



FREEMASONRY TODAY

The Future That Everybody Wanted

Matthew Scanlan interviews Lord Elgin

Few families can trace their lineage back forty generations. From Scotland's medieval hero king, Robert the Bruce, to the 7th Earl who gave his name to the famous 'marbles', Lord Elgin's illustrious line is further illuminated by figures from Britain's past imperial élite : a governor general of Canada, two viceroys of India, a founding father of the Royal Society, and the famous African explorer, James Bruce.

The present Earl, Andrew Douglas Alexander Thomas Bruce, 11th Earl of Elgin, is the 37th chief of the family house, a status easily forgotten in his jovial presence. Lord Elgin is a true gentleman. Blessed with three sons and two daughters, he farms 1500 acres of malting barley suitable for distillation, and lives in his 18th century estate Broomhall, north of the Firth. Earlier this year, Lord Elgin celebrated 50 years in the Craft. Like his father before him, he is a past-Grand Master Mason of Scotland, holding the rank of Provincial Grand Master of Fife. Lord Elgin is also the enthusiastic head of the masonic Royal Order of Scotland world-wide.

As we settled in his basement study, I began by asking what he thought of the recent attacks made upon the Craft by the House of Commons Select Committee and elements of the media.

Yes, there is a terrible attack on at the moment. Every single old institution is being attacked. Perhaps old institutions, having existed for so long, should be, but it's a different thing to destabilise things, adopting a nit-picking method – the end result being that people who might otherwise have liked to join, simply will not. In an era when much more time is taken up socially than it was 25 years ago, you have to make a choice, and if the choice is that you're going to join something that is persistently under some form of attack, then you're likely to say 'no'. So you lose interest in that way - and it's the same for people who are already members : 'Why should I have to register my interest?' is their response, and they just give up and disappear from the lodge.

As I'm still a Provincial Grand Master, I go round and meet a lot of masons. We have lodges down in Fife, and they're all members from different communities. This year I'm going to ask them to pluck up their pride and refer to some of the things that they have done, in the face of the most extraordinary public pressures.

Now, there are quite a number of our brethren in the Ambulance Service, and I said to them: "Tell me the last time a patient got into your ambulance and said: "Oh, by the way, are you a Freemason?" - and then, because you were, refused to go in your ambulance to hospital, because they didn't think you were a suitable person to be driving". We also had a man who was Assistant Grand Chaplain, who is a full-time fireman and a part-time minister of the Church of Scotland. He made a really brilliant save on the top of a multi-storey block in Leith, which involved taking people out who were trapped. And I said: "Would you by any chance tell them before they jumped, that you were a Freemason?" You see, if you try and get the ridiculous on

your side, then make people laugh, you begin to realise that you can fight back.

It's like all things: the enemy who can't, won't, or it's not in his nature to strike back, he is the most marvellous target.

One thing I fear will never work, and that is attempting to buy your way out. I don't think you can do this through massive giving to charities. On the other hand, if you place it in a careful way, where the community sees that it has come as a result of a number of men who also live in the community and who have seen the need, and then have collectively moved together to try to overcome it, then I think you can use money to make a point.

Have you noticed a change in public attitude towards Freemasonry during your 50 years as a member of the Order?

Well, it's a curious thing. It was taken as a matter of course that there would be masonic appearances, photographs of gatherings, brethren meeting together. There was never any aggravation about it at all. And it's during my lifetime I suppose, over the last 50 years, that this problem has developed. Convenience is probably - or lack of convenience - is one of the most devastating things as a whole in society, because it's more convenient to take your wife, your girlfriend, to whatever it is, and consequently the weekly budget dictates that you can't just take out your bit for the masons. The motor-car, the holiday on the costas, the outfit for the children, and all the things you can buy for the home. It all costs a lot of money.

As we enter the next millennium, do you see a positive future for the Craft?

The future that everybody wanted, was that there should be safety valves in the community, where people can find somewhere where they get enormous comfort in each other's company. There are very few safety valves or places where people do meet in each other's ease, and I think that our forefathers knew this very well, and to a certain extent they encouraged it. The valves are now being tampered with from outside. Some fifteen years ago it was made quite clear from the senior law officers of Scotland, that Sheriffs would not be encouraged to be seen going about masonic duties. As a consequence, we now have practically no sheriffs as members, and this goes for judges as well.

Of course, many people are employed by local councils in Scotland, and I happen to know that many of their employees are Freemasons. Now, where a council happens to be failing in some capacity or other, it would be very sad if as a sort of fop for inefficiency, we are now going to witness a whole raft of measures of exposure which would force Freemasons to consider their employment over the Craft. The curious thing is that up to the late Lord Ross (Willie Ross), every single Secretary of State for Scotland, who had been a Labour Secretary of State, had been a very staunch and extremely active Freemason. I was on a Parliamentary Committee many years ago with an MP for Hamilton, who had been, before he became an MP, the Boiler Maker's Secretary, and was also a Freemason. Another was Secretary for the Scottish TUC who had also been Secretary of a lodge.

Masonic lodges date back in Scotland 400 years, and next year we have celebrations planned marking that. There are very few institutions who can

boast of an unbroken lineage for four centuries.

If one looks at the 18th century Craft and the founding fathers of modern Freemasonry, do you believe they had something to offer that we've lost? So many masons were also members of the Royal Society, or painters, sculptors, architects, writers and explorers. There were many creative and inspired people endorsing the movement. Indeed, Masonry inspired them.

Well you see, their thoughts were being thought before the ritual was developed as it is today. Nowadays we are so absorbed by ritual, but in those days, it was what they were thinking that helped to form the rituals. It was a period of free-thinking, they were drawing on the huge reserves of the Renaissance, going back and plucking something out of the cupboard and having a look at it. Those free-thinkers were of a respite, because they had moved out of the Civil War. They'd fought and become so horrified by the futility of it all. They moved out to Holland considering things, wrote to each other and then returned. And undoubtedly, these figures moved around and within the framework of the Royal Society.

Of course there was also a spiritual dimension to their scientific and philosophical enquiries. Do you think the spiritual side of Freemasonry has been a little lacking in recent years, which if rekindled, could help Freemasonry capture the imagination of younger generations, who seem to be greatly interested in searching for something meaningful now?

Well, yes. We used to have a lot of preachers in Scotland. Over the last few years the landowner, the laird and the ministers of the church have sadly gone, although the local Presbytery here are all against the Craft, possibly because a large number of ministers now are women. Somewhere in Africa a few years ago, there was an attempt by certain parties to ban Freemasonry through the courts. The judge however, in his summing up said, that he'd never heard so much nonsense and concluded that Freemasonry was the hand-maiden of the Church.

There has been debate over the alleged origins of the Craft, and the London Grand Lodge's insistence upon the 1717 date of origin. Although this debate has generally emanated from some rather wild and unsubstantiated populist sources, what do you believe would be the result of a discovery of an older link pre-1717?

In Scotland we have always accepted that we evolved as a movement. I can quite understand and respect this business of having the first Grand Lodge. By all means, if that's what you like then have it, but don't foist it on everybody else. Even after they formed a Grand Lodge in Scotland, they didn't do a great deal. They met twice a year and they met at Parliament House, in the Scottish Parliament Building, which is now used as the main court of judiciary. And they went with a torchlight procession all around the town. Just imagine the furore, if for the year 2000 if we said we were going to re-assert our rights and meet in the Parliament Building?

Do you feel there have been too many assumptions made regarding masonic history?

Yes. It's very difficult to do original research if you haven't had a full education, and in this respect the man I admire enormously is of course, Professor David Stevenson, because he is a Professor of Scottish social history and knows his subject exceedingly well. He asked himself: 'How did the Freemasons figure in all this?' And then he went and had a look.

Freemasonry beyond these shores has stood for tolerance, often in societies not exactly as familiar with that ethos as we, hopefully, are.

Our lodges in Trinidad, Panama, Chile, Peru, Argentina, are all 70% Roman Catholic. Many of them who come over to the Royal Order in Edinburgh are Roman Catholics, including many French people, who belong to the lodges of the Grand Nationale Loge Française, and we've now got four Jesuit priests who are members of the Royal Order.

One of the first journeys my wife and I made in a masonic capacity was to the Lebanon and Jordan. Amongst other members of the Golden Throne Lodge, which in those days met on the Jordanian side of Jerusalem, was the chief of the so-called special police, the secret police. And he frequently came over to Scotland and he knew a lot of the chiefs, because he'd been at Police College in Scotland. Also his Number Two was also a member of the lodge. Two weeks later the Pope went to Jordan and visited the reputed site of the Baptism of Christ, and standing on either side of His Holiness, were two senior policemen, who I knew were both Scottish Freemasons.

Well, times have changed! We went to a lovely place in the Bekaa valley in the Lebanon, and the lodge and the chapter there operated throughout the difficulties of the civil war. And about every five years they sent someone back to Scotland with a bag of money to pay their dues. I met one of them about four years ago, and asked them how they were. He explained, that their lodge room was first taken over by the Syrian army, and then an American battleship came up and fired its 16-inch guns at them, which demolished the lodge room. So they had to resort to meeting in one of the brothers' houses.

Beirut is, of course, a different thing and always was, but they're rebuilding and I've no doubt they'll go back. They got a charter from the Grand Lodge of Egypt, which had been originally set up by Lord Kitchener. The thirty original members threw in a handful of gold sovereigns and they bought a plot of land and built a lodge building. Over a period of time, the property was swamped by the expanding suburbs of Beirut, and they built a multi-story block on top. When the rent needed to be collected, the reigning Master was allowed to collect up the money which, needless to say, caused some problems.

We also visited Egypt, and a lodge there which worked in Arabic. There, the candidate came in for his initiation in the first degree, which involved a special custom of the lodge to prove that he had been divested of all worldly wealth before his entrance. It involved the Deacon bringing in a little bag on his wand. This was supposed to represent his entire worldly wealth. Suddenly the brethren just fell about laughing, and I asked "What's the joke?" "Oh," he said, "the candidate is the richest banker in Beirut!"

Do you have any other special memories from your time in the Craft?

We had lodges in Tehran at the time of the Shah, who wanted their own Grand Lodge, and so it was granted that I should have an audience with the Shah in person. The audience lasted about 40 minutes when it was only supposed to be for half that time. We covered every possible subject and I think he knew very well what Masonry was all about, but at the same time he was constantly looking over both shoulders, guarding himself against some form of conspiracy, which might come into Iran under the modernising ideas of the west. In actual fact, I would not necessarily know the characters of his country, but they seemed to be good fellows to us.

That interview was in the Shah's palace, which was hung with modern tapestries, and we couldn't see where the door was. We were simply ushered in and then the door closed behind us, leaving just tapestries. When it came to the time to leave, we were bowing our way out and I was fiddling behind my back trying to find the door handle. It was the most extraordinary meeting with a crown head I've ever had.

Normally, in a meeting with the Queen, she presses a button, the door opens, and you're out. When we finally got out into the street, our Iranian friends were sitting there trembling with fear. An hour had passed and we still hadn't appeared. They thought we'd been done away with. So we said "No, we've been talking to the Shah." "All this time?" they replied, and we said "Yes, of course." "That's amazing! He never speaks to anyone for more than 15 minutes."

However, the most extraordinary episode for me was when a very distinguished West African Judge, who'd become Chief Justice of the Appeal Court of Kenya, was also in the chair of a lodge. At the same time, the President Jomo Kenyatta, decided to give a cocktail party, which also coincided with a meeting of the African states in Kenya. President Kenyatta came through to talk to us as we were all drinking orange juice, and asked "Who are all these people?" I explained to him that it was a delegation of Freemasons, and almost straightaway, he saw the African Judge who was an old acquaintance of his, and asked "What's he doing there?" He immediately went over and greeted him and said: "Is it true, are you a Freemason?" "Of course I am, Jomo!" came the reply. With that, Kenyatta clapped his hands and all the servants rushed up, "Take this orange juice away and bring champagne!" It was marvellous, totally spontaneous.

As the laughter dissipated, Lord Elgin's gaze fell upon my friend, Alexandra Tiligada (above), who was sportingly clutching some of my camera equipment. "And what are you doing here?", he enquired sympathetically. She explained that she was a student of ancient Greek and Latin philology, and was spending a year out of her home in the Peloponese, studying for her Masters degree in London. "You must be bored stupid! Let's take you upstairs. I know you'll probably be wanting to see the marbles!"

As we were led out of the basement study and into the house proper, it became noticeable that the Earl had a mild limp, the result of a leg-wound received in Normandy in 1944. After swapping some relevant anecdotes on the subject, I asked whether he had seen Saving Private Ryan, the controversial and hard-hitting Steven Spielberg film, dealing with the

American experience of D-Day.

No, I haven't seen the film. I suppose the most terrifying thing for me on the beaches was a British Royal Navy Beach Master with his beard and dog. Of course, I should have turned around and gone back to England then. We'd landed on the wrong beach, at the wrong time, with the wrong method.

Once in the main part of the house, we were proudly shown some original sketches executed by his famous ancestor while surveying the sites of ancient Greece. The conversation turned towards a lament over the apparent reticence of academics in Britain to mention masonic involvement in their surveys of history.

Sadly, the history books don't mention Freemasonry that much, which is an oversight that needs to be addressed. For example, if a new settlement was built in New Zealand when it was being colonised, very often the first thing they constructed was the church, closely followed by the masonic lodge. And there's no way you can ignore that. It has been an important ingredient of social history.

A poignant reminder of the failure to record the importance of Freemasonry's historical influence is evident from a perusal of some of the recent biographical works on the 7th Lord Elgin (and 11th Kincardine, 1766 – 1841), and his purchase of the great Athenian marbles which now bear his name. Most of the works fail to mention the fact that the 7th Earl was also a Freemason, initiated into the St. David Lodge, No.36 in Edinburgh in 1819, who later, in the same year, became a joining member of the Naval and Military Lodge, No.40. He was exalted into the Royal Arch, and held the rank of Grand Zerubbabel from 1827 until 1835. Puzzled by these careless omissions and by the obvious neglect of an important aspect of the great man's character, the current Earl appeared confident that his notorious ancestor was inspired by his masonic membership, but added, that he "was passionate about many things, and a great enthusiast generally".

As a soldier, diplomat and first British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, the 7th Earl supposedly rescued the sculptures at a time when the Turks were using the Parthenon for target practice, though this version of events is still a matter of some controversy among historians. He was keenly interested in classical art, and managed to obtain permission from the Turks after his arrival as Envoy Extraordinary at Constantinople in 1799, to record and

remove the antiquities, arranging for their safe passage to England. Many of the sculptures were subsequently sold to the British Museum in 1816, but some stelae or grave-markers, carved with figures or lettering, not wanted by the museum, still adorn the walls of Lord Elgin's country house. However, not all the pieces originate from the Acropolis. For at the centre of this magnificent room with its coffered ceiling and marble floor, rests an unidentified Roman head casually set upon the mantle-piece. The walls are richly hung with paintings and objets d'art, and towards the window with its views over the estate, stands a marble seat, apparently a replica of the judgement throne of the Olympic games of 412BC. (The original is in the Getty Museum in Malibu, California.)

Adjacent to this treasure trove is an elegant library that would easily satisfy the most voracious of bibliophiles and where once again the importance of the past resonated strongly. Did he believe it crucial for masons today to understand the movement's past, if only to be better informed for the future navigation of the Craft?

Yes, I agree with you completely. There is one type of mason unfortunately who believes that because they've taken an oath, there is no way they are going to divulge any information, for it might cause them to be chopped up. The other type just go over-the-top into looking at the sort things the 19th century developed - the most extraordinary rituals!

As the Craft goes through something akin to a catharsis, and as Europe comes closer together, is there anything you would wish to say to the younger generations coming along?

I don't really know the answer. I think you've got a marvellous new Grand Secretary in James Daniel. I've got a letter from him here in his own hand, which I doubt whether either myself or my father ever got from preceding ones, that we knew quite well. Times have changed!

All the good masonic elements of character have to be involved. I would far rather it happened without the grandiose, but I think people might find a great deal in common. Yes, I think we've got a very long way to go, but I think there's a lot of people from all backgrounds who could enjoy, fellowship, friendship, fraternity and discussion which would be a benefit to themselves and to the overall picture.

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The Royal Order of Scotland

The Royal Order of Scotland comprises two degrees: the Royal Order of the Heredom of Kilwinning and the Knight of the Rosy Cross. Its origins shrouded in mystery, it is known that certain lodges of the Order were functioning in London as early as 1741. In 1750, a Bro William Mitchell applied to some unknown superiors of the Order for a charter to establish a lodge in the Hague (where he lived). By 1752, newly-made Provincial Grand Master Mitchell moved to Scotland and established a branch of the Royal Order in Edinburgh. In July 1767, this body achieved the status of a Grand Lodge, in which capacity it still meets in Edinburgh today.

From the Order's inception it was claimed that the King of Scots was the hereditary Grand Master, and consequently the head of the Order today, Lord Elgin, is only granted the title of Deputy Grand Master. The legend that certain Knights Templar, fleeing persecution in Europe, assisted King Robert the Bruce at Bannockburn in 1314 cannot be traced before the formation of its Grand Lodge in 1767, and may therefore be a comparatively late invention.

The Grand Lodge of the Order meets just off Edinburgh's Royal Mile, in what is the oldest lodge room in the world, used also by Canongate Kilwinning No 2 Craft Lodge (see photo, below). The basic minimum requirement for entrance is that the candidate must be a Master Mason for at least five years, and then only by invitation.