

Book Review

ÖNNERFORS, Andreas, *Freemasonry: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), xxix + 139 pp, £7.99, Pbk, ISBN: 978019876275.

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As the author points out in the last 15 years or so research into freemasonry has increased through academic and masonic collaboration assisted by the great availability of traditional sources via electronic catalogues and of new digital resources. One of the barriers to new researchers has been a dearth of reliable basic information about freemasonry. Recent publications by Brill and Routledge have helped to fill the void but their volumes are priced for the academic library market, Önnerrfors' contribution to Oxford University Press' excellent *Very Short Introductions* series is set at a much more accessible price – and it is pocket sized as well.

The book begins with what Önnerrfors calls 'two very opposed but representative images of freemasonry', Pierre Bezukhov's idealistic encounter with freemasonry in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and the distrust towards freemasonry encompassed by the British 'Secret Societies' Act of 1799, and the British Home Affairs Select Committee Reports in the late 1990s. This geographically and chronologically wide ranging approach is followed throughout the book. This can often be thought provoking but it can lead to juxtapositions which may not always be clear to the new reader in this subject and more knowledgeable readers might question whether the examples chosen are the most appropriate.

Following informative chapters on the development of freemasonry and the medieval influences, Önnerrfors includes an excellent chapter on the ideas translated into James Anderson's *Constitutions of the Free Masons* of 1723 set in the context of its time. He addresses the dichotomy between freemasonry as a training ground for liberal, proto-democratic ideas and its proclivity for secrecy from a sociological perspective. His next chapter considering ritual on both a historical and theoretical basis should be essential reading for any scholar working on any aspect of freemasonry and wanting to understand the nature of what actually happens in a lodge meeting.

The publicity material for this book and its flyleaf makes much of inclusion of material on the participation of women in freemasonry, an approach that certainly reflects both contemporary questions, historiographical interest in gender history and the relative lack of other accessible published material on the subject. Önnerrfors' chapter focuses on the 18th century and particularly on female adoption ritual. Whilst this is of interest it has been covered in depth in Snoek's recent work and the page limits of this particular format mean that as a result the formation of modern female freemasonry, following the establishment of the International Order of Freemasonry Le Droit Humain, in 1893, is limited to less than a page. It consequently ignores the links between women freemasons, suffrage and women's rights, and

any developments outside of Western Europe, particularly North America. It also seriously misdates the establishment in Britain of the Order of Women Freemasons to 1953. The Order had seceded from *Le Droit Humain* in 1908 to form what was originally called the Honourable Fraternity of Antient Masonry, the later date representing merely a change of name.

Another topic of continuing interest is freemasonry's relationship with religious and secular authorities which Ötnerfors discusses in a chapter titled *Perceptions, Prejudices and Persecutions*. The author's explanations and often very pertinent examples are somewhat undermined by the rather muddled structuring of this chapter which seems to go backwards and forwards between the issues, their historical development and suggested explanations. As this chapter also includes the author's concluding remarks, it is disappointing that he was not able to return to his two representative images of freemasonry at the end of the book and it loses its idealized version amidst a brief discussion of freemasonry and 21st century religions.

Without wishing to undermine the author's achievement, there are a couple of specific comments which might be made. A short publication – which can be read in one sitting – inevitably highlights inconsistencies. Of particular note are the references to the British Unlawful Societies Act of 1799 (39 Geo.III, c.79). It would have been preferable to be consistent in references to this legislation and not refer to it as the 'Secret Societies Act' as on page 4. More significantly it did not 'control the activities of masonic lodges in Britain' (p. 4) nor place them 'under government control' (p. 114) or regulate them in any way. The Act required masonic lodges in Britain to make an annual return of members to the local (not national) civic authority. There is no evidence that the authorities, national or local, ever used this information in any systematic way.

The author is, however, to be heartedly congratulated on working within the demands of this series format to produce such a readable and comprehensive introduction to freemasonry.