

Reseña

Miners, mariners, and masons: The global network of victorian freemasonry de Roger Burt. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2020. 324 páginas. ISBN 978-1-905816-16-3.

Reseñado por Diane Clements
Museo y Biblioteca de la Masonería, Reino Unido
diane.clements@postgrad.sas.ac.uk
ORCID: 0000-0002-0184-7970

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Many of the aspects of freemasonry can nowadays seem anachronistic: the aprons, the language of the ritual, the titles of its officers, but membership of freemasonry was one of the ways that helped men to cope with the change from what the author of this book calls a world of continuity and tradition to today's much more impersonal, modern world. This important book is a study of how freemasonry replaced long established social and economic ties of family and locality with the fraternity of the masonic lodge and the impact of this on the developing industries of the nineteenth century world. It draws on the author's extensive knowledge of the mining industry, in Cornwall and the western United States in particular, and follows the trail of miners as they emigrated and took their expertise across the world in the various mining booms of the nineteenth century. When they found themselves in pioneering mining settlements with often precarious and uncertain employment prospects, their membership of freemasonry helped them make friends, get jobs and supported them in sickness. Supported by their lodge membership, they contributed their skills to support the development of new communities.

The chapters of the book move across the world from a Cornish base and also address issues on different scales, local, regional, national and international. Chapter 2 starts with a broad outline of the economic development of Cornwall in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and considers how freemasonry developed within the county. The demographic structure of lodge membership there is considered in Chapter 3. It's conclusion that men from a range of occupations and social classes joined lodges supports evidence from other English lodges in this period.

In his next two chapters Burt seeks to establish why men wanted to become masons. He identifies what he calls the 'life-enhancing' aspects of freemasonry which included a desire for respectability and status, its recreational and social aspects and the attraction of ritual

ceremonies. Respectability and a reputation for honesty and reliability were necessary for lodge membership. Burt also discusses what he categorises as ‘Reassurance,’ which was particularly important given the social and economic insecurity in the mining industry of the late nineteenth century and, more generally, as society was affected by the process of industrialisation. One element of this was the financial assistance available from individual lodges, and from regional and national masonic sources, which acted as a safety net for members and their families. The second element was the network of personal contacts generated from lodge membership providing information and introductions. Burt argues that the association of men within their lodges provided them with the opportunity to gain knowledge about employment and business opportunities. The honesty and integrity implicit in masonic membership provided a basis of trust which gave this information network strength and reliability and thereby reduced the risks and costs of doing business. These attractions of membership were a particularly powerful incentive for those engaged in peripatetic and hazardous occupations, mariners as well as miners. Burt argues that freemasonry played a significant role in facilitating labour mobility.

The focus of the book then moves abroad, firstly to mining communities in the USA (Chapter 6) and then, more briefly, to Australia and South Africa (Chapter 7). Here Burt lightly includes his considerable knowledge of the mining activity in these areas to set the development of masonic lodges into a local context. A detailed analysis of lodges and their membership in the mining communities of the western USA supports many of his earlier conclusions about why men became freemasons.

In his final chapter Burt looks beyond the lodge and attempts to consider what freemasons offered to the wider community. He gives examples of charitable support for local causes and disaster relief including fundraising for the victims of the Chicago fire of 1871. Masonic lodges themselves played a part in the social life of individual communities but Burt argues that lodge members were also active in developing local infrastructure and leisure and commercial facilities, supporting local government and maintaining law and order. Lodges brought men together to create networks which helped facilitate community building.

As well as being a compelling read, *Miners, Mariners and Masons* has wider application for the masonic researcher. It provides a methodology for analysing the social and economic structure of membership of individual lodges and masonic groups which can be readily used elsewhere to enable robust comparisons to be drawn between lodges and geographical areas.

This book provides a fascinating picture of the role of freemasonry in economic development in the nineteenth century. It does indeed have a global scope, drawing on examples from Britain, North America, Australia and the Far East. Its focus on freemasonry in Britain and its sphere of influence does suggest opportunities for further research. In nineteenth century Britain freemasonry was non-political and socially and culturally accepted but freemasonry was ‘exported’ by other jurisdictions which did not necessarily operate in the same social context. Is there room for a comparative study of continental freemasonry to discover the experience of freemasons in those other empires?