

## **ENTREVISTA**

### **“Citizens of the Masonic Democracy”: The 18th Century Masonic Community in the Atlantic World and Beyond**

The researcher Hans Schwartz has defended a dissertation, entitled “Citizens of the Masonic Democracy”: The 18th Century Masonic Community in the Atlantic World and Beyond, at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, United States the 9th of December, 2016. Hans Schwartz was born in 1974 in Cape Ann, Massachusetts, United States.

The author has granted us the following interview.

#### **What were the reasons that led you to focus your research on Freemasonry?**

It was a combination of factors that just came together at the right time. I’d always had an interest in history, particularly the American Revolution, and of course freemasonry kept popping up in my reading. After I returned to the US from Japan, where I’d been teaching and performing weddings for about six years, I ran into an older fellow I knew and it came up that he was a mason, so I ended up asking about joining. At about the same time I entered freemasonry, I decided to do my masters in History at Salem State, so I needed a research topic. At the time Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* had just come out as a movie so freemasonry was in the public eye. So things just kind of came together.

At Salem I was more focused on political networking through Masonic lodges in revolutionary New England, particularly the relationship between masonry and revolutionary networks such as the Sons of Liberty. I haven’t published any of that work but I think that I will revisit it in the fairly near future. Once I got to Clark I was lucky enough to be able to work under Wim Klooster, so my focus shifted to the Atlantic, and my doctoral dissertation ended up with a scope that at least touches on the entire Atlantic World and the East Indies as well.

#### **What were the sources you used?**

Of course, in terms of secondary sources, I framed a lot of my analysis around the previous work of the big names in Masonic studies. Much of the intellectual and cultural side of my interpretation built on Margaret Jacob, Ric Berman and Stephen Bullocks works, and of course my study of trans-oceanic Masonic networks owes a lot to Jessica Harland-Jacobs. That said, if you are reading this interview then there’s a pretty good chance that I’ve cited

you at some point.

Overall though, my work pulls most heavily from a very wide range of primary sources. I didn't really set out with a clear thesis in mind; rather, I collected and compared as much data as I could. The Grand Lodge of Massachusetts has a tremendous collection of Masonic materials in several languages, much of which still hasn't been fully catalogued and which isn't listed on worldcat or any of the other online resources. I literally just went through all of the shelves and pulled everything that looked interesting. For example, in one chapter I analyze almost 600 appearances of freemasonry in the Colonial American press. Another chapter focuses on printed and published lists of lodges from around the masonic world and how they were copied, collated, and distributed to allow freemasons to find each other in just about any port of call. I also went through scores of 18th century masonic pamphlets, almanacs, pocket books, books, sermons, and lodges records. I went through the records, minutes, and proceedings of both of the white grand lodges in Boston and of Prince Hall's African lodge and a lot of the lodges in the region. The Grand Librarians, Cynthia Alcorn and now that she's retired Walter Hunt, were very helpful in giving me unfettered access to the archives.

In addition, I did a lot of work at the Scottish Rite library at the Museum of our National Heritage in Lexington, Massachusetts. Jeff Croteau was particularly helpful there, for example, when I told him I was looking into networks he dropped a load of French *Tableaux* and the Sharpe Documents in front of me, which led to my last couple of chapters, after I followed up with some research at the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania where they have fantastic documents from Pennsylvania's Grand Lodge of St. Domingo. Even though most of my research was done in New England, I was able to find a lot of primary documents from Europe, all of the US, and the Caribbean, and even a bit on Africa. I think the wide range of sources is one of the strong points of my work.

### **What were the main difficulties you encountered? How did you surmount them?**

I think the main difficulty was finding a clear thesis in all of the data I was looking at, and in connecting the several important strains that I came across into a coherent narrative with a unifying thesis linking them all together. My dissertation is broken into two major sections, one on the cultural movement and intellectual networks of masonic print culture, and the second on trans-Atlantic masonic networks and their relationship to commerce and trade. This section focuses mainly on Boston and Saint Domingue, the two oldest and most expansive masonic hubs in the British and French Atlantic, but also includes case studies of the Dutch lodge at the Cape of Good Hope and a London lodge specifically focused on the Americans and those in the American trade. Demonstrating clearly the relationship between these two aspects of freemasonry and their impact on the culture and commerce of the Atlantic world became the focus of my work. I actually found that in writing the final draft

I had to cut out a lot of stuff that is only interesting or relevant to those of us who focus on masonry professional.

**What major historical problems has your work resolved?**

I'd say mine is the first to view freemasonry in a truly Atlantic context, and in particular to investigate its role in inter-imperial commerce. This includes an in-depth exploration of the use of print culture to locate lodges throughout the European colonial world, long-range connection and communication in the masonic Atlantic, masonry's role as a cultural force in the European colonies and the intellectual interplay between masons in the periphery and the metropolis. I've also expanded understanding of the role of freemasonry in the African Atlantic diaspora.

**Please, could you summarize the essence of your thesis in two lines?**

Freemasonry was as a global cultural movement that created a sort of parallel republic, or society, which formed and was formed by ad hoc, interconnected commercial and intellectual networks.

**What were the lessons, at all levels, personal and professional, that you have deducted from your research experience?**

To be honest, the biggest lessons were in managing to maintain a viable economic life while undertaking such a major project. I often had to hyper-focus for short periods, put the research down to focus on work and family, and then try to figure out what I'd been thinking when I came back to it. For example, not long after I finished my comps and started on the dissertation writing, my son was born, and shortly after that his mother was diagnosed with a serious tumor in her inner ear, so between the new baby, her recovery, and paying the bills, I lost quite a lot of time and momentum. You have to learn to manage your time quite well to do this kind of work if you don't have any outside support.

Besides that, I'd say that the personal skills are an important part of doing research. For example, I got to see some very interesting documents written by masons such as Paul Revere and Joseph Warren because I attended dinner at the right lodge and got to know the secretary. Without librarians like Cynthia Alcorn, Jeffrey Croteau and Walter Hunt in Massachusetts and Cathy Giaimo in Pennsylvania, I wouldn't have been able to find a lot of the documents I did. Also, on the intellectual plane, making connections between sources, ideas, and other disciplines is really the essence of developing original research. And sometimes intuition can be important. We can never really know with 100% certainty if our interpretations of history are right, but sometimes you say to yourself, I think this is

what was going on with these guys, and if I'm right, such and such a document or record ought to have existed, and if it still does, it would have ended up in this archive or collection, and it should say something to this effect. When you find that source you were speculating about, it gives you some confidence that maybe you've actually got a handle on what really happened.

**Now, what are your professional plans?**

That's a good question. At the moment I am teaching as an adjunct at two schools; history survey courses at Anna Maria College and writing for second language speakers at Northeastern. I'm also teaching certification courses for English as a Second Language teachers on weekends. It's really not an ideal schedule. I was actually driving for Uber late nights on weekends up until a month or so before my defense, though I'm doing well enough with my other jobs that I haven't gone back to it since and hopefully won't have to. Of course, I'd like to find a full professorship, but I'm not very optimistic that that will happen anytime soon considering the job market. There aren't a lot of positions open, and many of those that are are in places I'm not inclined to live. One position I applied for recently had 437 applications, according to the search committee. So I'm looking into other options.

In addition to a couple of upcoming publications in academic journal, one major publisher has expressed a preliminary interest in the book version of my dissertation, but since I have yet to finish editing it into a book that isn't at all guaranteed. I'm looking into creating online content as a possible alternative. So far, I have a freelance gig with a Chinese company writing and recording lesson material and I'm in the process of trying to set up a few online schools of my own. The challenge is trying to find a way to make history marketable - most successful online courses are in tech or practical skills rather than humanities.

**Would you like to highlight an aspect that has not been covered and you consider worthy of review?**

I guess I'd say that one thing I like about studying freemasonry is that scholars studying freemasonry are all quite supportive of each other. For example, I've heard stories of conferences in some fields of history where scholars will have some pretty nasty quarrels over points most of the world could care less about. One of my committee members has stories about major arguments over single words at conferences where he's presented. In masonic studies, in my experience, the criticism you do get is generally constructive and positive even if there are some minor differences of interpretation. Everyone I've met, particularly the really big names in Masonic research like Jessica Harland - Jacobs, Stephen

Bullock, Ric Berman, Peter Hinks, and the list goes on, have all been quite helpful and supportive. I think we all want to see our topic taken as seriously as we know it deserves to be by the historical community in general. In turn, even though there's a lot of originality to my work, it really does build on and confirm the work of the senior scholars in the field; other than maybe a few minor points I don't think I've really contradicted anyone else's interpretations or ideas. Finally, looking at my dissertation, it covers a lot of ground, and keeping a coherent thesis was a major challenge - the thesis grew out of the data rather than vice versa - but what really sticks out is that there's a lot more to be done in looking at masonry in this period, including in many of the topics in which I feel I've moved the field forward.

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