



Notes from a Preceptor's Handbook

A Preceptor:

(OED) 1440 A.D. from Latin *praeceptor*

one who instructs, a teacher, a tutor, a mentor

JOHN THEOPHILUS DESAGULIERS

*'The Father of Modern Speculative Freemasonry
[to whom], more than to any other man, are we
indebted for the present existence of
Freemasonry as a living institution'.*

Albert G Mackey MD

John Theophilus Desaguliers

John Theophilus...who? Why should I ever be interested in *him*? Perhaps because he was described by the historian Dr A.G. Mackey as "*The Father of Modern Speculative Freemasonry [to whom], more than to any other man, are we indebted for the present existence of Freemasonry as a living institution*". He continued: '*by his energy and enthusiasm he infused a spirit of zeal in his contemporaries which culminated in the revival in the year 1717*'. Well, as an active member of your lodge and having just commemorated our Tercentenary, aren't you now just that teeny bit curious?

You might wonder how he had become inspired by the ideas of Speculative Freemasonry in the first place and, as tellingly, how had he achieve a position in which his ideas could bear such prized fruit over three centuries? Before we search for answers let us first clear the decks and have a look at his CV.

The Rev. Dr. John Theophilus Desaguliers was born in northern France on 12th March 1683. Following a brutal Catholic purge his father, a Huguenot Pastor, was expelled but his children were ordered to be detained and brought up as Catholics. They all fled across the channel to England with John Theophilus, then aged two, safely hidden in a barrel of clothing.

Educated at Christ College, Oxford, after graduation in 1710 he took Holy Orders in the Anglican Church and, as an MA, moved to London becoming a lecturer in experimental philosophy. In 1718 he received a Doctorate in Law (DLL). With his exceptionally active mind he continued to deliver a steady series of papers on mainly scientific subjects which were published without pause until his death in 1744. The most prominent was his '*A Course of Experimental Philosophy*'.

A polymath, Desaguliers was learned in philosophy, mathematics, geometry and optics becoming a national authority on subjects as diverse as gunnery and hydraulics. His work on projectile trajectory led to his design – aged twenty - of a siege canon which was successfully employed by the victorious British army in Belgium. It almost certainly led to the Royal Artillery being host to a disproportionately high number of military masonic lodges in the C18. In 1721 he was invited by the city fathers of Edinburgh to advise on the hydraulic requirements for the installation of fountains in the city squares. On return from Scotland he was asked to improve the ventilation system in the House of Commons. In between times he took a few moments off to create the first planetarium in England.

As a result of this far reaching scientific research in 1714 he was elected as Fellow of the prestigious Royal Society where he attracted the friendship of Sir Isaac Newton. As early as 1717 (yes, *that year again*) he had been invited to present his papers before King George I at Hampton Court palace. Income-bearing appointments to numerous churches in Essex, Middlesex and Norfolk then followed as did roles as chaplain to the immensely wealthy and influential Duke of Chandos and, later, to the Prince of Wales. All this had been achieved within ten years or so of completing his degree at Oxford.

You may well ask with such an active and wide-ranging workload exactly when and how, and *why* did this perpetually busy man ever turn his attention to Speculative Freemasonry?

Whatever our historian Mackey may write Desaguliers' name does not feature in any of the records of the four lodges forming Grand Lodge in 1717. He is therefore unlikely to have played any part in their decision to unite. In fact the first reference to Desaguliers' masonic career is contained in the Rev. Dr. James Anderson's '*Constitutions and Masonic History*' of 1723. In this Anderson lists the Grand Masters since 1717: Anthony Sawyer (1717) , George Payne (1718) and Desaguliers in 1719.

As Desaguliers and Payne were heavily involved in compiling the first Constitutions with Anderson it follows that the omission of Desaguliers' name in the Grand Lodge meetings of 1717 and 1718 was intentional and with his full knowledge. It is therefore likely that, to become eligible, Desaguliers had joined Anderson's lodge, *The Goose and Gridiron No 4*, shortly before he was made Grand Master. [*Brethren who have been given grief by colleagues for their speedy rise to the Master's Chair may wish to cite in their defence a fellow mason who, apparently, was initiated into Masonry and elected as the Grand Master of Grand Lodge possibly on the very same day in 1719. Such*

a practise however was not infrequent in the C 18!

There are two contemporary accounts that may assist us. Dr Stukeley, from his Diary of 1721, writes: *'I was the first person made a Mason in London for many years. We had great difficulty in finding members enough in all London to perform the ceremony..'* The four London lodges had united together in an age of social turbulence and political tension. This Grand Lodge met only annually on St John the Baptist's Day each June. Freemasonry was clearly short of members, short of initiates, short of ideas and, in effect, was a body in poor corporate health.

The excellent records of Scottish masonry are perhaps also relevant. Following an invitation in 1721 by the Provost of Edinburgh for Desagulier to advise the Burgh on the installation of fountains for the City, Desagulier used the opportunity to meet representatives of Scottish freemasonry *before* actually greeting the City Fathers. Recognising the vigorous Masonic scene in Edinburgh he presumably wanted to seize the opportunity to compare notes and perhaps learn lessons.

The Scottish Masons were deeply honoured to entertain such a distinguished former Grand Master of the English Grand Lodge and, as the Lodge records quaintly put it, *'finding him fully qualified in all the points of Masonry'*, they admitted him as a Master Mason in the Lodge of St Mary Chapel on the 24th August 1721. Two days later following his meeting with the Provost and his officers he was given the Freedom of the City.

On return Desaguliers focussed his considerable energies on inspiring his patient, Grand Lodge, not just to good health but with a new sense of purpose. To attract the creative leadership Freemasonry required and also to give it a national authority it had to be led not by a long-serving mason like Sawyer but by a prominent member of the nobility. Contemporary society demanded it. Such an appointment would allay public suspicion of misrule and, in turn, attract a membership for whom speculation about meaning and purpose of the world around them would be deeply attractive In this distinguished company.

To attract the nobility required however the organisation first needed to be formally and nationally structured and shown to be a going concern. The disparate English operative lodges then possessed many differing rituals, customs, rules and procedures. An important first step would be to publish a set of regulations to which all lodges could adhere. Payne set to and revised the former operative regulations; Anderson adapted them into a set of laws and constitutions as well as composing a (highly imaginative) Masonic history; Desaguliers drove the project and contributed the Preface. The result, *'The Constitutions and History of Freemasonry'* was published by Anderson and approved by Grand Lodge on the feast of St John the Baptist in 1723. Not inappropriately perhaps the Minutes were signed by Desaguliers as the Deputy Grand Master.

Desaguliers' major coup was to persuade a series of noblemen, commencing with the Duke of Montague in 1721, to accept the role of Grand Master and by 1726 the role was filled by one of Royal blood, the Duke of Sussex. (For the next nearly three hundred years the role of Grand Master has since been filled either by members of the Royal family or by closely related nobles.) It was a master-stroke. Henceforth Freemasonry was above suspicion - *'if it is good enough for the royal family then it is good enough for me'* would be the thinking. With a nobleman as titular head and with much work still to be completed Desaguliers acted as an influential Deputy Grand Master (equivalent to 'Pro Grand Master' today) in 1722, 1723 and 1725. Such was Desaguliers' formidable reputation that in 1731 when on the Continent he was invited to Initiate Francis, the Duke of Lorraine, who subsequently became the Holy Roman Emperor. Over the next 20 years twelve Fellows of the Royal Society, following Desaguliers, became Grand Master.

Over the five years from 1721 to 1726 the Grand Lodge of England having been borne in 1717 as a weakly infant had developed into a strapping young man. By 1735 the four lodges of 1717 had expanded to 126; the members were intellectually strong; the leadership was from the Royal family. These were considerable achievements. All in all Desaguliers might well have expressed quiet contentment.

We have glanced briefly at the 'How' and the 'When' of Desaguliers' interest in freemasonry. May we now turn to the 'Why?' He left no diary nor correspondence and again we need to read between the lines. Perhaps it began symbolically with that escape by barrel from France. In his lifetime the hostility and even open warfare between

the Catholic and the Protestant, between the Jew and the Moslem, made institutional religion's role as God's chosen instrument deeply questionable for his open and trained mind. Desaguliers' early interest in 'natural philosophy' (science) and the frequent contact with the foremost scientists of the day in the Royal Society led him to explore the natural laws behind God's Creation of the Universe. This background would have made the supernatural or miraculous events in the lives of Moses, Christ and Mohammed difficult to accept. Inevitably he tended towards Deism (belief in a God but not in his supernatural activities on earth).

We can only presume Desaguliers realised that Freemasonry might well become an ideal vehicle to spread his Deist view of morality. He took early steps to remove the Christian references from the operatives' catechism (e.g. Q. 'How many lights' A. 'Three; Q. What do they represent? A. The Father, Son and Holy Ghost were replaced by the non-religious 'The three Great Lights are the VSL, Square and Compasses.' Desaguliers had also accepted the time-consuming and provocative role of imposing uniformity on the wide variety of ceremonies practised across the country. He persuaded Grand Lodge to adopt a system of two separate and distinct degrees – the first initiating apprentices and a second devoted to the needs of craftsmen and master masons. ('Entered Apprentice' and 'Fellow craftsman' were terms imported from Scotland).

With sad irony Desaguliers' considerable efforts to unite the English lodges proved a stumbling block to Masonic unity for the next eighty years. Provincial lodges with a high proportion of former operatives objected to the changed passwords, to the removal of Christian references, to the inclusion of unfamiliar degrees and terms (Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft), to replacing the catechism with which they were all familiar and, above all, to the perceived arrogance of London lodges assuming country-wide authority. By 1753 this unhappy band of brothers had grouped together as a powerful rival to the 'London or Modern' Grand Lodge, and, to make a point, became known as the 'Antient' Grand Lodge. By 1813 however, when UGLE was finally united, Desaguliers' formidable achievements remained substantially unchanged.

But what sort of man was he? Desaguliers was apparently physically unprepossessing - relying on his mind, not his presence, to inform and persuade. He was not though without humour. As Grand Master one of his officers erred and swore a Holy oath in embarrassment. Realising who sat in the Chair he then expressed profuse and sustained apologies. Desaguliers looked on impassively. Eventually he silenced his errant officer saying merely: '*If God didn't hear you, my Brother, I certainly won't tell him.*'

He died 29th February 1744 and was buried in the Savoy Chapel Royal.

To mark the occasion of his Scottish visit the Edinburgh Masons presented him with an Ode. Let the last four lines be his epitaph:

<i>O worthy wight, whose genius great refines,</i>	[man]
<i>And puts in practice Euclid's unko lines,</i>	[extraordinary]
<i>Be ever blyth, and keeps a saul in heel,</i>	[retain courage to the end]
<i>Sae beneficial to the common weal.</i>	[well being or good]

As Grand Master in 1719 Desaguliers introduced the formal pattern of Toasts after dining with which we are familiar today. At your next Festive Board, it might be a kindly act to raise a glass to him in quiet appreciation....

Major References:

Celebration of the Craft: John Hamill and others.
Gould's History of Freemasonry: Ed. Herbert Poole
The First Freemasons: David Stevenson
Concise History of Freemasonry: Frederick Crowe
Short History of Freemasonry: A.F. Dence
Dictionary of Freemasonry: A. Mackey
The Freemasons: Jasper Ridley