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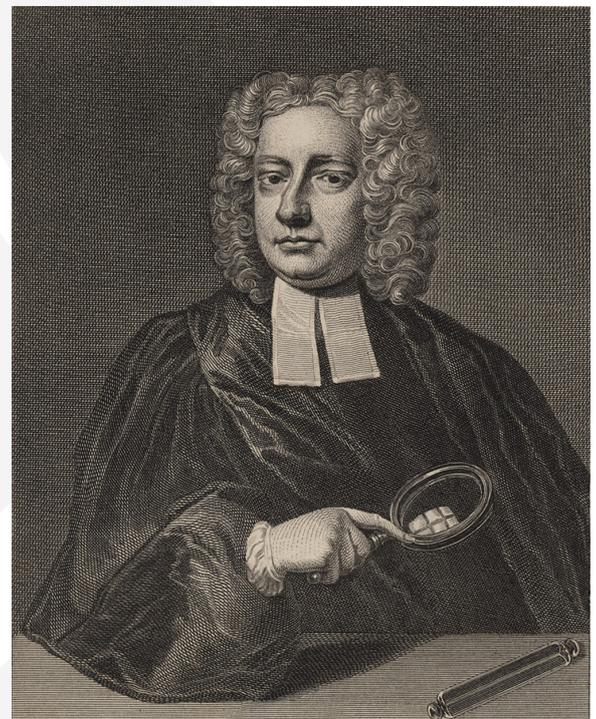
John Theophilus Desaguliers

Summary: A biography of the Reverend John Theophilus Desaguliers a very influential Freemason.

John Theophilus... who? Why should I ever be interested in him? Perhaps because he was described by the historian Dr Albert G. Mackey as: *'the Father of Modern Speculative Freemasonry, and to whom, perhaps, more than any other person, is the present Grand Lodge of England indebted for its existence'*. He continues: *'Desaguliers who, by his energy and enthusiasm, infused a spirit of zeal into his contemporaries, which culminated in the revival of the year 1717'*.¹ Well, as an active Member of your Lodge and having just commemorated our Tercentenary, aren't you now just a little bit curious?

You might wonder how he had become inspired by the ideas of Speculative Freemasonry in the first place and, just as tellingly, how he had achieved a position in which his ideas could have borne such prized fruit 300 years later? Before we search for answers, let's have a look at his CV.

John Theophilus Desaguliers was born in La Rochelle in France on 12 March 1683. Following a brutal anti-Protestant purge, his Father, a Huguenot pastor, was expelled from France, but his Wife and Children were ordered to be detained and brought up as Catholics. His Father went to England where he was ordained as an Anglican priest and sent to a Parish in Guernsey. His family then fled from France to join him there, with the two-year-old John hidden in a barrel of clothing. His Father later moved the family to Islington in London, where he ran a school. John attended Bishop Veasey's Grammar School in Sutton Coldfield and then read Theology at Christ Church, Oxford. On graduating, he too was ordained as an Anglican Priest and took up a post as Lecturer in 'Experimental Philosophy' in London; giving lectures to the Royal Family and the Royal Society among others. In 1719, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Civil Law by the University of Oxford. With his exceptionally active mind he continued to deliver a steady series of papers on mainly scientific subjects which were published without pause until his death in 1744. His most well-known publication was *A Course of Experimental Philosophy* (1734).



John Theophilus Desaguliers (1683–1744),
after Hans Hysing

A polymath, Desaguliers studied philosophy, mathematics, geometry and optics, becoming an authority on subjects as diverse as artillery and hydraulics. Aged twenty, his work on projectile trajectories led to his design of a siege canon which was successfully used by the British army. In 1721, he advised the City Fathers of Edinburgh on the installation of fountains in the city squares. On his return from Scotland, he devised an improved ventilation system for the Houses of Parliament. He also created the first planetarium in England.

As a result of this far-reaching scientific research, he was elected as Fellow of the Royal Society in 1714 and became a friend of Sir Isaac Newton. Income-bearing appointments to numerous churches in Essex, Middlesex and Norfolk then followed, as did his appointment as Chaplain to the immensely wealthy and influential Duke of Chandos and, later, to the Prince of Wales. All this had been achieved within ten years or so of completing his Degree at Oxford.

You may well ask, given his active and wide-ranging workload, exactly when, how and why he turned his attention to Freemasonry?

Whatever Mackey may have written in his *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, Desaguliers' name does not feature in any of the records of the four Lodges that formed the first English Grand Lodge in 1717 and he is unlikely to have played any part in their decision. In fact, the first reference to Desaguliers' Masonic career is contained in the Reverend Dr. James Anderson's *Constitutions and Masonic History* of 1723, where Desaguliers is listed as the third Grand Master, serving in 1719.

As Desaguliers and Payne were heavily involved in compiling the first *Constitutions* with Anderson, it follows that the omission of Desaguliers' name from the Grand Lodge Meetings of 1717 and 1718 was intentional and with his full knowledge. It is therefore likely that, to become eligible, Desaguliers had joined Anderson's Lodge, The Goose and Gridiron, No.4, shortly before he was made Grand Master. Brethren who have been given grief by colleagues for their speedy rise to the Master's Chair may wish to cite in their defence this fellow Mason who, apparently, was Initiated and Elected Grand Master possibly on the same day in 1719; not an infrequent occurrence in the 18th century.

There are two contemporary accounts that may assist us. Dr Stukeley wrote in his 1721 diary:

'I was the first person made a Freemason for many years. We had great difficulty to find members enough to perform the ceremony'.²

The four London Lodges had united in an age of social turbulence and political tension. The Grand Lodge met only once a year on St. John-the-Baptist's Day each June. Freemasonry was clearly short of Members, Candidates and ideas, and was in poor corporate health.

The excellent records of Scottish Freemasonry are perhaps also relevant. In 1721, the Lord Provost of Edinburgh invited Desaguliers to visit the city to advise him on the installation of fountains. Shortly after his arrival in Edinburgh, and before meeting the Lord Provost, Desaguliers had a meeting with representatives of Scottish Freemasonry. Given the vigorous Masonic scene in Edinburgh, he presumably wanted to compare notes and perhaps learn lessons. The Scottish Masons were deeply honoured to entertain such a distinguished

former Grand Master of the English Grand Lodge and, as the Lodge records quaintly put it: '*finding him duly qualified in all the points of Masonry*',³ they admitted him as a Master Mason in the Lodge of St Mary Chapel on 24 August 1721. Two days later, following his meeting with the Lord Provost, he was given the Freedom of the City.

On his return to London, Desaguliers focussed his considerable energies on inspiring the Grand Lodge of England to return to good health with a new sense of purpose. To attract the creative leadership Freemasonry required and also to give it a national authority, he argued, it had to be led, not by a long-serving Mason like Sawyer, but by a prominent member of the nobility. Contemporary society demanded it. Such an appointment would allay public suspicion and, in turn, attract a membership for whom speculation about the meaning and purpose of the world around them in distinguished company would be attractive.

However, to attract the nobility required the organisation to be formally and nationally structured and shown to be a going concern. The disparate English Lodges then possessed many differing rituals, customs, rules and procedures.

An important first step would be to publish a set of rules and regulations to which all Lodges could adhere. Payne revised the former Operative Regulations, Anderson adapted them into a set of laws and constitutions, as well as composing a (highly imaginative) Masonic history and Desaguliers drove the project forward and contributed the Preface. The result was the *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons: Containing the History, Charges, Regulations, &c. of that most Ancient and Right Worshipful Fraternity*, published by Anderson and approved by Grand Lodge on 24 June 1723. Not inappropriately, perhaps, the minutes of the meeting that approved publication were signed by Desaguliers as Deputy Grand Master.

Desaguliers' major success was to persuade a series of noblemen to accept the role of Grand Master, starting with the 2nd Duke of Montagu in 1721, which culminated with George, Prince of Wales in 1792. It was a master-stroke. Henceforth, Freemasonry was above suspicion, 'if it is good enough for the Royal Family then it is good enough for me'. With a nobleman as Grand Master and with much work still to be completed, Desaguliers acted as an influential Deputy Grand Master (equivalent to the Pro Grand Master today) in 1722, 1723 and 1725. Such was Desaguliers' formidable Masonic reputation, in 1731 when visiting the Continent, he was invited to Initiate the Duke of Lorraine, who subsequently became Holy Roman Emperor Francis I. Over the next 20 years, twelve Fellows of the Royal Society, became Grand Master, following in Desaguliers' footsteps.

In a mere five years, between 1721 and 1726, the Grand Lodge of England had been turned around from a basket case to a thriving Institution. By 1735, the four founding Lodges of 1717 had expanded to 126 and the membership was intellectually strong. These were considerable achievements. All in all, Desaguliers might well have expressed quiet contentment.

We have glanced briefly at the 'How?' and the 'When?' of Desaguliers' interest in Freemasonry. Now let's look at the 'Why?' He left no diary nor correspondence, so we need to read between the lines of other records. Perhaps it began symbolically with his escape from France hidden in a barrel. In his lifetime, the hostility and even open warfare between Catholics and Protestants, and between Jews and Muslims, made institutional religion's role as God's chosen instrument deeply questionable for his open and trained mind. Desaguliers' early interest in 'natural philosophy' (what we call 'science' today) and his frequent contact with the foremost scientists of the day at the Royal Society led him to explore the natural laws behind God's creation of the universe. This would have made it difficult for him to accept the supernatural or miraculous events in the lives of Moses, Jesus and Mohammed. Inevitably he leaned towards Deism (belief in a God but not in his supernatural activities on Earth). We can only presume that Desaguliers realised that Freemasonry might well be an ideal vehicle to spread his Deist views.

He took early steps to remove the overt Christian references from the operatives' catechism. For example, he changed the last answer in this exchange:

Q. How many lights?

A. Three

Q. What do they represent?

A. The Father, Son and Holy Ghost' changed to:

A. 'The three Great Lights are the Volume of Sacred Laws, the Square and the Compasses'.

Desaguliers had also accepted the time-consuming and provocative role of imposing uniformity on the wide variety of Ceremonies practised in Lodges across the country. He persuaded the Grand Lodge to adopt a system of two separate and distinct Degrees, the first Initiating Apprentices and a second devoted to the needs of Craftsmen and Master Masons. (Entered Apprentice and Fellow Craft were terms later imported from Scotland).

With sad irony, Desaguliers' considerable efforts to unite the English Lodges proved a stumbling block to Masonic unity for the next eighty years. Provincial Lodges with a high proportion of former operatives objected to the changed passwords; the removal of Christian references; the inclusion of unfamiliar Degrees; the replacement of the catechism with which they were all familiar; and, above all, to the perceived arrogance of London Lodges in assuming country-wide authority. By 1753, this unhappy band of Brothers had grouped together as a powerful rival to the 'London' or 'Modern' Grand Lodge, and, to make a point, set up the 'Antient' Grand Lodge. Desaguliers had the last laugh, however, for when the United Grand Lodge of England was formed in 1813, the Antients conceded on almost all these points and Desaguliers' formidable achievements remained substantially unchanged.

What sort of man was Desaguliers? Apparently, he was physically unprepossessing and relied on his mind to inform and persuade, rather than his physical presence to intimidate. He also had a sense of humour. When presiding over Grand Lodge as Grand Master, one of the Grand Officers made a mistake and swore under his breath. Realising the Grand Master had heard him, he expressed profuse and sustained apologies. Desaguliers looked on impassively. Eventually he silenced his errant Officer by saying: *'If God didn't hear you, my Brother, I certainly won't tell him'*.

He died in London on 29 February 1744 and is buried in the Queen's Chapel of the Savoy. To mark the occasion of his visit, the Edinburgh Masons presented him with an Ode. Let the last four lines be his epitaph:

O worthy wight, whose genius great refines, [man]
And puts in practice Euclid's unko lines, [extraordinary]
Be ever blyth, and keeps a saul in heel, [retain courage to the end]
Sae beneficial to the common weal. [well being or good]

As Grand Master, Desaguliers introduced the pattern of formal Toasts we use today. So at your next Festive Board, it might be a kindly act to raise a glass to him in quiet appreciation.

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 - Followed by 'any questions'
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 - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary

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*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version unless otherwise specified.

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*. Rudyard Kipling

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