

## GENDER

Paul Rich and David Marchant are the authors of a recent article in *THE PHILALETHES* titled *Gender and American Secret Societies*. They discuss the increased academic and governmental attention on gender and equity issues of voluntary and non governmental associations including ritualistic secrete societies like Masonry.

There is a generally held opinion that Freemasonry is a male institution, but historically they feel that is untrue and cite evidence to back their opinion.

Recently historian Mark Carnes and sociologist Mary Ann Clawson have argued that Masonry served as a social resource which men used to construct conceptions of masculinity. They have understood Masonry as a masculine organization which functioned in opposition to the influences of women and in an adversarial relationship with women.

Neither my mother, grandmother or aunt would have agreed with that assertion.

There is a record from 1408 that states that newly initiated Masons swore to obey "the Master or Dame, or any other ruling Freemason." Records of Mary's Chapel in Edinburgh, dated 1683 show that the Lodge was presided over by a Dame or Mistress. The records of the Grand Lodge of York in 1693 speak about male and female initiates.

By the eighteenth century anecdotes about women Masons take a different tone. Women are unwelcome interlopers who have become Masons by accident and are made members to protect the secrets. A women who was found spying was initiated in a Lodge in the English town of Barking in 1714.

There were a number of secret societies in Europe during the eighteenth century claiming Masonic association which initiated only women or both men and women. These "adopted" groups were often linked to male Lodges either by the requirement that a man be the presiding officer or by providing that only the female relatives could join.

Dr. James Anderson published his *BOOK OF CONSTITUTIONS* in 1723. In Rule III of his 'Charges of a Freemason' he wrote: The persons admitted members of a Lodge must be good and true men,.....of mature and discrete age... Masonry was interpreted, or reinterpreted as masculinity par excellence.

That Rule aroused great curiosity among the ladies, and soon there were many stories of women hiding in grandfather clocks, in attics, and behind paneling in order to learn the secrets which their men were so cautious about. Some of them were probably true.

The English planted Freemasonry in France in 1725 where it soon became an elegant pastime for the nobility and gentry. The Duke of So and So would hold Lodge in his own home, where he was Master, and whenever it took his fancy, he would make a few of his friends Masons.

After 10 to 12 years the Craft had spread widely to the merchants and tradesmen and the meetings were held in taverns and restaurants. By 1736 conditions and finances in France had greatly deteriorated and a fear arose in Court circles that the secret meetings in Lodges might be used for plots and conspiracies against the government. In 1737 an Edict was issued by Lt. General of Police Herault, prohibiting taverns and restaurants from giving accommodations to Masonic Lodges, under severe penalties. The Edict was unsuccessful. Masonry which had started in private homes simply went back into private homes and the police were ignored.

Herault, enraged by his failure, decided to damage and ridicule Masonry by making it a laughing stock. He visited one of his girl friends Mme. Carton, who was described as a dancer at the Paris Opera. The truth is that she belonged to a much older profession and had slept in the best beds in Europe. He asked her to obtain the Masonic ritual from one of her clients and give it to him, so that he could publish it in one of the naughty newspapers, in hopes that it would end Masonry in France. But for all the damage that it did to the Craft it might as well have been dropped into the Seine. After reading the actual text Harry Carr said that the gentleman who dictated it had his mind on much more worldly matters at the time.

Mollie, was a chambermaid in a tavern in Canterbury, England where a military Lodge met in 1754. In order to find out what they did in their Lodge meetings she climbed into the attic above the Lodge room and made a small hole in the lath and plaster ceiling. One day, after the meeting had begun, she fell through the thin lath and plaster. There is a famous engraving showing Mollie coming through the ceiling, feet first with lots of lingerie and a large expanse of Mollie showing, while the Masons stared aghast at their unexpected visitor. True or not the engraving must have made a small fortune for the artist.

One story, probably a hoax, is that Mrs. Bell, the land lady of the Crown Inn at Newcastle, where the Lodge of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Regiment met broke open the door, but there were no details of what she saw or heard. However, there was an advertisement in the *NEWCASTLE CHRONICLE* of Jan 6, 1770 saying that Mrs. Bell had found out the secrets and is willing to make it known to all her own sex.

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There is a well documented story, concerning the Hon. Elizabeth St. Leger, daughter of Viscount Doneraile, who regularly held Lodge in his home in County Cork, Ireland. Some time between 1710 and 1713 repairs were being made on one of the Lodge room walls. A large section of paneling was removed and temporarily covered by leaning a loose panel against the wall.

Elizabeth had gone in to their library which adjoined the Lodge room and had fallen asleep while reading. When she awoke, she could see and hear the ceremonies. Realizing what had happened she attempted to leave, but was seen by the family butler, who was the Tyler. After a lengthy discussion it was resolved, as a matter of honor, that she should allow herself to be initiated. Elizabeth agreed and received the Two degrees current at the time. She died in 1773 age 80 having held such a veneration for Masonry that she would never suffer it to be spoken of lightly in her presence. There is a portrait of her wearing a "trowel jewel", and her descendents own what is supposed to have been her Masonic apron.

In 1802 Baron Cuvelier de Trie was giving a Fete for his Lodge of Adoption. A Certificate was presented to the Outer Guard by a Calvary Officer, who was not a Mason, which was then read by the Orator. It had been issued to Madame Xaintrailles, a heroine of the French Revolution. The Brethren were astonished and proud to have such a visitor. She was well known to have great courage and virtues, having served in several missions with discretion, prudence and bravery.

The Lodge resolved that she should be initiated as a man, not in Adoptive Masonry, but in real Masonry, and a message was sent out to her, inviting her to accept initiation. Her answer, "I am a man for my

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country, I will be man for my Brethren." She was initiated with proper modesty, and from that time often assisted in the work of the Lodge.

Perhaps the strangest story of all concerns Charles d'Eon de Beaumont, who was a distinguished lawyer and an accomplished French diplomat, who served his country well. He was also awarded a Commission in the Dragoons with whom he served bravely and was twice wounded in the Seven Years War.

D'Eon was initiated as a Mason in London in May 1768 and was Junior Warden of the Lodge of Immortality No. 376.

Through out his life, this brilliant man had one extraordinary disability – he had the face and figure of a women.

Eventually, he was displaced from office in 1786 age 40 and went to England. Meanwhile, his enemies in France had begun to spread rumors that he was a women. These rumors rapidly spread to England. This was the era of gambling in England and soon enormous wagers were being laid on his sex. Bookmakers began to issue Policies enforceable by law and in 1771 it was said that there were £ 120,000 worth of wagers on his sex. D'Eon was harassed and horrified. He made a sworn declaration before the Lord Mayor of London that he had no part in these bets and refused £ 25,000 to prove his sex judicially.

The gamblers gave him no peace and the matter went to trial before Lord Mansfield, in the Court of the King's Bench in 1777. D'Eon had nothing to do with the wager or lawsuit. Two lying witnesses gave evidence, one a surgeon swore that he had examined him and a journalist swore he had slept with her. The Court adjudged him to be a women and the bets were paid.

This was too much for D'Eon. He accepted a pension from Louis XVI to return to France with the condition that he would live the rest of his life as a woman and never wear men's clothing. He lived first in a Convent and finally in a home for ladies of gentle birth. He died in 1810 and was buried as Mlle. la Chevaliere D'Eon. An autopsy, by an independent surgeon and in the presence of witnesses, proved beyond doubt that he was a man.

Carr states that there are two firmly established orders in England today that claim they use the same ritual as their husbands. They wear the same Masonic clothing, even calling each other Brother. He adds that they are both respectable societies that do useful social and charitable work. But Masonically they may not be recognized.

Unquestionably Masonry played a major role in the life of the American male. But how about women and Masonry in a modern context? Have mainstream Masons in the last two centuries been prejudiced in keeping women out of the Lodge?

Although Masonry of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was by definition, a restrictively male institution, it was not supported exclusively by men. The roles that women played in fairs held to raise funds for the construction of Masonic Temples in New York state between 1870 and ~~1890~~<sup>1930</sup> indicate that Freemasonry was not just a male resource for the construction of masculinity, but a societal resource that reinforced values supported by both men and women.

One of the ways funds for Masonic buildings was raised was by holding bazaars. Masonic fairs, that drew huge crowds, were so common that there were itinerant Masonic fair organizers.

The thousands of women who actively participated in these fund raising fairs for the construction of Masonic Temples are witnesses to the

fact that Freemasonry was not an organization which functioned beyond the influence of women. Women not only affected the Fraternities functioning, but were also actively committed to its existence and supported its material welfare.

Why would women eagerly support an organization in which they were excluded because of their gender? Masonry's emphasis on moral teaching provides the answer to why women were comfortable working towards the construction of Masonic Temples. Since the teaching of morals was defined as women's work in that period, the building of Masonic Temples could be defended as falling within the realm of legitimate female activities.

One elderly woman from Bombay has spoken of how Masonry perfects the human character, requiring us to meet men of other faiths and stations in life as equals and Brothers, of how Masonic teachings strengthen the soul in a world which all too often regards only the material. In short women supported Masonry because it taught morality, ethics and charity which are values supported by both men and women.

Some Masons may be thinking the unthinkable, which is that at some time women may enter the traditional male Lodge as equal members. That of course would threaten Amaranth and organizations that have derived their appeal from the fact that women could not be in mainstream Lodges.

Regardless of one's opinion, Rich and Marchant feel we need to recognize that women have been a part of the Craft for a very long time, in one way or another.

In time will the courts, legislative policy makers, and public opinion require Masonry to make a fundamental change in Dr. Anderson's *BOOK OF CONSTITUTIONS*, Rule III?

SOURCES:

1. Rich, P., and Marchant, D., *THE PHILALETHERS*, vol. LIV, p14.
2. Carr, H., *WORLD OFF FREEMASONRY*, Lewis Masonic Terminal House, 1984, pp. 280-287.
3. Russell, J. R., The Builders In Bombay, *THE SCOTTISH RITE JOURNAL*, vol., CXI, p 29, May 2003.

OTHER READING:

Davis, R. G., *UNDERSTANDING MANHOOD IN AMERICA: The Elusive Quest for the Ideal in Masculinity*, Heredom, vol., 10, p 9-33, 2002