

W. L. Wilmshurst - THE MEANING OF MASONRY

Read, mark, learn, inwardly digest

Get Knowledge and get Wisdom; ~
But with all thy getting, get Understanding
The Proverbs of Solomon

When the ancient sage wrote “*of making many books there is no end*” he might have been describing the literature of Freemasonry. Many indeed are the books published on the history, symbolism, and philosophy of Masonry. A contemporary editor states that, “*There are said to be more than 50,000 books on the Craft, and not one of them tells the whole story.*”¹ The American writer, Bro. Harry LeRoy Haywood (1886 – 1956) suggested that, “*Masons have more need to read than men in almost any other society or organization.*” Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626), has this advice for the reader: “*Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.*” One that is “*to be chewed and digested*” is **The Meaning of Masonry** written by **Walter Leslie Wilmshurst** and English Freemason more than seventy-five years ago. His wisdom is timeless and the import of his thought is timely today.

The purpose and object of Masonic Education

- To deepen its understanding of its own system
- To educate its members in the deeper meaning and true purpose of its rites and its philosophy (Introduction – p. 16)

“Surely the essence of any initiatory system – for that is what Freemasonry is – is the individual’s personal progress through self-knowledge and understanding to an individual perception of the relevance of Freemasonry both to their lives and to the world at large.”

John Hamill – Foreword to The Way of the Craftsmen. W. Kirk Macnulty, 2002

- What alone is of vital moment – what so many Brethren are hungering for?
“Knowledge of the spiritual purpose and lineage of the Order and the present-day value of rites of Initiation.” (Introduction – p. 8)

“It is from lack of instruction rather than of desire to learn the meaning of Masonry that the Craft suffers today. But, as one finds everywhere, that desire exists.” (Introduction – p. 17)

KNOW THYSELF – “to seek and knock at the door of the world within”

The sole aim and intention of Masonry

A course of self-knowledge and self-discipline

“It is upon this inner world, and the path to and through it, that Masonry promises light, charts the way, and indicates the qualifications and condition of progress.” (Introduction – p. 13)

“To indicate that path of self-perfecting to those who care and dare to follow it, modern Freemasonry was instituted.” (Introduction – p. 13)

“The future development and the value of the Order as a moral force in society depend upon the view its members take of their system. If they do not spiritualize it they will be increasingly materialize it. If they fail to interpret its veiled purport, to enter into the understanding of its underlying philosophy, and to translate its symbolism into what is significant thereby, they will be mistaking shadow for substance, a husk for the kernel, and secularizing what was designed as a means of spiritual instruction and grace.” (Introduction – p. 17)

Walter Leslie Wilmshurst (1867 – 1939) spent his adult life in Huddersfield, Yorkshire, as a solicitor. He was initiated in Huddersfield Lodge No. 290 on 11 December 1889, passed 8th January 1890, and raised 5th February 1890. Reflecting on his own experience, he would later write, *“Often the three degrees are taken rapidly, sometimes in three consecutive months. It is unlikely that in so brief a time you will grasp their implications in full. You have been furnished with a system of instruction in spiritual advancement too rapidly to grasp fully. You are expected to focus your future life on it. But it may take you years of thought and effort to work out how to do so.”* In October 1899, he joined the Lodge of Harmony No. 275, and served as the WM in 1909. He was the founder of Lodge of Living Stones (1927) and served as WM 1928-1930 and 1937-1938. He held several offices in the Provincial Grand Lodge of West Yorkshire, including Grand Registrar (1913) and Past Senior Grand Warden (1926). He was accorded the Honorary Rank of Past Assistant Grand Director of Ceremonies in the Grand Lodge in 1929. He died 22 July 1939. In a tribute published after his death by this lodge, he was described as *“One of the World’s greatest Masons – deepest Mystics – and most perfect English gentlemen.”* (The Life and Work of W. L. Wilmshurst, 1954) ² **The Meaning of Masonry** was first published in May 1922, thirty-three years after he was initiated. (The copy in your hands is a reprint of the fifth edition published in 1927.) It consists of five lectures or papers *“written with a view to promoting the deeper understanding of the meaning of Masonry; to providing the explanation of it that one constantly hears called for and that becomes all the more necessary in view of the unprecedented increase of interest in, and membership of, the Order at the present day.”* (Introduction – p.5)

W. L. Wilmshurst was writing in the years immediately following The Great War 1914-1918 when Masonry experienced a great influx of members. At the present time, we too are enjoying a significant increase in the petitions for initiation being received by many lodges in this Grand Jurisdiction.

‘Tis the good reader makes the good book

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 – 1882)

The Three Readings

First, to see what the book is all about.

Second, to see how the author deals with the subject.

Third, to argue with the author on the points he makes.

Bro. George Draffen, AQC Vol. 86, 1973, p. 173

WHAT IS MASONRY?

Here are several extracts which collectively give Wilmshurst's definition.

- Masonry is a veiled and cryptic express of the difficult science of spiritual life. (p. 5)
- Masonry was designed to teach self-knowledge. (p. 12)
- Masonry is a sacramental system, possessing, like all sacraments, an outward and visible side consisting of its ceremonial, its doctrine and its symbols which we can see and hear, and an inward, intellectual and spiritual side, which is concealed behind the ceremonial, the doctrine and the symbols, and which is available only to the Mason who has learned to use his spiritual imagination and who can appreciate the reality that lies behind the veil of outward symbol. (p. 21)
- Masonry offers us, in dramatic form and by means of dramatic ceremonial a philosophy of the spiritual life of man and a diagram of the process of regeneration. (p. 27)
- Masonry is essentially a philosophic and religious system expressed in dramatic ceremonial. It is a system to supply answers to the three great questions that press so inexorably upon the attention of every thoughtful man and that are the subject around which all religions and philosophies move. What am I? Whence come I? Whither go I? (p. 59)
- A working philosophy for those brought within its influence. (p. 63)
- Masonry is a system of religious philosophy in that it provides us with a doctrine of the universe and of our place in it. (p. 74)
- A working philosophy and a practical rule of life. (p. 84)
- A living philosophy, a vital guide upon those matters which of all others are the most sacred and the most urgent to our ultimate well-being. (p. 85)

“Spiritual quality rather than numbers, ability to understand the Masonic system and reduce its implications into personal experience rather than the perfunctory conferment of its rites, are the desiderata of the Craft to-day.” (Introduction – p. 6)

“What seems now needed to intensify the worth and usefulness of this great Brotherhood is to deepen its understanding of its own system, to educate its members in the deeper meaning and true purpose of its rites and philosophy. Were this achieved that Masonic Order would become, in proportion to that achievement, a spiritual force greater than it can ever be so long as it continues content with a formal and unintelligent perpetuation of rites, the real and sacred purpose of which remains largely unperceived, and participation in which too often means nothing more than association with an agreeable, semi-religious, social institution.

Carried to its fullest, that achievement would involve the revival, in a form adapted to modern conditions, of the ancient Wisdom-teaching and the practice of those Mysteries which became proscribed fifteen centuries ago, but of which modern Masonry is the direct and representative descendant. (Introduction – pp. 16-17)

“It is the lack of instruction rather than of desire to learn the meaning of Masonry that the Craft suffers to-day.” (Introduction – p. 17)

*Reading furnishes the mind only with materials for knowledge;
it is **thinking** that makes what we read ours.*

John Locke (1632 – 1704)

“It rests with ourselves whether Masonry remains for us what upon its outward and superficial side appears to be merely a series of symbolic rites, or whether we allow those symbols to pass into our lives and become realities therein.” (I – p. 51)

“Even when the desire for wisdom is at last awakened, the education of the understanding is a long process.” (V – p. 215)

notes RSJD 17 August 2005