Criminal Justice Act that the 1799 Unlawful Societies Act was finally repealed.[153]

[153] As late as 1965, a detailed explanation of why lodge secretaries had to make annual returns to the Clerk of the Peace appeared in *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* 78 (1965), pp. 276-7.

Freemasonry and the Problem of Britain

Inaugural lecture to mark the launch of the Centre for Research into Freemasonry at the University of Sheffield, 5 March 2001

Most inaugural lectures draw together research which has been in progress for many years. This inaugural lecture is unusual in that it marks the launch of a new programme of research, with the establishment here at Sheffield of the Centre for Research into Freemasonry, the first such centre in a British university. I will not this evening be presenting the fruits of years of reflection on the subject of freemasonry, but will instead seek to convey why this is an exciting new area for research. I will, however, take advantage of one tradition of the inaugural lecture and begin with some personal reflections.

I was born in Battersea, an unremarkable area of south London, which was until the early nineteenth century a peaceful country village. One of the few surviving relics of Battersea's rural existence is the beautiful riverside church of St Mary, a Georgian building which incorporates remnants of an earlier medieval church. When my great grandfather moved to London, he became verger of this church, and my family have been associated with it ever since, my father holding a number of church offices there. Like many historians, my appetite for the past was first whetted by local history. This was due to my father, who was an enthusiastic local

historian. In his researches, my father drew heavily on a book published in 1925 called *Our Lady of Batersey* by John George Taylor, the headmaster of a grammar school known locally as Sinjuns. *Our Lady of Batersey* is a history of St Mary's church and, weighing in at 442 heavily footnoted pages, is perhaps the most detailed study ever written of a single parish church, earning Taylor a doctorate and election to the Society of Antiquaries. Taylor's book was privately printed by a Chelsea stationer and is difficult to obtain. My father's copy was his most precious possession, and I am sure that my ambition to be a historian owes something to the awe with which I regarded that thick black book. I suppose it was inevitable that, when the time came for me to attend secondary school, my preference should be for Taylor's old school, Sinjuns.

And so I began on the path which thirty five years later brought me to the University of Sheffield with a brief to investigate the history of freemasonry. For anyone interested in freemasonry, the first port of call is the remarkable Library and Museum of Freemasonry in Freemasons Hall London, one of London's hidden treasures. When confronted by a library containing extensive archives which have been little used by historians and thousands of rare publications, many of which have escaped the bibliographical net, the main problem is knowing where to start. I was dimly aware that there was a masonic lodge associated with my old school, and finding out something about the Old Sinjuns lodge seemed as good a starting point as any.

I quickly found a history of the lodge, Old Sinjins, no. 3232, by John Nichols, a history master at the school. The lodge was formed in 1907 after a circular had been sent to members of the Old Boys Association, pointing out how a masonic lodge would weld `in the closer ties of fraternal good will those friendships which many of us formed during our school life'. To my surprise, I found that one of the first recruits to the lodge was J. G. Taylor, the author of *Our Lady of Batersey*. Taylor was master of the lodge in 1923 and, as headmaster of the school, arranged for a lodge meeting to be held in the school hall. Until 1954, the lodge always included at least one member of staff of the school. Among the lodge possessions were items with interesting school associations, such as a box of working tools made in the school woodwork shops from old school desks. The lodge endowed school prizes and helped the school purchase the portrait of the founder and his wife which hung in the school hall. The lodge held services at St Mary's church, and at least three vicars of the church became members of the lodge. The lodge's usual place of meeting was until 1911 the Gaiety Restaurant in the Strand and thereafer Pagani's Restaurant, also in the Strand. Following bomb damage to Pagani's in 1940, the lodge moved to Freemasons Hall. It still survives, meeting nowadays in the Duke of York's barracks in

Chelsea. The masonic lodge has thus outlived the school, which closed in 1986.

At the end of Nichols' book, I noticed that an earlier lodge history had been compiled by John George Taylor. This was, to me, an amazing piece of information - I knew that none of the major research libraries possessed any such work by Taylor. I checked the card catalogue at Freemasons Hall and there indeed was this work by Taylor. I ordered it up, and was presented with a mint copy of a handsomely produced volume in a distinguished blue binding. The Freemasons' Hall copy of Taylor's book is the only publicly accessible copy in existence. It was published by the same printer as *Our Lady of Batersey* and looks almost like a supplementary volume to it. Taylor's distinction as a historian is evident even in this short lodge history. It begins with a very well informed account of the development of school lodges which anticipates more recent findings of masonic scholars, and contains a short history of the school which is more rounded than that given in *Our Lady of Batersey*.

I do not expect you to share my enthusiasm for the works of J.G. Taylor, but the identification of this forgotten work by a significant topographical scholar seems to me emblematic of the remarkable discoveries that can be made by investigating the records of freemasonry. The finds I was able to make for Battersea - and the Sinjuns trail led me down many other interesting paths that I won't bother you with now - can be repeated for almost every town and city in Britain. In investigating the Old Sinjins lodge, the feature I found most striking was the way in which freemasonry was portrayed as an accepted part of everyday life. Restaurants like the Gaiety or Pagani's went out of their way to cater for the masonic trade, having their own masonic temples and offering rooms where lodges could store their equipment. The masonic lodge was part of school life. Masonic rituals were practiced in the headmaster's study, and the making of lodge equipment was an acceptable woodwork project. Sinjuns was not unique in offering school facilities for masonic purposes. When the Federation of School Lodges was formed in 1947, the first meeting was held at another Battersea grammar school, Emmanuel School, with the active support and encouragement of the Headmaster and Chairman of Governors.

It is only in the past seventy years that freemasonry has lost its public face. Until then, public masonic processions, most often held in connection with the laying of foundation stones and the opening of new buildings, were a familiar feature of town life. In 1797, the opening of the general infirmary at Sheffield was marked by an enormous masonic procession, in which freemasons from all over the north of England were joined by the local clergy, the cutlers' company and an enormous number of sick clubs and friendly societies. The well-being of a masonic lodge was a matter of local concern. In 1821 at Monmouth, news that disciplinary action against the local lodge had been suspended so that

it would be able to join a procession was greeted, much to the embarrassment of the Master of the lodge, with the ringing of church bells. These processions continued into the twentieth century. In 1910, the year in which Keir Hardie was reelected as one of the M.P.'s for Merthyr Tydfil and which saw the beginnings of the industrial conflict leading afterwards to the disturbances at Tonypandy, masons from all over South Wales processed through the streets of Merthyr to lay the foundation stone of a new masonic hall, the proceedings being watched with great interest by the Mayor and Mayoress and enthusiastically reported in the local paper. The laying of the foundation stone of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford upon Avon in 1929 was again attended with full masonic ceremonies.

Given the local prominence of freemasonry and the strong topographical tradition of British historical scholarship, the neglect of freemasonry by British historians is surprising. It is now more than thirty years since the distinguished Oxford historian John Roberts published his inspiring rallying cry in the *English Historical Review*, `Freemasonry: the Possibilities of a Neglected Topic'. Roberts pointed out that freemasonry began in Britain and that the first grand lodge was established in London in 1717. From England, it spread rapidly though Europe, and by 1789 there was perhaps 100,000 masons in Europe. Roberts emphasised that, despite the fact that freemasonry is one of the social movements of British origin which has had the biggest international impact, it has been largely ignored by professional historians in Britain. This contrasts with, say, France and Holland, where freemasonry has been the subject of elaborate scholarly investigation. Because of the neglect of this field by British historians, it has been dominated by, on the one hand, anti-masonic conspiracy theorists, and, on the other, by masonic antiquarians investigating details of ritual or institutional development. Since Roberts wrote, the area has received more attention from professional historians in Britain. Major studies on different aspects of the history of freemasonry have appeared by such scholars as David Stevenson, James Steven Curl and, most recently, Peter Clark. Nevertheless, the study of freemasonry is still seen as by many British historians as a marginal subject, and its many historical connections remain largely unexplored.

Both Roberts and Stevenson suggest that this neglect is partly because the enormous literature produced by masonic scholars is baffling and confusing for historians. Many historians are certainly discouraged by articles in masonic journals with such titles as `Passing the Veils' or `The Mystery of the Winding Staircase'. However, there are perhaps broader intellectual reasons for this neglect. Masonic scholars are obsessed with discovering the origins of the craft. Sir Walter Besant was one of the founders of the English masonic lodge devoted to research, Quatuor Coronati lodge, no. 2076. Besant declared that he was not an enthusiast for the rites and

ceremonies of freemasonry, but felt that it had great potential as a force for social and religious improvement. He considered that a great defect of freemasonry was that its origins were imperfectly understood and, in helping to found Quatuor Coronati, he hoped to put this right. The results have been perhaps the opposite of what Besant intended. Enthusiasts constantly chew over the same slender evidence of early freemasonry, elaborating theories of its origins which range from the over-pragmatic to the over-fantastical. These activities are not helped by the recurrent assumption that the rituals preserve a hidden spiritual truth handed down from ancient times. The results are very reminiscent of Shakespearean authorship mania, and it comes as no surprise to find that one theory suggests that Shakespeare invented freemasonry. Like discussions of Shakespearean authorship, these theories often rely heavily on cyphers, numerology and singular coincidences, and, because the questions considered are posed in such a way as to anticipate the answers, the lines of argument are frequently self-validating. In the case of both Shakespeare and freemasonry, the saddest aspect of this feverish activity is that it is completely pointless. Just as it would make very little difference to our perception of Shakespeare's plays if it could be proved that Bacon wrote them, so our appreciation of the historical impact of freemasonry would be little changed if it could be showed beyond doubt that it stemmed from the Pharoahs or the Templars.

The obsession with origins has, paradoxically, robbed freemasonry of its history. The focus on the early period means that we neglect the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when freemasonry was a major force in society and there is extensive documentary evidence of its activities. Of course, this later period poses its own dangers. There is a risk of producing inward-looking and self-obsessed institutional history. The only way of avoiding this is by anchoring the investigation of freemasonry within broader historical problems. It is when freemasonry is considered within these wider themes that its richness as a historical subject becomes apparent. For example, freemasonry is an important aspect of imperial history. Army regiments formed masonic lodges, and, as these military lodges moved around with the regiment, they rapidly spread freemasonry through the colonies. Freemasonry became, with gothic architecture and organised sports, one of the forces which bound together the British Empire. Mixed race lodges were one of the chief forums in which coloniser and colonised could mix socially. As countries jostled for control of a particular territory, so their grand lodges also vied to establish themselves as the supreme masonic authority in the area. Conversely, as colonies demanded greater autonomy, so their masons also tried to secure more independence.

With its central secretariat and provincial hierarchies, freemasonry was organisationally very advanced. The organisational structure of freemasonry influenced

groups such as the United Irishmen, and this is perhaps the sphere in which freemasonry has had its most significant historical impact. Moreover, rituals and oaths which are reminiscent of masonic forms are found in many early trade unions and friendly societies. The oaths and rituals for which the Tolpuddle Martyrs were prosecuted were very similar to those used by freemasons. It is not clear whether freemasonry was the source of these features or if they represent an older common tradition, but this is clearly a major area for investigation. One concern of historians of radical activity in the nineteenth century has been to establish how far there was continuity between the various radical groups. One such common thread which has been overlooked is an interest in freemasonry. Tom Paine wrote on freemasonry, seeing it as a relic of the ancient sun religion destroyed by christianity. Richard Carlile, the populariser of Paine's work, took up this theme at greater length. He apparently influenced Charles Bradlaugh, who became a mason (resigning in protest at the appointment of the Prince of Wales as Grand Master). Bradlaugh's interest in freemasonry as a force for social reform may partly account for Annie Besant's involvement with it. Besant helped introduce from France a form of freemasonry which admitted both men and women.

Mention of Annie Besant raises another major issue, that of gender, and the way in which freemasonry has helped shape gendered hierarchies in society. There are innumerable other possible themes that could be mentioned: the role of freemasonry in philanthropy, in education, in underpinning the social position of the aristocracy, and so on.This evening I want to concentrate on just one such historical problem, an issue which is still central to the intellectual concerns of history as a discipline, namely that of how nations are formed and how they function. For British historians, this problem is a very current one, thanks largely to Linda Colley, who, in her book *Britons: the Forging of A Nation*, argues that the concept of Britishness is an artificial construct, forged in the wake of the union between England and Scotland in 1707, tempered by the Hanoverian succession and the defeat of the Jacobite rebellions, and burnished by a succession of wars against France. Colley is the most influential of a large number of historians ranging from Raphael Samuel to Norman Davies who have recently investigated what I have called in the title of my lecture tonight the problem of Britain, namely the issue of how British national identity was constructed from the diverse national and regional groups who inhabit the British Isles.

Anyone interested in the history of freemasonry will encounter this historical problem very quickly. One of the essential starting points for the study of freemasonry is David Stevenson's magisterial study *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's Century, 1590-1710* in which Stevenson draws attention to the wealth of documentation for lodges in Scotland in seventeenth

century. Stevenson argues that `in spite of much obscurity, the evidence indicates that something that is recognisably modern freemasonry first emerges in seventeenth-century England, and then spreads to England'. The early development of freemasonry in Scotland is closely linked to the figure of William Schaw, Master of the King's Works under James VI. At the beginning of his book, Stevenson points out how the importance of the Scottish evidence had previously been played down, sometimes deliberately. He gives a startling illustration of this in the publication history of the standard nineteenth-century history of freemasonry by Robert Freke Gould (I quote): `Gould very sensibly dealt with early Scottish freemasonry before early English freemasonry, as so much Scottish evidence pre-dated English evidence. But the heretical implications of this arrangement were too much for English twentieth-century masonic editors. Consciously or unconsciously responding to their built-in assumptions of English primacy, chapters were swapped around so that early Scottish freemasonry was considered not only after English but after Irish freemasonry! No doubt this arrangement was justified by the order in which the national grand lodges were founded, but the result is an absurdity'. Stevenson has also described how English masonic scholars produced convoluted explanations to account for the fact that all the earliest surviving lodge records were Scottish. `My favourite explanation', he wrote, `was that English lodges had existed for so long that they had given up bothering to keep records. In Scotland, the lodges...kept minutes because writing was something pretty new to the beknighted Scots..'

Shortly after its establishment in 1717, the Grand Lodge in London issued a rule book called *The Book of Constitutions*, compiled by James Anderson, a presbyterian clergyman. Anderson explicitly links the creation of the Grand Lodge to the Hanoverian succession. He writes: `King George I entered London most magnificently on 20th September 1714 and after the rebellion was over AD 1716 the few lodges at London finding themselves neglected by Sir Christopher Wren thought fit to cement under a Grand Master as the centre of union and harmony'. As befits somebody who wrote a Latin elegy for George I, Anderson takes every opportunity to present the prosperous state of freemasonry as reflecting the flourishing state of Britain under the rule of the `Saxon kings', as he calls them. His concluding paragraphs echo the kind of new British rhetoric which Linda Colley has catalogued at length. In Anderson's words: `And now the freeborn British nations, disengaged from wars, and enjoying the good fruits of liberty and peace, the Brothers of the Royal Art have much indulged their bright genius for true antient masonry...'. For Anderson, freemasonry helped cement the British nation, `made so firm, that the whole body resembles a well-built arch of the beautiful Augustan stile.'

Anderson's was not the only view of freemasonry, however. In France, Jacobite exiles brought freemasonry with them, and a rival masonic rhetoric developed. Andrew Ramsay, employed by the Old Pretender as tutor to his son, became an active and prominent freemason in France. In a famous oration before the French Grand Lodge in 1737, Ramsay enunciated a view of freemasonry which was radically different to that of Anderson. He stressed the international and catholic character of freemasonry. He stated that freemasonry had been created by the crusaders to help bind individuals of different nations in a common fraternity in order to create a new spiritual empire of virtue and science. Freemasonry had been lost to Europe because of the strife of the religious wars, but the true faith had been preserved in Scotland, which was now bringing freemasonry back to Europe. The use of freemasonry as a battle ground between Hanoverian loyalists and Jacobites was not confined to the kind of shadow boxing we can see in the works of Anderson and Ramsay. In 1722, an attempt was made by Jacobites to infiltrate the London Grand Lodge. On the continent, freemasonry provided a useful cover for Jacobite conspiracy, and papal condemnations of freemasonry in the eighteenth century were largely prompted by the need to rein in Jacobite hotheads.

Linda Colley sees the concept of Britishness as emerging from precisely the kind of dialectic that is evident from the works of Anderson and Ramsay, and clearly the history of freemasonry may potentially assist in elaborating the Colley thesis. However, for Colley, the modern nation of Britain is very much an Anglo-Scottish creation. It is striking how, in Colley's book, little attention is given to Wales. There are just 23 references in the index to Wales and the Welsh language. It does not seem credible that, if the period 1707-1837 really saw the invention of British nationality, the third major national grouping in Britain made such a limited contribution to the process. Further examination of the Welsh situation raises serious doubts about whether the Colley thesis as a whole is a viable. Above all, there is the matter of language. In 1801, at least 80% of the population of Wales and Monmouthshire were still Welsh speakers, with a high proportion of monoglots. It is difficult to see how one can talk about a British nation having been created while such a large separate linguistic grouping remained. Moreover, Welsh literature and culture still fostered a strong sense of an alternative mythology of nationhood, looking back to the romantic tradition of the bards, Prince Madoc and the Mabinogion, which represented a different view of Britain to that being developed in England and Scotland. Wales had undergone great changes in the eighteenth century, principally the development of its fissural and populist non-conformity, but it is difficult to see how these changes feed into the overall picture described by Colley. If one is to see a point at which Wales becomes more firmly absorbed into British nationhood it is probably in the 1890s, when the percentage of Welsh speakers for the

first time falls below 50% and a more integrated Anglo-Welsh society (what Gwyn Williams has called Imperial Wales) emerges. But by this time there was already a significant demand for greater autonomy for Wales. One is left wondering whether the kind of integrated British nation described by Colley ever actually existed.

The history of Welsh freemasonry reinforces the point that the framework of national development when considered from a Welsh perspective may be very different to that which adopts a primarily Anglo-Scottish view. Although Welsh freemasonry, unlike Scotland, falls under the jurisidiction of the Grand Lodge in London, it is treated administratively like an English county, and the Grand Lodge is known as the United Grand Lodge of England. From the point of view of the history of freemasonry, Wales is perhaps most interesting as the dog that didn't bark. For a long time, freemasonry could find no firm footing in Wales. Although a lodge was established in Carmarthen as early as 1724, and the provinces of North Wales and South Wales were among the earliest established by the Grand Lodge, at a time when freemasonry was spreading like wildfire through Europe and America, in Wales it made very little impact. The handful of lodges which were established were generally introduced by outsiders. These lodges were small, prone to internal quarrels, and short-lived. By 1850, freemasonry was on the verge of disappearing altogether in Wales. It was only in the late 19th century, in Imperial Wales, that Welsh freemasonry finally began to flourish. This chronology seems to mirror the overall pattern of integration of Wales into a broader British nation, and suggests that we require a more sophisticated view of the process of formation of national identity than one which restricts the process to the period 1707-1837.

The complex cross-currents which contributed to Welsh national formation are illustrated by the role of the London Welsh. Extensive Welsh immigration to London made it a dominant centre of Welsh culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As new ideas of Britishness stressing the Anglo-Scottish nexus emerged in the eighteenth century, there was a risk that Wales would be marginalised. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that the Welsh gentry included a number of Jacobite sympathisers whose loyalties were suspect. It was the London Welsh who first responded to these pressures in ways which would profoundly influence Welsh culture.

In February 1715, an announcement appeared in the London Gazette that a service would be held on March 1st at St Paul's, Covent Garden, where a sermon would be preached in the Ancient British language. This would be followed by a procession to Haberdashers Hall, where a President and Stewards would be elected and future commemorations arranged. This initiative marked not only St David's Day but also the coincidence that March 1st was the birthday of the Princess of Wales. The occasion was used to produce Hanoverian propaganda

for Wales; 4,000 copies of the sermon were sent to Wales `to be dispersed among the common people...that they might be instructed in the duties of brotherly love and loyalty to the King in their own language'. Thus was born the Society of Ancient Britons, and the annual St David's day procession became a familiar feature of London life. The Society became an important charitable body, establishing a school for the children of impoverished Welsh in London. The Society of Ancient Britons predated the formation of the English Grand Lodge by two years, and it performed for the London Welsh many similar social functions to freemasonry: a formal social gathering, a charitable role, and a visible demonstration of Hanoverian loyalty. However, as the Society grew more prosperous, its character changed. The charitable component became more important, and the commitment to the Welsh language weakened, with the St David's day sermon being given by courtly bishops in English.

Irritation at the anglicised respectability of the Ancient Britons helped prompt the formation of the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion in 1751 by Richard Morris of the Navy Office, a native of Anglesey. Richard was one of three remarkable brothers who played an important part in preserving and revitalising Welsh literary culture. It was said that another reason for the establishment of the Cymmrodorion (which means aborigines) was pique after the eldest Morris brother, Lewis, had failed in his candidature for the Royal Society. Although the Cymmrodorion had strong social and charitable components, its primary function was the discussion of Welsh literature and history in the Welsh language. The rules outline an ambitious programme of study and proposed the formation of a Welsh library and museum. Members of the Cymmrodorion had to swear an oath in Welsh and undergo a rite of initiation. This may seem reminiscent of freemasonry, but such proceedings were common in clubs at this time and do not necessarily indicate masonic influence. However, the Cymmrodorion sought to provide in the Welsh language a similar mix of social, charitable and intellectual activities to that offered by freemasons lodges, and it is not surprising that the London Welsh were more inclined to support the Cymmrodorion than the freemasons.

Although both the honorary chief presidents of the Society, William Vaughan and Sir Watkin Williams Wynne II, were freemasons, few of the active members of the Cymmrodorion were freemasons. The only significant figure to become involved with freemasonry was Goronwy Owen, a poet whose ideas on epic poetry profoundly influenced Welsh poetry for nearly a hundred years. Owen was a demanding man, probably an alcoholic, who ended up as a tobacco planter in America. He became a freemason while he was a curate at Walton near Liverpool. He wrote enthusiastically about his new hobby to William Morris, stating that `the chief thing that urged me to look into this secret craft was that I fully believed it to be a branch of my old ancestors, the Druids of yore, and I didn't guess badly'. The Morrises were

unconvinced, however, and preferred to concentrate on the Cymmrodorion. The society did not long survive the death of Richard Morris, and was replaced by various other groups. There is a strong sense, however, in which the Society of Ancient Britons, the Cymmrodorion and its successor bodies represented an independent response by the London Welsh to the same cultural trends which prompted the formation of Grand Lodge, and in some respects these London Welsh clubs and societies can be seen as a kind of parallel freemasonry. It seems that a kind of symbiotic relationship emerged between the London Welsh institutions and freemasonry. The meeting which reestablished the Cymmrodorion in 1820 was held in the Freemasons' Tavern in Great Queen Street, a regular meeting place of the London Welsh, which has been described as `the *locus originis* of some of the most important Welsh cultural and educational movements of the nineteenth century'. Moreover, some eisteddfods were held at this time in Freemasons' Hall. Whether this was more than just coincidence cannot be established.

The ambiguities of the relationship of the London Welsh to freemasonry are encapsulated in the figure of Edward Williams, whose bardic name was Iolo Morganwg, `Ned of Glamorgan'. Iolo was a South Welsh stonemason who became one of the most accomplished Welsh lyric poets. Iolo lived in London from 1773 to 1777 and 1791 to 1795, organising bardic ceremonies on Primrose Hill. In his determination to ensure the survival of a vibrant Welsh literary culture, Iolo produced many pastiches of medieval Welsh poetry and manuscripts. How far his visionary forgeries were influenced by the laudanum he took for his asthma is not clear. Iolo's forgeries were taken as genuine historical discoveries until very recently. He claimed to have found in Raglan Castle old manuscripts describing the rights and privileges of an order of bards. He believed that he was the sole survivor of this ancient gorsedd of bards and successfully established it as part of the eisteddfod. The gorsedd still forms an important component of the national eisteddfod. The rituals, secret signs and three bardic orders devised by Iolo are strongly reminiscent of freemasonry. Iolo's critics denounced the gorsedd as `pure freemasonry' and accused Iolo himself of being a freemason, a charge he hotly denied. In fact, it seems that Iolo's fevered imagination drew on many sources, the most important of which was the Friendly Society of Ancient Druids which had recently been formed in London. If there was any masonic influence on Iolo, it came perhaps by this route.

Iolo lived near Cowbridge, a small town between Cardiff and Bridgend. He perhaps witnessed a scene in 1765 described by the diarist, William Thomas: `The first of this month was held at the Bear in Cowbridge, the Society of Free Masons, being in all about 24, and went to Cowbridge church by two and two, in their white aprons, with their trowels, hammers and other instruments as belong to masonry, according to their rank

in the fraternity...A great crowd admiring and looking at the sight, being the like never before seen here'. Thomas thus presents the masonic procession at Cowbridge as something novel and strange. His diary contains mordant pen portraits of many local inhabitants, and he notes that some were freemasons. In these entries, he again portrays freemasonry as exotic and alien, as in his comments on Thomas Matthews, who had died in London: `He was a freemason and when a youth a very wild sort of a man, but of good memory in what he read, but esteemed the Bible as an old story as folks report, and somewhat melancoly the last years of his life.'

Thomas's depiction of freemasonry as alien and marginal accurately reflects its position in eighteenth-century Wales. Few lodges were established and these were mostly short-lived. This is epitomised by the lodge at Wynnstay near Wrexham. Wynnstay was the seat of the Wynn family, owners of a vast estate who were effectively the kings of North Wales. The freemasons' lodge was established by the fourth baronet, who took a close interest in the preparations, asking Grand Lodge for the warrant to be `wrote finely upon vellum' and demanding its prompt dispatch. Sir Watkin was an ornament of the London cultural world - an enthusiastic amateur actor, a friend of David Garrick, a promoter of musical concerts, and an artistic patron. He made Wynnstay a smart place to visit, building a private theatre on the estate. The masonic lodge seems to have been just like the theatre, another fashionable amenity. It did not put down strong roots in the locality, and expired shortly after Sir Watkin's death.

Ports such as Swansea and Haverfordwest provided more fertile ground for freemasonry. The story of the Beaufort and Indefatigable lodges in Swansea illustrates many of the issues associated with early freemasonry in Wales. The Beaufort Lodge was established in Swansea in 1769. It got off to a bad start. Some of those who had signed the petition for the lodge were not regular masons, and the Deputy Provincial Grand Master had to travel over from Carmarthen to rectify the situation. Then the Master embezzled the lodge funds, including money owed to Grand Lodge. At this point, Gabriel Jeffries took charge. Jeffries was a member of the town council and afterwards served as portreeve, the equivalent of mayor. When a trust was set up to improve Swansea Harbour, he became the clerk and quickly demonstrated great financial acumen. Jeffries' first act in trying to rescue the Beaufort lodge was to try and get in the good books of Grand Lodge by sending three barrels of oysters to the Grand Secretary. He also sent a long list of equipment he wanted for the lodge. He was willing to use his own considerable financial resources to make the Swansea lodge the match of any in London. A surviving account shows that money was no object. A visit of the Cowbridge masons to Swansea was marked by an enormous feast, the ringing of the church bells and the firing of guns. Opulent lodge furniture was purchased, including such exotic items as gilt pomegranites and a

sword so huge that no box could be found to transport it. Jeffries persuaded many local dignitaries to join the lodge, including members of the council and the local MP. He drew up plans for a masonic hall which he declared would compare with any in England. Jeffries' motives appear to have been partly civic - he hoped that the provincial grand lodge would be moved from Carmarthen to Swansea - and partly personal - he wanted to be a provincial officer himself.

Then Jeffries lost interest. The lodge rapidly declined and by 1800 was virtually defunct. In that year, George Bowen, a painter who had been master of a lodge in London, moved to Swansea and decided to start a more vigorous lodge. He met many other newcomers to Swansea, particularly visiting sailors from Scotland and Ireland, who agreed that this busy port should have an active lodge. Statutory restrictions at this time meant that new lodge warrants could not be issued, and new lodges had to take over the warrants of defunct lodges. The Grand Secretary in London suggested that Bowen should ask Jeffries for the warrant of the Beaufort lodge. Bowen went to see Jeffries, who regarded the interloper with suspicion and made difficulties about handing over the Beaufort warrant and equipment. So Bowen tried Neath, where a lodge established by Jeffries under the patronage of the local landowners, the Mackworth family, was also virtually defunct. With Sir Digby Mackworth's agreement, the Neath lodge was transferred to Swansea and renamed the Indefatigable. At this point, Jeffries threatened to prosecute Bowen for establishing an illegal lodge, an offence then punishable by transportation. Finding his trade badly affected by this dispute, Bowen brought actions for slander against Jeffries and his associates. Dissuaded from continuing his actions by Grand Lodge, Bowen left Swansea on business, and the new lodge almost collapsed. It rallied on his return , and somehow managed to stagger through, despite the continued jibes of Jeffries. The lodge remained very dependent on mariners from across the Bristol Channel, particularly Somerset, Devon and Cornwall. Bowen's final letter to Grand Lodge makes the difficulties of trying to introduce freemasonry to Wales very clear. In London, he wrote, masters `are supported by able and well experienced officers past and present, each of them knowing well their respective duty. The reverse is my situation, my wardens are young in masonry and younger in office and for the want in experience in the grand and fundamental part are but of little service to me...even the whole of the writing necessary for conducting the lodge is all and must be performed by myself...'

The most concerted attempt before 1840 to introduce freemasonry on a large scale to Wales was the work of one man, Benjamin Plummer, a merchant from Somerset. Plummer was initiated into freemasonry in 1798 in the Royal Athelstan lodge in London, an Antients lodge. At this time, English freemasonry was split between two rival grand lodges. In 1751, a group of largely Irish masons who had been unable to join lodges operated by

the Grand Lodge formed in 1717 established their own Grand Lodge which claimed to represent an older form of masonic practice. The Antients became particularly popular among artisans and tradesman, with strong support in the industrial towns of north west England. Eventually, in 1813 the two Grand Lodges were reconciled and the United Grand Lodge of England was established. Plummer rose rapidly through the ranks of the Antients. In 1803, he became Master of the Royal Athelstan lodge. The following year he was appointed to a national office, Grand Sword Bearer. In 1805, he became Grand Junior Warden of the Antients and in 1806 Grand Senior Warden. It was at this point that he launched his masonic missionary campaign in South Wales. His business took him on a constant journey round the country, and required him to spend half the year visiting towns in Wales. The exact nature of Plummer's business is not clear; it is possible that he sold naval supplies of some kind.

Plummer found Welsh freemasonry in a sorry state. He afterwards wrote that when `I commenced my exertions, there were but two lodges, one of them in Swansea, which was very thinly attended, and the other at Brecon in a dormant state'. During a period of eight years from about 1807, Plummer established eight new lodges in Wales and initiated more than two hundred masons. He planned his campaign like a military conquest. He selected Caerphilly as his starting point, then used a kind of swarming technique, with members of the Caerphilly lodge establishing lodges in nearby towns, whose members in turn formed further lodges elsewhere. Members of the Caerphilly lodge set up new lodges in Cardiff, Newport and Merthyr. Members of the Newport lodge established lodges in Pontypool and Carmarthen. The Pontypool lodge helped set up a lodge in Abergavenny, and so on. This process was assisted by the masonic lodges of French prisoners of war billeted in towns like Abergavenny, with whom Plummer maintained close contacts. Plummer's energy in pursuing this strategy is evident in his breathless correspondence with Grand Lodge, dealing with dozens of detailed queries about the new lodges and issuing a stream of complicated instructions for forwarding his mail as he moved from place to place.

Plummer's attempts forcibly to implant freemasonry in Wales could create problems. A Modern lodge had been reestablished at Carmarthen in 1810, but disputes had arisen and Plummer saw a recruiting opportunity for the Antients, boasting to Grand Lodge that if an Antient lodge could be created in Carmarthen, thirty masons from the rival Grand Lodge would join it. An Antient lodge was duly consecrated by Plummer at Carmarthen, with masons from his Newport lodge as the senior officers. Returning to the lodge a few months later, Plummer found it in uproar because the Master had secretly taken the lodge warrant and equipment by boat to Tenby and illicitly created masons there. Plummer annulled these proceedings and claimed he had restored

harmony to the lodge, but the Master wrote to Grand Lodge complaining about Plummer's overbearing manner. He alleged that Plummer had insisted that the lodge pass a vote of thanks to him and, when this was passed by only a small majority, had gone from house to house with a petition supporting his actions, which he had bullied members of the lodge into signing. Plummer countered by sending to Grand Lodge documentary evidence of the Master's dubious proceedings at Tenby, including an account of his expenses there which included an expensive box at the theatre and ten pounds for `dinner bill and girls'.

By 1814, Plummer had become weary. The union between the Grand Lodges seems to have disillusioned him, as he felt provincial officers were appointed who had insufficient involvement with local freemasonry. He lobbied unsuccessfully to become a provincial officer in Wales himself. Shortly before Plummer petitioned to become Provincial Grand Master of South Wales, the Indefatigable Lodge at Swansea had passed a resolution that `Benjamin Hall of Abercarn in the county of Monmouth, MP for the county of Glamorgan...become a mason', and Hall was promptly appointed Provincial Grand Master. Plummer accepted this disappointment with fortitude, declaring that Hall `is a man much respected, possessed of great talent, high property and great responsibility', but adding `I hope it will be convenient with him to attend the duties of that office (if any are required).' Plummer went on to say that `I cannot attend the business of masonry in this country as heretofore but I trust that Grand Lodge considering my exertions are satisfied. I have done my duty in forwarding the welfare of masonry'. In May 1815, however, Plummer was back in Swansea and wrote one last letter to Grand Lodge: `It is with unfeigned regret I have to inform you that the various country lodges I am in the habit of visiting three times in each year through the counties of Somerset, Wilts, Gloucester and Monmouth and South Wales are much disappointed since the Union of the two Grand Lodges, expecting a regular quarterly communication...; and at this time four quarters are past, without any information. The ancient lodges, in particular, finding themselves thus neglected, feel disposed to retract from the union, and remain independent of any Grand Lodge...'

This threatened western rebellion did not take place, unlike north west England where a number of lodges did shortly afterwards secede from United Grand Lodge. However, as soon as Plummer left the scene, the lodges he had established fizzled out. All Plummer's lodges except those at Cardiff and Merthyr had disappeared by 1830. Even those which survived experienced great difficulties. Merthyr was at this time the largest Welsh town, but between 1816 and 1827 the Loyal Cambrian lodge in Merthyr failed to recruit a single new member. The lodge rallied slightly in the 1830s, but again no new candidates were recruited between 1843 and 1849, and the possibility of closing the lodge was considered. In

1853, when the Provincial Grand lodge for eastern South Wales met at Merthyr, only thirty six people attended. The position in north Wales was even worse; between 1811 and 1852, no Provincial Grand Master for North Wales was appointed.

Most masonic scholars have ascribed the difficulties of early Welsh freemasonry to economic reasons, but this hardly explains the problems of the lodge in Merthyr, for example. Moreover, the difficulties of freemasonry contrast with the growth of the friendly societies, which became a significant feature of Welsh society. In the 1830s, while freemasonry was struggling, Swansea had 47 friendly societies and Merthyr 32. There were nearly 200 such societies in Glamorgan alone. While the freemasons in Merthyr could only muster six people to attend a Provincial Grand Lodge, the funeral of an Oddfellow in Merthyr attracted 170 brethren from four lodges, and on Christmas Day 1838 400 Merthyr Oddfellows processed in full regalia. Moreover, in contrast to England, the Welsh friendly societies attracted significant support from the upper middle classes. The Welsh preference for friendly societies seems to have been due largely to language. There were a number of indigenous Welsh-speaking friendly societies, most notably the Ivorites, and English friendly societies such as the Oddfellows allowed proceedings to be conducted in Welsh. By contrast, the freemasons remained a resolutely English-speaking body; at a time when 91% of Merthyr's population was Welsh-speaking, it is not surprising they had difficulty recruiting there.

The greater flexibility of the friendly societies allowed them to become more closely allied to the emerging Welsh national institutions. Friendly society processions formed an important part of the Eisteddfod. The Oddfellows and Ivorites took a prominent part in the opening of the Carmarthen Eisteddfod in 1865. They were also one of the main attractions of the processions at Wrexham and Oswestry marking the coming of age of the Sir Watkin Williams Wynne IV in 1841. Another problem for the freemasons was their close alliance with the established church. The various Welsh clergymen who were freemasons before 1850 all seem to have been Anglicans. Given the overwhelmingly non-conformist character of Wales, this must also have weakened the position of the freemasons.

All this was about to change. In 1847, a parliamentary commission undertook an investigation of the state of education in Wales. The commissioners were three English lawyers who could not speak Welsh. Their report was ill-informed and prejudiced, portraying Wales as an ignorant backward country, inhabited by promiscuous and dirty people. The commissioners ascribed the backwardness of Wales to the Welsh language and the influence of non-conformity. The report caused an outcry in Wales, where it became known as the Treason of the Blue Books. The importance of the 1847 report as a

watershed should not be exaggerated, but it certainly galvanised the existing debate about language and education in Wales, and gave an enormous impetus to attempts to improve Welsh education. Welsh society became determined to prove its respectability through education. There were many views on the future of the Welsh language, but an influential body of opinion felt that English should be the language of trade and commerce and that Welsh should be used only for domestic purposes. The Cambridge academic Connop Thirlwall, the Bishop of St Davids, explicitly urged that the Welsh language should become merely a tourist attraction. The revived Society of Cymmrodorion organised an English-speaking social science section at the Eisteddfod to act as an instrument of modernisation.

Frederick Bolingbroke Ribbans studied at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge and became a schoolmaster at Birmingham, where he specialised in commercial education. From 1843 to 1857, he was Headmaster successively of Sir Thomas Powell's School and Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School at Carmarthen. Following his retirement in 1857, he returned to England, settling at Windsor. Ribbans was a minor, and faintly ridiculous, man of letters. He published a collection of poetry, the quality of which can be judged from the opening couplet of his lines to a Cambridge friend: `Thank you Charlie for your letter, Never yet was penned a better.' He also produced some very banal works of religious instruction and pamphlets extolling the virtues of the Anglican church. His pamphlets on education were more forward-looking, advocating the value of a commercial education and even suggesting the introduction of decimal coins and measures. Ribban's enthusiasm for commerce is also evident from his poetry, including his lines on the opening of the railway in Carmarthen in 1852, beginning `Hail commerce! source of every social good', and praising the railway as `a boon to Wales - a source of profit too - when her vast mineral wealth is brought to view'.

Ribbans' most notorious literary work was his memoir of the royal librarian, Bernard Bolingbroke Woodward, claimed as a relative on the strength of the coincidence of middle name. Ribbans' memoir comprises a number of inaccurate anecdotes and transcripts of letters to him by Woodward, including tactful comments on Ribbans' lamentable poetical efforts. The memoir was savaged by reviewers, who commented that the only reliable item in it was the photograph at the beginning, and questioned the propriety of reproducing so many personal letters. Woodward had published a history of Wales which cast doubt on many popular Welsh legends, which was so badly received in Wales that Woodward was apprehensive about visiting the country. Ribbans praised Woodward's work and gave examples of the backwardness and superstition of Wales, declaring that the only answer lay in education of the sort proposed by Bishop Thirlwall, the advocate of Welsh as a tourist attraction.

Ribbans, then, was an enthusiast for Anglicanism, commerce and the greater use of English by the Welsh. He was also a keen freemason, including a masonic song in his collection of poetry. In 1841, a lodge, known as St Peter's lodge, had been reestablished in Carmarthen; Ribbans became master in 1845 and helped set the young lodge on its feet. In 1855, St Peter's lodge sponsored the application to establish the Brecknock lodge at the Castle Hotel in Brecon, and Ribbans was the first master of the lodge. In 1856, he was instrumental in establishing the Prince of Wales lodge in Llanelli, and was again the first master of the lodge. Despite his teaching duties in Carmarthen, Ribbans attended all the meetings of the lodge in Carmarthen during his year as master, initiating fourteen new recruits. Ribbans' devoted service was marked by a special presentation in 1856. In 1857, he served as the Grand Senior Warden for the Province of South Wales Western Division.

Ribbans' work seems to epitomise a new phase in the history of Welsh freemasonry, where it is explicitly linked to a modernising movement, the distinctive features of which were commerce, education and the English language. It is at this point that freemasonry becomes a feature of Welsh life. The change can be seen by looking again at the membership figures of the Loyal Cambrian Lodge in Merthyr. From its low point in the early 1850s, the lodge rallied, establishing a new lodge at Aberdare in 1856, and attracting in the 1860s an average of four recruits a year. This figure increases to an average of six a year in the 1870s, including, significantly, an unitarian minister. In the 1880s and 1890s, yearly recruitment is frequently in double figures, including such notable individuals as Lord Rhonnda, owner of Cambrian coalmines, MP for Merthyr and a significant figure in the Liberal establishment of late Victorian Wales. The annus mirabilis for the Loyal Cambrian was 1911, when twenty new candidates were initiated, comprising a cross-section of the Merthyr upper crust, including the Chief Clerk of the County Court, the Deputy Town Clerk, a police inspector, three solicitors, colliery engineers, a surgeon, an architect and musicians from the suburb of Cefn Coed. A similar resurgence is evident in North Wales. When Sir Watkin Williams Wynne IV became Provincial Grand Master of North Wales in 1852, only one North Welsh lodge was active. By the time he retired in 1885, the number of lodges had increased to 23 with seven hundred and forty members. By 1943, the number of lodges had increased to forty six; by 1977, there were ninety six lodges and a total north Welsh membership of more than 6000.

The link between the growth of freemasonry and the movement for improved educational and cultural provision in Wales is illustrated by an event in Haverfordwest. The Haverfordwest lodge had recruited sixty members in six years, and the need for a new meeting place was pressing. There had also been for some time complaints about the town's lack of a public

assembly room for concerts, lectures and other functions. The new masonic hall opened in 1872 incorporated a large hall with seating for 600 people which was made available for town use. Inhabitants of the town actively contributed to fundraising for the hall, principally through a grand masonic bazaar, held over three days in November 1869, which raised four hundred pounds. The night before the bazaar opened the local MP, Colonel Edwardes, was initiated into the lodge. Colonel Edwardes, afterwards Lord Kensington, later became Provincial Grand Master for the western division of South Wales, and an important figure in the late Victorian growth of Welsh freemasonry.

The story of Welsh freemasonry turned full circle in 1929, with the consecration of Gwynedd lodge, no. 5068,. the founders of which were all members of the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion. The first master of the lodge was Sir Vincent Evans, the Secretary of the Cymmrodorion and a prominent figure in the national Eisteddfod. The close relationship of this lodge to the liberal welsh establishment was reflected in the membership of Gwilym Lloyd George, the prime minister's son. It was hoped that the formation of this lodge would rekindle the older social functions of the Cymmorodorion, which had been squeezed out by its work as a learned and educational society. Thus, the society which had represented in the eighteenth century a London Welsh response to freemasonry itself became linked with freemasonry. At the consecration of the Gwynedd lodge, it was pointed out that, although there were lodges in London operating in French, German and Italian, no Welsh version of the ritual was available. The Gwynedd lodge produced a book of Welsh masonic songs and a lecture on the second tracing board in Welsh, but progress in giving Welsh the same status as other languages was slow. In 1979, permission was given for the use of a Welsh address to the Worshipful Master in installation ceremonies, and, finally, in 1982 Dewi Saint lodge, no. 9067, was formed, which was the first lodge given permission to perform the ritual in Welsh.

This lecture has been an extended reflection on a passing remark of Raphael Samuels, who, seeking to illustrate the dangers of Anglocentrism in history, pointed out that, in investigating the origins of freemasonry, one might start by comparing it with the eisteddfod. Unfortunately, Raphael's remark misfired, in that, as David Stevenson has magnificently shown, the best place to start examining the origins of freemasonry is in fact north of the border, where the earliest lodge records survive. Nevertheless, I make no apologies for concentrating, in my consideration of the problem of Britain this evening, on Wales. There has recently been a fashion for producing works which claim to offer British history looking at the whole of Britain, but which in fact largely concentrate on England, with token examples from Wales and Scotland. I would contend that truly British

history can only emerge from detailed studies of aspects of the history of Britain's component national groupings. Laurence Brockliss and David Eastwood have suggested that it is a mistake to think in terms of the creation of an integrated concept of British nationality, and that the British state which gradually emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was formed of multiple allegiances. Even this is perhaps too rigid, and the concept of Britishness should perhaps be conceived as more fluid and dynamic, changing shape constantly from the earliest to the most recent times. It is perhaps a mistake to see freemasonry as playing one single role in this process. Its function also changes and it can assume multiple identities. It would be wrong to see the role of freemasonry in Welsh history as exclusively associated with Anglicising modernisation from 1850. As a body with a highly organised provincial structure, freemasonry could offer even the most remote areas access to metropolitan facilities and thus help build a sense of national identity.

In 1769, the son of one of the members of the lodge at Anglesey went mad. Grand Lodge's committee of charity in London agreed to pay the expenses of admitting the unhappy man to Bethlem Hospital in London and the Senior Grand Warden, one of the governors of the hospital, made the arrangements for his admission. The Grand Secretary himself went to the hospital to fill up the necessary forms, and obtained advice from a friend on the medical staff as to how the various practicalities should be handled. Later that month, the `poor lunatick', accompanied by his doctor, unexpectedly arrived by coach in London late one evening. The Grand Secretary, James Heseltine, was away, and noone would allow the poor man any shelter, even in their stables. Eventually, the landlord of a tavern close to Heseltine's office allowed him to stay there, provided he was chained to a table and the doctor slept in the same room on chairs. There was a delay in completing the admission to Bethlem and the doctor who had accompanied the man to London refused to stay with him any longer, so Heseltine, who had now returned, arranged for the patient to be sent to a madhouse just outside London. Heseltine, who was `left with the man upon my own hands and answerable for everything', also sorted out the eventual transfer to Bethlem and gave the necessary security required by the hospital should he ever escape. He then sent a detailed account of his proceedings back to Anglesey. Sadly, about a year later, the unfortunate man died, and Heseltine again intervened to ensure that he had a decent funeral. Acts of charity and kindness such as Heseltine's can contribute to the shaping of a nation. By providing a means by which provinicial members could get access to metropolitan facilities such as hospitals, freemasonry could help bring Wales closer to London and played a part in developing those everyday contacts which are the sinews of the nation.