

Page 117

Our Masonic Correspondent

Reports of current activities of the Masons in the "Telegraph" have prompted Francis Bennion to reflect upon his memories of Masonic influences in his family background. He argues that the Masons' secrecy and irrationality make them an unhealthy influence in society.

When the *Times* is absent, the *Daily Telegraph* ranks as the newspaper of record. The facts recorded include news from a person it calls "Our Masonic Correspondent". On 16 April, for example, this scribe was accorded eleven column inches on the Court page. Absurd of course - but then almost everything about Freemasonry is absurd. It is one of the most bizarre offshoots of Old Testament theology. As Our Masonic Correspondent confirms however, it is still both popular and powerful.

I had nearly as much trouble with my father as Edward Blishen had with his, and some of our frequent rows were over Freemasonry. I knew something about it because Grandfather (who lived with us) belonged to a Lodge. He joined the Masons in his early days as a shopkeeper in Manchester when someone told him it would be good for trade.

Sometimes I surprised Grandfather studying a mysterious black book. He was not much of a reader, and his lips moved in silent agony as he tried to master the intricate rituals it described. Mother told me they were rituals. Grandfather would say nothing, and slid the black book out of sight down the arm of his chair when discovered. According to Mother, who was occasionally taken by him to Masonic "ladies nights", the old man was striving to rise in the hierarchy. He had to pin on a little pale blue silk apron whenever there was a Lodge meeting. I once saw this when Mother was sewing black rosettes on it as a mark of respect at the death of King George V.

Father, who was a civil servant in the Exchequer and Audit Department, was very scornful about the Masons. It was over this scorn that I had the rows with him. He told me often that no one could get promotion in the Civil Service unless they joined a Lodge. Being a man of integrity he refused to do this himself. That explained why he was never promoted.

Father did pick up some of the Masonic secret language from somewhere. He told me that at one promotion board the inquisitor said to him "Do you know the meaning of words?" Father believed this was a cabbalistic interrogation, and he knew the response. He told me it was "I've been taught to be cautious". He replied to the inquisitor in these terms, but was not promoted. Probably he got it wrong.

The rows with me came when Father sought to apply a double standard. Although on principle nothing would induce him to join the Masons himself, he urged me to do so. Whatever career I took up, he said, I would have much more success at it if I were a Mason. Being, as a point of honour, no less idealistic than he was, I indignantly refused. Father returned to this several times, and each time there was trouble.

One way or another the Masons caused me a lot of trouble as a child. I remember an acutely embarrassing experience at school when I was about twelve. Trying to make conversation to some ass of a master, I volunteered the information that my Grandfather was a Mason. It was only after

he had. made a number of patronising remarks about the worthiness of honest toil, to which I contrived laboured replies, that his misunderstanding dawned on me. By then it was too late for my immature social capability to engineer a correction. The master was a snob, and thenceforth treated me coldly.

Silliness

Back to the present day, and the eleven column inches in the *Daily Telegraph*. Can grown men (there seem to be no women involved, except on ladies nights) really be so silly? Yes, it appears they certainly can. Our Masonic Correspondent faithfully records it all.

Worthy citizens, some captains of industry or scions of the nobility, award themselves childish titles. In these the word "grand" appears with monotonous regularity. Earl Cadogan, Pro Grand Master of United Grand Lodge, installs a Mr Shepherd as Provincial Grand Master for Lincolnshire. He is assisted by two other Provincial Grand Masters and a Grand Director of Ceremonies. Lurking in the wings is a personage who is not a Secretary, nor even a Secretary General, but a Grand Secretary.

Earl Cadogan hasn't finished yet. Changing hats rapidly, he becomes Pro First Grand Principal of the Royal Arch Supreme Grand Chapter. He then heaps further honours on the humble Shepherd, and in a flurry of mumbo-jumbo erects his Grand Superintendent over Lincolnshire. (Do the Department of the Environment know about this?)

Our Masonic Correspondent is just getting into his stride. Now he tells us about the Mark Masons (though he doesn't of course tell us what they are). There has been a meeting at Brighton of their Sussex branch (sorry, Sussex Provincial Grand Lodge). In breathless tones he discloses an "historic" discovery. A document more than 105 years old has been found by a Provincial Grand Warden backing a picture. It is the original petition from the four oldest lodges in Sussex for the formation of Sussex province, and is signed by no less a personage than.....

Page 118

.....Earl Percy, MP. Recognising the document as being "of great value" the Grand Warden hastens to submit it to his Provincial Grand Master. Our Masonic Correspondent adds that after restoration it is hoped the document will find a final resting place in one of the temples at the new Mark Mason's Hall in London. The Sussex Provincial Grand Lodge has so far raised £4,100 towards the cost of this building.

There is plenty more. I will not quote further except to remark the sinister fact that these Mark Masons have whole Lodges devoted to *instruction*. They are a proselytizing lot. For all I know their numbers, clearly already considerable, are rapidly increasing. What makes people behave like this?

Does it matter, even if Father did exaggerate the importance of Masonic membership in achieving worldly success? I think it does. The existence of grandiose secret societies wielding power and influence is disquieting to democratic man. As Father fondly believed, it may affect the processes of central government. A friend who lives in Chester assures me that in that city the tenor of local government changes according to whether the Catholics or the Freemasons are in (Catholics are prevented by their priests from joining the Masons incidentally). This no doubt happens elsewhere too.

If grown men want to spend their time dressing up, learning and performing superstitious rituals, and awarding themselves ridiculous titles, need the rest of us bother? Yes, because the irrational is always disquieting and secrecy is usually unhealthy. I don't yet lie awake at nights worrying about

those Mark Masons' temples slowly rising in London, financed by money from all over the country that could surely be better spent. But I might if I bring myself to read much more from Our Masonic Correspondent.

Francis Bennion