

WOMEN FREEMASONS

The romances of the Ancient Craft include a number of stories of women who are said to have become Freemasons, in one or another. The majority are hoaxes, legends or pure fiction.

For a woman to become a real Freemason is as impossible as for a man to become a mother, a leopard to change his spots. A female duly elected, properly prepared, initiated and obligated, passed and raised, who signed the by-laws of a regularly constituted lodge would not be a freemason, as all which had been done with her would be entirely illegal, and one illegally initiated is not a Freemason.

The Third of the Old Charges, foundation law of the Craft, states emphatically: "The persons admitted Members of a Lodge must be good and true Men, free-born and of mature and discreet age; no bondman, no women, or immoral or scandalous Men, but of good report."

It would, however, be extraordinary if at some time, in some place, some woman was not illegally given a Masonic degree, or obligated as a Freemason. That the instances which rest on anything more reliable than tradition and heresay are so few is a remarkable tribute to the fidelity of Masons. It is a point worth noting that the number of even possible true instances is much less than the known number of exposes of Masonry written and published by foresworn brethren. Best known, most often quoted, and most credible of all histories of alleged "women Freemasons" is that of the Honorable Elizabeth St. Ledger, later Mrs. Richard Aldworth, of Ireland. Even about her strange story has clustered a curious collection of myths and legends, which have required some untangling at the hands of skilled Masonic historians.

According to the most reliable accounts, Arthur St. Ledger, 1st Baron Kilmayden and Viscount Doneraile, with his sons and a few intimate friends, were in the habit (as was the custom in those early days when Freemasonry was closing the era of Operative and opening an era of Sepculative Masonry), of opening a Lodge and conducting its ceremonies in the family mansion at Doneraile Court, County Cork, Ireland.

When Elizabeth was seventeen years old, the old house underwent repairs, including removal and replacement of a partition between the library and a back room, in which the Lodge meetings were held. One afternoon Miss St. Ledger, in the library, heard voices. With perhaps pardonable feminine curiosity she listened at an opening between the bricks of the replaced partition. Not hearing sufficiently well, she removed a loose brick and obtained an unobstructed view and complete audition of what occurred.

She looked and listened for some time before she realized what she saw and heard. There seems to be no question of her gentle breeding, education or high mindedness; when she understood she became terror-struck and fled from the room, intending forever to conceal her guilty knowledge.

Her way out, however, was barred by the Lodge Tiler, her father's butler. She screamed and fainted..

The Tiler summoned the Master; the young woman recovered consciousness, and confessed to what she had discovered. The Lodge considered what should be done, and finally decided to have her take part in ceremonies similar to those she had witnessed. Accordingly, she was initiated and passed a Fellowcraft. At this time (1710) the third degree, or what she was the "Master's Part," was not a separate ceremony, so that, granting the story to be true. Miss St. Ledger received all the light her father's Lodge had to give.

Too much corroborative detail surrounds this old tale to pass it by as apocryphal. There is today extant in the possession of Lady Castletown, Upper Ossory, a painting of Miss St. Ledger in her Masonic Regalia. Two Jewels she wore are preserved, one in the possession of the family, the other held by Lodge No.1, Cork.

Contemporary accounts credit her with acting as Master of the Lodge, and riding in Public Masonic processions, clad in Masonic regalia; these are doubtless mere inventions. It is not on record that she was permitted to attend any meeting of the Lodge except that in which she was initiated and passed.

Nor has the Lodge been identified; yet this is not surprising, since the date (1710) is prior to the formation of the Irish Grand Lodge, and seven years before the formation of the Mother Grand Lodge in London. It is supposed that her father received his Masonry in London, and brought it home with him, in the easy custom of the olden time, making Masons of his friends and with them practicing the Speculative Art.

It is pleasant to chronicle that every version of the story - and they are many - sets forth that this Irish Lady, as a girl, a wife, a mother and grandmother, highly valued her singular distinction, never took advantage of it, and venerated the Craft for all of her eighty years of life.

Among the many versions of this story, one credits Miss St. Ledger with "intent" to overhear by concealing herself in a clock-case in the Lodge Room. This seems altogether out of character; moreover, the clock-case" method of a woman's getting Masonic secrets has been overworked.

In a letter written in 1879 to Brother Montague Guest, the following passage relating to a Dorsetshire Lodge occurs:

"There was a Lodge about a hundred years ago, held in a house facing the Up-Lyme turnpike . . . It was in that lodge that it was said the woman hid herself in a clock and was in consequence made a Mason." The clock-case tradition finds an echo in Thackeray's story of "My Grandfather's Time," which occurs in one of his papers on SNOBS, about . . .

". . . my great aunt (whose portrait we still have in the family) who got into the clock-case at the Royal Rosicrucian Lodge at Bungay, Suffolk, to spy the proceedings of the Society. of which her husband was a member, and being frightened by the sudden whirring and striking eleven of the clock (just as the Deputy Master was bringing in the mystic Gridiron for the reception of a

neophyte), rushed out into the midst of the Lodge assembled; and was elected by a desperate unanimity, Deputy Grand Mistress for life. Though that admirable and courageous female never subsequently breathed a word with regard to the secrets of the initiation, yet she inspired all our family with such horror regarding the mysteries of Jachin and Boaz, that none of our family have ever since joined the society or worn the dreadful Masonic insignia.

There seems to be small doubt that Helene, Countess Hadik Barkoczy, born 1833, was actually “made a Mason” in Lodge Egyenloseg, warranted by the Grand Orient of Hungary. The last of her race, at her father’s death she was permitted by the Hungarian courts to take the place of a son, receiving his full inheritance. In this was an extensive Masonic library in which she became much interested. In 1875 the Lodge mentioned admitting her!

The Grand Orient of Hungary took immediate action on this “breach of Masonic vow, unjustifiably conferring Masonic degrees, doing that which degrades a Freemason and Freemasonry, and for knowingly violating the statutes.” The Deputy Master of the Lodge was expelled, the officers of the Lodge had their names struck from its rolls, and the members were suspended for various periods of time. To the honor of the Grand Orient be it said, its final pronouncement - apart from these merited punishments - was unequivocal. It Read:

“1. The Grand Orient declares the admission of the Countess Hadik Barkoczy to be contrary to the laws, and therefore null and void, forbids her admittance into any Lodge of their jurisdiction, under penalty of erasure of the Lodge from the rolls, and request all Grand Lodges to do the same.

“2 The Countess is requested to return the invalid certificate which she holds, within ten days, in default of which measures will be taken to confiscate immediately the certificate whenever produced at any of the Lodges.”

The Chevalier d’Eon is a mysterious and remarkable character, but he was not a “woman” Freemason. It seems highly probable that this peculiar person (born 1728 was partially an hermaphrodite, feminine in appearance, if sufficiently masculine in nature to become a distinguished soldier and one of the best swordsmen in France. In spite of a pronouncement by a court of law that “he” was a woman, his male sex was definitely proved after his death. This is more remarkable, as after a masculine career of some distinction (which included being made a Mason in London) he voluntarily admitted that “he” was a woman, and lived as such for thirty-three years.!

The world believed him at the time, and great was the stir caused by the thought that a regular Lodge had “made a Mason of a woman.” Postmortem examination restored confidence; the best explanation of his odd life is that he was insane; the worst which may be thought of him as a “woman” is that he deceived the world, Masonic and profane alike, for many years.

Melrose Lodge No.1 is on the roll of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, preserves the tradition of as woman initiate, Isabella Scoon, known in the vernacular as Tib Skin. The story runs that after removing from Newstead, the meetings were held in hired rooms for some years. and:

“The matron, a true daughter of Eve, somehow obtained more light upon the hidden mysteries than was deemed at all expedient, and, after due consideration of the case, it was resolved that she must be regularly initiated into Freemasonry,” which tradition states was actually done, the initiate being greatly impressed with solemnity of her obligation, remaining ever a true and faithful Sister among the Brethren, and distinguishing herself in works of charity.!

“The Lodge minutes, however, contain no record of the occurrence.” The officers and about forty privates of the 22nd Regiment quartered at Newcastle, England, in 1769, being Freemasons, celebrated St. John’s Day in Winter by attending services at St. Nicholas’ Church. This publicity would appear to have excited the curiosity of the landlady under whose roof the Lodge was held, for in the “Newcastle Chronicle” of January 6, 1770, the following advertisement was inserted:

“This is to acquaint the public that on Monday the first inst., being the Lodge (or monthly meeting night) of the Free and Accepted Masons of the 22nd Regiment, held at the Crown Inn, Newgate, Mrs. Bell, the landlady of the house, broke open a door (with a poker) that had not been opened for some years past, by which means she got into an adjacent room, made two holes through the wall and by that stratagem discovered the secrets of Masonry, and she, knowing herself to be the first woman in the world that ever found out that secret, is willing to make it known to all her own sex; so that any lady that is desirous of learning the secrets of Freemasonry by applying to that well learned woman Mrs. Bell (that lived fifteen years in and about Newgate St.) may be instructed in the Secrets of Freemasonry,” If Mrs. Bell did actually acquire the knowledge the advertisement claims, it is clear that she had by no means learned the lessons which were apparently so deeply impressed upon the other “lady candidates.” The story can only be a hoax. Probably Mrs. Bell heard a good deal about the doings of the Lodge held on her premises, and was inclined to pretend to know more than really was the case. The advertisement, in the spirit of those times, was doubtless intended to hold her up to ridicule and warn her to be more discreet.

Recording the death, aged eighty-five, on Tuesday, May 11th, 1802, of Mrs. Beaton in Norwich, a newspaper notice reads:

“She was a native of Wales, and commonly called here (i.e. at Norwich) the ‘Freemasons’ from the circumstance of her having contrived to conceal herself in the waincoting of a lodge room, where she learnt that secret, the knowledge of which thousands of her sex have in vain attempted to arrive at - She was a singular old woman, and as proof of it the Secret dies with her!”

Capt. J.W. Gambier, a non-Mason, in his, “Links in my Life on Sea and Land”, wrote:-

“In 1861 I arrived at Chatham and met my father. We went ashore, and dined at the old inn by the pier at Chatham. sacred to the memory of Pickwick and his companions, and but for a fat old waiter . . . regaling us with pot-house legends . . . we should have been dull indeed. Amongst other anecdotes this venerable old Ganymede told us was how once a woman had hidden herself in a cupboard, which he showed us in the room, to overhear what went on at a Masonic meeting, but that, being discovered, by her dog scenting her out, she had been hauled out and then and there made a Mason with all due Masonic rites.”

About 1864, Lodge Tongariro, No.705 E.C., met at the Rutland Hotel, at Wanganui, New Zealand. Part of the premises adjoining the room used by the lodge had ceased to be occupied and had become somewhat dilapidated. The following story is told in the history of the Lodge: -

“The landlord, who was a member of the Lodge, had a sister living in the house. She was an elderly lady with a great thirst for knowledge, and she was determined to find out all about Freemasonry. Accordingly she went to this disused part of the building and succeeded in removing a knot from the wooden portion, and from this spy-hole was able to witness unobserved some portion of the proceedings. She did not, however, possess the gift of silence, and one evening while serving behind the bar, told a gentleman who was at that time not a member of the Craft, although he afterwards became a Mason and subsequently occupied the Master’s Chair in the Lodge. The good lady was especially impressed with the third degree, which she described as ‘very dreadful’. She stated she was going again that night, and that it was her intention to enlarge the hole in order to get a better view. She informed her hearer that there was not a great deal to see until the Lodge had been opened about an hour. There was to be ‘a third’ that night, and if her friend would join her in about half an hour, he might take his turn at the peep-hole.

Unfortunately for her plan, her brother, who was standing near, though unobserved, overheard this conversation, and when the old lady had climbed up to her accustomed place, he crept softly behind her, and taking a firm grip on her ear, conducted her without ceremony to her rightful place behind the bar. Unlike the Hon. Elizabeth St. Ledger, the lady who concealed herself in a clock-case at an Irish Lodge, she was not initiated into Freemasonry, so could not equal this famed lady.”

Loose bricks, knot-holes, clock-cases, doors pried open with pokers - the ladies seemed to have had but one method of “becoming Freemasons.”

A number of supposed “women Freemasons” have received temporary notoriety in the United States. Probably the best authenticated (and that very poor) is Mrs. Catherine Babington, “nee” Sweet, who was born in Kentucky in 1815, married in 1834, and died in 1886.

Brother J.P. Babington, her son, of Cleveland Lodge No.202, Shelby, North Carolina, after her death published a biographical sketch of his mother, evidently in the sincere belief that what he heard all his life was true, and giving a plain (if inherently improbable) account of this “lady Mason.”

According to this book, which ran into three editions, Catherine Sweet spent the greater part of her childhood and young womanhood with her Grandfather, Benjamin Ulen, who lived near where she was born in Kentucky. Near her Grandfather’s house was a two-story building; a school below, and a room intended as a church above.

However, it was used by Masons as a Lodge room. Your Catherine is said to have concealed herself in the hollow pulpit not once, but at every meeting of the Lodge for more than a year, seeing all the degrees and learning all the work, even the most secret. She was finally discovered by one of her six Uncles, all alleged members of the Lodge, and on being closely questioned -

and she is stated to have refused to answer unless interrogated Masonically - she showed a more proficient knowledge of the ritual than any of them possessed!

She was kept in custody for more than a month, while the Lodge decided that to do with her. Finally she was “properly prepared” and “made a Mason” but not a member of the Lodge.

This estimable lady is said to have talked Masonry on every and any occasion even “instructing” brethren whom she considered “bright” and was immensely proud of being “the only woman Freemason.” Critical historians, however, look with considerable doubt on the major incidents of this tale. It appears that there was no regular Lodge near her Grandfather’s home at the time she was alleged to spy upon it (there may have been a spurious Lodge, of course) and no records exist that any of her Uncles were Masons.

There seems to be no doubt that (1) Mrs. Babington lived; (2) that she knew at least some Masonic ritual and (3) that hundreds if not thousands of her neighbors and friends believed the story.

Her knowledge of ritual can easily have come from any of a half dozen of the so-called exposes of Masonry (such as the Morgan booklet) which circulated freely enough and may still be found in libraries and second-hand stores. It is possible that she learned Masonic work from her husband (unlikely, inasmuch as he was a Past Master) and barely possible that she did get into some spurious Lodge and hear from a concealed place. If the latter is true, why were the particulars which her son received from her not of a place and a Lodge which could be identified?

There are tales and tales and still more tales not here mentioned; many of the are obviously confusions between the French Rite of Adoptive Masonry and the genuine Ancient Craft Masonry, or have to do with that odd little bi-product of quasi-fraternity known as “Co-Masonry.” The story of Madam Xaintrilles belongs among the former; she was doubtless a member of an Adoptive Lodge, but the story that she was later initiated into Craft Masonry at the close of the eighteenth century rests almost wholly upon tradition.

Some supposedly Masonic bodies at one time or another have admitted women to membership - one of these in Mexico in a not far distant past - but their stories belong in a history of spurious Freemasonry, not in the chronicle of curious fiction in which only the illegal “making” of the Countess and the accidental discovery of the young English girl seem to have genuine claims to credibility.