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British Freemasonry, 1717-1813. General editor Róbert Péter. 5 vols. London and New York: Routledge, 2016. p. 2396. £515. ISBN 978-1-31563-990-1.

This large-scale multi-volume publication contains transcriptions of a wide range of texts relating to freemasonry in Britain and Ireland during the long eighteenth century, many of which are only available in masonic libraries in London and Dublin and have not been reproduced before. As such, this collection will be useful to anyone interested in the history of freemasonry. However, poor overall planning and a confused approach to the arrangement, selection and presentation of texts make these volumes difficult to use, and the publication is unlikely to achieve its aim of enhancing the profile of the study of freemasonry in eighteenth-century studies.

British Freemasonry in its printed version comprises five volumes. The first volume, edited by Cecile Revauger and entitled *Institutions*, focusses on the role of the Grand Lodge in England in developing masonic governance. The second and third volumes reproduce texts of the rituals which form the heart of masonic practice and are edited by the leading expert on masonic ritual, Jan Snoek. The fourth volume, *Debates*, edited by Róbert Péter, concerns attacks on and vindications of freemasonry. The final volume also edited by Róbert Péter comprises a selection from the hundreds of notices in the eighteenth-century press relating to freemasonry.

This is a huge assemblage of primary materials. In such a large-scale publication, a clear structure is vital for the reader, but unfortunately the overall arrangement is confusing. The relationship between the discussion of *Institutions* in Volume 1 and the collection of *Debates* in Volume 4 is unclear and there is a great deal of overlap between the two volumes. Given this overlap, it is very odd that the two volumes of rituals are intruded between Volumes 1 and 4. The introduction to the final volume, entitled *Representations* but really about the press, includes a discussion of the governance of freemasonry which is more detailed than the introduction to the first volume on *Institutions*. Despite the large scale of *British Freemasonry*, texts are presented in a very selective fashion, with some represented only by excerpts. The result is at many points an editorial rag-bag. It would have been more helpful to have produced some separate publications on more focussed themes, rather than try and cover the whole range of British freemasonry and sprawl messily over five volumes.

Starting to use *British Freemasonry*, it is a surprise to find that it is actually the work of a large editorial team. Those contributing introductions to particular texts comprise some of the most eminent scholars of freemasonry, including David Stevenson, Ric Berman, Susan Mitchell Sommers, Andrew Pink, Mark Wallace, Martin Cherry, Susan Snell and Rob Collis, as well as the volume editors noted above. Strangely, their names are tucked away in the editorial notes and are not mentioned in the list of contents. This is an ungracious way of treating one's contributors. It is often unclear whether those writing the introduction to particular texts were also responsible for the transcripts and editorial apparatus. This is a major problem, as it is essential in a collaborative edition of this kind to know which editor prepared the transcript.

Although the aim of this publication is to promote wider interest in the masonic archive, the way material has been selected makes it difficult for anyone not already well versed in

masonic bibliography to use it effectively. There have been a number of earlier collections of masonic texts, such as the two anthologies by Douglas Knoop, G. P. Jones and Douglas Hamer, *Early Masonic Catechisms* (1943) and *Early Masonic Pamphlets* (1945), or the collection by A. C. F. Jackson of *English Masonic Exposures 1760-69* (1986). A number of texts have also been published in *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, the journal of the English research lodge Quatuor Coronati No. 2076. On the whole, *British Freemasonry* excludes texts already printed in volumes such as these (although it is not consistent in this principle) and any researcher using *British Freemasonry* must constantly cross-check with these publications which are themselves not always easy to obtain.

There does not seem to have been any cogent overall plan in selecting material for inclusion in *British Freemasonry*. The stated aim is to present texts which are not readily available outside masonic libraries, but this is not consistently implemented or clearly documented. Thus, in Volume 1, *Institutions*, many of the items are not in the ESTC and do not appear in *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. However, some of the texts in Volume 1, such as William Dodd's *Oration Delivered at the Dedication of Free-Mason's Hall* (1776) and Robert Trewman's *Principles of Free-Masonry Delineated* (1777) are in ESTC and ECCO and easily obtained. It is puzzling that Dodd and Trewman were included, but the influential justifications of freemasonry by William Preston and William Hutchinson are omitted. There appears to be no rhyme or reason behind the selection of many of the texts. While the list of sources indicates which base editions were used for the text, we are not told whether items are in the ESTC or not. A more coherent collection would have emerged if there had been a greater focus on items not in the ESTC.

In the two volumes on ritual, however, the principle of selection is very clearly explained, but by contrast with the rest of the publication, the two volumes on ritual aim for complete and systematic coverage and include editions of manuscript texts. The introductions to these volumes on ritual are excellent and provide authoritative surveys of the development of masonic ritual and its source material. It is the first time that permission has been given to publish a number of these ritual texts, particularly those from higher degrees. While the two volumes on ritual show admirable clarity of purpose, they are different in function and structure to the other three volumes in the collection. This only adds to the overall sense of incoherence in the structure of *British Freemasonry*. It would have been much better to have published these excellent volumes on ritual separately as a stand-alone publication.

These problems of selection and arrangement are particularly evident in the last two volumes. Volume 4 is called *Debates* but is really about Scotland and Ireland - it seems that Scottish and Irish material could not be accommodated in the first volume on *Institutions*, which is English in focus. The introduction suggests that attacks and controversies into freemasonry were in three categories: religious; social; political, financial and legal. This classification is so generalised as to be useless and does not work when applied to major controversies, such as the creation of the Ancients' Grand Lodge in England in 1751. This was caused by the exclusion of Irish freemasons from the existing Grand Lodge, but the reasons for the dispute encompassed almost every aspect of the classification - the reasons for the antipathy towards Irish masons were religious, social, political and financial. While scholars such as David Stevenson and Mark Wallace provide some useful detailed

introductions to particular texts, this volume on *Debates* is particularly unpersuasive in its structure.

These problems are in large part due to the failure of the project to come to terms with the ambition inherent in its title *British Freemasonry*. Hitherto, the history of British freemasonry has largely been written as separate histories of freemasonry in England, Scotland, Ireland and (to a lesser extent) Wales. This ignores the complex interaction between freemasonry in the different countries. As David Stevenson has demonstrated, many of the features we associate with modern freemasonry such as the admission of non-working stonemasons to lodges, use of a mason word, the organisation of lodges on a territorial basis and the keeping of regular minutes emerged in Scotland in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Irish freemasonry was also very precocious and achieved very high levels of membership in the eighteenth century. The chief contribution of England appears to have been the establishment of a Grand Lodge system and the popularisation of a third degree extending the legends around Hiram, the mason of Solomon's Temple. Although Scotland, Ireland and England all developed separate masonic organisations, there was a complex interaction between them which makes freemasonry an interesting test case for investigating ideas of British nationhood in the long eighteenth century. This is particularly evident from the great success and popularity in England from the 1750s of the Ancients' Grand Lodge, closely connected with freemasonry in Ireland and Scotland.

If this present collection had seized the opportunity implicit in its title *British Freemasonry* it could have made a major pioneering contribution. Unfortunately, it misses this opportunity. British freemasonry in the eighteenth century is here seen as an English phenomenon, with some limited Scottish and (very little) Irish material tucked away under the misleading heading of *Debates*. The English orientation of the volumes is evident from their date range - the start point of the collection is 1717, the traditional date of the foundation of the Grand Lodge in London, and its end date is 1813, the Union of the English Grand Lodges. These dates ignore the large quantities of seventeenth-century material from Scotland which might have been represented here or the fact that other end dates (such as the short-lived proscription of freemasonry in Ireland in 1823) might be more appropriate. The lack of a truly British perspective in these volumes is evident in the general introductions which assume English freemasonry as the norm, and only pay limited attention to Scottish and Irish freemasonry, despite the great popularity in England of the Ancients' Grand Lodge.

The final volume of *British Freemasonry*, oddly entitled *Representations*, is particularly irritating in structure. The editor, Róbert Péter, has compiled a database of more than 11,000 newspaper articles relating to freemasonry, providing fuller coverage than is possible using the defective search mechanisms of online packages of eighteenth-century newspapers. A comprehensive catalogue of newspaper references to freemasonry based on this database would be a wonderful tool. Unfortunately we are not provided with that here. The *Representations* volume instead reproduces transcripts of a small selection of items from the database. Although the volume reproduces a number of previously unknown newspaper references to freemasonry in the eighteenth century, the principles of selection of particular newspaper reports are not evident and seem quixotic. Some very well-known reports are included, but others are omitted, so that a researcher working on eighteenth-century press reports of freemasons still needs to refer back to earlier compilations by

masonic researchers such as Alfred Robbins. While some of the press reports have been checked by the editor in online collections, others are reproduced from antiquarian transcripts and have not been checked against the original newspapers. The most exasperating feature of the *Representations* volume is the way in which the newspaper reports have been grouped together in vaguely designated thematic sections. The classification of individual articles is inconsistent, so that a routine announcement of a meeting of Grand Lodge in 1722 is unaccountably given in 'Debates and Conflicts', as is an advertisement for a sporting event under masonic patronage. The value of this thematic arrangement is unclear and it hinders usage of the sources. A simple chronological arrangement would have been much better.

Given the size of the editorial team for *British Freemasonry* it is not surprising that the quality of introductions to the texts is uneven. Some of the introductions are well-rounded and thoroughly documented overviews of major themes; others are superficial, omit important details and are inadequately contextualised. This is reflected in the way that some of the editors make use of basic reference works such as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* but others do not. *British Freemasonry* is marred by many inconsistencies in editorial practice and presentation. Volume 1 lacks any statement of editorial principles, while the other volumes have clear definition of the editorial practice adopted by individual editors. Volumes 2 and 3 reproduce title pages of the majority of the edited texts, which is helpful when they are only available in masonic libraries. Volume 4 reproduces decorative details from some of the represented texts which is not particularly useful. A consistent policy in the reproduction of title pages would have been desirable. Practice in citing call numbers for base texts is also inconsistent between different volumes.

The publisher provided an electronic version of this book for review and has only deposited electronic versions in legal deposit libraries in Britain. This is problematic in that it is difficult to know quite what you are reviewing. Is this an electronic or print publication? The electronic version is awkward to use, and the difficulties of using it contributed to the delay in completing this review. I am fortunate in that my university is one of the few which has acquired the print version of the publication, enabling comparison of the two. There are many problems with the electronic version. There are a number of formatting differences between the electronic and printed versions and the electronic version introduces erroneous hyphens which is unacceptable in a collection of edited texts. The fascinating frontispiece in Volume 3 (Rituals II) with the useful discussion by the editor is not included in the electronic version. If publishers are going to save costs by offering electronic versions for review and legal deposit, then they should at least ensure that the electronic version is an exact equivalent of the print publication.

It is tempting to conclude that *British Freemasonry* is a missed opportunity which, because of poor planning and general editing, fails in its aspiration to raise the profile of the eighteenth-century masonic archive. However, perhaps the problems derive not from the way the project was executed but rather from the very conception of the project itself. The enthusiasm of researchers into freemasonry for their subject is laudable but there appears to be a feeling among researchers into freemasonry that somehow the study of freemasonry is not given its due and that, if only scholars of the eighteenth century appreciated how wonderful the masonic archive is, it would be given much greater

prominence and acknowledgement, and maybe even emerge as a field in its own right. These claims ring increasingly hollow, given that such prominent scholars of the eighteenth century as Margaret Jacob, Peter Clark, James Stevens Curl, Steven Bullock and David Stevenson have all produced major studies of freemasonry. It is striking how, in contrast to the work of these scholars, the discussion in *British Freemasonry* is often inward looking, concerned with the detail of the workings of freemasonry and not engaged with current issues of scholarly concern. It seems that what many researchers into freemasonry really want is the opportunity to engage endlessly with masonic *arcana* and ignore its wider cultural contexts. If we are to develop a better understanding of the importance of freemasonry in the eighteenth century, what is required are not overblown and poorly executed editorial projects like *British Freemasonry*, but rather focussed and strongly contextualised studies which show how the masonic archive offers fresh perspectives on the major themes of eighteenth-century scholarship.

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