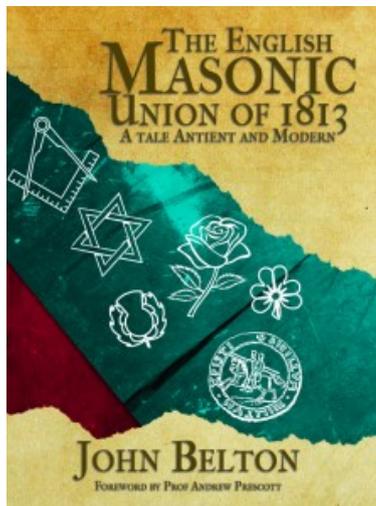


Book Reviews

by Tony Pope



The English Masonic Union of 1813: a tale Antient and Modern

John Belton

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John Belton, 2009

Ankara, Turkey

As every student of English-speaking Masonic history knows: in 1717 a grand lodge was formed in London and Westminster, which later was called the Grand Lodge of England, the *premier* Grand Lodge, and the *Moderns*; from 1751 it had a rival, also London-based, known as the *Antients*; and in 1813 the rival grand lodges united as the United Grand Lodge of England.

The Union was an event of considerable significance and one might reasonably expect many popular and scholarly works to have been published on the subject over the 200 years since that event. Not so! One might also expect the United Grand Lodge to have organised a great celebration of the bicentenary of the event later this year. Not so! It has been left to one English Masonic scholar, well known and well respected worldwide among Masonic researchers but of no exalted position or rank within the United Grand Lodge of England, to produce a small volume at a very modest price: *The English Masonic Union of 1813: a tale Antient and Modern*.

Until recently, the tendency has been to regard Freemasonry as an isolated phenomenon, and to subdivide its history into categories, by nation or by grand lodge, by rite or 'order', by date of event or some other demarcation, the subject of separate study in isolation. But John Belton adopts a modern, holistic approach to the events which culminated in the union of rival grand lodges, and the steps taken to maintain that union. He demonstrates that the union was the result of interaction not merely between the *Antients* and *Moderns*, but also with the grand lodges of Ireland and Scotland, and some assistance from Sweden.

The *Moderns* grand lodge began in 1717 when four existing lodges in London and Westminster decided to celebrate St John the Baptist's Day (24 June) jointly, and for that purpose elected a Grand Master. From this modest beginning the idea evolved for the newly created grand lodge to control all the lodges in England and to be the sole authority for the formation of new lodges. The grand lodge concept was copied in neighbouring Ireland (1725) and Scotland (1736), with local modifications. All three grand lodges met with opposition sooner or later, and some of the Irish and Scottish problems were relevant to events in England.

In 1751 a rival grand lodge was formed in London, the *Antients*, which claimed to follow ancient ritual and customs that had been altered or abandoned by the grand lodge of 1717, the *Moderns*. The latter regarded the *Antients* as rebels who had rejected the authority of the premier grand lodge, whereas there is strong evidence that the *Antients* were derived from immigrant Irish and Scottish Masons who were denied membership in the *Moderns* lodges and from (English) lodges that had never accepted the premier grand lodge rule.

The author examines many seemingly isolated events and concepts which all impinged on the need for the two English grand lodges to unite, including political and religious unrest in Ireland, the formation of the Grand East of Ulster, the Scottish problem of independent lodges, the Royal Arch and Knights Templar, the attempt of the *Moderns* to become an incorporated body, the *Unlawful Societies Act* of 1799, and the

surprising number of noble grand masters who ruled more than one of the 'Home' grand lodges, simultaneously or serially.

This is a complex book that can be read, and re-read, at several different levels: as a simple tale, unravelling a complicated plot to achieve a happy ending; as a primer, leading to in-depth study of related subjects, particularly aspects of the early history of the three 'Home' grand lodges; as an inspiration to examine other events holistically; and for the glimpses of early examples of more abstract topics such as 'ritual uniformity' and 'regularity and recognition'.

It is possible from the author's account of the manoeuvres and events of 1717–1813 to trace the development of the modern doctrine of regularity and recognition, including what is now known as 'the Australian precedent', from the *Moderns*' claim of sole authority over lodges in its geographical area (1723), to the *Antients* gaining agreement from the Irish and Scottish grand lodges to engage in 'constant correspondence' with each other (1762–72), thus isolating the Moderns, and then in 1810 Scotland agreeing to 'constant correspondence' with *both* English grand lodges when the union had not yet been effected.

Whatever your taste or interest, this book is a 'good read', worth more than twice the asking price. Recently, your reviewer attended a meeting of a small study group. Eight persons were present; three of them had a copy of this book; before the evening ended, the other five were determined to buy a copy. If this small statistic is any indication, John Belton has a Masonic best seller on his hands.