

Book Review

CARPENTER, Audrey, *John Theophilus Desaguliers: A Natural Philosopher, Engineer and Freemason in Newtonian England* (New York; London: Continuum, 2011), 344 pp., £22.99, Pbk, ISBN: 9781441182227.

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The Reverend John Theophilus Desaguliers (1683–1744) has long been recognized as a pioneer of modern English engineering and of modern English freemasonry and yet to most he remains an incomplete figure. This is because he has been delineated by two quite distinct schools of history: the largely professional historians of science and the largely amateur historians of freemasonry. While the former have been preoccupied by Desaguliers' theoretical and practical engineering achievements, the latter have been preoccupied by his elevated social connections and freemasonry's standing by association. Under-explored by each have been the facts of Desaguliers' Huguenot refugee origins, his priestly ministry, his political sensibilities, and his married life. Now Audrey Carpenter has combined her passion for science with a very real talent for writing about it to present the first thorough account of the whole man. Her seemingly effortless literary style belies the scale of her achievement, the scientific complexity of the material being presented here, drawing together the hitherto disparate elements of Desaguliers' life and the tenets of Newtonian Natural Philosophy into a wonderfully compelling narrative.

Of particular interest to the current readership will be the attention Carpenter gives to the masonic networks that criss-crossed and underpinned not only Desaguliers' career—at the Royal Society (where he was demonstrator), at Stanmore (where he was parish priest), at Cannons Park (where he acted as technical, scientific and business advisor to the Duke of Chandos) and as a chaplain to the Prince of Wales (whom Desaguliers encouraged into freemasonry)—but also his busy social world, his foreign travels, and his family life. In these latter regards Carpenter's account is notable for what she reveals of Desaguliers' provincial French origins, his early years in England, his love of amateur dramatics, his poetry, his translations, his support for promising young scientists, his good natured bonhomie, and for being a most welcome and entertaining house guest in well-to-do homes. To be agreeable was a pre-requisite for success in the strictly mannered world of polite eighteenth-century England and this character trait was honed by the young Desaguliers, we must assume, during his family's secretive flight from France to England via Guernsey, all the while dependent on the generosity and goodwill of those in more powerful positions. It was clearly a social grace well-learned given Desaguliers' unbroken succession of powerful patrons from his university days at Oxford until the end of his life.

But above all, the story of Desaguliers is the story of modern science at its dawning. As a disciple of Newton, Desaguliers' life-long mission was to turn Newtonian theories into realities, and to sweep away superstition about the natural world by revealing the inner working of Creation. In doing so he sought to address real world

problems for the greater good in the realms of hydraulics, and steam engines, for example, to provide clean water, cheap power and safer industrial processes. To this end Desaguliers pragmatically courted those with money and status who, in return for a profit on their investments, could provide him the means to bring his ideas to fruition.

From his position as demonstrator of experiments at the Royal Society he was able to develop his pioneering ideas with the leading scientists at home and abroad, while beyond the confines of the Society he developed a remarkable series of hugely popular public lectures (attracting both men and women) and which in turn became best selling science books. Even today these books are recognized for the clarity of their prose and the excellence of their engravings.

The exhaustive references in this book reveal Carpenters' determination to do justice to her subject, which has led her to all the major UK public collections, and many private ones (most notably in a masonic context the private papers of the 2nd Duke of Richmond at Goodwood House). The trail also took her abroad to California's Huntington Library, the National Library of Congress in Washington, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, municipal archives at La Rochelle and the departmental archives of La Charente Maritime. Carpenter's work is a fine example of the History of Science at its best, and is likely to be the defining work about Desaguliers and his world for many years to come.