Book Review


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The study of scientific networks and the analysis of the formation and working mechanisms of scientific societies are nowadays considered an important trend in scholarly research. The early Royal Society, although extensively scrutinized by such outstanding scholars as Michael Hunter, still intrigues researchers today.

In the last decade the freemason, Robert Lomas, unquestionably established himself as one of the best known popularizing authors of freemasonry, although his heterodox views and mostly far-fetched conclusions on the study of the fraternity presented in co-authored earlier books such as the *Uriel Machine* or the *Hiram Key* have practically deprived him of serious academic reputation.

The new edition of Lomas’ *Invisible College* has the somewhat overambitious aim of establishing a direct connection between the institution of freemasonry and the Royal Society. Adopting a positivistic outlook on the history of sciences, he stresses the Royal Society’s crucial importance in the propagation of scientific achievements and the amelioration of overall living standards. With the inclusion of some novelistic passages, he meticulously describes the historical context to the formation of the scientific society. The discussion of contemporary intellectual streams, such as Francis Bacon’s empiricism and scientific method are also depicted in the book. Lomas emphasizes the role of certain individuals during the creation of the Royal Society. Constructing his arguments around the most known masonic fellow of the society, Sir Robert Moray, Lomas claims no less than that the Royal Society’s progenitor group, referred to as the Invisible College, was a masonic lodge.

The book is written in a very readable style: the structure is logical and all chapters, not counting the last two, are closed with a brief summary. But despite the structural transparency of the book it cannot be called a scientific study, rather an entertaining piece of fiction that contains large elements of truth. Aside from the factual errors, Lomas’ line of argumentation is highly speculative and his usage of academic literature can be described as casual at best.

A fundamental error lies in his main argument, namely, that the progenitor group of the Royal Society, to which he applies the name Invisible College, was a masonic lodge (p. 101). The name Invisible College was, in fact, not a widely applied term; it was used by Robert Boyle in his private correspondence, referring to a group, whose nature is yet to be disclosed. The continuity between the Invisible College and the Royal Society is not proven and neither is the connection of other groups with the early Royal Society. From the account of John Wallis we know that a group of natural philosophers existed who met at Oxford in the 1650s under the aegis of John Wilkins.

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Wallis also mentioned an earlier group, which had met in London in the late 1640s, but none of the above was referred to as the Invisible College. The author’s strongest argument to prove these groups’ connections with freemasonry is the claim that they worked under masonic ‘conditions’, as their members did not discuss religion and politics during their meetings (p. 100). Although these rules are similar in both organizations, it must not be forgotten that these doctrines of freemasonry were crystallized only in the early eighteenth century. The claim that the progenitor group of the Royal Society was a masonic lodge remains speculation.

The description of the intellectual environment is also problematic. Lomas writes about the Rosicrucian Brotherhood, as if it was a real society. At present, no evidence has been discovered to substantiate this claim. Francis Bacon is depicted as a freemason, and his lodge membership is proven by the frontispiece of the Novum Organum, where a ship leaves the pillars of Heracles, which are, in Lomas’ interpretation, the pillars of Solomon’s Temple (p. 113). In the same manner, the masonic membership of James I is implied by a secondary source (p. 121). This ‘trend’ of describing important sixteenth and seventeenth century figures as freemasons on the basis of the most impossible ‘evidences’ is a continuous feature of the book: Charles II, William Lilly, John Evelyn and Thomas Gresham are all depicted as masonic brethren. Moreover, the presumed masonic membership of the college founder, Gresham, leads directly to the masonic ideology of Gresham College in Lomas’ line of reasoning. The author also tends to misinterpret pictures: for instance, the presence of a compass is always referred to as an obvious reference to freemasonry.

The book contains some chapters that are irrelevant for his main concern. For example, there is no obvious reason to include the experiments of the early Royal Society, and the postscript, titled ‘Life, the Universe and a Theory of Everything’ that features Prof. Stephen Hawking is also puzzling (pp. 395–406).

To sum up, The Invisible College is not successful in providing convincing evidence for the masonic origins of the Royal Society. Perhaps a more extensive usage of Michael Hunter’s works on the Royal Society could have elucidated these mistakes. Despite its shortcomings, Lomas’ work is an entertaining read, although it cannot be considered to be an academic study.

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