

Book Review

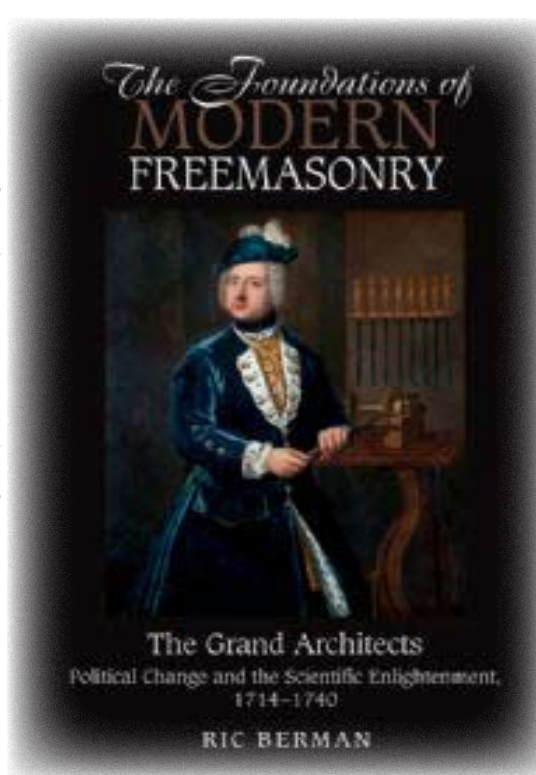
By Bro. Robert Blackburn, P.M.



THE FOUNDATIONS OF MODERN FREEMASONRY

While Masonic tradition holds (and certain authors and readers continue to fantasize) Freemasonry to be of great antiquity, this is simply not the fact. Today, there is overwhelming consensus within academic and scholarly Masonic circles that our ancient and honorable association is no more than a mere four hundred years old or so. The real debate, however, has been the process by which so-called operative lodges, a largely moribund collection of craft guilds, transformed into 'speculative' Masonry, a fraternal body formerly associated with aristocrats and intellectuals that now spans the globe.

In *The Foundations of Modern Freemasonry*, Ric Berman places the 'modern' Freemasonry's early years under a microscope, examining so-called 'transitional' masonry, early players the first Grand Lodge, and related social and political circles. Most interesting, and perhaps shocking for some, is his rejection that operative bodies as such 'evolved' into modern speculative lodges. On the contrary, Berman argues that a coterie of like minded intellectuals and aristocrats revolutionized the notion of a lodge in the early 1700s and created something entirely new – an overtly Whig social club, operating



under a central authority, which promoted tolerance, education, conviviality, and social networking. Chief among modern Freemasonry's architects and proponents, Berman notes, was the Rev. John Theophilus Desagliers – a member of London's French community, an endowed clergyman with aristocratic connections, and a Fellow of the Royal Society.

"Desagliers' approach to Freemasonry was bound up with personal, philosophical and political objectives, and Grand Lodge provided a means by which these could be advanced.

Largely motivated by self-interest, his pro-Hanoverian political views were shared by the Huguenot community as a whole and, more importantly, by many senior Whigs and entwined with Enlightenment theories and the natural rights of John Locke. The reinvention of Freemasonry as a bulwark of the Hanoverian status quo and enlightened thought led to its embrace by the Whig establishment and many of

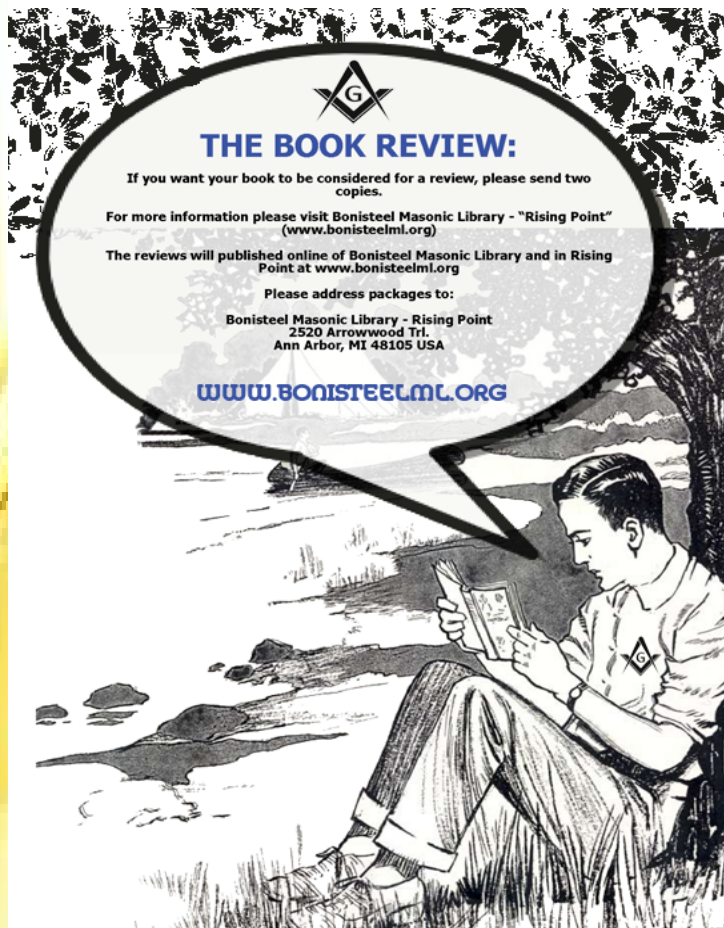
those at its political core. And the forum it provided for education and entertainment resonated with its aspirant members to the extent that it could be regarded as an outpost of the scientific Enlightenment."

Desagliers, George Payne, Martin Folkes, and other prominent modern Freemasons used their personal and political influence to mold the Order and extend its membership through a variety of civic, social, and intellectual networks, not least of which were the learned professions and, even more important, the military which carried their new fraternity around the world. It is the fruit of their labor, rather than the stone carvers and architects of old, which gave rise to the myriad forms of fraternal Freemasonry which we know and enjoy today.

Those wishing to retain the illusion of Masonry as a timeless mystery cult whose tentacles weave their way

from deepest antiquity to our modern world would do well to skip this book. Berman's walk through Hanoverian England and its players offers a critical and crucial insight into our Fraternity's underpinnings that helps set the historical record straight. He also provides some useful resources in his appendices including a list of English Grand Lodge Officers from 1717 – 40, a discussion of the Old Charges and early Regulations, a list of Irish, Scottish, English and other regimental lodges, and a list of selected Masons and the professional societies to which they belonged. Much new 'light' has indeed been provided here. No doubt Desagliers and our other formative, Enlightenment brothers would be pleased.

Ric Berman, *The Foundations of Modern Freemasonry: The Grand Architects – Political Change and the Scientific Enlightenment, 1714-1740* (Sussex Academic Press 2012, Hardback \$63.73/ \$39.95 Paperback USD)



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