

Amanda BROWN

3<sup>rd</sup> year doctoral student under the supervision of Professor Cecile REVAUGER

University of Bordeaux

Research and teaching assistant, University of Tours

amjoy.brown@gmail.com

Abstract of doctoral research.

Freemasonry and the Notion of Secrecy in XXth century England

The goals of this fraternity have always intrigued, nay disturbed, many outsiders, for reasons which were linked to the historical context of the time : religious questions have always been in the forefront of the debate on freemasonry, from the XVIIIth century until the present day, although the debate has somehow slightly shifted. However, a feeling of uncertainty remains, fuelled by the masons themselves and the very nature of the fraternity, that is to say its secret aspect, or if not secret, at least very discreet. This trend is shared between all countries and across the centuries, but is a notion the masons of every Grand Lodge try to refute, arguing that, contrary to common belief, freemasonry is not a “secret society” but a “society with secrets”. The distinction is quite slim and is often lost on the profanes, those who are not initiated, who therefore often have a negative view, or are, to say the least, wary of this organization which keeps its secrets well hidden. One cannot discuss the secret nature of freemasonry without broaching on the corollary aspect it inevitably raises, that is to say anti-masonry and conspiracy theory, which appeared as early as the XVIIIth century, and regularly rise up to the surface. We shall study different cases underlining this conspiracy theory, related by the media, especially in the second half of the XXth century. This thesis will broach several themes related to the notion of secrecy : the position of women, religion, the press and the media in general, the stakes of World War II etc.

## SECRECY AS A UNIVERSAL FACTOR BOTH OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

Although Freemasonry has always prided itself as being a universal fraternity, in the sense that its message has gone through the ages and travelled across the continents, it is really difficult to speak of Freemasonry as a general entity, as if it were governed by a single body and encompassed people who share the same values. Of course, the message of fraternalism is an attractive one, and it certainly has a strong basis, yet an organization which is nearly 300 years old is bound to have witnessed changes and modifications in the perception its members have, and the perception non-masons have of the Craft. The dialectics between what is commonly held to be the reasons why men and women join Freemasonry and the idea they represent in the eyes of non-masons are complex and depend very much on the historical and geographical context. The gradual transformation of the original stone-masons' guilds into a fraternity that has lived on for nearly three centuries and is well-established in every democratic country around the World has not been the same everywhere, and differences have appeared as the Craft grew and expanded. Of course here again, all these changes have been dependent on the context of the time, but were nonetheless crucial ones, dividing the Craft along racial, religious, gender and dogmatic lines, making it all the more difficult to speak of Freemasonry in the singular, universal form it can be argued it was at its beginnings. As my research focuses on British Freemasonry in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, I will develop my present talk along these geographical and historical lines.

But before the disparities drew barriers between what came to be known as different branches of Freemasonries, and probably above these disparities, come the elements that enable us to identify these men and women around the World as Freemasons. One common trait to all forms of Freemasonries, be it Regular or Continental, is the fact that secrecy plays a central role and is a key element of the Craft. And in fact, this aspect can be regarded as a pivotal one as it is at the same time the binding element between the members, and the one component that essentially keeps non-Masons out. Paradoxically, it is probably the most visible aspect or the best-known facet to those who do not belong, thus acting as a dual factor, both of inclusion and exclusion. As this notion has never lost its value depending on the country or the era, one can wonder whether it could be

considered as quintessential to Freemasonry or indeed, if it were lost, if it would imply an irreversible shift or even perhaps the decline of the Craft.

I will first focus during this presentation on the universality of this notion of secrecy, and we shall see how it is used as a means to include as well as to exclude. In the second part on the other hand, I shall attempt to demonstrate how the cultural aspect influences the debate, focusing more precisely on the British case. Finally in the last section, the question of the relevance of secrecy will be asked, as it seems like a dated notion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an era in which the mass media has paved the way for openness and communication as a prerequisite for a transparent society.

oooOOooo

From the very beginning, the notion of secrecy was an essential part of Freemasonry, at a time when the guilds were only composed of operative masons. Indeed, in order to protect the secrets of their training and so as to make sure unqualified stone masons would not take over on the building sites, the Mason word as it was known was used to prove a proper level of qualification upon arrival on a new construction site. This password was only communicated to the worthy, with instruction not to let others know : a recommendation which was easily followed as it was in everyone's best interest not to divulge the information, ensuring the overseers the best craftsmen and the workers a steady supply of labour.

When the lodges started to admit what will come to be known as speculative masons, that is the gentlemen who wished to be initiated but were not stone masons, the password tradition lived on. Of course, it was no longer used to prove qualification for labour, but enabled visiting masons to be admitted into the lodges along their way. So the password still bears this notion of "being admitted", one cannot cross the threshold of the temple room unchecked.

The whole initiation ritual is all about that. The profane, literally the one standing before the temple, has to go through a proper initiation before he can be admitted and thus entrusted with the secrets of Freemasonry. And here again, the message is a universal one. All men and women share the same information, the information which enabled them to become part of the group that literally made them brethren. In that sense, the secret of

Freemasonry is truly a factor of inclusion, it creates a tangible link between the members. Tangible, because what is shared is the means of recognition by which a mason is able to identify a brother, the handshake for example. Such a signal can of course also be used outside the temple room, an aspect which can create tensions for those who do not belong, but we shall come back to this.

The sense of being part of a group can also be illustrated by the fact that masons operate in a distinct time and place : the temple, for a start, is a sacred place as we have seen, where access is restricted. But within the temple room, the time span is quite specific to the meeting. The Master Mason's words have a performative function, thus establishing a *sacred* time span, distinct from the profane one. Once the boundaries are physically and mentally established, the ritual itself stresses the separation from the outside world. Gilbert Garibal points out : “For what reason this moving about rhythmically inside the lodge, alternating sequences, rise and sit are imposed on the assistants and give the meeting its tempo ? First of all to cause a scission, a break with the outside world, to isolate oneself from the profane world where all come from and are still suffused in the agitation. Thanks to this break and by opposition to it, to sanctify the place and gather the brethren in a similar mood, a spiritual communion. The repetitive and reassuring ritual enables the brethren to let go and enter a specific ‘here and now’.”<sup>1</sup>

Sharing these secrets, first of initiation, then the lodge meetings, automatically creates a bond that is transposed outside the temple room. As we have seen, the means of recognition can easily be used in everyday life, and if it creates a sense of belonging, it necessarily has a corollary in the sense that it excludes all non-masons, and can provoke among the latter an uncomfortable feeling of being used at the expense of the masons. This is especially true in a context of suspicion or mistrust as can happen for example following publications of alleged masonic undue influence.

As we have seen , secrecy is universal regarding Freemasonry, but the way in which each individual mason chooses to tackle this notion depends very much on the context. We

---

<sup>1</sup> Garibal, Gilbert. « Devenir franc-maçon. L'initiation, le symbolisme et les valeurs maçonniques », Paris, éditions de Vecchi, 2005. Quoted by Bryon-Portet, Céline. « Etude sémiotique d'une communication fondée sur la contextualisation et les processus : du rôle des représentations symboliques et pratiques rituelles de la franc-maçonnerie », Actes sémiotiques [Online]. 2013, no. 113. Available at : <<http://epublications.unilim.fr/revues/as/1833>> (consulted 09.01.2014)

shall now have a closer look at Britain and the way the United Grand Lodge of England chooses to deal with this.

oooOOOooo

Freemasonry is universally rooted in secrecy. Yet the way in which the members choose to deal with this notion is variable, and depends on several factors according to time and place. This reaction to secrecy is yet another element pointing towards the fact that there is not one singular, monolithic and worldwide organization, but different trends which depend on the people making up Freemasonry. On the other hand, even if Freemasonry is a highly personal experience, it is one intended to make its members feel gregarious, and very often the attitude one adopts is included in a larger context. One example of this is the choice of disclosure. Indeed, it is left to the individual mason to disclose his or her membership (although here in a British context I should really say “his”, as women are not recognized as Freemasons under the United Grand Lodge of England). The only secret he must keep concerns the membership of others. What is interesting to note is that UGLE recommends its members to disclose their membership of the Freemasons whenever possible . The reason for this goes back to times of suspicion. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Freemasonry was merely regarded as an open, well-integrated organization, very much part of English society. Andrew Prescott notes that “Freemasonry was just one of many means by which the late-Victorian middle-classes could affirm their respectability and social prestige and feel a vicarious sense of community”.<sup>2</sup> On the whole, before World War II, the members had no reason to question whether or not they should disclose their membership, being a freemason was certainly not something to be ashamed of and, they believed, could not be held against them. Of course, the War changed many people’s point of view in that respect. As Hitler rose to power in Germany, the Grand Lodges there were dissolved (between 1933 and 1935), and as the dictator gradually invaded and occupied other countries, freemasonry was banned there as well, and was one of the first steps to be taken. The Grand Masters of many Lodges were sent to concentration camps, and numerous masons died during the war years. It is only natural then, for the ones who remained across Europe (as it was the case in Britain, as the country was never invaded), to go underground and speak very little of their activity. This

---

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Prescott, *A History of British Freemasonry 1425-2000*. CRFF Working Papers Series No.1.

trend continued for many years, and was deeply engrained in the brethrens' conscience, on an individual level but also institutionally, as it became the norm to remain silent even in the face of criticism. Indeed, throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whenever suspicion gathered around the Brotherhood, the line of conduct was to not answer the questions, nor correct the mistakes that could be made, or indeed make any comment about what was at stake. The cases of suspicion which arose took place primarily at a local level, and referred for example to masonic influence on the local council level, or indeed in the police force. It was not until the 1980s that United Grand Lodge finally changed the way it dealt with the press and adopted a new stance against criticism : they hired a Director of Communications, who was responsible for the relationship with the media and who contributed to give a much more open image of Freemasonry, with the idea that the Brotherhood should no longer be regarded as a secret society, but really as a benevolent one. In order to dissipate the doubts the public had, it was essential that each individual member openly discuss Freemasonry with their relatives, and disclose membership in the workplace whenever possible. We shall now see how this new communication plan was set up, and what the consequences were.

oooOOOooo

When United Grand Lodge decided to become more vocal and more open about its activities, they knew the task ahead would be a difficult one. Indeed, silence had been prevalent for decades, for Freemasonry as an institution as well as for the individual members in their everyday life. They had simply learned not to discuss their Freemasonry openly, because they feared it would be prejudicial to them. Indeed, the Craft had an ambivalent position within British society. On the one hand, the ties and connections it enjoyed with the Monarchy vouched for their good reputation ; yet on the other hand, the main dealings the public had with the masons did not always go in the same direction. During the 1970s and 1980s, various affairs were drawn to the public's attention concerning underhand dealings the masons were accused of conducting at the expense of others. But the most important turning point in the period was the publication of a book, *The Brotherhood*, by the late Stephen Knight. This book claimed to reveal Freemasonry's true purpose, that is, that the brothers have a duty to help each other to the detriment of

other people and of other loyalties. Fearing a new backlash of criticism, this time it was agreed that the masons would defend themselves, and this included becoming more visible to prove to the public there was nothing sinister about the Craft. All the means of the time were used : television shows, radio programs, videos, leaflets etc. And it did work. In fact, it was going so well and the public was so receptive that in June 1992, in celebration of the 275<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Grand Lodge, “over 12,500 Freemasons and guests gathered at Earls Court Exhibition Center in London, and for the first time press and television were present at a meeting of Grand Lodge. The event featured on television newscasts around the world<sup>3</sup>. The Grand Master declared : “We have now almost managed to eliminate the belief that we are a sinister conspiracy.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet this period of calm and trust was relatively short-lived. Soon after, new doubts were being put to the front of the media, questioning this time masonic involvement in the police and the judiciary system. And all the efforts United Grand Lodge had put into getting across the message that Freemasonry had nothing to hide, came to nothing as a Home Affairs Select Committee investigated the Craft, eventually finding no proof of misconduct due to masonic membership, yet concluding that compulsory declaration of membership on appointment to jobs in the criminal justice system was essential to reassure the public that nothing sinister was going on and there was no undue influence. The masons fought actively to have this measure abrogated, and they eventually succeeded in this. But the damage was done : once again, public opinion was no longer on their side. Only this time, suspicion did not necessarily involve a huge conspiracy to take over the World, or even influence in the police force, but perhaps a more a general mistrust concerning the day to day running of business. Another, widespread prejudice concerning the idea that people have of the masons, is that it is more of an old boys’ club, senior men playacting and rolling their trousers up. In fact, with the decrease in membership in the UK, it is true that members are getting older, and one of the challenges United Grand Lodge has to face is how to appeal to younger men. This issue relates to a larger, more general questioning United Grand Lodge has decided to tackle as a preparation for the tercentenary which will take place in 2017. It would appear that, since 1984 when they decided to go public, UGLE has reacted to waves of criticism and tried to

---

<sup>3</sup> [www.ugle.org.uk](http://www.ugle.org.uk)

<sup>4</sup> Grand Lodge Proceedings 1990-1994, Vol. XXXIV, June 1992, p.343

do some damage control, in the hope of giving a more positive image of Freemasonry. This time, it seems as if they want to be pro-active, using the tools they strived to escape in the past, that is the media. With a brand new website, different publications widely available like Freemasonry Today, and a report which was produced in 2012 at the demand of UGLE on the “Future of Freemasonry”, the stress is clearly put on openness. The goal is to show that Freemasonry is not a secret society, and all the means used by UGLE strive to prove this. Concerning the report, the UGLE website states that, I quote : “the report suggests that, contrary to some misleading commentary, Freemasonry actually demonstrates genuine openness and transparency and it concludes that it is arguably more relevant today than ever before.”<sup>5</sup>

The whole purpose of this, is indeed to demonstrate that Freemasonry is still relevant in a transparent 21<sup>st</sup> century society, however old the ritual may be, and can still bring pleasure to young...*men*. Nigel Brown, the Grand Secretary, concludes: "This report will form an important part of our discussions as to how best to ensure that Freemasonry continues to evolve and adapt to meet the needs of its members and also of wider society, while at the same time retaining the distinctive character and intrinsic values that have attracted members for centuries and continue to appeal to people today."<sup>6</sup>

oooOOOooo

A society with secrets. This is how members of the Craft are accustomed to describing Freemasonry. Secrecy is indeed a central element, one which binds the members together just as it excludes those who cannot share the secrets. However today, secrecy no longer has just a *private* connotation, it has a sinister one. Top secret classified information, secret dealings...the members of the public are no longer prepared to trust those who hold the secrets at their expense. A demand for transparency in a society in which information has acquired a commercial value, has forced even Freemasonry to reconsider its position on

---

<sup>5</sup> Freemasonry Today. Report on the Future of Freemasonry.  
<http://www.freemasonrytoday.com/ugle-sgc/ugle/item/511-future-of-freemasonry-study-is-published>

<sup>6</sup> Freemasonry Today. Report on the Future of Freemasonry.  
<http://www.freemasonrytoday.com/ugle-sgc/ugle/item/511-future-of-freemasonry-study-is-published>

secrecy : “there are no secrets, that is the biggest secret of all”, says the Grand Secretary. Why the oath then? Maybe after all, secrecy is still very attractive and possibly constitutes the means to attract new members looking to be let in on the big secret.