1 Introduction

The origin of Freemasonry is one of the most debated, and debatable, subjects in the whole realm of historical inquiry.[1]

[Masonic history is] a department of history which is not only obscure and highly controversial, but by ill luck the happiest of all hunting grounds for the light-headed, the fanciful, the altogether unscholarly and the lunatic fringe of the British Museum Reading Room.[2]

... the wealth of old Masonic records in Scotland, so strangely neglected by those who possess it.[3]

The evidence relating to the emergence of modern freemasonry is complex, confusing, and often fragmentary. The purpose of this introduction is to help readers gain their bearings before plunging into the jungle of more detailed arguments and explanations.

Masonic history

This book is a study of the emergence in seventeenth-century Scotland of freemasonry, a brotherhood of men bound together by secret initiations, by secret rituals, and by secret modes of identification, organised in groups known as lodges. The functions of these lodges, and the attraction they had for those seeking admission were various. At first, and in some cases well into the eighteenth century, one of the basic functions of many of the lodges was regulating the working lives of stonemasons. But from the start social and ritual functions lay at the heart of the lodges. Already by the mid seventeenth century ideals resembling in many respects those of modern freemasonry can be detected in the lodges, and significant numbers of men who were not stonemasons were being admitted to these lodges.

This study is based as far as possible on contemporary written sources, evaluated like other historical sources. This should go without saying, but in

[1] F. Yates, *The Rosicrucian enlightenment* (Paladin edn, Frogmore, 1975), 252.
[2] Quoted in Knoop, *Genesis*, 5.
[3] R. J. Meekren, comment in discussion in *AQC*, 58 (1955), 83.

view of the strong tendency of many people either, at one extreme, to believe the most implausible fables about masonic history, and at the other extreme to dismiss all evidence relating to the history of freemasonry as totally untrustworthy, it is worth stressing the obvious: that masonic history should follow the rules accepted for other branches of history. As the outstanding twentieth-century historians of early freemasonry, Knoop and Jones, wrote in 1946,

> whereas it has been customary to think of masonic history as something entirely apart from ordinary history, and as calling for, and justifying, special treatment, we think of it as a branch of social history, as the study of a particular social institution and of the ideas underlying that institution, to be investigated and written in exactly the same way as the history of other social institutions.[4]

Unfortunately these sentiments have failed to free masonic history from the ghetto to which it has all too often been consigned by the narrow historical outlook of many masons combined with the unreasoning prejudice of professional historians. Knoop and Jones themselves failed to provide a properly balanced approach to masonic history, for it should not be seen as a branch of social history, but simply as a branch of history; and though they talked of social history this often in practice turned out to mean economic history. Thus other aspects of the historical context within which freemasonry developed – political, religious, intellectual, cultural and even social – have continued to be neglected, and what economic history in isolation could reveal about freemasonry turned out to be distinctly limited.

Moreover, in their enthusiasm for freeing masonic history from past absurdities and excesses, Knoop and Jones dictated very narrow and puritanical definitions of the role of the historian which appear to have influenced some later writers into hardly daring to say anything. The duty of the historian, masonic or otherwise,

> is to hunt for facts and verify conclusions, and not to fill in gaps either by the dangerous argument of analogy ... or by an equally dangerous exercise of the imagination ... There are undoubtedly numerous gaps in the history of freemasonry, but to fill them, not by the successful search for new facts, but by the use of the imagination, is to revert to the mythical or imaginative treatment of the subject.[5]

This stark creed has been valuable in raising the standards of masonic history, but in trying to cure the excesses of one extreme it goes too far in the opposite direction by suggesting that the historian must limit activity to the collection of facts. These facts, it seems, may then be left virtually to speak for themselves, and where facts are lacking all the historian can do is seek new

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[4] Knoop, *Genesis*, v. For a brief sketch of the main schools of masonic history see *ibid.*, 2–5.
[5] D. Knoop and G. P. Jones, *The scope and method of masonic history* (Manchester Association for Masonic Research, Oldham, 1944), 9.

facts. If they cannot be found no attempt should be made to fill the gap. Fortunately, in practice Knoop and Jones showed themselves to be much more sophisticated historians than this suggests. What they really meant to banish was not imagination but invention, for they were denouncing the tendency to invent convenient facts to fill gaps or add glory to freemasonry's past. Imagination is in fact an essential item in the historian's toolkit, both in trying to make sense of facts and in speculating when facts are lacking, though it must of course be intelligent and informed imagination, and it must be made clear where fact ends and interpretation and speculation begin. The same is true of the use of analogies: potentially dangerous in the wrong hands, but powerful and enlightening when sensitively employed.

Thus though much of this book is based on sound documentary evidence, I make no apology for the fact that it also contains much in the way of tentative interpretation and imaginative guesswork. It is hoped this is plausible, and wherever possible is based on whatever scraps of evidence survive, but this the reader must judge. The 'facts' are frequently stubborn, refusing to speak for themselves and demanding interpretation if they are to make any sense, and speculation abounds when facts fail altogether. The alternative would be to present a heap of disjointed facts, which would be an abdication of the historian's duty to do all that is possible to make the past comprehensible. As many aspects of early freemasonry are obscure, the book is littered with phrases such as 'it is possible that', 'it may well be that' and 'it would seem that' – clumsy but necessary to draw the reader's attention to the problems and uncertainties inevitably involved in attempting to fill those gaps which Knoop and Jones in their severer moments would have insisted should be left unfilled.

Though the work of Knoop and Jones may be criticised in some respects, their work provides a strong and essential foundation for masonic history, vastly superior to what had preceded it: criticising them is a backhanded compliment, for they must be taken seriously and their works should still be studied, whereas most attempts to write the early history of freemasonry are best ignored, relegated to merciful oblivion. Further, in criticising aspects of the approach of Knoop and Jones to masonic history I have the advantage of being able to call on the conclusions of a great deal of non-masonic historical research which were not available to them. Such research has widened the horizons of historians in a number of ways, opening up whole new fields of study relevant to freemasonry. Outstanding here has been the work of Frances Yates into previously obscure areas of Renaissance thought. Though she never specifically investigated freemasonry she speculated acutely on several occasions that the themes she was studying must link up with it somehow. Chapter 5 seeks to prove that she was right.

Beginning in Britain, freemasonry swept across Europe in the mid eighteenth century in the most astonishing fashion. The claim is often made

that the creation of modern freemasonry dates from the foundation of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717. In fact that date is almost an irrelevance in the long process of development of the movement, for though the English Grand Lodge came in time to play a major role in organising freemasonry, when founded it merely brought together four London lodges: 'At the time, the formation of Grand Lodge was an event of very minor importance in the development of freemasonry, and in no sense constituted a milestone in masonic history.'[6] Nonetheless, the fact that England can claim the first move towards national organisation through grand lodges, and that this was copied subsequently by Ireland (*c.*1725) and Scotland (1736), has led to many English masonic historians simply taking it for granted that freemasonry originated in England, which then gave it to the rest of the world. Thus we get confident statements such as 'There can be little doubt that speculative freemasonry was originally wholly of English growth.'[7] But when the seventeenth-century evidence relating to the development of freemasonry is examined, it is immediately apparent that documentary evidence is astonishingly copious in Scotland, almost entirely absent in England. This has often been perceived as an embarrassment, and a number of arguments more ingenious than plausible have been put forward to explain away the overwhelmingly Scottish provenance of the evidence to pander to the patriotic prejudices of English masons.[8] This is startlingly illustrated by the various editions of the standard full-scale history of freemasonry, written by Robert Gould. In the first edition of 1884–7 Gould very sensibly dealt with early Scottish freemasonry before early English freemasonry, as so much Scottish evidence pre-dated equivalent English evidence. But the heretical implications of this arrangement were too much for English twentieth-century masonic editors. Consciously or unconsciously responding to their built-in assumptions of English primacy, chapters were swapped round so that early Scottish freemasonry was considered not only after English but after Irish freemasonry! No doubt this arrangement was justified by the order in which the national grand lodges were founded, but the result is an absurdity. Much of the evidence discussed in chapters on early English freemasonry is in fact Scottish evidence, as the English evidence on its own is too slight to make a coherent account possible.[9]

One of the major innovations of the great partnership of Knoop and Jones was to stress the importance of the Scottish contribution to the making of freemasonry, and this proved one of the most controversial aspects of their

[6] Knoop, *Genesis*, 321.
[7] B. E. Jones, *Freemasons' guide and compendium* (London, 1950), 96. See also J. Hamill, *The Craft. A history of English freemasonry* (1986), 19, 27.
[8] E.g., E. Ward, 'Operative entered apprenticeship', *AQC*, 70 (1957), 19; R. E. Wallace-James, 'The minute book of Aitchison's Haven Lodge', *AQC*, 24 (1911), 44.
[9] R. F. Gould, *The history of freemasonry* (6 vols., London, 1884–7), ed. Dudley Wright (5 vols., London, 1931), ed. H. Poole (4 vols., London, 1951).

work.[10] But their understanding of the Scottish contribution was inevitably limited by the fact that they studied it within an English framework, as they still regarded freemasonry as an essentially English movement, instead of placing it in the context of Scottish history. This book seeks to rectify this by looking at the Scottish seventeenth-century developments initially as part of the history of the country they take place in, and only then seeking to relate them to what was happening in England. This new perspective, it is hoped, will throw much new light on the origins of freemasonry. The end date for the study, about 1710, is inevitably arbitrary, but has been chosen as marking approximately the point at which the popularity of masonry in England led to developments there which ended the period of Scottish domination of early freemasonry. The book is thus about the 'Scottish phase' in the development of freemasonry. Considering the wealth of the Scottish early masonic records[11] surprisingly few attempts have been made to write histories of Scottish freemasonry. The first, that of David Murray Lyon in 1873,[12] produced a vast and chaotic heap of valuable information disguised as a history of the Lodge of Edinburgh. Georg Begemann produced a history which at least admitted in its title what it was, but did so in Germany and at a time, 1914, when German works were unlikely to receive widespread distribution or a welcome in Britain.[13] These are the only substantial previous attempts to provide a history of freemasonry in Scotland, for though Knoop and Jones produced a book on *The Scottish mason and the Mason Word* in 1939, the first of the two studies it contained was almost exclusively concerned with economic history, though the second was of great value in demonstrating conclusively that the Mason Word was a Scottish institution.[14]

The origins of freemasonry

In tracing the direct line of descent of modern freemasonry, the starting point undoubtedly lies in England, in the documents known as the 'Old Charges' or 'Old Constitutions'. Like other Medieval trades the masons had their craft organisations or guilds, and their mythical histories stressing the antiquity and importance of their crafts, closely linking them with religious and moral concepts. The crafts also had their secrets, relating to techniques and working practices. Masons doubtless had some sort of ceremony or ritual to mark the initiation of new members of the craft, but in this they were no different from other crafts. But the English masons were peculiar in one

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[10] Jones, *Guide*, 133.   [11] These records are fully listed in Inventory.

[12] D. M. Lyon, *History of the Lodge of Edinburgh (Mary's Chapel), No. 1, embracing an account of the rise and progress of freemasonry in Scotland* (London, 1873, 2nd edn, London, 1900)

[13] Georg E. W. Begemann, *Vorgeschichte und Anfinge der Freimaurerie in Schottland. Buch 1. Die alten schottischen Werklogen* (Berlin, 1914). See D. Knoop and G. P. Jones, *Begemann's History of freemasonry* (privately printed, 1941), 9–10.

[14] Knoop, *Scottish mason.*

respect by the fifteenth century: their mythical trade history, contained in the Old Charges, was unusually elaborate. This lore was to make a significant contribution to freemasonry through its emphasis on morality, its identification of the mason craft with geometry, and the importance it gave to Solomon's Temple and ancient Egypt in the development of the mason craft. Nonetheless, to speak of 'freemasonry' in the modern sense in the Middle Ages is anachronistic; there is no indication that the mason trade was to be singled out from the rest for a remarkable and unique future.

The Medieval contribution, of craft organisation and legend, provided some of the ingredients essential to the formation of freemasonry, but the process of combining these with other ingredients did not take place until the years around 1600, and it took place in Scotland. Aspects of Renaissance thought were then spliced onto the Medieval legends, along with an institutional structure based on lodges and the rituals and the secret procedures for recognition known as the Mason Word. It is in this late Renaissance Scottish phase, according to the main argument of this book, that modern freemasonry was created.

In the course of the seventeenth century men at all levels of society became intrigued by the secrets of the stonemasons and their claims that their craft had a unique intellectual status, and some of these outsiders were initiated into lodges. Initiation of gentlemen into lodges in England is also recorded from the 1640s, but the process there is much more obscure. The link with working stonemasons and their organisations was weak, and the secrets possessed by English masons and their organisation in lodges seem to have derived from Scotland suggesting that, whereas in Scotland freemasonry grew out of the genuine practices of working stonemasons, in England it was in part at least imported from Scotland, with lodges being from the first created by gentlemen and for gentlemen. But from the early eighteenth century the English began to innovate and adapt the movement, though Scottish influence remained strong, and at this point England took over the lead in the development of freemasonry from Scotland. Moreover, the movement was changing in other ways. The Scottish phase, that of the Renaissance contribution, was being succeeded by a new phase – in both Scotland and England – in which some of the values which were to be associated with the Enlightenment were incorporated into the movement: as the Age of Reason dawned freemasonry, Renaissance in origin, was adapted to fit a new climate.

Medieval, Renaissance and Enlightenment influences had blended together to create an institution that seemed to reflect the progressive spirit of the age, with ideals of brotherhood, equality, toleration and reason. Yet even as freemasonry emerged and spread as a world-wide movement, it diversified in the most bewildering way. It seems a protean institution that changes shape and content according to circumstances and membership. It could provide an

institutional framework for almost any religious or political belief. It could be committedly Catholic (until outlawed by the papacy) or protestant. It could nurture conspiracies of left or right. In Britain both Hanoverians and Jacobites were attracted to rival masonic allegiances. It is as if the lodge system, combined with secrecy, ideals of loyalty and secret modes of recognition, had created an ideal organisational framework, into which members could put their own values and which they could adapt for their own uses. Many of these variants arising from masonry which survive today are not recognised by British masonic organisations, being regarded as having abandoned the original ideals of the movement, but it is nonetheless true that masonry has provided the classic structure for secret organisations in the modern world.

Thus the development of masonry from the early eighteenth century is bewildering in its incoherent diversity. But the masonry of the grand lodges within Britain, and of other lodges they recognise elsewhere, retains to this day clear evidence of its late Renaissance and Scottish origins.

The Scottish evidence

The claim that it is in Scotland in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the essentials of modern freemasonry emerge is a large one, but the following list of 'firsts' that Scotland can claim on the basis of surviving sources is a crude indication of the evidence on which the claim rests:

> Earliest use of the word 'lodge' in the modern masonic sense, and evidence that such permanent institutions exist
> Earliest official minute books and other records of such lodges
> Earliest attempts at organising lodges at a national level
> Earliest examples of 'non-operatives' (men who were not working stonemasons) joining lodges
> Earliest evidence connecting lodge masonry with specific ethical ideas expounded by use of symbols
> Earliest evidence indicating that some regarded masonry as sinister or conspiratorial
> Earliest references to the Mason Word
> Earliest 'masonic catechisms' expounding the Mason Word and describing initiation ceremonies
> Earliest evidence of the use of two degrees or grades within masonry
> Earliest use of the terms 'entered apprentice' and 'fellow craft' for these grades
> Earliest evidence (within the Lodge of Edinburgh) of the emergence of a third grade, created by a move towards regarding fellow craft and master not as alternative terms for the same grade but as referring to separate grades (or at least status).

To set alongside all these Scottish masonic 'firsts' England can claim:

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Earliest copies of the Old Charges (no Scottish copies are known which pre-date
the mid seventeenth century)
Widespread use of the word 'freemason', and use of the term 'accepted mason'
Earliest lodge composed entirely of 'non-operatives' (which can be interpreted as
indicating how English masonry was, much more than Scottish, an artificial
creation, not something that grew out of the beliefs and institutions of working
stonemasons)
The earliest grand lodge

Of these, the Old Charges which developed in England were to become an
essential part of freemasonry, but they were not in their origins part of it,
while the other 'English' developments are late and, it might be argued,
comparatively superficial, not affecting the basic nature of the movement.

Up to the end of the sixteenth century there is no evidence indicating that
the masons of Scotland differed much from other types of craftsmen, except
that the nature of their trade meant that masons often moved from one place
to another in search of work. But from the 1590s evidence that the craft was
unique emerges with bewildering rapidity. In 1590 an Aberdeenshire laird
was confirmed as having hereditary jurisdiction over masons in Aberdeen-
shire and two other shires. In 1598 William Schaw, the king's master of
works, issued a code of statutes regulating the organisation and conduct of
masons. The following year surviving minutes of two lodges, Aitchison's
Haven and Edinburgh, begin, and the Lodge of Haddington also had at one
time records surviving from 1599. At the end of the year a second code of
statutes by Schaw was issued, partly addressed to Kilwinning Lodge and
mentioning also the lodges of Edinburgh and Stirling; and the Lodge of St
Andrews is mentioned in an Edinburgh minute. In 1600 or 1601 William
Schaw and representatives of five lodges confirmed the position of William
Sinclair of Roslin as hereditary patron of the craft; the five lodges included
one not referred to before, Dunfermline. Glasgow Lodge existed by 1613,
and a new confirmation of the rights of the Sinclairs of Roslin in 1627 or 1628
was signed by representatives of the previously unknown Lodge of Dundee.
In 1642 the remarkable minute books of Edinburgh and Aitchison's Haven,
covering the whole seventeenth century, are joined by those of Kilwinning
Lodge. In the 1650s the lodges of Linlithgow and Scone (Perth) are revealed;
the 1670s brings Aberdeen (perhaps), Melrose, Canongate, Kilwinning, and
Inverness, followed in the 1680s by Dumfries, and Canongate and Leith. The
rate at which new lodges are founded, or emerge from previous obscurity,
continues high in the final two decades covered by this study, with Kirkcud-
bright (probably), Dunblane and Hamilton in the 1690s and Kelso, Haugh-
foot, Banff, Kilmolymock (Elgin) and Edinburgh Journeymen in the first
decade of the eighteenth century. Thus we know (either certainly or in a few
instances on good though not conclusive evidence) of 25 lodges scattered
throughout Lowland Scotland and into the fringes of the Highlands,

including lodges in all the largest burghs: and it would be remarkable (considering that some are only known through single fragments of surviving evidence) if other lodges did not exist in this period of which all trace has been lost.

The term 'lodge' had been used long before the 1590s, but the lodges which then emerge are very different from their predecessors, as will be explained in chapter 3. These new masonic lodges are, it will be argued, from their first appearance, as much or more concerned with rituals and secrets as with regulating the working practices of stonemasons. Generally only the latter aspects of the work of the lodges get recorded in their minute books, but this is hardly surprising; by definition the secret is unlikely to be recorded, and historians of any institution know to their cost that minutes are likely to be silent on many of the most interesting features of its activities. However, other evidence of the existence of masonic rituals and secrets soon appears to eke out the occasional tantalising references which occur in minutes. From the 1630s there is a steady trickle of references to the Mason Word, a secret means of identification. All the earliest references are in non-masonic sources, but soon they are joined by ones in lodge records. From the mid seventeenth century there also emerge Scottish copies of the Old Charges. Finally, in the 1690s the first surviving masonic catechisms appear, detailing secret rituals of initiation.

From this mass of Scottish evidence a fairly coherent picture of seventeenth-century Scottish freemasonry can be drawn. Much remains unknown, and always will, but compared with the situation in England, where only isolated scraps of evidence of masonic activity survive, the historian of early Scottish freemasonry has remarkable wealth at his disposal.

Problems of definition

From the early seventeenth century onwards the Scottish 'operative' masons (working stonemasons) began to be joined in some lodges by 'non-operatives', men from other walks of life who wished to share in their rituals. If the first question facing the historian studying the origins of freemasonry is 'What were the secrets and rituals of the operative masons and how had they acquired them?', the second is 'Why did men who were not stonemasons wish to participate in the activities and secrets of the stonemasons, and what sort of men were these non-stonemasons who joined lodges?' Providing an answer to this latter question has been hindered by problems of terminology and attitudes. The terms usually used for the non-stonemasons who joined lodges are 'non-operative masons', 'gentlemen masons', and 'speculative masons'. The problem arises partly through the three terms often being assumed to be synonymous. Frequently this is not the case, for the term 'non-operative' contains a hidden ambiguity. Is a non-

operative a member of a lodge who is not a stonemason? Or is it a member who is not a working man (an 'operative') of any sort? Even the best masonic historians have tended to overlook this important ambiguity and conflate the two possible meanings. They tend to assume that the non-operatives whom they should identify and discuss are not 'all members who are not stone-masons', but 'all members who are not craftsmen', which is a much more limited group. Its members are by definition of higher social status, and can therefore be conveniently referred to as 'gentlemen masons'.[15] Thus an important group of members of some lodges, men who were operatives in that they were working men but who were not operative stonemasons, has fallen through a definitional gap and disappeared from view.

Problems of definition also arise when the terms operative and non-operative are applied not just to individuals but to lodges. An operative lodge is taken to be one which is made up mainly of stonemasons and is largely concerned with regulating the mason trade. So far so good. But there is a tendency to proceed to contrast 'operative' lodges of stonemasons with 'non-operative' lodges comprising mainly non-stonemasons. It is then assumed that the former type of lodge was largely concerned with functioning as a trade guild, regulating the craft, while the latter was concerned with esoteric rituals, freemasonry proper.

Thus the assumption imposed by the terminology, if one is not careful, is that operative lodges, made up of stonemasons, must do operative things; non-operative lodges of gentlemen or speculatives do speculative things. This may make some sense in an English context, where nearly all lodges were 'artificial' foundations by gentlemen, but it is totally inappropriate for Scotland where virtually all the pre-1710 lodges were originally, and often long remained, closely tied to the mason trade. The stonemasons in their 'operative' lodges were doing 'speculative' things long before gentlemen non-stonemasons came on the scene, so a terminology which insists that lodges of operatives must be largely concerned with operative functions forces distortion on the facts. The older masonic historians who invented these terms seem to have been influenced by the snobbish assumption that, though freemasonry recognised in its very name its connection with the mason trade, and based its ritual and symbolism on the trade's tools and practices, nonetheless mere working stonemasons could not have developed interesting rituals comparable with those of later freemasonry; that must have been the work of respectable, educated gentlemen. Thus speculative equals gentleman equals non-operative. Again the assumption may have some appropriateness in England, where at least the spread of lodges was largely in the hands of the gentry, but in Scotland the terminology can force mis-conceptions on the evidence in an interesting example of how use of an accepted terminology can, if it is not entirely appropriate, prescribe limits

[15] Knoop, *Genesis*, 129.˙