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Haunted Chambers: the lives of early women Freemasons

Karen Kidd

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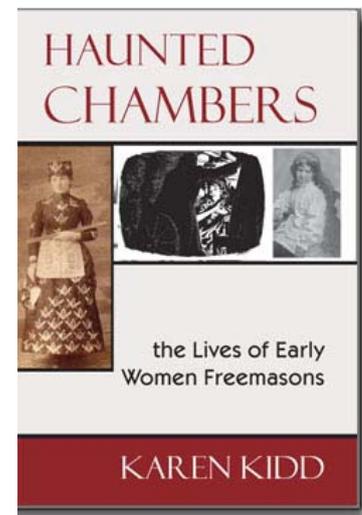
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Reviewed by David Slater



From someone who states that ‘this book required more than a little effort, persistence and a certain stubborn commitment to apply high standards and research’ (p ix), I would have expected a rather different presentation. Don’t get me wrong: the book is factual and well researched but the results of this research could have been, not to place too fine a point on it, better presented in some instances.

The preface opens with a citation from the ‘1892 edition [*sic*] of *Ars Quatour* [*sic*] *Coronatorum*’. If there is a second edition of this book, I would suggest that there be some more proof reading before it is published. The use of informal writing such as the word ‘thru’ and paragraphs such as:

‘And we must give up Sabina von Steinbach.
She never existed.
Period.’ (p 11)

rather grates when one is expecting a more research-oriented style, and an index would have been helpful.

The first chapter looks at ‘Women in Medieval Mason Guilds’. The author cites the Sabina von Steinbach story and, as shown above, comes to the conclusion that Sabina never existed but ‘represents the many women who did exist but whose stories and names are forgotten’ (p 12). She lists a number of documents that prove beyond reasonable doubt that there were female operative masons, and then goes to great lengths to show that the ‘shee’ in York Roll No 4 indeed refers to a female, a point that I thought had long been conceded. As Bro Kidd argues that women were prohibited from joining lodges because they were not free at the time when Anderson wrote his *Constitutions*, I fail to see why so much space was spent on showing that there were women operative masons, since she is not arguing that women were not able to join the Malecraft (a term she acknowledges to be borrowed from our own WBro Graeme Love) because of a mistaken belief that there were no women operative masons.

The 18th-century antipathy towards women in Freemasonry probably resulted in what is termed Adoptive Masonry. Bro Kidd makes the point that this was a European, more specifically a French, phenomenon. Adoptive Masonry, she argues, is masonic in the sense of its symbolism, as opposed to American Adoptive Masonry, which was and is more allegorical in nature.

The bulk of the book covers women and Malecraft Masonry. Bro Kidd gives the background to and discusses differing opinions of a number of women who have been initiated into lodges. These include women who, either accidentally or purposely, overheard lodge ritual, such as the Irishwoman Elizabeth St Leger Aldworth, the Canadian Mary Ann Belding Sproul and Catherine Sweet Babington from Kentucky. Others seem to have been legitimately initiated, such as Hannah Mather Crocker (who was Mistress of St Anne’s Lodge in Boston, Massachusetts), the German-born French war heroine Henriette Heiniken (*aka* Madame Xaintrailles) and the Hungarian Helene, Countess Hadik Barkoczy (whose initiation was later declared invalid by the Grand Orient of Hungary). Vinnie Ream Hoxie (the sculptress and acquaintance of Albert Pike who was received into the degrees of Pike’s short-lived Adoptive Rite) is also mentioned. Bro Kidd sees Pike’s Adoptive Rite as being akin to the European adoptive rites rather than to the Order of the Eastern Star (OES). Another who was probably, but not definitely, initiated into a Malecraft lodge, is Salome Anderson of Oakland, California.

There is mention of Charles de Beaumont (Chevalier d'Eon), who in my opinion should not be included in this book as it was proved after his death that he was male. Other possibilities are mentioned and also a number of 'near misses'—women who could easily have been made masons if circumstances had been different or who had eavesdropped, or tried to eavesdrop, but were not initiated as a result. Perhaps one of the most interesting examples is an 'Irish Girl' which Bro Kidd states is the least documented of the women Freemasons in her book. During the Civil War in the USA, she saved her brother from death by giving the Grand Hailing Sign of a Master Mason.

In the last chapter, Bro Kidd gives a brief summary of the OES, Femalecraft and Co-Masonry, and ends by citing Graeme Love's 'soft option' that the problem is not women wishing to join Malecraft but rather the need for the Malecraft to recognise that women can meet as masons. This would result in less pressure for the Malecraft to change its admission rules.

The appendix includes a satire that has been attributed to Jonathan Swift in the form of a letter from the Grand Mistress of the Female Free Masons (amusing but, in my opinion, not relevant), a Hudibrastic poem (referred to in the text, but not really necessary to be included in the appendix), some more information relating to the Irish Girl and to Salome Anderson, and UGLE's statement on Women and Freemasonry made in 1999.

So, in summary, this book is well worth reading for the background that it gives to the lives and circumstances of various women Freemasons. In my opinion the book could be improved by substantially reducing the space given to women operative masons, by more careful proof reading, by the use of less informal language and by the inclusion of an index. I hope that this book does succeed in more women Freemasons being remembered—one of its stated aims. The extensive number of illustrations, references and bibliography will be very helpful for anyone who wishes to pursue the topic of women in Freemasonry any further.

David Slater