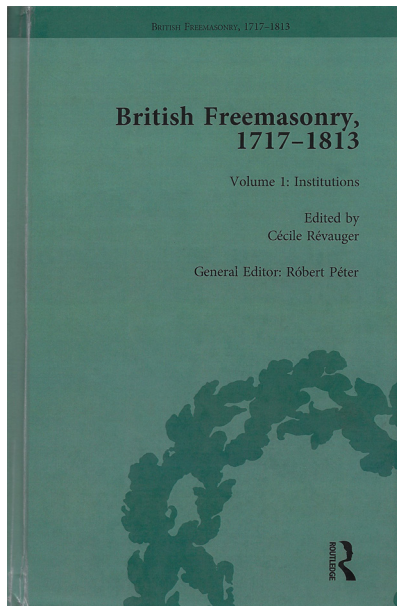


CITATION:

Eyer, Shawn. Review of *British Freemasonry, 1717–1813. Volume One: Institutions*, edited by Róbert Péter & Cécile Révauger. *Philalethes: The Journal of Masonic Research and Letters* 70(2017): 35–42.

In Review



British Freemasonry, 1717–1813
Volume One: Institutions
EDITED BY RÓBERT PÉTER
& CÉCILE RÉVAUGER

Routledge, 2016

ISBN 978-1-138-10017-6 (casebound)

530 pages, \$155 US

MASONIC RESEARCHERS have patiently—or not so patiently—awaited one book release for several years: the five-volume set of *British Freemasonry, 1717–1813*, edited by Róbert Péter. Long in preparation, this extensive collection of early Masonic sources was originally to be issued by Pickering & Chatto, a

leading academic publisher that was absorbed in 2015 by Routledge. The set was finally issued in the fall of 2016.

For several decades, the academic world has been developing an interest in Freemasonry, with famously mixed results. Analysis and interpretations have proceeded, but until now, academics have shown little stamina for the fundamental work that is a prerequisite of interpretation. *British Freemasonry* is the first major contribution from the non-Masonic, academic side that addresses such fundamentals. The entire set (ISBN 978-1-84893-377-4) costs \$875 US or £495 UK, and comprises 2,396 pages in five volumes. The publishers note that the set contains “more than 550 texts,” including “260 pages of newly-transcribed manuscript material.” That said, a great deal of the material is not rare at all. Thus, the collection occupies a middle ground between a collection of rare texts and a sourcebook of key texts. Across the set, individual texts are arranged into themed volumes, and within each volume they are presented chronologically. The index, which is thankfully a subject index and not simply an index of proper names, is presented in the fifth volume, and encompasses the entire set.

Due to the scope and potential importance of this release, *Philalethes* will review each volume independently.

THE GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The first volume of the series opens with a “General

Introduction” by Róbert Péter. This 34-page essay begins by noting that many of the texts found in *British Freemasonry* are newly-published because Masonic libraries, until recently, did not allow non-Masons to access sensitive materials such as certain rituals. He then acknowledges the similar work done by Knoop, Jones, and Hamer in the classic sourcebooks *Early Masonic Catechisms* and *Early Masonic Pamphlets*, and points out that *British Freemasonry* should not “give a false impression of completeness.” (xii)

Prof. Péter then presents a lengthy historiography of Freemasonry, which is of great value as a kind of “state of the discipline” address, from an outside researcher’s perspective. On this point, he contrasts the academic approach with research done by Freemasons. Although he describes much of the participant scholarship as “invaluable,” he also states that the quality of such work varies greatly, and that Masonic historians “with some notable exceptions, often display a tendency to reconstruct hermetically sealed masonic universes.” (xiv) Biographies “often appear as one-dimensional hagiographies.”¹ He describes much of the participant scholarship as positivistic—an apparent reference to what has been termed the “authentic school,” the approach generally taken by England’s esteemed Quatuor Coronati Lodge.

In this context, Péter points out the problem of bias in research, first pointing to the flaws sometimes observed in the work of participant scholars: “As insiders, many amateur masonic historians rarely bracket out their biased view of Freemasonry as a harmonious and universal brotherhood.” (xv) However, he then points out that “scholarly writings on Freemasonry are not devoid of ideological, political, and national biases,” giving the specific example of the narrative that

portrays Freemasonry as a deliberate “vehicle for the spread of Enlightenment values” (xvi), which has a particular appeal to those academics who approach our fraternity from within a secular frame of reference. And, as he points out, recent scholarship is shifting away from the concept of a “homogeneous, unified and secular Enlightenment” (xvi) which is so often applied to Masonic studies. He also notes that academic scholars have given too little attention to the content of “public and private masonic rituals,” (xvii), and recommends an “examination of the religious dimensions of Freemasonry” to address a deficit in our understanding of the eighteenth century.

Although Péter notes the need for researchers to bracket personal, subjective opinions only in an emic context, his essay points to similar difficulties in outsider research as well. While it is certain that the tension between emic and etic perspectives will continue within the field, the overview provided by Prof. Péter offers insight as to how each side may effect improvement.

The scope of the material covered in the volumes is explained as intended “to reproduce an equal number of Scottish, English and Irish texts.” (xxix) Péter notes that Welsh material could not be explored due to costs of the research. The British Colonies are not mentioned, which is somewhat unfortunate, considering that prior to the American Revolution, the lodges in America were direct expressions of British Freemasonry, and their surviving literature is often deeply relevant to the history of the English-speaking Craft.

One of the most remarkable features of *British Freemasonry* is that, as Péter notes, it “reproduces texts that seem to have been deliberately ignored by masonic historians in their publications.” (xii) This phenomenon—worthy of exploration in its

own right—is noticed by all systematic students of Freemasonry. It is a mystery why so many interesting texts are seldom, or even *never*, referenced. This uneven treatment of the evidence, unjustified and unacknowledged, certainly points to methodological shortcomings in the discipline up to this point. However, if it is true of participant scholarship, as Prof. Péter states, it seems just as true of outsider scholarship. It is a problem that all of us working in this field need to transcend. The issue appears to be interconnected with bias: one who finds esotericism uninteresting might pretend that there is *no* esoteric Masonic literature and then “find” that there is no esoteric content in the evidence. Another whose bias is to find in Masonry a bastion of Enlightenment rationalism might pass over the vast majority of Masonic literature, imbued as it is with mythical themes, and essentially dispose of it as reactionary. As the discipline matures, and evidence becomes more accessible, such approaches will be more clearly perceived as unsustainable.

INCLUDED TEXTS

The first volume of *British Freemasonry* is titled “Institutions,” and the texts presented are edited by Cécile Révauger of the University Bordeaux Montaigne; she has in most cases provided a prefatory introduction and annotations on each specimen. Exceptions are noted below.

The first item is John Pine’s engraved list of lodges from 1725, the introduction for which is presented by Martin Cherry of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry. This is the oldest of many such engraved lists. While it has often been reprinted in the past, Mr. Cherry’s notes are quite valuable.

The next feature is a 1739 text, *The Beginning and First Foundation of the Most Worthy Craft of*

Masonry with the Charges Thereunto Belonging. It was, essentially, a typographic version of the Inigo Jones M.S. This text has been reprinted in the past.

Then, there are three excerpts from the 1754 *Pocket Companion*, wrongly identified (25) as the first of the *Pocket Companions* or handbooks that were popular in the eighteenth century. The original *Pocket Companion* actually appeared in 1735, and the 1754 is the sixth publication of the type. This text has already been reprinted and is readily available in full elsewhere.

Next, is a 1757 essay by Thomas Dunckerley: *The Moral Part of Masonry Explained*, edited by Susan Mitchell Sommers. This text is, if not rare, certainly obscure.

The selection that follows is truly rare, with only two known specimens in the world. It is a 1763 address and a 1764 charge by Thomas Edmondson, two items that have received very little scholarly attention. These survive in a rare pamphlet of 1766, and I do not believe they have been republished since 1793.² The appearance of these items in *British Freemasonry* is most welcome.

Next is Dunckerley’s 1769 *Charge, Delivered to the Members of the Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons, Held at the Castle-Inn, Marlborough*, again by Dr. Sommers. This is a readily available text.

This is followed by a rare text: William Meeson’s 1775 *Introduction to Free Masonry*. While many passages from this text have been often reprinted in the past (usually without Meeson’s name attached), it has never been reprinted in full. The presence of most of its text here will be appreciated by many, although the songs are regrettably omitted “for reasons of space.” (420)

The next text is not rare at all: William Dodd’s 1776 oration from the dedication ceremony of the first Freemasons Hall in London; it has already been

reprinted very widely.

Following that is a 1776 charge of a high literary character by J. Rotheram. It has been reprinted numerous times since 1795, and incorporated into other charges.

The subsequent item is Robert Trewman's *The Principles of Free-Masonry Delineated* from 1777. This item has been available in free digital libraries for some time, and reprinted as well.

The item that follows will be of interest to many. It is William Preston's 1778 *State of Facts*, a careful defense of the Lodge of Antiquity in a period of conflict with the Moderns Grand Lodge. The original booklet containing this text is rare indeed, and its inclusion will be useful for many scholars.

Next is a short piece from 1788, *An Account of the Institution and Proceeding, of the Governors of the Royal Cumberland Free-Mason School*. This piece is edited by Susan Snell. This is an exceptionally rare item illustrating some of the charitable aims of English Masonry, reprinted here, I believe, for the first time.

After this is *An Essay on the Origin of Masonry* by James Mullalla, Esq., published in Dublin in 1792. This text is a short retelling of the Traditional History of the Craft, drawing directly on pre and post 1717 sources. It is rare, although it is available through private databases.

A very fascinating text features next: a pair of Masonically-themed compositions from Jane Elizabeth Moore's *Miscellaneous Poems* of 1797. One is a humorous debate about the fraternal nature of Freemasonry from a woman's perspective, where Moore laments that women ought "T'have a Lodge of their own, with the tinsel and shew / The fringe and the flounces, the jewels and the toys / The ladies may please, and add much to their joys." This text is readily available in private databases

and hardcopy reprint.

Following is an extract from the English Parliament's 1799 *Act for the More Effectual Suppression of Societies Established for Seditious and Treasonable Purposes*. This text has never been particularly rare. Happily, the Act did not have much effect on Freemasonry; as such, however, it seems rather out of place in *British Freemasonry*. Its inclusion in the volume is probably more of a result of the fears on the Continent that Freemasons were involved in fomenting revolution.

After this is another graphic entry about two Masonic Craft certificates, written by Harriet Sandvall. The headnote is a good summary which quickly covers the history of lodge-issued and Grand Lodge-issued certificates, from seventeenth-century Scotland (a draft drawn into a copy of the Old Charges), to the first engraved Grand Lodge-issued certificates of the Antients and the Moderns in the 1750s, with Irish and Scottish engraved certificates arriving later. This being the case, the reader regrets that only two, very late, certificates are actually shown. It would seem more natural for at least one example of each "pedigree" to be included.

The penultimate feature is a selection from an extremely scarce Masonic songbook of 1799, titled *The Masonic Museum*. This section is edited by Andrew Pink. Thirty-two of the seventy songs are reproduced from this rare book. The reviewer is gratified to see that the frontispiece and engraved title page are included, as these are of great interest.

The final item in volume one of *British Freemasonry* is the famous (and, again, not at all rare) *Articles of Union* of 1813, the treaty which united the Antients and the Moderns into the United Grand Lodge of England. This transcription is from an original in the Library and Museum of Freemasonry, London.

A CLOSER LOOK

Although for the most part the documents included in the first volume of *British Freemasonry* are not actually rare, all of them hold some interest to the historian. The first volume is subtitled “Institutions,” and this is defined as items “concerned with the establishment of Freemasonry, that is, the formal structure of the fraternity, its principles and aims as well as practical information on masonic activities.” (xxii) It could be argued that some of the items included in volume one do not—despite their value for other reasons—rise to the level of “Institutions.” The reader will be aware of the exclusion of much that would bear more directly on the formal institution of Masonry; however, to be fair, it is clearly stated that the collection is not intended to be comprehensive. (xii–xiii)

Other issues with the volume are more likely to stimulate disappointment. In the General Introduction, it is stated that “we aimed to reproduce the texts *ad litteram*. Original capitalization and punctuation have been retained and only the significant typographical errors have been amended.” (xxx–xxxi) This is commendable and essential if other scholars are to use the texts and cite them from this volume. However, there are many cases where the volume is defective on this front. Although it is possible that original sources also diverge, transcription variances appear. Also, in several places, the archaic medial s (f) has been transcribed as an f; see page 320 for “fitting” where the original is more likely “sitting.” Where the originals are hard to obtain, the reader may be uncertain as to the actual reading. While in a book of this size such errors might be expected, they are less forgivable when we consider that the individual texts are short and the editors of each had, in certain cases, many years to perfect them.

The General Introduction also states: “The original pagination of the text is indicated by the inclusion of / [forward slash] within the text at the point of the page break.” (xxxi) In practice, these slash marks in the transcribed texts have no actionable meaning. They indeed signify page breaks, but without page numbers to go along with them, they have almost no utility to the scholar. Nor is there a bibliographical summary of the original pagination: the Edmond’s speech, for example, has the pagination of xiii, 56 per Hughan’s 1893 description. Without that information, the slash convention is meaningless; even with it, it is not really possible to objectively know what most of the original page numbers were. The point of this critique is that the loss of the original page references is not in the reader’s best interest, and the slashes are a constant reminder of the missing information. Because the pagination is not preserved, and the transcriptions given are not always orthographically identical to the originals, some scholars—admittedly including the reviewer—will feel uncomfortable citing early documents directly from *British Freemasonry*.

Certain transcription errors are even capable of changing the meaning of a text. For example, on page 226, there is a great deal of Latin text, with the Greek letters ΓΝΩΜΟΙ ΣΕΑΥΤΟΝ. This is, of course, an imperfect rendering of the Delphic aphorism, ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΕΑΥΤΟΝ, “know thyself.” Mangled ancient words are not unknown in early Masonic literature, so I consulted the original source document, Trewman’s *Principles*, where, on page 96, I found the correct Greek phrase. Also troubling was the fact that the page break in the *British Freemasonry* transcript was before the Greek, while it is *after* the Greek in the actual book, and the capitalization of several words did not actually match the

transcription. In short, when it was possible to consult originals, it often turned out that the edited versions differed from the originals and that the transcriptions were not *ad litteram* as intended. The problems are significant enough to mean that scholars must not directly use these edited texts for critical citation, but should always seek out the originals instead.

The editorial notes to these documents are extremely valuable in general. Still, occasionally they are noticeably problematic.

For example, the headnotes on some of the entries seem rather uneven in their summaries of the attached texts, as well as in their treatment of existing scholarship on the specific subject of the text. The ideal headnotes would provide context for the reading to follow, an objective thematic summary, and appropriate connections to prior work on the text. Saying that some of these prefatory notes are uneven alludes to the fact that, occasionally, the notes do not provide a systematic summary of the texts, but focus strongly on certain aspects of them to the relative exclusion of others.

As for references to prior work, important Masonic sources like *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* are occasionally listed, but not to an extent one might expect. Perhaps in place of this, there are a large number of references to Bernard Jones' *Freemasons' Guide and Compendium* (1950)—an excellent source which summarizes the findings of the “authentic school” up to 1950. The gaps in the reference terrain may indicate a general editorial principle of citing mainly academics and keeping references to participant scholars to a minimum. Considering this, the reviewer is reminded of the differences pointed out by Róbert Péter in the General Introduction between research carried out by the “authentic school” and today's

academic research. These differences are real, and one can understand why an academic work would not wish to rely too heavily on participant scholarship. However, I believe that rather than citing a summary like Jones' *Compendium*, it is generally more appropriate to cite the original research to which Jones refers; thus, a reader gets the benefit of understanding past contributors to the discipline, and is more empowered to revisit those conclusions.

Beginning scholars, who will use *British Freemasonry* as an entry point into this complex literature, would certainly benefit from less prepossessed content summaries and more direct references to prior work.

Occasionally, there are issues caused by summarizing a matter a little too rapidly. For example, in a discussion of Thomas Dunckerley's charges from 1757 and 1769, the explanation offered could be considered somewhat anachronistic. The description of the lectures as the “second part of the degree” applies more to the formalized structures seen from the nineteenth century forward. In the 1750s and 1760s, lectures were often given in catechetical form over the dinner.

Orthography varies in the headnotes. Both “Masonic” and “masonic” are used, sometimes in close proximity. “Fellow Craft” and “Fellowcraft” appear in adjoining sentences. (115) Elsewhere, there is a reference to “master Masons.” (421) These are matters of little importance to some readers, but to others they are distracting in a work of this type, which would commonly be produced according to an agreed-upon style guide.

One of the most attractive features of *British Freemasonry* is found in the detailed annotations that are given in the form of endnotes to the texts. The volume makes great strides toward closing a

notable lacuna in Masonic studies: a lack of careful study and commentary on our primary sources. The thirty-six pages of notes provided offer the reader an opportunity to gain context, understand obscure details, and pursue deeper connections. Dozens of personages mentioned in the source texts are identified or provisionally so, which is a tremendous timesaver to anyone new—or not so new—to our field. Other notes provide intertextual links. In short, for the most part, the endnotes are outstanding. However, in certain cases, the reader may find himself in disagreement with the substance of the notes, which contain some errors.

The note at 406:24 (repeated at 416:33 & 420:8) claims that “Freemasons use the mythical date of the building of the Temple of Solomon to date all their works.” It seems as though this must be a reference to the so-called “Year of Masonry” or “Year of Light,” *Anno Lucis*, used since at least 1723 to date Masonic documents. *Anno Lucis* is obtained by adding 4000 to the common year. But, of course, this does not and cannot refer to the building of Solomon’s Temple; the reference is instead to the mythic timeframe for the divine pronouncement of *fiat lux*, “Let there be Light.”³ While there seems nothing to support the accuracy of this annotation, we may now encounter future scholarship that relies upon it.

The following note, 406:25 (and paralleled at 416:34) defines “Hiram, King of Tyre” as follows: “Hiram is central to the symbolism of the third degree of Masonry, i.e. the master’s degree as he is the good master killed by the three ruffians (fellowcraft).” This confusion could be rooted in the viewpoint found in the subsequent note, which says that there “has been a lot of debate among historians of Freemasonry as to whether Hiram King of Tyre and Hiram Abif were two very dif-

ferent characters or whether they were father and son, since ‘Abif’ possibly means father.” Any such debates—and it is not clear to which scholars the writer refers—have no meaningful bearing on the texts mentioned.

Another example appears in the note at 415:27, which is discursive on the Biblical character of Noah’s son Ham, noting that “racist people” later used the account of Ham to justify slavery. But the annotated text in this case, Thomas Edmond’s 1763 Masonic speech, casts no aspersions on Ham whatsoever, instead elevating him to a lofty status: “Shem, Ham, and Japhet, who alone were divinely preserved from the *watery desert*, were grand officers, and learned geometricians; they brought up their descendants to study geometry, and improve the sciences.” (94) More useful would have been a note comparing and contrasting other eighteenth-century Masonic references to Ham.

In certain cases, sources referenced do not seem ideal as scholarly sources: at 416:46 John Yarker is cited in support of the building of the University of Cambridge by Ethelward, and at 405:5 the character of Lamech is described citing the online version of a 1915 Bible reference book.

A few general history statements stand out. At 412:47 the commentary says that Pythagoras “is generally considered to have been the first mathematician.” At 415:14, Moses is described as “the most important prophet in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam” (emphasis added).

Considering the grand scope of the work, some errors are inevitable. These examples do not detract much from the overall value of the volume.

PHYSICAL PRODUCTION

After offering these critiques of the content of this work, it may seem too pointed to continue into a

discussion of the physical form of the book. However, as a book designer, it is impossible for me to pass over certain flaws in the production of *British Freemasonry*. As a physical product, the series is less than ideal. The casebound print-on-demand process used to manufacture the volumes results in a binding that is too tight and never sufficiently loosens. This makes for an uncomfortable reading experience, as one always feels he is actively holding the book open; and laying the book flat for use as a reference is all but impossible. The volumes are also unsturdy: after a thorough reading, my copy of the first volume is in fairly sad shape. By comparison, my 1945 copy of *Early Masonic Pamphlets*, a predecessor of *British Freemasonry* which is one of the most frequently-consulted books in my library over the last decade, shows little wear. Essentially, these are paperback books glued into cardboard shells, and they would be better off as traditional hardcovers or as trade paperbacks. The matter of the binding should be revisited by Routledge—and, because these books are printed on demand, it could easily be done. *British Freemasonry* is expensive, and it is intended for long-term use. It should open flat, and it should hold up as well as the average hardcover book.

CONCLUSION

British Freemasonry simultaneously exposes and partly addresses one of the biggest elephants in the room of Masonic studies: namely, the degree to which early Masonic literature has not actually been systematically collected, interrogated, analyzed, and integrated into historical narratives. Yes, such literature—especially the easy-to-obtain specimens thereof—has been avidly included in Masonic research, but typically in a non-methodological manner that treats the evidence in an

inconsistent way. This has led scholars to frame characterizations of early Freemasonry which do not reconcile particularly smoothly with the actual evidence. The most dominant such characterizations depict the Craft as a hale and hearty Fraternity of food, drink, and fellowship quite devoid of heady ideas on the one hand, or as a vehicle for the popularization of experimental science and secularism on the other. Yet, if either of these characterizations were truly accurate in a general institutional sense, the literature of early Freemasonry would be different than it is. *British Freemasonry: 1717–1813* offers scholars a nearly unrivaled sourcebook of that still-neglected literature, revealing a complex and multivalent definition of the phenomenon of Masonry.

Despite some flaws, the first volume of *British Freemasonry* is a truly notable contribution to the discipline: a document of outstanding scholarly importance that must be duly considered by anyone working in the field of Masonic studies.

Reviewed by Shawn Eyer, FPS

- 1 Such “hagiographies” are, in the reviewer’s opinion, more often found in Masonic lay literature rather than Masonic scholarship *per se*. It is worth pointing out that internal Masonic scholars have, until recently, been quite dismissive and even hostile toward foundational figures such as James Anderson and Laurence Dermott, openly questioning their honesty, intelligence, integrity, and motivations. On balance, it may be that Masonic writers may tend too much toward the extremes of uncritical praise on one hand, unreasonable deprecation on the other.
- 2 See *The Freemasons’ Magazine: or, General and Complete Library*, 1 (December 1793), 535–52, for a slightly abridged reprint. A brief excerpt had also appeared in a short review of the original publication in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 36 (1766), 39.
- 3 Although there are other dating systems (generally pertaining to orders other than the Craft), they do not refer to the time of building of Solomon’s Temple either.