

The Influence of Freemasonry on Society

Although Freemasonry's stated goal is the improvement of the individual man there is no doubt that it also has had an influence on society as a whole. Whether this is due to improving the individuals who take part in society, or by affecting social institutions or the social order is up for debate. Dr. Andreas Önerfors of the Centre for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism at Sheffield University, in his paper "Cosmopolitan Foundations Of Freemasonry", quotes an official of a present day Grand Lodge as saying: "In that context, I was rather surprised that some of you had been discussing the role of Freemasonry in a changing Europe and how Freemasonry can influence, for the common good, the social and moral development of the new Europe. The Home Grand Lodges – England, Ireland and Scotland – would respond that Freemasonry has no role outside Freemasonry and that the only influence it should be seeking is over itself and its members."(1)

But Dr. Jessica Harland-Jacobs of the University of Florida argues in her book *Builders of Empire* that as a side effect of its policy of universality, Freemasonry has had a profound influence on the development of the British Empire and subsequently the Commonwealth.(2) Dr. Önerfors notes that there has been discussion of Masonry's influence on Society at least as far back as 1797 when we find Chevalier Ramsay's *Discours*, published in the *Scientific Magazine, and Freemason's repository* under the heading "The Influence of Freemasonry on Society. Philosophically inquired to". In fact, there was much public discussion of Freemasonry in the 18th Century, with frequent articles appearing in the press.(3)

The effect of Freemasonry on Society has again become a topic for study among academics around the world as Freemasonry, once a bastion of secrecy, has opened itself up to the public. Lord Northampton, while Pro Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England, went as far as to say "we became obsessively secret about ourselves. That has now changed and with our new ethos of openness we hope to be able to change any misguided perceptions, and show those who are not masons the good things that Freemasonry stands for."(4)

There have sprung up centres for the study of Freemasonry at several universities: Sheffield in England, Leiden in Holland, and UCLA in California. The researchers are sometimes not Masons, and the outsider perspective they bring is enlightening. Unfortunately, much traditional Masonic research has been very introspective. By connecting Masonic history with what else was going on in the world at the time, much light is shed on both sides.

On Aug 4, 2009 M.W. Bro. Raymond S. J. Daniels, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario announced his project for the creation of a centre to encourage research into the significant impact fraternalism in general and Freemasonry in particular have made on our society here in Canada and throughout the world.

The first phase of this project is to initiate an annual lecture series presenting world renowned and local Masonic scholars. This lecture series is named in honour of R.W. Bro. Charles A. Sankey (1905-2009). Dr. Sankey served as Chancellor of Brock University from 1969 to 1974. A renowned Masonic scholar, he was active in all the concordant bodies of Masonry including the Ancient & Accepted Scottish Rite, the Royal Order of Scotland, and Royal Arch Masons. His extensive collection of rare

Masonic books and papers is in the Special Collections of the James Gibson Library at Brock, providing a rich resource for research scholars and students.

The Inaugural Charles A. Sankey Lecture
Saturday, April 17, 2010, 3:00 p.m.
Pond Inlet, Brock University, St. Catharines

"Perceptions of Freemasonry from the Eighteenth Century to the Internet"
by Dr. Andreas Önnorfors

"Since its modern establishment in urban London of the late 1710s, freemasonry was covered extensively in the press. One of the first steps of the fraternity was to publish its mythological history and charges, the famous *Constitutions* of Anderson of 1723. Books and pamphlets attacking and defending freemasonry almost immediately appeared on the market. These dynamics accelerated in connection with events such as the papal condemnations of freemasonry and peaked early around the years of the French revolution. Since then, anti-masonry in different colors on the spectrum has influenced the image of freemasonry both in political ideologies, conspiracy theories of various kinds, as much as in popular culture as recently demonstrated by Dan Brown's new novel *The Lost Symbol*. Freemasonry itself has reacted modestly upon this development of an image over time with few successful exceptions that also will be addressed by the lecture. The presence of a seemingly secret society in media begs also the question how private freemasonry in reality was and is. It is legitimate to ask if public perceptions of freemasonry not even constitute a major element of the impact of freemasonry upon society itself. This lecture aims to map the main lines of these perceptions from the first press articles to the presence of freemasonry in the main media of the twenty-first century, the Internet."

Dr. Önnorfors is Senior Lecturer and Director of the Centre for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism at Sheffield University. As an academic and a member of the Swedish Order of Freemasons and its research lodge, he has experienced firsthand the pitfalls and successes of forging cooperation between academia and Freemasonry, establishing the highly regarded International Conferences on the History of Freemasonry in Edinburgh. Planning for a third conference in Alexandria, Virginia in 2011 is well under way. He has done postdoctoral research on Swedish Eighteenth Century Freemasonry and has interests in the history of the Press, and cultural semiotics, trying to understand how human encounters create symbol systems. Dr. Önnorfors has published about forty papers and articles in various languages, a majority of them on Freemasonry. He has organized three themed lecture series: Freemasonry and Fraternalism in the Middle East, in Eastern Europe and "Perceptions of Freemasonry". He firmly believes that initiatives to raise the profile of academic research into Freemasonry will generate positive off-spring both for academia and the Craft.

Tickets are required but to enable university students to be exposed to this exemplary speaker and program they will be free. We are asking Masons who are able to do so, to make a tax-deductible donation to the Masonic Foundation of Ontario Grand Master's Project, Number 2937 in lieu of the price of a ticket. General contributions to the overall project can be made through the same project number. The website is <http://mfo.masonicfoundation.on.ca/donate.php>

Tickets are available through the Brock Centre for the Arts box office.
(905) 688-5550 x 3257 or 1-866-617-3257 boxoffice@brocku.ca

by R.W. Bro. David Cameron, FCF
for The Committee on Masonic Education
February 2010

Please share this Bulletin with the members of your Lodge, District and any other
Masons you wish.

References:

1. Önnersfors, Andreas, “‘Men Are Not To Be Essentially Distinguished...’:
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<http://sheffield.academia.edu/documents/0053/1316/CosmopolitanFoundations.pdf>
2. Harland-Jacobs, Jessica, *Builders of Empire, Freemasons and British Imperialism,
1717 - 1927*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill: 2007
3. Önnersfors, Andreas, *op. cit.*, p. 6
4. Lord Northampton, Address at the General Meeting of the Grand Charity of the
United Grand Lodge of England, Freemasons Hall, London, U.K. on 21 June 2006,
<http://web.mit.edu/dryfoo/Masonry/Essays/lord-noho.html>