Freemasonry – the Missing Link Between Jacobitism and the American Revolution?
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“WHY IS THERE NO JACOBITISM IN AMERICA?” This question, to my knowledge, has never been asked, let alone adequately answered—although it may turn out to be as significant to scholars’ understanding of the eighteenth century as Werner Sombart’s famous question about the lack of socialism in America is to the nineteenth. It has never been asked, presumably, because the Jacobite party—the movement that sought to restore the deposed Stuart dynasty to the English and Scottish throne—was traditionalist, royalist, rife with Roman Catholics, and vaguely Francophile, and hence was the antithesis of everything that we take early Anglo-America to be—Protestant, Whiggish, Enlightened, and proto-democratic. Hence, Jacobite sentiments are assumed, rather than argued, to be alien to American soil. Scholars have held to this assumption despite the awkward fact that American patriots in the 1760s and early 1770s asserted the supremacy of the Crown over Parliament, closely echoing Jacobite arguments; historians have shown the same squeamishness that William Knox, the colonial agent for Georgia, expressed in 1769, when he wrote that the American Whigs “must see, that if they reject parliamentary authority, they make themselves still to be subjects of the abjured Stuart race. This however is too delicate a matter to say more upon.”¹

We may, two and a half centuries later, violate Mr. Knox’s sense of delicacy by asking what relationship Jacobitism, which spawned two major rebellions in Britain, might have had to the more successful uprising in America. The historian Brendan McConville points out that the Stuart dynasty experienced something of a vogue of popularity in North America after 1750, with colonial assemblies displaying portraits of the Stuart kings in their chambers while miniatures sold briskly on colonial streets—but he denies that this fashion for the Stuarts reflected any desire to restore their descendants to the throne.² Nonetheless, in the small colony of Rhode Island, records suggest that colonists were fascinated with Jacobitism. For instance, when the Providence Library Company, founded largely by Freemasons, burned down in 1758, only those books checked out at the time survived; these sixty titles included no fewer than five books on the Jacobite movement, in addition to two by the Chevalier Andrew Michael Ramsay, a famous Jacobite and Masonic author who promoted the notion that the Fraternity was

² McConville, The King’s Three Faces, 193-205.
descended from the Crusading knightly orders. In addition, in 1775, the Reverend Ezra Stiles of Newport recorded hosting an Irish Protestant minister from Nova Scotia who claimed to have met Charles Edward Stuart, the so-called “Young Pretender,” three times and asserted that the exiled prince was secretly a Protestant.

Whatever we might make of the private feelings of American colonists toward the House of Stuart, we can easily establish that participation in the Jacobite cause in the earlier half of the eighteenth century did not preclude active support for the American Revolution in the latter half. The example of Hugh Mercer, a Scottish physician who migrated to America, is sufficient to demonstrate this point: after serving as a surgeon for the Jacobite forces in the failed uprising of 1745, Mercer relocated to Fredericksburg, Virginia, where he practiced medicine. A close friend of George Washington, during the Revolution he took up the office of Brigadier-General in the Continental Army before dying of wounds sustained in the Battle of Princeton in 1777.

Precisely how Hugh Mercer squared his Jacobite past with his Revolutionary actions in America may be impossible to know—but any hope for an answer must be sought in the more private and secretive sphere that our friend Mr. Knox considered too delicate to discuss in print. Specifically, Hugh Mercer was a Freemason, and affiliated in 1761 with the Fredericksburg Lodge, of which he later served as Worshipful Master. It is a long-established fact that Freemasonry has a peculiarly close relationship to Jacobitism, with British Jacobite exiles founding most of the earliest lodges on the European continent and the Jacobite Prince of Wales, Charles Edward Stuart, joining the Fraternity some time before 1745. However, historians have been just as reluctant to discuss and make sense of this Jacobite strain in eighteenth-century Masonry as William Knox was to discuss the Jacobite implications of American patriotism. Jessica Harland-Jacobs, in *Builders of Empire*, acknowledges the strange abundance of Jacobite Masons, but avoids the matter by concluding that Masonry had a “protean nature” and an “ability to accommodate a range of political positions in the eighteenth century.”

In fact, the connection between Jacobitism and Freemasonry was much more than a mere accident of eighteenth-century politics, and the strong overlap between the two movements should not be surprising, considering their shared commitment to kingship. The foundational documents of eighteenth-century Masonry reveal that the so-called “Royal Art” was positively obsessed with the

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sanctity of kingship. Masonic myths trace the formal organization of stonemasons to Solomon and Hiram of Tyre, divinely sanctioned monarchs who stood as intermediaries between the earthly and heavenly realms; as the “Master’s Song” in Anderson’s *Constitutions* declares of the Solomonic age, “The Royal Art was then divine, / The craftsmen counsell’d from above,” and, “[n]o wonder then if Masons join, / To celebrate those Mason-Kings.”6 (Indeed, remarkably for a pamphlet that supposedly promoted proto-democratic Whiggism, the first edition of Anderson’s *Constitutions* uses the word “royal” at least 29 times and “king” at least 36 times.) Similarly, Jacobite propaganda emphasized the sanctity of monarchy and the divine right of kings, associating the monarch with the pagan gods of virility and spring; the Stuart claimants in exile even continued the old custom of the “king’s touch” as a cure for ailments.7

The obsession with kingship extended to all branches of eighteenth-century Masonry, including the Whiggish branch centering on the Grand Lodge in London. Although the leaders of the Premier Grand Lodge rejected the Stuarts’ claim to the throne, they sought royal patronage from the House of Hanover, which they obtained with the initiation of Frederick, Prince of Wales in 1737.8 James Anderson, who penned the *Constitutions of the Free-Masons*, was a fervent monarchist who also published the obsessively thorough *Royal Genealogies; or, the Genealogical Tables of Emperors, Kings, and Princes, from Adam to these times*.9 Although he was a Whig, Anderson was eager to proclaim his reverence for kingship: he published the sermon “No King-Killers” in 1715, in order to deny the Presbyterians’ role in the execution of Charles I sixty-five years earlier; he dedicated the work to his mentor, Daniel Williams, “a profess’d and firm friend of monarchy and Presbytery, [who] ever asserted them to be highly consistent.”10

Our Scottish physician, Hugh Mercer, was, like James Anderson, born in Aberdeen, Scotland, and his father was, like Anderson, a Presbyterian minister. Their similar backgrounds suggest that a similar Scottish brand of royalism could cross over from the Jacobite to the Hanoverian wing of British politics, with Freemasonry serving as the common denominator. Moreover, Hugh Mercer’s migration to America and his entry into revolutionary politics suggest that Masonry might have further served as a connecting link between the Jacobite movement and the American Revolution. Indeed, most North

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6 Anderson’s *Constitutions*, 1723, p. 77.
8 Harland-Jacobs, 109; Denslow, *10,000 Famous Freemasons*, vol. 1, 70.
9 James Anderson, *Royal Genealogies; or, the Genealogical Tables of Emperors, Kings, and Princes, from Adam to these times*, London: James Bettenham, 1732.
American Masons who did take part in the Revolution practiced the Ancient Rite, the branch of Masonry that had been founded in the 1750s by largely Jacobite Irish Masons.

Nonetheless, the rites and ceremonies of “Ancient” Masonry were hardly distinguishable from their “Modern” counterparts. If Masonry transmitted any distinctively Jacobite ideas or practices to Revolutionary-era North America, they must be sought in the higher degrees. Indeed, the Fredericksburg Lodge over which Hugh Mercer presided was one of the first in the world known to confer the Royal Arch degree, the germ of all higher-degree systems, which developed among Jacobite circles in France or Ireland. More dramatically, the Rite of Perfection, an elaborate system of twenty-five higher degrees, developed among Jacobite Masons and their allies in France in the mid-eighteenth-century, and can be seen to reflect the Jacobites’ anxieties over royal legitimacy. The Rite of Perfection spread from metropolitan France to the West Indies in the 1760s, where it continued to attract men connected to the Jacobite cause—so much so that one lodge of Perfection in Saint Domingue even took the name of “Édouard Stuart” in honor of the exiled British dynasty. The Rite spread eventually to North America; the first two Lodges of Perfection on the American mainland were at New Orleans and Albany, but each of these collapsed fairly quickly by 1774.

Shortly after these failed higher-degree lodges, Masons in Newport, Rhode Island, took up the Rite of Perfection in the 1770s. It was here, in Newport, that the Rite would survive the Revolution and find a permanent home. Moses Michael Hays, a Jewish merchant who had attained the degrees of Perfection several years earlier in New York, opened a lodge in Newport in June 1780, which he called “King David’s.” The founding members of King David’s Lodge were mostly Jewish, Quaker, and Anglican merchants, along with a smattering of Continental Army officers. On July 10, 1780, just three weeks after the lodge’s opening, a French expeditionary force under General Rochambeau arrived in Newport harbor and began quartering several thousand soldiers in the town. Nine days later, Jean-Louis de Sybille, the secretary to General Rochambeau, asked for admittance to the lodge. Not only was Sybille approved and soon after initiated, but over the ensuing year, while the French forces resided at Newport, thirteen French military officers followed Rochambeau’s secretary into the lodge. Claude Blanchard, the commissary to the French forces, remarked on the openness with which American Masons marched and displayed their regalia—in a spectacle unknown in France. On February 7, 1781, Blanchard himself was initiated by his own secretary, M. de Jumecourt, a “zealous free mason,” and attended two more receptions at an American lodge; as he remarked in his journal, “I was then nearly 39 years old. This was beginning rather late.”

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12 King David’s Lodge Log Book, 1780-1790, Saint John’s Lodge no. 1, Portsmouth, R. I.
Blanchard’s and Sybille’s initiations into Masonry in Rhode Island suggest that the Fraternity served as a social cement to the Franco-American alliance. What is more, the makeup of King David’s Lodge—Anglicans, Quakers, and French Catholics, allied in opposition to a Hanoverian king—perfectly mirrors that of the Jacobite-Masonic circles in France that originally conceived of the Rite of Perfection. The Rhode Island Masons could hardly have missed this remarkable concordance.

More specifically, the French expeditionary force stationed in Newport comprised four regiments, one of which hailed from Saintonge, a rural region north of Bordeaux that had long been a hotbed of mystical heterodoxy; at least one French officer who joined King David’s Lodge in Newport, Major de Fleury, is known to have belonged to the Saintongeais regiment. Saintonge was also the homeland of Bernard Palissy, the sixteenth-century Huguenot potter and alchemist who had come to symbolize the encoding of esoteric beliefs in primitive forms. Benjamin Franklin, during his diplomatic mission to Paris to procure French support for the American Revolution, took on the persona of a rustic artisan, and French printers posited a “great analogue” between Franklin and Palissy. Franklin, of course, went on to affiliate with the famous Loge des Neuf Soeurs in Paris.

In sum, Freemasonry can be seen to bring a greater emotional depth to the Franco-American alliance by evoking the past, including the Jacobite legacy. More specifically, the Rite of Perfection offered a means of reconciling the conflict between the royalism of Freemasonry on the hand and revolutionary republicanism on the other. The outbreak of revolution in North America in 1775-6 triggered a wave of iconoclasm, with previously loyal subjects attacking statues, coats of arms, and other signs of royal authority, suggesting a violent emotional break with the old order. The myths and rituals of the Masonic higher degrees could help to defuse the psychic conflict of rebellion against an anointed king. The first nine degrees of the Rite of Perfection (the 4th through the 12th degrees of Masonry, according to this scheme) deal with the aftermath of the murder of Hiram Abiff, dramatizing the month-long quest to avenge the master builder’s death. These degrees deal with the dilemmas of conflicting loyalties; their lessons are ambiguous and inconclusive. For instance, in the 9th degree, “Master Elected of Nine,” the initiate plays the role of Joabert, a Masonic workman sent to apprehend one of Hiram’s three assassins. Joabert locates the fugitive in a cave but breaks King Solomon’s commands by killing him on the spot rather than returning him to Jerusalem to stand trial. When Joabert reports to Solomon’s palace, the king orders him executed, but his fellow Masons intercede, obtaining clemency for Joabert on the

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15 Neil Kamil, Fortress of the Soul, 272-5.
grounds that, “it was an excess of zeal and love for the memory of our respectable Master H[iram] A[bif] that had certainly prompted him to disobey his orders.” The lecture following the ritual declares both the necessity of following orders precisely and “how easily the heart of a good king is influenced to be merciful,” without resolving the tension between these two notions.17

The conflicts and ambiguities of the first nine degrees of the Rite are partly resolved by the Royal Arch and the degree of Perfection, which serve as the 13th and 14th degrees of the Rite. They recount the recovery of the lost true and ineffable name of God, which Masons find in a vault and deliver to King Solomon. After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Assyrians, the Masons preserve the true name among themselves. Taken together, the fourteen degrees from the Apprentice degree to the Perfection seek to preserve the holiness of kingship while gradually transferring it from monarchs to the Masons themselves. At the opening of the Perfection degree, the Worshipful Master anoints each candidate’s eyes, lips, and heart with oil representing that which anointed “the penitent David and the wise Solomon.” When the lecture of the degree declares that the Masons work “in secret places, to re-establish the edifice ruined by the traitors, under the protection of the sovereign and sublime princes,” it may as well be describing the Jacobite movement. In the immediately ensuing degrees, the Masonic candidate begins to take upon himself the authority of earthly kings. Firstly, in the fifteenth degree, “Knight of the East,” the candidate plays the role of Zerubbabel, a Jewish elder who successfully petitions the Persian emperor Cyrus for permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. The lecture of the following degree, Prince of Jerusalem, declares that, “For their great zeal, courage, and knowledge [the Masons] obtained the title of governors of the people.”18 Finally, in the twentieth degree, the candidate leaves behind the role of Zerubbabel and takes on that of the Emperor himself.

Ultimately, the conflict between a deep attachment to kingship and the new republican order could be reconciled through apocalypticism. Kings, in the apocalyptic world-view, serve as temporary intermediaries, representing divine authority on earth; God’s direct intervention in worldly affairs renders human kingship unnecessary. The Masons, according to the higher degrees, must prepare the world for a moral renovation and the millennium. The arrival of American envoys in Paris led some French observers to describe the American Revolution in apocalyptic terms, with Franklin standing in for the primitive artisan who, like the Prophet Elijah, would reveal the secrets of nature and herald the restoration of Eden.19 The same train of thought—the questioning of royal authority leading to apocalyptic hopes—can be seen in the later degrees of the Rite of Perfection. The candidate ascends the political ladder at the same time that he climbs a spiritual ladder, approaching an enlightenment that

17 Francken Manuscript 1783, 76, 80.
18 Francken Manuscript 1783, p. 201-2.
19 Kamil, Fortress of the Soul, 272-3.
renders the political order obsolete. The ritual of the seventeenth degree, “Knight of the East and West,” takes place in a lodge illuminated by sun and moon figures. The Master of the lodge draws objects one by one out of a chest or trunk with seven compartments, re-enacting the breaking of the seven seals described in the Book of Revelations. On the opening of the sixth compartment, the sun goes dark and the moon “is stained with blood.” The breaking of the seventh seal reveals seven trumpets which are sounded as the candidate receives the apron, jewels, and crown of the degree, “to show that a good mason is equal to the most high prince.”\(^{20}\) The Masons’ future dominion is represented in the trestle board of the nineteenth degree, that of “Grand Pontif,” as a heavenly Jerusalem, whose walls are a perfect square pierced by twelve gates, and at the center of which grows, as in the Garden, the Tree of Life.\(^{21}\)

In the culmination of the Rite of Perfection, the 23\(^{rd}\) or “Knight of the Sun” degree, human and earthly institutions are superseded by God’s representatives: the candidate is instructed to cultivate an alchemically purified body, “from which must come a new king and a revolution in fullness of time, filled with glory.” The Mason himself becomes the instrument of a divine mandate to re-establish the peace and harmony of Eden and the “one and true religion, and the same which Adam received from God.”\(^{22}\) The overthrow of worldly authority, which the Hanovers embodied for the American revolutionaries as well as for the Jacobites, went hand in hand with a religious restoration and the return of human affairs to their prelapsarian innocence. A “revolution” was the completion of both a political and a cosmic cycle.

The Rite of Perfection embodies a stream of thought connecting the Jacobite movement with the American Revolution, and in so doing, it illustrates the depth of the revolutionaries’ dilemma. The break with the Crown demanded deep mental, emotional, and philosophical change. The ritual texts show the influences of eighteenth-century religious writings, such as Andrew Michael Ramsay’s *Travels of Cyrus* of 1727, which depicts the Persian prince voyaging through the ancient world and discerning the primitive religious truth underlying all religions, including the unity of God and humanity’s fall from grace and eventual redemption. Likewise, elements of the higher degrees echo the teachings of the English mystic William Law, a nonjuring Jacobite, who identified the Sun with God’s undying creative fire. Law rejected the notion of creation *ex nihilo* in favor of an eternal, cyclical universe; the lecture of the twenty-first degree similarly claims that, “9000 years before the era of Adam this world did exist.”\(^{23}\) Law’s 1726 *A Practical Treatise Upon Christian Perfection* probably supplied the title of the Rite of Perfection. The revolutionary restoration envisioned by Ramsay, Law, and the authors of the higher

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\(^{20}\) Francken Manuscript 1783, p. 207-9.

\(^{21}\) Ibid, 219-20.

\(^{22}\) Ibid, 248.

degrees was anti-political rather than democratic or egalitarian, looking to the institution of a divine, spiritual authority on earth.

These observations on Freemasonry in general and on the Rite of Perfection in particular do not demonstrate that any American Revolutionaries were Jacobites per se—that they actually wished for a Stuart restoration. However, they are intended to suggest that a set of myths and rituals, developed in response to an earlier crisis of the British monarchy, later helped American colonists to cope with the breakdown of royal authority in America. Freemasonry was the vehicle for these myths and rituals, which helped to make sense of both American independence and the Franco-American alliance as stages in an unfolding millennium. The Jacobite legacy and its influence both on Freemasonry and on the American Revolution must be explored and taken seriously; academic historians have long ignored the persistence of Jacobitism in both Europe and America, preferring a progressive history of continual secularization and democratization. This Whiggish mythology must give way to an appreciation of how those who made history continually re-enacted the past.