

Living the Enlightenment

LIVING THE ENLIGHTENMENT: FREEMASONRY AND POLITICS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE

By Margaret C. Jacob

Reviewed by Bro. Michael Adam Neulander

When I attended graduate school at Old Dominion University, I double majored in philosophy and history. The most intelligent, and the most academically demanding professor I studied under was Dr. Michael Carhart. He had a master's degree in philosophy and a Doctorate in history. Thus, we were "kindred spirits" in the sense that we both realized one could not fully grasp an understanding of history without a deep knowledge of philosophy, and vice versa. Dr. Carhart virtually taught me how to truly "see" and ultimately understand all the historical, social, and philosophical complexities that made up what is known as the "Age of Enlightenment." After I completed Carhart's course on the "Age of Enlightenment," one definite affect it had on me personally was that I gained a much deeper and better understanding of Freemasonry and its proper place it had in cultural and philosophical history. Thus, when I joined the staff of the History Department as an Adjunct Professor Michael and I continued a wonderful professional and personal relationship; which, I admit is one of the few sorrows I harbor about retiring to Tennessee.

As a historian, I believe in looking at history through the hermeneutic "lens" in order to better understand historical events, and the motivations of historical personages. Hermeneuticism is essentially defined by historians and philosophers as the necessity to immerse oneself in the entire social milieu associated with a historical epoch to fully understand its significance on a particular historical event. Only since the 1960's has Freemasonry been viewed through the hermeneutic "lens;" thus, gaining the attention it richly deserves from professional historians. My experience has been that even today most Freemasons, let alone the general public, have a very cursory understanding of the truly in-depth contributions our fraternity has made on shaping history during the "Age of Enlightenment." Thus, modern historians are just waking up to the importance that Freemasonry played on social history during the "Age of Enlightenment;" some prominent ones are, Margaret C. Jacob, David Stevenson, Francis Yates, and Steven C. Bullock. Dr. Margaret C. Jacob (1943-present), is the preeminent historical authority living today who analyzes Freemasonry's effects on the social history of the "Age of Enlightenment." Jacob attained this status because, for over forty years, she was the first modern historian who "rolled up her sleeves" and did the hard work of "rummaging" through the ignored and "dusty" archives in Europe. Her research has brought to light the nexus between "speculative" Freemasonry, and the "Age of Enlightenment's" social, political, and religious history. The thesis of Jacob's book is as follows: "It is the contention of this book that the masonic experience in every western European context, from Edinburgh to Berlin, from the 1730's to the 1780's, was resolutely civil and hence political."[\[1\]](#) It is not often that Freemasonry is viewed in the political realm of history; so, I was very excited to read this book when I came across it recently. I am happy to say that this book shed "more light" on a subject that I did not have as much knowledge in previously. Thus, I am excited to author a book review on her

seminal book, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth Century Europe*. However, before delving into Jacob's thesis it is necessary to define what is known as the Age of Enlightenment in greater detail.

My readings on the historical epoch known as the "Age of Enlightenment" has definitely proved to me that this historic epoch gave birth to "speculative" Freemasonry. In addition, there is no doubt in my mind that "speculative" Freemasonry is the "longest living child" of the "Age of Enlightenment." After such a bold statement, I find it is necessary now in this review to define for my Masonic Brothers the term "Age of Enlightenment." The first definition is from Jacobs who states the following: "This term, Enlightenment, ironically veils as much as it illuminates. It presumes a taxonomy of eighteenth-century ideas...that places the science of Newton at the heart of enlightened discourse and adds to it contract theory, associated with writings of John Locke, as well as rational religiosity, oftentimes described as deism and frequently combined with anticlericalism."[\[2\]](#) Unfortunately, Jacob's definition strikes me as the coldest and most pedantic definition of the "Age of Enlightenment" I have ever come across. I would define the "Age of Enlightenment" in the following way. The "Age of Enlightenment" was an eighteenth-century intellectual movement which started in Europe, and spread through the rest of the Western Civilized world; it emphasized reason, knowledge, science, philosophy, individualism, liberty, democracy, and the study of human culture and the natural world. Jacob's noted in her book that one of the most imminent scholars on the "Age of Enlightenment" is Dr. Jürgen Habermas; he is a philosopher whose writings I was familiar with, so I decided to consult his ideas on the subject. Thomas McCarthy, in his book *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*, synthesizes this Modernist German philosopher's writings on the "Age of Enlightenment." Habermas (1929-present), is one of the greatest scholars of the historical epoch; thus, it is important to explore what he thought about the subject to give a hermeneutic context to what the "Age of Enlightenment" was. Habermas believed that "Enlightened" philosophes understood that science contained universal truths, and that progress was a process of discovery; with perfection at the end of a linear progression. To be "Enlightened," a person had to know themselves. The philosophes believed that one way to do this in the eighteenth-century was through the arts.[\[3\]](#) Now I can hear some of my Masonic Brethren asking the question; "what does art have to do with it"? Habermas would answer, and I whole heartedly agree with him, that many imminent philosophers from as early as Plato and Aristotle and running up through many modern philosophers such as; Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer and Habermas have all agreed that artists and art movements have helped to shape historical movements throughout human history. Examples of the historical epochs that were shaped by and in many ways even defined by the arts are as follows: the Greco-Roman classical period, the Renaissance, the "Age of Enlightenment," Romanticism, Modernism, and post-Modernism just to mention a few. In fact, Habermas argued that the "Age of Enlightenment" gave birth to the development of the "public sphere;" a phrase he coined in his doctoral dissertation, where rational private people took their ideas and judgments and publicly developed them through the arts, and communal associations. For example, Habermas noted that during the "Age of Enlightenment," the "public sphere" invented the modern novel with character development. In addition, Habermas noted that this great historical epoch spawned the "public sphere" of newspapers, coffee houses, salons, and Freemasonry. Finally, Habermas maintained that since Great Britain was the most liberal country in Europe during the "Age of Enlightenment;" the culture of the "public sphere"

emerged first from there, around 1700. The “public sphere” culture then spread throughout most of Continental Europe during the rest of the eighteenth-century.[\[4\]](#) Thus, I am convinced that Habermas not only adequately defined the “Age of Enlightenment,” but also accurately described the birth and growth pattern of “speculative” Freemasonry which took place during this great historical epoch. Now that I have provided a more nuanced definition of the Age of Enlightenment and have given some historical context to it *vis-à-vis* to the birth of “speculative” Freemasonry; it is time to review what Jacobs book has to say about the Craft’s role in European society during this historical epoch.

Jacob in her book recognized that a “kaleidoscope” of Enlightenment ideas played a crucial role in the social and political history of the eighteenth-century in Europe. Interestingly, Jacob’s research has led her to observe that Freemasonry played a larger role in shaping and supporting social and political institutions during this historical epoch than it has ever been credited for before by academics; Habermas being one of the very few exceptions. In fact, Jacob’s research is not even known by most Freemasons. Most are ignorant regarding the historical forces that “speculative” Masonry played first in its birthplace Great Britain, and then throughout most of Continental Europe. As a matter of fact, Jacob’s research led her to recognize that Freemasonry became an integral part of a “new sociability;” a term she coined, to explain where Freemasonry fit into the “kaleidoscope” of Enlightenment ideas which ultimately changed society and formulated new political institutions throughout the world in the eighteenth-century. “Perhaps we have finally located the earliest moments in the formation of modern civil society. The lodge, the philosophical society, the scientific academy became the underpinning, as philosophers like J. Habermas and some historians have long believed, for the republican and democratic forms of government that evolved slowly and fitfully in Western Europe from the eighteenth century on.”[\[5\]](#) So, what did Jacob observe about Freemasonry to cause her to assert that it had such a large role in the shaping of social and political institutions? Her answer to the question is as follows: “The lodges sought to civilize, to teach manners and decorum, to augment the order and harmony of civil society. They taught men to speak in public, to keep records, to pay ‘taxes’ to be tolerant, to debate freely, to vote, to moderate their feasting, and to give lifelong devotion to other citizens of their order.”[\[6\]](#) This quote is the crux of Jacob’s thesis; that Freemasonry had a large influence on shaping political history in the eighteenth-century, not only in Great Britain, but throughout most of Continental Europe. I recognize that Jacob’s research for this book was confined to European history. However, as a historian and Freemason who has done recent research in Freemasonry during the American Revolutionary period, I feel compelled to interject that her thesis would also prove Freemasonry’s influence on the political history of the era in several countries of the Western Hemisphere starting in Colonial America. Thus, since Freemasonry’s influence on politics is such a unique and rarely examined phenomena in the history of the “Age of Enlightenment,” Jacob’s assertion needs to be explored further.

All historians and philosophers understand that when examining the history of human civilization, law making by a society is of fundamental importance in the creation of a healthy and well-regulated society for its citizens. Thus, when Jacob observed the “enlightened” and “civilizing” principals of

morality and democracy being taught by Freemasonry in the lodge, she saw that these men would become uniquely suited to spread the “language of the lodge,” a term she coined in this book, to the public. For example, Jacob rightfully contended that the British citizenry was “hungry” for the spread of these “enlightened” ideas after the bloody upheaval they had recently endured during the English Civil War 1642-49.^[7] In addition, Jacob astutely reminded her readers that it was important to remember that Great Britain did not have a “written” constitution to govern the nation. However, Jacob did recognize that the *Regius Manuscript* written around 1390 CE to govern the stonemasons’ guild in London was, in essence, the first written constitution in Great Britain. Soon after “speculative” Freemasonry came on the scene in 1723, Dr. James Anderson published *Anderson’s Constitutions*. Jacob’s research led her to believe that *Anderson’s Constitutions* was a “watershed” document, not just for Freemasonry, but for the political life of Great Britain. Jacob observed that *Anderson’s Constitutions* was an amalgamation of ideas that stemmed from three streams of thought that already existed in Great Britain. The first two streams flowed from Freemasonry; borrowing moral ideas concerning the conduct of its members from its constituent lodges, who in turn, inherited their code of conduct from the *Regius Manuscript*. The last stream it received ideas from was the one that was most significant to the religious and political conduct in lodge. I agree with Jacob’s assertion that John Locke’s (1632-1704) *Two Treatises of Government* published in 1688, was the most significant work on politics ever published in English; and therefore, it was also a significant influence on *Anderson’s Constitutions*. “What they attempted to institute in their ideal civil society—their masonic lodge—has, it may be argued, a Lockean quality.”^[8] Locke was one of the great *doyens* of Enlightenment philosophy. He espoused the notions of freedom of religion, natural law, and a democratically elected republican form of government in his seminal work. Thus, it should come as no surprise to American citizens that Locke’s work was also the main source of influence on the American *Declaration of Independence*, and the *U. S. Constitution*. Thus, it is the spread of these “enlightened” ideas first taught in lodge and then codified in *Anderson’s Constitutions* that served as a “midwife” for the birth of Great Britain’s modern political structure. These “enlightened” ideas helped to “fan the flames” of the Glorious Revolution in 1689 and “rooted” themselves in Britain’s society under the reign of Queen Anne, who reigned from 1702-14, and they quickly spread to the European Continent.^[9] Some of the examples that Jacob pointed to are how *Anderson’s Constitutions* espoused freedom of religion by ensuring there was no religious “test” for its members; members were only required to have a belief in a “supreme being.” Men were accepted to membership in lodge based on merit, and not for their station in life they held in society. This was a revolutionary change in the fabric of the British social structure of the time. In addition, Freemasonry allowed for its members to vote, by secret ballot, for its lodge officers, who in turn, would govern them in the lodge. Of course, the notion of “freedom of assembly” was a direct outgrowth of the ability of Freemason’s to meet in lodge to openly share ideas of the “Age of Enlightenment;” such as, liberty and fraternity. These are just a few of the great “treasures” that Freemasonry had a hand in spreading throughout Europe.^[10] I think Jacob made a strong case for the importance of Freemasonry’s role on British public life with the following quote. “The lodges became microscopic civil polities, new public spaces, in effect schools for constitutional government. On the Continent, in every European country, even the Dutch Republic, the practice of this sort of governance was unique.”^[11] As mentioned earlier Locke’s political ideas which were adopted as a part of *Anderson’s Constitutions* served as a basis for many of the important freedoms codified in the American *Constitution*. After all we should not forget that Most Worshipful Brother Benjamin Franklin was a very influential figure both in the writing of the *Declaration of*

Independence, and in the writing and adopting of the American *Constitution*. This fact is not surprising considering that in 1734, Franklin published the first Masonic book in the Americas, a reprint of *Anderson's Constitutions*. I will use Franklin's experience spent in Europe to show how he was a major "transmitter" of Freemasonry's "enlightened" ideas to Continental Europe and was a major impetus in transforming social and political history there.

Before I write about Franklin's influence on the Age of Enlightenment and Freemasonry, I need to properly place him in historical context. I became a historian because I enjoyed reading biographies of interesting people from an early age. My readings convinced me that extraordinary human beings made and shaped history. It was only when I went to graduate school to become a professional historian and philosopher that I learned in my course on Historiography that my predilection to believing extraordinary personages made history was actually recognized as a historical school of thought-known as the "Great Men Theory." The progenitor of this theory was the Scottish historian, Thomas Carlyle 1795-1881. In his book *Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle wrote: "For as I take it, universal history, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the history of the great men who have worked here."[\[12\]](#) In essence, I agree with Carlyle's assertion that history has often turned on the decisions, works, ideas, and characters of "Great Men." I genuinely believe that Franklin is in this category. However, if you asked people who was one of the leading figures that spread the ideals of the Age of Enlightenment in the world; unfortunately, Benjamin Franklin's name would rarely be given as the answer. As a historian I am appalled by the lack of knowledge Americans have of this Founding Father and great "savant" of the "Age of Enlightenment." I would probably be disappointed in the lack of knowledge my Brethren have of Franklin as well. However, I will show in the next paragraph how, as Carlyle would classify him, this "Great Man" of history and Freemason became one of the "Age of Enlightenment's" greatest purveyor of its ideals.

Franklin's biography leads me to assert that he was the greatest "human conduit" in spreading Freemasonry's enlightened ideas on two continents. Franklin was the most successful printer in the American colonies; and America's most recognized man of science of his time. Franklin was also a major political force in America during his lifetime; he was one of only six men who signed both *Declaration of Independence*, and the *U. S. Constitution*. In addition; Franklin was the most famous and prolific Freemason in early America; his Masonic career spanned six decades. In 1731, Franklin was initiated in St. John's lodge in Philadelphia. In 1734, he was elected Grand Master of Pennsylvania. In 1749 he was the first American born Freemason to be appointed Provisional Grand Master in America. Thus, his wisdom and longevity made him the most capable Freemason in America to spread the "language of the lodge" to the public. What is really amazing about Brother Franklin is the influence he asserted on the European Continent during the Age of Enlightenment. Franklin was one of the most "well-travelled" men from the Americas to Europe. He spent twenty years of his life living in London from the early 1750's.[\[13\]](#) Thus, he had a "front row seat" to observe how "enlightenment" ideas were transforming British society and politics; undoubtedly, they left a lasting impression on him that he "tapped" into when he advocated for American independence. During the American Revolution he was the American ambassador to France from

1776-85. Franklin was highly successful in “charming” all Parisians; including King Louis XVI into giving monetary and military aid to the American Colonies. Without Franklin’s impassioned entreaties the cause of American liberty could have easily died an early death. While serving as an American representative in France; Franklin “was made a member of the Nine Muses Lodge, in Paris, in 1777, and was elected Venerable (Worshipful) Master in May, 1779, and re-elected the following year.”[\[14\]](#) It was while he was serving as Master of the lodge that he escorted in and initiated into Freemasonry the great French philosophe Voltaire. It is this time period in Franklin’s life, which will be explored in greater detail below, to see how he helped to spread “enlightenment” ideas into French Freemasonry and French political society.

It has already been ascertained that Great Britain was the “springboard” for Freemasonry into Continental Europe. Jacob’s noted that one of the very first countries Freemasonry landed in was France around the 1730’s. However, it was not a propitious start; as Jacob’s research into Parisian police records regarding Freemasonry attests to. Jacob began her book writing about the mistrust that the Roman Catholic French government had regarding Freemasonry. “In the 1740’s the Parisian police arrested, searched, and systematically interrogated freemasons.”[\[15\]](#) Jacob noted that many of the suspicions of Freemasonry in the French government in fact really stemmed from the French clergy who held great sway with the monarchy. The clergy were anti-Masonic because of the 1738 Papal Bull that condemned Freemasonry, specifically the most egregious conduct it pointed to was that Freemasons democratically elected the officers of their Lodges; thus spreading the idea of government rule by republicanism.[\[16\]](#) Although Masonic Lodges were allowed to exist in France, they were always spied on and viewed with great suspicion by the monarchy and clergy until the “full flowering” of the Age of Enlightenment; which for France started in the 1760’s. I cannot claim that Franklin was one of the early progenitors of Freemasonry in France. However, I can claim that he was one of the most effective advocates to the French court for Freemasonry in the following two examples. First, Jacob’s listed who she termed: “The grand men of the Enlightenment; Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, and in the American colonies, Franklin.”[\[17\]](#) Thus, Jacob observed that Franklin’s stature and charm provided him the “cache” he needed to be an effective advocate in convincing King Louis XVI to accept Freemasonry and its “enlightened” ideas. Franklin was instrumental in convincing the King to allow the French Lodges, which he termed bastions of morality and virtue, to “step out of the shadows” allowing them to truly flourish in French society.[\[18\]](#) The second example comes from Walter Isaacson’s book, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*, and helps to illustrate my point further. Near the end of Franklin’s tour as ambassador to France, he very effectively argued in King Louis XVI’s court for religious tolerance to be accepted in France; an idea supported by French philosophers and Freemasons. His well-reasoned plea resulted in Louis XVI’s signing of the Edict of Versailles. This edict effectively allowed non-Catholics civil status and the right to openly practice their faith.[\[19\]](#) Finally, Franklin’s influence and advocacy for Freemasonry was not just confined to France; it even crossed the border to Austria. Baron Ignaz von Born (1742-91), was General Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Austria. Born was another of the great luminaries of the “Age of Enlightenment” in Europe. He was one of Europe’s leading scientist in the field of mineralogy and metallurgy. Born was a major progenitor of the idea that much of Freemasonry’s rituals were borrowed from the ancient Egyptian Mysteries. Born authored a long article supporting this idea published in 1784 in the *Journal for Freemasons*, which had a wide circulation in Europe. He was a frequent correspondent, on the subjects of

science and Freemasonry, with Benjamin Franklin during Franklin's time spent in France.^[20] On this particular point even Jacob realized how important knowledge from the Ancient Mysteries was to both the "Age of Enlightenment" and Freemasonry. "Its sense of perfectibility of humankind owes much to the immortal Newton, in other words, to the new science. The ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans are another source of human wisdom, and of freemasonry."^[21] Still ringing in my ears today are the words from Dr. Michael Carhart: "We stand on the shoulders of giants."

In conclusion, I know that this was a lengthy and involved book review. However, I think that Dr. Margaret C. Jacob's book *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth Century Europe* deserves the in-depth analysis I gave it. Many Freemasons, if they do much reading at all, spend most of their time reading books espousing theories regarding Freemasonry's beginnings. There are dozens of theories and hundreds of books available and I have even delved into the subject myself to some detail. However, I think that Jacob's book is a more compelling story to read. Jacob tells a story about how our great Fraternity and some of its important members truly made an impact on history. Her research is impeccable and thorough. Unlike the previous theories I have mentioned, there is no need to speculate on this historical event, Jacob provided a plethora of clear written evidence. In addition; she is a compelling writer and her story is a captivating one. Thus, I highly recommend that all Freemasons read her book.

1. Margaret C. Jacob, *Living Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 17.
2. Ibid., 19.
3. Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1978), 76-83.
4. Ibid., 76-83.
5. Jacob., 5.
6. Ibid., 21-22.
7. Ibid., 71.
8. Ibid., 114.
9. Ibid., 92.
10. Ibid., 3-22.
11. Ibid., 20.
12. Thomas Carlyle, *Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1880), 5.
13. Ronald E. Heaton, *Masonic Membership of the Founding Fathers* (Silver Spring: The Masonic Service Association, 1965, 3rd rep. 1988), 18-19.
14. Ibid., 18-19.
15. Jacob., 3.
16. Ibid., 23.
17. Ibid., 143.
18. Ibid., 151.
19. Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 32.
20. Jacques Chailley, *The Magic Flute: Esoteric Symbolism in Mozart's Masonic Opera.*, (Rochester:

Inner Traditions International, 1992), 16.

21. Jacob., 160.