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James Smith Allen, *A Civil Society: The Public Space of Freemason Women in France, 1744-1944*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022. 374 pp. Photographs, illustrations, appendices, and index. \$70.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781496227782.

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Women in various European countries have now joined freemasonry officially, even assumed positions of leadership. At the same time gender history has helped to mature contemporary masonic historiography. New research has expanded knowledge and understanding of when and why women joined lodges, although at first not as fully equal to their brothers, but as “adopted.” For this process French sources are the richest in Western Europe and originate in the 1740s when the first women were adopted—to use the masonic term—into the lodges.

Did adoption signal an equality with male members? For most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it did not. Nevertheless, we know that the very act of admitting women could make both women and men imagine a new social order. Remarkable French manuscript records from The Hague in 1751 detail the proceedings of an adoptive lodge where actresses and actors in the local Comédie Française joined with Dutch nobility to list the officers in both the masculine and feminine, “le Maître” and “la Maîtresse.” In their songs the brothers and sisters proclaimed their mutual equality. With our sisters “we will find a true method of perfecting ‘nos édifices...’ it is by the assistance of our sisters. [With them we shall build] the school of manners, the temple of virtue.”[1]

The perfection sought seems to have lasted only a year. This egalitarian lodge, deeply affiliated with the court of the stadholder, was controversial, and while other lodges of adoption sprang up in the Dutch Republic after 1751, their records are not as complete as what can be found in France in the second half of the century. There whole families participated in lodge activities, and “in this individual and collective dynamic...these women evidently found the social conscience, a spirit of solidarity, that has come to define much of modern civil society in France” (p. 186). Allen calls upon us to rethink any assessment that imagines France as a low trust society, with a weak associational life.

Well into the late nineteenth century, and partly because of the Napoleonic Code of 1804, French gender equality encountered distinct limits. Yet some eighteenth-century records prove that masonic thinking and practice about equality could be extended to women, however absent they were from the proceedings of hundreds of lodges. (That is still the situation prevailing in contemporary Anglo-American freemasonry). Adoption was also deeply ambiguous. French

feminists and socialists throughout the nineteenth century battled law and custom and eventually created a masonic association dedicated to gender equality, *le Droit Humain*. Under its mantle French women, and some other Continental lodges, gradually embraced equality. It remains an egalitarian force in contemporary European freemasonry.

Clearly present circumstances call forth a new historiography. The distinguished historian of France, James Smith Allen has joined growing American and French scholarship on women freemasons and given the best account that we now have for women freemasons in France. He is astute on the intricacies of freemasonry and provides useful appendices on terms and lists of members. Allen also gives rich descriptions of a host of female luminaries, some like George Sand (probably never initiated), who were deeply influenced by masonic idealism. He is wise to see that initiation into a lodge is not the sole criterion to determine masonic influence.

Any historian of French intellectual history needs to consult Allen's account of Sand's writings, as well as his assessment of Minette (Anne-Catherine de Ligniville) Helvétius and (Sophie de Grouchy) the Marquise de Condorcet. Mme. Helvétius kept a salon where masonic membership predominated, and she mentored the young Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis who inherited much of her estate. His protection and her discretion saved them from the Terror and the hostility of local patriots. Although never formally initiated into a lodge, the Marquise de Condorcet enjoyed a rich intellectual life, insisting that her husband write what stands as his most famous work on the progress of the human mind. The Marquise also became an expert on Adam Smith, translated his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and wrote her own *Letters sur le sympathie*, both published in 1798. She edited Condorcet's complete works, all twenty-one volumes, published in 1804. To these circles Allen adds brief mention of Rosalie Jullien and Stéphanie-Félicité Du Crest, Comtesse de Genlis who was initiated into the lodge of Cagliostro's wife. Genlis published extensively and educated several pupils among them the future king, Louis-Philippe (1830-48).

Such allegiances to secular and masonic culture could weigh heavily on women from whom religiosity was most expected. As Allen notes in the tortured life of Lorenza Feliciani, Comtesse de Cagliostro, masonic idealism could be undone by a return to Rome and religious orthodoxy. Feliciani was enticed by the Comte de Cagliostro's mysticism until, stricken with remorse, she confessed his lodge activities to the Roman Inquisition. It promptly convicted and imprisoned him for his masonry. Following Allen's lead, a book is yet to be written on the dynamic role of mysticism in late eighteenth century masonic circles with particular attention to adoptive freemasonry. Feliciani ended her days in a convent, but then lived a fictive life in various nineteenth-century novels filled with magic and conspiracies.

Prior to 1789 there were probably one thousand women French freemasons, and the vast majority were either from the aristocracy or added an aristocratic particle to their name. The collapse of the Old Regime left most of them displaced both socially and masonically. The Marquise de Condorcet (unlike her husband and brother, never initiated) devoted herself to translating and editing. Her understanding of sympathy and the instinctive responsibility felt for others, Allen sees as arising from her "masonic network" (p. 51). A similar benefit accrued to Rosalie Jullien, a virtual Jacobin, who nevertheless in the early 1790s, with help from the family's masonic network, got her son out of the country to the safety of England. Finally, Allen relates Charles d'Éon de Beaumont, Chevalier d'Eon and her cross-dressing, to her masonic values. As one of the largest landowners in the region, who also dressed as a woman, the local lodge accepted her, as the *chevalière*, saying that "despite her change, we would have failed not only in patriotic

sentiments, in ties of blood and friendship, but also in the name of brethren” had we failed to allow her participation (p. 55).

Allen is careful not to make freemasonry singularly causative in the intellectual portraits that he paints. Similarly, he sees how after 1799 the adoptive lodges were molded in support of the new imperial state and “became an instrument for sustaining male domination” (p. 59). For much of the nineteenth century women’s masonry declined and the working of degrees for women virtually disappeared. Then with, and after the Commune, they reappeared and proceeded to thrive during the Third Republic, “the most mason-friendly regime in French history” (p. 60).

Even before the radicals of the Commune, *A Civil Society* demonstrates the deep relationship between masonic women and the Saint-Simonian movement. Their connections extended out to Irish nationalists and British abolitionists, and into multiple publishing ventures. Later in the century perhaps the most important feminist leader profiled by Allen is Maria Deraismes, from a wealthy republican family who refused to marry as a matter of principle. In 1878 she helped to organize the first International Congress of the Rights of Women. She invested in newspapers and managed to get initiated into an all-male lodge, Les Libres Penseurs. None of these activities were conflict free and finally, in 1893 she and her *sœurs* created a new masonic order, Le Droit Humain (DH), where women and men were initiated in the same ceremonies and assumed equal leadership in lodge governance. To put this innovative social imaginary in the words of Deraismes, “The inferiority of women is not a fact of nature, to say it once again, it is a human invention, it is a social fiction” (p. 91). The radicalism further extended into the twentieth century with masonic leadership provided by Annie Besant and Louis Goaziou. Paris remained central, but by 1900 the outreach had become imperial and DH lodges were particularly strong in north Africa.

Only a comparative perspective will tell us how essential freemasonry should be seen to be in the modern history of French feminism. Perhaps only in Catholic countries does an alternative social structure need to exist, one that permits private virtues to extend to public spaces complete with ceremonies, ritual, costumes, and oaths. The values of freemasonry everywhere are secular, but the masonic persona requires a form of religiosity.

James Smith Allen does not employ a comparative perspective. That may be the next phase as we exam feminism within various national settings. In this rich and detailed history of French women in freemasonry Allen has shown how, over two centuries, “gendered sociability finally made space for masonic equality” (p. 88). There was nothing inevitable about a process by which even masonic forms of idealism had to struggle with the shocking reality of women’s equality. Every step forward seemed to entail a step backward, until, as Allen shows, “the Droit Humain participated disproportionately in the activities of the early women’s rights organizations” (p. 180). No history of French women’s rights and public engagement can now be written that does not grapple with his achievement. It is nothing less than remarkable.

NOTES

[1] *Chansons de l’Ordre de l’Adoption ou la Maçonnerie des Femmes, Au temple de Union, Le premier May 1751, à la Haye*, pp. 1-5. The only known copy of this song is in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, YE 17876; for a longer discussion see Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment*.

Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, chapter 5.

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