

Freemasonry and the English Civil War

Author: Shelby L Chandler

Presenter: Jeffrey D St.Onge

George Washington Masonic Lodge of Research No. 1732

Grand Lodge of Virginia, Ancient, Free & Accepted Masons

February 22, 2015

Freemasonry and the English Civil War

When we look back at the history of Freemasonry, many Masonic Historians will make the claim that the beginning of modern Freemasonry begins in the year 1717, when four Lodges in London, established the first Grand Lodge in the world, the Grand Lodge of England and for many writers, this is where all Masonic research begins. They state that this is such because when dealing with Freemasonry from an international point of view, the only acceptable body to be recognized is a standing Grand Lodge which offers both a standardized and organized approach. However, what is not often talked about is that in 1717, there was already hundreds of Masonic Lodges throughout Ireland and Scotland that had as yet to come together to become their own Grand Lodges, respectively in 1725 and 1736. For few Masonic historians, the belief in the true origins of modern day Freemasonry begins during the English Civil War when from out of hiding, Freemasons were permitted to hold public office while being free to openly practice in this, our gentle Craft.

The English Civil War was the result of a clash between two worlds and two eras. The first was struggle between the religious dominance of the Church of Rome and the Church of England which believed the old medieval system of the "*Divine Right of Kings*" (Figgis, 1897) against the various fractured sects of the Protestant Reformation and other free thinkers who accepted the new renaissance beliefs of the "*Natural Rights of Man*" (Hobbes, 1651). At stake was a society which became economically self-sufficient with the rise of the educated and prosperous middle class and a culture which could sustain the trades of the creative or cultural industries such as thespians, artist, fashion, play writers and music. In other words, for the first time ever, the people of England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland were not simply surviving, but

also able to enjoy the fruits of their labor and thus came the possibility of losing all that they gained.

While having overt Catholic tendencies and a strong belief in the system of absolute monarchy, King Charles I pushed to diminish any form of representative government while taxing the common people without the consent of Parliament. As fear of Catholic dominance grew, the Church of England chose to suppress it by superimposing the Anglican Church upon the people and the results was the fracturing of the various Protestant faiths with the Anglicans, Lutherans, Calvinist, Puritans, Quakers, and Presbyterians moving to defend their system of belief by suppressing another or simply fleeing to the new world to escape from the persecutions. As both Scotland and England were going through major religious and political upheavals, the new social gains were on the verge of being lost due to conflicts between these various faiths. People became polarized and watching each sides persecute one another in the name of revealed truth was creating a “Religious Fatigue”.

Parliament struck back against the aggressiveness of the king by passing laws to suppress the king’s rulings, so as Charles I decided to dissolve Parliament and close it permanently, armed belligerents amassed as both lords and commoners chose sides (Hunt, 2002). Out of loyalty to both crown and tradition, a large number of the peasant and nobility joined the king's army. At that time, noblemen were trained at a young age to ride horses and act as military officers. This meant that King Charles had the advantage of having strong officers and a very good cavalry to which Parliament's soldiers gave them the nickname “Cavaliers”, after the cavalieros or Spanish horseman who were responsible for killing Protestants in Europe, and they would jest that the

long ringlet hair of these Royalists was evidence that they were more worried about their own vanity than they were of the nation.

In retaliation, Cavaliers called the new Parliament army “Roundheads” because most of these soldiers had their hair cut very short to show their defiance to the Crown. It should be said that these Roundheads were made up of the freethinkers and religious minorities who were of the middleclass; the same people who realized that they risked losing all that they have gained with the return of the old ways. With most of the standing army siding with the Cavaliers, Parliament ordered the establishment of a permanent and professional national army, the first of its kind since the ancient legions of the Roman Empire. Parliament even established the Self-Denying Ordinance (Cannon, 2009) in 1645 to force its own members to resign their military commissions and permit the army to function with professional military leaders who would be able to advance themselves through merit. Unfortunately, most officers of this period were of the nobility class and almost all of them sided with the King against Parliament.

Of the few nobility that sided with Parliament, one shining stars of this period with Sir Thomas Fairfax, the 3rd Lord of Cameron (Plant, 2012), a proven soldier who was a man of both charisma and integrity. Known as “Black Tom” from his dark, handsome complexion, he was considered a trusted Parliamentarian figure despite being of nobility and maintaining cavalier attire and appearance. Fairfax made it known that although he loved the King and respected the right of the Crown, he accepted that King Charles overstep royal prerogative by infringing on Parliament’s rights. It was his purpose to capture the King and force his signature recognizing the political rights of Parliament and the natural rights of the people and in doing such, he was willing to guarantee to the King that his own sovereign rights would in turn be again recognized.

Parliament elected Fairfax to be Commander-in-Chief of all Parliament forces with Major General Philip Skippon leading the infantry and Lieutenant General Oliver Cromwell commanding the cavalry (Hickman, 2015).

Into this social chaos, did Freemasonry come into this fracturing society and the documents and writings of the scholars of this time chronicled the growth and impact of this fraternity during this period. With all the conflict and divisiveness which divided the British people of this time, Freemasonry was a binding force in the midst of this political and religious breakdown and became an integral part of British society. From the writings of the time, we know that the contending commanders of both armies were Freemasons, Royalist Prince Rupert (Kenning, 2006) and Thomas Fairfax (Muir, 2009), whose family is recorded as one of the most prestigious Masonic families in England. Another significant Freemason was Sir Robert Moray, who was also the founder and first president of the Royal Society (Bruta, 1996) along with artillery officer Sandy Hamilton (1996).

During the war, Royalist Elias Ashmole, another founder of the Royal Society, on 16 October 1646 records the following event in his diary during the war:

I was made a Free Mason at Warrington in Lancashire with Colonel Henry Mainwaring (a Parliamentarian) of Karincham in Cheshire; the names of those that were then at the Lodge, Mr Richard Penket Worden, Mr James Collier, Mr Richard Sankey [a Catholic], Henry Littler, John Ellam, Richard Ellam and Hugh Brewer [Royalist]. (Ashmole, 2014)

Other Masons recorded in his diary would be Royalist Sir Francis Biddulph and Sir Philip Mainwaring and Parliamentarian Sir William Brereton (2014). In its first public debut, Freemasonry found its brethren choosing sides as Freemasons fought against Freemasons.

Earlier mentioned, most of the military officers of this period sided with the King while Parliament received educated men who lacked any military pedigree as the bulk of their forces. It is recorded that Thomas Fairfax reported in a letter to Sir Charles Egerton, Speaker of the House of Commons, that if he could not have born gentleman as officers in his army, then he would have made gentlemen instead (Urban, 1834). Following this, we find that many of the starting Parliamentary officers of the New Model Army were Freemasons along with many other Puritans who supported Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell had a loathing hatred for Egerton and would one day seek to arrest him, but he was a brilliant general and politician who had a strong but tested friendship with Lord Fairfax (Cromwell, 1905), despite the many points of politics that they disagreed upon. Following their many military victories, Cromwell would one day compel Fairfax to walk away from the hateful games of politics and in his absence assume command.

Although some speculated that Cromwell was a Freemason, there has never been any evidence of such and the fact that he was a Puritan made it less likely. But many of his peers were and this was one of the reasons speculated that during the Siege of Rosslyn Castle, Cromwell gave the direct order to one of his generals to preserve Rosslyn Chapel at all cost (Muir, 2009). At the end of the siege, although the castle was completely sacked, the chapel remained intact with very minor damage. It is also reported that Cromwell, as the Lord Protector of England allowed the building of the first Masonic lodge in London, but these two events may only suggest that Cromwell was beholden to those officers who served with him who were

Freemasons and not that he himself was one. The single major point that Cromwell would not bend was that those siding with Fairfax simply wanted to reform the king whereas he, along with most Puritans, wanted the King executed and Cromwell was successful in doing such.

What is well recorded was that just before the actual physical conflict begun, there were a few times when both sides would meet to fight and would come together to parley. But instead of a bloody battlefield, the Freemasons on both sides would separate from both armies, come together and support each other in their Masonic degree work. One such case was in 1641, when both sides amassed 50,000 men to meet on the battlefield near Newcastle (Stevenson, 1990). The bloodshed is averted only because of the brethren on both sides decided to work together to resolve the matter. Instead of the expected chaotic bloodletting, generals from opposing armies joined together to initiate Cavalier General Sir Robert Moray and a few others into the mysteries of Freemasonry. This will become another of those many times that the Light of Freemasonry will shine in the Darkness.

The English Civil War was a terrible crisis as all civil wars tend to be and the British people fought and killed each other as never before. More than half the total battles ever fought on English soil were fought during this war. Over 80,000 died in battle and another 100,000 died of other causes, mainly disease and throughout all this, brethren killed brethren. By 1645, the Royalist cause was floundering as opposing ideology of loyal Royalist was taking its toll and by 1648, Charles I was given over to Parliament who executed him one year later, only to replace him with an equal tyrant in Cromwell. But for the rise of Parliament, many Freemasons found themselves in position of civic authority while those in the military found that with regards to a

man's status as a "gentleman", membership in the fraternity was a somewhat acceptable alternative to those who lacked noble pedigree.

There are few Masonic historians who believe that the origins of modern day Freemasonry begins in the mid-1600 when from out of hiding, Freemasons were permitted to hold public office while being free to openly practice in this, our gentle Craft. During the latter half of the 17th Century was a time of growth as Masonic lodges could now be publicly found throughout Britain and the fraternity grew in membership as the government became more hospitable and accepting of it. But security of social status for our fraternity could not be permanently obtained until the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 (Childs, 1990) when William of Orange assumed the British throne, thus forever ending both the rule of absolute monarchy and religion oppression by ensuring parliamentary power and protestant toleration during his rule and those of his successors. Under the House of Hanover, Freemasonry would flourish throughout England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales and Grand Lodges would be formed in both Europe and America.

In closing, it should also be reported that in Thomas Fairfax, this would be the same family whom for generations were considered the most influential family in English Freemasonry and whom George Washington's older brother Lawrence, would married into (Wilson, 1903). This same family would take in young George Washington, train and groom him, give him his start as the surveyor of their lands in America and they will eventually sponsor him with the Royal Governor of Virginia to receive his military commission as a Major.

Reference

- Ashmole, E. (2014, March 22). *The Origins of Speculative Masonry*. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from The Masonic Trowel:
http://www.themasonictrowel.com/Articles/History/united_states_files/the_origins_of_speculative_freemasonry.htm
- Bruta, J. (1996). *Sir Robert Moray: The Civil War Years*. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from Pietre-Stones Review of Freemasonry: http://www.freemasons-freemasonry.com/robert_moray.html#_ednref57
- Cannon, J. (2009). *The Oxford Companion to British History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Childs, J. (1990). *The Army, James II, and the Glorious Revolution*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Cromwell, O. (1905). *Carlyle's Oliver Cromwell: With a Selection from His Letters and Speeches*. Princeton University: Hutchinson & Company.
- Figgis, J. N. (1897). The Theory of the Divine Right of Kings. *Political Science Quarterly*, 158-160.
- Hickman, K. (2015). *English Civil War: Sir Thomas Fairfax*. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from About.com - Military History: <http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/army/p/English-Civil-War-Sir-Thomas-Fairfax.htm>
- Hobbes, T. (1651). *Leviathan*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Hunt, T. (2002). *The English Civil War at First Hand*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Kenning, G. (2006). *The Masonic Magazine*. Oxford: Bodleian Library.

Muir, G. (2009, May 4). *Freemasonry and the Royal Society*. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from Hawke's Bay Research Lodge No 305:
<http://www.mastermason.com/hbresearch/pages/lecture22.htm>

Plant, D. (2012, March). *Sir Thomas Fairfax, 3rd Lord Fairfax, 1612-1671*. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from British Civil War Project: <http://bcw-project.org/biography/sir-thomas-fairfax>

Sell, P. J. (2007). *From Blood to Compassion*. Raleigh: Lulu.com.

Stevenson, D. (1990). *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's Century, 1590-1710*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Urban, S. (1834, March). Diary of a Lover of Literature. *Gentlemen's Magazine*.

Wilson, W. (1903). *George Washington*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers.