

Masonic Historians.

Someone defined history as "an account of what didn't happen by someone who wasn't there" and although that may be a humorous and cynical opinion, it is preferable to the unconsidered acceptance of statements concerning Masonic history made in many of the popular non-fiction books. Sensationalism sells books! We must also be aware of the dangers in accepting as undeniable truth, the inadequately researched and biased statements, articles and talks, from self-proclaimed Masonic experts. The Orator scheme may correct this problem.

It is difficult enough to be absolutely certain about events that occurred only 60 years ago in World War II despite the availability of a wealth of written and photographic evidence. How much more difficult is it to get at the truth of events that occurred 200 or 300 years ago when the participants in those events were reluctant to put anything in writing. In both the recent and distant past, 'reports' are distorted by political pressures, bias and downright reporting inaccuracy either deliberate or accidental.

Masonic History is a question of probability. Some interpretations can be considered 'probably true' others as 'possibly true' some as 'unlikely' and the remainder 'virtually impossible'. There is rarely 'absolute truth' but all too often what is 'possible' is presented as 'fact' and therein lies the danger.

Where evidence is scarce, as it often is when dealing with Masonic history, speculation may be valuable as long as the speaker or writer makes it clear to the audience that the thoughts are just speculative. Speculation can be a thought provoking and interesting. Maybe, it can promote discussion and even open new avenues of research.

We need to be particularly aware of the inaccuracies which abound in the popular non-fiction works which purport to contain serious historic research. Their main aim is not accuracy but popularity. The formula used in these works of fiction, is to make statements such as "It has been tentatively suggested that Freemasonry has its roots in the Knights Templar" [No reference given of course]. Later in the same book can be found the statement "...as has been shown, Freemasonry developed from the Knights Templar.". Speculation suddenly becomes a fact on which further dubious speculation is developed.

The works of popular fiction are harmless. Good tales, an easy read with intertwined fact and fiction. We would not believe anything contained in these excellent books any more than we would believe in the exploits of Sherlock Holmes.

The insistence by some self styled Masonic Historians, that their interpretation of our history is the absolute undeniable truth, is particularly dangerous. As an illustration of how a probability can, over the years if repeated often enough, become 'a fact', consider the date given and accepted for the formation of the premier Grand Lodge of 24th June (John the Baptist Day) 1717 when at an assembly and feast, Mr. Anthony Sayer, Gentleman, was elected Grand Master of Masons¹..

This date was given by Dr. Anderson in his Book and Constitution of 1738 but there is, as far as I know, no independent verification of this date although no one at the time challenged Anderson's date.

Anderson also said that when the 'old brothers' met at the Apple Tree, they agreed to constitute themselves into a Grand Lodge and forthwith *revived the quarterly communication*² and also referred to an earlier Grand Lodge, which had failed due to the neglect of its Grand Master Sir Christopher Wren, who suffered from bad health in his later years. At the time, no one challenged these statements either.

We ACCEPT Anderson's 1717 date although there is no contemporary supporting evidence. We want to believe it so it's accepted and becomes thought of as more or less fact. But when Anderson mentions a 'revival' and Wren, we decide that it was written for 'effect' and is a fabrication despite there being some supporting evidence. We don't want it to be true so it's deemed by the so called 'experts' to be a fiction and dismissed without any justification.

This is quite illogical and an unsupportable attitude.

A more rational approach would be to say that, based on the evidence of Anderson's 1738 Constitution, the date of 1717 is probably true and, with other supporting evidence, the existence of an earlier Grand Lodge is a slim possibility.

The sole point I wanted to make is that the so called 'experts' tell us what evidence we are allowed to believe and what evidence we are to ignore because the source, they say, is unreliable. Worse, they never say why we should ignore the bits that don't happen to fit in with their entrenched interpretation of the evidence. We all have a duty to look at the evidence, such as it is, and, together with the literature from reliable historians, make up our own mind what to accept and what to reject.

As a further, although rather different example. The date of 1725 is often quoted, by even the most respected authors, for the formation of the Grand Lodge of Ireland. Bro Yoshio Washizu in his paper points out that "We have no knowledge about the origin of the Grand Lodge of Ireland except for an account in the Dublin Weekly Journal (26th June, 1725), we know it was in operation in 1725 and assume it had existed for some time previously."³

Far too often the Masonic 'experts' will make statements implying that what they say is the absolute truth and not to be questioned, when in fact it is no more than a probability. Those who follow then accept the statement as absolute truth. It isn't! These 'experts' always fail to mention any evidence that contradicts their view of 'the truth'.

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¹ Anderson's Constitution of 1738 (See www.kessinger.net)

² The Grand Lodge of England by Bro. A. R. Hewitt, AQC, Vol. 80 pp 210

³ "Critical Reading of Masonic Literature" by Yoshio Washizu. AQC Vol. 114 pp200.