ENGLISH SPECULATIVE FREEMASONRY – Some Possible Origins, Themes and Developments

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The wording of my somewhat provocative title has been chosen very carefully!

- The Lecture focuses on only 18th century English Freemasonry and ignores much other evidence from, say, Scotland which may indicate Masonic activities were earlier.
- It deals exclusively with the origins of the broad themes, or ideas and notions, that are espoused today and are enshrined in Preston’s famous *Syllabuses*. 
And if time permits...

- I shall try to indicate some possible future ideational developments – absolutely necessary if the Craft is to survive by appealing to young men of the modern age and by concentrating, directing and retaining their interest and whole-hearted involvement.
An initial, crucial and valid distinction must be drawn between

- ‘Freemasonry’ as a social institution – with a structured organisational hierarchy & rules, premises, etc., and
- ‘Freemasonry’ as a body of moral values & ideational aspirations that our members adhere to and try to practice.

My focus will be on the latter!
Freemasons have always sought, perhaps instinctively, for clues about their origins...

- This quest is entirely understandable. Antiquity brings a legitimacy, an authority, a sense of unbroken tradition and belonging, a social acceptability – particularly important when recruiting new members, of course.
- This quest is mirrored by similar claims for antique origins among nearly all other Friendly Societies, learned societies, etc. but that hardly makes it valid.
- It has always been present among speculative freemasons even from the start of the Premier Grand Lodge; e.g., with Anderson’s extraordinary extrapolations back to Adam as the first GM!
Some examples to clarify this distinction for you…

- It’s the sort of distinction between, say, a golf club and the game of golf played there;
- or between a coal mine and the coal mined there;
- or between a theatre and the plays enacted there.

- This distinction helps to justify why I have carefully limited my inquiries in this Lecture.
But this paper ignores all previous well-intentioned and diligent attempts to find

- The earliest trace of the use of the words ‘Lodge’, ‘Mason’, ‘Freemason’ etc. because those theories focus on just ‘Freemasonry’ as a social institution.

- Evidence of influences from, for example, the druids, the ancient classical Mysteries, the ancient Egyptians, the Knights Templar, even the mediaeval operative stonemasons etc., etc.
And why do I refuse to be beguiled by these seemingly attractive siren voices?

- There are far too many obvious gaps in the time sequence, gaps that are far too long, and gaps that are ignored by the proponents!
- Besides, the evidence they adduce is too ‘scrappy’ by far.
- I prefer to deal with sure evidence – not to chase myths!
- Hence, I focus not on ‘Freemasonry’ as a social institution but on ‘Freemasonry’ as an identifiable body of moral ideas and aspirations.
‘Freemasonry’ was the creation of English Enlightenment Thinking

- It is my contention that it is only from the 18th century that sufficient quantities of documentary evidence become available to allow us to understand what the pioneers actually thought, believed, understood & practised in their ‘Freemasonry’,

- and so allow us to draw substantive & verifiable general inferences about the nature of early English speculative ‘Freemasonry’.
There were two broad ‘Stages’ in the accumulation of this properly identifiable documentary evidence

- a ‘Stage I’ – from late 14th century to c. 1730
- a ‘Stage II’ – from late 1760s to end of 18th century (i.e., the era of William Preston and his associates in the Lodge of Antiquity) containing a huge expansion of ideas that were incorporated by zealous Brethren into ‘Freemasonry’ and which are now accepted as the epitome of Masonic learning.
‘Stage I’ – the evidence available

- 113 surviving ‘Old Constitutions’ – others may be discovered in due time; they enshrine basic Trinitarian Christianity & operative stonemasons’ regulations and legends/myths; probably used by early Lodges to legitimise their proceedings.

- 15 Catechetical texts up to c.1730 (‘cribs’) in which the entire First Degree is summed up in only 37 Questions & Answers.
What they can provide for us

- Neither type of document was written for profit or spite – therefore they are credible sources of what early 18th century freemasons really believed and were expected to know.
- Indeed, they provide us with useful summaries of all that freemasons then were expected to know and espouse: i.e., they indicate the range of their ideas some of which were later incorporated into Preston’s scheme in the latter half of the 18th century.
Assessing the ideational contents of ‘Stage I’

♦ Prof. Wallace MacLeod has usefully given us a synoptic analysis of the contents of his own reconstruction of all of the ideas contained in an Ur-text of the 113 ‘Old Constitutions’.

♦ Harry Carr diligently gave us his similar analysis of the contents of the 15 early Catechetical documents.
But the ideational contents of this ‘Stage I’

- Are found to be very basic stuff!
- Imagine, if we could, that we might time travel back to witness their occasional meetings.
- We would hardly recognise much of what is now taken to be ‘Freemasonry’ in what they did and said.
A detailed synopsis of the contents of ‘Stage II’…

- was formulated in this Lodge in the late 1960s & early 1970s
- But no analysis of the general philosophical notions contained therein has been attempted until now.
‘Stage II’ (i.e., Preston *et alia*) – some of the characteristic notions that finally coalesced in 18th century at about Preston’s time

- The names used to refer to God: e.g., ‘The Grand Geometrician’
- Recurring images of God as a benevolent interventionist
- Recurring clockwork images of the universe
- Sustained emphasis on measuring & quantification and other mathematical concepts
- Obsession with symmetry & patterning: e.g., ‘triplicities’
- Much emphasis on codes, encrypting, secrecy & typological exegesis.
What is more there are human dimensions of ‘Stage II’

- Perfectibility of human nature (that can be brought about by participation in the Craft)
- Homogeneity of human nature – men are the same everywhere
- Ethical ‘mechanics’ creating a harmony that mirrors that in the heavens
- Living utopia via the associationalism of the Lodges
- The Craft’s universal and universalising mission in the world
- The freemason as the instinctively ‘good natured man’
More general features of ‘Stage II’

- Its apparent coherence as a totally integrated ‘package’
- Its eclecticism
- Its sheer exuberant self-confidence
And all of these ideas

Surely bring us a very long way from the simplicity of ‘Stage I’ and from any possible connection - if such existed - with medieval operative stonemasons’ yards.
Of course some of these ideas certainly flourished separately long before the 18\textsuperscript{th} century…

- But it was only in the first decades of that era that they finally coalesced into that coherent body of ideas we now recognise as ‘Enlightenment thinking’.
So the basic historical question becomes...

- How did Preston and his associates in the Lodge of Antiquity get from the relative primitivism of ‘Stage I’ to their encyclopaedic ‘Stage II’?
- How were they able to make the necessary intellectual leaps to collect and incorporate so much ‘expanded’ material into ‘Freemasonry’?
Let’s look first at Bro. William Preston (1742-1818) himself...

- A Scot who found early London employment with a notable King’s Printer – therefore enjoyed daily professional exposure to some leading intellectuals
- His simultaneous membership of many London Lodges
- His long employment as the Clerk to successive (absentee?) Grand Secretaries
- How he started on his Masonic researches
- His working methods – his ‘magpie’ mind; Preston not an original thinker but he knew who to ask!
- What he found that was useful that was already being practised in London Lodges.
Early Documentary Evidence of Masonic Cerebration before Preston started on the compilation of his Syllabuses

- Dr Robert Plot – an early 17th century testimony
- Randle Holme III & Elias Ashmole – two of the earliest (17th century) English gentlemen initiates
- Anderson’s claims about intellectuals becoming members of the Craft (in his 1723 & 1738 Books of Constitutions)
- Smith’s Pocket Companion, 1735 – evidence of ideational ‘extension’
- The Book M; or, Masonry Triumphant, 1736 – more evidence of ideational ‘extension’
- Martin Clare’s testimony in his 1735 Address – his stress on Lodge meetings being ‘conversations’.
- Charge V in the 1723 Book of Constitutions about discussions in Lodges.
- Thomas Edmondes’ testimony in his 1763 Address – an emphasis like Clare’s.
And in the 18th century

- Conversation was the mark of a civilized gentleman
- Through polite discourse – a corporate interchange that could be simultaneously challenging, stimulating and intellectually pleasing – ‘self-improvement’ could be brought about.
- Moreover, up to 1770 in Lodges up to 16% (in London) & 26% (in Provinces) came from landowners and emergent professions: i.e., just the sort of men who would have been among the most articulate sectors of Hanoverian society.
Consider then some ritual advances…

- The rise of the Third Degree – new legend and new ‘theological’ focus
- The rise of the Royal Arch rite – new complex symbolism etc.
- These both contain some huge conceptual steps away from ‘Stage I’
- This could only have been generated from within Lodges then meeting.
Some new ‘negative’ evidence of this masonic cerebration occurring...

- Consider the 1723 and 1725 Premier Grand Lodge membership lists
So where would you expect to find groups of intellectuals gathering regularly?

 Though there were other learned Societies functioning in the first half of the 18th century, let’s try the Royal Society for a start...
Some possible Royal Society influences on developing the ideational content of ‘Freemasonry’

♦ The popularising of Newtonian Philosophy with many books and public lectures by many of Newton’s ‘disciples’ who were FRS and also freemasons – it amounted to almost an orchestrated campaign

♦ Large numbers of early FRS who were also freemasons for several decades – but numbers are really too small to allow for substantial and accurate inferences to be made.
But there is some evidence discovered here for the first time...

- The Royal Society did have direct influences in devising Anderson’s 1723 & 1738 *Books of Constitutions* – clues are in his lists of those who helped him.
- Consider also some of the personal appointments that were made: FRS to GL & GL to FRS
- Consider too some of the close personal relationships that were crucial: e.g., Martin Folkes and Duke of Richmond, GM.
So let’s look at the careers and connections of two FRS who were also active & popular Freemasons before Preston began his work…

- Bro. William Stukeley
- Bro. John Byrom

These are just two examples of many similar men who might be mentioned.

- Usefully Stukeley dates from the beginning of the relevant period while Byrom was mainly active in the later part.
Bro. William Stukeley, MD, FRS, FSA (1687-1765)

- His rapid entry into the centre of London’s intellectual, social and Masonic activities
- His sustained fascination with KST matching that of his more famous Lincolnshire contemporary – Newton; models of KST on public display in exhibition rooms very close indeed to some Lodges’ meeting places
- His association with societies and clubs
- His self-proclaimed friendship with Newton
A new discovery!

- His newly discovered ‘secret’ club:
- the mixture of its members (freemasons & non-masons),
- the frequency of their meetings and the location,
- their preoccupations with all things ‘scientific’ and theological, cultural, artistic etc.
8 Portrait of John Byrom in middle life (from an etching by Dorning Rasbotham)
Bro. John Byrom, MA, FRS
(1691-1763)

- His appearance & ‘clubbable’ personality; a discrete Jacobite; member of Newton’s own Cambridge college, Trinity; a skilled cryptographer
- His mysterious ‘Cabala Club’ – facts now charted here for the first time!
  - Its origin & present-day reputation
  - Its various meeting places used by several London Lodges simultaneously
  - Its organisation and procedures – its formality; treasurer’s accounts, preparation of papers for discussions, etc.
  - Some topics which they discussed – now charted for the first time
  - Desaguliers’ remarkable visit to the club, 1729
  - The newly discovered 14 freemasons who were members of 10 different London Lodges – the proliferation of influences via them?
  - NB – the mixture of membership: freemasons and non-masons
  - Martin Folkes FRS, a diligent member of the Club & distinguished freemason - his contribution to furthering ‘Newtonianism’ by publishing Newton’s work on KST
  - Significance of the incident of the Duke of Richmond’s coach journey
The main unifying & levelling features of these clubs’ discussions were…

- Wide ranging, scientific & controversial topics – almost any subject was considered worthwhile
- Cosmopolitan & energetic
- Their fluency
- Impartiality & knowledgeable
- Their sheer excitement in making & reporting new discoveries.
Has shown that there were many hundreds of similar debating and lecture clubs in towns and cities throughout the country. Many lasted only briefly while others became firmly established; a few still exist today. They were mostly ephemeral because, unlike the Craft, they lacked any national organisation that purported to speak for them all (GL) and they lacked the Craft’s universalising mission.
So much for debating clubs, but what about the London Lodges then?

- Unfortunately, we have only the records of a very few Lodges in complete runs from the relevant period: i.e., before Preston and his associates started their work.
- Two of them are notable and deserve re-examination here: the Old King’s Arms Lodge and the Lodge of Friendship – both still famously existing as ‘Red Apron’ Lodges.
The wide range of their lectures in the 1730s & 1740s – here we have Enlightenment gentlemen ‘at play’

Frequent practical demonstrations in the upper rooms of the taverns used by the Lodge: e.g., even the occasional dissection of a cadaver!

The execution of a convicted felon by shooting: a spontaneous debate to try to decide on the velocity of sound.

Fermentation – a favourite topic for their demonstrations!

Eyeballs!
...meanwhile at the Lodge of Friendship

- Their insistence on having debates is enshrined in their By-laws – *intellectual improvement leading to expected moral improvement* – a favourite 18th century pre-occupation that can be detected in other sources too.
- An exhibition of crystals – followed by use of microscopes to examine them minutely.
- The dissection of a human eyeball one night!
- Metals in the service of Man – another lecture showing 18th century empiricism at work.
- Astronomy lectures – in keeping with the prevailing ‘Newtonianism’.
- Note: this was considered to be the perfectly proper work of a Lodge.
So what books did these pioneering freemasons collect and read?

- Consider first their personal libraries
- Next consider their book subscriptions.
Libraries owned by some 18\textsuperscript{th} century English Freemasons have been traced at last!

- Using the British Libraries huge collection of book sales catalogues I have been able to trace 36 Brethren who owned their own libraries.

- They range throughout the country and throughout the century.

- This is an entirely new and unexpected source of a wealth of material which will indicate directly and revealingly these Brethren’s intellectual interests.
William Hutchinson, F.S.A. 1732–1814
One swallow doesn’t make a summer, of course, but...

- Consider the case of Bro. William Hutchinson FSA (1732-1814), WM of the former Lodge of Concord in Barnard Castle, Co. Durham in the 1770s.
- The timely and particular use he made of his library to further the Masonic cause in 1775.
- Yes, he became masonically active after Preston and his associates started their work in London.
- This is a case which I know particularly well and it illustrates how these freemasons may have used their libraries to further the masonic cause.
18th Century Book Subscriptions by freemasons – a hitherto untapped, promising source of very useful data

♦ Book subscriptions’ uses in charting cultural history

♦ Lodges’ subscriptions to non-masonic texts: e.g., Palladio’s *De Architectura*

♦ The book subscriptions of two well-known freemasons (Martin Folkes & Richard Rawlinson) traced at last and for the first time!

♦ Lodges’ subscriptions to Masonic books – a hitherto unregistered example, from the end of the 18th century – Hutchinson’s *The Spirit of Masonry* (2nd edn., 1795).
RICHARD RAWLINSON, D.C.L.

From an Original Picture in the Bodleian Gallery, Oxford.
It is usually invidiously difficult to ascribe direct literary parallels and derivations but...

- Consider two unrelated 18\textsuperscript{th} century authors, Shaftesbury and Hartley, whose books were popular among freemasons then but who, curiously enough, have escaped the notice of masonic historians hitherto.
- (Certainly there will be yet others who can and will be traced, of course.)
Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713)

- He was never a freemason, nor a FRS but he obviously would know of them.
- His famous book, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (many edns.) is to be found in nearly all of the 36 libraries owned by 18th century freemasons traced so far.
- His writings were hugely popular then.
- Indeed, there is hardly any writer national significance of those days who was not influenced, directly or indirectly, by his ideas.
What were Shaftesbury’s key ideas?

- Human Nature is essentially benevolent; our natural impulses towards exercising humanitarian sentiments are in harmony with an orderly universe; his ‘amicable collision’ theme of social intercourse (echoed in First degree Charge) and entertained an exuberant confidence in human sociability and fellow feeling and was entirely committed to open-ended conversations, emphasising individual liberty & toleration for others.

- He presented a thoroughly materialistic view of ethics, not founded on traditional Judeo-Christian values, he insisted on a pragmatic worldliness while retaining some sense of transcendence.

- He had a thorough-going adherence to the prevailing ‘Newtonianism’ and formulated an optimistic assessment of a divinely created cosmos.

- Following his great mentor, John Locke, he espoused the notion that philosophy teaches & has practical, even therapeutic uses.

- His many quotations from classical and other authors and his support for an aesthetic of classical regularity appealed to contemporary taste while his use of the Socratic form of dialogue matched the Craft’s adherence to a catechismical form of instruction.

- He stood at the cross-roads between the ‘Ancients’ and the ‘Moderns’ approach to history, as did the 18th century freemasons.

- ‘Masons live to improve and improve to enjoy’ – an actual quotation!
David Hartley MA, FRS (1705-1757) – yet another Cambridge Man

- Though not a member of Byrom’s ‘Cabala’ Club, he was a loyal associate of Byrom and vigorously advocated the use of his shorthand system.

- Newton’s predication in Query 31 of his *Opticks* prophesised the possibility of a rigorous definition and extension to the bounds of Moral Philosophy similar to what he had already accomplished in Natural Sciences.

- Eventually Hartley took up this challenge with his book entitled *Observations on Man, his Frame, his Duty and His Expectations* (1747) – also found in every one of the 36 libraries owned by freemasons alluded to above.
Hartley’s main ideas were...

- A thoroughly unified view of the physiological, the ethical and the spiritual dimensions of human existence.
- The human individual can be properly seen as a ‘mechanism’ that is entirely susceptible to scientific study.
- His ethics too were not entirely dependent on traditional Judeo-Christian values and expectations.
What can this historical excursion teach us today?

- To get from ‘Stage I’ to ‘Stage II’ Preston and his associates drew on an already well established custom and wide-spread custom in the London Lodges and elsewhere for Enlightenment discussions and on popular ‘Newtonianism’.
- In fact, the materials were all around them.
But…

- Their undoubted achievement in systematically codifying ‘Freemasonry’ was done almost 230 or more years ago!
- Where then is ‘Stage III’ for this modern world?
- Or are we to assume that did Preston *et alia* said the last word?
- Can, indeed should, Preston be improved upon?
Our present predicament

- In the 19th and 20th centuries English Freemasonry may have become far too much enslaved in Preston’s ‘Stage II’ and in outward forms.
- Has our Freemasonry become ‘a body without a soul’, perhaps?
- Our approach to learning rituals seems to have become far too ‘set in concrete’.
- We don’t, as a rule, demand enough of the right things from our members. Huge amounts of leisure time, rote learning and money are not enough!
- English Freemasonry is seen by too many members as an unchanging and unchangeable entity.
- As such it may be doomed to fail eventually? Organisational entropy lurks! ‘Expect poison from still water’.
- The many Lecture Lodges have given valuable service over many years, but listening to lectures is largely a passive receptivity, which does not of itself promote ‘ownership’.
A recommendation for the future

- But in looking forward, perhaps we could do worse than to look back!
- Recommended – a return to a more 18\textsuperscript{th} century approach of \textit{daring to speculate} so that our members really can study ‘the Liberal Arts and Sciences’ and fathom ‘the hidden mysteries of Nature and Science’ \textit{as indeed we are specifically enjoined to attempt daily} (First and Second Degree respectively).
- \textbf{But do we ever do that in our Lodges?}
- Some examples of using our own existing ‘in house’ resources.
- Perhaps out of that admittedly long & gradual process \textbf{our} ‘Stage III’ will emerge eventually.
And what is more...

- Preston *et alia* did not consider their work to be finished – for them it was an on-going process!
- Hence the inter-leaved blank pages in the earliest preserved copies of the *Syllabuses*.
- Brethren were clearly expected to make their own additions, amendments, corrections etc. to his *Lectures*.
- **But have we the courage to take up their work again?**
I am NOT decrying repetitious cermoniality as such!

- **Used properly** ritual can be a potent, effective force – entry into the Craft should – indeed must bring about a real, qualitative change in a man’s whole life!
- Its ‘Wonder Bra’ effect.
- Memory training – no bad thing either (Art of Memory).
- Besides, it consolidates & helps to unify members.
- **BUT** it (and it alone) is, indeed it cannot be, enough in the modern age, with modern men’s higher expectations and spiritual yearnings, less deference to authority, less security in work patterns, lateral thinking and decision-taking etc., etc.
So let me return finally to my previous question…

- Do we have the courage, the audacious insight, the sense of mission in this world that Preston and his associates developed?
- Can we dare to step off with the left foot into largely uncharted territory in order to bring about our own ‘Stage III’?
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