

Book Review

GODWIN, Joscelyn and Christian Goodwillie, *Symbols in the Wilderness: Early Masonic Survivals in Upstate New York* (Clinton and Hamilton, NY: Richard W. Couper Press and Upstate Institute at Colgate University, 2016), 181 pp., \$35, Pbk, ISBN-13: 9781937370213.

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In the opening pages the authors indicate that the goal of their research and publication project was to 'locate, document and analyze extant masonic buildings and material culture' from lodges in the region covering Albany, New York, to the Finger Lakes that pre-date the Morgan Affair in 1826 (with an end date of 1830) (p. 5). They succeed with the locating and documenting, although their analysis often falls short. The book is loaded with photographs of lodge buildings, rooms and objects, making it an effective resource for those seeking to learn from fraternal objects.

The book is divided into ten chapters, haphazardly organized by general overviews, specific lodges and types of objects. The chapters on the history of freemasonry in upstate New York and the local lodge buildings are useful for providing context about the area and the objects found there. The chapter on lodge buildings offers a nice summary, identifying purpose-built lodge buildings, private homes and businesses where lodges met. The book would benefit from a cohesive introduction and some consolidation and reorganization. Unfortunately, no information or context is provided about how freemasonry's development in this region compared to other regions in the state, such as New York City, or to neighbouring states.

Three chapters highlight specific lodge buildings, although the criteria for these selections are unclear. Each chapter offers a history of the building and its use as a masonic lodge, along with a mix of illustrations: historic and contemporary photographs; interior paintings and furnishings; and architectural drawings.

While the photographs and descriptions offer a useful resource for future scholarship, the text in the book often centres on sweeping generalizations and assumptions, many of which are incorrect. For example, in the introductory discussion of freemasonry, the authors suggest that 'anyone may found a masonic lodge independent of a Grand Lodge', but then cite Prince Hall's lodge as an example (p. 8). Hall actually joined an established military lodge in Boston in the 1770s and later sought and received a warrant from the Grand Lodge of England; he did not found a lodge 'independent of a Grand Lodge'.

The chapter on tracing boards brings several examples together, offering fascinating comparisons, but, the authors place tracing boards above all other objects and suggest that they were the primary source for masonic visual culture, which seems to be a bit of an overstatement. Further they write: 'As for the letter G, contrarily to popular belief it does not stand for God...most authorities say that it stands for geometry' (p. 41). While they offer examples of the latter point, there is no source

listed for the first assertion and, in fact, there are many sources from the early 1800s suggesting that in American freemasonry the G could stand for geometry, or God, or both. The book is only cursorily footnoted. The bibliography is dated, omitting many recent journal articles, books, blog posts and websites that could have helped the authors to provide a more nuanced analysis of the region's 'masonic survivals'.

The chapter on aprons suffers from the same problems. While the photographs of aprons found in early upstate lodges are useful, the inaccurate statements about their history and symbols demonstrate that the book could have benefitted from pre-publication review by established masonic scholars. The statement that 'the first masonic aprons were a plain square of white cloth or soft leather' (p. 116) is directly disputed by engravings from the mid and late 1700s showing long aprons maintaining a suggestion of the shape of the animal that provided the skin. This explanation also omits any discussion of the evolution of masonic aprons from the work aprons worn by stonemasons and other craftsmen throughout the 1600s, 1700s and 1800s.

The authors remark on the 'Noah's Ark' symbol throughout the apron chapter, in one place describing it as a 'toy Noah's Ark' (p. 127) and in another writing, 'Note that the anchor has been playfully attached to Noah's Ark' (p. 119). In fact, as described in numerous masonic sources, including some of those cited in this book, the ark and anchor form a masonic symbol together, representing 'that divine Ark, which safely wafts us over this tempestuous sea of troubles, and that Anchor which shall safely moor us in a peaceful harbour' (Jeremy Cross, 1820).

Throughout the book are observations that point to an unfamiliarity with the history and context of American freemasonry. In the apron chapter, they highlight an apron engraved by one young man writing, 'We wonder that a young man of below the masonic age of twenty-one was allowed to work on these symbols [on the apron]' (p. 130), yet a few pages prior they note that wives of masons probably decorated aprons (p. 116). In fact, making and selling aprons was a business venture pursued by men and women alike, sometimes freemasons and often not. Being able to represent the symbols did not require an esoteric understanding of them.

The final chapter on masonic symbolism offers a more nuanced discussion of the three columns, the two pillars and the point between two lines. This section acknowledges that freemasonry is part of a larger context more successfully than the rest of the book. The intentions of the authors for this project are to be commended, making it all the more frustrating that it falls short in meeting them. There is a tremendous need for more studies of masonic and fraternal material culture. Finding and identifying these objects are the first steps to advancing our understanding of this topic. This book brings many of these buildings and objects to light. But, the study of material culture requires the same discipline and diligence as other types of history if we are to move the field forward.