HIST 399: FREEMASONRY AND SECRET SOCIETIES (Sophomore Seminar)
University of Oregon – Winter 2012 – CRN 26564

Instructor: Ian F. McNeely, Department of History
Meeting times: TR 4:00-5:20 in 116 ED
Office hours: M 12:00-1:00, W 9:00-10:00 and by appointment in 319 MCK
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Description

Why do people join masonic lodges and other so-called “secret” societies? What do they do within their windowless confines? What benefits, social, spiritual, psychological, or economic, do they derive from membership? How long have these groups been active? Do they really date to ancient or biblical times? What influence, if any, have they exerted on key historical developments since their inception? Why have they so often been suspected of nefarious activities? Are they really subversive, satanic, and/or sexist? Why do outsiders show such fascination with them? Why have academic historians been so reluctant to take them seriously?

In this course, we trace freemasonry back to its origins in the age of Enlightenment. Then we take stock of the traditions, both authentic and invented, tying freemasonry to ancient, medieval, and Renaissance spiritual quests. This leads naturally into consideration of controversial, alternative forms of freemasonry and the antimasonic agitation that often surrounded them. Finally, we turn to masonry’s revival in the mid-nineteenth century, and to its increasing influence outside Europe and North America.

Besides treating a fascinating topic in European cultural history, this sophomore seminar trains students in methods of primary-source analysis and independent research useful throughout the historical discipline and beyond. We will make special use of digital resources like ECCO (Eighteenth-Century Collections Online) and Google Books. I especially welcome research topics that extend beyond the Western world to explore the spread of freemasonry globally.

Assignments

• Two 3- to 4-page short analyses of course readings, each from a different unit on the syllabus (20% each; due in class on the relevant discussion day; sign up during week 1)
• One 8-page analysis of an historical text from the 1700s (30%; due Tue. 2/14 in class)
• Final exam: analysis of contemporary writings on freemasonry (30%, Tue. 3/20 from 1:00-3:00)

Descriptions of the papers and final exam can be found at the end of this syllabus.
Readings

For purchase


On Blackboard

*These materials are posted as PDFs on Blackboard in one ZIP file under COURSEPACK.*

SCHEDULE

(1/10) Introduction
(1/12) Jacob, 1-25; Wikipedia articles on freemasonry and anti-freemasonry (study contemporary controversy)
  Sign up for short papers

UNIT I: THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Grand Lodge freemasonry
(1/17) Jacob, 26-46; Stevenson, 166-89
(1/19) Jacob, 47-70; Anderson

Schisms in a world of gentlemen
(1/24) Jacob, 71-91; Bullock, 50-68, 85-108
(1/26) Jacob, 92-132; “Free-Masons Accusation and Defence”

UNIT II: THE DYNAMICS OF INVENTED TRADITION

Medieval and Ancient “mysteries”
(1/31) Stevenson, 1-25, 125-165
(2/2) Hutchinson

Hermeticism and Rosicrucianism
(2/7) Stevenson, 77-124
(2/9) Brooke; Roberts, 105-121

Scottish Rite (higher-degree) freemasonry
(2/14) Source discussion on higher-degree freemasonry
(2/16) Discussion (continued)

UNIT III: THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Illuminati and antimasonry
(2/21) Roberts, 133-149; Robison
(2/23) Bullock, 277-308

Masculinity and the Victorian revival
(2/28) Carnes, 1-65
GUIDELINES ON COURSE PAPERS

Short analyses

Each student, over the course of the term, must submit two 3- to 4-page analyses, each from a different course unit. Your analysis should focus on one of the course readings listed on the syllabus. Every course meeting from 1/17 through 3/6 is eligible with the exceptions of 2/14 and 2/16. Each analysis is due at the class session when the reading is to be discussed. On days when more than one reading is assigned, you should choose one or the other.

A sign-up sheet will be circulated during the second class meeting asking you to choose, in advance, the two readings that you’ll be writing about. These choices should be regarded as binding. You must attend class and be prepared to discuss your analysis in order to receive credit.

Be concise: in a 3- to 4-page paper you should not waste space on lengthy introductions, conclusions, and fluff. I am interested in analytical reactions to the source, not in subjective impressions of it. Please don’t simply write “this was hard to follow,” or “I was not convinced” (or their contraries!). Instead, follow the guidelines below.

For scholarly readings (secondary sources), your answer should incorporate answers to questions like these:

- what is this reading’s subject?
- what is its argument? (not the same thing as its subject)
- what answers does it provide to questions raised elsewhere in the course?
- what sorts of evidence is it based on?
- what methods does it use to interpret that evidence and build explanations?

For historical (primary) sources, your answer should incorporate answers to questions like these:

- when and where was the source written?
• can its author be identified or at least somehow placed in society?
• how is the author’s perspective manifest, directly or indirectly?
• what trends in freemasonry and in broader society does the reading reflect?
• what answers does it provide to questions raised elsewhere in the course?

These lists are not meant to be mechanical or exhaustive recipes for writing a paper but as a collection of some ingredients you will want to concoct in your own fashion.

8-page papers

For your 8-page analysis, you should locate and read a primary (historical) source that sheds light on the “invented traditions” we will be discussing in unit II. Higher-degree (sometimes called “Scottish Rite”) freemasonry provides a great number of these; so, too, do the many and various attempts to locate the Craft’s origins in biblical, ancient, and/or medieval times (in the Egypt of Hermes Trismegistus, among the Jews at the time of Solomon’s Temple, among the Druids of Celtic Europe, among the Knights Templar at the time of the Crusades, etc.).

To locate a source, you should use the ECCO database, which allows you to search the full texts of virtually everything published in English in the eighteenth century. Alternatively, you may want to use Google Books, so long as you restrict your focus to primary sources from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Finally, you may want to thumb through the regular course readings (particularly Bullock, Brooke, and Roberts) to find a source to look up. Many of the texts available on ECCO are hundreds of pages long. You should use the table of contents and fulltext search features to locate an excerpt about 25 pages to focus on. The ECCO database allows you to print out sections of what you read. You should include with your paper (1) a copy of the source (or at least a 25-page excerpt from it) in addition to (2) the title and contents pages.

In format, your paper should follow the guidelines for historical (primary) sources listed for the short analyses but you should assume, in this case, that I have not read the source in question. You should therefore incorporate into your paper both a close reading of your chosen excerpt and an overview of the larger work from which it is drawn. Substantively, you should draw extensively on the analytical techniques developed in the first two units of the class, e.g. how to read texts for evidence about class and gender and how to account for the genesis and meanings of invented traditions.

You may need to draw on additional secondary (scholarly) sources to guide you in your interpretations; I am happy to provide references. It is perfectly acceptable for two or more students to work on the same text, but I do not encourage collaboration.
Sample research questions

What accounts for the proliferation of higher degrees after the mid-eighteenth century, at the peak of the Age of Reason?

To what extent were Hermeticism and other esoteric philosophies involved in this change?

What dynamics of class, gender, generation, confession (religion), and geography were at work in promoting this change?

Sample search terms

Desaguliers, Andrew Ramsay (Travels of Cyrus), Cagliostro, Swedenborg
red masonry, blue masonry, blue lodge
Hermetic, Hermeticism, Hermes, Hermes Trismegistus
Druids, Solomon’s Temple, Cabala/Kabbalah/(other variants)
Rosicrucian, Rosicrucianism, rosy cross, rose-croix, Rosenkreuzer, Christian Rosenkreutz (Rosencreutz), “Gold and Rosicrucians”
Royal Arch, Scottish Rite, York Rite, Strict Observance, African masonry
Rite of Perfection, Lodges of Perfection
Knights Templar, Templars
“Grades of vengeance,” Kadosch
Elus Cohens, Juges Ecossais, Saint-Martin, Pasqually
Philalethes, Avignon Society (Pernetty)
Ahiman Rezon (the “constitutions of the Ancients” vs. the Moderns)

FINAL EXAM STUDY GUIDE

The final examination will consist of three or four passages from contemporary (late twentieth- or twenty-first-century) nonscholarly, nonacademic texts. You should write a separate essay analyzing each passage.

The author of each passage will be identified briefly on the exam. S/he could be, for instance:

1. an antimasonic conspiracy theorist
2. an “apologetic” masonic historian
3. an independent, neutral reporter or nonacademic scholar
4. a novelist taking poetic liberties with freemasonry’s history

Substantively, the passages are likely to likely to range from the half-baked to the downright kooky, but don’t assume this: they may be perfectly legitimate, even from a scholarly, academic perspective.
Some issues likely to be covered in one or more passages:

1. the extent to which freemasonry is a secret society: what we know, don’t know, can’t know, and/or shouldn’t know about Blue Lodge and/or higher-degree freemasonry. Examples: death ritual, passwords to “power,” significant differences between lower and higher degrees, the “secret” revealed, “open” (innocuous) secrets versus “real” (and more sinister) secrets

2. the legendary origins of freemasonry in ancient and medieval times. Examples: Solomon’s Temple, Hermes Trismegistus, the Knights Templar, the Druids

3. the exclusion of women and the nature of male homosociality. Examples: the lodges of adoption, the Victorian crisis of masculinity

4. the infiltration of freemasonry by conspiratorial, “underground,” revolutionary, utopian, and/or violent elements: the Illuminati, the Morgan affair, the Rosicrucians

Your responses should take the form of essays. Their format and structure are up to you, but in every case you should aim at producing a readable analysis governed by a thesis statement and covering the following bases:

1. you should distinguish among the following, ideally through line-by-line criticism:
   - facts: things we know to be correct
   - lies: things we know to be incorrect
   - half-truths: things we know to be partly correct, but which are inaccurately contextualized or incompletely presented
   - speculations: things we don’t know
   - fabrications: things we can’t know
   - insinuations: things we don’t or can’t know that nonetheless seem plausible based on things we can and do know

2. you should step back and look for a pattern to the distortions of fact: what is the author’s motive or axe to grind? How does the author propose to make us believe otherwise incredible or implausible statements and conjectures?