

## A Word for the Victorians

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While much Masonic ritual is older than the reign of the good Queen Victoria (1819 - 1901) the philosophy and world view of the Victorians had and continues to have a profound influence on Freemasonry. Because of that, and because Victorians have been the victims of an unfairly bad press, it is worth while to spend a little time looking at them as they were. You will easily spot the influences on Freemasonry.

I must admit, in honesty, that Victorians are close to my heart, because I am one. Yes, I know that Victoria died forty years before I was born, but of the seven members of my extended family when I was born (two grandfathers two grandmothers, a great aunt, mother and father) all but my mother and father had been born while the Good Queen was yet on the throne. Because we tend to carry our childhood values throughout life, they remained in many ways Victorian until their deaths. Most of the books, especially the children's books, I read while growing up were Victorian books. Indeed, most of the books in the house were Victorian and early Edwardian, and it was a large library.

I have often thought that it has given me a very helpful insight into American Freemasonry, and especially perhaps the Scottish Rite, because both are the quintessence of Victorianism. That may seem extreme, but you need only consider the time periods in which the rituals were being developed into the form they now have to see the truth in it.

So, while this is likely to be far more personal than I usually approve of being (and I crave your indulgence for that) it may be that some insight into the Victorian mind-set will be useful to some of you.

First of all, and never to be forgotten, these were tough people, with a toughness I can only admire with awe. None of my grandparents came from privileged backgrounds. Quite the contrary. My paternal grandfather was driving a team of mules on a road construction gang when he was 8 years old, because he was the sole support of his mother, who was very ill, and his baby brother. When my grandmother was 14, she and her 16-year-old sister, my great aunt Effie, drove a team pulling a wagon from Oklahoma to Pueblo, Colorado, in the fall and early winter because Effie's husband, my great uncle Will aged 19, had tuberculosis, and

the doctor thought it possible he might live longer there. I simply cannot imagine two teen-aged girls, in 1910, making that trip while taking care of a young man who could not rise from the bed in the wagon. They had to prop the wagon up each night, pull the wheels off, grease the axles, put the wheels back, feed and water the horses, find and cook food, and do the whole thing again the next day for weeks, with snow and cold winds whipping around them.

Victorians had to be tough. Medicine was primitive, only about one child in three lived to be a teenager, and there was no such thing as a social safety-net.

We would not have one either, had it not been for the Victorians. They were the very first culture to decide that “social conditions” were problems which should and could be solved, rather than the will of God or “just the way the world is.” Until then, poverty was simply a fact, like water running downhill. If people were poor, it was because God wanted it that way, or because it was natural and right. The Victorians said that poverty was a problem which effected the entire society, and needed to be eliminated. They created the whole idea of organized charity. The charities of Freemasonry would never have existed without them. Not all the answers they found were good, not all worked. But they assumed there *were* answers and looked for them with great energy and resources. They created the first orphanages and the first homes for the elderly. Nothing like that had existed before. It is impossible to imagine our world without some sense that the sick, the elderly, infants and young children should be cared for and that we all have some responsibility to help, but that idea was Victorian. They created large and small institutions for those purposes.

They were the first to define mental illness as illness. Their homes for the insane might have been crude and useless by our standards, but before that they had been only specialized prisons which people visited to laugh at the crazies as an afternoon’s entertainment.

Perhaps the most important Victorian idea, so far as Freemasonry is concerned, is the idea of self-improvement (an idea our general society has largely lost, to its great detriment). While scattered thinkers throughout history had suggested that people could and should work on themselves, the idea had never been embraced by a society until the Victorians came along. For them, it became a passion.

If you go to a gym or health club, thank the Victorians. They started the first ones from a belief that it was important to develop the body. The first books on exercise

were written. The first clubs for exercise were formed. The first studies in nutrition were done—all this because they believed that man was a work in progress, not a finished product.

The first public libraries and public school systems (in the American sense of the term) were created and publicly funded. People went in droves to public lectures. Societies were formed for the study of music, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, science, and literature.

The typical Victorian believed that he had an absolute and personal responsibility to develop himself, especially morally, ethically, mentally, and emotionally.

The word “emotionally” may come as a surprise. We tend to think of feelings and emotions as something which just happen, but the Victorians no more thought that than they thought poverty or crime “just happen.” They realized that feelings and emotions add depth and richness to life, and they worked on developing those just as they worked on developing the intellectual aspect of the mind.

The two greatest compliments a Victorian could pay another were to say that they had a “good understanding,” or were of “good sensibility.” Good sensibility meant that the person had a good awareness of the emotions and emotional needs of others, and that he or she were capable of feeling and emotional response. “Understanding” meant that the emotional and logical facilities of the mind were in balance. Perhaps one of the finest expressions of this Victorian balance of the reasonable and the emotional is in Robert Ingersoll’s oration delivered at his brother’s grave. In addition to being one of my favorite works of prose, it is a great description what ideal Victorian manhood as the Victorians saw it. To quote a short section:

“This brave and tender man in every storm of life was oak and rock, but in the sunshine he was vine and flower. He was the friend of all heroic souls. He climbed the heights and left all superstitions far below, while on his forehead fell the golden dawning of the grander day.

“He loved the beautiful, and was with color, form, and music touched to tears. He sided with the weak, and with a willing hand gave alms . . .”

The oration was delivered in 1879, but he could as easily be describing the Masonic ideal as taught by the Blue Lodge and the Scottish Rite.

Just as Victorians delighted and puzzles and word games to sharpen the intellect,

so they worked at developing their emotional awareness with art, music, and literature. Some Victorian novels seem overly “sweet” to our taste (although we should remember that the Victorians approached them in the same way some people approach running---it is both entertaining and good for you), but they were very much aware of the dark side. Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* was published in 1818, the year before Victoria was born, but it remained extremely popular throughout her reign. *Dracula* was published in 1897. In a way, the novels nearly bracket the age of Victoria, and both explore the darker sides of human nature. And, in the middle of it all, the Sherlock Holmes stories with their celebration of logical reasoning struck a balance. In America, Edgar Allan Poe became in some ways the very model of this balance, writing stories which seem filled with horror and the supernatural, but which always provide a rational explanation for what has happened, leaving us to understand that the only irrationality took place in our own minds.

I need not recount all the instances in both Blue Lodge and Scottish Rite ritual in which balance is stressed, along with the ability to both think and feel. Pure Victorian.

Another core Victorian value which obviously plays out in Masonry is the idea of duty. Duty was central to the Victorians. They could find excuse for almost every wrong or sin, but not for failure to perform one’s duty; whether assigned or self-imposed. Everyone had duties, and everyone was expected to perform. Some of them seem a little strange to us. Every young Victorian woman knew it was her duty to find a man who was straying from the straight and narrow, and to reform him, setting his feet upon the better way.

They borrowed the idea of duty from Rome, and carried it to what even I must admit were sometimes extremes. A painting which hung in reproduction in many a Victorian parlor was David’s “The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons.” It is still an astonishingly powerful painting, and told the story of Brutus, a Judge in Rome, who had to condemn his two sons to death for plotting to overthrow the Roman republic. Brutus was held up as a hero in Victorian England. The idea of duty as it is defined in most of the armed forces of the world is of Victorian origin.

It rings throughout the Scottish Rite, of course. Consider the sentences from the 4th Degree. “Woe to those who aspire to that for which they are unfitted! Woe unto those who take up a burden which they cannot carry! Woe unto those who assume

duties lightly, and afterward neglect them! Duty is with us always, inflexible as Fate! In health or sickness, in prosperity or adversity, Duty is with us always, exacting as Necessity. It rises with us in the morning, and watches by our pillow at night. In the roar of the city and in the loneliness of the desert, Duty is with us always, imperative as Destiny!" Which seems to leave little doubt.

Two more bits of Victorian thinking which it is useful to understand (and then I promise I will end this).

The first is the Victorian concept of sex, which wasn't the way it is often assumed. The Victorians were neither afraid of nor ignorant about sex. (With the exception of the fact that the process of human reproduction was not well understood. It was not until about 1930 that we really started to understand human sexuality. Victorian medical books discussing sex are good for a laugh today.) But Victorian England was still essentially a rural community, and very few people growing up on farms are ignorant about the fundamentals of sex. If anything, it is the ruthless practicality of the Victorian concept of sex which we find a little disturbing. The Victorian landed gentry had been breeding cattle, pigs, dogs, and horses for hundreds of years, and they applied exactly the same standards to people.

It would be hard for us to imagine today a man interviewing someone who wanted to marry his daughter about his genetic heritage, but it was standard practice for the Victorians. It was a complement to say of a man or woman that they "came of good stock," and it meant just what it would have meant if they had been talking about breeding a prize bull. Most marriages were still arranged, or at least approved, by the fathers of the people involved. Since this was primarily a means by which the inheritance of property was going to be determined, it was essential that there be no doubt about the parentage of offspring. That is why a young, unmarried couple, was simply never left alone. Many upper class Victorian mothers and fathers maintained notebooks with the names of eligible bachelors and their probable genetic strengths. They were literally called "stud books." Victorian parents were all for their children experiencing romance, but not sex. Sex led to offspring, and an unwanted pregnancy was a true catastrophe.

In many ways, Victorian society was much more healthy than ours. They were very serious about these virtues, about making the world a better place, about their duties and responsibilities, and about their faith. And yet they could and did laugh at themselves and their own foibles. They had a wonderful sense of humor, and they pointed it at their own most sacred cows. Consider the most popular

entertainment of the time, the comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. (As it happens, both Gilbert and Sullivan were Masons.) They had a wonderful gift of music and comedy. We have talked about the importance of duty. Go on-line and look up the text and lyrics for “The Pirates of Penzance: of A Slave of Duty,” and you will find Gilbert and Sullivan lampooning the whole idea of duty, taking it to ridiculous extremes, and generally making fun of law and order, the aristocracy, the court system, and almost everything else. The operas were tremendously popular, as they still are, and yet the Victorians were laughing out loud at all the things they held most sacred. There is remarkable mental health there.