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Newsletter 38 (2009:5) May 2009

Dear colleagues and friends,

This newsletter is sent out on the eve of the Second International Conference on the History of Freemasonry in Edinburgh 29-31 May. The ICHF has defined its purpose as follows:

"By holding a biennial conference open to the public, the overall purpose of the ICHF is:

- to promote Freemasonry as a subject for academic study.
- to present and debate relevant contributions to the research area.
- to create a venue for interactions between researchers, experts and a wider audience.
- to encourage individuals to take an interest and participate in an active exchange of knowledge in the area.

3) Women and freemasonry since the Enlightenment. Conference organized at Bordeaux University and Musée d'Aquitaine, June 17-18-19, 2010.

by

LNS (Lumières Nature Société), Université de Bordeaux
3 sponsored by the Conseil Régional d'Aquitaine

Today women are still largely absent from Masonic lodges. Yet few rational arguments can be summoned to account for such an exclusion. The argument of tradition, which is the most frequently put forward, only holds for Anderson's Constitutions as no such explicit ban against women can be found in the Old Charges. The significance of Elisabeth Aldworth St Leger's initiation by an Irish Lodge is probably more symbolical than historical as it was a single occurrence never repeated. Yet the event was never denied by the Irish masons at the time, although it probably deterred the

"brethren" from renewing the experience and mostly reinforced their convictions on the issue of female initiation. Women however did enter the lodges afterwards, first in the lodges of adoption, and later in co-masonry as well as specific female lodges.

The lodges of adoption have sometimes been considered as a low-key form of masonry, a kind of ersatz masonry meant to humour women. Yet their importance and significance should not be underplayed as Margaret Jacob and Janet Burke in particular have recently shown. The lodges of adoption which emerged in Holland and France during the Enlightenment highlight the main features of women's commitment in those days, with the same limitations, namely the elitist and aristocratic component. Yet they conveyed some important values, let alone possibly through their rituals, and they allowed women to play an unprecedented part in the public sphere, not unlike the celebrated "French salons". We may wonder whether those lodges merely reflected the society of their time or whether they anticipated and even encouraged the emancipation of women. How emblematic are they of Enlightenment sociability? Quite significantly the adoption lodges lost lustre at the same time as the Enlightenment. When they emerged again as the Eastern Star in the United States in the following century they were quite different. The nineteenth century Masonic world was predominantly a male one and it would be interesting to find the reasons why. One has to wait till the end of the nineteenth century to find a female presence again in Masonic lodges with women such as Annie Besant, Madame Blavatsky, Clémence Royer or Louise Michel, sometimes in close connection with the Theosophical Society, as in the case of Annie Besant.

We shall endeavor to identify the main evolutions in women's commitment, both through co masonry, which appeared at the end of the nineteenth century and through female lodges which date back to the twentieth century only. All those women fought for equality, but some hoped to reach it alongside with men while others opted for autonomy in separate lodges. We shall try to understand those choices both in terms of structures and rituals. We shall focus on the social composition of

co masonry and women's lodges, and try to assess how far they committed themselves to the society of their time or preferred to remain discreet. Women's' lodges developed in some countries only, we shall try to suggest possible explanations for such disparity. Lodges and Grand Lodges as well as individual itineraries will be studied. The different factors of exclusion need to be addressed:

- the cultural, social and political factor. Is there a direct link between the development of co masonry and women's lodges on the one hand and social progress, women's emancipation and strong feminist movements in the twentieth and twenty first centuries? Why do Scandinavian countries, which have become respectful of women's rights, or the United Kingdom, the Suffragettes' country which enfranchised women long before France, lag behind in terms of female initiation?

- the religious factor. How far does the religious context inform the issue of women's initiation? Can one identify different attitudes in Catholic, Protestant, Islamic or Orthodox countries?

- the Masonic factor : the rift between English speaking freemasonry and "liberal" freemasonry dates back to 1877, when the Grand Orient de France decided to grant complete liberty of conscience to its members instead of imposing a belief in the Supreme being. Curiously enough the issue of women's admission into freemasonry has also been a dividing one ever since that time. English speaking Grand Lodges and their affiliates exclude women, whereas "liberal" ones accept the idea of initiation, even if the statement needs to be qualified for the latter.

Several levels of exclusion can be identified today: women can either be considered as unfit for initiation, which is still officially the case in the United Kingdom, the USA and in all the Grand Lodges which pay allegiance to the United Grand Lodge of England and in the Prince Hall Grand Lodges, or their presence can be accepted and encouraged but in separate organizations, not considered as Masonic but meant to enhance the male lodges through their charity work: this is the case of the Eastern Star chapters. As to the Women

Freemasons, they are still deprived of official recognition by the United Grand Lodge of England. Finally, the "liberal" Grand Lodges are themselves divided on the issue of women's admission into the lodges. Some have opted for co masonry; others have put the admission of women on the agenda, while others reject the very notion. How far can one speak of Masonic universalism, how far does gender inform the Masonic issue? Our purpose is twofold. We shall address the problem of women's exclusion under its various guises and try to uncover some of the motivations, and we shall also concentrate on the specificity of female freemasonry both in time and space, from the earliest lodges to the modern ones, in Europe, Asia and the Americas. Conversely we shall wonder how feminist criticism has viewed women's freemasonry, from the lodges of adoption to contemporary lodges. We welcome different approaches, and would like the historical and geographical scopes to be broad enough to allow for a better understanding of differences, common points and evolutions.