

Builders by Joseph Newton

THE BUILDERS: A STORY AND STUDY OF MASONRY

By Joseph Fort Newton, Litt.D.

Reviewed by Bro. Michael Adam Neulander

Joseph Fort Newton, (1876-1950), was commissioned by the Grand Lodge of Iowa in 1914 to produce a book that would be given to every newly “raised” Master Mason in their jurisdiction. His “charge” from the Grand Lodge was to: “Prepare a brief, simple, and vivid account of the origin, growth, and teaching of the Order, so written as to provoke a deeper interest in and a more earnest study of its story and its service to mankind.”^[1] What Newton expertly produced for the Grand Lodge of Iowa was *The Builders: A Story and Study of Masonry*. The first thing I am compelled to comment on is what a truly worth while idea that the Grand Lodge of Iowa had in looking to bring “more light” to their membership. It is a shame that all Grand Lodges do not follow in the footsteps of the Grand Lodge of Iowa. After reading Newton’s book I gained a great appreciation for his Masonic knowledge; clearly he was the right man for the “task at hand.” Newton stated in his book that he wrote it in three parts to emphasize to the reader the significance of the number three to Freemasonry. His book is divided as follows: *Prophecy*, *History*, and *Interpretation*. In my book review I will be pointing out some of Newton’s excellent scholarship from the first two sections of his book. As a Freemason, this erudite book helped to “illuminate” my pathway towards gaining “further light;” especially, when it came to understanding the significance of the “Ancient Mysteries” to the development of Freemasonry.

In the first part of the book entitled *Prophecy*, Newton made a bit of a controversial assertion that I am sure many historians would take umbrage with. “Two arts have altered the face of the earth and given shape to the life and thought of man, Agriculture and Architecture.”^[2] Newton would get no argument from me or other historians on the importance of agriculture to the development of human civilization. However, classifying architecture as more important to the development of human civilization than the invention of written language for example is problematic for most historians. Be that as it may, I will continue to explore Newton’s assertion in this book review and comment on it later. Newton noted that humans have always been builders. There is plenty of evidence for this claim; especially, when one studies the early civilizations of Egypt, Sumer, India, and China. Of course, for Masonic purposes, Newton focused his attention on the Egyptian civilization; with the building of the great pyramids and temples in Egypt starting about 5,000 years ago. Newton correctly pointed out that agricultural life in Egypt was essentially an effortless endeavor due to the yearly “inundation cycle” of the Nile River. Therefore, Egyptians had plenty of “free time” on their hands to spend on other pursuits; thus, they were able to turn their attention to architecture. One only has to observe the collective “genus” that was required to construct the magnificent Great Pyramid of Giza; the tallest man-made edifice in the world until the Lincoln Cathedral was finished in 1311 CE; to realize the great contribution the Egyptians made to the “architectural arts.” As Newton most beautifully stated: “Here then are the real foundations of Masonry, both material and moral: in the deep need and aspiration of man, and his creative impulses; in his instinctive Faith, the quest of the Ideal, and his love of the Light.”^[3] Therefore, it should come as no surprise to anyone that “speculative” Freemasons, during the “Age of Enlightenment,” would focus on Egyptian

civilization's architectural achievements as the "starting point" for some of its own symbolism and allegory.

Since childhood I have had a fascination and a real "thirst" for conducting an in-depth study of the Egyptian civilization. However, I did not have the opportunity to "slake my thirst" for most of my life due to work requirements. Now that I am retired, I have finally been able to satisfy my long held desire to embark on my "journey of discovery" regarding Egyptian history, culture, and especially its language. Part of my journey has led me down the path towards learning Egyptian hieroglyphs, so far I have memorized over 500 of them. Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised when Newton in this book looked to Egyptian hieroglyphs and the importance of their symbolism to both Egyptian culture and Freemasonry. Newton made a fascinating connection for me between the Egyptian hieroglyph for the "Sun God" *Ra* and the Masonic significance of the "All seeing-eye." Newton stated: "There is less mystery about the Circle, which was an image of the disk of the Sun and a natural symbol of completeness, of eternity. With a point within the center it became, as naturally, the emblem of the Eye of the World—that All-seeing eye of the eternal Watcher of the human scene."[\[4\]](#) Therefore, like the Egyptian *Ra*, the Masonic "All seeing-eye" is the symbol for the omnipresence of the Great Architect of the Universe. It is important to note that Newton like so many other distinguished Masonic scholars, such as: Albert Mackey, (1807-81), Albert Pike, (1809-91), Robert Freke Gould (1836-1915), and William Leslie Wilmhurst, (1867-1939), understood that Masonic symbolism which took "root" in the Egyptian "Mystery's" continued to "flower" through the various "Ancient Mysteries" that developed throughout history.

For me, Newton really struck a "gold vein" of scholarly knowledge when he turned his attention to the use of symbolism in ancient Chinese writings. I specialized in Asian history during my last ten years of teaching at Old Dominion University. Therefore, I was "mesmerized" by the "illuminating" evidence Newton exposed in his book explaining how ancient Chinese writers used builder's tools as symbols to teach morality. I was well aware of the magnificent architectural feats of China; such as, the Great Wall, The Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, and the Silk Road terminus city of Chang'an. However, you could have "knocked me over with a feather;" after Newton revealed to me in his book, that some of the great Chinese Confucian philosophers had used builder's tools to illustrate moral teachings much in the same way that Freemasonry had done. Thus, I had to do some investigating in my own library when Newton mentioned some of the writings of one of the greatest Confucian scholars in history, Mencius, (372-289 BCE). I was so pleased to uncover, with Newton's "mentorship," a new reason to further respect the great philosophical teachings of Confucianism. In *The Book of Mencius*, the great sage stated: "A Master Mason, in teaching apprentices, makes use of the compasses and the square. We who are engaged in the pursuit of Wisdom must also make use of the compass and the square."[\[5\]](#) Although I am both a Freemason and Asian scholar I had never come across the Chinese use of builder's tools to teach morality in the same way that our Craft had done. Besides the similarities between Chinese philosophy and Freemasonry's use of symbolism of the builder's "working tools" to teach morality; Newton went on to explain in his book other similarities as well. For instance, Chinese sages were always referred to by their students as "Master." Chinese sages used an oral system of teaching to impart wisdom to their students. Students had to prove their proficiency in the knowledge they gained before they would be exposed to more knowledge.[\[6\]](#) Amazingly, Newton's book is the first source that I had come across regarding the existence of a Chinese "Ancient Mystery" system. This "nugget" of information alone made it worth reading!

In the second part of the book entitled *History*, Newton expounded on the rich history of the “operative” stonemasons guilds of the “Middle Ages,” and how they eventually gave birth to “speculative” Freemasonry in the British Isles. Newton astutely noted with his reading of the *Regius Manuscript*, which experts have dated to 1390 CE, that “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. Thus, in the first reprint of the *Regius Manuscript* done in 1894, soon after its discovery in the British Library, one finds 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.”^[7] In addition, the *Regius Manuscript* contained thirty moral “charges” that the Fellowcraft and Master Mason had to live by.^[8] Historically, the transition between “operative” and “speculative” Freemasonry started during the beginning of the 17th century. Newton astutely wrote about this transitory period in the following way: “For the Freemasons, be it once more noted, were not only artists doing a more difficult and finished kind of work, but an intellectual order, having a great tradition of science and symbolism which they guarded.”^[9] Newton’s claim throughout the rest of this chapter is that although most “operative” stonemasons were illiterate; they were enabled to learn many of the “arts and sciences” required to build the miraculous cathedrals of Europe through an oral tradition of learning, using allegory and symbolism. Most importantly, Newton pointed out to me an obvious observation that I had overlooked in my studies concerning the inception of “speculative” Freemasonry. The oral tradition of imparting knowledge by mostly illiterate “operative” stonemasons was “adopted” and used by the very literate “speculative” Freemasons of the “Enlightened Age,” and is still in use up through the modern era.^[10]

A “veil” was lifted from before my eyes after I finished reading Newton’s book. I found myself willing to soften my criticism that I had raised at the beginning of this book review regarding his claim that “architecture” was just as instrumental as “agriculture” was in giving “...shape to the life and thought of man.”^[11] Thus, Newton made me realize that the rich use of allegory and symbolism; as practiced by the “operative” stonemasons following in the footsteps of the sages of the “Ancient Mysteries,” is just as valid a form of communication as a written language is to communicate thoughts and ideas between people. With this new knowledge imparted to me by Joseph Fort Newton, I wholeheartedly recommend *The Builders: A Story and Study of Masonry* be read by all newly raised Freemasons!

1. Joseph Fort Newton, *The Builders: A Story and Study of Masonry*, (1914: repr., Whitthorn: Anodos Books., 2017), 1.
2. Ibid, 5.
3. Ibid, 10.
4. Ibid, 14.
5. Mencius, *The Book of Mencius, abridged*, Translated from the Chinese by Lionel Giles. (London: John Murray, 1942), 128.
6. Newton, 17.
7. Louis L. Williams and Robin Carr, *Records of the Hole Crafted and Fellowship of Masons*, (1894: repr. Bloomington: The Masonic Book Club, 1988) 42.
8. Ibid, 42-44.
9. Newton, 63.

10. Ibid, 51-105.

11. Ibid, 5.