

## Women and Freemasonry

Excerpted from a talk given by VW Bro. Rev. Neville B. Cryer to the Philaethes Society, as printed in *Masonic Times*, May, 1995, Rochester, New York, USA

In 1693 we have the York Manuscript No. 4, belonging to the Grand Lodge of York, which relates how when an Apprentice is admitted the 'elders taking the Booke, he or *shee* [sic] that is to be made Mason shall lay their hands thereon, and the charge shall be given.' Now I have to tell you, that my predecessors in Masonic Research in England from Hughan and Vibert and from all the rest onward, have all tried to pretend that the 'shee' is merely a misprint for 'they.' I now am the Chairman of the Heritage Committee of York. I know these documents; I've examined them, and I'm telling you, they say 'she,' without any question.

Of course, we have a problem, haven't we; to try to explain that. My predecessors would not try to explain this; they were too male oriented. The fact remains that, there it is, in an ancient document of a 17th century date. That this could have been the case seems all the more likely as that in 1696 two widows are named as members in the Operative masons Court. Away in the South of England, we read in 1714 - that's before the Grand Lodge of England - of Mary Bannister, the daughter of a barber in the town of Barking, being apprenticed as a Mason for 7 years with a fee of 5 shillings which she paid to the Company.

### Women Freemasons

by Bro. Dudley Wright

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Although the Antient Charges forbid the admission or initiation of women into the Order of Free and Accepted Masons, there are known instances where as the result of accident or sometimes design the rule has been broken and women have been duly initiated. The most prominent instance is that of the Hon. Elizabeth St. Leger, or, as she afterwards became, on marriage, the Hon. Mrs. Aldworth, who is referred to sometimes, though erroneously, as the "only woman who ever obtained the honour of initiation into the sublime mysteries of Freemasonry."

The Hon. Elizabeth St. Leger was a daughter of the first Viscount Doneraile, a resident of Cork. Her father was a very zealous Freemason and, as was the custom in his time - the early part of the eighteenth century - held an occasional lodge in his own house, when he was assisted by members of his own family and any brethren in the immediate neighbourhood and visitors to Doneraile House. This lodge was duly warranted and held the number 150 on the Register of the Grand Lodge of Ireland.

The story runs that one evening previous to the initiation of a gentleman named Coppinger, Miss St. Leger hid herself in the room adjoining the one used as a lodgeroom. This room was at that time undergoing some alterations and Miss St. Leger is said to have removed a brick from the partition with her scissors and through the aperture thus created witnessed the ceremony of initiation. What she saw appears to have disturbed her so thoroughly that she at once determined upon making her escape, but failed to elude the vigilance of the tyler, who, armed with a sword stood barring her exit. Her shrieks alarmed the members of the lodge, who came rushing to the spot, when they learned that she had witnessed the whole of the ceremony which had just been enacted. After a considerable discussion and yielding to the entreaties of her brother it was decided to admit her into the Order and she was duly initiated, and, in course of time, became the Master of the lodge.

According to Milliken, the Irish Masonic historian, she was initiated in Lodge No. 95,

which still meets at Cork, but there is no record extant of her reception into the Order. It is, however, on record that she was a subscriber to the *Irish Book of Constitutions*, which appeared in 1744 and that she frequently attended, wearing her Masonic regalia, entertainments that were given under Masonic auspices for the benefit of the poor and distressed. She afterwards married Mr. Richard Aldworth of Newmarket and when she died she was accorded the honour of a Masonic burial. She was cousin to General Antony St. Leger, of Park Hill, near Doncaster, who, in 1776, instituted the celebrated Doncaster St. Leger races and stakes.

## **Co-Masonry**

by Bro. Dudley Wright

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In 1879 several Chapters owning allegiance to the Supreme Council of France of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, at the instigation of the Grand Orient, seceded from that allegiance and reconstituted themselves as La Grande Loge Symbolique de France. One of these Chapters, bearing the name of Les Libres Penseurs, meeting at Pecq, a village of Seine et Oise, in November 1881, proposed to initiate into Freemasonry, Mlle. Maria Desraimes, a well-known writer on Humanitarian and women suffrage questions, which they did on 14th January, 1882, for which act the Lodge or Chapter was suspended. Mlle. Desraimes was instrumental in bringing into the ranks of Freemasonry several other well-known women in France, with the result that an Androgynous Masonic body, known as La Grande Loge Symbolique Ecossaise was formed on 4th April, 1893 although its jurisdiction at that time extended over only one lodge, that known as Le Droit Humain, which came into being on the same day, and which, in 1900, adopted the thirty degrees of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite.

One of the principal workers in the formation of this new Grand lodge was Dr. Georges Martin, at one time a member of the Lodge Les Libres Penseurs. The schismatic movement spread to Paris and Benares and afterwards to London, at which last-named place, in September, 1902, the Lodge "Human Duty," now No. 6 on the Co-Masonry Register, was consecrated. The title "Co-Masonry" in lieu of the earlier term "Joint Masonry" was adopted in 1905.