

Book Review

GILBERT, Robert A. (ed.), *Seeking the Light: Freemasonry and Initiatic Traditions* (Surrey: Lewis Masonic, 2007), 140 pp., £18.99, Hbk. ISBN 978-0-85318-290-0.

The fourth volume in the 'Canonbury Papers' series provides diverse perspectives from scholars both established and new, on the initiatory traditions of freemasonry. Presented at the 2005 Canonbury Masonic Research Centre Conference, these eleven papers investigate methodological approaches, present historical overviews and case studies addressing freemasonry's interrelationships with society, religion, the arts, and the individual within a framework spanning both East and West. Perhaps the book's most significant contribution is its demonstration of potentially useful directions for the cross-disciplinary exploration of freemasonry, as seen in the presentations of Julia Cleave and Philip Carr-Gomm from a literary/artistic perspective, J. Scott Kenney from a sociological viewpoint, and Peter Maxwell-Stuart's diligent exploration of the interrelationship between ancient theurgical practices and masonic initiation. As discussed in Andrew Prescott's timely introduction, such approaches still have far to go towards establishing an underlying unity in both method and result.

J. Scott Kenney's phenomenal sociological evaluation and Henrik Bogdan's paper on defining the meaning and function of secrecy in esoteric groups are the showpieces of the collection, both in terms of scholarship and potential. Bogdan successfully clarifies the extent to which secrecy is a ritualistic core aspect of initiation (p. 23) as opposed to an elitist or affectational exoteric characteristic of masonic and quasi-masonic societies in general. Rather, he argues that the core of such groups is initiation, as defined by experience and interpretation of the dialectical interplay between layers of meaning, rather than secrecy (p. 22). Kenney's groundbreaking presentation of his fieldwork and proposals for 'theoretical bases for the ritualistic enactment of meaning and identity among contemporary members of the Craft' (p. 80) draws on sociological methodology, providing key insights into the meaning and impact of ritual on several levels.

Kirk MacNulty's insider's exploration of the purpose and underlying structure of initiation along with its social, psychological and practical functions compares the four major principles of Renaissance philosophy against the masonic symbolic structure, illustrated via Craft tracing boards and officer hierarchy. While demonstrating phenomenological commonalities between the two philosophies, it makes leaps and assumptions with no provision of documentary evidence. As self-admitted personal perspectives (p. 5), these interpretations penetrate meanings possibly inherent in the Craft degrees, but remain speculation in terms of their connection with the components of Renaissance principles.

David McCready's comparison of Christian baptism and profession rituals with masonic initiation is problematic, for despite a detailed look at each, his conclusion that profession to monkhood bears no dissimilarities to masonic initiation (p. 19) is based solely on phenomenological similarities, without taking significant contextual differences into account.

Peter Maxwell-Stuart's in-depth examination of rituals of initiation in the theurgical practices of late antiquity explores the themes touched on by MacNulty and McCready,

scholastically detailing concepts of sensory perception and their role in ritual theurgy. This he connects with similarities in the masonic initiatory experience while leaving open the possibilities for interpretation of this interrelationship.

Tobias Churton's concise overview of the major figures and events of the Rosicrucian current offers a lively interpretation of their intentions, providing useful insight and pointing out the tragic irony that these same figures 'never wished their conception to devolve into some kind of esoteric sect' (p. 78).

We find fascinating snapshots of very human aspects of freemasonry in Anat Harel's effective portrayal of an attempt at ritual reform in late nineteenth-century Dutch masonry, underscoring issues such as the religious versus universalist quest for the essence of the Craft. Equally, Pauline Chakmakjian presents elements of freemasonry's attempts at adaptation to an Oriental context, highlighting the disparities between Western and Eastern spirituality, demonstrated through four inherent incompatibilities between freemasonry and Eastern spiritual perspectives. Her proposal that 'a distinction ought to be made between following the *letter* and following the *spirit* of Masonic law,' (p. 192, her emphasis) to counter such issues, is refreshing, although likely to raise a few eyebrows among purists.

Revd. Neville Barker Cryer's diligent analysis of pre-1717 Yorkshire rituals delves further into the possible link with guild traditions and the vehicle of mystery plays, adding to the growing body of work seeking to illuminate the ongoing operative-speculative provenance debate.

Likewise, Julia Cleave's daring and pragmatic exposition of the plethora of apparently masonic motifs in Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well*, makes a serious case for the re-examination of Elizabethan literature in such a light. Cleave carefully uncovers 'Birth/Death and Raising' motifs in the main plot (p. 58), demonstrates the close resemblance between the dramatis personae and lodge hierarchy (p. 52) and draws out numerous textual references so close to masonic idiom that 'taken in aggregate, assume a critical mass,' (p. 51) strongly supporting her position.

Carr-Gomm analyzes the fascinating topic of 'Opera as Initiation' through his examination of Sir Michael Tippett's *The Midsummer Marriage*, structured as a ritual drama and replete with esoteric content; combining 'Jungian psychology and the inner mysteries of Druidism' (p. 119).

Taken together with Cleave's and Maxwell-Stuart's papers and Kenney's sociological and phenomenological discussion of the dramaturgical content of freemasonry, further exploration of the vehicle of the arts in relation to initiation is called for. Having stood the test of time in such a role, it shares the language of image, symbol and space with freemasonry, since the subjective experiential nature of its interpretation, as illustrated by these papers, is also a kind of initiation.

This compilation's greatest strength may also be its greatest weakness as not all the papers feature the same rigorous scholarship and others reiterate historical elements covered elsewhere. While the exploration of new possibilities is vital, a careful balance between the infinite possibilities for interpretation offered by the symbolic essence of freemasonry that avoids the trap of free association is needed.

Overall, these papers quite appropriately raise more questions than they answer. Both the informed and less well-versed reader should come away with a sense of the complexity and breadth of the topic as well as directions for further reading, as it accessibly covers both ends of the spectrum with a wisely diverse selection of approaches.

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