

We understand that you have expressed an interest in the Masonic Order, and that you may possibly be considering making an application to join us. At this point, you are probably keen to ask a number of questions about Freemasonry, but perhaps are thinking that Freemasons, with their reputed attitude to secrecy, are unwilling to talk about their organisation, particularly to non-members. This is not so. This pamphlet is designed to provide a few of the more basic answers, and to lead you towards the other answers that you may want.

## ORIGINS

Freemasonry is many centuries old. As a result, there is no absolute agreement as to how, where or when it began. The most likely theory, and the one most widely accepted, is that it had its origins in the days of the great Cathedral-builders, who erected those magnificent edifices throughout Europe in medieval times. Buildings such as local castles and churches were originally raised mainly by local labour, in days when travel from place to place was often very hazardous, and when most men never ventured more than, say, 20 miles from where they were born. However, the larger structures such as cathedrals, major castles and the like, required a much greater, and more sophisticated, workforce than could be recruited locally. Hence there arose the travelling craftsman, who followed his calling from town to city.

In days when a man's credentials could not be established by a union card, or a telephone call, it became necessary to ensure that these craftsmen were suitably qualified for the work they were to be engaged upon, because that work, the building of immense and scientifically advanced structures, was at the leading edge of the technology of the day. Accordingly, they formed themselves into Guilds, not only to enable them to maintain the level of qualification of their membership, but also to protect the secrets of their trade, and so prevent unqualified outsiders from gaining unauthorised entry into the Craft of Masonry, to the risk of both reputation and employment. Such Guilds were, in fact, Professional Societies, and acted not only to help their members, but also to educate worthy apprentices and, in general, to increase the reputation of their Craft. We look back on these marvellous craftsmen and artists of the Middle Ages, much of whose work still survives after many centuries, in the cathedrals, churches and other ancient buildings of our land. They were craftsmen of the greatest skill, devotion and integrity, and we still find in them a living inspiration to bring like qualities to the erection, not of a material building, but of a brotherhood of all men of good will, forming, in the words of our earliest Book of Constitutions, a 'centre of union for those who would otherwise remain at a perpetual distance'.

During the 17th Century, the status and reputation of such Craft Guilds had risen to such a height that it became increasingly common for leading citizens of the town to be invited to become honorary members. Such people were not stonemasons, and often had no connection whatsoever with the craft. They were known as 'Speculative' (as

opposed to 'Operative') masons, or 'Freemasons', and as their numbers grew, and as matters to do with the education and qualification of craftsmen were formalised and controlled at a national level, so the structure of the groups of craftsmen changed, and came, over the years, to be composed exclusively of such Freemasons.

Individual groups of Freemasons were called Lodges, a term that was drawn from the temporary lean-to structure that was lodged against the walls of the cathedral or castle under construction, and that remained in place, often for many years, until the work was completed. At the same time, a national structure grew up for the control of these Lodges, and was called 'Grand Lodge', and usually with the additional title 'of Free and Accepted Masons'. All Regular (see below) Grand Lodges in the World are lineal descendants of what are known as the 'Mother Grand Lodges', the United Grand Lodge of England, the Grand Lodge of Ireland, and the Grand Lodge of Scotland, all three of which were formally established not later than the early Seventeen-hundreds, and probably much earlier.

## RELIGION AND POLITICS

Perhaps the most frequently asked questions nowadays are about the relationship between Freemasonry, and religion and politics. The Press makes much of this subject, and it is frequently implied, or directly stated, that Freemasonry is 'anti-religious', or 'Politically orientated'. Of all the charges that might be levelled against the Order, these are the most inaccurate.

In the first place, it is an absolute requirement for membership (perhaps the only unalterable requirement) that a Mason must have a belief in a Supreme Being. There is no exception to this rule. In every Lodge, there will be found, at all meetings, what is known as 'The Volume of the Sacred Law'. This Book is that Volume which the members believe to contain God's revealed Word to mankind. In this country, it is the Holy Bible; for the Mahomedan it would be the Koran; for the Jew, the Old Testament, and so on. It must be admitted that in some countries there are organisations calling themselves Masonic, which do not require such belief in a Supreme Being. These are not Masonic Bodies, and are deemed to be 'Irregular' bodies, with which Regular Masonry can have no point of contact.

You should note that there do exist other organisations with which Freemasonry is sometimes confused. Some actually call themselves 'Masonic', but are not. Some use words, emblems and symbols resembling ours. Some permit women to join, and some admit atheists: some are frankly sectarian. We have, and can have, no connection with these organisations, however well-meaning they, or their members, may be. They are not Masonic, whatever they may claim.

At the same time, Freemasonry regards a man's relationship with his God to be a purely personal matter, and while requiring such a relationship, never enquires into it, or lays down any rule or regulation about it, save only these two rules:

- (1) All Masons must believe in God, however they address Him; and

- (2) No discussion of religious matters is permitted at Masonic gatherings.

So it is possible to dismiss any charge that Freemasonry attempts to take the place of religion, or is biased either against, or in favour of, any particular religion or denomination. Our meetings begin and end with prayer which, though sincere, is non-denominational.

The position of politics in Freemasonry is also easy to explain. Freemasonry itself has no political attitudes except to require its members to be peaceable and law-abiding subjects, whatever their political opinions as individuals and citizens. As a result, no discussion of political matters (as with religious matters) is permitted at Masonic gatherings.

## MEMBERSHIP AND SECRECY

An accepted Candidate for the Order becomes a member in a number of stages, or 'Degrees' separated by a few weeks. These Degrees are accompanied by traditional and colourful ceremonies that have come down to us from our distant past. During each Degree, he is required to make a solemn promise, or 'Obligation', never to reveal certain matters that are to be communicated to him. From this fact stems what is known as Masonic secrecy, which has caused the Order to become unfairly known as a secret society.

In fact, what is secret in these Obligations is the method, or methods, of examining a man to prove whether he is a Freemason or not, and so to exclude from our meetings anyone who is not a genuine Brother Mason. Referring back to the earlier days of the Order, when membership cards were non-existent, and most men could neither read nor write, reliance was placed on memory, and the level of qualification of a travelling craftsman was established by confiding to him certain secret words or signs, by which he could establish his credentials in places where he was not known. Naturally, these 'secrets' were rigidly protected by oaths and promises, so that no unqualified person could gain employment on the basis of having ferretted out the word or signs of a Master Mason, and so obtain wages by fraud and deception.

For reasons of tradition, modern Freemasonry has retained these secret signs, and obligations of secrecy, although the ancient penalties invoked for breach of one's obligation were relegated by the Grand Lodge of Ireland to a mere historical mention nearly 150 years ago. And so, is Freemasonry a Secret Society? No! This is a mistaken notion, although a widely accepted one. Its membership, meeting places and activities are actually well known to anyone who is interested. Many books have been written about Freemasonry, and can probably be found in any good library. The Constitution, Rules and details of meetings are all published. Our Organisation pays taxes, and admits the public to its headquarters in Molesworth Street, Dublin, which is less than one hundred yards from the seat of the Irish Government. Freemasonry is, clearly, a Society with certain secrets, but the term 'Secret Society', with all the connotations attached to that phrase in our society, is surely incorrect.