

# Book Review

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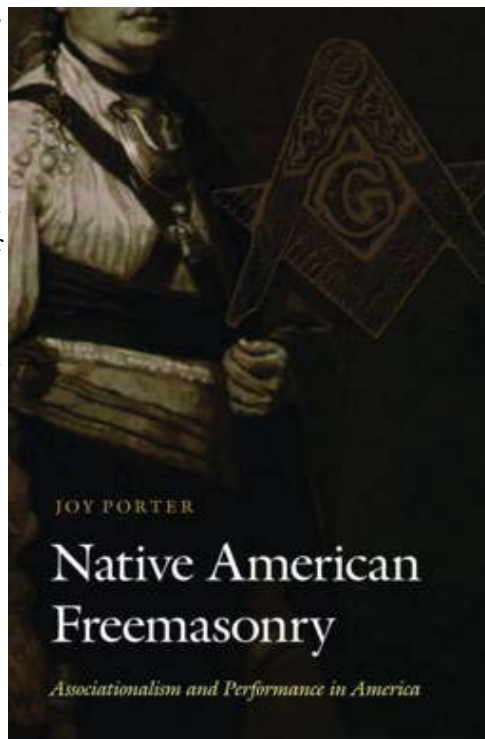
*"Native American Freemasonry provides an important insight into how Native and European Americans made use of Masonic space for mutual recognition, acceptance, and cultural exchange and how popular notions of "Nateness" were exploited within the context of American fraternalism."*

## NATIVE AMERICAN FREEMASONRY:

### ASSOCIATIONALISM AND PERFORMANCE IN AMERICA

*Native American Freemasonry* represents another in a growing list of academic studies of Freemasonry. Porter's book is unique, however, the in manner in which she conducts her examination – by viewing the Fraternity in terms of "performance" and sacred space. Moving beyond dates, persons, and events, she explores how and why Native American Masons and their European American counterparts used a shared ritual to forge ties, advance personal and communal goals, and surmount, if only within the lodge, race prejudice against Native peoples. Porter summarizes her approach and thesis thus:

In terms of Freemasonry as an area of study in itself, performance cannot replace other extremely valid and established approaches such as viewing the fraternity through the lens of gender or class or as part of the history of association, just as it cannot do away with the structural or cultural inequities of power. I argue that although certain Indians found positive intercultural space in the Masonic lodge, this does not mean that what went on in lodges was necessarily "pure" in terms of intercultural representation or that the balance of power between the dominant



culture and the Indian cultures was wholly refigured by the Masonic context.

Indeed, Porter goes on to show exactly how nuanced these relationships could be.

The first recorded Native American Mason was Chief Joseph Brant, a Mohawk, initiated at Hiram's Cliftonian Lodge No. 417 in London in 1776. Later he helped found one of the earliest lodges in Upper Canada (now the Province of Ontario), Lodge No. 11 in Brant's Town, and was reputed to have been its Master until around 1801.

He, like so many Native American brothers to follow, would have a complicated relationship with

British/European American society, Freemasonry, and his indigenous heritage. Brant, who spoke English, was well educated, and an Anglican convert, would be remembered both as a brutal adversary (the "Monster Brant") and mythologized as a Masonic savior, rescuing a number of brothers in distress from grisly deaths at the hands of Native captors. No doubt this was inevitable given the conflicting interests, visions, and social-cultural norms surrounding Native Americans and their admission into Masonic lodges and, by extension, European American society. As America's colonial period ended and its shaping as a nation began, Porter notes:

The Indian men welcomed into the

Masonic lodges of the nineteenth century and early twentieth were special people, who may have sought compensation for the enormous price they paid adopting an alien culture in the unique and assured promotional structure of the Masonic lodge.

For their part Masons embraced Indians because... they too sought a means whereby they could reintegrate into their lives those things that seemed slipping away... Individual Indians were attractive to Freemasons, who were keen to use them to legitimize their claims to having access to arcane or essential truths... Individual Indians meanwhile used Masonry to insert and Indian identity into a subculture that has remained at the heart of the American community until relatively recently.

Another intriguing reason why early Native Americans may have sought admission, and why European Americans may have been more receptive to their requests, is a shared tradition of fraternalism. In fact, there are uncanny similarities between Freemasonry and Native American brotherhoods such as the Ojibwe *Mide' wiwin* or 'Grand Medicine Lodge' and the Seneca 'Little Water Medicine Society.' These include the use of admission 'fees,' multiple degree systems, delineation

of sacred space and structure, ritualized artifacts, and even a 'raising' ceremony akin to Masonry's Hiram Abiff legend. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Masonic writers were so struck by these details they began referring to these wholly Native American orders as 'Indian Masonry.'

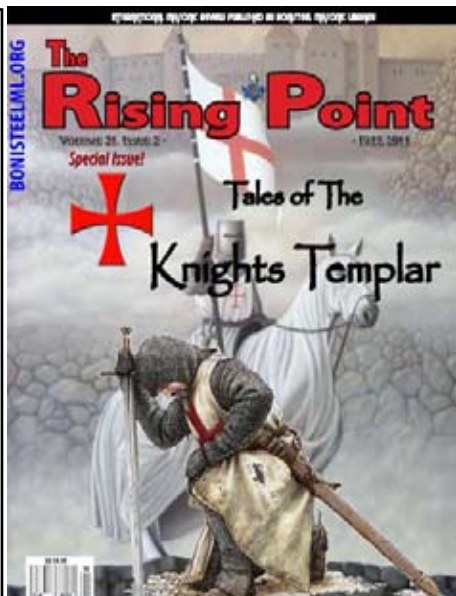
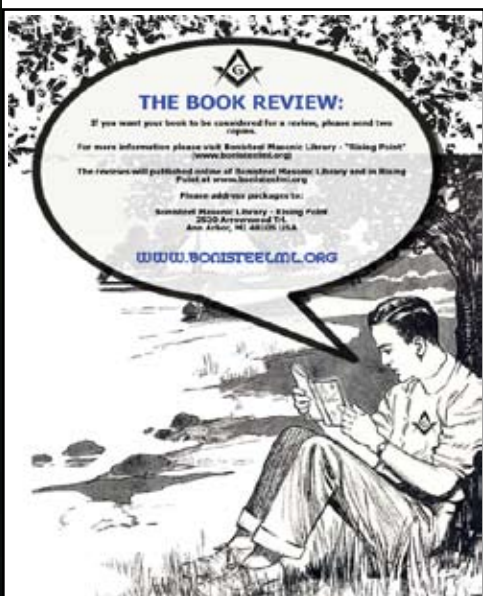
*Native American Freemasonry* provides an important insight into how Native and European Americans made use of Masonic space for mutual recognition, acceptance, and cultural exchange and how popular notions of "Nativeness" were exploited within the context of American fraternalism. While Masonry's playing field, at the time, may not have been well and truly 'level,' it is undeniable that real and lasting friendships were formed between Native and European Americans within Masonic lodges and that these connections helped carry individual Native Americans to positions, both inside and outside the Fraternity, that would otherwise have been closed to them. Native American participation in Masonry, moreover, helped affirm and make visible the place of all Native peoples, rather than as a 'dying race,' as part of America's living and dynamic social landscape.

Joy Porter, *Native American Freemasonry: Associationalism and Performance in America* (University of Nebraska Press 2011, \$60.00 USD)

University of Nebraska Press web site:

<http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/product/Native-American-Freemasonry,674870.aspx>

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