

19th Century French Freemasonry

A Global Historical Perspective I/II

French Freemasonry starts with the constitution of the **Grand Loge Anglaise de France** in 1728 two years after the foundation of the **Loge Saint-Thomas***, Scottish Rite in 1726 by **Charles Rodclyffe**. Anderson's Constitutions will not be translated until 1735 under the name of **Devoirs En-joints aux Maçons Libres**.

At this time, one of the most active cities, besides Paris, is Bordeaux where in 1732 an English captain opens **Lodge 204** and initiates the first French men. Soon, Lodges open all over the country: Lyon, Avignon, Caen...

In 1736, following the installation of the new Grand Master, **Derwentwater**, Freemasonry goes public, organising sumptuous festivities. By 1742 more than **200 lodges**, with 22 in Paris alone, are constituted. The tendency is to accept more or less anybody able to pay the initiation fee; nonetheless, the idea of an **Egalitarian society** is very attractive for many people in these times of absolutism.

To make matters more complicated the Pope, **Clement XII**, in his 1738 Papal Bull: "*In eminenti apostolatus specula*" condemns Freemasonry as being Counter-Church and Counter-State. In France, the condemnation has no effect but sends shock waves through the Brotherhood at large. More Papal condemnations follow with a similar lack of repercussions, the **French Magistrates** refusing to countenance any interference from the Papal state.

For the Saint-Jean d'été 1738, **Louis de Pardailan de Gondrin** is elected Grand Master of the Kingdom of France. He brings an energetic dynamism to the Order. When he dies in 1743 French Freemasonry starts to sever links with the **Grand Lodge of England**.

He is succeeded by **Louis de Bourbon-Condé**. A poor organiser, he delegates too much to corrupt elements trafficking in **Initiations** and **Grades**. Despite this, a positive aspect of his leadership emerges: the promulgation of the **Ordonnances Générales** inspired directly by Anderson's Constitution. One article states that only the grades of **Entered Apprentice, Fellow-Craft** and **Master Mason** will be recognized. This helps to insure peace and harmony in the craft by eliminating the tendency to elitism engendered by brethren calling themselves **Scottish Master**.

In 1755, the **Grand Loge Constitution** is revised to remove the reference to England, becoming simply the **Grande Loge de France**. As another important part of the amendments, the **Scottish Rite** is finally accepted. **Scottish Masters** are even allowed to inspect lodges and, in some cases, to restore order.

The first schism occurs in 1766. The **Comte de Clermont**, acting Grand Master is not recognised by some of the brethren. The problem reaches such proportion that the **Grande Loge de France** ceases all activities until the death of the Comte in 1771.

1773 marks the creation of the **Grand Orient de France** with **Louis-Philippe-Joseph d'Orléans** as Grand Master coming from the also newly formed **Grande Loge Nationale Française** from the defunct **Grand Loge de France**. The fight between the two Obédiences, the old and the new, persists until the advent of 1789.

The biggest innovation introduced by the **Grand Orient de France** at the time is the annual election of the Grand Master and his officers whereas previously these offices had been held for the lifetime of the incumbents.

Freemasonry expands rapidly having **Louis-Philippe-Joseph d'Orléans**, who will be also known as **Philippe Egalité** from 1780's, as de facto Grand Master for all the brethren.

During the **French Revolution**, Freemasonry becomes dormant to allow France to recover. It is interesting to note that Freemasonry is not forbidden during this period, maybe, a reminder of the **Egalitarian aspect** of the **Brotherhood** which certainly inspired a number of the revolutionary leaders.

The new awakening, in response to the fall of **Robespierre** and the **Terreur**, begins in 1795 and a new Grand Master is elected: **Roëttier de Montaleau**. 1799 sees the fusion of the remaining lodges of the **Grande Loge Nationale Française** and the **Grand Orient de France**.

* in the remembrance of the Archbishop of Canterbury, *Thomas Becket*, assassinated on the order of the King of England in the 12th Century.

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At the beginning of the **1800's French Freemasonry** sees the return of substantial numbers of the bourgeoisie. The aristocrats had lost everything and fled the country. The **Directoire** regards Freemasonry with suspicion and puts the **Ateliers** under surveillance. The lodges are under political pressure and in order to survive they have to coalesce with the political power. **Napoléon Bonaparte** is the first to understand the potential.

Beside this fragile equilibrium and an appearance of unity, **Freemasonry** is a complex entity. In 1801, **Claude-Antoine Thory** reorganizes **l'Ancien Rite Ecossais Philosophique**. This specific Rite will have up to 70 lodges by 1826. But, in 1804, the **Comte de Grasse-Tilly** constitutes a **Supreme Council of the Great Inspectors of the 33°** and last Degree of the **Old and Accepted Scottish Rite**. This Rite had 'emigrated' to America back in **1761** to return under the form previously stated.

The **Grand Orient de France** also adopts the **High Degrees**, in 7° instead of 33°, under the name of **Rite Français**. As a result, a concordat is agreed upon between the two **Obédiences**, **GODF** administering and monitoring from the 1° to the 18° and the **Supreme Council** taking care of spiritual matters. Soon, **Cambacérés***, takes the place of the **Comte de Grasse-Tilly** as a **Grand Master** of the **Grande Loge Générale Ecossaise**. It is interesting to note that the co-existence Rite Français and the Rite Ecossais both claiming of the purest Masonic origin. A mason can be both, a particularly good example of **Brotherhood Fraternity**.

At the beginning of the Empire, Freemasonry is potentially subversive to the totalitarianism of **Napoléon Bonaparte**, but, the brethren **Sieyès**, **Masséna**, **Kellermann** and **Cambacérés** make the Emperor change his mind - control being better than repression. Maybe the fact that most members of **Napoléon Bonaparte** family are brethren is decisive in this acceptance. All the greatest names of this period are masons: **Augereau**, **Lefebvre**, **Mortier**, **Sérurier**, **Soult**, **Ney**, **Lacépède**, **Fouché**, **Lalande**...

Napoléon Bonaparte transforms Freemasonry into an official institution supporting his despotism. In 1814, **905 lodges** including **73 in the military**, mostly consisting of officers, are in existence. He uses the **Order** as a political weapon for his pan-European ambitions. With the fall of the Empire, the **Brotherhood** is in crisis. When **Louis XVIII** arrives in Paris, the leaders of the 'Imperial Freemasonry' have already left France. The **Maréchal MacDonald**, **Duc de Tarente** takes command for the interim. He's one of the first of the 'old guard' to rally to

the new king. The lodges **Saint-Napoléon** are renamed **Saint-Louis** very rapidly. Under **Louis XVIII** the spirit of **Carbonari** arrives in France from Italy. **La Fayette** and a few other Freemasons attempt a coup d'état in 1821. It's a failure with the last minute hesitation of **La Fayette**. The backlash is ferocious, four sergeants are especially taken as example, they're executed screaming '**Vive la liberté**'.

The church, whose previous intervention with the **Order** was pre-1789, is now controlled by ultras. In 1824, le **Comte d'Artois** is crowned as **Charles X** succeeding **Louis XVIII**. His regime is even more reactionary, targeting **Freemason** in particular.

In 1830, **Louis-Philippe** succeeded **Charles X** under more or less the same authoritarian attitude leading to 1848 and the advent of the 'Freemasonic' Second République. **Alphonse Baudin** parliamentarian and **Freemason** dying on the barricades declares: "Citizens, you're going to see how to die for 25 francs (parliamentarian indemnity)". The '**Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité**' Masonic theme becomes the republican motto.

Napoléon III's putsch of 1851 turns the tables and brings in 1852 **Lucien Murat**, from a **Napoléon I** background, as Grand Master of the **GODF**. After many intrigues, **Lucien Murat** is replaced in 1862 by the **Maréchal Magnan**. Being in the control of **Napoléon III**, **Magnan** tries to fuse the **Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite** with the **Grand Orient de France**. It's a total failure. After this unexpected opposition **Magnan** learns to be a more understanding brother. He dies in 1865 leaving the **Brotherhood** in order.

Général Mellinet follows **Magnan** in his line of conduct, but, by 1870 the storm with the defeat against the Prussians and the commune leads to the **Grand Orient de France**, in 1877, renouncing the First Article concerning the principle of '**the existence of God and the immortality of the Soul**'...

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Jack Chabout, Librio, 2004

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* Archichancelier of the Empire, assisting *Joseph Bonaparte* (brother of the Emperor) Grand Master of the Grand Orient de France.