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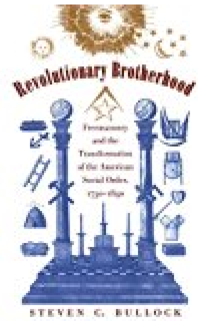
Steven C. Bullock. *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xviii + 421 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2282-1.



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Over the past several years, Freemasonry has captured a good deal of attention among eighteenth-century Europeanists, largely because of its apparent centrality in creating a "public sphere" within which public opinion could reflect independently on the state. Students of the early United States, for whom institutional development of the state is less central, have had less reason to delve into Masonry as an element of public order. Most Americanists have also been influenced by a prevailing sense that Masons, like Elks and others of that ilk, have always been nothing more than a colorfully innocuous excuse for convivial or commercial elbow-bending. At the same time, however, revolutionary-era and early republic historians have remarked for years on the seeming omnipresence of Freemasons among political leaders and their ubiquity on developing frontiers after 1800. And recently, as a spirited exchange on H-SHEAR testifies, many scholars have felt keenly that the profusion of voluntary associations like (and including) Masons represented something central in American life during the period. Their problem has been what to make of a phenomenon which they can no longer accept as tangential but which nevertheless still cuts obliquely across most major historiographical issues in early nineteenth-century American history. What did these organizations stand for, what did they do, what did they mean? What problems in American life did they solve? What in American life made them desirable things to create and join? What, in short, were they all about?

Steven Bullock's *Revolutionary Brotherhood* takes significant strides toward answering such questions. It is the first comprehensive social history of Freemasonry in English-speaking North America during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and, as his subtitle indicates, Bullock is centrally interested in explicating the mutual interrelationships between Freemasonry–who Masons were, what they did, what they represented–and social and cultural development in America. His starting point is the possibly unexpected or disproportionate, but certainly undeniable, public importance the brotherhood enjoyed just before it was effectively suppressed by mobilized public opinion in the late 1820s, and his method combines collective biographies of selected lodge membership with analytical and contextual readings of Masonic texts, ceremonies, and practices.

Bullock's argument is complex and not easily summarized, but in very rough outline it looks like this: Freemasonry began in early eighteenth-century Britain as a very flexible and adaptable blend of supposed esoteric ancient wisdom with quasi-mystical biblicism, wrapped in the remnants of guild practices and terms, all put in the service of a new form of gentility known as politeness. This new fraternal sociability helped tutor new social groups into social and political influence under noble patronage. Rather differently in the colonial American port cities, he argues, it helped legitimize and justify the claims of local elites to their positions of public leadership and taught them equality among themselves; order within the fraternity thus reflected the larger social order, at least as those people wished it to be.

Just before the Revolution, a transformed breed of Masonry came to the colonies from the British Isles–the "Ancients," a more socially peripheral group whose new rituals and constitutions drew on a different combination of the fraternity's language and ideas; this version seemed to allow middling men–Freemasonry was a males-only society–to claim truer credentials as society's

natural leaders than those of inherited or ascribed status. Ancient Masonry grew quickly, incorporating both ambitious middling men in port cities and "inland elites" or locally important men (though of little account in the imperial scheme of things) farther inland. It also came out of the Revolution with a large nation-wide membership base among Continental Army officers, a strong (though largely fortuitous) reputation for ardent patriotism, and a less fortuitous link to republicanism. All served it well in its salad days between about 1790 and 1826.

In that brief period, the heart of Bullock's study, Freemasonry helped to define an unstable social and cultural order with which it became very closely identified (unstable because it sought to create new social distinctions as the basis of hierarchy), but in response to cultural pressures Masons also acted in ways that belied their claims of public benefit. Masonry centrally claimed to exemplify and teach virtue, a claim of great importance to a republic and one strengthened by the fraternity's own growing self-identification as a sort of nonsectarian Christianity with inclusively liberal goals. The contemporary importance of Masonry appears in its very wide acceptance; its ceremonials organized the cornerstone settings of public, private, and religious structures, for example, and its membership grew at a much greater rate than the population as a whole, taking in very disproportionate numbers of local leaders, including clergymen. In this view, Freemasons acted as a kind of republican elite who claimed and received credit for virtue and universal benevolence as well as some particular benefits for members.

Increasingly, however–and Bullock is not entirely clear on the timing–the latter came to outweigh the former as society grew more mobile and trade networks widened; in these conditions a preference for brothers, though urged on them as fraternal benevolence, was clearly exclusionary. Exclusion also characterized a new set of explicitly Christianized but possibly blasphemous higher degrees that, Bullock argues, helped to set the lodge apart from the world, much as happened to the middle-class home. In 1826, when William Morgan's plan to publish esoteric secrets was cut short by his kidnapping and disappearance, and the confederates were obviously protected by powerful Masons, a rainbow of opponents coalesced in grass-roots organization, bypassed their local elites, and created a new and more democratic public culture that threw Masonry on the defensive and destroyed the hybrid republican hierarchalism with which the fraternity had so closely identified itself.

Revolutionary Brotherhood is clearly based on prodigious research in sources that do not always live well together, and this breadth and depth of research will give the book its lasting value. For the social dimensions, Bullock has painstakingly combed fragmentary lodge records to read them against equally spotty local directories and tax duplicates in order to establish the social standing of lodge members in several different places and times. This data convincingly establishes the high status of urban colonial Masons, the middling status of the new colonial Ancient movement, and the preponderance of professionals, merchants, and artisans–the local leaders of economic change–in early national Masonry. Analysis of memoirs, newspaper reports, and other published accounts provides firm grounding for his discussion of members' beliefs and the brotherhood's assertions of exemplary leadership, as well the credence given those claims by others. Such sources also underlie significant new contributions to the institutional history of American Freemasonry. Those, like myself, who had previously thought Masonry unusually important will find plenty of new ammunition here, and even those inclined to dismiss it as nineteenth-century country-clubbery should find themselves conceding ground.

Some readers may want to balk at discussions of the mystical hermeticism and biblicism pervading early Freemasonry, finding them a trifle outre', not to say lunatic, for a history of the American brotherhood. But Bullock has performed heavy spadework in standard and esoteric sources here, as his footnote discussions demonstrate, and this material is central to the topic because the fraternity's language linking virtue, benevolence, harmony, and social order originated with it. Such language was the basis for what Masons not only claimed, but were granted, by their contemporaries; in the author's phrasing, before 1826 "Americans largely acquiesced in the brothers' extraordinary claims about their order" (p. 219).

While reaching back to hermeticism clearly strengthens the author's case, his narrative of cultural change will be less convincing to those who do not share some of his suppositions. In particular, the book would be stronger (though perhaps with a less clear narrative line) had Bullock allowed himself to broaden his view of the contexts within which members acted. Men who joined lodges are depicted as focusing almost purely on local status; even when they espouse cosmopolitan or universalist ideas, they do so in order to affect their position in local eyes or to assuage immediate life anxieties. As a result, much is presumed about what was culturally effective, and some

interesting evidentiary leads which point to larger contexts and a more rounded analysis can get lost.

An early discussion illustrates this functionalist tendency. Colonial Masons, Bullock argues, primarily wanted recognition of their elite status by others in their own cities; to get it they painted themselves with metropolitan luster, adopting Freemasonry as one of many status-affirming strategies. Masonic ideas as such were almost beside the point except as they confirmed hierarchy and Enlightenment attitudes: "The ancient mysteries…played little role in colonial Masonry…Colonial Masons took up metropolitan practices and attitudes only to the extent that they fitted their particular needs" (p. 51). To be sure, "act locally" is an inescapable maxim even in an outpost of empire. But the question of social and political order consumed the metropolis through much of the eighteenth century, and the claim to take part in that imperial discourse was much sought after–was perhaps more important than any specific position on the question, especially for provincials. Adopting Masonic regalia was one way for colonial brothers to crash the imperial party. It worked, as did adopting Enlightenment terminology, because Freemasonry's teachings were already part of the discourse; they bore the stamp of fitness which came with the right peoples' acceptance of arcane Masonic wisdom as relevant. This, in turn, might have made such ideas more important in members' lives and in different ways than the author allows. Colonial Masons not only imported status for local deployment, but they also exported a piece of themselves to a notional imperial elite discussing the empire's destiny. A hint of this appears in the *Virginia Gazette's* specifically mentioning James Thomson's elevation as a Mason in 1737 (p. 52). He was, as Bullock notes, the famed author of "The Seasons"; but the poem was a key didactic text in the Georgic genre of social and political commentary, and the Gazette's notice united this leading metropolitan voice with local Masons in the imperial community. This is not to say, of course, that London accepted provincials' claims, but is to say that their intellectual communities included the empire as well as the province, and that they acted in real ways as members of all their communities, whether sincerely or platitudinously. A contemporary analogy, easily recognizable within the far-flung community of historical scholars to which H-SHEAR subscribers belong, might be the many articles on prominent graduates in our alma maters' glossy alumni magazines; they unite us in a non-contiguous, but no less real, community of alumni within which we (sometimes) act.

This question arises also in Bullock's discussion of nineteenth-century Masonry. The men who joined lodges then are seen as wanting to get ahead, to appear benevolent, to fulfill needs of sociability, to advance the interests of their chosen regions, to be leaders where they were, and so on. It should be important, though, that a good many of them seem to have been conscious members of that non-contiguous community of leaders who jointly contributed to the expansion and fixing of a certain vision of America's republican empire–commercial, generically Christian, self-governing, socially open yet orderly and mutually interdependent, and so on. Their intellectual as well as habitational communities matter because the functionalism that dominates this aspect of Bullock's analysis allows him to assert perhaps too easily that an institutionalized meritocracy was inherently too unstable to last, a point many might dispute. It also implicitly argues that change happened in America primarily when individuals did what immediately served them best in a narrowly local and functionalist perspective, that the intentions that really mattered historically are found in that context. Other contexts, some very broad and nebulously related to status, also helped shape what people decided to attempt. The author's discussions of the visions that Masons and anti-Masons held of American society seem to move beyond functionalism's invisible hand, but his overall analysis would be a broader one had he been able to touch on the outward pull, as well as the local cachet, of Freemasonry.

This reservation notwithstanding, *Revolutionary Brotherhood* is a significant achievement. To have integrated such disparate materials into a coherent narrative spanning the social and cultural history of two eras with such very different historiographical traditions and topics is no small feat. This book fully deserves the place it will occupy as the necessary starting point for any serious discussion of the relationship between pre-Morgan Freemasonry and American society and culture.

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