

Strange and Infamous Masons



This is something just a little bit different in the way of Masonic Education. I have always believed that education should be enjoyable, even fun and amusing, and to prove it I want to tell you about some rather strange (and, yes a few infamous) men who were Freemasons.

We begin with a Frenchman.....

The Chevalier Charles D'Eon of France was born in 1728, and was given the name Charles Genevieve Louis Auguste Andre Timothee D'Eon de Beaumont....obviously born of a noble family. He became a Freemason in 1766 in the Lodge of Immortality No. 376, which met at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, in the Strand, in London. He served as Junior Warden in 1769. He had many talents; he was an expert in the art of fencing and a well-trained soldier, an able diplomat who successfully negotiated the Treaty of 1763, ending the Seven Years War. So what, you say?....nothing strange about him so far. He unfortunately had a very effeminate appearance, and was known on occasion to masquerade as a woman. His enemies in France publicly accused him of being a woman masquerading as a man. Some of his Lodge Brethren seriously wondered if they really had initiated a woman into the Craft.

The controversy about his gender caused considerable gambling, and finally speculation got out of hand. An insurance company filed a legal petition to have the matter adjudicated. Five 'official witnesses' from the insurance company testified that he was actually a woman. About this time he accepted an offer from Louis XVI of France to receive a generous government pension, on the condition that he return to France, permanently reside there and from henceforth wear the clothes of a woman. So, from then on, with rare exceptions, he dressed as a female. When he died in 1810, a competent physician performed an autopsy and it was finally proven that D'Eon de Beaumont was indeed a man after all.

Now, let's 'cross the pond' to England and a British 'Man of the Cloth'

The Reverend William Dodd was an English Freemason, who was born in 1729, and died in 1777. He was the first Grand Chaplain of the Grand Lodge of England, in the year 1775. My research confirms that he delivered one of the many, many, speeches heard at the dedication of Freemasons' Hall in London in 1776. He was also the author of many books and Masonic papers. His weakness of character concerning money matters caused him to be tried for the crime of forgery. He actually had the nerve to sign the name of the Earl of Chesterfield to a document in the matter of 7,200 Pounds Sterling. He was convicted of forgery and faced execution.

The whole affair created such a great public outcry that attempts were made by the City of London, and by 30,000 people who signed petitions to the King, to commute his sentence. But to show how severe English criminal law was at the time the sentence was carried out. It was, by the way, one of the last public hangings in England. Not a good ending for a man of God, and a brother Mason.

Now on to an American of Scottish decent.....

Matthew McBlain Thompson was born in Scotland, and was a member of two Scottish Lodges and a Past Master of one of them. He also affiliated with King Solomon Lodge, No. 22, in Montpelier, Idaho when he settled there in 1881. He briefly returned to Scotland, and in 1898 he came back to the United States, where he created the "American Masonic Federation." He actively promoted the sale of all sorts of "Masonic" degrees by mail, and through paid salesmen; they were sent out to organize lodges and grant degrees throughout the United States. By the way, reduced rates were given for large groups and thousands joined his special Craft.

I actually found what is reported to be one of the original promotional flyers for the American Masonic Federation on eBay recently, but the 'buy-it-now' price of \$150 was a bit much to spend for a 'show-and-tell' item. In 1922 one of his salesmen was arrested in St. Louis, Missouri, and the postal inspector there decided that it was time to break up the old gang. Brother Thompson and two others were found guilty of 10 counts each of using the U.S. Mails to defraud the public. They were sentenced to serve two years in jail, and to pay a five thousand dollar fine on each count. With the exception of the St. Louis Postal Inspector Monte Price, a Freemason in Illinois, no one involved in the case; neither judge, jurymen, nor attorney, was a Freemason. So much for the Masonic 'degree mills'.

And here are the details of a 'mad' Englishman.

Joshua Norton was born in England in 1819, and in his youth engaged in a number of business enterprises in Africa, and ultimately he moved to San Francisco in 1849. He immediately entered the real estate business and accumulated considerable wealth. When he tried to corner the rice market, he lost everything. In order to cheer him up, his friends started to call him "Emperor". In 1859, at the age of forty, he proclaimed himself Norton I, Emperor of the United States and protector of Mexico. He donned an elaborate blue uniform with tarnished gold-plated epaulets, given to him by officers of the United States Army post at the Presidio of San Francisco. He also wore a beaver hat decorated with a peacock feather and a rosette. He frequently enhanced this regal posture with a cane or an umbrella. Instead of sending him off to have his head examined, everyone humored him because of his pleasant and cheerful disposition. He rode the streetcars for free, attended theatres without charge, and was supplied with food and other necessities of life by those around him. When he ran short of cash, he simply wrote a draft on his 'Imperial Treasury'. He issued Royal Proclamations that were designed to better the human race. On Sunday he always attended a church...he played no favorites, but visited them all.

So what does this have to do with Masonry? Well, I found out that he was a member of Occidental Lodge of San Francisco, and for a time he actually took up residence inside the Masonic Temple; some of his proclamations originated from his office there. On January 8, 1880, Norton collapsed on a street corner, and died before he could receive medical treatment. Two days later he was given a Masonic funeral. The funeral cortege was over two miles long, and some 30,000 citizens of San Francisco attended the Masonic graveside service. In June of 1934 his grave was moved to San Francisco's Woodlawn Cemetery (at the city's expense) and a huge monument was erected over his new grave.

Finally, a Brother from up North.....Canada, that is.....

This is one of my very favorite short but true stories. The story of man who loved his Lodge so much he didn't want to leave. Miles McGugan was a member of the 81st Regiment of Loyal Lincoln Volunteers and a member of Merrickville Lodge, No. 55, in the St. Lawrence District of Ontario. When he died, it was his last wish that his body be dissected, and his bones placed in the Lodge for future work in the degrees. Although no specific mention was made in the documents I found about this Mason, my guess is that his bones perhaps would have been somehow used in the second section of the Master Mason degree. At any rate, his wishes were carried out, and his bones resided in Merrickville Lodge until the entire building was gutted by fire in 1959. The Lodge was rebuilt, but Bro. McGugan didn't make the move to the new building.

So my brethren, I hope you have been entertained a bit with these short episodes in the lives of these 'not so ordinary' Masons....and some were not ideal role models either! But interesting! Believe it or not, this is too, is Masonic Education.

From original research and,

'The Reverend William Dodd', and 'Joshua Norton' adapted
from the writings of Bros. Nelson King, William Foster (NZ)

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