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Book Review

Bill Speer

National Treasure and its ilk have given the public a distorted perception of Freemasonry in early America. Professor Steven C. Bullock of Worcester Polytechnic Institute has assisted in righting this wrong with a seminal work on the transformation of Freemasonry during our nation's formative years. While Freemasonry has been central to our history in many ways, few are aware of the subtleties therein and evolution of Freemasonry in the United States. In *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, Bullock traced the history of the Masonic movement from England to the United States and demonstrated how crucial Masons were to the success of both the American Revolution and the new nation under the Constitution. He placed the roots of Freemasonry firmly in the stonemason guilds, but he failed to document this successfully and he did not address other possible origins. His prose interwove Freemasonry with the ebb and flow of social and political movements of the day.

During the Revolution, Southern planters like George Washington and Richard Henry Lee had little in common with New Englanders like Nathanael Greene, a Quaker from Connecticut, and Paul Revere, a Massachusetts engraver, even less with the likes of the Marquis de Lafayette and Baron Frederick von Steuben. Bullock extensively explored the link that bound these and many other Revolutionaries together, Freemasonry.

Bullock attempted to answer such questions as what Freemasonry stood for, what issues Freemasonry confronted, and how the public as a whole reacted to Freemasonry. He tackled confusing and difficult issues like the rise of the Anti-Masonic party (our first true third party) and in the 1820s, the William Morgan affair and its impact upon Freemasonry and the public as a whole. He relied upon both published and unpublished primary sources (including numerous Blue Lodge and Grand Lodge documents) and extensively documented his findings.

This work is not an easy read and can seem dull and listless, at times, the

kind of writing sometimes anticipated from mainstream historians writing to their peers. However, the book is overflowing with fascinating insights into Freemasonry in the period. His argument is complex with many subplots. Beginning in the eighteenth-century, British Freemasonry was a blend of esoteric ancient wisdom and mystical religious beliefs enveloped by terms and practices taken from guilds. In Colonial American cities, the Craft legitimized and justified the claims of social elites. By the mid eighteenth-century, a transformational Freemasonry came from England to the Colonies, known as the “Ancients.” This group brought new rituals and beliefs and allowed the common man into the Craft. It is interesting to note that due to a schism between the two groups, Philadelphia Masonic Lodges did not participate in the funeral of Brother Benjamin Franklin; they completely ignored the event and did not even record it, as Franklin was the wrong “sort” of Freemason. This incident underlines the institutional transformation that occurred within Franklin’s sixty-year life as a Freemason.

This work should be standard reading for anyone interested in the early years of Freemasonry in America. One final observation, a subtle theme of Bullock’s piece is the inability of Freemasonry to change with the times. This should serve as a cautionary tale for the Fraternity today, we must learn from our past mistakes.

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Our reviewer: Bill Speer is a graduate of the Pennsylvania Military College (now Widener University). A long-time instructor in history at American Military University and Georgia Military College, he has written for numerous periodicals. He is the author of the series *From Broomsticks To Battlefields: After the Battle, The Story of Henry Clay Robinett*, and the forthcoming *Harum-Scarum: The Story of David Vickers Jr.* both of whom were Freemasons. He is a member of Harlem Lodge #276, in Harlem, GA, a York Rite Knight Templar, and a 32-degree, Knights of Saint Andrew Mason.