

Book Review

KENNEY, J. Scott, *Brought to Light: Contemporary Freemasonry, Meaning, and Society* (Waterloo, Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), pp. xiv +294, £29.99, Pbk, ISBN 978-1-77112-194-1.

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Why is it that by the 1990s, some countervailing tendencies apart, there was within freemasonry, ‘over-institutionalization, bureaucratization and aging and declining membership’ and, perhaps worse, ‘indifference’ (pp. 4, 250)? Scott Kenney’s informative and thoughtful analysis addresses these concerns through a close examination of current practices of ritual as mediated through the personal testimony of participants and contextualized through his nuanced engagement with a range of scholarly traditions. The result is a text which deepens understandings of ‘a traditionally masculine form of emotion management’ (p. 259) as experienced within the ‘dramaturgically organized institution’ which is freemasonry (p. 13).

While freemasonry, ‘an organization struggling to find itself (p. 250) and ‘notoriously resistant to change’ (p. 247) may be ‘headed in the direction of a traditionalist subculture’ (p. 247) it is not too late for ideas about integration with ‘broader social developments’ (p. 243) to be considered. Kenney advises that ‘lodges need to be nimble, adaptive and better able to balance necessary traditions with a rapidly changing society’ (p. 216). He suggests that the ideal lodge will mentor and encourage learning through engagement in activities and that its members will perceive the lodge as ‘providing moral and ethical benefits (p. 212) and be focused on freemasonry, rather than other commitments. Long-term retention within a lodge correlates with efficient, tactful, organization, the existence of close ties between members and a sense of good fellowship and support. The ‘fit’ between, social background and ability to engage is ‘key’ (p. 118). One of Kenney’s respondents noted that masonry crossed ‘back and forth with the skills and lessons I’ve learned in 12-step organizations’ (p. 221) some of the conclusions regarding the decline in civic, ‘volunteer participation’ (p. 117) might be applicable to other charitable, fraternal and voluntary sector bodies.

The bulk of the book is an analysis of the data which Kenney collated in order to reach these conclusions; the personal testimony of a sample consisting largely of ‘White, middle-class Christian men in their sixties and seventies ... of local origin ... many with post-secondary education’ (pp. 29–30, 245) in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. He has also overtly drawn on his own observations and experiences as a freemason. He notes the differences of his sample from wider society and concludes that, as it was in many ways representative of the all freemasonry, this does not ‘bode well for a broadly meaningful interface between the Craft and society at large’ (p. 245). Testimony is utilized to indicate the perceived benefits of membership and that which ‘respondents find meaningful’ (p. 241). Respondents said that being a mason, adds ‘richness and meaning’ (p. 218), expands one’s ‘circle of acquaintances’

(p. 219) and provides 'friends all over' (p. 224). Membership helped to 'keep me on the straight and narrow' (p. 221) and it 'made me better as a man, better with my family' (p. 226). It was also said that 'I got over my shyness' (p. 234) and that it encouraged 'lifelong learning' (p. 237), tolerance and charity (pp. 231, 232). Kenney also explored what makes joining unattractive, noting the range of alternative activities, familial, spousal and religious opposition (though some respondents reported support from religious leaders) and the poor image of freemasonry within wider society. He placed such claims within the context of a shift in freemasonry from an interest in ritual and self-improvement to a focus on coordinating philanthropy. While Kenney favours freemasonry, he has some criticisms and his insider status and academic training make this a sophisticated analysis of survey data.

Within his assessment of the literature and methods, Kenney has recourse to a diverse range of theories about symbolism which he derives from (among others) the works of philosopher George Herbert Mead and the sociologist Erving Goffman. He also builds on historical accounts of the significance of gender, on notions from the sociology of emotions, on ideas about multiple versions of reality associated with Norman Denzin's approach to phenomenology and as this is a study made at the level at which masonic practices are enacted, on ethnomethodology. Much use is made of Weber's notion of an 'ideal type' but his work assessing the benefits of bureaucracy is marginalized as, for Kenney, when ritual is 'drained of meaning [...] bureaucracy forms the organizational structures of meaninglessness' (p. 252).

The continuous prose is broken up by indented anonymous quotes. Sometimes the testimony is categorized as representative (e.g. 'eight respondents commented' (p. 219) followed by a quote). Sometimes an individual is categorized, for example one interviewee defined himself as a 'grease monkey' (p. 235). The impact is that it feels as if the author is exploring one of his themes 'the social interplay between secrecy and curiosity' (p. 44). We do not see the whole man, just the disaggregated parts which appear in chapters about joining, taking degrees, members' involvement, structures and impacts.

Recollections of, and reflections on, the initiation ceremony, including the teasing and sometimes supportive comments by those already initiated, are used to illustrate some of the perceived attractions of membership. Kenney also scrutinized the Second and Third Degree ceremonies, the rites of passage which lead to a man becoming a Master Mason and often gaining, or strengthening, his sense of identity.

Aimed at 'academic and lay readers' (p. 39) Kenney highlights which chapters are likely to be of interest to those categories of readers. While some masons may feel that a glossary of sociological terms might also have been useful (there is one of masonic terms) the index and tables, italics and lists help to ensure that the specialist language is not too impenetrable. Indeed, the academic framing is to be valued for it illuminates the study of current practices within freemasonry which is at the heart of this book.