

Records of the Hole Crafte

RECORDS OF THE HOLE CRAFTE AND FELLOWSHIP OF MASONS

By Edward Conder

Reviewed by Bro. Michael Adam Neulander

For about a decade starting in 1995 I was a member of “The Masonic Book Club.” Its mission was to re-publish Masonic books that had been out of print for many years; unfortunately, they have gone out of business in 2016. Many of their books had to do with information on old manuscripts and records found in the London library about the “operative” stonemason guilds. Of interest to the Masonic community was information regarding “The Old Charges,” essentially the rules for the members to live by in the various stonemasons’ guilds in the British Isles. Being a lover of history all my life and finally making it my profession at the age of forty-eight by teaching it at Old Dominion University; I have always been interested in studying the multi-faceted history of Freemasonry. There is one facet of Masonic history I became interested in soon after I joined the craft in 1983. I have been on a quest to find the “Holy Grail” of Freemasonry; which is essentially to answer the question of “when and where did Freemasonry get its start”? This is a quest that a plethora of Freemasons have embarked upon as well and the definitive answer has eluded all of us. There have been many remarkably interesting and plausible explanations written in literally hundreds of books on the subject. However, no one can answer the question with “concrete” factual certainty. After two decades of searching I finally came to the realization that the “true answer” was that the “destination” of my quest was not what was important. I now suspect we will never know the answer to this question with “concrete” certainty. What I came to realize was, that what is most important is the quest itself. The act of searching has brought me “more light” in Freemasonry. Ultimately, I now understand that the quest is more important than the destination. Thus, after this epiphany on my part I continue to walk towards the “bright light;” to be “bathed” in the “glow of knowledge” it shines upon me. I may never come to know what the ultimate “source” of the light is; but for as long as I live, I will continually be drawn to it. Thus, along the path of my quest I picked up a better understanding of the “operative” stonemason’s guilds and their connections to “speculative” Freemasonry. Ultimately, the reprinted book *Records of the Hole Crafte and Fellowship of Freemasons*, written by Edward Conder, Jr., (1861-1934), helped to “illuminate” my path on the quest for a better understanding of Freemasonry’s antecedents.

With the publication of his book in 1894, Conder was credited in the Masonic world with shining “more light” on the nexus between “operative and “speculative’ Freemasonry. Conder rummaging through the Library of London’s archives unearthed a “treasure trove” of information regarding the formation by the London City Council in 1356 of the first organization to oversee and inspect the work of the stonemasons working in London. In less than twenty years this organization morphed into the London Masons Company. “Conder’s record of the fellowship offers, more than any other document, evidence of the slow change from a trade guild composed of operative masons to a close fellowship composed of both operative masons and men accepted as Masons who were not qualified to work as operatives.”^[1] After Conder completed his research he saw enough evidence to propose that the London Masons Company organizational structure and old constitution may not have been the only source that “speculative” Freemasonry relied on in the 17th century to form there

organization. However, he strongly asserted: "Yet, so far as London is concerned, it forms the only DEMONSTRABLE SOURCE; and, so far as we know, it is *only* in connection with this company that any mention is made of speculative freemasonry, as existing in London during the 17th century, or, in fact, any society of citizens meeting together for the purpose of fostering symbolical masonry"[2] I agree with Conder's assertion and will highlight some of the evidence he amassed.

Conder's book is useful to the Masonic researcher because besides just translating the old documents into modern English, he gave a good treatise on the history of the building of Pyramids and Temples by ancient civilizations; as well as, the history of masonry from its introduction to Britain by the Romans in 43 CE up to modernity. Conder felt compelled to do this because he noticed how the old documents hearkened back to ancient history to give its membership a historical context to how important their profession was to human civilization from time immemorial. Thus, the old documents that Conder investigated taught their membership that the Mason's art had its antecedents back to the building of magnificent temples in early civilization to honor their Deities. As a for instance, Conder found in the *Regius Manuscript*, which experts have dated to 1390 CE, the following statement concerning the birth of the "operative" stonemason's craft. "On this manner, through good wit of geometry, began first the craft of masonry; the clerk Euclid on this wise it found, this craft of geometry in Egypt land." [3] Conder understood that much of the accounts of the magnificence of the Egyptian Pyramids and Temples taught to early stonemasons came from the ancient Greek historian Herodotus (c. 484 - c. 425 BCE). For his information on the Egyptian civilization Conder relied on the scholarship of some imminent historians and antiquarians; such as, Richard Rawlinson (1690 - 1755), and Sir John Gardner Wilkinson (1797 - 1875), the Father of British Egyptology. Of course Conder in similar vein to other contemporary Masonic scholars such as: Albert Mackey, (1807-81), Albert Pike, (1809-91), Robert Freke Gould (1836-1915), and William Leslie Wilmhurst, (1867-1939) came to the conclusion that Masonic symbolism which took "root" in the Egyptian "Mystery's" continued to "flower" through the various "Ancient Mysteries" that developed throughout history and reached its "tentacles" into the old charges of "operative" masonry. Additionally, Conder noted that the stonemason's guild system rapidly spread throughout the land in the fifty years since the start of the London Masons Company. The *Regius Manuscript*, was written during the reign of King Richard II; however, it makes special mention of how the craft of stonemasons came to England during the reign of King Athelstan who was also responsible for instituting the first "charges;" which were fifteen rules for Master Masons to live by. [4]

Additionally, one of the other practices that Conder noticed about the stonemason's guild was their close association with the clergy; due to the religious nature of their work. Thus, the *Regius Manuscript* contained thirty moral "charges" that the Fellowcraft and Master Mason had to live by. These facts led Conder to surmise that the guild became a quasi-religious order and their religious aspects carried over into "speculative" Freemasonry. Conder points to this fact for the reason why the Bible has such an essential role in the Lodge, and why all of Freemasonry's philosophy revolves around morality. Thus, "operative" stonemasons like their later "speculative" Brethren were interested in teaching their members about the historical antecedents of their profession; as well as, how to act morally in society. [5]

In Conder's *Introduction* of his book he presents the earliest known information on men becoming "speculative" Freemasons in England. The first evidence found was from a diary entry from Elias Ashmole (1617 - 1692), dated October 16th, 1646. "'4:30pm. I was made a Freemason at

Warrington, in Lancashire, with Colonel Henry Mainwaring of Karincham, in Chesire.”[6] Two important facts to note was that Ashmole made several mentions of Freemasonry throughout the years in his diary. What is even more significant is that none of the men he mentions in his diary attending meetings with him were “operative” masons. Research into their names has disclosed they all had professions outside of the building trades. Conder made a significant historical discovery when he noticed this early date of Lodges wholly made of “speculative” Freemasons. Conder matches the information on Ashmole with a diary entry in 1691, from another Brother, John Aubrey (1626-1697), who described attending a meeting where the imminent architect, Sir Christopher Wren (1632-1723), was accepted into: “...the fraternity, of the free accepted Masons.”[7] The strikethrough of the word “free” and insertion of the word “accepted” caught Conder’s attention and he believed it to be an important clue into the transitional period of “operative” to “speculative” Masonry. As Conder studied the guild’s account books containing membership lists he noticed as early as 1620 the guild had a dual membership of “operative” and “speculative” members. Often the account book would have an entry: “referring to certain gratuities received from new members in consequence of being *accepted* on the livery.”[8] Conder noticed that the London Masons Company which previous to 1620 always used the term *admitted* for men who were entered into the membership of the guild after serving a period of apprenticeship in the Lodge. Thus, Conder concluded that there was irrefutable evidence that the London Masons Company in 1620 started a dual membership system. Furthermore, by calling some of their members *accepted*; meant these men did not serve an apprenticeship as a stonemason. Therefore, Conder purported that the 1620 entries in the Company’s Livery books marks the earliest evidence of “speculative” Freemasonry in England.

As Conder studied the Livery books of the London Company he picked up on several traditions followed by the Company since its inception that eventually transferred over to “speculative” Freemasonry. As an example, members wore a particular form of dress to denote their membership to the guild. They always had three grades in their Company. To obtain the first grade often known as “yeomanry” a man had to serve a seven-year apprenticeship or give a gift of intrinsic value to the Company. The second grade known as “members of the Livery” allowed the members to wear distinctive garb, and to have certain voting privileges. The third grade was known as “Members of the Court of Assistants” which was essentially the Company’s governing body who elected their wardens and masters to rule over them. Many other privileges accrued to the Members of the Company as well which included: receiving funds from the Company in cases of illness or becoming destitute; exemption from paying highway tolls; and the freedom to ply their trade within the city. In addition, next to each member’s name in the Livery book a distinctive sign associated with that member known as a “mark” appeared.[9]

Finally, Conder found, what he believed to be, definitive proof regarding the metamorphosis of Freemasonry. Conder came across two books of *Constitutions* that helped to clear the “fog” concerning the nexus between the “operative and “speculative” Masonic societies. In 1665 the *Constitution* of the “operative” branch of the London Company quit using the word *Free* in their title. The other *Constitution* which Conder argues is the true beginning of the “speculative” branch of the London Company; used the title “The Society of Freemasons.” “From this London Society of Freemasons, emanated no doubt several lodges of speculative masons, who early in the next century (1717) met together and formed the nucleus of modern Freemasonry.[10]

During my thirty-six-year association with Freemasonry I have read many books espousing a plethora of theories concerning the “true” beginning of the fraternity. Many ideas are familiar to Freemasons, some of the most popular include that the fraternity was started after the completion of King Solomon’s Temple; or the fraternity was started from the remnants of the few surviving, Knights Templars. However, I believe that Edward Conder, Jr.’s. book, *Records of the Hole Crafte and Fellowship of Freemasons*, comes closest to finding the “holy grail” of Freemasonry with the evidence he unearthed. For now, I agree with Conder’s claim that “speculative” Freemasonry grew out of the London Masons Company. Soon, I will be reading David Stevenson’s book *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland’s century, 1590-1710*, and I look forward to seeing if his claim of the origins of “speculative” Freemasonry convince me to think otherwise. I recommend Conder’s book to any Freemason who like myself is interested in searching for the “true” antecedents of Freemasonry.

1. Edward Conder, *Records of the Hole Crafte and Fellowship of Masons*, (1894: repr. Bloomington: The Masonic Book Club, 1988), ix-x.
2. Ibid, 2.
3. Ibid, 42.
4. Ibid, 37-42
5. Ibid, 2, 17-21.
6. Ibid, 4.
7. Ibid, 5.
8. Ibid, 7.
9. Ibid, 46-50, 177.
10. Ibid, 208.