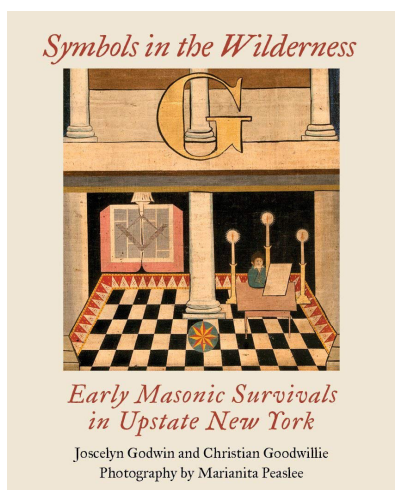


# In Review



## **Symbols in the Wilderness: Early Masonic Survivals in Upstate New York**

**JOSCELYN GODWIN  
& CHRISTIAN GOODWILLIE**

Richard W. Couper Press, 2016  
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181 pages, \$35 US

**A**CADEMIC STUDY of Freemasonry continues to grow, the appearance of valuable books on Masonic material culture has increased. For example, *As Above, So Below: Art of the American Fraternal Society, 1850–1930* by Lynne Adele and Bruce Lee Webb (published by the University of Texas Press and reviewed in *Philalethes*, vol. 69, pp. 39–40) presented a survey of fraternal artifacts spanning numerous orders,

with an emphasis on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century period sometimes called the “golden era” of fraternalism. *Symbols in the Wilderness: Early Masonic Survivals in Upstate New York*, is focused upon the surviving material culture of Freemasonry in a specific and crucial region of the United States—upstate New York having been the epicenter of the anti-Masonic movement, as a result of whose influence many lodges were closed and their items in some cases lost.

The authors have excellent qualifications for this work. Joscelyn Godwin is professor of music at Colgate University, and a leading scholar in the academic study of esotericism. Christian Goodwillie is the Director and Curator of Special Collections and Archives at Hamilton College’s Burke Library. The work was supported by grants from Colgate University. *Symbols in the Wilderness* is admirably produced, with photography by Marianita Peaslee, digital imagery specialist at Hamilton College, reproduced in full color throughout.

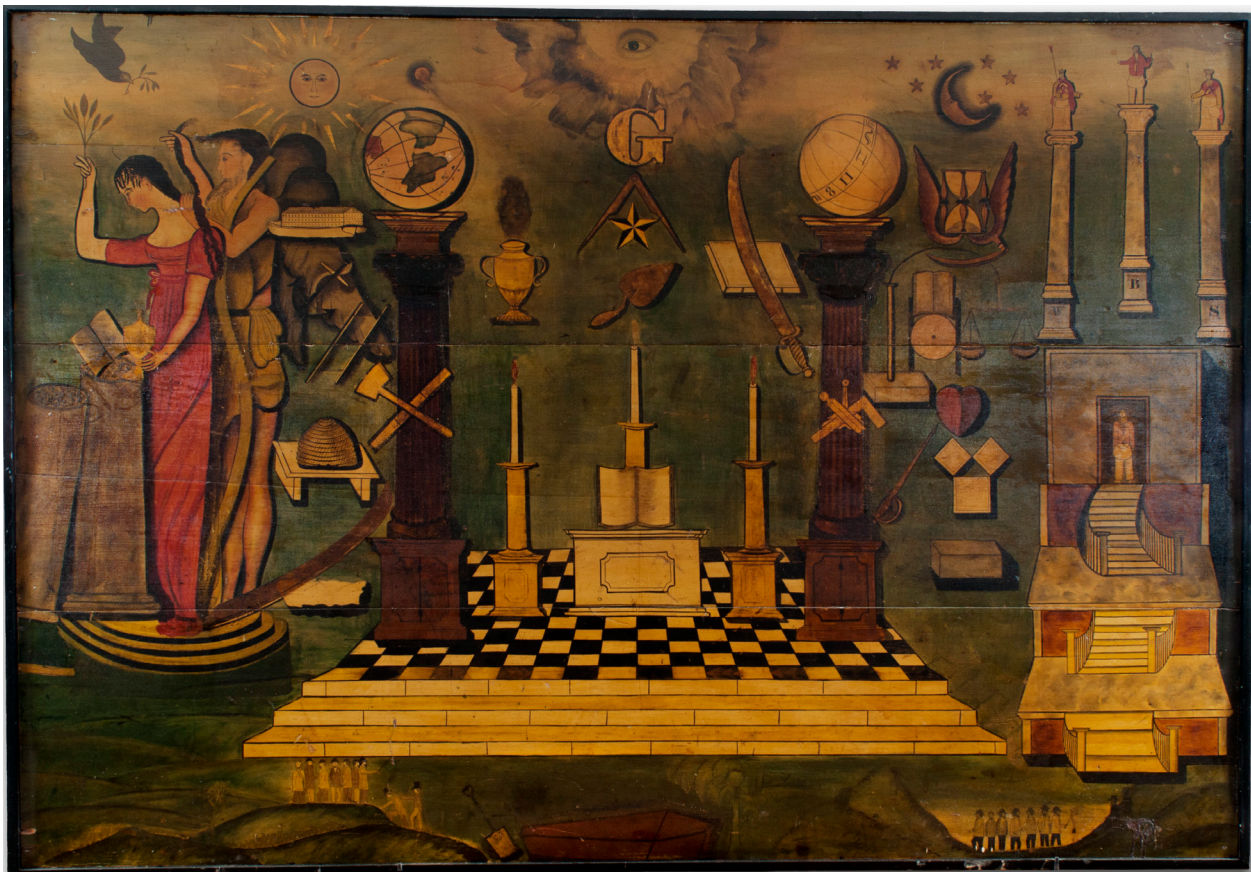
The study originated when a “chance architectural encounter” brought Mr. Goodwillie’s attention to a rural Masonic temple in Oneida County. Later, he learned that the lodge possessed a beautiful painting (featured on the cover of this edition) used to teach the philosophy of Freemasonry using symbols alluding to “Biblical antiquity, alchemy, Neo-Platonism and its Renaissance revival, and the Rosicrucianism of the seventeenth century. What was this elegantly executed mash-up of

western religious and occult iconography doing in a wooden building in the countryside of New York ca. 1815? Who was looking at it? What insights were they trying to gain by doing so?" Following up on this led him to partner with Prof. Godwin to develop this valuable survey.

*Symbols in the Wilderness* commences with a concise history of the arrival of Craft Freemasonry in upstate New York, followed by a fascinating account of the identifiable meeting places of the Fraternity during its early years in the region. This is an outstanding contribution of the understanding of Masonic life during that area and period.

The next chapter, on the symbolism of tracing boards and degree charts, wades into esoteric

territory made all the more obscure by the fact that the authors are looking, as it were, from the outside in. The section has merit, but also some defects. For example, the discussion on the symbolism of the Letter G (p. 41) is based too much upon secondary sources and theories. As such, the meaning of the symbol is described in a way that is disconnected from the common Masonic experience, and—most importantly—in a manner that conflicts with what would have been the ideas of the Masons of New York during the specific time period under consideration. A better method to connect with the past would be to examine primary documents and contemporary literature dealing with that symbolism. Later, in the final chapter, a



Masonic chart (ca. 1826), Pulaski, New York. This survived only by being hidden during the anti-Masonic period.

similar problem arises when an excellent discussion of symbolism is marred by a reliance upon Mackey's *Encyclopædia* as primary source for the content of Preston's lectures of two generations past, leading to some mistaken points about the development of the symbolism of the Pillars of the Lodge. However—by both definition and design—Masonic symbolism is a thorny subject, and overall the descriptions given by the authors are insightful and communicate well the philosophical dimensions of the lodges being studied.

Next are a series of detailed explorations of three Masonic lodges in Oneida, Cayuga, and Onondaga counties. This is the most valuable part of the text, and is made vivid by the color photographs of dozens of lodge paintings, artifacts, and architectural details. Extremely welcome, and given as an appendix, is a 1797 oration given on the Feast of St. John the Baptist to Western Star Lodge N°15 by Daniel Perkins. Material like this provides a

valuable glimpse into the values and ideas of the early New York Masons.

In some ways, *Symbols in the Wilderness* is in the vein of the five volumes on *The Masonic Halls of England and Wales* by Neville Barker Cryer. The ability to compare and contrast the architecture, artwork, and other items preserved by these lodges presents opportunities for future research. Studies like *Symbols in the Wilderness* are essential to furthering our understanding of the lived experience of Freemasons in different time periods, and provide essential context for the literary products that tend to attract the majority of research.

By making the rich visual record of Freemasonry in upstate New York accessible to researchers for the first time, Godwin and Goodwillie have provided a magnificent service to all scholars. *Symbols in the Wilderness* is highly recommended to all serious students of Masonic culture.

Reviewed by Shawn Eyer, FPS

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## Editor's Remarks

**A**S WE APPROACH the Feast of Saint John the Baptist, we continue to find ourselves in challenging times, amid a worldwide pandemic that has curtailed most in-person Masonic activity. As noted in the prior edition, Freemasons have accordingly been participating in the widespread Masonic education programs taking place online. If there was ever a silver lining to an unfortunate situation, the explosion of interest in learning more about the history and traditions of Freemasonry would likely qualify.

For my part, two months ago I began to offer online mentoring in early Masonic literature. The format is that of a graduate seminar, and there

are currently five sections of this class operating. In each session, we explore an early Masonic text and discuss its meaning and connections. There may be details in the next issue of *Philalethes*, if space is available. To learn more, contact me at my academic account, [see594@g.harvard.edu](mailto:see594@g.harvard.edu).

As this edition went to press, we learned of the passing of a highly esteemed scholar: Brother Wallace McLeod, FPS. He was truly one of the *Philalethes* Society's most prolific writers and one of Freemasonry's greatest academics. Our next issue will carry a suitable tribute to him. Though his working tools are now laid down, his contributions to Masonic research belong to the ages.