

Women in Freemasonry....You're kidding, right?

Let me begin with a parable: *At the building of King Solomon's Temple, one of the workmen had his lunch brought to him each day by his daughter. She would sit and watch him, and eventually she asked if she could try her hand at cutting a stone. At first he thought she was foolish, for this was man's work, but she persisted, and so he relented. He showed her how to shape the stone, and it soon became apparent that she had a very natural talent for such work. While she was not as strong as the young men, she had a much surer touch than most.*

There wasn't much that escaped the keen eye of Hiram Abif, as he oversaw the work. He saw how the girl helped her father, and how she improved day by day. Finally, Hiram Abif asked her father to bring her to a meeting of the workmen on the ground floor of King Solomon's Temple. She feared that he would chastise her, but to everyone's surprise, he insisted that she be initiated as an Entered Apprentice. No one dared dispute the will of Hiram Abif, and it was done as he said. After the meeting, Adoniram came up to Hiram Abif and said, "How could you do this? From time immemorial only men have been initiated as Masons. It is against all our ancient landmarks." Hiram Abif smiled, and said, "It wasn't my idea. God made her a Mason. I just agreed to help her improve herself in Masonry."

Remember, now...it was *just* a parable. Women in Masonry is an issue that may one day be resolved, certainly not in my lifetime working in the quarry, and along the way it will raise the ire of lots of the brethren who have always been told '*there are no women in Masonry*'. For heavens sake, look how long it took us to get around to recognizing our Prince Hall brothers. I don't think official recognition of women within our ranks, or even a separate branch of 'feminine Masonry' will happen anytime soon! Please don't throw any rotten tomatoes for what I am about to say, and I am *not* advancing the idea of initiating women into our Lodges, but I think women probably can be involved in our gentle craft...in some way, while still protecting all that regular Masons hold dear. The extent of that involvement is open to much discussion, but that is not my intent tonight. So, there, I've tossed a controversial topic on the table.....so, keep an open mind and let me offer some historical background and my research.

In the obligation portion of most Grand Lodge rituals, each Mason swears that he will not be present at the initiation of a woman Mason. Others specifically say that a male Mason may not sit in Lodge with a female Mason. My research shows that several other Grand Lodges don't even admit to the possibility of a female Masons' existence, and therefore don't require that sort of statement in their obligations. However, no matter what each of you was told, there *are* woman Masons around the world, and yes, even here in the United States.

From 2003 to 2009, my wife and I volunteered our time for three days each July at a medical mission project in the hills of Appalachia in Southwest Virginia. The last summer we were there, while surrounded by a throng of people who came to get free medical attention, I was holding converse with four Masonic Brothers from the Lynchburg area. We all happened to be wearing our Masonic pins and rings, and one Brother was even wearing a baseball cap with his Lodge name and number emblazoned on the front. In the middle of our conversation we were approached by a female TV reporter covering the medical event who was sporting a gold square and compasses on the lapel of her jacket. At first we thought she was perhaps the widow of a brother Mason, and I judged her to be in her early to mid-forties. Now I know that's a dangerous thing to do...guess at a woman's age...and later I was relieved to hear that she was only 43.

She walked up to the group and looked closely at my Past Master's pin and offered her hand in greeting. I was surprised, to say the least, when she gave me a Masonic grip, and said 'Greetings, Brother'. All of a sudden the group of brethren I was talking with got really quiet! I have to admit my mind wasn't ready for that encounter, so I simply smiled, returned a handshake, and introduced myself as a Past Master from Tuckahoe Lodge in Richmond. Hey, at least I didn't blurt out something stupid like, 'You're a Mason!...you're kidding, right?'

She proudly announced that she is a Past Master of The Order of International Co-Freemasonry, known as Le Droit Humain, with Lodges in New York, Los Angeles, and DC here in the U.S. The logo of this Grand Lodge usually contains a five-point star in place of the 'G' within the Square and Compasses. I had heard of this organization before, but as soon as she announced that she was a Mason, two of the brethren in my group suddenly remembered that they had other places they needed to be...they wanted nothing to do with holding any kind of conversation, secret or otherwise, with a 'female Mason'.

Her Lodge, Universalis, is a bilingual Lodge in mid-town Manhattan, New York, and was the first women's Lodge in the United States to 'work' in English. Now, if you thought some of our local Lodges have trouble with little conversations on the side lines during a meeting, try this.... simultaneous translation that enables both English and French speakers to express themselves in their own language and be understood by all. By the way, to petition her Lodge you have to be over 25 years of age, the degree fees are \$1250, and the dues are just under \$900 a year!

The meeting was friendly, very courteous and, I must say, quite enlightening. She was well versed in the history of Masonry and its principles. She told us she really enjoys conducting her 'informal survey' and watch men's reactions when she tells them that she is 'one of us' (her words, not mine). She noted that the masculine Grand Lodge's won't recognize her order because, quite obviously, her Grand Lodge admits women. However, she says, things are slowly beginning to change.

The United Grand Lodge of England has stated in its official newsletter that there are two orders of female Masons in England that it believes to be 'regular in their operations and ritual'.....except for the fact that they admit women. When I heard that, my mind reverted back to the late '60's TV commercial for Virginia Slims cigarettes that used the phrase, "...You've come a long way, baby!" Indeed women's Masonry has emerged from behind the curtain. In addition, we were told there is open interaction (within the bounds of each person's obligations) on list serves and chat groups on the Internet. We are all learning more about each other as time goes on. We traded web site addresses that day, so I'm certain that there are several 'hits' on the Tuckahoe website from a 'brother' from Universalis Lodge in New York City.

I'm sure most of you are aware of the legends that exist about women who were initiated (and passed and raised) into masculine Lodges. Rumors abound about a number of initiations that were held in order to bind the women to secrecy when they accidentally observed or learned of Masonic rituals, but in nearly five months of research I found only two that are what I consider to be well documented.

The most prominent woman to be initiated into masculine Masonry was the Honorable Elizabeth St. Leger, the daughter of Arthur St. Leger, 1st Baron Kilmayden, and Viscount Doneraile. Elizabeth later became the wife of Richard Aldworth, Esq.

The Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon has, with permission, reproduced the best account of her story as presented in 1895 to England's premier research Lodge, Quatuor Coronati No. 2076, by Bro. Edward Conder. Some of the following information comes from that source.

Her father, Viscount Doneraile, was a zealous Mason and often held Lodge meetings in his own home. Bro. Conder believes that this Lodge meeting at the Viscount's estate was a private Lodge not listed on the rolls of the Grand Lodge of Ireland.

In 1712, before the grand Lodge of Ireland was formed, this Lodge met to initiate a local gentleman by the name of Coppinger. Miss St. Leger was in a room adjoining the Lodge room where some construction was in progress. On awakening from a nap and hearing voices in the adjoining room, curiosity prompted her to remove a brick from the intervening wall where it was loosely placed, and she observed the entire initiation ceremony. When at length she attempted to leave the adjoining room, she quite literally came face to face with the Tyler and his drawn sword. Her scream alerted the Lodge to her presence, and she was held "captive" while the Lodge debated this 'dire situation'. The decision was made to obligate Miss St. Leger and admit her to the Lodge.

I could find no verification of what Lodge Brother St. Leger was entered into, or her date of initiation; although Lodge numbers 44, 95, and 150 were all mentioned in the numerous documents I reviewed. Lodge No. 44 was not formed until 1735 making it too late for Brother St. Leger's initiation as "a young girl"...most likely at about 17 years of age... as various accounts claim. Likewise, Lodge No. 95 was not formed until 1738, also too late. And lastly, Lodge No. 150 was warranted in 1746 but was located in Dublin, not in Munster.

To add yet another layer to the mystery I found a picture of her tombstone in the churchyard of St. Finbar Cathedral (Church of Ireland) that does note her Masonic membership with a square & compasses and a number '44' engraved on the stone. So, Bro. Conder's theory that it was a private lodge is most likely the true account of her membership in the Craft. I could not verify if the Lodge at Doneraile continued to meet after her father's death.

Legend has it that Brother St. Leger eventually rose to be Master of her Lodge, but again I found no evidence to substantiate that claim. A picture of her in regalia was published in Robert Gould's "Concise History of Freemasonry", and various versions of this image exist. One is said to hang in the Masonic Temple in Atlanta, Georgia. At least three accounts I found note that she was often seen wearing full Masonic regalia, and was accorded a Masonic burial when she died in 1775. The evidence in the case of Brother St. Leger points to the truth of this legend of a woman Freemason. Several other women's names are mentioned in various accounts from 1770 to about 1815, including Mrs. Harvard, and Mrs. Beaton of Hereford, England, Hanna Crocker of Boston, and Catherine Babington of North Carolina.

The second well-documented account is that of one Countess Helene Barkoczy. She was the last of her family line and was given the place of a surviving son by the Hungarian courts. Her inheritance included her father's huge Masonic library, which she read and studied. In 1875 Lodge Eyenloseg, working under a warrant from the Grand Orient of Hungary, admitted the Countess to the order.

To say the least, the Grand Orient was not happy, and as a result disciplined several members of the Lodge. The Master was expelled from Masonry, and the other officers of the Lodge who took part in the degree work were suspended for up to twelve months. The Countess was ordered to return her certificate of initiation.

So it happened, but she could no longer prove it. This is the best-documented instance of a woman actually being admitted into masculine Masonry that I could find.

Early Feminine and Mixed Masonic Lodges

The earliest form of women's Masonic Lodges in France used the Rite of Adoption, a rite somewhat similar to that of the Order of the Eastern Star here in the United States. The first of these Lodges was formed in 1744. They were open to the female relatives of masculine Masons and were sponsored by masculine Lodges. In addition, the Master was a male Mason. These Lodges were formed under the auspices of the Grand Orient of France. During the French Revolution these Lodges were dormant; however, by the end of the 19th century, there were 150 lodges, with over 5,000 members

On January 14, 1882, Les Libre Lodge in France initiated Mlle. Marie Desraimes into Freemasonry. There had been discussion of initiating women into this new grand lodge for several years, but no Master had dared to proceed with the plans. As Grand Lodges seem to do when their rules are not followed, they became upset, and promptly suspended the Lodge, which split over the initiation. Brother Desraimes withdrew from the Lodge rather than cause the expulsion of her Brethren.

In May 1891 Lodge Le Jerusalem initiated 16 women into Masonry as Entered Apprentices. On March 24th, 1893 these same women were passed to Fellowcraft, and raised six months later. R.: W.: George Martin was affiliated with the Lodge making it a truly mixed Lodge.



[Seal of Le Droit Humain](#)

On April 4th of 1891, the International Order of Co-Freemasonry, Le Droit Humain, was chartered. A lasting form of Mixed Masonry had finally arrived in France and from there it would spread around the world.



[A postage stamp of France noting feminine Masonry](#)

Continental Feminine Masonry

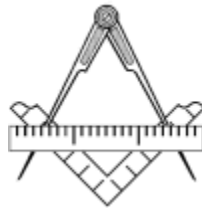
In 1901 Adoptive Lodges were reactivated in France under the auspices of the Grand Lodge of France, but they did away with the male Mason sitting as Master of the Lodge. In 1945 the Union Maçonnique Feminine de France was formed with the aid of the Grand Lodge of France, in order to unite all the women's lodges.

This Grand Lodge was independent and its membership was and is, even today, exclusively female. In 1952 the name was changed to the Feminine Grand Lodge of France.



[Seal of the Women's Grand Lodge of Belgium](#)

In 1981 the Women's Grand Lodge of Belgium was formed. This GL played a significant role in the formation of orders for women in the United States today. Today there are a number of Masonic Orders admitting women here in the United States. One is completely female: the Women's Grand Lodge of Belgium, with 4 lodges.



[Logo of the Ancient and Primitive Rite of Memphis](#)

One order, the Ancient and Primitive Rite of Memphis allows each Lodge to choose if it will be all male, all female, or mixed. This order has 1 all-female lodge in the United States, 1 all-male lodge, and 4 mixed lodges. They use a square and compasses set the same way as we do, but they include a 24 inch gauge extended over the points of the compasses.

The Order of International Co-Freemasonry, Le Droit Humain, maintains a presence with several lodges in its American Federation. In addition, the American Federation of Human Rights has 12 mixed lodges, and the Eastern Order of International Co-Freemasonry's North American Federation has several lodges.

I'm sure that you have all heard the modern 'myth' that men and women are equal...but they are *not*. Some may be upset with my statement, but that doesn't make it any less true. Look at it this way, equality is a mathematical concept, and there are no two human beings that are equal. However, there is a kind of 'equalness' that relates to the inherent human value of each person. There is a 'social equality', in that sense. The social role assignment was long ago assigned with an acknowledgement and an understanding of where people's strengths were. From antiquity, there have been men's mysteries, and women's mysteries.

A California Masonic Symposium was held last year in San Francisco with the theme, 'Freemasonry and Women'. There were five presenters including the 2018 Henry Wilson Coil lecturer, Bro. Robert Davis, The Executive Secretary of the Guthrie Oklahoma Scottish Rite

Bodies, and a renowned Masonic scholar. His presentation was entitled “the Sexual Paradox in Initiatory Rites. There he explored differences in men’s and women’s Masonic experiences. In addition to some Eastern Star Ladies, the symposium was attended by seven women Freemasons.

I wouldn’t want to leave you with the impression that men haven’t found a sense of humor in the midst of all this banter about women in Masonry. So, I share with you the first stanza of a poem, published in 1765...published anonymously, of course....

*It has oft of the females been said,
But you’ll know the report is not true,
That they cannot be Freemasons made,
For they cannot their passions subdue.
That they never can subject their will
Nor be bound to any secrets keep,
Nor never can keep their tongues still
Except when in bed and fast asleep.*

So, is there a place for women in Masonry? On one side there is this argument; that in an organization with such high and lofty goals as those of Freemasonry, perhaps we should not worry too much about the gender of our members. Responding to this can only lead to heated rhetoric, and most likely charges of sexual discrimination. I personally know of at least two ACLU lawyers that would love to sink their teeth into that case! Notwithstanding, the fact remains that Freemasonry began as a male-only bastion, and the vast majority of its members want it to remain that way.

*Living Stones - Masonic Thoughts for Today’s Mason
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