

Illustrations of Masonry

This presentation is not from the official publications of the Grand Lodge of Illinois but represents my personal opinion.

Freemasons often characterize the Morgan Affair as an unfortunate event perpetrated by a man of poor character. Some portray Captain William Morgan as a drunk and owner of a failed distillery, who, losing favor with his brethren, published the secrets of Freemasonry as an act of spite upon the fraternity. Even his membership in the fraternity has been questioned, and occasionally, he is recorded as a fraud and impostor.

Captain William Morgan reprinted *Illustrations of Masonry*, a detailed guide to the three degrees of speculative Freemasonry practiced in Upstate New York in the late 1700s and early 1800s. According to Col. David C. Miller, the book's publisher, Captain William Morgan had been a practitioner of Freemasonry for thirty years. *Illustrations of Masonry* is an accurate and detailed floor work and ritual manual initially printed in 1772, which has become the basis for our modern floor work and ritual monitors.

The work reprinted by William Morgan is nothing more and nothing less than our present-day Masonic blue book, which has been instrumental in the growth and prosperity of the Masonic fraternity until today. But for reprinting *Illustrations of Masonry*, William Morgan was murdered.

The content of "*Illustrations of Masonry*" is verifiably accurate as Masonic doctrine in every detail. Any Freemason who has earned the title of Certified Lodge Instructor or Grand Lecturer and knows how much time it takes to commit the floor work and ritual to memory also knows how much time it took to memorize these works. It would take much longer to memorize the work strictly by oral transmission and without a printed manual.

As to whether William Morgan was murdered, some will claim that his body has never been found. Whether or not the body was ever found, the Masonic ritual lays out the penalties for printing the Masonic ritual and revealing the Masonic secrets. The fact that William Morgan was known to be abducted by a group of Freemasons immediately after *Illustrations of Masonry* was delivered to the publisher is sufficient evidence in any court of law to pass a judgment of guilt upon the parties involved.

Although no law enforcement officer or court of law brought justice for William Morgan, the court of public opinion certainly did. The uproar that spread across the fifty-year-young independent nation of the United States of America caused the near-total collapse of the Masonic fraternity into the Frontier territories and newly organized States. The Grand Lodge of Illinois was but a few years in existence and was forced into abandonment; such was the intensity of the citizens' rage, both Masons and non-Masons alike.

"*Illustrations of Masonry*" was printed with a forward critical of Freemasonry by Col. David C. Miller. He questioned the need for Freemasonry, which Miller admits has roots in ancient times. Mr. Miller's view became the predominant view of Baptists and preachers of many faiths. He elucidates the truth that all the secrets of Freemasonry are found in the Bible and that no

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Christian or follower of Mosaic faiths needs to look any further for divine knowledge. He questions the need for archaic secrecy and rituals during a time of social enlightenment, where the same moral lessons taught by Freemasons can be learned from freely available writings and public assemblies. He also accurately predicted the sufferings he would endure from entrenched Masons in civil offices due to promoting William Morgan's book.

David Miller's deepest fears are subtly revealed in his own words;

The day we trust will never arrive here, when ranks in Masonry will be stepping-stones to places of dignity and power—when this institution will be a machine to press down the free born spirit of men. We have now no tyrant to rule over us—no kingly potentate to move over our heads the rod of authority; but high in our elevation, and invincible in our strongholds, we put at defiance secret cabals and associations. The public opinion is like a mighty river, and gigantic in its course it will sweep every interposing obstacle before it.

As Freemasons, we must look objectively at the content of our ritual, with its admittedly ancient origin. The same Freemasons who swore oaths to the fraternity also rose against the tyranny of the British Crown and, as a result of their sacrifice, enshrined the rights of all future citizens of the United States of America to have among them the freedom of speech, the freedom of the press, and the right to due process. Freemasons rose to fight tyranny, yet they did not abandon the tyranny carried over in their ancient established usages and customs of the fraternity. Some Freemasons reserved for themselves the right to murder men for printing their secrets, a blatant form of tyranny in itself.

Even today, every new Master Mason is asked to take a solemn oath or obligation, which carries several penalties, including death, should they violate their oath or obligation. This penalty applies not only to printing the works of Freemasonry but also to several other promises the candidate is led to make. Despite the candidate's acceptance of this oath, do the Grand Lodge of Illinois, and its local lodges possess the authority to carry out these penalties? It is clear from the laws of Illinois and the United States federal government that the answer to this question is a resounding "No." And yet, 60,000 men in Illinois consider their oath to Freemasonry to be binding and solemn.

We are approaching the 200th anniversary of the abduction of Captain William Morgan by Freemasons. Two hundred years ago, Freemasonry suffered a strong public rebuke for its embrace of ancient penalties and practices which conflict with duly enacted laws. Ironically, our civil and criminal laws have their origins in the actions of Freemasons. Suppose we continue to avoid our responsibility to maintain our oaths and obligations in conformity with the Federal and State laws our institution has inspired. In that case, Freemasonry will inevitably meet another crisis.

Col. David Miller should have noticed the true value of Freemasonry. Although he correctly identified that Masonic subject matter is derived from the Bible and is freely available through many sources, he failed to understand that Freemasonry is not just knowledge but the

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application of knowledge. A motorcyclist understands and appreciates the knowledge of motorcycles, but the experience of riding the motorcycle gives meaning and purpose to that knowledge. Anybody can read the Bible, but it takes the daily application of Biblical principles through social engagement to bring those principles to life. Freemasonry is the *experience* of living with moral principles.

Freemasonry eventually ascended from the ashes of the Morgan Affair because men desire more than knowledge of morality; they want to live in morality. Freemasonry is preserved by acknowledging the antiquity of its operative and speculative origins and the archaic nature of its ancient practices. Freemasonry does not derive its value due to the practice of murdering people for violating their oaths and obligations. Freemasonry endures because of its contribution to the good health and well-being of the individual, the family, the local community, and the nation. The experience of living as a Freemason is where the value is, not the intellectual knowledge of our history or the symbols by which we teach morality.

There is no need or reason to guard our mysteries jealously or to keep our Masonic identities secret. Still, it is interesting to see how Freemasonry evolved from ancient customs and usages. We should always remember our origins, but neither should we admire the past at the expense of living in the present. Our ritual should reflect this understanding, and we must bring Freemasonry into compliance with our nation's laws. At the very least, our ritual immediately following the obligations should include a disclaimer explicitly stating that the penalties of the obligations, although once practiced, are now only symbolic.