

Revolution and Freemasonry*

ALL who are familiar with France in the past or the present are aware that Freemasonry plays and has played an important part in her political and social life, but what that part is remains something of a mystery. Catholic and conservative writers usually attribute to Masonry a considerable rôle in the preparations of the French Revolution, and it is believed by many people that the Lodges exert today a great influence over political men and parties. Yet those who state this most emphatically are seldom able to substantiate their declarations by concrete facts, and the question of the real power of Masonry is still obscure. What is certain is that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it has been a powerful and determined enemy of Catholicism and of the conservative tradition in France, and a stronghold of the Jacobin type of radicalism. It is significant that Fascism has made haste to stamp it out as far as possible in Italy. What exactly did French Freemasonry originally represent? What were its beginnings and its philosophy? In view of its supposed power today these questions are of real interest, and those who care to understand France will do well to read Mr. Bernard Faÿ's new book, *Revolution and Freemasonry, 1680-1800*. Mr. Faÿ is well qualified to write of Freemasonry in the eighteenth century. His first book, *The Revolutionary Spirit in France and America*, is a scholarly study of the thought of that period, and his present volume answers some, at

* REVOLUTION AND FREEMASONRY, 1680-1800 by Bernard Faÿ (LITTLE, BROWN. 363 pp. \$3.00).

least, of the questions about Freemasonry which an historian is bound to ask.

In the first part of his book (which is by far the best) Mr. Faÿ studies the origins of Freemasonry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He shows us its connection with the scientific discoveries of Newton, which were revolutionizing the thought of the period, and he proves the essentially aristocratic character of Freemasonry in those days, its successful efforts to attract first the English and then the French nobility, and its dependence on their prestige for its own growth in power and prosperity. His studies of some of the early patrons or founders of the order, notably Boulainvilliers and Desgouliers, though highly critical and ironic, are among the most interesting portions of the book. According to Mr. Faÿ, English Freemasonry early became the champion of the revolution of 1688, and of the parliamentary régime which it brought to power. Moreover, it continued to defend the Hanoverian dynasty against the deposed Stuarts and their protectors, the Bourbons, and the success of the dynasty which they favoured eventually brought about a great difference in the later attitudes of English and French Freemasonry.

As to its philosophy Mr. Faÿ indicates that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Freemasonry attempted to create a synthesis between the scientific thought of the day on the one hand, and Deism, non-conformist religion, and Protestantism on the other. In his conclusion he states that Masonry was fundamentally rationalistic in its point of view, and that its ritual, ceremonies, and secrecy were intended to supply men with the mystery in the material field from

which it sought to wean them in the metaphysical domain. "The Catholic Church", he says, "worshiped openly a mysterious god. Freemasonry honoured mysteriously a logical principle. . . . The Masonic god had no mystery, while the Masonic society was all mystery" (p. 317). Hence the fundamental conflict between Masonry and Catholicism. Masonry, by undermining the authority of revealed religion, and offering a seemingly wider synthesis of reason and mysticism, in which men of various conditions and opinions might meet, was preparing the way for the advent of the modern "lay State". Moreover, in spite of its aristocratic character, it always emphasized the ideas of equality and fraternity. One gathers from Mr. Faÿ's book that Freemasonry in the eighteenth century represented on the whole the viewpoint of the liberal nobility who undoubtedly did so much to prepare and precipitate the first phase of the French Revolution (from 1789-1792). So far, then, Mr. Faÿ seems to prove his point, and moreover he sheds considerable light upon the character and origins of Freemasonry.

The latter part of his book is less satisfactory. It is difficult to believe, as Mr. Faÿ seems almost to imply, that the American Revolution was largely the result of a Masonic plot! The wider factors which brought about our separation from England, of which Mr. Faÿ speaks, only to dismiss them rather too rapidly, seem to most historians much more important than he tends to allow. As to the French Revolution also, his point of view is questionable. He seems to see it as essentially a religious conflict. Thus he says:

French Masons were, then, hoping to establish a religion which would not be bound by dogmas and ruled by a

religious hierarchy, but would become part of the whole social life of the country and would recognize as its primary aim service to mankind and the nation. . . . All the French Assemblies between 1788 and 1799 held these views and cherished these desires. . . . As they were in earnest they did not cease trying to reform French religion, *which led them to break with the Pope, and to start in France a religious war which, added to the country's other difficulties, put France into the state of lyrical and bloody disorder called the "Grande Revolution"*. (P. 296. The italics are mine.)

This passage and others on the following pages would seem to imply that for Mr. Faÿ the Revolution was in its essence a religious struggle. Just as the Marxian historian tends to see in the Revolution only an episode of the class struggle, so Faÿ, writing from a conservative and Catholic point of view, tends to see in it chiefly a conflict between the religious and the lay conception of the State. The idea is an interesting one, and it would explain a phenomenon patent to those who know France well, namely the continued existence of what a Swiss writer has called "the two Frances". Nevertheless, few students of the Revolution will accept so limited an interpretation of that complex event, for to do so is to overlook many vital factors. Mr. Faÿ's apparent contention that Freemasonry was a leading cause both of the American and the French Revolutions, seems to be at best an exaggeration. It is certainly not sufficiently established by this book.

The subject is no doubt a difficult one to disentangle. Mr. Faÿ has himself admitted that a scholarly and exhaustive treatment of Masonry is almost impossible. Few Lodges, he says, have kept their eighteenth-cen-

tury records, and these, even when they exist, being primarily administrative, are dry, and give little idea of the real philosophy or activities of the order. Thus Mr. Faÿ's bibliography, particularly as regards the later portions of his work, consists largely of secondary material, as is natural, since the primary sources are so limited. Moreover, the subject itself is highly controversial, so that an objective point of view is difficult. If the writer is a Mason, he will, as Mr. Faÿ points out, be apt to be eulogistic. If he is not a Mason, and particularly if he is a Catholic, he will also have certain preconceptions. Whether or not he be a Mason, Masonic secrecy will impede him.

It is to the credit of Mr. Faÿ that he has written so readable a book on this interesting but obscure subject, and one which tells us some, at least, of the important things which we would like to know in regard to Freemasonry. The book shows evidences of haste. It is not so clear nor so well-constructed as one might have hoped from Mr. Faÿ's usually lucid pen. The irony in which he often indulges, witty as it is — for Mr. Faÿ enjoys paradox — will not always please, or perhaps be comprehended by, an American public. Yet the book is certainly a contribution both to our knowledge of that most fascinating and complex period, the eighteenth century, and to a little-known but vital subject. As such it is an important book and deserves to be read and considered with care.

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