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BOOK REVIEW BY THE PRECEPTOR, WOR. BRO. J A J LYND

The Elixir and the Stone by Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh,

published by Arrow Books.

This book was first published in 1997, but hit the bookshops again last year, presumably to cash in on the hype generated by the success of the Da Vinci Code.

The subtitle of the book is "A History of Magic and Alchemy" and despite this rather off putting subtitle, on the whole I enjoyed this book, even though it is heavy going in parts.

If I had been giving it a subtitle it would have been "A History of Hermeticism", although as the books title refers to the Elixir of Life and the Philosophers Stone, the reference to Alchemy is probably warranted.

Hermeticism has been around for a long time and probably originated in ancient Egypt, where it was associated with the god of writing known as Thoth. When the Hellenistic dynasty of the Ptolemies took over in Egypt following Alexander"s victories, they combined Thoth with their own Greek deity Hermes. This type of syncretism was particularly associated with the city of Alexandria.

Although a lot of mythology surrounds Hermeticism it is more of a philosophical movement than a religious one. Part of the mythology is that it was founded by an historical figure called Hermes Trismegistus or Thrice Great Hermes and that its teachings were recorded by him on the Tabula Smaragdina or Emerald Tablet. If l could sum up the philosophy of Hermeticism it would be a belief in the power of nature combined with the concept of microcosm and macrocosm or ""as above so as below"". This philosophy has pervaded Western thought for the last two millennia and was particularly influential during the renaissance, although the Roman Catholic Church, in particular, has generally regarded it with deep suspicion.

The book gives a history of Hermetic thought through the ages and lists many great figures of history who were involved with it. Men such as Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle and Christopher Wren, who were also connected to the so-called Invisible College from which the Royal Society is supposed to have sprung.

So is there a connection with Freemasonry? Quite a strong connection according to the authors. They claim that when the rituals of Freemasonry were being formulated during the "age of reason" of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the ritual writers incorporated quite a lot of Hermetic thinking into them. Certainly the exhortation in the Second Degree to study —the hidden mysteries of Nature and Science "" has strong Hermetic overtones.

Also when I learnt the Retrospect and Raising in the Third Degree and delivered it recently to a candidate in my own Lodge, it became apparent to me, after reading this book, that there are also elements of Hermetic thought in the Sublime Degree of a Master Mason. Although not specifically a Masonic book I think most Freemasons would enjoy and gain some knowledge from ""The Elixir and the Stone—.

Social changes also followed the growth of printing. In a time of considerable religious and political upheaval and intolerance there developed a blossoming of Knowledge and a growing spirit of inquiry. Those who could afford to do so investigated nature and science in the truest sense of the expression. In the late 17th century the political atmosphere imposed severe limitations on freedom of thought. A tax on newspapers and pamphlets was aimed at reducing popular discussion, and only Government news sheets appeared between 1660 and 1679. The law was also extremely harsh. Shoplifting and stealing furniture were punishable by death. A man was flogged to death, publicly, in 1685 and a woman burnt at the stake in 1693. The last English witch trial took place in 1712. Against this background some liberal thinkers proposed a more humane approach to punishment but this was officially resisted. Rigid censorship also prevailed and books on the history of State Affairs, divinity, philosophy or science had to be licensed. The Schism Act of 1714 aimed at restoring the Church's educational monopoly and destroying non-conformist schools. But against this background thinking men became "active, industrious and inquisitive" and this led to "a universal desire and appetite after knowledge" so that progress was made in the fields of chemistry, botany, geology, medicine, mathematics and astronomy. Meeting discreetly, groups of like-minded men sought to discuss social problems and systems of morality.

Coffee houses, dating from the 1650's, were suppressed in 1675 as the "resort of idle and disaffected persons" who had succeeded sectarian congregations as centres of sedition. The need of those who wished to discuss new ideas with others of a similar frame of mind, in an harmonious atmosphere, met at more exclusive coffee houses or taverns which had private dining rooms appropriate for their needs.

It was a time, in London, which saw not only the rise of the Press but also the introduction and growth of coffee houses which, although they had been suppressed in 1675 as the "resort of idle and disaffected persons" who had succeeded sectarian congregations as centres of sed ition, they flourished in the early 1700s with over 1000 in London. This meant that half of the men in the City visited a coffee house every day. Those who wished to meet and discuss new ideas with others of a similar frame of mind, in a harmonious atmosphere, met at the more exclusive coffee houses or taverns which had private dining rooms appropriate to their needs.

It has been said that "all institutions and ideas are the product of a certain place and time". This was the time for speculative masonry, with some of these groups, although not all of them, developing into the Lodges, the forerunners of the Order today, that were loosely banded together in the original Grand Lodge of England.

One suggestion is that the Craft's originators clothed themselves in the appearance of an operative organisation or guild to cloak their activities which, at that time, may have been difficult to practise openly. As their meetings may have had been considered subversive by the authorities, there was a total restriction on the discussion of Masonic matters with outsiders.

About this time lodge dress varied but it was generally what would be considered today as "formal". Some lodges had special jackets or coats with particular buttons or braid; some lodges requiring court dress with swords.

Most of those concerned in the development of speculative Masonry had backgrounds that suggest a literary or philosophical background, not a manual one. Certainly those who were instrumental in developing modern Freemasonry were not operative masons. James Anderson, associated with the 1723 Constitutions, was a graduate in Arts of the Mariscal College, Aberdeen, and a Minister of a Presbyterian Chapel in Piccadilly, London, in the 1720's. John Entick, who revised the original Constitution in 1756 was not an operative mason.

Of freemasons mentioned in early Grand Lodge minute books, there were 23 "of noble birth"; 18 painters, sculptors or engravers; 17 authors, poets or dramatists; 15 clergy or ministers; 15 scientists; 14 physicians or surgeons; 12 actors, musicians or singers; six architects; five printers on publishers; four lawyers; three men of fashion and two public servants of high standing. Many operative masons would probably not have been comfortable in such a gathering.

But I've said enough. There's little harm in tracing the Craft back to Solomon if it is to teach a moral or illustrate a philosophy, as long as we don't spend all our time looking back - when our problems today call for us to look forward and shape our organisation so that it is not an outsider in a changing society.