CHAPTER 23

Freemasonry and Blacks

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Introduction

The very title of this chapter, “Freemasonry and Blacks”, is somewhat paradoxical: why should race be an issue at all, given the fact that Freemasonry has always claimed to be universal? Besides, it is not relevant in all historical and geographical contexts. Race was obviously an acute problem in the United States and in Caribbean countries while in Europe itself, Freemasonry tended to be more tolerant or at least remained more indifferent.

The roots of the problem are to be found in Anderson’s *Constitutions*, although Mackey’s landmarks certainly added fuel to the fire, as will be contended in the first part of this chapter. One of the reasons why race never was a formal problem for French Freemasons is that Anderson’s *Constitutions* did not cut much ice in France, notwithstanding la Tierce’s efforts to popularize them by providing a rather loose translation from the English into French. The other reason is more political, as the French were strongly influenced by the Jacobin principles of equality and fraternity and never wholeheartedly indulged in communitarian approaches, refusing to consider ethnic groups and always preferring to acknowledge the human rights of individuals rather than the rights—or absence of rights—of communities. This does not mean that racism never existed in French lodges, of course. Before Haitian independence, the French lodges of planters in Saint Domingue had found a ‘compromise’: they would accept black brethren, but only at the first and second degrees in order to allow them to attend to their white brethren as ‘frères servants’ at meals (Combes 1986: 155–180). Toussaint L’Ouverture, however, whose masonic affiliation now seems to have been proved by Jacques De Cauna (De Cauna 2013), was to become active a little before the Haitian revolution and to initiate a new tradition in Haitian Freemasonry. In the French West Indies, Martinique and Guadeloupe, the first lodges were obviously planters’ lodges,
but this was not regulated by any kind of text, this was just plain elitist practice. On mainland France neither the Grand Orient de France nor the Grande Loge de France ever brought forward any formal racist consideration and black brethren have always been accepted as a matter of course, even if obviously numbers have been limited in practice. In Britain black brethren have never been barred entry from lodges either, in spite of Anderson’s *Constitutions*. The ban was only enforced in the British colonies, in the American ones and in the West Indies, as the Oviton case proves (see below).

Black Freemasonry developed at a fast pace in French-speaking Africa, but this is too long and complex a story to be dealt with in this chapter, and it was not a specifically racial issue either. The scope of the present study has to be limited. Therefore only black Freemasonry in the United States and the British Caribbean will be considered, from the early lodges to the most recent ones, with a few case studies, not in an exhaustive manner, as this would be impossible, although general trends will be suggested.

**The Original Ban**

The Persons admitted Members of a Lodge must be good and true Men, free-born, and of mature and discreet Age, no Bondmen, no Women, no immoral or scandalous Men, but of good Report.

*Anderson’s* *Constitutions*, 1723, *The Charges of a Freemason, III Of Lodges*

This quotation from the 1723 edition of Anderson’s *Constitutions* had an enormous impact in the British colonies, whereas it passed virtually unnoticed in Britain. In France it was largely ignored, but just as the whole text of Anderson’s *Constitutions*, no More, no less. The same ban was reiterated in 1738. However, the British Masons paid no heed, probably considering oral tradition as much superior to written constitutions, be they masonic, and accepting a few blacks now and then in their own lodges at home contrary to what took place in their colonies. The British have always declined to provide themselves with a written Constitution for their country, contrary to the French for instance. The Freemasons in a way acted as true Britons, refusing to be tied up by written rules. However in the British colonies, and even more so in the United States, Americans felt the need to provide themselves with laws and constitutions. Similarly the American Freemasons endowed themselves with several byelaws, rules and regulations and not content with abiding by Anderson’s *Constitutions*, bound themselves with more and more ‘landmarks’ throughout the nineteenth century.