

## **WHAT IS FREEMASONRY?**

**by**

**W.Bro. W.J. O'Brien**

On Wednesday, 29th October, 1980, a Musical Evening was presented in the Grand Lodge Room, Molesworth Street, Dublin. The programme was provided by the Band of the Garda Siochana, and the proceeds of the Concert were divided between the Irish Wheelchair Association and the Garda Benevolent Society.

The event was promoted by the Grand Master's Lodge, and for the occasion the Paper 'What is Freemasonry?' was written by Bro. W. J. O'Brien. It is an answer for the profane.

Editor,  
Lodge of Research.

# WHAT IS FREE MASONRY?

An Answer for the Profane<sup>1</sup>

by Bro. W. J. O'Brien

Ask men who are not members of the Masonic Order and you will receive a variety of replies. "A Secret Society" say the majority. "A mutual welfare organisation" or suchlike is the belief of others - and so on through many erroneous ideas about it. Volumes have been written on the subject yet, to very many, the nature of Freemasonry remains a closed book.

This brief programme note is to relate just a few facts that will inform and correct the misconceptions referred to.

An initial definition is always useful and a good one on this theme is:

*Freemasonry is the activity of closely united men who, employing symbolical forms, taken principally from the mason's trade and the art of architecture, work for the welfare of humanity, striving morally to ennoble themselves and others, and thereby in the long term to bring about a unity of mankind, which they aspire to achieve even now on a small scale.*

The Order of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons is the oldest, largest and most widespread fraternal organization in the world.

Freemasonry traces its ancestry back to the Middle Ages and even earlier from a fraternity that was then a purely operative one with a membership drawn exclusively from the stone masons' trade. These men, because of their specialised knowledge and skills were given privileges and travel permissions to pass from place to place and from country to country. Because it was very necessary they developed private means of recognition and identification of their work.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, when major cathedral building had virtually ceased some of the workings masons' lodges accepted into membership men who were not operative craftsmen. As time passed the lodges gradually came to be composed entirely of philosophical or speculative members. A manuscript in Trinity College shows that Speculative Masonry was known in Dublin earlier than 1688. From these groups the Masonry of today developed.

As Speculative Lodges increased and superceded eventually the purely operative ones, governing bodies called Grand Lodges were formed - the

---

<sup>1</sup> Profane - to treat (something sacred) with abuse, irreverence, or contempt

first in England in 1717. The actual formation date of the Grand Lodge of Ireland is unrecorded but it is known to have been in full working order in 1725, as a detailed account of the Grand Master's installation on St. John's Day was reported in detail in the Dublin Weekly Journal dated June 26th of that year. A Grand Lodge is the supreme administrative authority over all ordinary lodges warranted by it either in its own home territory (known as a Jurisdiction) or overseas. The larger Grand Lodges form Provincial Grand Lodges, devolving some of the local administrative work to them.

The basic unit of all Grand Lodges is the Subordinate or Ordinary Masonic Lodge - often referred to as a 'Craft Lodge' - and it is these that deal with Candidates for the Order.

Membership is open to men aged twenty-one years and over, mentally and physically competent (or covered by a dispensation for any otherwise disqualifying disability) regardless of race, colour or creed who are of proved good character and reputation. Masons are not permitted to solicit for Candidates for the Order. Any man desiring membership must seek it entirely of his own volition by making his wish known to Masons of his acquaintance, requesting that they submit his name for membership. Two members at least of the Lodge involved must recommend the applicant, and they will sponsor his application only if they firmly believe him to be a good man and one they would be prepared to receive in their own homes. Even so, a thorough independent check is made on his character and reputation and following a formal report on this in Lodge by the Committee appointed, if favourable, a ballot for his admission is taken which must be unanimous if the application is to succeed.

Contrary to what many suppose. Freemasonry is not a secret society. It does not hide its existence, membership, principles or teachings which are solely devoted to promoting Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. Its Constitutions are published for the world to see. Its Rules and Regulations are printed and open for inspection. Regular minutes of their proceedings and activities are kept by all Masonic bodies in the normal way which can be consulted. Hardly the 'modus operandi' of a Secret Society. It is true that Masons have modes of recognition and ceremonies which those outside the Order generally are not acquainted with. In this regard the Fraternity do not differ materially from family groups, business organizations, governments and many other institutions that elect to keep certain of their affairs private.

Neither is Freemasonry a religion nor does it aspire to take the place of religion by serving as a substitute for the religious beliefs of its members. It is, however, religious in character as an essential requirement of all

candidates for membership is a belief in a Supreme Being - though the Fraternity does not in any way seek to define or fix any member's personal conception of God. The Order does not concern itself with the kind of finedetail interpretation that invariably creates divisions in Creeds into opposing groups that so often contest the non-essential aspects. Because of this broadminded tolerance throughout the entire history of Masonry, men of every sect, race, country and opinion have found nothing in its philosophy incompatible with their religious beliefs. No man in a Masonic Lodge ever has to compromise the cherished convictions of the Creed he believes in. He has learned that God is the great Creator and Preserver of all things and peoples, and that the God-given humanity all men share in common is greater than all the accidental circumstances of his birth and environment, including the external marks of ephemeral rank or fortune. So, men can sit side by side in a Masonic Lodge and echo to the teachings therein revealed the timeworn acquiescent, So Mote It Be.

The first condition of admission into, and membership of, the Order is a belief in the Supreme Being. This is essential and admits no compromise. It necessarily follows that an avowed atheist cannot under any circumstance be admitted into the Fraternity, as one who lacks a belief in God has no place in the Masonic structure.

The Grand Lodge has always consistently refused to express any opinion on questions of foreign or domestic state policy either at home or abroad, and it will not allow its name to be associated with any action, however humanitarian it may appear to be, which infringes its unalterable policy of standing aloof from every question affecting the relations between one government and another, or between political parties, or questions as to rival theories of government.

In fact the Laws and Constitution of Grand Lodge lay down that no discussion on religious or political matters, shall, under any pretence whatever be permitted in any Masonic gathering.

Speculative Masonry emerged out of Operative Craft Masonry entirely free from anything of a commercial character. It is not a provident benefit society nor is it organised in any form to foster profit or business advantage for its members. Every man who joins must put completely from his mind a thought that he can obtain through the Order either personal pecuniary gain or other worldly advantage. Charitable help is rendered though where justified by need or circumstance. In Ireland Freemasonry beams its financial resources to providing an education for its orphans; support for members and their families who have fallen on bad times through illness or otherwise, and for indigent and aged

members or their widows. With the increasing educational facilities and social services provided by the State, the need for our Girls' and Boys' Schools progressively diminished in recent years to the point where each in turn ceased to be viable educationally or economic financially, so they were closed, but the children are still provided for by being placed in suitable schools - the cost being met by the Order. The emphasis on the Fraternity's benevolence seems now to be veering more and more towards increasing support for the aged either in homes or by granting annuities.

From the earliest period of man's existence his better nature has ever yearned for a common bond which would promote peace and good-will among all the peoples of the earth. Recognizing this, Freemasons regard it as their plain duty to nourish whatever trace of the Divine Nature each one may possess, off-setting man's baser instincts which lead him to hatred, ill will, unscrupulous rivalry and, too often on to unnecessary and avoidable bloodshed and misery. To further the ideal of bettering the state of humanity generally, the Fraternity has as its chief aim the promotion of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth, and the moral elevation of the human race by means of an ultimate enlightened universal Brotherhood. Through the exemplification of its principles and precepts the Order teaches the golden rule of self-improvement, and ever seeks to make good men better.



The original paper was reproduced by kind permission of Grand Master's Lodge in the Lodge of Research Supplementary Volume A, Pages 1-5, 1985