

THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF A MASONIC APOLOGIST

BY

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Some of you will be familiar, I am sure, with Cardinal Newman's spiritual autobiography, *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, and it is in Newman's sense that I use the term 'apology'. This is the justification of the rightness of a particular course of action; a specific set of beliefs, or the tenets and activities of a particular body - in this case Freemasonry. The first technical definition of the term given in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* is, 'The pleading off from a charge or imputation; defence or vindication from accusation or aspersion'; and an apologist is, 'One who apologizes for, or defends by argument; a literary champion.' But a champion is supposed to defeat his opponents and I am not at all sure that I - or anyone else speaking on behalf of the Craft - have managed to do that. At least, not yet.

It is also important to bear in mind that the apologist is not making excuses for something that is deserving of attack. My task is not a negative one; I have no need to make pleas in mitigation for the crimes and sins of Freemasonry, because it is wholly innocent of any wrongdoing whatsoever. What I must do is to demonstrate that in its tenets, its practices and its entire ethos, Masonry is a good and desirable Organisation that can be 'well and worthily recommended' to the world at large. But however positive the task, it is far from easy, even with the apparently simple matter of definitions.

We all know the standard definition from the Second Degree: '[Freemasonry is] a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols' - puzzling to the candidate and quite incomprehensible to anyone outside the Craft. For the benefit of outsiders the Board of General Purposes, in the leaflet *What is Freemasonry* (1984), offered a more comprehensive definition:

[Freemasonry is] one of the world's oldest secular fraternal societies ... a society of men concerned with spiritual values. Its members are taught its precepts by a series of ritual dramas, which follow ancient forms and use stonemason's customs and tools as allegorical guides. The essential qualification for admission and continuing membership is a belief in a Supreme Being. Membership is open to men of any race or religion who can fulfil this essential qualification and are of good repute.

All well and good, but this raises at least as many questions as it answers: how old is it?; what spiritual values is it concerned with?; what are its precepts?; what is the content of the ritual dramas and what is allegorised?; and 'of good repute' in who's eyes? The matter of the precepts is easy: Brotherly Love; Relief [Charity]; and Truth. The other questions are still largely matters of debate and we should seek a new definition that is at once concise and comprehensive. Alas, I cannot, offer one.

Perhaps we should try a different approach. Some years ago I had to produce a working definition of the term 'Mysticism', something far more nebulous and impossible to pin down than Freemasonry. The solution (admittedly far from satisfactory) lay in defining it in terms of mystics: those who undergo the experiences involving the practices and concepts - which I need not elaborate here - commonly labelled as 'mystical'. Applying this approach to Freemasonry we can define it in terms of its members, what they *do* and what they *are*: men bound together by a common experience (of the ceremonies of initiation), and by adherence to common goals (the basic precepts of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth that constitute the masonic code of behaviour). In other words, 'Good Men seeking to be better'.

This is, of course, overly simplistic. It is what we *ought* to be, and what I believe most of us are, but the *Proceedings* of the Quarterly Communications of the United Grand Lodge of England contain a depressingly regular catalogue of expulsions from the Craft for a breathtaking range of criminal offences. Clearly, not every Freemason is a 'Good Man seeking to be better' and it is the behaviour of those who are not that is seized upon by our critics to be used as a cudgel for beating the Craft. The argument goes like this: Mr. A is a convicted criminal; Mr. A is also a Freemason, *ergo* all Freemasons are criminals and Freemasonry is wicked. We may recognise that condemning the Organisation for the sins of a tiny minority of its members is both unjust and illogical, but people in general (including Freemasons) have a marked tendency to think the worst of their fellow human-beings, and precious few of them seem willing to identify and refute the fallacy of undistributed middle.

Here, then, is the next problem. Having defined Freemasonry as a good and noble Organisation, how do we *prove* that it is so? Simply by each and every one of us living up to the precepts to which we profess to adhere: by practising 'every moral and social virtue'; by discharging our duties to God, to our neighbour and to ourselves; by practising 'every domestic as well as public virtue'; by 'never proposing or at all countenancing any act that may have a tendency to subvert the peace and good order of society'; by paying 'due obedience to the laws of any State' in which we may live; and by maintaining allegiance to our Sovereign. Perhaps we all do take the Charge after Initiation to heart and do lead exemplary lives, but we must not only *be* honest and upright citizens in everything we do, we must also be *seen* to be such.

This point has been debated recently in the correspondence columns of *Freemasonry Today*, but I feel that some of the writers have missed the essence of the point. Trumpeting the merits of our charitable donations inevitably seems like special pleading, not so much 'See how good we are', as 'See how much better we are than lesser, non-masonic mortals'. We may well swell with pride when we discover how much we have given to maintain lifeboats, to support hospices, to restore the great Cathedrals, or to relieve the suffering that follows natural disasters, but other bodies, other individuals also give money to worthy causes and - more to the point - give their time and their expertise as well. There is little effort and less sacrifice in the passive contribution of filling the alms-dish than in the active giving of our time. I know that many masons do willingly give their time to provide transport, outings and entertainment for sick children, for the elderly and for the infirm but consider the impact on the public perception of Freemasonry of, for example, (and I know that technically this is not feasible) a lifeboat maintained and *manned* by masons. But this is something of a digression; let us return to the question of citizenship.

In a letter in *Freemasonry Today* (5, p41), Michael Baigent suggests that the Craft should 'seek always to be at the forefront of social change: socially progressive and active but maintaining the tradition while guided by the divine principles'. This sounds very laudable but the words 'social change' and 'socially progressive' have a politically partisan ring to them, however innocent the author's intention may have been. One of the great strengths of regular Freemasonry has been its complete abstention from involvement in either party politics or denominational religion, and once it is seen as descending into the political arena and supporting a specific political stance (irrespective of what that stance may be), its death-knell will have been sounded. It is the duty of parliament and of local councils - as, good men (and women) elected to do good, or to act as if they were doing good, on our behalf - to ensure the well-ordering of society. Freemasonry, as such, has no special agenda to promote and no role in government, although the rulers of the Craft have a duty to speak out when Freemasonry is unjustly attacked. But as good citizens taking an active role in society, individual Freemasons should support the democratic process as their consciences direct them. They should also play their part in defending the Craft, but before I suggest how that may be done there are other matters to consider.

Unjust attacks upon Freemasonry are nothing new, and in the past the Craft has weathered every storm that has beset it. But today there is a significant difference in that Freemasonry is, in some respects, weaker than it has been since the foundation of the first Grand Lodge in 1717. Previous generations of English masons over the last two and a half centuries have invariably included in their number significant figures from both royal and governmental circles: men who have had the respect, and often the affection, of much of the population. Today this is no longer the case. We have few, if any, powerful members of the establishment within the Craft and our interests are thus no longer protected either directly by influence or indirectly by reputation. Nor are the great and the good represented to any degree within Masonry in other countries, so that we cannot bask even in reflected glory. As a consequence we have become an easy target for the attacks of politicians who, by stirring up anti-masonic hysteria, can gain the acclaim, or notoriety, that their lack of real talent must otherwise deny them. The attacks may be unjust and the politicians may be venal, but the damage is done. Already, at a national level, members of the judiciary are required to state whether or not they are Freemasons, and in local government many councils demand that their employees make a similar admission. In theory this should be of little consequence but in practice there are serious implications.

First there is the implicit threat to the employment and promotion prospects of Freemasons working within local government: no council making demands for masonic exposure will be well-disposed towards Freemasonry and will view its masonic employees with suspicion if not with hostility. There is also the tacit suggestion that Freemasonry provides a breeding ground for organised political and financial corruption. Indeed, the suggestion of corruption has been made openly, both by professional anti-masons such as the odious 'investigative journalist', Martin Short, (see, e.g. 'A secrecy breeding corruption' *Daily Mail* 18 February 1998), and by Chris Mullin, MP, who chaired the all-party Home Affairs Select Committee that investigated Freemasonry within the Criminal Justice system. No evidence whatsoever exists to justify their allegations, but the Craft has been smeared and the mud sticks. In the absence of informed comment to the contrary - the media in general being either hostile to or dismissive of Freemasonry it is not disposed to give space to any defence - much of the populace now accept unfounded allegations about masonic corruption as the truth. Any and all moves against Freemasonry will thus have substantial public backing - unless we ensure that the truth is made known.

But just how do we defend ourselves and present our *Apologia*, and to whom do we address it? The second question is the more easily answered. For our purposes the public can be divided into two groups: masons and non-masons. The former divides again into two sub-groups: informed masons and ignorant masons, the latter being, alas, by far the larger of the two. Non-masons fall into four sub-groups: the neutral general public, who know nothing and care less about us; the professional antimasons and others who are avowedly hostile towards us; the families of Freemasons; and - bearing in mind that all of this has a positive purpose - potential Freemasons. It is safe to assume that the vast majority of non-masons are either uninformed or ill-informed about us. If we are to weather the present storm it is both urgent and essential that we correct their misconceptions and implant a positive perception of the Craft in all of these groups and sub-groups. Let us now consider what the concerned Freemason can do, how he can do it and what pitfalls he will encounter.

Let us also take it as axiomatic that all Freemasons wish for three things: the accurate portrayal and perception of Freemasonry within society as a whole; the future well-being of the Craft; and the continuing well-being of society. To further these aims we must first continually remind ourselves that Freemasonry does not exist in isolation: all members of the Craft are also citizens of their own country and as citizens they are part of the cement that binds society together. We also have a group identity *as freemasons*. We are members of a fraternal Organisation with the common goal of promoting public and private morality, expressly by way of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. What we must

do is demonstrate to the public that these *are* the goals of Freemasonry (and the *only* goals) as we strive to attain them ourselves. More simply put, we must teach by example.

First, Brotherly Love. With our avowed commitment to racial, social and religious tolerance we are ideally placed to demonstrate the principle of Brotherly Love and thus to be perceived as the ideal Organisation to overcome social tensions within our multi-cultural and multi-faith society. But what does the public see? It sees all too few members of racial and religious minorities within our lodges. I do not know why this should be so, for racial mixing and racial harmony prevail in masonic lodges in all parts of the Commonwealth where Masonry is active, but it is a problem that we should address as a matter of urgency. Members of ethnic minorities are increasingly active in all other aspects of British culture and we should ensure that they have a true image of the Craft and that they are welcomed into it. We do not want accusations of racism hurled at us in addition to everything else, for although we are recognising increasing numbers of Prince Hall Grand Lodges in the United States of America, racist attitudes are still prevalent within lodges under some of the Grand Lodges in the deep South and we will undoubtedly suffer from guilt by association. If we attend masonic meetings in America, or anywhere else, in which overt racist comments are openly made, then we should be prepared to walk out of them and to say why we are doing so. There will undoubtedly be a furore, but only by having the courage of our convictions can we truly demonstrate Brotherly Love.

Similarly with Relief. Much of our charity is directed, and rightly so, towards masonic charitable causes. We can be proud of our masonic homes for the elderly, of our support for masonic widows and dependents, and of the help we give to brethren in real need. But we are routinely accused of self-interest, and of helping one another at the expense of non-masons to the extent of corruptly favouring fellow masons in the fields of commerce, industry and finance. That we are strictly enjoined not to use Freemasonry for self-advancement, and equally strictly enjoined to obey the law of the land is ignored by our critics and enemies, and the public is led to believe that masonic charity begins and ends in the masonic home. The falsity of this perception can only be made clear if we engage in high profile involvement in charitable activities for the public good - which, as good men and good citizens we should be doing anyway. As I have said it is impracticable to consider a masonic life-boat manned by masons, but other community commitment is perfectly feasible. Our financial commitment can lead, for example, as it does in the USA and increasingly in this country, to the endowment of Chairs in medical research, to the establishment of teaching programmes for children and adults with learning difficulties, and to rehabilitation programmes for drug addicts. Given sufficient dedication it can lead even to the funding of hospitals that serve the whole community (as with the superbly equipped and staffed Scottish Rite Children's Hospital at Dallas in Texas).

And with all such projects we can be actively involved in person by giving our time and enthusiasm to support the professional staff who run them. When we do become so involved we should make sure that our masonic light is not hidden under a bushel: we involve ourselves in charitable work because we are good citizens, and because we are good citizens we involve ourselves in Freemasonry - because it epitomises all that is best in human endeavour. But if we do not tell the public that this is so, then the public will never have a true image of the Craft.

We must also be equipped to field awkward questions. Thus, if we are dedicated to public and private morality why, in the past, have there been criminals guilty of serious crimes who have been - at the same time - active Freemasons. The only answer is that these men were, or are, hypocrites to whom a solemn Obligation is meaningless. If they are prepared to lie to their brethren in the lodge in this way then they are indeed 'void of all moral worth'. We should not excuse them but should emphasise that we take men on trust and that if they betray that trust they are expelled. At which point I must point out

that we are still our own worst enemies. When we give an answer something like that outlined above, well informed and perceptive critics pose another question: How do you explain the wording of the 'Royal Arch Charge or Long Closing'? For brethren who may be unfamiliar with this I give the relevant wording (from the Aldersgate Royal Arch Ritual, 13th ed., 1993):

Remember that in your respective Lodges you have solemnly and voluntarily vowed to relieve and befriend with unhesitating cordiality every Brother who might need your assistance, that you have promised to remind him in the most gentle manner of his failings, and to aid and vindicate his character whenever wrongfully traduced; to suggest the most kindly, the most palliating, and the most favourable circumstances in extenuation of his conduct, *even when justly liable to reprehension and blame*. Thus shall the world see how close is the bond that links Freemasons together.

It is a most unfortunate passage, and unlike the comparable statement in the Third Degree Obligation, 'that my breast shall be the sacred repository of his secrets when entrusted to my care', it lacks the waiver: 'murder, treason, felony, and all other offences contrary to the laws of God and the ordinances of the realm being at all times most especially excepted.' Apologists for the Craft (including me) regularly condemn critics for omitting to mention this waiver, and urge that its inclusion clearly demonstrates masonic probity and integrity. How then do we answer the question?

This is where we come to Truth. There is only one answer to the question. It is a leftover from Victorian ritual: flowery prose that emphasises Brotherly Love and that should not be taken as attempting to exonerate the criminal. But if *that* is not to be taken at face value, why should other parts of the ritual not be similarly treated, or mistreated, and how do avoid condemnation as casuists? There is no adequate answer to this second question. All that I can suggest is that this part of the Royal Arch Charge be revised so that it is consistent with true masonic morality. And revised as soon as possible.

Tinkering with the rituals brings us naturally to the other great area of debate and of frequent unjust accusation: the relationship between Freemasonry and religion. It is regularly, and correctly, asserted by Grand Lodge that Freemasonry is neither a religion nor a substitute for religion, but Christian fundamentalists will have none of this. Their attacks on Freemasonry, as anti-Christian, Gnostic, Satanic or what-you-will, are grounded in ignorance - derived from the works of fanatical and dishonest American hate-mongers, who do not merit the designation of 'Christian' (As an aside I should mention as especially dishonest and wicked, the works of Ed Decker; the most repellent of his books is *What You Need To Know About Masons*, in which he presents masons as murderers and offers a catalogue of lies *vis-à-vis* Freemasonry and Christianity).

Such critics make great use of Albert Pike's book *Morals and Dogma*, treating it as a dogmatic statement of masonic philosophical doctrine applicable to Freemasonry universal and thus binding upon all Freemasons. Of course, it is not: it was, but no longer is, a standard work of masonic philosophical speculation within the Ancient & Accepted Scottish Rite (Southern Jurisdiction) in the U.S.A. It has never possessed any authority outside that particular body and Pike was at pains to point out that all statements of a doctrinal nature made in the book were simply his own opinions which readers were free to accept or to reject. 'Christian' anti-masonic works are at equal pains to avoid pointing this out. Similarly they accept as absolute truth the nonsensical stories of the Palladian Rite propagated by 'Leo Taxil' as part of his elaborate hoax at the expense of both the Roman Catholic Church and the Grand Orient of France. Any well-informed Freemason with access to a basic library of standard masonic reference books can easily refute the anti-masonic rubbish put out by Christian (and, of recent years, Islamic) fundamentalists. But again we manage to shoot ourselves carefully in the foot.

Fundamentalists invariably bring into their arguments the name of Aleister Crowley: magician, pervert, fraud and, alas, a Freemason, albeit a very irregular Freemason. His antics and his beliefs have no hearing on Freemasonry and religion and as a man firmly rejected by Grand Lodge he could readily be dismissed from the argument. Until now, that is. Crowley was the head of an esoteric Order, the *Ordo Templi Orientis*, which had, and has, a series of rituals involving sex-magic and a theology based upon Crowley's *Book of the Law*. This particular 'Holy Book' contains such edifying passages as the following (for uttering which I must apologise):

I am in a secret fourfold word, the blasphemy against all gods of men. Curse them ! Curse them ! Curse them !
With my Hawk's head I peck at the eyes of Jesus as he hangs upon the cross.
I flap my wings in the face of Mohammed & blind him.
With my claws I tear out the flesh of the Indian and the Buddhist, Mongol and Din.
Bahlasti ! Ompehda ! I spit on your crapulous creeds.
Let Mary inviolate be torn upon wheels: for her sake let all chaste women be utterly despised among you.

We can rightly dismiss this as unpleasant adolescent rubbish, but members of the O.T.O. take it seriously. They are also currently seeking, in considerable numbers, to be admitted into regular Freemasonry - and they wish to be obligated upon their own 'Holy Book', the *Book of the Law*. This has not happened, and will not happen, in this country but some American Grand Lodges are rather less vigilant (or perhaps more lax in their interpretation of the words, 'of good repute'). It is reported (in Newsgroups: alt.freemasonry) that, 'Many of our [O.T.O.] members have also joined Craft masonry as well as AASR [!]. In some Masonic jurisdictions, the VSL for taking oath by Thelemites has been Liber AL [i.e. the *Book of the Law*], in recognition of the religious orientation of the OTO member applicants.' I have dutifully drawn this state of affairs to the attention of Grand Lodge, but when fundamentalist antimasons unearth this (as they surely will) we will be hard pressed to justify our inaction in not repudiating the Grand Lodges concerned.

All that we can do is to continue to emphasise that Freemasonry does not demand a specific religious adherence - only that its members *must* believe in God (which term I much prefer to 'Supreme Being', perhaps from an inherent horror at the thought that a 'Supreme Being' encompasses also the notion of a goddess) We have no *a priori* grounds for rejecting Thelemites (believers in Crowley's doctrines, the so-called 'Law of Thelema') as candidates if they take their Obligation on the VSL. But if they do so, does that Obligation have any meaning for them since they reject the morality of the VSL ? I have yet to formulate an answer to that question.

Considerations of the Obligation bring us back to the masonic rituals. The structural tinkering of recent years has come to an end and we may now hope that the rituals will be left in peace (for all that some parts would benefit from being put into good English). The texts of almost all masonic rituals are readily available to the public in one form or another and we shall never be free of awkward and pointed questions about them. Our Obligations require us to exercise reserve over the content of the rituals, and common-sense dictates that we refrain from any public debate about ritual texts. The rituals of both the Craft and Royal Arch are carefully constructed and very effective Rites of Passage. When the ceremonies are properly conducted, with a sincere candidate, they have a powerful psycho-spiritual effect - as they should, for they contain all the necessary elements of a true initiatic ceremony (and bear in mind that this does not make them essentially esoteric: the ceremony of Baptism is the process of initiation into the Christian Church). But although the ceremonies are of standard form, the experience of the candidate is unique to himself and is something that should be, and usually is, profoundly moving for him. It ought to suffice that the ceremonies, when properly conducted, have the desired effect. The symbols encountered by the candidate are

explained to him in the course of the ceremonies, and we would do well to refrain from further comment and interpretation as to the philosophical and spiritual meaning of the ceremonies. Attempts to do so invariably give ammunition to our critics and the misuse they have made of Pike's *Morals and Dogma* should be an object lesson to us.

Here you may have perceived a paradox. I set out to consider the problems of defending and justifying Freemasonry and have suggested that we studiously avoid any discussion of the central masonic experience of every Freemason. Some of my reasons have already been given, but there is also the question of secrecy. The fact that the ceremonies are crucial to the making of a mason, in both a ritual and philosophical sense, is reason enough to withhold their content from the candidate, so that he gains a full appreciation of the experiences he undergoes. We also undertake in our Obligations not to reveal the 'secrets and mysteries' of Freemasonry: that is, the signs, words and grips by which - *in the context of the ceremonies* - we recognise our brethren. These are the only secrets in Freemasonry and we need have no hesitation or shame about keeping them from the public. The public will still laugh and talk knowingly or derisively about funny handshakes and rolled-up trouser legs (as my now adult children do to me) but they will respect our feelings and respect us for our integrity in keeping to our Obligations. It is a part of our private morality and justifies us in considering ourselves as 'good men'.

Others, of course, will still condemn us for being a Secret Society, even though - as has often been stated - our meeting places are well known, our *Constitutions* are available to the public and we do not attempt to hide the fact that we are Freemasons. At least, most of us do not. There are still some masons who, for reasons best known to themselves, take no pride in Freemasonry and are ashamed to admit their membership. I cannot understand their attitude but I respect their wishes and will continue to argue for their privacy. Our increasing openness is to be encouraged but it should not entail a return to the days of making returns of lodge membership to Justices of the Peace. Freedom of Information should not be interpreted as freedom to interfere in the privacy of any individual. Our tolerance, as masons, of the religious and political beliefs of our brethren should extend to their personal beliefs as to the merits, or demerits, of disclosing our membership of the Craft.

In general terms, however, we must continue to argue the case that we are not and never have been a secret society - nor 'a society with secrets', perhaps the most absurd description of the Craft ever dreamed up by a misguided apologist: the general public simply does not understand the technical, masonic meaning of the noun 'secret'. The expression 'Secret Society' conjures up a vision of insurrection against the established order: the very last thing that could be imputed to the desperately respectable ranks of the English Craft, or of any other jurisdiction of regular Freemasonry.

Here, too, there is a need to educate the public. Regular Freemasonry eschews any involvement in partisan politics or religion; it does not attempt to interfere with lawful authority; and its first, essential landmark is belief in God. Any form of Masonry that does not conform to this pattern is irregular and beyond the pale as far as we are concerned. It does not matter that the members of such a body may be charming, erudite and respectable when we meet them in a social context. As masons we cannot associate with them and it is not helpful to our rebuttal of the arguments of antimasons - who quite rightly associate the Grand Orient of France, for example, with extreme republican and anti-clerical fervour - to find an extremely able masonic researcher (Paul Bessel, in *Harashim*, No. 7, July 1998) making an impassioned plea on historical grounds for tolerance, and perhaps recognition, of both the Grand Orient and the Grand Lodge of France.

Thus far racism, self-seeking, blasphemy, secrecy and subversion. Is there anything else of which we are accused and concerning which we stand in need of justification? Inevitably there is: sexism. This is a two-pronged attack. On the one hand we do not admit women as members, and on the other we neglect our wives and families in favour

of our all-male glorified social club. The obvious reply to the first charge is that there are at least two masonic Orders specifically for women (the Order of Women Freemasons, and the Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Freemasons). Both of these Orders are now prepared to talk to us on matters of common interest, and they have no more wish to be masonically involved with us than we do with them perhaps because many of their members are the wives, sisters or mothers of Grand Lodge masons! For them the question of familial neglect does not arise, and for those who cannot bear to be parted even in masonic activity there is Co-Masonry, the Order which admits both men and women. There are some masons who currently advocate inter-visitation with the male members of Co-masonic lodges, but to accept this sirensong would go against the Charges on which Grand Lodge Freemasonry is based and betray our basic principles. A selective acceptance or rejection of the Charges of a Free-Mason would render any justification of the Craft impossible and would make a mockery of any claim that we possessed integrity.

But the question of the role of our families in our masonic commitment remains. Society has changed dramatically since World War II and for all the cries of feminists it is no longer patriarchal. Nor is it as static as it was. Patterns of employment, education and housing have all changed and we cannot justify any Organisation that is, or appears to be, divisive of families and unable to accommodate domestic mobility. What is essential for the continued well-being, and even the very survival, of Freemasonry is the need to gain the interest not only of its members but of their families in understanding what Freemasonry is and in appreciating what it can represent in terms of a tool of social cohesion in a fragmenting society. If this is to be done, Freemasons must be better educated in the history, nature and working of their Craft, to which end masonic lodges of research and study societies must be promoted, the facilities for masonic education (libraries and information technology) must be available within every Provincial Grand Lodge, and the enthusiasm of newly made masons must be maintained.

This last point brings me to the last and most difficult task of the masonic apologist. How do we justify Freemasonry to its own members? It is, perhaps, even more important than pleading our cause before the general public. If we cannot persuade our own members that the Craft is worthwhile, that it offers them both social and intellectual challenges and rewards, then we shall neither persuade potential members that it is a desirable body to join, nor convince those who have joined that there is any real reason to remain.

Officially we have some 340,000 members but I strongly suspect that the number is considerably lower - probably in the region of 250,000. Certainly the number of Grand Lodge Certificates issued each year has shown a steady decline over the last fifteen years, from just under 16,000 to just over 10,000. Some Provinces, Yorkshire East, for example, have been successful in gaining and retaining candidates, but overall the picture is sombre. In strict terms it is not within the remit of the apologist for Freemasonry to suggest remedies for an ailing Craft, but in order to avoid closing on a bleak and depressing note I will offer some anyway.

We must find something more to offer our initiates than a continuing sequence of ceremonies for which they receive little explanation and in which it will often be many years before they can participate, assuming that they do not lack the confidence or even the desire to take part. And if they do take office they must not be made to feel that advancement is conditional on placing attendance at meetings above their duty to family and vocation. Above all they must not be frightened of taking office because of the prospect of impossible expense once they are in the Chair. Masonry is much more than a social club, and while socialising is an important aspect of the Craft it is far from being the most important.

Perhaps we should consider the possibility of copying the example of continental Masonry and require our candidates to make a *real* daily advancement in masonic knowledge: learning and understanding a complicated catechism, and preparing a short paper before advancing to the next degree. Such an approach would require existing masons to be far more knowledgeable about their Craft and would call for regular lectures, debates and discussions within the lodge about every aspect of Freemasonry. This would be far more satisfying fare than endless repetitions of ceremonies with surrogate candidates, tired and bored officers and watching brethren even more bored. But to bring about a programme of lectures and debates a far greater degree of willingness to learn must be shown by brethren than is presently the case.

It is the old problem once again. Having got the masonic horse to water, how do we make it drink? The answer, of course, is by providing incentives and then we must ask, what are the incentives? Honours, perhaps? - but they will seem increasingly less attractive if their recipients have to work rather than simply sit out their time in order to obtain them. This, I fully appreciate, is a cynical view, but striving against the unthinking hostility of anti-masons and the unfeeling inertia of the body masonic does little to make me a bright-eyed and enthusiastic apologist. Even so, I still believe that there *is* yet hope for the Widow's Son.