

Albuquerque – American Culture Association, March 2001

# French Perspectives on Mexican Secret Societies

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*(Square and Compass on Screen.)* The uniting theme of the panel this afternoon is fresh research, which for all of us has meant extensive travel. During 2000, on sabbatical leave, we (David Merchant and Paul Rich) had the opportunity to spend time in Paris getting first hand knowledge of Freemasonry in France. The experience was humbling, because the scope of the resources and scholarship encountered were far more than anticipated, and indeed were so overwhelming that it is possible to say that any study of secret societies is inadequate without a thorough examination of what French researchers have been uncovering and of the French libraries. For example, we have long looked for but not found significant nineteenth-century records of Mexican lodges, but in the Masonic archives in Paris we found the voluminous records of three nineteenth-century Mexican lodges, evidentially unstudied since the years when they were accumulated by secretaries of the grand or national lodges in Paris more than 150 years ago.<sup>1</sup>  
*(Bones and altar on screen.)*

Moreover, the experience served to underscore a comment made by Professor David Damrosch of Columbia University about the death of Latin in academic discourse and the rise of nationalism:

...having made the nationalistic move of switching to the vernacular, universities and their faculty could hardly conduct all their scholarly business in foreign languages, and soon inevitably an increasing amount of scholarship...began to be written in languages accessible only to foreign nationals. Even today only a small proportion of scholarly writing is ever translated into other languages...in practice a new parochialism has emerged, in which untranslated foreign scholarship is relegated to the back burner, either ignored outright or at best surveyed less thoroughly and less thoughtfully than what is available in one's native tongue.<sup>2</sup>

The history of secret and ritualistic organizations is complicated not only by language (*acetate of Masonic jargon*) but by the fact the subject has never received the attention from mainstream scholars that we think it deserves, quite possibly because of the major bibliographical problems such as limited private publication that are presented even at a national level. The subject really deserves but seldom gets a global perspective. (*acetate of civil society globally*) Remarks Michel Brodsky, "The level of research within the Craft is low, and mostly concerns the local history of lodges or remembrance of folk heroes..."<sup>3</sup>

The calibre of research by non Masons is often little better than that by Masons. One explanation of course as to why general histories give scant attention to societies such as Masonry is a partial misperception that they do not present an open door to inquisitive non-members. This is a stumbling block because few public or university libraries take seriously the collecting of material on the Masons, so the serious researcher must get permission to use Masonic archives. That would appear to be easier said than done as the secrecy of such groups seems their stock in trade, but our own experience is that this is an obstacle which is often overrated. Gaining access is not always as hard as it may seem; in Paris we were warmly welcomed by the libraries of both the Grand Orient and the Grand Lodge.<sup>4</sup>

Although the subject of Freemasonry seems esoteric, considering how widespread it and similar movements are,<sup>5</sup> there is a strong case that social scientists should give more attention to this aspect of popular and international culture. It is a vast topic and there is most assuredly not one Masonic movement but rather a number of Masonic movements which often are at cross-purposes with each other. The Masonry of England, closely tied

to the aristocracy and royal house and Anglican church, is not the Masonry of Chiapas. These distinctions give a lot of trouble, whether between countries or between rites. For example, Robert Putnam of “Bowling Alone” fame has never really seen that since all Shriners are Masons, that treating the Masons and Shriners separately befuddles his conclusions.<sup>6</sup>

Our view prior to our visit that the only important work in the field was being done in centers such as London was swept away; quite clearly and without dispute, Paris is the center of current research into Freemasonry and similar groups, and we understand from Guillermo De Los Reyes, our fellow panelist today, that Spain is also an increasingly strong entrant. The purpose of this paper is to give some background as to why the French have the “right” to have an outlook on a subject which is often thought, erroneously, to be largely British in its early history<sup>7</sup> and why a knowledge of French Freemasonry is relevant to understanding the history of secret societies in Mexico. Once one moves away from a preoccupation with British Masonry, consideration of the French influence makes sense: after all, the Templar legends which are part of Masonic folklore are firmly tied to the martyrdom of Jacques de Molay in Paris.<sup>8</sup>

One similarity that is immediately apparent is that French Freemasonry is no less controversial and prominent than Freemasonry elsewhere. *David Merchant will give a little glimpse of this by using some startling illustrations from one French Masonic pamphlet we acquired on our visit.*

Contributing to the lack of knowledge about French scholarship on Freemasonry is the fact that since the 1870s the United Grand Lodge of England has refused to recognize most of the institutions of French Masonry, claiming that the French Masons rejected the landmarks of the fraternity such as a belief in God. The English will not recognize any foreign grand lodge which recognizes the French bodies. So most French Masonic lodges are supposedly off limits to Masonic visitors from the United States or from the British Commonwealth. In contrast, the Grand Orient and the Grand Lodge of France welcome anyone who belongs to a Masonic lodge, basing their hospitality on the trust that such a lodge is genuinely Masonic if it says it is.

So one either goes to Paris suspecting the French as libertines or reciprocating the trust. That has a resemblance to the Mexican situation, where many of the Mexican lodges are not recognized overseas but which are quite glad to receive overseas visitors. We indeed found that there are a number of competing grand lodges in Paris, each with its archives and ethos. The French newspaper *Le Monde* has this to say about the fraternity:

Freemasonry is known for being multifarious, divided even, and perhaps more so in France than elsewhere. The clearest division is between the Grand Orient and the other lodges. Unlike the other rites, the Grand Orient does not invoke the “Great Architect of the Universe”, that is to say God, in its constitution and its members do not swear on the Bible. The Grand Lodge of France and the French Grand National Lodge both recognize the “Great Architect”, but the latter is the only one to be recognized by the United Lodge of England, the [self-assumed] parent chapter of the order worldwide.<sup>9</sup>

In any event, the need to look at French scholarship applies to the study of secret societies in Mexico just as much as it does to similar studies of the secret societies of other countries, and the exclusion of France from the dialogue is ridiculous. We had the pleasure of spending time with Pierre Mollier, who is the Librarian of the Grand Orient of France, one of the principle national Masonic organizations. In an address at the Canonbury Masonic Research Centre in London he made a number of comments about the influence of French Freemasonry, pointing out that much of continental Europe received Freemasonry from France. So Spain, for example, and thus *pace* Mexico, has far more early Masonic ties with France in his opinion than with England. Mollier asserted that, “Latin American Freemasonry could not be understood without taking into account the strong French influence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>10</sup> One only needs to reflect on the personal ties of Mexicans with France to see the truth in this statement -- Lorenzo de Zavala, instrumental in founding York lodges (though disgraced for revealing ritual secrets) and sometime Mexican minister to France, is a name that comes immediately to mind.<sup>11</sup>

This is not to claim that all French studies of Masonry sparkle: the need for a fresh approach was as much evident in Paris as elsewhere, although the French seem to be doing more about it. Just as Masonic studies in the English-speaking world rely on a few overused authorities such as

Gould, Mackay and Coil, Mollier points out that “The classical historiography of French Freemasonry relies on three names: Thory, Ragon and Clavel...even if we know today that their books are quite unreliable, historically speaking! Thory published in 1812 *Histoire de la Fondation du Grand Orient de France* and in 1815 *Acta Latomorum*. Clavel is the author of *Histoire Pittoresque de la Franc-maçonnerie* published in 1843, and Ragon wrote in 1853 the *Ortodoxie Maçonnique*.”<sup>12</sup> (Acetates by David Merchant.)

Not only did individual Mexican and French Masons spend time in each other's countries, but Mexico has very particular ties with France because of the prevalence of the so-called Scottish Rite of Freemasonry there. (*Ladder of the Scottish and York Rites on screen*.) The rite is not Scottish in origin, and indeed could much more appropriately be called the French Rite. The designation of the system as Scottish may have originated in an oration by Andrew Michael Ramsay (1686? - 1743), a mysterious and controversial Roman Catholic and Jacobite (but holder of an honorary degree from Oxford and a Fellow of the Royal Society) who was tutor to the eldest son of James Stuart, the Old Pretender. In an oration he supposedly gave to the Grand Lodge of France in 1737 — and whether he actually delivered it or whether it was simply written by him and circulated is controversial — he claimed that Scotland was where the “splendor” of Masonry was “preserved”:

This Oration introduced [or at least gave public currency] to the ideas that led to the development of the higher Degrees of Freemasonry, or Scottish Masonry. By the turn of the [18th] century, Scottish Freemasonry had superseded the original English Craft Masonry and had spread all over Europe and to America. Where English Masonry was based on an apolitical and tolerant doctrine, this new Scottish Masonry was founded on mystical speculations and complex connections with antiquity, primarily the traditional Crusader and Templar legends. The rapid acceptance of higher Grades outside England reflects social and political differences between eighteenth century England and Europe. Where the English system was democratic, the European systems were more totalitarian. In many ways these new Rites within Scottish Masonry provided an escape from the tyranny of oppressive governments and the powerful Catholic Church.<sup>13</sup>

An official of the Scottish Rite offered a slightly different version of

the founding period, writing that:

...we know now that a confluence of tributary streams flowed into a reservoir at Bordeaux, France. This developed into regular units there known as the Rite of Perfection that Stephen (Etienne) Morin was empowered in 1761 to bring into the Western Hemisphere. The label of *Ecosais* (Scottish) put upon these developments did not refer to Scotland but gave them the status of an established brand. Through Morin's first appointment about 1765 in the West Indies of Henry Andrew Francken as Deputy Grand Inspector-General, and the successive descendant appointments, there finally was established at Charleston, South Carolina, in 1801 the first Thirty-third Degree Supreme Council for the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry.<sup>14</sup>

Morin was a wine merchant who was a founder of the Lodge La Parfaite Harmonie at Bordeaux in 1743, and master of the lodge in 1744. Perfect Harmony fostered a multiplicity of degrees calculated to satisfy the desires of the most insatiable Mason.<sup>15</sup> He was subsequently in the spirits business at Jacmel in San Domingo: hence one reason for his Bordeaux connections, and for his travels.<sup>16</sup> Morin was also a traveling representative for the Sevres porcelain factories.<sup>17</sup>

In 1761, he obtained from the Grand Lodge and Sovereign Council of Masons at Paris appointment for life as Grand Inspector in the Western Hemisphere for all degrees above the fourteenth. French manuscripts prove that since about 1740 Bordeaux was the mother and controller of these so-called Scottish Degrees and had warranted daughter organizations under various regulations. These descendants included the following: Paris 1747; Cap, San Domingo 1748; St. Pierre, San Domingo 1750; Port La Paix, San Domingo 1752; St. Marc, San Domingo 1753; Les Cayes de Fond; Isle a Vaches, San Domingo 1757; Perigueux, France 1759; New Orleans, U.S.A. 1763 (pursuant to request of 1756). Morin was active in San Domingo Masonry during the 1750s, when Freemasonry on the entire island of Hispaniola was under French control. It is difficult to separate the early Masonic history for what is now the Dominican Republic from that of Haiti. The entire island of Hispaniola was Spanish until 1697 when the western portion was ceded to France. The Grand Orient of France soon chartered lodges in what was now Haiti but seems to have asserted jurisdiction over

the entire island until the French Revolution, when Haiti and Dominica after struggles became independent of colonial control.<sup>18</sup>

Morin's exact travels during these years remain a mystery, although once in San Dominique, he probably had his Patent or letters of authority endorsed by every Lodge he visited. So copies of the French version of this document may exist that have not yet come to light.<sup>19</sup> What is known is that on his first attempt to return to the West Indies in 1762, his ship was captured by the British and he was taken to England. There he met with Lord Ferrers, Grand Master of the Modern Grand Lodge of England. At the time there was a schism in English Masonry and there were two grand lodges, the Antients, who were actually the newest group, and the Moderns, who were actually the old original group. Morin claimed that Lord Ferrers endorsed his control for the Western Hemisphere of the first fourteen degrees as well. Morin may have had doubts whether this appointment was valid outside of French territories, but his stay in England gave him a chance to acquire some claim to authority for the English West Indies. He also spent time in Scotland, where he may have visited Masons among the French prisoners of war who were held in Edinburgh Castle and then met as well with prominent Scottish Masons.

In 1763, finally on his way back to San Domingo, Morin appointed as his Senior Deputy Inspector for Jamaica a Jamaican government official named Henry Andrew Francken, who translated Morin's ritual, which was in French, into English, and introduced the first twenty-five of the degrees into mainland North America. The first minute book of this lodge is now in the archives of the Northern Supreme Council at Lexington, Massachusetts. So is a handwritten three-hundred page book by him with the rituals of the sixth through the twenty-fifth degrees. The Albany lodge still exists. Meanwhile, back in San Domingo, Morin started another lodge and continued to seek candidates for the Scottish Rite higher degrees. Our knowledge of Mexican Freemasonry in the eighteenth century is so limited that any activities of Morin take on immense interest – did he ever visit Mexico or did he commission anyone to visit Mexico? We simply do not know, and the answers probably are in France.

His influence was wide and unchecked because the Deputy Inspectors who owed their authority to him began to give more degrees than the

twenty-five over which he originally had claimed jurisdiction. Although Masonic historians understandably do not dwell on the point, the fact is that the proliferation of degrees had an economic motivation since money changed hands for each and every advancement.

Henry Clausen is quite explicit about Morin's death in 1771 in Jamaica and in fact went there to confirm that Morin was interred on November 17, 1771 at Kingston, Jamaica, in the Anglican Parish Church or burial yard.<sup>20</sup> Others, apparently in error, have claimed he lived on and died in San Domingo during the first Slave Rising in 1791.<sup>21</sup>

In summary, the life of Morin demonstrates how important French influence was on Freemasonry in the Hispanic world of the eighteenth century, and one can venture that he had the most knowledge of anyone of his time in the Western Hemisphere of the Scottish System -- that to him goes the distinction of bringing it to the New World. But as the historian A.C.F. Jackson and others have speculated, what his motives were remains an enigma.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps he was just a mercenary seller of degrees, but most significant is that he was fully a father of modern Freemasonry in the same way that Thomas Dunkerley and Albert Pike were, that is to say that he helped shape and diffuse the degree systems that were to become so successful and global at a later date. If anyone wants a starting point for finding out more about early Mexican Masonry, Morin is a good bet. Pierre Mollier has gone deservedly unchallenged when he asserts that, "All the documents on the higher degrees before 1760-70 are French, even the first rituals of Royal Arch degrees, for instance." He also remarks, "...the oldest Knight Templars rituals in Britain are the Sheffield rituals circa 1790. in France the oldest ritual, recently discovered, dates 1750 and there are tens of manuscript copies dating before the 1790s."<sup>23</sup>

But there are many other French aspects of Freemasonry which anyone acquainted with Mexican Freemasonry immediately notices. One is the acceptance by the French of women's Freemasonry, regarded with horror in the United States. The so-called adoptive rite (*acetate of the Eastern Star*) has less appeal in France than does Freemasonry itself, although ironically most accounts of the Order of the Eastern Star and other adoptive rites credit them with a French origin. Another aspect of French

practice is the use of the zodiac, which is common in Mexican lodges and almost unknown in the United States. When one visits France, this repeated use of the zodiac is immediately apparent:

English Masonry did indeed make use of astrological symbolism, but it was employed in a bland way, often without explanation...In contrast, hundreds of zodiacs and planetary sequences have survived from French Masonic sources. To judge from such images, the French were far more inclined than the English to incorporate astrological imagery into their rites and Lodge decorations<sup>24</sup>

A telling phrase of Mollier perhaps summarizes the state of research into secret societies everywhere, particularly those movements related to Freemasonry and including those in Mexico – **the need to take Masonic history out of the Masonic ghetto**. He remarks in this regard that it is “quite peculiar” that the two most important historians of French Masonry in the late twentieth century were not Masons, Pierre Chevallier and Alain Le Bihan. Arguably the two most important historians working in English in the late twentieth century were (and are) Margaret Jacob and David Stevenson, neither of them being Masons. Quite possibly *Masonic authors*, a phrase Mollier prefers to the more complimentary *Masonic historian*, with a few exceptions, have been in that ghetto and not able to make the contributions that those who are more removed and hence more objective have been able to make. Certainly our adventures in Paris made us much more aware of the depth of the subject and of how little is really known about it.

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Two of these lodge caches are in the archives of the Grand Orient, and one is in the archives of the Grand Lodge. We plan to visit again for the purpose of thoroughly studying them.

<sup>2</sup> David Damrosch, *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts), 1995, 23.

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Brodsky, “Breaking the Ring”, privately circulated advance copy of lecture to Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076, 10 November 1994, 3.

<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, even Masons could get a cold greeting: “In 1934 J.Ray Shute, then Secretary of the North Carolina Lodge of Research and Grand Master of the Cryptic Rite, visited the office of Quatuor Coronati Lodge [in London] in the company of William Moseley Brown, Grand Master of Virginia, expecting a cordial welcome from its ‘distinguished Secretary, William J. Songhurst.’ Alas and alack, such was not the case. He was pompous and, to us at least, arrogant. In fact, Bill lost his temper when he presented his card as Grand Master and requested to visit Grand Lodge headquarters and was rebuffed.” R.A.Gilbert, “To See Ourselves as Others See Us”, privately circulated copy of paper delivered before Quatuor Coronati Lodge, London, n.d., 4.

<sup>5</sup> “More significant still was the way in which masonic practice conditioned the way in which later associations and confraternities behaved. “ Ronald Hutton, “Modern Pagan Witchcraft”, Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark eds., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1999, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2000., 94. Since the Shrine can only recruit Masons, of course if the Masonic membership declines then the Shrine declines. A further example of Putnam’s troubles is the Eastern Star, which has male members. Putnam excludes female members from his male organization statistics, but not males from what he terms female organizations such as the Star. The Putnam thesis about the decline in civic life in America rests so heavily on organizations like the Masons, Grange, Moose, and like groups, that these distinctions are not unimportant. See Paul Rich, “American voluntarism, Social Capital, and political Culture”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol.565, September 199, 15-34.

<sup>7</sup> American writers about Freemasonry, as far as we know, almost never cite French sources. The omission after what we saw on our trip to Paris is quite extraordinary.

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<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Tim Wallace-Murphy and Marilyn Hopkins, *Roslyn: Guardian of the Secrets of the Holy Grail*, Element, Boston, 2000, 104 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Claude Wauthier, “Africa’s Freemasons: A Strange Inheritance”, *Le Mondr Diplomatique*, September 1997, at [www.monde-diplomatique.fr/en/1997/09/masons](http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/en/1997/09/masons)

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Mollier “French Masonic history and its historiography”, Transcript of the public lecture..., 9 June 1999, Canonbury Masonic Research Centre, at [www.canonbury.ac.uk/library/lectures/pierre.htm](http://www.canonbury.ac.uk/library/lectures/pierre.htm)

<sup>11</sup> “In 1833 he was sent to France as minister, but later returned to Texas where he owned extensive property. When the province rose in rebellion against Mexico, Zavala joined the insurgents, proclaiming the reestablishment of the Federal constitution of 1824, and was sent as a deputy for Harrisburg to the convention of Austin, which on Nov.7, 1835 declared war....He was first master of La Independencia Lodge (location unidentified), a Royal Arch Mason and a 33° ASSR [Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite].” William R. Denslow, *10,000 Famous Freemasons*, Vol.IV, Macoy Publishing, Richmond (Virginia), 1958, 362.

<sup>12</sup> Mollier, *op.cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Kahler, “Andrew Michael Ramsay and his Masonic Oration”, *Heredom: The Transactions of The Scottish Rite Research Society*, Vol.1, 1992, 40-41. Cf. Cyril N. Batham, “Ramsay’s Oration: the Epernay and Grand Lodge Versions”, *Heredom: The Transactions of The Scottish Rite Research Society*, Vol.1, 1992, 49-59.

<sup>14</sup> Henry C. Clausen, *Clausen’s Commentaries on Morals and Dogma*, Supreme Council, Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, Southern Jurisdiction, U.S.A., Washington, 1974.

<sup>15</sup> George Adelbert Newbury and Louis Lenway Williams, *A History of The Supreme Council of the Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry for the Northern Masonic Jurisdiction of the United States of America*, Supreme Council, Lexington (Massachusetts), 1987, 34, quoting James

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Fairbairn Smith, *The Rise of the Ecossais Degrees*, Chapter of Research R.A.M., Dayton (Ohio), 1965, *n.p.*

<sup>16</sup> Newbury and Williams, *op.cit.*, 35.

<sup>17</sup> . Clausen, *op.cit.*, 11. He also used his travels to distribute a French religious paper, *Nouvelles Ecclesiastiques*, Newbury and Williams, *op.cit.*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> K.W.Henderson, *Masonic World Guide*, Lewis Masonic, London, 1984.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Pierre Lassalle, “From the Constitutions and Regulations of 1762 to the Grand Constitution of 1786”, *Heredom: The Transactions of the Scottish Rite Research Society*, Vol.2, 1993, 58.

<sup>20</sup> Clausen, *op.cit.*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Lassalle, “From the Constitutions and Regulations...”, *op.cit.*, 58, citing a mimeographed booklet by F.W. Seal Coon, *An Historical Account of Jamaican Freemasonry*, n.d. or page.

<sup>22</sup> See Alain Bergheim, “Notes on Early Freemasonry in Bordeaux (1732-1769)”, *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, Vol.101, 1988, October 1989, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Mollier, *op.cit.*

<sup>24</sup> David Ovason, *The Secret Architecture of Our Nation’s Capital: The Masons and the Building of Washington, D.C.*, HarperCollins, New York, 2000, 94.