

VICTORIA LODGE OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH  
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### **WOMEN IN FREEMASONRY**

by

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In 1961, I met a lady purporting to be a Freemason. Before that date I never knew of an Institution calling itself the Order of Women Freemasons. The occasion was a 'get together' of Freemasons of various Constitutions, taking passage to Australia and New Zealand on S.S. "Southern Cross". There were 40 brethren in the passenger list and for the occasion I was asked to act as Secretary and Treasurer. It was whilst making a list of the brethren likely to attend when a Mrs. Whitby, representing herself as a "brother" notified me of her intention to be present on the occasion. In conversation she proved to me that she was indeed in possession of our "secrets and hidden mysteries and with our ritual. As the occasion was informal with brethren and wives invited she was included in the gathering.

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I thought nothing more of this until on return to the U.K. I discovered a life-long friend, the Matron in charge of a large nursing home, who was a P.M. and deeply involved in this Order of Women Freemasons. Through her I was able to learn much about its organisation, knowledge so completely new to me that I decided to make it known to the brethren in our New Zealand Lodges, assuming as I did so that few would know of its existence. My paper is the result.

Under the heading "The Women are Marching" the front page of one of our periodicals had this to say:-"From the Conference of the Federation of Labour, the Office of Cabinet Ministers, the columns of our newspapers, and sober gatherings of the Anglican General Synod, the voice of women cannot be ignored."

The struggle by women for recognition and equal participation with men in the various fields of human endeavour extends beyond the present century. Advanced and intelligent women were not content to be engaged only in the world of home and fashion.

In Britain militant efforts were made to obtain representation in Parliament and, after years of demonstrations, often violent, they were given the vote in the years after the First World War. Since then they have served with distinction in Parliament, as Ministers of the Crown, in law, medicine, education and in business and industry. A woman now holds the highest office in the Government and in New Zealand a woman was until recently President of the National Party.

That they should wish to extend their researches into our hidden mysteries can be readily understood as, recognising the good done by Freemasonry, they sought to share in our institutions and the purpose of my paper is to indicate the progress they have made.

Although the Order of Women's Freemasonry took its rise in 1908, it traces its ancestry back to the earliest years of organised Freemasonry. The widow of Charles 1st, daughter of Henry IV of France, was called Protectress of the Children of the Widow, and she formed a Society of Women to whom she communicated signs and passwords of a Masonic nature.

In Russia in 1712, Catherine-Czarina was granted leave from Peter the Great to found the Order of St. Catherine, an Order of Knighthood for women only, of which she was proclaimed Grand Mistress. It was a quasi-Masonic body.

In the 18th century there were four Grand Mistresses of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem which was an emanation of early Masonry. Women sought to form a Lodge of Adoption and sanction was granted on condition that each meeting should be presided over by the Master of a regular Masonic lodge, and several ladies of distinction became active members. The Duchess of Bourbon was installed as Grand Mistress, and nearly a thousand of the elite of French society attended the ceremony.

Napoleon used Freemasonry to strengthen his Empire and in 1805 the Empress was installed Grand Mistress of the Imperial Lodge of Adoption of France. This movement gained strength; liberal control had been granted to daughter lodges, women were given a nominal share in Masonic life and were formally admitted into the Craft.

In 1889 a Co-Masonic Order was formed in Paris. English women of standing crossed the Channel to be made Masons. and in 1902 the first Co-Masonic lodge was consecrated in London. Others followed, but it wasn't long before certain members felt that the French constitution under which they worked was inconsistent with traditional ancient Masonry. Many resigned and formed a small society, the Ancient Masonic Union, to become eventually an Order of Ancient Masonry, a free Masonic association of men and women.

A Grand Lodge was constituted on 5 June, 1908, with Bro. the Rev. F.G. Cobb D.D. at its head,  
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the Order being based exactly on that of the United G.L. of England and differing only in the admission of women. It was first convened at No.1, the Mall, Notting Hill Gate, London. It granted petitions for three lodges and approved a draft of Principles. As befits the membership of a Universal Brotherhood the title 'sister' quickly fell into disuse.

In 1911 there were conflicts of loyalty amongst men who were members both of the older and the new Orders and in 1912 the rule of Dr. Cobb, the first G.M., ended and R.W. Bro. Marion Lindsay Holsey D.G.M. was selected to succeed him.

A Board of General Purposes was established in 1909 and an official journal-The Gavel - published. In 1920 an attempt was made to obtain recognition from the G.L. of England. The letter addressed to the G. Sec. United G.L. of England pointed out that the number of women who are given possession of the genuine Masonic secrets was daily increasing, and that their Order "existing side by side under the protection of the G.L. of England would afford an orderly, dignified and legitimate vehicle for securing an acceptable Masonic standing to all women conforming thereto".

In reply the Board after full consideration declined the request, saying they would continue to exercise disciplinary powers towards any of its members who were present at or assisted in assemblies professing to be Masonic and which were attended by women.

This reply undoubtedly deterred Masonic brethren from co-operating with the women, but the foundation had been well and truly laid out and, as will be seen, women eventually assumed complete independence.

No further approach has been made to the G.L. of England, it being felt that patience will in due time bring about the desired recognition.

After a brief period at a well-known London restaurant, and later at a Baptist Church in Southampton Row, the freehold of a property at Pembridge Gardens was received as a gift in 1923. The foundation stone of the Temple was laid on 2 July, 1924, and the building was completed and consecrated the following year.

For 20 years, following the foundation of the Order in 1908, its expansion was confined to London. Nine Craft lodges and one Lodge of Installed Masters were formed.

After the completion of the Temple in 1925, membership grew and new lodges sprang up throughout the country.

As a prelude to provincial expansion, the first Travelling Lodge Mercury No. 11 was consecrated. Between that year 1928, and 1938, eight more lodges were consecrated, of which seven were Provincial Lodges.

The outbreak of war in 1939 served as a restraint to further progress, but between 1943 and 1945 five more lodges were formed and by 1950 there were two lodges in Wales and two in Scotland. In her oration at Lodge Voyagers' consecration M.W. Bro. Hope said "In accepting the spiritual symbolism of the celestial and terrestrial globes associated with the two G.P.'s, women were under an obligation to extend universal Masonry". M.W. Bro. Moorhead Hope, as Grand Master and exercising her prerogative of "making Masons at sight", had already held occasional lodges to initiate candidates from America, Persia, Africa and the Channel Isles, in anticipation of the introduction of an Overseas Travelling Lodge, one which derived its strength, unity and common purpose by the spiritual link between its members. Thus the new Overseas Travelling Lodge was envisaged as a Voyaging Lodge, dedicated to extend their Masonic knowledge in untiring effort to enrich the lives of others, and was consecrated in December, 1950. With its formation its first list of regular officers included six high-ranking Grand Lodge Officers and its

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twenty-three stewards were all serving Masters of their respective lodges.

Then followed a succession of consecrations of lodges in Guernsey and Jersey in 1952, and Northern Ireland in December, 1953. Ten months later Lodge Pioneer Hope of Toronto No.1 was consecrated and the following year a second Toronto Lodge, Trillium of York No.3, the Lodge of Accord No.2 of London, Ontario, and in May 1956 Lodge Heritage No.4 of Whitby, Ontario.

The following year lodges were consecrated in Adelaide, Australia, and in Salisbury, Rhodesia.

After the Golden Jubilee in 1958 the Order gathered impetus. More lodges were registered, one in Belfast, in the far west of Canada two lodges in British Columbia, and in Malta in March 1961 the Lodge St. Michael and St. George No.132 was consecrated.

Thus progress was maintained -a lodge in Douglas, Isle of Man, another in Northern Ireland, a second Rhodesian lodge, one in Bulawayo, again back to Canada, until 1965 when a meeting was held in London to initiate, pass and raise two Dutch brethren. For 42 years expansion had been restricted to Britain and its years of overseas expansion confined to the Commonwealth but the initiation of

Dutch brethren marked a breakthrough into Europe. Lodge Voyager in 18 years of voyaging had established 22 lodges.

In her consecration oration M.W. Bro. Hope, G.M., submitted that Lodge Voyager was "The Lodge of the Order 'divorced' from local interests and offering its members, scattered as they might be throughout the world, a canopy network, the meshes of which would indeed be symbolic of unity.. Following her accession as Grand Master, M.W. Bro. Low sought to underline the now international character of Voyagers by inviting Council approval of new Bylaws whereby any Grand Master became automatically the permanent Master of Lodge Voyagers with powers to appoint a deputy if she so desired.

This then is an outline of the activities of this 'missionary' lodge whose members, unable to take part in its meetings or even to attend the annual Installation Meeting willingly give time and money to the development of the Masonic way of life, and whose imagination has been stirred by its teaching<sup>3</sup>,

In 1935, on the death of Rev. Bro. Peter Slingsby, the first G. Sec., it was decided to establish a Grand Lodge with a membership composed entirely of Women.

In 1931, Royal Arch Freemasonry having already been established, a Supreme Grand Chapter with three Chapters was formed; this has since grown to 31 Chapters in London, the Provinces and Canada.

In 1948, the Masonic Orders of Chivalry were progressively introduced; the Christian Degree of Knight Templar in 1949, Orders of Red Cross of Constantine and Knights of the Holy Sepulchre and St. John the Evangelist were instituted, and there are now ten conclaves including one in Zimbabwe.

Chapters of the Rose Croix were founded in 1950 for the further advancement of Christian Freemasonry. The final degrees of Grand Elected Knight Kadosh and Holy Royal Arch Knight Templar Priest are worked in London.

The order of the Red Cross of Babylon was inaugurated in 1954 and the Royal Order of Scotland, a degree of great antiquity, was worked in 1955.

From the foregoing it will be seen that women have penetrated deeply into our Masonic institutions.

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The Golden Jubilee of the Order was celebrated in the Albert Hall, London, on September 7th, 1958; representatives from the British Isles, Ireland, Channel Islands, Canada and Rhodesia were represented in a crowded ceremony.

In 1964, R.W. Bro. Mildred Rhoda Low, who served as Grand Treasurer from 1940-1951 and since as Assistant Grand Master, became the Grand Master. As Grand Master elect she arranged a reception of overseas visitors and entertained 400 members in the Peers' Reception Room at the House of Lords.

- As the intention of this paper is to create an awareness of the existence and progress of women in Freemasonry, I will deal but briefly with the objectives. There is a Charity Fund, and residential Homes have been established.

Financial and practical support has been found in assisting in the maintenance and adornment of cathedrals and other places of worship, many of which have been bequeathed by Masonic forebears of medieval days.

The Ancient Guild altar in York Minster, restoration of a monument in Chester Cathedral, enrichment of a reredos in Durham, and works at Chichester, Liverpool and St. Albans are amongst these.

To mark the Diamond Jubilee a sum of £30,000 was raised to beautify and extend the Grand Temple and the headquarters of the Fraternity, the rededication ceremony being attended by 540 "brethren". Also a fund was established to found a peaceful haven for those brethren approaching the close of life, a place where loving and expert care can ease the passing to the G.L. above.

Thanksgiving services were held in St. Paul's Cathedral before an assembly of nearly 2000 "brethren" and their families, and at 23 other cities including churches in Zimbabwe, Canada and British Columbia.

The Times of London, 7 October, 1968, contains this article:

"The Order of Women Freemasons celebrated its Diamond Jubilee, and the re-Installation of Miss Mildred Rhoda Law as G.M. for the Masonic Year 1968-69, at the Royal Albert Hall, Kensington, London, on Saturday.

Among the 3,500 present were members from Australia, British Columbia, the Channel Isles, Canada, Northern Ireland and Erie, the Isle of Man, Malta, Rhodesia and all parts of England, Scotland and Wales".

A leaflet issued by the "Order of Women Freemasons" has this to say:--  
"Women have felt the need for a spiritual haven in which to refresh their minds, and seek new strength, through friendship, devotion and understanding to face the many responsibilities of daily life in which they are now full partners with men...." - and asks the question "Is no woman qualified to understand and appreciate Masonry? Is she not a builder of her family, and of the character of her children? What greater help could she have in her tasks than the teachings of Speculative Masonry?" This is the question I leave to you, and conclude this Paper with a summary of the state of the Order from the latest statistics available.

Craft Lodges	319	Overseas Lodges	
Mark 48	Australia	3	
Chapter 48	Zimbabwe	5	in 1978
Conclave 20	British Columbia	2	
Rose Croix 6	Malta	1	
Knights Templar 6	Canada	2	

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Exhibits donated to the library are:

- A copy of the official Journal 'The Gavel'
- A Grand Lodge Certificate
- ACraft Ritual
- Summonses to Meetings of Craft and R.A.
- Golden Jubilee programme 1958

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## The Lady Freemason1

When an initiate presents himself at the door of the preparation room, he is asked by what right or benefit does he expect to become a Freemason? His reply through the Jr. Deacon is, because he is a man, freeborn, of mature age and coming under the tongue of good report. Which leads to the following question: "has there ever been a female Freemason?" The answer, affirmed by the Grand Lodge of England is yes -one woman, and one woman only was initiated into the mysteries and secrets of Freemasonry. This occurred at the beginning of the 18th century and is a very curious tale indeed.

At this time Freemasons did not have set Lodge rooms, but rather rented rooms over taverns or used premises that were owned by one of the members. As an aside, a number of the Lodges from this time, took their names from the taverns in which they met.

Lord Doneraile, of County Cork, Ireland belonged to a Lodge that met occasionally at his estate Doneraile House. On the night in question, a gentleman was to be initiated a Freemason in a large apartment at Doneraile House. Unknown to the masons there assembled, Lord Doneraile's teen age daughter Miss Elizabeth St. Leger, was in a small chamber adjacent to the temporary lodge room, the only exit from which was through the lodge room. History has explained that her presence was accidental, but I rather feel her curiosity was a determining factor. At any rate, as the ceremonies began, she was able to loosen a brick in the wall, and clearly could hear the ritual of the degree the gentleman was going through. Once her curiosity was satisfied, she realized that she would have to make her escape undetected. As the ritual was being conducted in the far end of the apartment, she quietly stole to the door and opened it. Imagine her surprise as she ran into the Tyler, complete with raised sword! She was terrified and let out a loud shriek, which caused the whole lodge to surround her. It was obvious that she now knew a number of the secrets of Freemasonry, and her fate was hotly discussed. The more rigid and traditional members proposed death, but Lord Doneraile explained that she was his only daughter, and that was more punishment than was warranted by the crime. One member said that if she was a man, she could be made a mason, and therefore sworn to secrecy. Lord Doneraile said "she must be sworn in without being a man". This proved acceptable, and Elizabeth St. Leger was initiated on the spot. She subsequently proved herself to be as loyal and true to her oath as any Freemason in the fraternity. It is reported that whenever a benefit function for the "Masonic Freemason Orphan Asylum" was given in Dublin or Cork, Miss St. Leger always walked at the head of the procession of Freemasons, wearing her apron and other regalia. Her portrait formerly graced almost every Lodge in Ireland, and at the present time (1920's) many Lodges in England have faded mezzo-tints of this lady in full regalia.

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