

The Role of Masonic Research in Freemasonry: Historiography, General Observations, and a Plan for the Future

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Upon assuming the Oriental Chair of this Lodge, the incoming Worshipful Master traditionally gives an allocution of his own devising. I would read the one research paper that I have completed in my eleven years as a member of the Craft, but most of you gathered here today have probably read it or heard about it and are probably sick to death of it by now. Given that I always believed it a forlorn hope that its recommendations with regard to dues and fees would be heeded by anyone outside of Lodge Vitruvian, or perhaps outside of Century Lodge, to be honest, I'm pretty tired of it myself.

Rather, today I will talk generally about Masonic Research, and about this Lodge in particular: where we have been, where we are, and where I hope this Lodge will be in the very near future.



This is a difficult time for fraternalism, in the sense that we as Freemasons understand the term. Only a couple of decades ago there were a hundred and fifty thousand Masons in this state alone, whereas today our numbers are barely half that. Yet, Freemasonry endures -- and genuine interest in its history, its rituals, and its traditions continues unabated. If we don't believe that, well, we need only ask one of our own members whose publication "empire" grew out of nothing because one man happened to write an extremely popular novel that just happened to touch on the Freemasons and their history.

To the extent that the world knows about Freemasonry, there is still plenty of prejudice and outright bigotry raised against our gentle Craft, even in these supposedly more enlightened days. The rise of the Internet has not quelled the untruths that are told about us; to the contrary, the rise of the Internet has simply made it easier for the anti-Masons and the false Masons to spread their message of hate against a worldwide fraternity of men whose only aim in life is to seek truth in further light.

You may ask what this has to do with Masonic Research.



Put plainly, our Lodges of Research and other scholarly bodies, along with entities of public education that are disposed to learn the truth, and men of good character who can spread the truth of what we are and what we do, are -- or at any rate, should be -- our main bastions of defense against those who would see us destroyed, and our malign influence -- or what they believe to be our malign influence -- abated. It is up to us to turn the tide of misinformation and to present to the world at large the truth about our Brotherhood. This is not accomplished by the existence of hundreds of lodge and Grand

Lodge websites whose aim is a combination of recruitment and public relations; it is accomplished by sober analysis and rebuttal of what our enemies say about us. Sadly, far too many of us believe that the best defense is not to take the offensive in this matter, and the blazing bonfire of Masonic literary effort that characterized the Fraternity through the first half of the last century, while not quite burned down to embers yet, still seems sadly in need of a refreshing breath of air.

The objective of a good Lodge of Research should be to keep alive the spark, and fan the flame of fair and honest inquiry into Freemasonry. What is Freemasonry? Why do men become Freemasons? How does modern Freemasonry differ from the original plan of the Fraternity? Can we truly sort the wheat from the chaff and understand the difference between the traditional and actual histories of our institution? Why do Masonic rituals differ, and yet teach nearly identical lessons? What is to be made of the bewildering maze of appendant and concordant bodies -- do they add a rich leavening to our fraternal life, do they steal away the best and brightest brethren from our lodges, or is the truth actually somewhere in between?

The last, of course, is purely rhetorical...or is it? Research could tell us the answer.

There are so many questions to be answered, and so few who are interested in answering them. And I haven't even opened the door to esotericism yet. Those of you who know me well will know the reason for that; but let it not be said that esoteric studies into the nature of Freemasonry are wasted, because there is no question that Masonry and esotericism have certain connections that many Masons find of interest.

Yet, more pressing than the problem of all of the questions we have to answer, is the problem that the vast majority of Masons don't even have an interest in answering them. Let me give you a quote that some of you may recognize:

The Mason, who reads, however little, be it only the pages of the monthly magazine to which he subscribes, will entertain higher views of the Institution and enjoy new delights in the possession of these views. The Masons who do not read will know nothing of the interior beauties of Speculative Masonry, but will be content to suppose it to be something like Odd Fellowship, or the Order of the Knights of Pythias - only, perhaps, a little older. Such a Mason must be an indifferent one. He has laid no foundation for zeal.

Of course this is our old friend Albert Mackey, writing in 1875, in an article entitled "Reading Masons, and Masons Who Do Not Read". A hundred and thirty-five years later, the same lament can be applied to our membership -- and indeed, it could be applied in every year of those hundred and thirty-five. A perfect example: There are, by some estimates, two million Freemasons in the United States. Two of the major "general-purpose" Masonic research societies, the Philalethes Society and the Masonic Society, between them do not even have ten thousand members. It is unlikely that the Lodges of Research in our 50 states amass more than five or six thousand. Other research groups that focus on the York Rite and other aspects of Masonry likely attract even fewer. The total number of Freemasons in the United States who are actively or even peripherally involved in Masonic research is probably far below fifty thousand.

(These are all guesses, by the way, but fairly educated guesses. Perhaps someone should do that research...)

If we assume that highly-optimistic number of 50,000 American Masons somehow involved in Masonic research -- and that is to say, Masons who do more than read the Grand Lodge magazine and the various organs of the various appendant bodies to which they belong -- we're still only talking about two and a half percent of all American Masons. My best guess is that the real number is below one percent.

When Masons are not interested in the history and philosophy of their Fraternity, what makes them different from men who disdain our gentle Craft and instead join civic and social clubs? Or as Mackey put it, what distinguishes us from other Orders, other than that we are "a little older"? Does Freemasonry still have something to teach men, or are our lessons outdated and useless in this progressive age?

Of course that is a rhetorical question. And of course, we all know the answer -- Freemasonry has something to teach men in any age who will simply be receptive to its lessons. But if our leaders in the lodges do not know what those lessons are, then where exactly do we stand? How do we engender or rekindle that love of learning that was supposed to be the hallmark of Freemasonry, which, as Chris Hodapp reminds us on a fairly regular basis, was the provision of an education in the liberal arts and sciences to a middle class who had not previously been in a position to obtain such? To open minds to philosophical vistas beyond the humdrum toil of daily existence? To teach men that there was a better way than strife and bloodshed, that in fact, all men were and ought to be brothers?

These were themes taken up by Dwight Smith many years ago, in editorials and articles in the *Indiana Freemason*, and in plays which placed Masonic virtues on display and on trial, and finally in his magnum opus, *Goodly Heritage*, the history of Freemasonry in this state written for its 150th birthday. They are themes echoed years later in a small pamphlet by a group called the Knights of the North, called *Laudable Pursuit*, who took Dwight Smith's themes and ran with them to their logical conclusion. Dwight's ideas were sound, and *Laudable Pursuit* has been credited with having brought to a new audience Dwight's writings, after they had lain neglected for a generation except by certain Masons -- among them the founders of this Lodge -- who kept the flame of his ideas alive.

Dwight L. Smith Lodge of Research was instituted in 1996 for the purpose of meeting the objective that I outlined earlier: "To keep alive the spark, and fan the flame of fair and honest inquiry into Freemasonry". However, our last meeting was, alas, over three years ago, and we have a lot of ground to cover and regain. I believe that the death of Worshipful Master David Bosworth in 2006 caught us all by surprise, and I know that since our last meeting in early 2007, our outgoing Worshipful Master Andrew Jackson has had many other things to occupy his time. Yet despite Brother Andy's other commitments, he has helped to create a structure for a renewal of this Lodge that will now be tested "in the field". It is our hope that this new structure will create more

awareness of the Lodge and its purpose among the Freemasons of Indiana, and that our brethren out there with the kernel of an idea for a research paper will sit up, take notice that they have a possible venue for their writing, and get down to the work of putting pen to paper...or keyboard to word-processor, as the case may be.

In addition to the usual solicitation of papers, however, we have other goals; some old, some new.



In 2002, this Lodge published a compendium of papers new and old, called *Perlustration*, and optimistically numbered it "Volume 1". *Perlustration* is defined in Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of 1913 as a noun, meaning, "The act of viewing all over", and appears to derive from the Latin "perlustrare", which means "to wander all through; to survey". This is, after all, what a good volume of research transactions does, is it not? It wanders from one article to the next, presenting its readers with a survey of numerous topics and themes.

I believe that in the eight years since, there must surely have been sufficient research done by members of this lodge to produce Volume 2 of *Perlustration*. As such, I am setting as one goal for this year the production of that volume.

The duty of maintaining the Grand Lodge Speaker's Bureau listings has also fallen to us. It is my goal to ensure that the Lodge creates and maintains an active committee that will take on this duty, and proactively seek out speakers among the lodges in Indiana who are willing to travel and share their Masonic knowledge with others. To help further that end, the Grand Lodge is creating an Orator Program, which will award any member of the Speaker's Bureau a pin after he has visited and presented a program at three lodges. This program will be maintained for the Grand Lodge by our Secretary and Assistant Secretary.

The Grand Lodge Library and Museum has been moved back to Indianapolis, to the fifth floor of Indiana Freemasons' Hall. This is the reason why the Lodge dispensation has been changed so that we now meet in Indianapolis rather than in Franklin -- the Lodge and the Library and Museum complement each other and should be located in the same place. Unfortunately, the Library and Museum is not in shape to be used yet. It is my intention to offer the services of this Lodge, whenever and wherever practical, to assist the Library and Museum directors in their task of organizing the facility so that it can be used, the eventual goal of course being that the Lodge will have a significant Masonic library resource in its own home for the pursuance of its research and study. I hope that the members of the Lodge will find it within the length of their cable-tows to assist in this important project.

The Lodge has a website now, at indianalodgeofresearch.org. We are open to assistance and ideas for the content and "look" of the website. Please contact me if you are interested in this project.

We have been charged with the oversight of Brother Al McClelland's Worldwide Exemplification of Freemasonry website on behalf of the Grand Lodge, which is sponsoring it. You can see the site at weofm.org; it goes live in January.

There are a number of other goals and projects that have come to mind or have been suggested. We will work through those suggestions and implement the ones that seem to have the most promise of success, and which are most closely related to the mission of this Lodge. As this allocution is becoming rather long and unwieldy, I'll not go into them here, but will provide the Lodge with more information as we follow through.



As I close, and consider anew the responsibilities of the Lodge of Research, I cannot but think of the words of that great Masonic writer, Joseph Fort Newton, who many years ago wrote,

Those sturdy men who set up the altar of Masonry on the frontier of this commonwealth were prophetic souls. They were men of faith who builded better than they knew, as men of faith always do. They believed in the future, in the growth of large things from small beginnings and in the principles of Masonry as the true foundation of society and the fortress of a free state. They knew that the Masonic lodge is a silent partner of the home, the church, and the school house, toiling on behalf of law and order, without which neither industry nor art can flourish, and that its benign influence would help us to build a commonwealth in strength, wisdom, and beauty. Therefore they erected their altar and kindled its flame; and having wrought in faithfulness, they died in faith, obeying the injunction of that master poet who said: "Keep the young generations in hail, bequeath to them no tumbled house!" ("The Men's House", p. 13-14)

This, then, is our mission. It is the duty of the Lodge of Research to present Freemasonry to our membership and to the world at large so that our labors can have a good effect, and to help defend our Fraternity from the depredations of time, prejudice, and misinformation. If this duty is disregarded, my brothers, then we risk the future foretold by Mackey more than a century ago:

If this indifference, instead of being checked, becomes more widely spread, the result is too apparent. Freemasonry must step down from the elevated position which she has been struggling, through the efforts of her scholars, to maintain, and our lodges, instead of becoming resorts for speculative and philosophical thought, will deteriorate into social clubs or mere benefit societies. With so many rivals in that field, her struggle for a prosperous life will be a hard one.

The ultimate success of Masonry depends on the intelligence of her disciples.

If we can accomplish our goals, and fulfil our duty, then I believe we can take credit for advancing that success -- so long as we understand that success achieved cannot be equated with a chance to rest on our laurels. Perhaps it may then be said of us that *we* kept the young generations in hail, and bequeathed to *them* no tumbled house.