Origins of Freemasonry by Stevenson

THE ORIGINS OF FREEMASONRY: SCOTLAND'S CENTURY 1590-1710

By David Stevenson

Reviewed by Bro. Michael Adam Neulander

David Stevenson (1942-present), is one of the very few modern-day historians who has decided to look at the effect that Freemasonry has had on social history. He is not a Freemason which he understands gives him a measure of credibility against accusations of bias when it comes to his historical conclusions regarding the influence Freemasonry has had on history. His book *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's century, 1590-1710*, is a very insightful investigation into the history of Scotland's "operative" stonemasons, and how their guild "metamorphosized" into "speculative" Freemasonry. Stevenson's thesis is that around 1600 in Scotland: "Aspects of Renaissance thought were then spliced onto the Medieval legends, along with an institutional structure based on lodges and the rituals and the secret procedures for recognition known as the Mason Word. It is in this late Renaissance Scottish phase, according to the main argument of this book, that modern freemasonry was created."[1] I wanted to read his book because several years ago I read *Records of the Hole Crafte and Fellowship of Freemasons*, written by Edward Conder Jr., which convinced me that despite all the interesting theories that have received popular notice concerning the antecedents of Freemasonry, "speculative" Freemasonry was an outgrowth of the London Masons Company of "operative" stonemasons. I will use evidence that Stevenson amassed in this book, in my book review, which has convinced me that Scottish "speculative" Freemasonry had an independent development from English "speculative" Freemasonry, yet both countries organizations had a similar metamorphosis from their "operative" stonemason guilds into their "speculative" Lodges of Freemasons.

As a professional historian myself, I admire the hard work that Stevenson engaged in by examining all the primary source material available to him which included examining all the early lodge minute books, lodge financial records, and a plethora of personal diary accounts. This enabled Stevenson to formulate an astutely researched thesis; which is vast in scope and goes a long way to prove his theory that there was a Scottish preeminence in the formation of modern Freemasonry. The culmination of his "deep dive" in all the primary source material he examined has produced a comprehensive list of "firsts" that are the basis on which his thesis rests upon. Thus, a few of the important "firsts" are what I want to focus on which are as follows: "Earliest examples of 'non-operatives' joining lodges. Earliest evidence connecting lodge masonry with specific ethical ideas expounded by use of symbols. Earliest evidence of the use of two degrees or grades within masonry. Earliest 'masonic catechisms' expounding the Mason Word and describing initiation ceremonies."[2]

Stevenson noted that the term "non-operative" was first used and is peculiar to Scottish Freemasonry. The term "speculative" was always in use in English Freemasonry and is still in use through most of the Masonic world today. Stevenson explained that early minute books of stonemasons' lodges did not always record the profession of its members; however, he found ample evidence that their existed "non-operative" members in these lodges starting in 1600. "In some lodges investigation quickly reveals that considerable numbers of these relatively humble members

were not stonemasons; they were 'non-operatives' in not being stonemasons, even thought they were not gentlemen."[3] Stevenson's quote brings out another significant difference between Scotland and England regarding the social status of the men who were some of the first "speculative" Freemasons to join the "operative" lodges. Stevenson makes a point of showing that in Scotland many of the professions of members listed in the stonemason's minute books were from other building trade professions such as carpentry; or, town tradesmen such as cobbler, or merchants such as shop keeper. In England, the first "speculative" members nearly always tended to be "gentlemen" who were "accepted" due to their station in society which would bring a modicum of prestige to the lodge. In addition, these "gentlemen" also had the ability to "buy" their way into the lodge because of their wealth. Thus, I believe that Stevenson unearthed another proof of Scottish influence on Freemasonry that is central to our beliefs today. We do not consider a man's wealth, or his social station in life when we ballot on his petition for Freemasonry. Especially in colonial America this had been a very early and key feature of Freemasonry. Now that I ponder the evidence of this aspect of Scottish Masonry, I believe colonial America developed this feature in a similar vein as the Scots for two reasons. First, colonials did not have the ingrained class status and nobility structure that England had; especially, since most colonials immigrated to America as indentured servants or tradesmen. Secondly, many colonials, especially in colonies like Virginia, were populated by the Scotch-Irish from Great Britain. Thus, it should not be surprising that some Scottish practices of Freemasonry became more prevalent than some English practices did in America.

Another set of facts that Stevenson turns to in order to prove that Scotland is the real progenitor of "speculative" Freemasonry is his investigation into the use of Masonic symbolism and the rituals used; such as, the "catechisms" and the two degrees system used to espouse "ethical ideas" as is practiced in "speculative" lodges today. Thus, Stevenson realized that to understand what was taking place during the transformative period between "operative" and "speculative" Freemasonry he had to find a nexus of ritual and symbolic practice that continued between the two organizations. Thus, Stevenson had to investigate some of the central features of what was practiced in "speculative" lodges that found its origins in "operative" lodges; as well as, who or what was the "primal force" behind the creation of Masonic symbolism and ritual in "operative" lodges. In his search for the answer to his question, Stevenson turned to the "old charges" of the *Kilwinning Manuscript,* which were in essence a facsimile copy of the English *Regius Manuscript* from the 1390's and were replete with symbolism, the antecedents of the stonemason's craft, and the rituals that found their way into "speculative" Freemasonry. A few examples include the following: the teaching of the seven liberal arts and sciences, the teaching of the "Ancient Mysteries," which started in Egypt and progressed to King Solomon's Temple, ultimately winding their way through Medieval history including St. Alban, finally bringing masonry to England and later its adoption by King Athelstan. In addition, the "old charges" in the *Kilwinning Manuscript* laid out the ethical rules by which all members of the stonemason's guild would have to adhere. Thus, what Stevenson found was that "speculative" Freemasonry was built on a foundation of a long history of "ethical symbolism" which used stonemason's working tools to teach a moral philosophy.[4]

Stevenson also observed that Scottish lodges were the first to communicate their philosophical teachings to members in two stages; known as entered apprentice and fellowcraft degrees. Entered apprentices served a seven-year apprenticeship under the tutelage of a master mason. Upon proving his skill and acumen as a stonemason the entered apprentice was advanced to the

fellowcraft degree with a ritualistic teaching of moral philosophy and ceremony in the lodge in front of his Brethren. The system that the stonemason's guilds used, and "speculative" Freemasonry adopted, of communicating this ritualistic moral philosophy to its members is known as a catechism. The catechism had several functions in "operative" Masonry that was continued into and helped to develop "speculative" Freemasonry. It consisted of a series of questions to be answered by a man claiming to be a stonemason. The accuracy of his answers would prove to the questioner his skill level, *i.e.* whether he was an entered apprentice or a fellowcraft for an example. In addition; a part of the catechism contained what the Scottish stonemasons were the first to refer to as the "Mason Word." Stevenson found evidence of the use of the term "Mason Word" in *The William Schaw Statutes* of 1598, over seventy years earlier than its first mention in English Masonic circles. For the Scottish stonemasons with their two tiered degree system they used the name of the pillar on the left of the entrance to Solomon's Temple as the entered apprentice's "Mason Word," and the name of the pillar on the right of the entrance for the fellowcraft's "Mason Word."[5]

All the evidence that Stevenson gathered in his research led him to ultimately understand that in regard to the transformation between "operative" and "speculative" Freemasonry, "speculative" Freemasonry continued to use a secret system of teaching through the use of a catechism; as well as, a secret system of communicating the "Master Word." These secret communicative systems by which members could identify each other, and were originally developed by "operative" Masons, are still used by "speculative" Freemasonry to this day. "The transformation came about, so far as can be discerned, because one man saw that some aspects of the traditional heritage of the craft masonry linked up with a whole series of trends of thought and culture of the age, and worked to introduce them into the craft."[6] Thus, Stevenson points to *The William Schaw Statutes*, written in 1598, as the documentary evidence that revealed to him the "primal force" behind Scotland really being the progenitor of modern Freemasonry. King James VI appointed William Schaw as "Master of Works and General Warden," for Scotland in 1583. This appointment put Schaw in charge of all public works constructed in Scotland, and the stonemason lodges involved in those works. Stevenson noted that Kings appointment gave Schaw immense power to put in place through his Statutes written in 1598 a standardized system that ruled the stonemason guilds for all of Scotland. *The Schaw Statutes* were later adopted by the "speculative" lodges and would have no equal in England until 1723. "More specifically, the grades of entered apprentice and fellow craft, initiation to which through the Mason Word lies at the heart of the catechisms, are first found in the First Schaw Statute of 1598."[7] Ultimately, this documentary evidence caused Stevenson to conclude that: "From 1598-9 the grades within masonic lodges of entered apprentice and fellow craft were established, and they had instruction and ceremony associated with their admissions, William Schaw thus had a major part in the shaping of not only the lodge organization but the rituals of freemasonry. Both were then exported to England in the latter seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries."[8]   It is also important to note that Stevenson observed that a "cross-fertilization" of ritual practice in both nations' lodges started to take place in the early eighteenth century.

In my long quest to figure out historically where "speculative" Freemasonry evolved from I was convinced after reading the book, *Records of the Hole Crafte and Fellowship of Freemasons*, written by Edward Conder, Jr., that he made a very good case for how it developed in England. However, after reading this book, I believe Stevenson also made a particularly good case for how "speculative" Freemasonry first developed in Scotland. I freely admit that I have not read all the available evidence about the antecedents of "speculative" Freemasonry; nor do I claim to have done extensive

research on the subject. However, after reading Conder's and Stevenson's books, in addition to my other studies in the subject thus far, both authors have led me to believe that "speculative" Freemasonry developed independently out of the stonemason's guilds in both England and Scotland up until at least the late seventeenth-century. In addition, my research and study on the subject has led me to formulate my own thesis that I have not seen purported by any other scholar on the subject for why Freemasonry developed independently out of the stonemason's guilds in both England and Scotland. I assert that this development had room to "sprout and grow" during the transformative period between "operative" and "speculative" Freemasonry both in England and Scotland because both countries were uniquely situated geographically. With "operative" stonemasonry starting in the Medieval British Isles, and running right through the nineteenth century, a peculiar development of their guilds took place which could not have taken place in the same way on the European continent. After all, European countries: such as, France, Germany, and Italy had very robust and successful "operative" stonemason guilds. These European guilds had similar organizational structures and were practicing their craft during the same time period as the British Isles guilds. However, the British Isles guilds enjoyed the advantage of having the protection of the English Channel; which served as a "moat" both figuratively and politically from the machinations of the Papacy. No other country in Europe had this luxury and much of Continental Europe's political decision making and social development was stifled under the strict dictates of the Roman Catholic Church until the European Revolutions of 1848. Thus, I am convinced that historically Great Britain had the advantage of "geographic determinism," a phrase that historians' use to indicate when geography has a major impact on how a nation's history is determined due to their unique geography. Therefore, even though all of Europe had stonemason guilds; only "speculative" Freemasonry was uniquely situated to develop in Great Britain. In addition, I think the freedom afforded to England and Scotland through "geographic determinism" enabled both nations to have a "separate but equal hand" as the originators and developers of "speculative" Freemasonry.

In conclusion; I want to briefly write about the importance of this kind of social history to the craft. Besides Stevenson, there are "precious" few historians who have decided that Freemasonry's impact on social history is too large a field of history to be left unexamined. Besides Stevenson, the few historians doing serious research into Freemasonry's place in social history are Margaret Jacob, Steven Bullock, and Frances Yates. Jacob and Bullock are two historians whose area of expertise is the Age of Enlightenment, Yates is a historian whose primary research is in history of the Ancient Mystery's, Hermeticism, and Rosicrucianism. As a retired Adjunct Professor of history and a Freemason, I recommend my Brethren to read books written by all these exceptionally fine historians!

1. David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's century, 1590-1710*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 8th rep., 2004), 6.
2. Ibid, 7.
3. Ibid, 196.
4. Ibid, 18-25.
5. Ibid, 38, 125-164
6. Ibid, 25.
7. Ibid, 164.
8. Ibid, 164-165.