

William Hogarth & His Prints

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The Library of the Regular Grand Lodge of Italy has acquired a series of the well known Hogarth Masonic Prints, namely the 1724 'Gormagons' and a 1798 edition of the set of the four prints titled 'Times of Day' first published in 1738.

William Hogarth (1697-1764) was a Freemason although an exact date of his initiation is not known. Records show him to be one of the nine members of the Lodge meeting at the Hand and Apple Tree, later Lodge no 41, in Holborn, when it was consecrated in November 1725. He also became a joining member, in 1730, of the newly constituted Corner Stone Lodge (now No 5). There were a number of well-known and influential Masons who were members of these lodges. It is important to appreciate the Masonic environment in Hogarth's days in order to enjoy his exceptional artistic talents. Freemasonry, in those early days was a mere dining and drinking club, one of many similar fellowship societies soon to develop into a respected entity. That special environment is manifest in William Hogarth's first print of Masonic interest.

'Masonry brought to light by the Gormagons' is a revealing print which appeared prior to Hogarth becoming a freemason about 1725. Two years earlier in 1723, James Anderson's first Book of Constitutions was published and it caused considerable tension and a split

in Grand Lodge. The publication of the constitutions had been instigated by a strong and influential faction of Freemasons, consisting of intellectuals and members of the nobility, which included the 2nd Duke of Montagu and John Desaguliers amongst others. The original founders, however, saw in these new constitutions a major deviation from the original genial and sociable drinking and eating club atmosphere that the society had enjoyed. The dispute reached a climax in June 1723 when the renegade Philip, Duke of Wharton was elected the 6th Grand Master of the Grand Lodge instead of the more popular Duke of Montagu. A year later, at the 1724 elections, when Wharton was defeated by just one vote, in a typical huff, he stomped out of Grand Lodge in the middle of the proceedings.

It is this situation which William Hogarth exploited, as any good caricaturist would today. 'Masonry brought to light by the Gormagons', first published in December 1724, is a classic Hogarth print and depicts his genius at its best. The print describes and satirises the circumstances detailed above. Symbolism is rife: the ancient craft of freemasonry is represented by an old lady riding an ass, James Anderson, (this apparently being the only known image of him) has his face far too close to her backside for comfort, implying the Scottish Presbyterian Reverend's subservience to the society. A tall and prominent Duke of Wharton stands in the guise of Don Quixote, directing the proceedings and behind him a corpulent John Desaguliers appears as Sancho Panza. The monkey in Masonic gear represents the 'aping' of freemasonry by the Gormagons.

An advertisement had appeared in the London press stating that the new Order had recently arrived in England and was founded by the Emperor of China, thus the four Chinese sages leading the procession, itself an allusion to the public Masonic processions that had just begun to appear in the streets of London. The ladder, bucket and mop, tavern signs and other emblems show Hogarth to be au fait with Masonic matters. It should be noted that the Society of Gormogons – the alternative spelling to Hogarth's Gormagons – was an active organisation attributed to Wharton as a founder and which spread through England and appears to have survived to the end of the century as a rival organisation to freemasonry.

The second acquisition is the best known of all Hogarth's Masonic prints 'The Times of Day'. By the very nature of his work, as a caricaturist and satirist, Hogarth often found himself at variance with various individuals. He was bound to antagonise those whom he depicted, sometimes cruelly, in his caricatures. The truth always hurts. In 1736, Hogarth found himself at loggerheads with one Sir Thomas de Veil (1684-1746), a justice of the peace and a member of the Lodge meeting at the Vine Tavern, Holborn which Hogarth also frequented. It was this antagonism between the two Brethren that led to the publication of the set of 4 prints collectively titled 'Times of Day', of which 'Night' was the fourth.

The set of four prints are to be seen in context as they tell a story of a day's happenings in the streets of London. The last print reflects the not uncommon late night celebrations in the back streets of the city. Freemasonry,

identified still as a dining and drinking club, falls into this bracket of revelry. Thomas De Veil, wearing his Master's collar and jewel, is blatantly drunk, being helped home by the Grand Tyler at the time, Andrew Montgomery, 'Garder of ye Grand Lodge', a well known and popular figure amongst masons. The print, typically, is filled with detail and innuendo. Celebrations are on because it is the anniversary of the restoration of Charles II, on 29 May 1660. The barber is performing his art as a surgeon. In the background is the sign of the Rummer and Grape Tavern in what is now Northumberland Avenue. There is considerable significance to the content of the chamber pot being poured over De Veil's head. It is a commentary and gibe at De Veil who was involved in the legislation banning the popular trade in gin. On one well-publicised occasion, the unfortunate De Veil, whilst testing the liquid content of a bottle in a tavern, inadvertently found himself gulping down a mouthful of urine! De Veil, known to be a heavy drinker and womaniser, was nonetheless quite an extraordinary character. He had had no fewer than 4 wives and 25 children. He had fought in the War of the Spanish Succession and when appointed Stipendiary Magistrate in 1738, acted decisively and with passion. Hogarth's humiliating depiction of his fellow mason went beyond any consideration of fraternal loyalty.

Hogarth reached the peak of his Masonic career on his appointment as Grand Steward for the year 1735. His name will forever be associated with events of the first half of the 18th century in England, so well depicted in his famously sharp and often cruel etchings.

Bibliography

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