



A CLASSY BUNCH: Equality between men and intellectual freedom were the values of Triune Lodge in the early days of Powell River. Papermakers and carpenters hobnobbed with the business and political elite.

Freemasons value equality

Pop culture typically portrays Freemasonry as either a fraternity of silly men harmlessly enacting funny rituals (think of *The Simpsons*' "Sacred Order of the Stonecutters"), or as an eminently dangerous secret cult bent on world domination.

Part three of a three-part series.

BY KEITH CARLSON

Neither is accurate, and both do much to obscure Freemasonry's important history as a provider of charity to those in need and as a fraternity promoting philosophical principles for its members.

In the context of Powell River, Freemasonry has additionally been an important forum for nurturing democracy and building community.

Freemasonry emerged as a fraternity in Scotland

during the sixteenth century Reformation. To give structure to the brotherhood, the early Freemasons organized themselves into a progressive three-stage (degree) system that emphasized each individual member's role as a rational human being.

In sixteenth and seventeenth-century Britain, Freemason's lodges became havens for men seeking a climate of religious tolerance and intellectual freedom.

At the time, Britain was still only marginally democratic; the Church and landed aristocracy wielded enormous power. Masonic lodges provided safe spaces for those who wanted to think and speak freely, in confidence, in the company of like-minded men.

Modern Freemasonry may have been born out of debates over religious freedom during the Reformation, but it came of age in the intellectual climate of the Enlightenment.

Central to eighteenth-century philosophy was the belief that reason was a curative for superstition and blind faith. In Enlightenment Britain and its North American colonies, people increasingly believed that the existence of God could only be demonstrated through rational thinking, and that the world could only be understood through careful scientific observation.

Knowledge, according to freemasons, could only be attained and advanced through careful, reasoned explo-

ration and observation of the natural world.

Enlightenment philosophy is also prominently reflected in the masonic requirement that all members must profess a faith in a non-denominational Supreme Being, referred to in masonic ritual as the Great Architect of the Universe.

In masonic tradition, God created and set the natural world in motion, but thereafter seldom, if ever, intervened other than to provide humankind with the tools of reason.

It is no coincidence that many of the early members of the British Royal Society of London (a learned society dedicated to the advancement of scientific reason) were Freemasons—men such as William Beckett, and Sirs Christopher Wren and Isaac Newton.

By the early 1700s, Freemasons had established lodges throughout all of Britain, and while the content of their degree work and meetings remained secret, members no longer felt the need to keep the places and timing of their meetings so.

And the Enlightenment ideal of equality between men (which so profoundly influenced British political reformers and the American founding fathers) found support in masonic ritual where men, regardless of rank, privilege, or creed "meet on the level and part on the square."

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