

Róbert Péter (General Editor), *British Freemasonry 1717–1813*, Routledge 2016. Hardback in five vols. ISBN 9781848933774, comprising 2,396 pages, £412.

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In the age of mass-digitization of cultural heritage, the publication of this hardback five-volume source edition on British Freemasonry must be regarded as a milestone achievement in itself, opening up to its readers the concepts, practices and discourses surrounding one of the most mystified fraternal orders in modern history. The source edition marks a peak of development during the last two decades which has witnessed a steep surge of interest in Freemasonry and related fraternal organizations in a wide range of academic disciplines. Together with a *Handbook of Freemasonry* (Brill, 2014) and a *Very Short Introduction* (OUP, 2017) it is now possible to capitalize on this trend in scholarship through direct encounters with a careful selection of sources from the first century of modern British Freemasonry, edited and commented by leading scholars in the area. From the first draft to the final printed outlet the realization of the project took almost seven years. Certainly the content of the five thematically-structured volumes – much of it transcribed and (re)printed for the first time – is designed to inform future generations of scholars, a much-appreciated counterpoint to the prevalent short-termism of contemporary academia. Already in this sense the general editor Róbert Péter has accomplished an enormous task in collaboration with his team of volume editors, Cécile Révauger and Jan Snoek, assisted by a larger group of contributing editors.

Before moving into the content and structure of the five volumes it is however necessary to make a principal point. What this five-volume source collection amply illustrates is that the conventional image of the supposed ‘secrecy’ of Freemasonry collapses in the face of available source material. It is simply not possible any longer to claim that Freemasonry (in Britain) took place in a secret space separated from the public gaze, but rather to the contrary. This has serious implications for conventional theories of the formation of public space such as brought forward by Koselleck and Habermas who presupposed the necessity of a secret space for the development of enlightenment publicity. From its very outset Freemasonry was a topic treated in the press and in print outlets throughout Europe in a striking tension between sensationalism and self-design. This apparent paradox between secrecy and transparency awaits clearly more elaborate socio-psychological explanations. Why did Freemasonry maintain a culture of secrecy and mysticism when knowledge about its aims and activities were readily available for the general public? And why did the general public maintain its suspicions of conspiracy, when the largest parts of the activities of Freemasonry were available in print?

*British Freemasonry, 1717–1813* is sub-divided into five thematic volumes: Volume 1 (Institutions, ed. Cécile Révauger, 441p.); Volume 2 (Rituals I – English, Irish and Scottish Craft Rituals, ed. Jan Snoek, 443p.); Volume 3 (Rituals II – Harodim Material and Higher Degrees, ed. Jan Snoek, 554p.); Volume 4 (Debates, ed. Róbert Péter, 430p.); Volume 5 (Representations, ed. Róbert Péter, 518p.). Every volume has a general introduction as well as a large section with editorial notes and a comprehensive list of sources. Each source text is introduced with a bio-bibliographical headnote providing necessary context and information about the history of its reception. Some of the volumes also include images such as those of rare title pages. A general index of almost 70 pages is inserted in volume 5. In this review it is impossible to treat all or even a representative selection of sources, which is why I will focus on each volume introduction.

Róbert Péter's 57-page general introduction with its 93 notes and 20 pages of bibliography is not only an introduction to the source edition but demonstrates the range and scope of sources that have been brought together and discussed in the five volumes. Furthermore, the reader is introduced to the history and historiography of British Freemasonry during the century in question in the light of contemporary scholarship, the development of research into Freemasonry as a discipline and the challenges in studying and editing primary sources. One key element of Péter's general introduction and possibly one that will define the legacy of the source edition itself is the discussion of the position of Freemasonry within 'protean facets' of the enlightenment. Without dwelling too much on this issue, the source texts amassed throughout the volumes not only demonstrate that Freemasonry can be interpreted as a complex response to what we conventionally understand as enlightenment (as a supposedly hegemonic and orthodox move towards rationality, reason and personal autonomy), but rather that enlightenment as an intellectual movement itself represents a kaleidoscope of contradictory eclectic and heterodox positions and statements.

It should be noted that the source edition assumes 1717 as the (internal Masonic) reference point for the origin of modern Freemasonry in the British Isles simply for practical reasons. Since there are many phenomena related to what was called Freemasonry before this date, the source edition would have grown into an investigation of the renaissance and mediaeval roots of the fraternity, an undertaking that still awaits conclusive scholarship and which would merit a separate edition of primary sources. The end date 1813 was chosen because two competing Grand Lodges in England, Antients and Moderns, were merged into the still existing United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE). To cover the history of British Freemasonry during its modern first and formative century thus constitutes the overall rationale of the source edition.

Cécile Révauger's introduction to volume 1 offers a clear explanation of the intricate development of British Freemasonry and how this development influences the availability of sources in the corpus investigated. Since the volume is dedicated to institutions, or what we might call the organizational culture of Freemasonry, most of the texts 'highlight specific aspects of lodge or Grand Lodge activities' (lxxvi): lists of lodges, instructions for the foundation of lodges, normative lectures to lodges outlining the 'moral geometry' of Freemasonry, songs and certificates as expressions of its 'sociability and mobility' (lxxvii). The prevalence of Masonic certificates, produced by their holders when visiting other lodges around the globe (and endorsed by these) are 'excellent testimonies of the spirit of universalism' in Freemasonry (lxxvii). Another text included outlines rules and regulations for a Masonic school for female orphans, demonstrating that Masonic charity well preceded the establishment of the welfare-state. But the institutionalization of Freemasonry did not occur without significant fault-lines and internal conflicts such as the establishment of rivalling and competing Grand Lodges. Last, but not least, the issue of exclusion of women from Freemasonry is elaborated as well as the growing suspicion towards Freemasonry in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Révauger points out that the sources allow the reader to get a deeper understanding of Masonic historiography which was not too concerned with accuracy, but rather attempted to legitimize claims of authority and legacy by adopting a mythological concept of the past. But beyond such imaginations it is possible to observe that Freemasonry encouraged democracy and participation in decision-making, short of flaws such as the exclusion of women and men born in slavery. Both issues have haunted Freemasonry ever since. The organizational diversity of British Freemasonry, partly caused by

diverging religious positions in society, reflects, according to Révauger, the ambiguity towards the Enlightenment and its political philosophy as such. As a phenomenon embedded in and not separated from society Freemasonry absorbed and mirrored intellectual and cultural developments in its larger context.

The second and third volumes, both edited by J. A. M. Snoek, open the door to the inner imaginative and ritual world of Freemasonry through exposures, one of the many paradoxes in the interface between secrecy and transparency in our understanding of the fraternity. The publication of rituals did not obstruct the dissemination of Freemasonry as a social phenomenon. But neither did it dispel the suspicions of the general public. Volume 2 is dedicated to the three Craft degrees and their symbolic content (Apprentice, Fellow, Master) situated in the imaginative realm of the Old Testament in general, the Masonic Craft and its legendary history and the construction of Solomon's temple in particular, with some apocryphal variations. First of all Snoek explains that the exposure of rituals developed in four phases. Between 1696 and 1730 a number of 'catechisms' were published, outlining the Masonic ritual in questions and answers. More developed descriptions of rituals appeared over the next two decades in France followed by England. And in the final phase a series of lectures on rituals was published in different outlets.

The conventional reading of Freemasonry is that it was confined to the first three degrees (over which the first Grand Lodge claimed authority) and that the development of these degrees demonstrates the general compatibility of Freemasonry with (yet another conventional assumption) the 'Enlightenment' – or they are even are to be interpreted as secular. Furthermore, established historiography has claimed that any variations or continuations of these degrees were continental deviations or degenerations of 'proper' Freemasonry. This is a reading that must be contested after delving into the realm of higher degree sources unlocked in volume 3. Snoek's main (and not undisputed) claim is that the two competing English Grand Lodges of 'Antients' and 'Moderns' did everything in their power to conceal the existence of another and presumably earlier tradition of ritual, that of 'Harodim' (overseers of Solomon's temple). What is certain is that around 1730 a fourth degree of Freemasonry, that of the 'Royal Arch', saw the light, which told a story about the reconstruction of Solomon's temple after the Babylonian captivity, the centerpiece of which is the recovery of the 'lost word'. About the same time another degree, the 'Harodim', is found in the sources. To make things more complicated, a 'Scots Master' degree was practised from around 1740 and onwards, placing the narrative within a mediaeval and chivalric context. Higher degrees also introduce antediluvian motifs such as the Garden of Eden, the Tower of Babel or Noah's Ark that not are present in the Craft degrees and that are worked into the ritual narratives of 'adoption' Freemasonry (in which women were initiated). In short the higher degrees of the Harodim family are explicitly Christian, and contain elements of both sacerdotal and chivalric initiation. The massive evidence of the prevalence of these motifs as practised in British Freemasonry has the potential to revitalize general discussions about the scope and content of the concept of 'Enlightenment' as such and its relationship to religion, oscillating between esoteric illumination and exoteric rationalization.

Edited by Róbert Péter, the last two volumes of the source collection illustrate clearly the extent to which Freemasonry with its positive as much as its negative attributes was perceived by the wider audience. Volume 4 covers (publicly ventilated) debates within and about Freemasonry that have shaped its inner heterogeneous fabric and external perception. These debates are rarely covered in Masonic (hagiographic) historiography that rather is written from a Whig perspective,

which avoid touching upon sensitive issues and developments. The final volume allows elaborate insights into the rise, establishment, varieties and dissemination of Freemasonry as a topic in periodical press, again questioning its presumed secrecy and instead highlighting its visibility as a cultural phenomenon in everyday eighteenth-century life in Britain. In his introduction to volume 4 Péter groups the debates related to Freemasonry under three headings: religious disputes, social conflicts and political, financial and legal feuds, many of them intersecting. The religious disputes are well-known when it comes to the tensions between Roman Catholicism and Freemasonry. But Péter includes sources that clearly demonstrate that anti-Masonry was also (and has remained to this day) a prevalent feature of low church, congregational or what we today would call evangelical Protestantism. Many state authorities, both in Catholic and Protestant states prohibited or regulated Masonic activities throughout the century investigated, a development that accelerated in the aftermath of the French Revolution. However, the development of British Freemasonry was also defined by a number of internal tensions and conflicts along ideological, political and sociological dividing lines. Furthermore we can read in the sources that the organizational culture covered in volume 1 could also lead to fierce disagreements between freemasons and their lodges. This could positively be branded as an atmosphere of constructive debate, in which organizational principles were discussed transparently in a sense of addressing structural deficiencies, and in the long run legal certainty, a foundation of the rule of law. For the historiography of Freemasonry volume 4 thus opens up a new dimension, to embrace diverging ideas and conflicts as an innovative starting point for a history of what Mouffe has branded ‘agonistic pluralism’.

Last, but not least, the 484 articles presented in volume 5 allow the reader to delve deep into the varieties of ‘representations’ of Freemasonry as a topic in periodical press, which ‘demonstrates the shifts and fluxes in public opinion as well as the self-perceptions of Freemasonry in the long eighteenth century’ (xiii). Apart from the presence of Masonic news as such, the activities and positions of Masonic printers and publishers as well as the rise of a distinct and specialized Masonic press at the end of the century deserve particular interest. Admissions of new lodge members, the announcement and accounts of lodge meetings, or activities such as public theatre visits and processions, constitute the bulk of plain news content. They allow the conclusion that the existence of Freemasonry, individual membership and public presence was well-known among the general public. However, another big part of media coverage consists of debates and conflicts (along the rationale of volume 4), allowing insights into the contentiousness of Freemasonry as a socio-cultural phenomenon, particularly with regard to women and their exclusion. However, the press reports also challenge previous assumptions of Freemasonry as an exclusively male zone of sociability and provide evidence for the existence female sociability on equal terms, to be researched further in primary sources. Another interesting set of articles deals with contextualizing Freemasonry as a topic in the press within a wider British associational culture. One of the risky shortcomings of Masonic historiography has been and still is its blind eye towards other forms of sociability, competing, rivaling, or even mocking societies and orders, seriously challenging or simply making fun of Freemasonry and its *gravitas*. In parallel to volume 4 and the acknowledgment of fault-lines in the manifold conflicts and debates within and surrounding Freemasonry, the creative and chaotic heterogeneity of sociability organized in the ideal type of ‘orders’ or lodges (including the idea of gender-mixed or all female organizations) is a fascinating starting point for new studies into the socio-cultural dynamics of what we today would call civil society in Britain during the century covered by the source collection.

Taken as a whole the five-volume source edition *British Freemasonry 1717–1813* has the potential to vitalize a number of academic approaches towards a deeper understanding of the long eighteenth century in Britain. First of all it sheds light upon the position of Freemasonry as a strongly integrated (and yet disputed) part of British society. Secondly, while certainly demonstrating the firm embeddedness of Freemasonry in British constitutional thinking, it simultaneously challenges our concepts on the content and scope of enlightenment philosophy when it comes to the prevalence of rich ritual performance of alternative religious ideas. The coexistence of scientific rationality and dynamic esoteric imagination appears to constitute a contradictory or complementary feature of British enlightenment culture. Thirdly we are invited to identify conflicts, polemical debates, and controversies both within and surrounding Freemasonry as the starting point for a new cultural history of Britain, based upon the idea of ‘agonistic pluralism’. In the age of ‘filter-bubbles’ and ‘echo chambers’ in social (or ‘alternative’) media it is likewise interesting to see how a topic like Freemasonry created a strong and visible polarization in British media, at least in terms of argumentation. The perception of Freemasonry oscillated between distrust and idealization, attacks and apologies. In many ways, the periodical press during the long eighteenth century was closer to direct expressions of opinions and its content and agendas were not yet shaped by professional journalism. When studying a subject like Freemasonry in the British press, it emerges clearly that press sources allow us direct access to the intellectual climate of the period.