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Jessica L. Harland-Jacobs. *Builders of Empire: Freemasonry and British Imperialism, 1717-1927.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. xiv + 384 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3088-8.

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More Equal Than Others

In the nineteenth century, few institutions within the British Empire could rival the importance and prestige of freemasonry. The list of prominent masons read like a roll call of military and administrative icons: Nelson, Wellington, Dalhousie, Carnarvon, and Kitchener. As a woman, Queen Victoria herself could not be a mason, but her father, her uncles, and her sons were. Ambitious men throughout Victoria's realm sought to join the masons; according to one estimate, the number of lodges across the empire increased from 1,350 at Victoria's accession to 3,650 just fifty years later (pp. 253-260).

Beginning in the eighteenth century, masonry spread along with the empire, and facilitated the work of empire. As Jessica L. Harland-Jacobs observes, it was perhaps the very first secular non-governmental organization to offer its membership a reliable worldwide presence (pp. 44, 101). Even those who joined out of admiration for its cosmopolitan ideals could also appreciate the practical benefits that masonry offered to deracinated merchants and military men in need of emotional and financial support. Joining the masons meant that you now had a surrogate family that would supply a safety net for you–and your dependents–no matter which continent you started from, and no matter where you wound up (p. 208).

Builders of Empire explores the limits of fraternity, and also the ways that the movement gradually overcame some of them. Indebted to Enlightenment thought, the masons proposed a cosmopolitan standard for membership, but even wealthy men from the wrong social, ethnic, or religious background often found that they had difficulty joining their local lodge. In Ireland, masonry failed to live up to its inclusive ideals, in part because the Catholic Church condemned the movement, but also because Irish Protestants actively sought to make Catholics unwelcome. Another failure involved the mistreatment of social climbers, who sometimes successfully joined a lodge and served it well, but received reminders that their dishonorable origins in a lowly trade had not been forgotten. Harland-Jacobs highlights cases in which persons from despised groups (former slaves, freed Australian convicts, Muslims, and other non-Christians in India) overcame resistance and joined the masons, but she also shows that throughout the period covered in her book, most lodges charged such high dues that only the

wealthy could contemplate membership. Brotherhood, however cherished within the lodge, was not seen as vitiating social inequalities outside the lodge–not even between members who "met on the level" as masons (p. 115).

Considering the elaborately aproned and medallioned figures in her photographs, Harland-Jacobs offers surprisingly little discussion of the role played by ritual and aesthetics. This aspect of masonry must have played some role in the movement's popularity. It would originally have been designed to communicate masonry's much-vaunted ideals to the rank-and-file membership. The medium was, or should have been, in harmony with the message. At one point, she enumerates a long list of ritual paraphernalia requested by a new lodge in Australia, but the significance of these objects is never interrogated. On another page, she refers to Masonic "props," (p. 198), not intentionally a belittling term, but one that surely does not do justice to the energy–and expense–that went into the public parades and private rituals.

How did the participants feel about these elaborate exercises? What did they think about while they were enacting them? *Builders of Empire* would have benefited from the example of Scott Hughes Myerly's *British Military Spectacle: From the Napoleonic Wars through the Crimea* (1996), which acknowledged that for many army officers, the aesthetic dimension was actually the one that counted most. Many influential masons came from a military background, so they may even have seen the uniforms, marching, and rigorous adherence to protocol as a close analogue to the army's traditions. Harland-Jacobs is inclined to see hypocrisy in the numerous instances where lodges ignored or contravened seemingly indispensable masonic ideals such as cosmopolitanism; does this assume too much intellectual depth in men who may have joined the masons principally for the show and ceremony?

On a related note, this book would have benefited from some deeper reflection about architecture. The masons enacted building in their rituals, but they also built in the most literal sense, signposting their presence throughout the empire with meeting halls that were meant to catch the eye. Certainly, the decision to erect these sometimes massive edifices fits in with one of Harland-Jacobs' main themes, the nineteenth-century campaign to dispel all suspicions that freemasons were a furtive conspiracy against the established order. What other functions did these buildings serve? Were they intended primarily to shape the movement's image among the uninitiated, to demonstrate civic pride by contributing to a dignified "skyline," or to impress masons who might visit from elsewhere? How did the buildings enrich the experience of membership for the local masons who contributed substantial sums for their construction and subsequent maintenance?

Two of the most intriguing photographs in *Builders of Empire* face each other on pages 200 and 201. Both are from Transvaal, South Africa in the late 1890s. Harland-Jacobs presents them without comment. The first picture is of Gold Fields Lodge No. 2478. It is only two stories, but it presents an extremely elegant faÃ§ade, topped with a long balustrade supporting a series of urn-shaped ornaments. The second picture is of Fordsburg Lodge No. 2718. The meeting hall shares the one-story building with a butcher shop (the large sign says "wholesale and retail"). The only decorative element visible from the street is a few cast-iron brackets in a filigree pattern, a cheap ornament that appeared in most railway stations and bandstands. The interior furnishings of the two buildings, presumably, differed along the same lines; all masons were equal, but some lodges were "more equal than others," in George Orwell's phrase.

For masons in the Transvaal, however, the contrast that mattered most may have been a different one, between the rough, boomtown ambiance (and cutthroat commercial rivalries) outside the meeting hall and the dignified, soothing, atmosphere of brotherhood inside it. This would have been true even for the members of the Fordsburg Lodge, who had to suffer the indignity of sharing a frontage with a sausage factory. It is a familiar observation that the expensive furnishings of the late Victorian public house flattered its humble, beer-swilling customers, who could never afford such grandeur in their own homes; an equivalent point could be made about the appeal of the imperial masonic lodge for its somewhat better-off constituency of businessmen and adventurers on the make in "foreign" parts.

It may seem churlish to suggest that a book which ranges from Nova Scotia to New South Wales (and many points in between) should have encompassed still more territory, but I will do so anyway. The tensions between mother and daughter lodges within the British Empire supplied Harland-Jacobs with the bulk of her archival material. The metropolitan eagerness to position Britain on the correct side of history, however, reminded me of Christopher Leslie Brown's *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (2006). Brown argues that the idealism of the British crusade against the slave trade was pro-

foundly shaped by an anxiety for Britain to appear more noble than the other Great Powers. The Brown thesis may have a lot to tell us about the extraordinary growth of British freemasonry in this period, particularly when it found ways to make British dominance look inclusive and egalitarian (without, of course, changing the way they dealt with the overwhelming majority of their colonized subjects). The masonic embrace of former slaves (in the Americas) and Muslims (in Asia) had considerable international propaganda value, particularly if British masons could boast that they had outpaced their French or Dutch counterparts. Or were British masons lagging behind? *Builders of Empire* is an admirable foray into global history, but it does not fully address the relationship with rival masonries outside the English-speaking world that may have stimulated, or accelerated, some of the transformations it describes.

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