

John Reuther, *The Changing Face of the Royal Masonic Benevolent Institution*, published Lewis Masonic 2016. Hardback, ISBN 978-0-85318 535 2, 168 pages, 178 illustrations, £19.99.

Reviewed by Bro Paul Richard Calderwood

A new history of the Royal Masonic Benevolent Institution has been long overdue. Before John Reuther took up his pen, the last history of the RMBI to be published was in 1902. That book, written by George Blizard Abbott, which was called *History of the Royal Masonic Benevolent Institution* (London: George Kenning & Son, 3rd edition, 1902), adopted a tabular rather than a narrative approach and consisted mainly of lists of information. Since it was published more than a century of a development has therefore taken place at the RMBI and during that time the institution has undergone enormous changes (including the opening of 17 new homes across Britain to augment the single residence that existed in 1902 as well as the six-fold increase in the number of annuitants that were supported). There is therefore much that needs to be recorded and explained and it is a delight to find that Dr Reuther has addressed this lacuna.

John Reuther is particularly well qualified to undertake such a task. His numerous medical and academic qualifications include a Doctorate from the Faculty of Medicine at St Thomas Hospital in London. He spent most of his working career in medical microbiology and until recently was a Visiting Senior Lecturer in the Department of Biosciences at the University of Kent. He became a Freemason in 1973, a Trustee of the RMBI in 2006, and its Deputy President in 2013. He is a noted historian, having delivered numerous lectures and he was the Cornwallis Lecturer in 2003. He has also had numerous articles on Masonic history published and is a full member of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No 2076.

With such a background, the insights which he brings to the subject of this book are particularly impressive and valuable – especially when he describes the medical subjects that form a fascinating part of the story of the RMBI. These include the health conditions and support for the poor in the period leading up to the establishment of the first ‘Asylum for Aged and Decayed Freemasons’ at Croydon in 1850. Similarly his medical knowledge and interpretation is of great benefit as he explains the nineteenth-century development of the medical profession and the background of the leading campaigner for such a home, Dr Robert Crucefix. A considerable part of the book is devoted to the study of Crucefix and his struggles to convince the Masonic authorities of the need for annuities and a residential home for Aged and Decayed Freemasons. Indeed, the focus on Dr Crucefix occupies more than a third of the book, to the detriment of a more detailed description of how the RMBI came into existence through the merger of two rival funds, in the immediate aftermath of the death of the Grand Master, the Duke of Sussex in 1843. Another aspect of the book where I am sure historians would echo the call for more information is the great transformation which took place in the late 1950s and beyond - when the RMBI, having relied for a century upon just one residential home, began opening additional homes all over Britain.

Dr Reuther's book is lavishly illustrated, on high quality glossy paper, with many colour and black and white photographs and drawings and it is written in a style that is very accessible to the general reader. Indeed it should be stated that it is primarily addressed to the general Masonic reader rather than to historians and this explains many of the simplifications and generalisations that we come across in the text. It adopts a strongly narrative style that is very lucid. Researchers will undoubtedly bemoan the fact that it lacks citations and a bibliography but it does contain a very useful index. This group of readers will however be pleased by the lengthy extracts from the Minutes of the annual Festival which the narrative contains – and which seem to be its principal source of information. They will also be reassured to read the review of *An Alternative to the Workhouse* which follows this review.

John Reuther, *An Alternative to the Workhouse, The History of the Royal Masonic Benevolent Institution*, Privately printed 2014. Hardback, 328 pages, 35 illustrations.

Reviewed by Bro Paul Richard Calderwood

I am sorry to say that you will have great difficulty laying your hands on a copy of this book. Going to a good library may be your only solution.

It was researched and written by Dr John Reuther at the suggestion of the Board of the RMBI and it was published privately as a limited edition. The physical production was entrusted to Lewis Masonic who subsequently offered to publish it themselves in a slimmed down and highly illustrated version under the title of *The Changing Face of the Royal Masonic Benevolent Institution*, which appeared some 18 months later.

The original book was not aimed at the broader audience which Lewis Masonic subsequently identified and so it is written and presented in a style that is more attractive to researchers and historians. It is fully indexed and benefits from an abundance of citations and a valuable bibliography. It also contains a number of very useful appendices.

Scholars and anyone with a deep interest in the subject will be delighted by this book and indebted to John Reuther for his research and painstaking presentation. One is reminded of the popular saying about buses - you wait a long time for a bus to come along and then two appear together. So it seems with the history of the RMBI. We wait more than a century for a book detailing the history of this fine institution and then two come along within a short space of time. Praise be!