

James Stevens Curl, *Freemasonry and the Enlightenment: Architecture, Symbols & Influences*, (London: Historical Publications, 2011), pp. 384 (ISBN 978 0 85318 385 3), £45.

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James Stevens Curl's *The Art and Architecture of Freemasonry* came out in 1991. At the time it was a ground breaking study and opened the eyes of architectural historians and Masonic historians alike to the rich topic of Masonic symbolism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century architecture. It is still the standard work on the subject. This new book, *Freemasonry and the Enlightenment: Architecture, Symbols and Influences*, draws on some of the same material and some of its chapters even share the same titles as those in the former work, but all have been entirely rewritten. In this sense, as the title suggests, it is not a new edition of the previous work but a completely new book.

Freemasonry and the Enlightenment opens with a new 'Preface' by Professor Andrew Prescott. Curl's 'Introduction' then sets the scene, starting by quoting Cambridge Fellow John Saltmarsh's review of Knoop and Jones's *An Introduction to Freemasonry*,¹ which laments that Masonic history was 'by ill luck the happiest of hunting-grounds for the light-headed, the fanciful, the altogether unscholarly and the lunatic fringe of the British Museum Reading Room.'² This sets the tone and the introduction is very much a cautionary tale in the problems and pitfalls of Masonic research. However Curl also condemns architectural historians who seem to have shied away from any study of Freemasonry, which he rightly views as an important aspect of eighteenth-century thought that cannot be ignored. Chapter 1 then sets out to explain the origins of Freemasonry in the Middle Ages, or rather to set out the various positions currently taken on that very difficult subject. It provides a good overview and naturally leads on to Chapter Two, which looks specifically at the rise of 'speculative masonry'. Professor Curl and David Stevenson are good friends and appear to agree closely on these aspects. Again Curl's tone and stance is reflected in his citation of Robert Cooper's *The Rosslyn Hoax*³ which he describes as 'a splendidly robust interpretation of the vast accretions of nonsense that have become glued to an unfinished Collegiate Church.'

Chapter Three is on the Hermetic tradition. The influences of Hermeticism and esoteric thought cannot be ignored in the history of Freemasonry. This chapter provides an excellent and balanced introduction to a very tricky subject. Curl, not being a Mason, is able to discuss matters such as the origins of the Masonic word and the development of rituals, which are expressly forbidden as subjects of research in *AQC*. Such prohibitions, though well-intended, have undoubtedly held back a better understanding of these issues, so it is good to see them tackled here. However, it may make Freemasons slightly uncomfortable to see their 'secrets' in print. As Curl notes, all aspects of the ritual have been published and are readily available to any interested member of the public. Here also Curl introduces the syncretic nature of Masonic ritual and symbolism and possible links to the Egyptian cult of Isis. This link is vital for Curl, whose initial interest in Freemasonry arose from investigations of Egyptian Revival architecture.

In Chapter Four, Curl cautiously notes the possible links between the Knights Templars and a series of extraordinary Scottish stone sundials and goes on to give a summary of the possible origins of Masonry in Scotland and England (pp.60-61) and its religious and political connotations. The chapter ends with a useful discussion of the differences between pillars and columns and their various significances and meanings. This is a particularly important section, worth purchasing the book for alone. Up until this point the book has been about Freemasonry, but the discussion of columns marks the point at which it turns to architecture.

¹ Douglas Knoop & Gwylim Peredur Jones, *An Introduction to Freemasonry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1937).

² *History Review* 8, No. 1 (November 1937), 102–4.

³ Robert L. D. Cooper, *The Rosslyn Hoax* (London: Lewis Masonic, 2006).

Chapter Five, 'The Great Prototype', is an expanded version of the chapter of the same name in the previous book. It provides an excellent introduction to the history of reconstructions of King Solomon's Temple in books in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Chapter Six, on lodges, covers various topics including women in Freemasonry, the design of tracing boards and certificates and the designs for Masonic halls. The architectural character of the discussion is continued in Chapter Seven, which looks at French architects such as Boullée, Ledoux and Lequeu whose strange fantasy projects seem to owe much to Masonic symbolism.

Chapter Eight is a new revised version of 'Elysian Fields', Curl's celebrated and controversial chapter from the previous book, which looked at the landscape garden in France and England and its links with Masonic symbolism, to which is added a further chapter on the gardens of Schwetzingen and Wörlitz in Germany. In both these chapters Curl traces the huge range of references in these gardens and draws a parallel with Masonic symbolism. The problem here is that it is not clear whether the gardens were meant to be read in a Masonic light or were merely coincidentally drawing on the same broad range of esoteric and mythological references. Tombs for instance are a common theme; however, tombs are not necessarily an allusion to the Hiram legend, but merely to a general understanding of the temporary nature of life and the imminence of death, which could be attributed to many sources. Curl understands this, but it undoubtedly reduces the strength of the argument.

Chapter Ten, 'Mozart and Freemasonry' is on firmer ground. There is plenty of evidence for Mozart's association with Freemasonry and that Mozart wrote music for Masonic events and of course, most famously, *Die Zauberflöte*, his Masonic opera. The chapter explores this territory and provides an analysis of the extraordinary stage sets designed for this opera by a whole series of famous architects.

Chapter Eleven, 'Conclusion', draws together material in Chapter Eight of the previous book ('Cemeteries, Monuments and Mausolea') in an attempt to determine whether there is anything that might be called a Masonic Style in architecture. This is rightly tentative. I am not sure even Curl is convinced there is. The book ends with a call for more work on the subject. There is also a useful glossary, bibliography and index.

This is a lengthy and complicated book. It is not an easy read. It is dense in ideas. It is closely argued, well-researched and beautifully illustrated. It provides a very good introduction to Masonic history. As such it will serve as a useful reference for the Masonic historian and a very fine introduction for any architectural historian or non-Mason trying to understand Freemasonry. *Freemasonry & the Enlightenment* is certainly an essential book for any person with an interest in the relationship between architecture and Freemasonry. Curl's general point is important: historians have for too long ignored Freemasonry as an aspect of eighteenth and nineteenth-century life. They have viewed it as an embarrassment or worse. This book is a call for the subject to be taken more seriously by mainstream historians. But it also carries a warning for Masonic historians that they too often treat their subject in isolation. Masonic history only gains real value by being seen as part of history as a whole. Curl provides a good example to follow.