

ALBERT GALLATIN MACKEY

The great American Masonic historian and jurist, Albert Gallatin Mackey, has had so profound an effect upon American Freemasonry - indeed, upon Freemasonry the world over - that it is difficult, even after the many years which have passed since his death in 1881 - properly to evaluate his labours.

America has produced a number of brethren of international renown, writers whose labours have materially aided in the formation of sound Masonic thought, the spread of Masonic light, the inspiration of their brethren. But none have written so voluminously, yet accurately, delved so deeply into so many Masonic subjects, or brought a riper scholarship, a greater energy, a keener vision to their self-imposed tasks than the great South Carolinian.

Born at Charleston, March 12, 1807, he graduated with honours from Charleston Medical College in 1834. He practiced his profession for twenty years. But then the magic of the pen, and the voice of the Craft, called him from scalpel and medicine to paper and ink, and the rest of his life was devoted almost wholly to Freemasonry.

Raised in St. Andrews Lodge, No. 10, of Charleston, in 1841, he affiliated with famous old Solomon's Lodge, No. 1, and was elected its Master in 1842. From 1842 to 1847 he was Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of his State, and also Foreign Correspondent. Eighteen fifty-one saw him a founder member of Landmark Lodge, No. 76; much later, after removing to Washington, D. C., he affiliated with LaFayette Lodge, No. 19.

Meanwhile, spite of his Blue Lodge labours, his restless energy demanded other avenues; they were found in Capitular Masonry, in which he rose to be Grand High Priest (1855 to 1867) and finally General Grand High Priest (1859 to 1868). Eminent Commander of South Carolina Commandery, No. 1, in 1842, he was later honoured by being made Past Grand Warden of the Grand Encampment of the United States.

Crowned with the 33rd and last degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite for the Southern Jurisdiction, he was an active member of the Supreme Council and served as Secretary General for many years. It was during this time that he was closely associated with another great American Mason, Albert Pike.

Personally Dr. Mackey was considered delightful by a large circle of close friends. He as dignified in demeanour, and possessed an old world Southern courtesy of speech which was noted even in days when it was more common than today. If interested in a subject he became animated in its discussion, even eloquent. Generous, frank, loyal, sincere, he well deserved that which was said of him by Past Grand Master Henry Buist of Georgia: "His monument is in the hearts of those who knew him longest and best."

The following is from the Clegg Revision of Mackey's Encyclopedia:

As a contributor to the literature and science of Freemasonry, Doctor Mackey's labours have been more extensive than those of any other in America or in Europe. In 1845 he published his first Masonic work, entitled A Lexicon of Freemasonry, in 1851 he published his second work entitled The True Mystic Tie. Then followed The Ahiman Rezon of South Carolina, 1852 Principles of Masonic Law, 1856; Book of the Chapter, 1858; Text-Book of Masonic Jurisprudence, 1859- History of Freemasonry in South Carolina, 1861; Manuel of the Lodge, 1862; Cryptic Masonry, 1867; Symbolism of Freemasonry, and Masonic Ritual, 1869: Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, 1874; and Masonic Parliamentary Law 1875. Doctor Mackey also contributed freely to Masonic periodicals and edited several of them with conspicuous ability. In 1849 he established and edited Southern and Western Masonic Miscellany for five years. In 1857 he undertook the publication of the Masonic Quarterly Review which continued for two years. Then he was invited to assume editorial charge of a department in the American Freemason which he accepted in July, 1859, and he held this position for one year. He was solicited to take charge of a department in the Masonic Trowel, his first article appearing in the September number of 1865 and he wrote for this publication for nearly three years. In October, 1871, Doctor Mackey again published a Masonic magazine of his own, Mackey's National Freemason. Although a periodical of great merit, after three years it was discontinued. In January, 1875, Doctor Mackey became one of the editors of The Voice of Masonry, and for over four years was a constant contributor to the periodical, when failing health necessitated his giving up this work.

In addition to the works above listed, Dr. Mackey's monumental History of Freemasonry, in seven volumes deserves an important place in any Masonic Library.

Of the many works which Dr. Mackey contributed to the Craft, probably an almost universal judgment would list the Encyclopedia as of greatest importance. Previous to its publication there was no authoritative work of equal scope anywhere in the world - indeed, no other Encyclopedia since has approached it in thoroughness.

It is true that the great scholar made errors; a newer light, a greater research, a different viewpoint, have all pointed to mistakes in Dr. Mackey's fine volume. But the wonder is not that errors were made, but that they were so few. As a whole, his work stands today, as it has for sixty-one years, the ultimate Masonic authority.

It has had many editions and been revised more than once. McLenachan added to it an Addenda of scholarly import. Robert Ingham Clegg undertook and completed a revision which was also an expansion and the two volumes Mackey of today, in place of the original one volume, are in constant use in a thousand libraries and on the desks of countless Masonic students. But the foundation, the arrangement, the theory behind, are all as much Mackey today as they were when he blazed a path across a wilderness of Masonic ignorance.

Dr. Mackey's contribution to the thinking of Masonic jurists was as clear cut and precise as was his logical mind. Practically all fundamental Masonic law today is interpreted according to the concepts of the southern authority. It is true that here, as in the Encyclopedia, mistakes crept in - occasionally mistakes of logic which Dr. Mackey would not make were he alive today. His compilation of twenty five Landmarks of Freemasonry, adopted as official by half the nation, and its principles set forth in other forms and language by a majority of all the Grand

Jurisdictions, do not now as a whole stand the light of critical examination. By the very tests which Dr. Mackey himself proposed to apply to all Masonic legal principles, to discover whether there were or were not Landmarks, his own list may be and has been, well riddled.

Yet his reduction to writing of twenty-five principles of Masonic law, whether or no they are all true landmarks, was a feat of no mean proportions. His list gave other Masonic thinkers a solid foundation from which to take off on expeditions into what was then an unexplored Masonic field, and is even yet a matter more nebulous than settled.

He reached into the past and brought "immemorial custom" into line with modern Masonic practice. He stretched forth a giant hand to pluck from the nimbus of vague thinking of the Oliver school of thought a mass of hard cold facts. He brought orderly array out of chaos. He gave to the thousands of jurists who followed him a point of beginning.

Let him who will decry the Mackey Landmarks, and say that but a few of the twenty-five are genuine, the rest but good foundation principles; the fact remains that without that clarifying list, Masonic thought would be at least half a century behind its times. One is inevitably reminded of the "warping wing" of the first Wright "aeroplane" without which mechanical flight in the early years of this century was impossible. The "basic patent" of the Wrights is no longer used in any airplane, but originally it gave man flight. Mackey's list of Landmarks is discredited often in Jurisdictions which have not repealed adoption, but it enabled Masonic minds to fly where before they had but crawled.

Mackey's great work on jurisprudence, besides the Landmarks, has well stood the test of time. He is quoted often as a final authority. His clear cut and cleanly phrased principles are written into practically all Grand Lodge codes and constitutions. He laid down in terms so distinct there can be no misunderstanding, the relation of a Master to his Lodge, to his Grand Lodge, the function of Masonic law, the foundation stones on which the legal system of Freemasonry is built. To his labours American Masons owe much of the justice of Masonic procedure in trial and punishment, and practically all of the parliamentary practice of Masonic bodies.

Many have criticized Dr. Mackey as a symbolist. Giving full credit to his scholarly researches, these contend that the great law giver and historian was somewhat less than inspired when he wrote of the spiritual implications of Masonic symbolism. However justified these criticisms may be, it is nevertheless true that Dr. Mackey elucidated symbolism from a sound standpoint. He went to history, to folk lore, to early custom and usage; if he kept his fancy strictly bridled and let it run wild but little, he nevertheless avoided with uncanny skill those pitfalls into which less learned teachers stumble. Never did he read into a Masonic symbol a meaning which is not actually there. Not for Dr. Mackey, for instance, the development of a whole body of symbolism built on the similarity between a square apron with triangular flap, to the 47th problem of Euclid; too well did he know that the modern form of apron is but a mere youth in the long history of aprons, and that even so recently as Washington's time, aprons were rounded, rather than square - indeed, there are yet Grand Lodges the official apron of which is made with round corners and semi-circular flap.

Dr. Mackey's symbolism is concrete, to the point, logical, sound. If it is less flowery than that of more modern writers, if it seems to contain less inspiration, it is wholly sane.

Of Dr. Mackey as an historian nothing may be written in criticism. He wrote the facts as they were then known. By his researches a great body of information come out of hiding. That many documents, numerous researches, much intensive study have brought new facts to light, necessarily proving mistaken some of his conclusions, is not a basis for criticism of the historian; as well criticize Galen for not understanding the X-ray or the circulation of the blood !

The Grand Lodge of South Carolina, at its annual communication of 1935, provided for the creation of the Albert Gallatin Mackey Medal, to be given, under circumstances yet to be determined by a suitable Committee, for distinguished Masonic service. That the greatest Mason ever to come from any State in the Union is to have his deathless memory still further eulogized by such an action must give pleasure to many, even if they wonder who may be worthy to wear a jewel which bears so revered a name.

The following memorial was presented by a Committee headed by Brother Charles F. Stansbury at a Special Communication of the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia:

Our illustrious Brother, Albert Gallatin Mackey, is no more! He died at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, on the 20th of June, 1881, at the venerable age of 74, and was buried at Washington on Sunday, June 26, 1881, with the highest honours of the Craft, all Rites and Orders of Masonry uniting in the last sad services over his remains. The announcement of his death has carried a genuine sentiment of sorrow wherever Freemasonry is known. His ripe scholarship, his profound knowledge of Masonic law and usage, his broad views of Masonic philosophy, his ceaseless and invaluable literary labours in the service of the Order, his noble ideal of its character and mission, as well as his genial personal qualities and his lofty character, had united to make him personally known and widely respected and beloved by the Masonic world. While this Grand Lodge shares in the common sorrow of the Craft everywhere at this irreparable loss she can properly lay claim to a more intimate and peculiar sense of bereavement, inasmuch as our illustrious Brother had been for many years an active member of this body, Chairman of the Committee on Jurisprudence, and an advisor ever ready to assist our deliberations with his knowledge and counsel. In testimony of our affectionate respect for his memory the Grand Lodge jewels, and insignia will be properly draped, and its members wear the usual badge of mourning for thirty days.

To avoid the enthusiasm born of admiration and keep impersonal words spoken of great men of the past is difficult; to focus in a few phrases the Masonic world's opinion of the most indefatigable of its scholars is all but impossible. Yet considering the life time labours of Albert Gallatin Mackey as a whole the conclusions seem inescapable:

His contributions had, and now have, a profound effect. His labours still permeate the larger part of the body of modern Masonic thought. His logic still stands. His sanity of presentation is still a model to all who follow the road he built from the darkest continent of Masonic ignorance to the brilliant East of inspiring Masonic knowledge.

Vivat Memoria!