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Freemasonry in Depth

*for the seriously interested
potential member*

*prepared by
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for
The Grand Lodge of Ireland*

Introduction

This leaflet is primarily for those thinking of becoming Freemasons, but also serves to inform others who may be interested and should dispel much of the reputation of secrecy and the perception that Freemasons are unwilling to talk about their organisation to non-members.

Origins of Freemasonry

According to the legends which form part of the tradition of Freemasonry, the fraternity dates back to the time of the construction of King Solomon's Temple. This enormous structure required a highly organised workforce and led to stonemasons, architects and others, being organised into various grades or guilds, each with its own responsibilities. Towards the end of the 19th century, while excavating in the Libyan desert, the British archaeologist and Egyptologist, Sir William Petrie, unearthed papyrus records describing secret meetings around 2000 BC of such a guild. These records concerned not only matters such as working hours, wages and rules for their labour, but also the relief and assistance for workers in distress and for widows and orphans.

Of the many great buildings erected by the masons of the Middle ages, attention has focused mainly on the great cathedrals of England and Europe. To build these vast structures, it was necessary for masons to gather in large groups, which moved from one finished structure to the next one under construction. Considerable knowledge of geometry, arithmetic and engineering was necessary and these craftsmen formed themselves into guilds to maintain a level of qualification for their membership and to protect the secrets of their trade. The resulting Guild of Stonemasons became a significant centre of learning, serving not only to protect its members, but also to educate worthy apprentices and to increase the reputation of the craft

It was not then possible to verify a man's credentials by a union card or by telephone, and signs and words were used for this purpose. Much of the work of these marvellous craftsmen survives to this day; and from it we find a living inspiration to bring similar qualities to the creation, not of a material building, but of a brotherhood of men of good will.

The status and reputation of these Craft Guilds rose to such a height that it became common for leading citizens to become honorary members. They were

known as 'Speculative' (as opposed to 'Operative') masons or Freemasons. As their numbers grew, and as matters concerned with education and qualification of craftsmen were formalised and controlled at a national level, so the structure of the guilds changed over the years and Lodges came to be composed exclusively of 'Freemasons'.

One of the earliest mentions of the term 'Freemason' is in a City of London manuscript dated 1375, which includes reference to regulations for the society; duties to God, church and country; and many references to brotherhood.

What is a Lodge?

The term 'Lodge' has two meanings in Freemasonry. Firstly, it is used to describe the place where meetings are held. It refers to the temporary buildings erected by Masons alongside their construction projects. These were used by the craftsmen as places to rest, eat, plan the project, receive their wages, and socialise. Training and education would also have taken place in the Lodges.

The second use of the term 'Lodge' refers to individual groups of Freemasons.

A national structure evolved for the control of these Lodges and was called the 'Grand Lodge'. All regular (see below) Grand Lodges 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 established in the early seventeen hundreds.

What happens at Lodge meetings?

As in any organisation, the meeting is first called to order, and the ceremony of opening the Lodge is quite formal and draws on elements of the very foundations of Masonry. It serves to remind Freemasons of the virtues they seek to live by.

Once this is complete, minutes and correspondence are read, projects are planned, and other business taken care of, very much like any other organisation.

When new members are being received or are being advanced through the degrees of Craft Masonry, formal ceremonies are again used to teach Freemasons important moral lessons.

Following the formal closing of the Lodge, it is usual for some socialising to take place, often over supper.

Why do Freemasons dress up for meetings and have secret handshakes and signs?

The different forms of dress, based on ceremonial aprons, collars and gauntlets are to distinguish rank and derive from and reflect the protective garments worn by the original stonemasons. In olden times aprons would have been of leather, tied around the waist, to protect the mason as he handled stone. The ceremonial aprons worn at Lodge meetings become more ornate as the Mason progresses through the three Degrees of Craft Masonry. The most identifiable symbols would be the common tools of ancient stonemasons, the gavel, the rule, the square, the compasses, the level and so on. Various Degrees and Offices are associated with particular implements, as symbols.

The various levels of Freemasonry

At its basic level, known as 'the Craft', Freemasonry has three degrees, beginning with the degree of 'Entered Apprentice' representing the apprentice of the working stonemason who learned how to use the tools of the trade. After a period, he advances first to the degree of 'Fellow (of the) Craft' and finally to that of 'Master Mason'.

Religion and Politics

Perhaps the most frequently asked questions nowadays are about the relationship between Freemasonry and religion & politics. The Media frequently implies or directly states that Freemasonry is 'anti-religious' or 'politically orientated'. These charges are, in fact, entirely inaccurate and without foundation.

It is an absolute requirement for membership, that a Mason must believe in a Supreme Being. Every Irish Lodge, at its meetings must have the Holy Bible known to Freemasons as 'The Volume of the Sacred Law', in evidence and open. For the Jew the old Testament, for the Muslim the Koran, and so on may also be in evidence if Brethren of such beliefs are present. Some organisations calling themselves Masonic, do not require belief in a Supreme Being and, like others which may use words, emblems and symbols similar to ours, are deemed 'Irregular Bodies' with which we as 'Regular' Masons can have no contact whatever, however well-meaning their members may be.

Freemasonry regards a man's relationship with his God as a purely personal matter, and never enquires into it or lays down any rule or regulation about it save that: (i) all Masons must believe in God, however they address Him, and (ii) no discussion on religious matters is permitted at Masonic gatherings.

The ruling on politics is much the same. Freemasonry has no political attitudes except to require its members to be peaceable and law abiding citizens regardless of their individual political opinions, and discussion on politics is similarly prohibited in Masonic assemblies.

Membership and Secrecy

Masonry is not a secret society, but it is a society with a few secrets. Very few, in fact, and these are solely concerned with modes of recognition. They are simply the methods by which a Mason can prove he is a member. Like many other aspects of Freemasonry these are traditional. Again for reasons of tradition, modern Freemasonry has retained the means of mutual recognition.

A Candidate, during the degree ceremonies is required to make a solemn promise, or 'Obligation', never to reveal certain matters which are about to be revealed to him. The symbolic ancient penalties for breach of such promises were, however, relegated in the last century to mere historical mention.

The membership, meeting places and activities are readily ascertained by anyone who is interested enough to enquire. The Laws and Constitutions are all published and many books on Freemasonry are available in any good public library. Our organisation pays taxes and its headquarters building in Molesworth Street, which is less than one hundred yards from the seat of the Irish Government, is open to the public at certain times. Freemasonry is clearly a Society with certain secrets, but cannot be described as a Secret Society with all the connotations which that implies.

The Grand Lodge of Ireland is the supreme authority over all its subordinate Lodges, not only in Ireland, but in Africa, Asia, Australia, India and many other places from New Zealand in the East to Jamaica in the West. It is an entirely independent and autonomous body, though it works in close co-operation with its sister Grand Lodges in England and Scotland and with more than 100 other Regular Grand Lodges throughout the world.

What and Who?

What are Freemasons? They are ordinary men who try to live as good citizens with high moral principles. They do not claim a monopoly on these ideals, but by joining together in Lodges, they practise and teach these ideals of kindness, honesty, decency, fairness, courtesy, understanding and concern for others, and hope thus to become better members of society.

Who are Freemasons? They are ordinary men from all walks of life without social or financial distinction. Some do not openly declare membership; others do and wear Masonic ties or rings. Some you will like; others you may not. They are in other words, a cross section of society.

The names of many former Masons will be familiar to you. They include several Kings and political leaders, among them, Edward VII, Sir Winston Churchill. American Presidents Washington, Trueman and both Roosevelts were members.

In the Arts and Entertainment world, Robbie Burns, William Hogarth, Goethe, Sir Walter Scott, Chagall, Clark Gable, Nat King Cole, Peter Sellers, John Wayne and even Davy Crockett and Buffalo Bill were Freemasons.

And in the realm of composers men like Mozart, Haydn and Liszt, and from more recent times, Gershwin and Gilbert and Sullivan were all members.

Famous Irishmen who were Freemasons include Edmund Burke, Daniel O'Connell, the Duke of Wellington, Oscar Wilde, the Dukes of Leinster, Henry Joy McCracken and many others.

The 'Old Pals' factor

Freemasonry demands that its members respect the law of the land in which they live and work. Its principles do not conflict in any way with their duties as good citizens, but rather strengthen them in fulfilling these duties. It never calls on a member to put the Order before his family or friends and condemns the use of his membership to promote his own or anyone else's business or personal interests. It insists that a Mason's duty to society should always prevail and a member may never attempt to shield another Freemason who has acted dishonourably or dishonestly.

Cost and Time of Membership

Most Lodges meet monthly, eight or nine times in the year, and members are expected to attend regularly. Many members will occasionally visit other Lodges.

Dues payable by members are modest compared with most other clubs and societies and can easily be determined by enquiry from any member of a particular Lodge.

Should you decide to join us, once accepted, we and every legitimate Lodge world-wide will make you heartily welcome.

How do I join?

Most of our members will have come into Freemasonry through contact and friendship with existing members but, if you don't know a Mason, contact our headquarters, at the address below. As with most other clubs and fraternities, each application will be considered by a committee which will meet the candidate to ensure that he has been properly and adequately informed about the Order.

You will not be pressurised into joining. If you join, it will be because you want to, and not because you have been persuaded by us to do so. Membership is a commitment to live with integrity and honour, to care for others, to trust each other and to place one's ultimate trust in one's God.

Need to know more?

Should you have any remaining doubts or queries, please ask a friend who is a member, or contact:-

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