

Can Freemasonry be Secular?

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Radical Traditions in British Freemasonry

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One Sunday in 1814 or 1815, a young Devon tinsmith worker, forced to London in the search for work, was caught in a shower of rain while out for a walk. He took shelter in the porch of a house. He noticed that the house was festooned with strange printed advertisements with baffling symbols, referring to freemasonry. The young man had heard of freemasonry, but didn't know much about it. His curiosity was struck by the strange display, and, even though the rain stopped, the young man stayed until he had inspected all the advertisements, although he could not make much sense of them. The image remained with the young man, and it was to return to him ten years later, when his life had been totally transformed in ways that he could never have anticipated on that rainy Sunday.

The young man was Richard Carlile, who shortly after this incident, was to achieve national notoriety as a pioneer of the freedom of the press, a supporter of republicanism, a militant atheist, and an advocate of such social novelties as vegetarianism and birth control. Indeed, Carlile can be seen as the forefather of many aspects of modern political protest. As a recent commentator Joss Marsh has put it, 'the Chartists' jailhouse refusals, the suffragettes' hunger strikes, the self-starvations and blanket rebellions of IRA terrorists and internees: all alike look back to Richard Carlile.' Yet, for all this, the only one of Carlile's many books still in print is his *Manual of Freemasonry*. Moreover, this continuous publication history is not just an accident. Carlile himself evidently thought that his *Manual of Freemasonry* represented an important contribution to radical ideology, and he went out of his way to ensure that it remained in print.

The strange house where Carlile had taken shelter belonged to William Finch, a tailor from Canterbury who settled in London in 1802. Finch took up masonic research as a sideline, began publishing lectures and other material on freemasonry, which sold widely, and encouraged him to give up his tailoring and become a full-time masonic publisher. Finch's publications made him the subject of a series of complaints to Grand Lodge. He was an acerbic critic of the way in which the Union had been conducted, accusing the Lodge of Reconciliation both of plagiarising his work and of bungling certain aspects of the changes in ritual which accompanied the union. By 1815, United Grand Lodge had decreed that 'no Lodge under the United Constitution will admit Mr Finch, neither has he any dispensation from the Grand Master for any act he may do'. It does not seem that Finch was ever actually expelled, but he certainly constituted a one-man awkward squad, as much a nuisance for his contumacious behaviour as for his actual publications.

In many ways, there is an extraordinary similarity between Carlile and Finch, and I see that moment when Carlile took shelter in Finch's porch as a key image in understanding the relationship between freemasonry and the radical tradition in the nineteenth century. It is often assumed that the printing press made its greatest impact on society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the discovery of the power of printing by the working classes at the time of the French Revolution was just as potent. Publications by self-taught artisans such as Carlile and Finch, often deliberately priced in such a way as to reach the widest possible audience, pulsate with excitement at the discovery of the power of the written word and of printing. Both Carlile and Finch felt that with their printing presses they could shake the foundations of the mightiest institutions in the world. An interest in freemasonry forms a significant theme in this textual upsurge, but the importance of freemasonry within this world of what might be called guerilla publishing has been largely neglected. From Finch to Carlile there is a link to other radical freethinkers later in the century such as Carlile's friend George Jacob Holyoake, who attempted to hoodwink the Oddfellows in a way very reminiscent of Carlile's treatment of the masons, and Charles Bradlaugh, a freemason under the Grand Orient of France. An interest in the spiritual traditions of freemasonry is a thread connecting much of the secularist counter-culture of the nineteenth century. In studying the history of freemasonry, an important dimension is lost if this complex relationship with radical traditions is neglected. Annie Besant's enthusiasm for theosophy and co-masonry, an apparent breach with the materialist freethinking of her mentor Charles Bradlaugh, becomes more explicable if seen in the context of this radical engagement with freemasonry.

In 1813, Carlile had moved from Devon to London in search of work. London was at that time in a ferment of radical discussion and agitation, its streets crowded with tract sellers hawking cheap papers aimed at working class radicals. Carlile was intoxicated by this heady atmosphere of debate and discussion. He began attending reform meetings, and in 1817 wrote his first essays. He gave up tin plate working to devote himself full-time to radical politics, selling such papers as *The Political Register* and *the Black Dwarf*.

Among the contacts which Carlile formed at this time was William Sherwin, who had published a radical journal called *The Republican*. The risks involved in publishing political literature of this kind were considerable. The 1799 Unlawful Societies Act, which required the registration of freemasons' lodges, also stipulated severe penalties, including transportation, for the sale of publications which breached various strict regulations. Sherwin and Carlile came up with an ingenious scheme. Carlile would be the nominal publisher of Sherwin's paper and run the various legal risks. In return, Sherwin would finance the publications and give Carlile use of his premises in Fleet Street. Prison was evidently at this time a better bet for Carlile than starvation or the workhouse, and the arrangement with Sherwin enabled Carlile to launch himself as a radical publisher.

Carlile seized his chance enthusiastically, and flooded the streets of London with cheap political publications. Above all, Carlile published the works of Tom Paine, and Carlile's growing reverence for Paine is evident in his decision to name his third son after his hero. In 1817, Carlile was imprisoned for the first time, for publishing an article maintaining that the poor were enslaved politically. At this stage, Carlile was indistinguishable from many of the other London radical figures engaged in the struggle for parliamentary reform. It was

the example of Paine which was responsible for the next stage in Carlile's development, and the study of freemasonry was to play a significant part in this process.

Paine's writings had been vigorously prosecuted ever since their first appearance, and were difficult to obtain. Carlile, convinced that Paine's were 'the only standard political writings worth a moment's notice', felt that, if only Paine could be readily available in cheap editions, the momentum for reform would be unstoppable. First of all, Carlile published Paine's political works. This was risky enough, but the first indication that Carlile was about to cross the rubicon came in 1818, when he published Paine's *Essay on the Origins of Free Masonry*. Although Carlile had previously published some anti-religious squibs, this was the first sign of his growing interest in religious matters.

Paine's essay formed part of a reply, unpublished at the time of his death, to an attack by the Bishop of Llandaff on Paine's infamous work, *The Age of Reason*. *The Age of Reason*, partly written while Paine was imprisoned in revolutionary France, was, at one level, a compelling attack on christianity, and, on the other, an argument for the necessity of a more generalised deistic religion. The *Essay on Freemasonry* developed this thesis further by arguing that Christianity was a perversion of the ancient worship of the sun, and that freemasonry preserved these tenets in a purer form. Paine favoured a return to the ancient sun religion, developing a new solar method of chronology which he used to date his letters. This aspiration to return to the old sun religion was to haunt radical freethought for much of the nineteenth century. The *Essay on Freemasonry* was unpublished by Paine when he died, but a version, omitting the more abusive comments on christianity, was published by his executrix in 1810. The *Essay* was afterwards reprinted in this expurgated form in French in 1812. Carlile's 1818 edition was apparently the first unexpurgated edition of Paine's *Essay*, and reflects the assiduousness with which Carlile tracked down texts of Paine's works. Carlile's version was to form the basis of all subsequent editions of Paine's *Essay*.

Having printed the *Essay on Free Masonry*, the obvious next step for Carlile was to produce a cheap edition of Paine's infamous *Age of Reason*. All previous attempts to publish this work in England had ended in the prosecution of the publisher. In December 1818, Carlile produced a cheap edition of *The Age of Reason*, aimed at the working class reader. Within a month, a prosecution was brought against him for selling *The Age of Reason*. Since the 1790s, radicals had used such trials as a means of gaining publicity, and a great set-piece trial was an indispensable rite of initiation for a major radical leader. Carlile seized his chance gleefully. He read aloud lengthy extracts from *The Age of Reason*, which were entered verbatim into the court record, so that anyone printing the record of the trial, a public document, could print *The Age of Reason* without fear of prosecution. He attempted to summon the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Chief Rabbi and the Astronomer Royal as witnesses, so that he could interrogate them on the truth of certain passages in the Bible. Despite all these stunts, Carlile was found guilty, and sentenced to three years in Dorchester gaol and a fine of fifteen hundred pounds.

Carlile was imprisoned in Dorchester from November 1819 to November 1825. These were perhaps his greatest years. Carlile turned his gaol cell in Dorchester into a 'Repository of Reason' and the focal point of the struggle for freedom of speech. In return for a weekly payment, Carlile was given a light, airy room, containing a sink, bed and desk, as well as

some oddments of furniture and a set of weights for training. These were donated by friends and supporters, who also sent him razors, hosiery, night caps and other gifts. Carlile was allowed to purchase his own provisions and hired two servants, one to run errands and the other to do laundry and cleaning. However, Carlile was kept away from other prisoners and visitors were discouraged. He was allowed only three hours exercise a week, and, when permitted this luxury, 'he was led out as a caged animal and exhibited to the gaze of the passing curious', degrading treatment which was remembered long afterwards in the small Dorset town. Carlile developed a programme of rigorous mental and physical training. He read and wrote ceaselessly, constantly asking for supplies of books and periodicals.

In planning the battle for the freedom of the press from his gaol, the first foot soldiers deployed by Carlile were his family. He insisted that they should face the risks involved in continuing his publication activities. His wife Jane, though personally unsympathetic to her husband's political activities, loyally took over the publishing house, and was duly sent to join her husband in Dorchester for two years. Carlile's sister Mary-Anne then took over, and was also eventually dispatched to Dorchester. From July 1821, Carlile asked for volunteers to sell his publications, and the 'battle of the shopmen' began. Dozens of working class volunteers offered to sell Carlile's publications, and more than twenty were convicted and imprisoned between 1821 and 1824. These tactics were incredibly successful. By jamming up the courts and prisons, and keeping the issue of freedom of the press constantly in the public eye, Carlile simply wore the government out. By 1825, the attorney general had thrown in the towel. There were no more prosecutions for publication of *The Age of Reason*.

Meanwhile a flood of publications issued from Dorchester gaol, which, it was claimed, was the only place in the country where true freedom of expression could be found. Of these productions, the most influential was Carlile's journal, *The Republican*, which was avidly consumed by Carlile's supporters throughout the country. In 1825, in opening the twelfth volume of *The Republican*, Carlile declared that 'my last effort in Dorchester gaol will be the annihilation of Free Masonry, at least, such an exposure of it, as will shame sensible and honourable men from joining it, and draw many from it'. He wrote breathlessly to one of his Sheffield supporters saying that he was 'full of Masonry', and asking him to send twelve of the best steel pens to furnish him for the battle. He urged another correspondent not to be ill until the exposure of freemasonry was complete. He promised to provide 'the only correct history of masonry', which would be a great blow to superstition. By exposing masonry as empty tom-foolery, he would also, by analogy, expose christianity: 'I shall strike the very roots of masonry, and, in so doing, I shall un-christianize thousands'.

Throughout the second half of 1825, *The Republican* was filled with transcripts of the rituals not only of craft masonry, but also of the Royal Arch and many additional degrees, interspersed with Carlile's comments. Many features distinguished Carlile's exposure from earlier works. First, it was explicitly linked to Carlile's attacks on the monarchy and religion, and used the kind of mocking rhetoric and satire which characterised radical publications of the period. There were dedications and open letters to George IV, urging him to give up his position as Grand Patron of Masonry and patronize mechanics' institutes instead. Carlile notes 'I recollect reading...of the Duke of Sussex toasting his mother, as the mother of six masons. If she had been the mother of six practical house-building masons, it would have been more to her credit...'

The twelfth volume of *The Republican* was perhaps the first exposure of masonic ritual directed at a large working-class audience. The weekly circulation of *The Republican* was at that time about 12,000 (with a much higher readership), and, as Carlile's discussion of freemasonry gradually unfolded, it was avidly followed by his supporters. Despite the acerbic tone of Carlile's commentary, he also provided a wide-ranging and well-informed account of the history of freemasonry. He had assembled a comprehensive masonic library at Dorchester and made very intelligent use of the materials he had assembled. As Carlile's study of freemasonry developed, its tone changed. Again, an important influence was that of Paine. At first, Carlile argued that there was not a shred of antiquity in masonic ritual. But, on re-reading Paine's *Essay on Freemasonry*, Carlile felt that Paine was right in suggesting that freemasonry in some way reflected ancient forms of religion. Carlile decided that masons had forgotten the true significance of their craft, and that he would have to teach it to them. 1825 was to be for masons AL (the year of light) 1. Carlile declared that: 'I shall masonify masons, not only by teaching them what is morality, about which they talk without understanding; but by showing them what is the real meaning of all their boasted secrets, about which they talk without understanding'.

Carlile's view as to the importance of Freemasonry in understanding religion was also profoundly influenced by the work of the Yorkshire radical Godfrey Higgins, a pioneer of the comparative study of religion. Indeed, Carlile helped popularise Higgins's ideas in the way he had already done for Paine. Higgins was a Yorkshire gentleman, who inherited a large estate near Doncaster in Yorkshire. When Napoleon threatened invasion, Higgins became a major in the local militia but fell ill and resigned his commission. Becoming a local justice, he interested himself in social issues. He campaigned for better treatment of the insane and built a model asylum at Wakefield. He was invited to become a radical MP, but declined.

Higgins was reluctant to pursue a political career because he had become deeply interested in the history of religion. His illness had prompted him to devote himself to the study of philosophy, and he decided to investigate the evidence for christianity. This developed into a study of the nature of all religions, and eventually became an investigation of the origins of language and nations. Higgins's magnum opus was *Anacalypsis*. Advance copies of the first volume of this huge work were only printed seven weeks before Higgins's death in 1833, and the second volume was edited from Higgins's papers by his publisher. *Anacalypsis* has been described as the first large-scale attempt at a synthesis of religion and science. *Anacalypsis* is a Greek word which means uncovering or revealing, and *Anacalypsis* seeks not simply to prove the common origin of all religions but also to show that, 'concealed under the garb of history' is a secret doctrine which is the essence of this ancient belief-system. Higgins argued that stonemasons were the priests of this first religion. Freemasonry, preserving the secrets of the ancient stonemasons, was for Higgins a lineal descendant of the primeval religion. Higgins used his own position as a freemason to investigate these matters, and claimed to have found firm proof of his conjectures. He described how he suspected that there was a line of descent from the Chaldees, the astronomer priests of the Near East, to the medieval Celtic religious communities of the Culdees, and argued that they were all masons. Higgins had searched the records at Freemasons' Hall in London and had found that a body called the Grand Lodge of All England had met in the crypt of York Cathedral. He went to York and interviewed the last survivor of this lodge, who showed him documents which established that the lodge had

variously called itself a druidical lodge, a chapter of royal arch masons and a templar encampment, and had met in York for the last time in 1778.

It is not known when Higgins was initiated into freemasonry. He may possibly have joined a regimental lodge while he was serving in the militia. His further involvement in freemasonry was encouraged by his friendship with Robert Beverley, a young Calvinist who had been appointed as Deputy Provincial Grand Master of freemasons in Yorkshire and who afterwards fell out with Higgins over his views on Mohammed. When Beverley wanted a special occasion to mark the opening of a new masonic hall in Hull, he persuaded his friend Godfrey Higgins that it was about time that he proceeded to the degree of Fellow Craft, and this ceremony was the first event in the new hall. Almost as soon as he had become a master mason in Hull, Higgins joined the Prince of Wales Lodge in London. Higgins could hardly have joined a more prestigious lodge. The Prince of Wales Lodge was one of the 'red apron' lodges which had the zealously guarded privilege of nominating a Grand Steward. Higgins's commitment to his lodge is illustrated by his tenure of this office, which usually involved substantial charitable contributions by the steward, in 1829.

Unfortunately, Higgins was unable to attend the Grand Feast due to illness, but in a fascinating letter recently discovered in the Library and Museum of Freemasonry apologising for not being able to travel to the feast, Higgins explains that he had been in York 'searching into the antiquities of masonry by desire of his Royal Highness the Duke of Sussex', at that time Grand Master of English Freemasonry. It was doubtless the Duke who had arranged for Higgins to join the Prince of Wales Lodge. The Duke of Sussex was well known for his support of such liberal political causes as catholic emancipation and the abolition of the slave trade. He was also profoundly interested in the history of religion, assembling a celebrated library of printed and manuscript bibles. Sussex's own religious views require further study, but there is every indication that he would have been sympathetic to many of Higgins's ideas. It has been suggested that at the time of the Union of the Grand Lodges, the Duke of Sussex took the opportunity to expunge overtly christian references from masonic ritual. This claim that the Duke 'de-christianised' freemasonry is an over-simplification of a very complex process, but the Duke's contact with Higgins does give a fascinating glimpse of the ideas about the nature of freemasonry which were evidently current in the Duke's circle.

There is every indication that the royal Duke of Sussex sought with the assistance of Higgins to turn English freemasonry into a vehicle for restoring the ancient sun religion in a way that Thomas Paine and Richard Carlile would have found very sympathetic. In this context, Carlile's report of a conversation with Godfrey Higgins is very significant. Higgins said to Carlile that there were only two masons in England - the Duke of Sussex and himself. Carlile responded that he and Robert Taylor were the third and fourth. Robert Taylor was a renegade clergyman with whom Carlile struck up an alliance after he was released from Dorchester gaol. Taylor was another who was convinced that all religions derived from sun worship and that Christianity, by substituting Christ for the sun, was blasphemous. He wrapped up these ideas in an elaborate panoply of spurious astrological and etymological learning. Taylor was a natural showman, and an ebullient speaker. He often wore baroque clerical attire which shocked his audiences. Henry Hunt called him 'The Devil's Chaplain'. Taylor's sermons were reprinted under the title 'The Devil's Pulpit'.

Carlile's study of freemasonry had convinced him that it concealed ancient deist truths. Taylor's arguments reinforced his conviction that the value of christianity was also in its allegorical representation of ancient moral truths. Just as Carlile had taught masons the true meaning of masonry, so he and Taylor would now teach the true meaning of christianity. Carlile and Taylor set out on 'infidel missions'. In May 1830, Carlile and Taylor's partnership reached its climax when they opened the Rotunda in Blackfriars Road, which became the focus of radical and freethought activity during the period leading to the passing of the Reform Act in 1832. The Rotunda was a large complex containing a theatre, lecture rooms, refreshment and game rooms. Taylor spoke two or three times weekly, presenting what can only be described as multi-media presentations, with the signs of the zodiac painted on the dome of the theatre, and spectacular use of lighting and theatrical effects. Taylor was sometimes accompanied by a female chorus playing guitars. From the time the Rotunda opened, Carlile was keen that Taylor should examine the allegories of freemasonry, and Carlile hoped it might even be possible publicly to enact masonic rituals at the Rotunda.

Eventually, in 1831, Taylor was ready to give a course of lectures on freemasonry. Thus, at the supreme moment of the Reform crisis in Britain, the main centre of radical activity in London was preoccupied with the spiritual allegories of freemasonry. Taylor's aim in these talks is clearly explained at the beginning: 'I shall prove Free Masonry to be the combined result of the Egyptian, Jewish and Christian superstitions, and absolutely identical with the celebrated Eleusinian mysteries of Greece, the Dionysian mysteries, or the Orgies of Bacchus, and the Christian mysteries of the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, which are absolutely not more different in any respect from each other, than the customs and forms of any Lodge of Freemasons in England may be from those of a Lodge in any of the nations of the Continent'. Carlile urged freemasons to attend Taylor's lectures, and attempted to hire Freemasons' Hall so that Taylor could repeat his lectures to a masonic audience. Taylor's lectures were printed in *The Devil's Pulpit*, and also issued separately. They continued to be read for many years afterwards. As late as 1881-1882 *The Devils Pulpit* was reprinted by the Freethought Press, run by Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant.

To accompany Taylor's lectures, Carlile reissued the material from volume twelve of *The Republican* as a separate book, entitled *An Exposure of Freemasonry: or, a mason's printed manual*, with an introductory *Key-stone to the Royal Arch of Freemasonry*, considerably revising and refining his edition of the rituals. Anxious to stress the allegorical meaning of freemasonry, Carlile inserted new introductions, omitting the attacks on freemasonry itself and stressing its spiritual interest. As Carlile put it, 'My great object is here to instruct Masons as well as others, and not to give them offence. They ask for light. Here is light. They ask for fellowship. Here is the only basis of fellowship'. Carlile's aim was the same as Taylor's: to expose the ancient mysteries preserved in freemasonry. A concern with freemasonry as a key to understanding the allegorical character of religion was to be the key theme in Carlile's thought for the rest of his life. It explains for example his antipathy to early trade unions, which made use of quasi-masonic ritual. When a group of farm labourers in Tolpuddle in Dorset were transported to Australia for administering an oath to members of their union, Carlile described their behaviour as quackery. In his journal *The Gauntlet*, he published a caricature of the initiation of the union men and with the blunt declaration: 'You have degraded yourselves. I present you today with a picture of your

degradation. Some men learn better by pictures than by letters'. If you want nonsense, said Carlile, why pay more when you could buy his exposure of freemasonry for five shillings?

Carlile's interest in freemasonry was to influence his successors in the secularist movement in Britain. Carlile's successor as the most prominent advocate of freethought in Britain was George Jacob Holyoake, who was befriended by Carlile as a young man. Holyoake had been converted to atheism by his association with the pioneering socialist movement founded by Robert Owen. Holyoake engaged in a wider range of radical political activities than Carlile, but, through his contacts with liberals such as John Stuart Mill, Harriet Martineau, Holyoake helped establish that the religious pluralism of the period included a place for those who did not necessarily accept christianity. Moreover, through his activities in support of Garibaldi and his contacts with refugees from France and elsewhere after 1848 he helped forge links between the British and European movements. Doubtless as a result of Carlile's influence, Holyoake was also intrigued by fraternal organisations. When the friendly society known as the Oddfellows, whose character was very similar to freemasonry, ran a competition for the composition of new lectures for use in their ceremonies, the winning entry was composed by Holyoake, to the great embarrassment of the Oddfellows. Holyoake's interest in Freemasonry is apparent from his proposal that the London secular guild should be a 'Freemasonry in freethought'.

However, perhaps the most significant result of Carlile's interest in freemasonry was on Charles Bradlaugh, the dominant figure in English freethought in the late nineteenth century. Bradlaugh was born in humble circumstances in the East End of London. He became a Sunday School teacher, but when he asked his local clergyman to explain discrepancies in the bible, he was accused of atheism. Suspended from his Sunday duties, he attended radical meetings and became confirmed in his opposition to christianity. He was sacked from his job and thrown out by his family. He was taken in by Elizabeth Sharples, the widow of Carlile. Through Sharples, Bradlaugh became familiar with Carlile's work on freemasonry.

In 1860, Bradlaugh became editor of the National Reformer, which he quickly established as the leading journal of secular anti-religious views. Bradlaugh was the first President of the National Secular Society and by his barnstorming speaking tours in the provinces was chiefly responsible for turning it into a national organisation. From 1874, Bradlaugh formed a close alliance with Annie Besant and together they energetically lectured, wrote and campaigned to establish in Britain a secular republican society, free of established religion and hereditary privilege. Bradlaugh and Besant achieved national notoriety when they were prosecuted for obscenity for reprinting a manual describing methods of birth control. After a dramatic trial, they were eventually found not guilty.

Bradlaugh's anti-religious views were throughout his career accompanied by political radicalism. He was a prominent member of the Reform League, which campaigned for an extension of the parliamentary suffrage. He supported Irish home rule and nationalist movements in Italy and Poland. He worked with French refugees in rallying opposition in Britain to Napoleon III and encouraging support for the Third Republic after 1870. In 1880, Bradlaugh was elected as a member of parliament for Northampton. He thought that, instead of swearing an oath when he took his seat in the commons, he would be able to affirm. When it was ruled that he could not affirm, he said that he would just take the oath

anyway. The thought of an atheist swearing an oath outraged many members of the House of Commons, and a resolution was passed preventing Bradlaugh from taking the oath. This precipitated a crisis which lasted many years, with Bradlaugh barred from the House of Commons and at one point imprisoned in the Clock Tower. The whole nation was gripped by the controversy and the work of parliament at times ground to a halt. Eventually, following a general election, the Speaker ruled that Bradlaugh could take his seat. Bradlaugh himself was responsible for finally securing legislation which allowed MPs to affirm when taking up their seat.

The revelation in 1870 in the masonic newspaper *The Freemason* that the notorious atheist Bradlaugh had attended a masonic meeting in America caused a storm of controversy among English freemasons. Bradlaugh was forced to write to *The Freemason* to clarify his masonic status. He declared that he was made in the Loge des Philadelphes, on the 9th March 1859, was received in the Loge de la Persévérante Amitié, Grand Orient of France, 11th March 1862, and was an avowed atheist prior to the first date. He had joined the Tottenham High Cross Lodge [No. 754], after a discussion on his religious opinions, and he received his regular certificate from the Grand Lodge of England.

Bradlaugh's decision to become a freemason in 1859 was due to his friendship with French radicals who had fled to London after the coup of Napoleon III in 1851. Bradlaugh assisted in the defence of Simon Bernard, a French doctor who was accused of complicity in Count Orsini's attempt to assassinate Napoleon III. Bernard was Bradlaugh's sponsor when he was initiated into the lodge favoured by the French refugees, the Grand Loge des Philadelphes. The French refugees in London after 1851 included a number of masons. Horrified by the cost of English freemasonry, they instead joined a lodge in London under the Rite of Memphis. When the Rite of Memphis was proscribed by Napoleon III, the London lodge transmuted itself into a Grand Lodge, the Grand Loge des Philadelphes. The egalitarian members of the lodge increasingly found the 95 degrees of the Rite of Memphis objectionable, and from 1857 the lodge worked a reformed system comprising just three degrees. They also adopted statutes which deliberately echoed the pre-1849 statutes of the Grand Orient of France.

The Philadelphes founded daughter lodges in Stratford and Woolwich whose members were English working-class radicals and freethinkers. However, after a complaint to the Grand Secretary from a senior mason who had been refused admission into the Stratford lodge, the English Grand Lodge circulated lodges warning them against any contact with the Philadelphes. In response, the Philadelphes published through Edward Truelove, who published Bradlaugh's more controversial pamphlets, a leaflet called *Masonic Intolerance*, a ferocious denunciation of English freemasonry:

Spurned by the English Grand Lodge, the Philadelphes sought to build up closer contact with their French brethren. In 1862, an International Exhibition was held in London, and the Philadelphes ran an office to welcome French masons visiting London, providing guides and translation services. Many friendships were formed as a result, and a number of French lodges became affiliated to the Philadelphes. These included *La Persévérante Amitié* in Paris, and it was at this time that Bradlaugh and other members of the Philadelphes joined the Parisian lodge. The Philadelphes circularised other French lodges, denouncing English freemasonry as a body without a soul, declaring their intention of spreading the

spirit of French freemasonry in England, and asking for further affiliations. The most important achievement of the Philadelphes was the establishment of their own journal, La Chaîne d'Union in 1864. This was widely read in France, and the respect in which it was held is shown by the fact that its French correspondent was Esprit-Eugène Hubert, formerly Secretary-General of the Grand Orient. Hubert eventually took over the periodical in 1870, switching its publication to Paris, where it is still published. Increasingly, the Philadelphes were treated by lodges abroad, particularly in France, as if they were a regular Craft lodge. Through their circulars and the publication of La Chaîne d'Union, the Philadelphes' criticisms of English freemasonry became widely shared abroad.

In 1869, the Prince of Wales became a freemason. This prompted Bradlaugh to make his first foray into masonic journalism, with the publication in the National Reformer of a Letter to the Prince of Wales, signed 'A Free and Accepted Mason'. The Letter to the Prince of Wales was reprinted as a separate pamphlet, and is a prime example of Bradlaugh's republican rhetoric. It opens by noting that both the Prince and Bradlaugh were now brothers, and, stopping just short of libel, pokes fun at the Prince's scandalous reputation. Bradlaugh outlined his vision of freemasonry as 'a body which teaches that man is higher than king, that humanity is beyond church and creed, and that true thought is nobler than blind faith'. Bradlaugh urged the Prince to move among the common people, and assured him that before long he would hear cries for a republic in England. As a freemason, declared Bradlaugh, the Prince was bound to promote peace, to help the oppressed, to educate the ignorant, and, above all, to encourage freethought.. Bradlaugh's pamphlet was received with delight by the Philadelphes, but had little wider impact on English freemasonry. Five years later, the Marquis of Ripon unexpectedly became a Roman catholic and resigned as Grand Master. The Prince of Wales was nominated as his successor. Unnoticed by The Freemason, Bradlaugh returned his certificate as an English freemason to Great Queen Street.

It has been assumed that, following the establishment of the Third Republic in France in 1870, the French refugees in London returned home and the Philadelphes collapsed. In fact, many French refugees were unable or unwilling to return home while the future of the Republic was uncertain, and the proscription of the communards meant that a new wave of exiles appeared in London. Not only did the Philadelphes remain active, but other avowedly revolutionary lodges were established in London. The process whereby the Third Republic achieved stability was a complex one which took nearly ten years. An important part of this process was the promulgation of secular republican values by masonic lodges. The struggles within French freemasonry reflected these wider issues. A focal point was the campaign to revise the constitutions so that the requirement to believe in a supreme being and a future state were removed.

In September 1876, the French Grand Orient adopted a revised first article. Thus far, Anglo-French recriminations had been conducted through the masonic press, but now the Grand Officers felt a need to intervene. The Grand Secretary John Hervey made a speech in which he warned French freemasons that if they went ahead with the changes, Grand Lodge would have to consider barring them from English lodges. Hervey's warnings had no effect. The Grand Orient adopted a revised constitution in September 1877. The Irish and Scottish Grand Lodges acted quickly to withdraw recognition from their French brethren. The matter was scheduled for consideration by the English Grand lodge in December 1877

and Bradlaugh, hoping to rally support for the French masons as he had for the French republic, entered the fray with a stirring leader in the National Reformer.

What have the French freemasons done that you should exclude them from your lodges, and that you break off all communication with them? Have they shut out any man on account of his religious creed? Not one; all that they have done is to erase from their constitution words which were a barrier against, and a penalty on, honest heretics ... I warn you that your act will carry religious controversy amongst the whole of your lodges...

This was fighting talk, and was backed up by French masonic periodicals which threatened that the Grand Orient would warrant lodges in England. In March 1878 the English Grand Lodge resolved that visitors could not be admitted to lodges under its jurisdiction unless they had been initiated in a lodge professing belief in the Great Architect of the Universe. This led to a brief but very belated flurry of letters to the English masonic press supporting the French position, but the great battle promised by Bradlaugh never came. Possibly the Grand Orient persuaded Bradlaugh to keep quiet to avoid polarising opinion.

In 1884, a new lodge under the English Grand Lodge was consecrated in London, La France Lodge No. 2060. The lodge was formed by French masons resident in London who held certificates under the English Grand Lodge, and received permission to work in French. At the consecration, a Past Grand Chaplain expressed a hope that La France Lodge might prove the means by which masons in France were led back to a path of godliness. This news alarmed the Grand Orient, which wrote to the English Grand Master, reiterating its position and explaining how the supposed changes in French masonry had been misrepresented. This olive branch was refused by the English Grand Lodge which declared that 'belief in God is the first great mark of all true and genuine masonry'. In the meantime, the Grand Orient had summoned Bradlaugh to Paris to see if he could help. In March 1885, the National Reformer carried a leading article on 'Freemasonry in England and France', which outlined the Grand Orient's case, and promised further articles on the nature of freemasonry.

These articles afterwards appeared in a new journal edited by Annie Besant called Our Corner. Entitled 'What Freemasonry Is, What It Has Been, and What It Ought To Be', they represent Bradlaugh's last testament on freemasonry. Bradlaugh reviewed the varying views taken by different bodies of the relationship between freemasonry and religion. On the one hand, the Pope had described it as atheistic and revolutionary; on the other the Grand Lodge of England declared that religion was grafted into the heart of freemasonry. How can this contradiction be explained? The answer in Bradlaugh's view was simple. In England, historical circumstances meant that freemasonry had become royalist and respectable, whereas by contrast in France and Italy the lodge doors welcomed the proscribed so that freemasonry helped foster democracy. True freemasonry worked to reduce human suffering, by affirming tolerance and opposing bigotry:

Under the temple roof the strife of creeds should be hushed, work should be the only worship: work for the redemption of long-suffering mankind.

Bradlaugh struggled, unsuccessfully, to reform Freemasonry in Britain along the French model. A more direct attempt was to be made to introduce a new type of freemasonry by Bradlaugh's erstwhile associate, Annie Besant, who in 1902 introduced co-masonry to

Britain, establishing the first lodges under Le Droit Humain. Besant only seems to have taken an interest in freemasonry after Bradlaugh's death. Besant knew about freemasonry through Bradlaugh – she had helped publish his articles on the subject – but the type of freemasonry she introduced in Britain was very different to that advocated by Bradlaugh. Indeed, she justified her insistence that, by contrast with France, members of Le Droit Humain in Britain should believe in a supreme being, by reference to the recriminations suffered by Bradlaugh. There is not time here to discuss in detail Besant's relationship with freemasonry which introduces a whole new set of themes. However, in many ways Besant's co-masonry, and indeed her whole connection with theosophy, should be seen not as a breach with the radical tradition of Paine, Carlile and Bradlaugh, as it is often portrayed, but rather as the wheel turning full circle. It has been pointed out that the ideas of theosophy bear a close resemblance to those expressed by Godfrey Higgins in *Anacalypsis*. In many ways, Besant's emphasis on religion as allegory and her exploration of new scientific ideas can be seen as revisiting themes developed by Carlile in his later work. Moreover, increasingly through her work with Charles Leadbetter and others, Besant supported the idea that within freemasonry is the kernel of many ancient spiritual truths, a view that can be seen as reaching back through Higgins and Carlile to Paine. Besant should be seen not as breaking with that tradition when she 'went to Theosophy', but rather as reaffirming and reanimating it.

The engagement of British radicals in the nineteenth century with freemasonry thus provides a means by which the broader continuities and underlying themes of British radical thought can be better appreciated. The British radical tradition of the nineteenth century is sometimes portrayed as a weak and fragmented movement. Its fascination with freemasonry as the remnant of ancient religions and a counterweight to christianity gives a different perspective. Underlying all this is a fascination with textuality and the power of the printed word, running through from Carlile's journals written in his prison cell, Bradlaugh's bravura editorship of the *National Reformer* to Besant's tireless editorship of theosophical journals. The way in which this esoteric radicalism was animated by the power of the printing press is nowhere better expressed than in one of the letters to George IV printed in *The Republican* by Richard Carlile, who can be seen as the pivotal figure, linking Paine and Higgins with Bradlaugh and Besant.

Sir [wrote Carlile]

When the art of printing was discovered, there arose, on the part of those who ruled the people of Europe, a great dread of printed books. The first book submitted to the press was the bible, and a printed Bible then had precisely the same or a more terrifying effect, than the printed investigation of the Bible called the 'Age of Reason'...

I counsel you to throw off all dread of printed books and to send out a flaming proclamation, inviting all to free discussion, upon all subjects. We shall then hear nothing but the cry of 'God Bless the King: we have gotten a wise king at last'.

I am, Sir, your prisoner,

For printing books,

Richard Carlile.