changes to the essential character, body or core of that ideal, no matter how desirable on other grounds, are strenuously opposed as, by definition, whatever emerged from those changes would not be the institution we seek to perpetuate. Even so, Freemasonry's essential character is not easily defined and, largely due to Freemasonry's tradition of secrecy, even many members disagree as to its purpose, origins and the individually necessary and collectively sufficient conditions we have come to call our Ancient Landmarks.

However, it seems incontrovertible that our exclusion of women violates our principle of 'universality'. This principle is more defensibly a part of our essential character, whereby we are expected to put aside prejudice to admit any applicant who meets certain minimal criteria, regardless of such things as their race, creed or political opinions. Masons are taught: "...we are all sprung from the same stock, are partakers of the same Nature and sharers of the same hope...", presumably these mystic ties embrace and encompass both men and women. Such universality allows people, who would otherwise remain at a distance, to meet together in fraternal harmony. To test the 'universality' of a policy, one might determine if, overall, its tendency is to unite or to divide. Applying this test to our exclusion of women we find that, by excluding half of humanity, we exacerbate the social distance between men and women.

With universality has come a diverse range of people, many of whom insist they know what the essence of Freemasonry is, when they are instead externalising their own compulsions and avoidances. Their misuse of Freemasonry brings us close to the heart of the problem. As Bernard Jones wrote:

To the customs, practices, tenets, traditions, and observances that can be proved to have existed from time immemorial, some

Brethren would add any customs, even if not ancient, that are universally acknowledged; but against this, it is solidly contended that were it possible for the freemasons of the whole world to come together and agree on a new and common belief they would not and could not by so doing create a landmark! It is held that a landmark can be discovered, but not created; it cannot be changed or altered; it cannot be improved; it cannot be obliterated. Thus, a world concourse of masons, unable to create a landmark, would be equally unable to obliterate one (p. 334).

Significantly, however far back we trace our antecedents, masons find that our Ancient Landmarks have always been considered ancient. This was the case in 1717, when four private lodges formed the Premier Grand Lodge. They acknowledged that any changes they introduced could themselves be changed; that only the Ancient Landmarks were unchangeable; and that these landmarks took absolute priority over other considerations.

It further seems that, with the introduction of the first book of *Constitutions* in 1723, an innovation was introduced excluding women. With a few exceptions, for some time previously women had generally been excluded from speculative Freemasonry, not because of their gender in an absolute sense, but because women of the day generally lacked the legal or social freedom required for membership. As masons are told, "Masonry is free, and requires a perfect freedom of inclination and action from every Candidate for its mysteries".

Origins

There are many theories as to the origins of Freemasonry. Opinions range between two extremes. One of these extremes traces Freemasonry from a prototype beginning with the 'Creation', with Adam as the first Grand Master (R. Wells, side one). Incidentally, both Adam and Eve were said to have made aprons for themselves (Genesis 3:7). Overreaching theories such as this then have the tradition being transmitted through groups such as the ancient mystery schools.

A theory, only slightly less ambitious, is given by Robert Race, in his article entitled "Genuine Ancient Landmarks". He argued that regular Freemasonry is for 'men only' because, according to him, it arose among phallic worshippers, during the astrological age of Aries, the ram, stating: "Hence I claim for the origin of Freemasonry and antiquity of between 2,267 and 4,417 years; and I further claim that the great ancient landmark for this origin is the use of lambskin for the Masonic badge" (Martin, v.1, p. 128). Even less vivid imaginations might easily find masonic references to all astrological signs. As for his case, I refute it thus!

An illustration from Strep, p. 62 is of a figurine attributed to the Vin_a Culture. It was excavated in the former Yugoslavia and is dated between c.4700 – 4500 B.C.E. Modern, masonic collars have a half sphere or 'beehive' on the centre, where this collar has a raised oval. The pendant resembles compasses, (which in modern usage signifies a Grand Master or, in this case, a Grand Dame). Of further interest to those familiar with masonic regalia is the apron: It has remnants of white pigment, fringes or tassels and a hip belt (Gimbutas, plate #20, pp. 50, 52 & 282).

While similarities between the traditions of Freemasonry and those of other groups may be fanciful, exaggerated or coincidental, we need to entertain the possibility of their relevance if we wish to understand its appeal. This appeal explains why there have been fewer people for whom the anachronistic customs of the operative, medieval stonemasons had immediate professional relevance than there have been people practicing them for other, more speculative reasons. The distinguishing features of our generic identity are, as the name implies, by no means exclusive to Freemasonry but were common in type, context and interpretation to various groups.

They include allegorical references to building and to the use of working tools, especially the square and compasses, as moral allegories; the wearing of aprons and collars; the use of particular modes of recognition, (including particular words, the meanings of which remained similar, although different groups employed different languages); instruction by catechism; private meetings; secret ballots, advancement through various offices and democratic self-administration; and, above all, a peculiar emanationist form of morality, stressing truth, equality and universal brotherhood.

The other extremity of opinion insists that modern, speculative Freemasonry simply began with the formation of the Premier Grand Lodge in 1717. Between these extremes is a continuum wherein opinions largely depend on the importance given to either Freemasonry's generic identity with other groups or to its specific identity arising from the formation of the Premier Grand Lodge. Significantly, the founders or reformers in 1717 claimed to be continuing a more ancient tradition and ostensibly invoked that tradition to legitimise their actions.

What ever the case, if Freemasonry began in 1717 it would have no 'Ancient Landmarks' and all customs and usages would be subject to routine constitutional amendment. But, if Freemasonry derives from an earlier date and it can be shown that women were involved in the institutions from which it is thought to derive, then those who insist that 'men only' is an Ancient Landmark would need to demonstrate such involvement was itself an irregular deviation from an earlier, inflexible standard.

Although many suggested origins have been explored, including some of the more imaginative theories, none have been found which necessarily involve the exclusion of women. Naturally, a thorough examination of all these theories would be well beyond the scope of this paper. So I shall concentrate on the theory that speculative Freemasonry arose from the guilds and lodges of the operative stonemasons.

While there are records of speculative masons being admitted to operative lodges, there is no record of any operative lodge developing into a speculative lodge. Even so, this theory has received the most support, is best documented, and is historically most likely, as it precedes the rise of speculative Freemasonry. Bernard Jones supports this theory, saying:

Freemasonry has two histories – the one, legendary and traditional, going back almost to the dawn of architecture; the other, authentic, covering a period of a few hundred years and deriving in some part from the ancient craft guilds and fraternities whose fortunes rose and fell in England with the Gothic period; in that particular period are believed to lie the main roots of world freemasonry (p.19).

In H.L. Haywood's book *Symbolical Masonry*, we find the following statement:

Women were freely admitted to a majority of the old craft guilds, of which says Robert Freke Gould, "not one out of a hundred but recruited their ranks from both sexes" (p.63) [Gould continued, saying]; and even in guilds under the management of priests, such as the Brotherhood of "Corpus Christi" of York, begun 1408, lay members were allowed (of some honest craft), without regard to sex, if "of good fame and conversation," the payments and privileges being the same for the "brethren and sisteren." Women "were sworn upon a book" in the same manner as the men. (v.1, p. 90)

To this policy, the Freemasons' Guilds were, despite Haywood's denial, no exception.

Old Charges: The rules and regulations for the governance of operative lodges, (together with a number of romantic and fanciful legends and moral admonitions), were contained in manuscripts, we now call the *Old Charges* or *Old Constitutions*. These manu-

scripts function like warrants or charters, in so far as the possession of one seems to have given each lodge authority to conduct its work. Their contents provide the most secure evidence of the actual work practices of operative masons.

In masonic jurisprudence, anyone claiming as an Ancient Landmark a custom or usage not mentioned in any of the *Old Charges* would generally require extraordinary proof to make up for this deficiency in their case. Albert Mackey observed: "The law which excludes women from initiation into Masonry is not contained ... in any of the Old Constitutions!" (v.2, p. 855). Indeed, this law is a modern innovation, first published in 1723 by the Rev. Dr. James Anderson, in the first *Constitution* of the premier grand lodge (Mackey, *ibid.* & Waite, v.1, p. 25): Arthur Waite was one of several brethren who severely criticised Anderson for his "...errors, omissions, inventions..." (p.25). The exclusion of women is clearly one of the more serious and harmful of his innovations, (although, as A.F.A. Woodford rightly said, "...we cannot ... judge Anderson fairly by our colder criticism of today..." (p.27)).

Some Brethren, together with Albert Mackey, are concerned that an unwritten law excluding women may be implied in the *Old Constitutions*. Their concern is based on terms such as, "of limbs whole, as a man ought to be", and that he must also be "no bondsman" (v.2, p. 855). These Brethren may be misled by the practice, more prevalent in the past, in which masculine terms such as 'manpower', 'manslaughter' and 'mankind' are confusingly used to 'embrace' both men and women. Mackey goes on to suggest that there is some significance in there being many regulations which "...would be wholly inapplicable to women" (*ibid.*). This does not however establish any intention to exclude women from the Craft. Rather, it reflects the prevalence of men. There would be no surprise, for instance, if the army or the police force had many regulations which apply only to men, without them meaning to exclude women.

While Mackey thought the *Old Charges* implied the exclusion of women, we find, in R.H. Baxter's translation of the *Regius Poem*, (the oldest of these manuscripts, c.1390): "There shall no master supplant another, But be together as sister and brother ..." (Martin, v.1, p. ,13); and an injunction to take turns at being stewards: "Amiably to serve each other, As though they were sister and brother" (*ibid.*, p. 19). There may have been some poetic licence used in referring to the quality of an ideal relationship; still, the references provide a stronger case for the admission of women than the case for their exclusion, based on general references to men.

Further, according to Neville Barker Cryer:

In the records of the Corpus Christi Guild at York in 1408 it is noted that an Apprentice had to swear to obey 'the Master, or Dame, or any other Freemason'; and, in case anyone should think that such a title meant perhaps only the Master's living partner, it is worth noting that as late as 1683 the records of the Lodge of Mary's Chapel in Edinburgh provide an instance of a female occupying the position of 'Dame' or 'Mistress' in a masonic sense. She was a widow of a mason but she exercised an equal right with other operative masons and took the same ceremonies (Cryer, p. 22).

George Martin adds to this point:

For example, in one manuscript the Masonic apprentice was charged that he shall not steal or pick away his 'Master's' or 'Dame's' goods; and in another charge, that he shall not disclose his 'Master's' or 'Dame's' counsel or secrets (v.17, pp. 130 & 131).

Indeed, A.F.A. Woodford reports that the word 'Dame' appears in every Apprentice Charge in the *Old Manuscript Constitutions* (p.146). He also reports that the *York Manuscript No. 4* (1693) clearly states the words "he or shee" (p.146). The manuscript entitled "Constitutions of the Freemasons", included the following

clause: "The one of the elders taking the booke, and that he or shee that is to bee made a Mason shall lay hands thereon, and the charge shall be given" (Wright, p. 95).

Modern authors have sought to dismiss this straightforward evidence with an *ad hoc*, conjectural, rearguard explanation. They wishfully suggest there may have been an error in reading or in translation, whereby "he or shee" should have read "he or they". To those who suggest "he or shee" to be a misreading, Cryer says:

Now I have to tell you, that my predecessors in Masonic Research in England from Hughen and Vibert and from all the rest onward, have tried to pretend that the 'shee' is merely a misprint for 'they.' I now am the Chairman of the Heritage Committee of York. I know these documents; I've examined them, and I'm telling you, they say 'she,' without any question. (Yronwode, *www*, (orig. *Women and Freemasonry* by N.B.Cryer, *Masonic Times*, May 1995, Rochester, N.Y.)

To those who claim "he or shee" is a mistranslation, we may ask them to consider that, if translated from an earlier document, the work was likely to have been done by an esteemed master, well acquainted with the genuine Ancient Landmarks of the Order. Further, the manuscript seems to have been handed onto, read and accepted by many subsequent masters without them perceiving any need for amendment or correction.

Operative Masons

The admission of women as operative masons was not only theoretically allowed under the *Old Charges* but was actually practiced. For instance, in her book *Women in the Medieval Town* and while noting the generally lower wages of female workers, Erika Uitz remarks:

Even under such pay conditions, female employment rates were high. On Würzburg building sites, for example, a large amount of female labour was employed on a daily basis between 1428 and 1524. The low-skilled labourer received the following average wage, reckoned in pfennigs:

Year	Number of female workers	Wage	Number of male workers	Wage
1428 to 1449	323	7.7	13	11.6
1450 to 1474	1472	9.0	381	12.6
1475 to 1499	209	8.3	131	11.2
1500 to 1524	429	9.2	237	12.7

The pay conditions in the Würzburg building trade were no exception. This can be seen in a decree on maximum prices and wages issued to all towns and markets in the Steiermark, according to which serving lads, who carried stones or mortar, were paid 8 pfennigs per day and women doing similar work were to be paid only 7 pfennigs (p. 64).

Thus, women participated in the heavy labour of the building trades. This being contrary to masonic apologists who implicitly argued that their modern exclusion was on account of women having been incapable of such work (e.g., Mackey, v.2, p. 855), (an argument which would have little sympathy among the women operative masons and other heavy industry workers of today nor among the working class of the age). Despite this, it may be argued that these were low-skilled workers and only highly skilled workers were admitted to the guilds. However, Erika Uitz informs us that, "In Strasbourg from 1452 to 1453, two women joined the masons' guild and were simultaneously granted the right to town citizenship" (p. 61).

Against this evidence, it has been argued that the situation

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was different in Britain where, it is claimed, Freemasonry first arose. However, Bernard Jones writes of the London Company of Freemasons, in which:

Margaret Wild, widow, was a member in [1663] ... As late as 1713-14 we find the remarkable instance of Mary Banister, the daughter of a barber of Barking, being apprenticed to a mason for the term of seven years, the fee of 5s. being duly paid to the company. In 1696 the Mason's Court Book gives the names of two widows... (pp. 77/8).

Jones also tells us that:

London had a strong Freemason and Mason Company. There is evidence of it before 1376, but for how long it had been in existence we do not know. There was a guild founded in London in 1313, and in the Record Office is a certificate relating to it dated 1389, the only known certificate of its kind. Fred L. Pick (*A.Q.C.*, vol. 1vi) tells us that brothers and sisters were admitted to the guild, which was a religious fraternity with a social side, and not a trade guild... (p.70)

Speculative Masons

Arguments for and against the possibility of Freemasonry including women on equal terms with men are perennial topics. These arguments are fuelled by some examples (several well documented) of women being admitted to otherwise regular, speculative Freemasonry (Wright, pp. 78/99). There have been a number of other responses, including several forms of so-called Adoptive Masonry in which women work contrived rites organised by and under the patronage of men (Wright, pp. 1/140 & Pike, *passim*). There are also so-called spurious bodies which admit women to membership and practice what is otherwise more or less regular masonic work (e.g., Legris, pp. 34/8). Their work effectively refutes H.L.Haywood's melodramatic assumption that: "To admit women, the entire organisation, from the spire to the basement, would need to be torn down and built anew and in a manner wholly different" (p. 64). The best known example is Co-masonry, which features the name and personality of Annie Besant. Apart from its admission of women, Co-masonry is considered to be irregular in other respects and it is discountenanced by the wider masonic community. Even so, it is one of the few means by which women may learn something of the nature of Freemasonry.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the rules excluding women from Freemasonry are rules which can be changed, should be changed and must be changed. In the absence of any sound and compelling reason to continue to exclude women, we may be justifiably impatient with the lack of meaningful action to admit them to regular Freemasonry. Freemasonry's current position is as weak or weaker than the positions formerly held by the Scouting fraternity, the Surf Lifesaving movement or the Lions Clubs, (all of which now admit women). We may agree with Marx, who wrote: "Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however is to change it" (Long, p. 24); and, as the masons are taught: "...the heart may conceive, and the head devise in vain, if the hand be not prompt to execute the design."

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Endnotes

Below appears the endnotes belonging to this paper. Due to format incompatibilities, no textual indicators appeared in the file as received. We have included the notes nevertheless.

1. As Gould observes in his history, "the laws for the guidance of the Craft in King Athelstan's reign, or later, were not intended to be final, but, alterable according to the necessities of the Craft, provided always that the spirit of the society was preserved" (Macbride, p.209).
2. The first *Constitutions*, those of 1723, make the matter clear. "The Persons admitted members of a Lodge must be good and true Men, free, and of mature and discreet age, no Bondmen."

In the version of the Ancient Charges prefacing the book of *Constitutions* of the United Grand Lodge of England we are told that the persons "made masons or admitted members of a lodge must be good and true men, free-born, and of mature and discreet age and sound judgement, no bondmen, no women, no immoral or scandalous men, but of good report" (Jones, pp.157-8).

3. Inventions which support the *status quo* are more likely to be accepted and published than are those which question it. One was published among the prestigious *Kellerman Lectures* by the *Australian Masonic Research Council*. It reads:

...we find that females are banned from the Order. This probably emanates from an edict issued by King Solomon, upon whose wisdom and the building of his temple at Jerusalem the Order is

based. He said that there was no place for women in the preparation of the materials in the forests and quarries, nor in the transportation or in the building of the temple. This work, he said, was for the matured men without deformities, those who were strong and capable. Women's place was in the home, caring for their menfolk, and raising and educating the children. To me, this edict forms one of the landmarks of the Order (K.Wells, p. 22).

When asked for his source, the inventor admitted to "...taking a little literary licence..." (letter to author dated 30.12.93).

4. Adopting this extreme position to avoid the historical admissibility of women only serves to beg the question: Even if modern, speculative Freemasonry is not the successor of an unbroken succession of one or more earlier institutions but is only emulating and is modelled on them, we may fairly expect the model to copy the originals, to which it strives and of which it professes to approximate, as faithfully as is practicable under modern conventions (certainly not diverging from them contrary to such conventions).
5. For instance, regarding theories of the roles of women among the Egyptians, Hebrews, Jews, early Christians and Muslims, I recommend: Joyce Tyldesley's *Daughters of Isis: Women of Ancient Egypt*, 1994, Viking, London; Raphael Patai's *The Hebrew Goddess: Third Enlarged Edition*, 1990, Wayne State University Press, Detroit; Bernadette J. Brooten's *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*, 1982, Scholars Press, Atlanta; Karen Jo Torjesen's *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, 1993, HarperCollins, New York; and Javad Nurbakhsh's *Sufi Women*, Revised Second Edition, 1990, Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi Publications, London.
6. The words, "hee or shee," in York MS. No. 4, are only equivalent to what may be shown in other Guild regulations, and the suggestion that "shee" should read "they," though made by so great an authority as Bro. D. Murray Lyon, is not, we venture to think, tenable in the face of the evidence of female Guild membership of some kind which may be adduced. The usage, as far as the Masons are concerned, proves the great antiquity of the instruction (Woodford, p.146).
7. The contemporary position is given under 'Stonemason' in the *Job Guide for New South Wales*, which explicitly states: "This field is open to both females and males" (D.E.E.T., p.39).