

#### *Chapter 4*

### *Secrecy and the Paradox at the Heart of Modernity (the Masonic Moment)*

If the bourse during the eighteenth century gave expression to the mundane affairs of preoccupied merchants and traders, then the major literary and philosophical movement of the century sought to make them more thoughtful, to call them to higher, less self-interested ideals. The Enlightenment had origins in the religious and political discontents of the later seventeenth century. The new science also played a role in creating this new cultural agenda. By the 1680s enlightened critiques of authority or prejudice and superstition began in books, but quickly became a phenomenon associated with social life, with groups such as the cosmopolites we met in Chapter 1. Typically they coalesced around learned projects: scientific experimentation, the editing of journals, self-improvement defined as education through reading and discussion. The ensuing movement to enlighten initiated a new basis for human interaction, a search for tolerant interchanges across the cultures and religions of Euro-American society.

The search for toleration and self-education took myriad social forms, none of them more exotic and distinctive to the age than the new masonic lodges. In their midst, first in Britain, then by the 1720s on the Continent, could be found men, eventually women, who can only be described as unexpected. In a Paris lodge a Negro trumpeter in the king's guard mixed with a champagne merchant from the provinces; in London French Huguenot refugees met in lodges with minor government officials.<sup>1</sup> A long-time resident of Algeria, back home in London and self-identified as a freemason, praised Islam for its toleration and took Christians to task for their ignorance.<sup>2</sup>

The struggle for more cosmopolitan forms of social life entailed a repudiation of the privileges and practices of closed elites, in particular the clergy and, to a lesser extent, the old aristocracy. The lodges grew out of the early modern guilds of stonemasons who gradually were subsumed under the authority of the genteel, but mostly middling men admitted out of necessity for their ability to pay much needed dues. The free and accepted masons, as

the newcomers called themselves, created new spaces where a different kind of social mixing became possible, more cerebral and having less and less to do with craft or work.<sup>3</sup> At every turn freemasons proclaimed themselves to be enlightened. They said that anyone would be welcome in a lodge—except a Jesuit.<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically they also embraced secrecy and discretion.

On the periphery of Europe where elite power often went unchecked—in Russia, eastern Prussia, or Ireland—cosmopolitan enlightenment struggled. Assisted by spies, the authorities of church and state everywhere watched, and as a result in such places robust civil society either faltered or took on increasingly more secretive practices. In Russia even the tsarina herself, Catherine the Great, used her literary skills to write plays attacking the freemasons, the most overtly Western and imported of the new social forms. These were widely read and performed, and while anonymous, known to be by Her Majesty.<sup>5</sup> Earlier, in Western Europe, during the conflict between the Protestant Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, secrecy had offered an opportunity for plotting or protection from persecution. After 1700 the religious hostilities became largely static, and secrecy took on new uses, generally, but not always—if we read and believe the spy reports—benign.

In so many places civil society embraced a protective, even playful, occasionally bizarre, layer of secrecy. The masonic form became the most famous: secret passwords, gestures, rituals and signs. But within the century, by the 1790s in places like Ireland, secrecy, often directly imitative of masonic practices, also became an essential part of political organization. Both playful and sinister forms of the secretive in social relations, with their promises and contradictions, and ranging from the 1730s to the 1790s, concern us now. In passing, we will also examine the mystical opportunities that the veil of secrecy permitted as French freemasons of the 1780s—among others—turned to the tradition of the magical arts in their search for a universal wisdom. It was as if alchemy had come back, not as a set of practices, but as a rather more cerebral mantra for change.

Given the power of the old elites nurtured by land and rural deference, cities with their anonymity—the larger the better—became the natural homes for new practices and mores. Enlightened circles preferred the coffee house over the confraternity, the salon as a celebratory site over the saint's days. The complexities and challenges of cosmopolitanism emerged most dramatically and paradoxically in the most fashionable form of clubbing, the new masonic lodges. Almost all forms of secretive political association in the modern world also first used the template provided by the lodges. Their habits of secrecy, once of guild origin, now imitative of court culture, at first created

nothing more sinister than mystery and aura. Yet they offered a new urbane form of social grouping that could be reoriented toward political goals at variance with the interests of established authority. And, of course, by the 1730s printed "exposures" of masonic passwords, rituals, and codes had become commonplace. By the 1780s the freemasons themselves printed almanacs and handbooks that offered engravings of how to perform ceremonies, complete with the "secret" password of the year.

When enlightened clubbing among relative strangers became the fashion, secrecy also acted as an umbrella. The paradox of educated professional men, and some women, exiting the privacy of their homes to feast and to ritualize under the mantle of secrecy, best understood as exclusivity and discretion, seems at this distance almost bizarre. Why, just as the cosmopolitan became fashionable, so too did the rush to create rule-bound secret societies and exclusionary social venues? Men donned aprons and jewels, decorated chambers with ermine, installed "altars" with "tabernacles." They broke bread in an upstart organization that claimed a lineage back to the time of Solomon and his master mason, Hiram. Most important, the new masonic lodges repeatedly said that they wanted in their assemblies "brothers of talent and orators of merit."<sup>6</sup> Throughout the century masonic literature, much of it anonymous, would argue that symbols and mysteries, more than anything else, "produce in the heart and spirit of the individual sentiments that make them enjoy their work and duties," and all more readily enhance a feeling of equality among brothers.<sup>7</sup> Precisely because the new ideal of egalitarian cosmopolitanism posed so many challenges, internally to the older ingrained habits of clan and cult and externally from the suspicious authorities, the claim to secrecy created a "free" zone where a group of relative strangers tested new limits and permissions. They could imagine themselves as citizens of the world, and masonic almanacs and pocket companions routinely gave lists of every urban lodge in Europe (and their meeting times). Sometimes lodges in the Americas and foreign colonies were also listed.<sup>8</sup>

Two quite different places will provide the prime examples of the testing, as well as the tensions, within cosmopolitan fraternizing: Bordeaux and the much larger city of Dublin. In the first, French masonic lodges struggled throughout the eighteenth century with the implications of their commitment to cosmopolitanism, with the issue of whom they should admit or reject. In the second, during the 1790s, Irish reformers seized upon the masonic ideal as the model to be imitated by the new secret political societies they established. Their goals became the reconciling of religious differences between Protestants and Catholics, who once united in secrecy, would, it was believed,

fight for profound change. Both French brothers and Irish reformers claimed that secrecy and discretion, accompanied by rules for behavior, focused the mind and fostered the bonds of society.<sup>9</sup> None saw secrecy as sinister—although we, in modern democratic societies, might. Ironically, the aspirations of most secret societies throughout the eighteenth century should be seen as nascently—if fitfully—democratic. In the Irish case, after the failed rebellion of 1798, the secrecy turned inward and became a way of life, the cornerstone for radical Catholic, and then Protestant groups, to be seen in the shadows of Northern Ireland to this day.

### *Secrecy and the Eighteenth-Century Lodges*

Throughout the eighteenth-century freemasonry was—as it is now—a supposedly secret society. Yet paradoxically the lodges flourished in the eighteenth century among men—and women—who defined themselves as enlightened and hence decidedly open to people of different religions or professions. In any lodge people could be found who had no other reason for being present other than an interest in ceremony and the ideals taught by the masonic creed. In Bordeaux during the 1730s a Captain Patrick Dixon from Dublin fraternized with James Bradshaw, a merchant in the town, and they were joined by a local curate. All would have been familiar with the masonic *Constitutions*, first published in 1723 in London. It proclaimed religious toleration, brothers “meeting upon the level,” rising in masonic wisdom because of merit, not blood or birth. Dozens of editions appeared in every European language, and strangers sought initiation who had little in common save their attraction to sociability in its masonic form. They sought personal improvement, and eagerly they practiced skills like voting in elections or giving formal orations before their brothers. They learned social behavior that was meant to be disciplined and refined, and they could be fined for breaches in conduct, both inside and away from the lodge.

In England and Scotland by 1700 the lodges evolved out of guilds where once only working stonemasons socialized and protected their craft from the unskilled or the uninitiated. Slowly they mutated into clubs for literate men attracted by the lure of the ceremonies, rituals, and an imagined history associated with the medieval guilds. Masonry, it was said, went back to the Temple of Solomon. Early in the eighteenth century in London the evolution was well underway. When the then aged and great architect Christopher Wren took the title of grand master, he probably met with friends, as well as



master masons who worked with him.<sup>10</sup> Within a decade lodges began to spread out to the British provinces, and then in the 1720s to Ireland and Continental Europe, to Rotterdam, Paris, and soon Bordeaux, and by the 1730s to America. At the same time brothers, current or former, published "exposures" that explained the rituals to the uninitiated, or "the profane," as non-masons were called by the initiated. By 1750, when there may have been about 50,000 freemasons in Europe, not much about the lodge practices remained secret. Yet brothers continued to value their "secrets" in the form of constantly changing passwords, new rituals and degree ceremonies, decorations, and dress.

The new public of the eighteenth century frequently met in private. That dichotomy remains central to much of modern social experience. The paradox at the heart of early modernity lay in its creation of a new public sphere that simultaneously championed the private, the interior, and the exclusive. The same public that read novels silently in the comfort of home also found "secret" lodges fashionable, even alluring. They were more typical of the age than might at first be assumed. The open-doored coffeehouses, pubs, or, in France, the cabarets stood as major exceptions to social gatherings that were more commonly semiprivate, even exclusive and sometimes bounded by secrecy.

The literary and philosophical societies required formal applications for membership and were confined to those so admitted. The royal academies for science—even the independent Royal Society in London and the *Haarlemse Maatschappij der Wetenschappen* in the Dutch Republic—were highly exclusive as to who could belong and attend. In London at midcentury coffeehouses existed where special slang was employed and largely understood only by their denizens.<sup>11</sup> Parisian salons, like the royal academies, were notoriously closed. Scientific lectures were the most open form of the new sociability, and, for as little as six pence or as much as two guineas, the public could attend one, or a course of lectures. The cosmopolitan emerged as an enlightened ideal protected by politeness, discretion, privacy, formality, dues, even secrecy. Eighteenth-century English literature presents multiple examples of characters obsessed with maintaining their privacy.<sup>12</sup> The popularity of such novels suggests that some of their readers may have found lodge membership a congenial escape from the tensions between the need for privacy and the demands of society.

When we consider masonic secrecy it might be tempting to see it as simply a medieval holdover from the original guild structure inherited by the lodges—where by 1720 nary a stonemason could be found. That explanation

is too easy, and it certainly does not address the further mutation that masonic secrecy took in the 1780s and 1790s. Then groups like the radical Illuminati in Germany and the United Irishmen in Dublin self-consciously embraced in imitation of masonic forms, but they did so with decidedly political agendas. The linkage between the new socializing and secrecy may have also been somewhat overdetermined. Whenever the French authorities arrested booksellers for trading in the heretical and pornographic invariably they hauled in the odd masonic pamphlet. Within the precincts of the absolutist state, secrecy, when not part of the apparatus of the state, simply looked suspect.<sup>13</sup> Yet it made sense to practice forms of it, to be safe rather than sorry.

To contemporaries versions of extreme privacy seemed hardly out of the ordinary. Discretion and secrecy lay at the nub of court culture; there its purposes were obvious. Intrigue and jockeying for place behind closed doors made the courts all the more interesting. The forging of state policies required secrecy, then and now. While the enlightened had relations with various of the European courts, for the most part philosophes, freethinkers, journalists, and natural philosophers—however much they jockeyed for place—had their own decidedly nonnoble haunts. Yet in those venues—particularly in the where antireligious or pornographic literature came into the world—secrecy was desired, even needed. A few months in the Bastille for writing or selling bad books would have convinced all in the trade of the perfect sense of secrecy.

What the daily practice of secrecy entailed we can never know for sure. According to masonic lore, brothers were to keep the identities of one another private, always to meet behind closed doors, regularly to invent new passwords and eventually rituals. Freemasons self-consciously defended secrecy as permitting freedom of expression and the fostering of brotherhood. Late in the eighteenth century Irish brothers, who saw in masonry a model for other types of overtly political organization, believed that secrecy nurtured and enthralled the senses, impacting particularly on sensibility and imagination. The radical William Drennan founded an entire political movement, as we shall see, based on the form of the lodge, and its power nearly undid British rule in Ireland, leaving a powerful legacy of secrecy in the service of rebellion. When in the next and final chapter we look at the international republican conversation that emerged in the Atlantic world in the 1770s we need to remember that while most of its participants were not freemasons, all understood the importance of discretion, if not secrecy.

Arguably, in the struggle to expand membership, secrecy also made cosmopolitanism easier. The daring and the bold found cover. For women to

organize themselves as officers of a masonic lodge, for Jews to seek out fraternity with Christians, may have been easier because these gestures occurred almost entirely in a new public that was intensely private. What is remarkable about the private and discreet format of the lodges concerns how many improbable people were drawn to them, were eager to try their hand at a form of sociability imported from Britain, rule bound and, not least, costly. Masonic membership was never to be taken lightly. Without exception, lodges saw it as their right to police behavior, to outlaw licentiousness, drunkenness, and what was sometimes called, opaquely, blasphemy. Membership could work in a life as an alternative form of religiosity, and perhaps that is why by the 1790s reformers caught in dangerous situations, faced with official repression, were drawn to lodges, or to groups that imitated their structures.<sup>14</sup>

If we are to understand better how secrecy, or an extreme form of privacy, worked in the heart of early modernity, we need to examine at least one lodge in some detail. Help in understanding the vogue of secrecy comes from masonic archives not seen since 1940. With their aid I want to meditate on the multiple meanings and uses to which masonic secrecy could be put. In the process I want to complicate our understanding of the public sphere and early modernity, and the role of secrecy within both.

### *The Bordeaux Lodge*

"Not seen since 1940" is not simply a tease. In 2002 I spent some weeks at the library of the Grand Orient of France, at 16 rue Cadet in Paris. There can now be found 750 boxes of French masonic archives recently returned from Moscow. Since 1945 they had been held in a secret archive. The Soviets tried to use these documents, and others, to barter with the Germans for the return of the Russian property that had been stolen by the retreating German army.<sup>15</sup> This story is poignant and germane to the issue of secrecy and modernity. On 14 June, 1940, the same day that the Nazis entered Paris, they burst into the building at rue Cadet and eventually took all its papers and archives. In short order similar confiscations occurred in Lille, La Rochelle, and Bordeaux, among various sites throughout the country. They believed that at the heart of the modern world and its corruption lay a vast Jewish-masonic conspiracy. In Berlin an institute was set up to search the records stolen from synagogues, masonic lodges, and liberal political parties in the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. The purpose of Nazi research was to find the starting point for the conspiracy that they said had brought about the

French Revolution and led to the decadent corruption of the 1920s and 1930s. We doubt that the Nazis had made much progress in their research when in May 1945 the Red Army came upon a depository that the Gestapo had hurriedly rushed from Berlin and hidden in a chateau in Silesia. It contained Jewish and masonic archives. In total, and from various locations, 140 tons of French documents—of which the 750 masonic boxes are a small portion—were seized and transported back to Moscow. The masonic documents undertook this secret journey as bartering chips or, just as probable, as part of the ever-seeing totalitarian state's desire to possess secrets for their own sake. Although no one knew that the Russians had them, the masonic archives were preserved in perfect condition. Their location only surfaced in 1992, and late in December 2000, under the specter of huge debts, the Russians began to return the archives to their rightful owners.

These archives, and their perambulation through Europe, have a lot to tell us. Throughout the twentieth century fascist political forces believed that the paradox at the heart of modernity, namely the secrecy associated with masonic fraternizing, the secret passwords, rituals, and signs, told the whole truth: the secrecy must have been about a cover-up of a hidden agenda to seize power while pretending to be ushering in an egalitarian transparency and democratic institutions. As we are about to see, secrecy did provide a certain safety throughout the eighteenth century, but the goals pursued under its mantle would have startled an earnest, unbiased inquirer, had such a creature existed at the Berlin institute founded by the Nazis. Secrecy worked where repression, aided by state spies, occurred on a daily basis. Unwittingly, by taking up the habits of secrecy, eighteenth-century advocates of the cosmopolitan gave hostages to the future enemies of democracy, many of whom would in turn use secrecy to their own advantage.

We can distance ourselves from the paranoid fantasies of the extreme right without for a second imagining that secrecy and exclusivity are unproblematic. To examine masonic secrecy as lived in the eighteenth century let us focus first on a rare document from what I shall call the Moscow collection. It is an extract made in the early nineteenth century from the minutes of the entire eighteenth century that then existed for the *Loge Anglaise*, founded in Bordeaux in 1732.<sup>16</sup> The original records have disappeared, but the summary made in 1817 has all the marks of authenticity in that so many of the entries are just what you would expect from any lodge.<sup>17</sup> What is very hard to find for any lodge are complete records for the entire century.

The *Loge Anglaise* believed itself to be the oldest properly constituted French lodge, and that claim is still probably true. The 1817 document was



made for a new master and it summarized the major events or actions taken by the lodge, sometimes month by month from 1732 right through the French Revolution, and up to the year it was written. Aside from Paris, where masonry was imported by both Jacobite exiles and Whig ambassadors from Britain, Bordeaux was the most important city for masonic contact between Britain and France in the first half of the eighteenth century. The wine trade fostered those links, and the names recorded by the French-speaking lodge were alternatively French and English, Patrick Gordon, Wm. Barreyre, M. Boucher, and so on.

Most of the routine activities of the lodge entailed the admission of new members and the election of new officers. Sometimes such admission required discretion, as when on 25 September 1745 the lodge admitted one "Father Duquesnoy religieux célestin." The admission occurred just a few years after the 1738 papal condemnation of freemasonry. Ignoring the ban, a number of clergymen joined this lodge and many others, and discretion undoubtedly made their lives easier. Officially (as we saw in Avignon), the Catholic Church remained hostile to the freemasons and condemned membership as a violation of church decrees. With its dedication to absolutism in church and state the Roman church saw the lodges as alternative forms of religion. It also objected to the fact that lodges held elections so frequently. Clearly, some French clergymen simply followed their own conscience and basked in the conviviality the lodges provided.

As the Bordeaux records tell us, the clergy could also be willful brothers and a source of grief within a lodge. For example, the curé of Rions "was condemned . . . for his extraordinary indiscretion . . . to have led women into the lodge . . . and for having said that he would voluntarily pay . . . 3 frs for making it possible for them to see the lodge."<sup>18</sup> The curate faced a three-month suspension. Whatever the priest's motives and his relationships with women, the issue of women within freemasonry, as we shall shortly see, would not be easily resolved. Aside from women, other, far more powerful forces were also watching the lodge. In August 1742 the lodge had been instructed by the local intendant of Guienne to close itself down by order of the king. Punishment would ensue if the order were to be disobeyed. The lodge's ruffled response also appears in the minutes: "Given the implication of this order, the lodge decided to no longer assemble in the same place."<sup>19</sup> Clearly the authorities were watching the lodge, but in a cat-and-mouse kind of way. In this situation too much secrecy could be just as dangerous as too little. The lodge had to be sure that nothing threatening to the state or church occurred at its meetings or could be imagined as occurring. The repressive

moment of 1742 coincided with the chief minister of state, Cardinal Fleury, and his Counter-Reformation stance. He was dead the following year. His intensely anti-British foreign policy would have made any lodge, but especially one full of English merchants mixing with French subjects, highly suspect. Certainly the freemasons did not much care for Fleury, and they penned many songs and diatribes aimed against him.<sup>20</sup> But other forms of subversive behavior, that Fleury probably never imagined, lurked under the mantle of Bordeaux freemasonry.

Subversion surfaced early in the life of *bordelaise* freemasonry, indeed earlier than in the life of any other European site, as far as we now know. A brother announced that women were holding their own lodge meetings in the town, "des Soeurs de l'Adoption." This would not do, the lodge decided, and in its wisdom decided to prevent them. Until this record came to light, the earliest known European women's lodge had been held in The Hague in 1751. There actors and actresses of the Comédic-Française had joined with local Dutch gentlemen to create a mixed lodge welcomed by the other, male lodges.<sup>21</sup> Officers could be both men and women, and as the 1751 record was written in French, the gendered nouns made the point: "Le Maitre" and "la Maitresse," and so on. The Dutch grand lodge approved of what was known as lodges of adoption, namely the creation of masonic social spaces into which women had to be adopted as they were not naturally born to inhabit them. In Bordeaux, by contrast, the issue of women's membership became instantly contentious.<sup>22</sup> Clearly some brothers, perhaps led by the local priest, thought that mixed lodges were a good idea; a majority disagreed. Thus began a controversy about the public role of women in civil society that continued until well into twentieth century.

Lodges for women signal an important social moment in the history of gender relations. These, like their male counterparts, were not simply social clubs. Voting in elections, dues collection, orations, officerships were an inherent and formal part of the public life of any lodge. By the 1740s in Western Europe women wanted to do such governing-like things, and some men approved, while others vehemently disliked public roles for women and the independence that went with them. Bear in mind that the freedom of women in public remained a fraught issue in the West until well into the nineteenth century. It was only then in Britain that the need even for public lavatories for women "was generally recognized."<sup>23</sup> Late in the eighteenth century women's lodges became all the rage in France, and while both men and women had voting rights, at least one lodge demanded that women could not meet without men being present and that pregnant women not be allowed to attend.<sup>24</sup>

Once again, auguring the future, the subversion of traditional social mores within the life of the lodges did not stop with women. Cosmopolitanism possessed an inexorable logic. Bordeaux held a thriving and reasonably integrated Jewish community of slightly less than 2,500 people out of population of about 50,000. In 1746 within a few months of the rancor about women being freemasons, the lodge faced the prospect of admitting Jews, "a proposition that is totally rejected." In the same year came a proposal to admit three "musicians of the theater" (*toneurs de instrument a la comedie*), and again opposition seems to have prevailed. Masonic cosmopolitanism in Bordeaux had its limits, and secrecy masked the limitations, as much as it permitted innovation.

The framework of secrecy also worked to shield from the eyes of the profane the enormous tensions presented by the notion of a voluntary association claiming, as did the lodges, that men can meet as equals and that rising by degree was a privilege based solely upon merit and wisdom. In contrast to the ideals of equality and merit, the lodge in Bordeaux—like so many voluntary associations throughout the history of modernity—kept wanting to limit its membership to men, or Christians, or simply the respectable, a category to which theater people did not belong at the time. Simultaneously, pressures were coming from every direction, from literate men and women who saw themselves as worthy of membership and capable of respecting masonic ideals, from local Jewish merchants who wanted to join with their French and English counterparts. Cosmopolitanism advanced slowly, and every step of the way provoked contention, in some places a willful desire to exclude.

Three years after the first skirmish about admitting Jews, one Cappadoce, as a Jew, turned up from Amsterdam in 1747 (again in 1749), saying that he had been admitted a freemason there.<sup>25</sup> Note that the Bordeaux lodge had discovered a few years earlier that its master was actually a Jew.<sup>26</sup> Clearly some European Jews had decided to take the possibility of cosmopolitan behavior seriously. Not only did the Bordeaux lodge take offense at the religion of its former master, it would also not admit Cappadoce. It refused to recognize him as *un frère*. He would not take "no" for an answer, and in two years asked again to be admitted. He was being recommended by the master of his Amsterdam lodge, the Loge de la Paix, who was probably at this moment (11 February 1749) Jean Rousset de Missy. On the second try, the Bordeaux lodge put its rejection starkly: "never will Jews be admitted among us." Back in Amsterdam, the more tolerant Rousset de Missy, a Huguenot refugee, had a long career as a journalist and promoter of clandestine works,

and he was a self-described pantheist. The *Loge de la Paix* was very much under his paternal care.<sup>27</sup> Clearly secrecy in Amsterdam opened a wider berth than it did in Bordeaux, at least for Jews. In 1735 one Jewish name, Solomon Noch, appears in the founding records of Dutch freemasonry. Around the same time we know that Jews were admitted to London lodges.

At times secrecy did complex work. In general, the lodges expanded the new public by bringing strangers together around enlightened goals, and lodge after lodge proclaimed that "masons are citizens of the world."<sup>28</sup> No amount of cosmopolitan fraternizing would, however, erase even more secretly cherished prejudices. What mattered were the beliefs that men brought to social experiences they hoped would be enlightened. The gap between the ideals of toleration and integration, and the reality of social exclusion based upon religion or gender or social status, has been a constant throughout the history of modernity, whether early, late, or post. Secrecy could offer opportunities, but it could also cover over the social tensions rife among those who believed in equality—largely for themselves. The cosmopolitan remained an ideal, occasionally a reality in the eighteenth century, as today. Only then secretive social behavior seemed more normal, a practice common among courts and elites. The largely middling classes drawn to the lodges—with the possible exception of Russia where the aristocracy dominated the lodges—placed their ideals under the mantle of secrecy, however honored, often in the breach rather than in the observance.

Other forces made secrecy attractive. The reality of the deep inequalities generated by market and birth also bred the need for discretion and privacy. Within every lodge there was the persistent issue of poverty and the needs of brothers fallen on hard times. Lodges could be fonts of generosity, of sums given on an obviously limited basis and then only to those brothers known to them and truly worthy.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the century the lodge in Bordeaux went deep into its pockets to do what neither church nor state could, or would, do. On occasion it reached outside the masonic family and gave funds to local curés for distribution. Private money freely given required secrecy, at least as the terms of the gift were being negotiated. It did then and it does now.

Being discreet about charity funds given or received might have a logic to which we can relate, but the secrecy within secrecy found commonly in late eighteenth-century European freemasonry is perhaps the hardest of its many aspects to understand. Regularly, brothers and, of course, sisters were forming "clandestine" or irregular or "bastard" lodges that did not have constitutions from a formally recognized lodge. These served many purposes now



largely lost to us, but this secrecy within secrecy receives some elucidation from the Bordeaux records. A brother had been frequenting “la loge Batarde de cette ville tenue par le S. Martin Pasquales, et sur l’affirmation, on lui a refuse l’entree du temple” (28 February 1764). The *Loge Anglaise* not only excluded the errant brother who had been attending “a bastard lodge in this city held by S. Martínez de Pasquals, and by acclimation, he had been refused entrance into the [masonic] temple.” The lodge had even asked the mayor to look into the disruption in the life of the lodges caused by Pasquales.

The reference to Martínez de Pasquales gives entrée to the secret within the secrecy, to the curious turn toward the mystical that gripped many a masonic lodge late in the eighteenth century. Martínez de Pasquales was a masonic reformer of shadowy, but it was believed at the time, Portuguese Jewish origins who preached an occult form of masonry that was highly ritualized and mystical in its expression. He had lived for a time in Bordeaux and promulgated his version of masonic wisdom that long after his death in 1774 made deep inroads in the life of French freemasonry, indeed it could be found as far east as St. Petersburg.<sup>30</sup> He preached the hierarchy of created beings capable of transcending their place by spiritual union with the Divine.<sup>31</sup> Brothers and sisters of the 1780s found his teachings alluring, possibly because they were personally troubled in ways that we do not fully understand but that signal a discontent with the cosmopolitan experience inherited from an earlier age. Quarreling became endemic to the French lodges. Indeed French society in the 1780s, as seen through the prism of its lodges, displayed a degree of social unrest far in excess of what can be seen in other Western countries.

For example, in Bordeaux a “red lodge” was set up, and it brought an interest in the Rosicrucianism fermenting in the German-speaking lands. After the start of the Revolution in 1789 royalists specifically blamed the red lodges as “clubs de la propagande.”<sup>32</sup> At the same moment a masonic priest in the *Loge Anglaise* was brought up on charges that go unspecified in the minutes. The following week seventeen brothers simply left the lodge and another five or six were excluded from it. Members from another lodge, the *Etoile flamboyante aux Trois Lys*, were refused admission. The very cosmopolitanism at the heart of the lodge had come apart, with English and French brothers at odds, and with the grand lodge in Paris largely powerless to heal the rift.<sup>33</sup> Within the national masonic temple lay deep divisions between the Grand Orient in Paris and many provincial lodges. These divisions stemmed in part from the effort by the Grand Orient to limit access to the higher degrees, or at the very least to oversee who would be entitled to rise in masonic

wisdom. Social exclusivity formed the core of the agenda from Paris, but the provinces and probably many Parisian lodges, except for the most aristocratic, were not buying into it. A notation in the minutes of 27 September 1803 tells us that the Loge Anglaise simply stopped corresponding with the Grand Orient in Paris in 1785. Thus by the 1780s an atmosphere of dissension fueled by social discontent, possibly of nationalist origins, came to prevail and new and occult forms of masonry rose to prominence.

By the 1770s and 1780s the secrecy of the masonic umbrella sheltered new, private societies with distinctively occult, yet curiously cosmopolitan interests. It was as if traditional Christianity had failed to satisfy the striving and curiosity of the lodges and the turn toward the occult became palpable in the German-speaking lands but also, and especially, in France. At the center of the mystical movement lay a Parisian lodge composed of the crème de la crème of ancien régime society. By 1780s the *tableaux* for membership in Les Amis Réunis contained financiers, bankers, tax farmers, commissioners of the Royal Treasury, the intendant general of the post, and various other government officials.<sup>34</sup> Out of it sprang a remarkable society, Les Philalèthes, and its records—now further restored by the return of the Moscow archives—reveal the aspirations of powerful men searching for a vast and universal spiritual renewal. Les Philalèthes was never a lodge, but rather a regime, a system inspired by the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg and Martínez de Pasquales, established for the purpose of human perfection. One of its founders was Savalette de Langes, the scion of a *noblesse de robe* family who had been active in *l'opposition parlementaire* that refused the reforms demanded in the early 1770s by the king's minister, Maupeou. At that moment the aristocracy using the *parlements*, or courts, served notice on the monarchy as to just how difficult it would be to challenge the traditional privileges that insured their financial exemptions. For his siding with the *parlements*, Savalette had been exiled and, probably as a consequence, his masonic activism increased annually.

In the setting provided by the lodges and their social off shoots, not only in Paris but also in Lyon, Strasbourg, Lille, among other towns, new and higher degrees were invented, and the ultimate forms of wisdom imagined as possible. Self-proclaimed masonic prophets, like Cagliostro, Martines de Pasquales, and J. B. Willermoz, became the pied pipers of this movement, which aspired to encompass all “les pays et regimes réunies a Paris.”<sup>35</sup> For Willermoz, philanthropy, especially on the part of the aristocracy, held the key to spiritual renewal while Les Philalèthes and Les Amis réunis wished to hold “un Convent fraternel,” to be set up in Paris. Their documents tell us

that they have put all their trust in "l'impulsion secrète, mais certaine, de la Divine Providence." In this instance, secrecy had sanctioned gnosis. The mystical wisdom found must be placed in the service of a total reform. The members of Les Philalèthes posed the question, "Has the masonic science possessed a rapport with the known sciences under the name of the occult science or secrets?" The answer presented itself. The assembled announced that they believed "in the rapport of masonry with Theosophy, Alchemy, the Cabala, Divine Magic, Emblems, Hieroglyphes, the Religious Ceremonies and the Rites of different Institutions, or Associations, masonic or otherwise."<sup>36</sup> They have discerned "a rapport between the usages generally adopted by the interior economy of the Masonic Society and those of which we have found the trace in the ancient works, which have conserved for us the usages of the primitive Church."<sup>37</sup> Wrapped in the mantle of secrecy, the brothers with occult interests wound up embracing every known form of ancient and modern learning and science—however far-fetched its foundation. They aspired "to develop the foundation of their opinion on the occult science . . . and to distinguish . . . which are the Schools of ancient Philosophy, and the other sources out of which Masonry has been enabled."<sup>38</sup> The goal became a total synthesis of all learning, a new, cosmopolitan "world religion that all the devout of whatever persuasion can embrace." Working within the disastrous financial context that many of these same French administrators helped to create, it is tempting to imagine them during the 1780s as embarked on a grand intellectual odyssey that would ultimately bring them to personal transformation, to a new reality not quite of this world, an alternative that could be embraced—and escaped into.

We may consider freemasons of the eighteenth century as in some sense apostles of modernity. They sought to cross the borders created by birth and blood, to embrace strangers as brothers, and to train themselves as civic men and women capable of speaking in public, voting, and deliberating. They tried to mix with other religious groups, sometimes, as in the case of the *Loge Anglaise*, with very limited success. As we survey their achievements and failings, may we not conclude that modernity possesses contradictory impulses, at once rational and irrational, both universalist and in danger of producing irrelevancies and intellectual cul-de-sacs? All those impulses are clearly present in the Bordeaux records. When posterity with its perfect hindsight lifts the veil of secrecy and finds something like *Les Philalèthes*, the contradictory impulses at work in modernity until well into the twentieth century parade before us.<sup>39</sup>

Yet there is another way of reading the records of the society and its

occult aspirations. This would be to see *les Philalèthes* as profoundly secular. In these records there is barely a wink in the direction of Christian orthodoxy. Instead, in search of a new truth the brothers have leveled the spiritual playing field in such a way that all sorts of beliefs and religious traditions—even mystical and irrational ones—can be accommodated under the mantle of sociability and secrecy. In such a spiritual universe, despite its Christian roots, might not all faiths—think of the Jewish brother from Amsterdam—find a berth? Conceivably. The mystical may not have been the kind of truth that Voltaire in Paris, or the Jewish reformer in Berlin, Moses Mendelssohn, had in mind when they preached toleration. Yet by its nature, I would argue, the spirituality of *Les Philalèthes* was harmless enough. It looks forward to the muddle of ideas that well-intentioned people, disaffected from traditional religiosity and possessed of little theological training, bring, even now, to their spiritual odysseys. In its universalism *Les Philalèthes* conjures up the vague religiosity or sentiments—or perhaps lack thereof—that have allowed people of many faiths peacefully to inhabit the same social space. In the heart of what in a few short years would become the “old regime” we have found the first stirring of what our own times will call the “new age.”

Wrapped in the cocoon of well-intentioned mysticism did the French lodges ever escape long enough to confront the exterior world, and in the process drop the affectation of secrecy? Did the lofty exclusiveness of some enlightened circles ever give way to the reality outside? Clearly, in the eighteenth century, months in the Bastille for clandestine trafficking could be such a reality and, after 1789, so too was political upheaval. Rare among all forms of sociability to be found in France during the Revolution, the *Loge Anglaise* in Bordeaux has left records that span the greater part of the 1790s. Generally, in that decade only the Jacobin clubs were so audacious as to meet and leave written records of their conversations.

In November of 1788, as the national financial crisis deepened and the king was forced to accede to a new role for the parlements, the Bordeaux lodge responded to public events. Only rarely did the overtly political intrude into the life of the lodge: the convalescence of the king in 1757 was noted, the reintegration of the parlement of Bordeaux in 1775, and in 1778 and 1781 the lodge proposed that a mass be sung in celebration of the birth of two royal children, one the heir to the throne. In 1788 the reopening of the parlement in Bordeaux was celebrated by a banquet and speech making.<sup>40</sup> The orator proclaimed that “justice will get back all its rights . . . [before now] vain combinations based on foolish pride and human vanity . . . a vile egoism and sordid interest . . . have usurped the place of virtue and patriotic



devotion."<sup>41</sup> A triumph for the magistrates and their "august chief" was hailed as was the maintenance of the rights of the province. We can contrast the *parlementaire* sentiments of the Bordeaux lodge with those found in a royalist lodge in Paris where officers of the crown reminded one another that while "masonry is an order in the universe," it is not an order in the state.<sup>42</sup>

We next hear in the minutes of the Bordeaux lodge from July 1790 that the Revolution must also be **celebrated. They described the king as a "sensible monarch and dignified father of the French."** The people must also be celebrated for their zeal, merit, and patriotism. In the nation the first anniversary of the Revolution called forth festivals that swore loyalty and harmony to the new order. In imitation of the Festival of Federation held on 14 July 1790, the Bordeaux lodges entered into "une pacte federatif" so that they need no longer be dependent upon the Grand Orient.<sup>43</sup> Clearly the Grand Orient with its aristocratic leadership had **now been associated with the old order** and some lodges wholeheartedly embraced the emergent revolution. In 1791 *la Loge Anglaise* had the first correspondence in its history with its sisters about candidates who had been proposed. Apparently a lodge of adoption had been somewhat integrated into its proceedings. A songbook of the year 1790 prepared for the use of all the Bordeaux lodges proclaims that "our country is free . . . **the mason cherishes liberty** without doubt, but the public peace is also the object of struggle."<sup>44</sup>

Clearly, the universal principles proclaimed by the **Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen** had implications for the practices of the Loge Anglaise. On 15 July 1790 an orator addressed his brothers on that very theme. Discord has appeared within the lodges and "the passions have been allowed to take too free access. . . . The practice of all the social virtues have been put in a troubled state by perfidious dissension."<sup>45</sup> The orator, M. Mailleres, urged the lodge to put itself under the same principles that now all of France accepted, and in particular to act upon the fact that in **January 1790 the Jews** of Bordeaux had been granted their civil rights. When **news reached the city** a near riot had broken out against their liberation.<sup>46</sup> **Thus came the bold request, "a brother, a philosopher without doubt and a friend of humanity has made the following proposition: The Jews in a word are now active citizens. From this title they may hypothetically possess all the qualities associated with our mores, and will you admit them into our care or reject them?"**<sup>47</sup> Fittingly, the lodge was being asked to replicate in its proceedings the universal principles proclaimed by the Revolution. Now we will see quite clearly how difficult, even inflammatory, those cosmopolitan principles could be when reformers sought their application. At that moment, the Revolution

had gone too far for the Loge Anglaise. Its principles drastically expanded the limits that the lodge had set on its own cosmopolitanism. The political and revolutionary process had created a new, and *avant-garde*, set of principles for public and private life, and this single masonic exemplar of civil society, private, secretive, and with a history of prejudice, might, or might not bend. Ultimately the lodge rejected the implications of human rights for all citizens and refused to admit Jewish brothers. In the course of the eighteenth century, practices that had once protected the Enlightenment were now used to subvert the logic of its principles.

The Loge Anglaise still wanted to adhere to the Revolution, or to those aspects of it that suited its temperament. In October 1792 the departure of a brother to the frontier where "liberty will be defended" was duly noted. In the same month brothers were no longer to be addressed as *monsieur* but as *citoyen*. Events began to tumble into the temple as army victories were celebrated (27 November 1792), and in November of 1793 the name of the lodge was changed to include the phrase "of Equality." At the height of the Terror a delegation representing "the people" did the lodge "the favor" of visiting it. The very furnishings of the temple had to be replaced, the *ermine* suppressed, and in place of the old draperies and cordons of the officers appeared the patriotic tricolor. New pagan festivals started in the next month, and the winter solstice took its place on the masonic calendar of celebrations. The actual banquet had to be postponed in the absence of "les subsistances de première nécessité." Finally, for fifteen months in 1794–95 the lodge did not meet because of the "force and vigor of the revolutionary turbulence."

Traditionally, we see the French Revolution as auguring the end of the Enlightenment as a distinctive movement with particular mores and conventions. In the case of freemasonry the date works well enough. What ended in the 1790s everywhere in Europe, for a time, might be described as the comfortable luxury of cosmopolitan gatherings devoted to literature or science, or the cultivation of masonic wisdom without reference to events in the outside world. Perhaps in the 1790s, along with the birth of democratic ideals, also emerged a truly modern, public sphere, one that only some elements within civil society were willing, or able, to accept. Private vices, like a dislike of the Jews, were not to be tempered, in this one instance, by the demands of public virtue.

During the Napoleonic years, as the attempt was made to turn back the clock on the more democratic innovations of the 1790s, the Loge Anglaise lost the right to recognize other lodges on its own. It had to be ceded to a provincial grand lodge. In 1806 the Bordeaux brothers put up a portrait of

Napoleon the Great in its banquet room, and the lodge's finances were deemed to be in a pitiable state. On several occasions the issue of admitting Jews into the lodge roiled the waters, and, once again, the lodge proclaimed that it would *never* do so. It acknowledged as how other lodges might be different and its remarks indicated that Jewish freemasons existed, possibly even in Bordeaux with its significant Jewish community. In 1814 *la Loge Anglaise* held a banquet to celebrate the return of the Bourbons to the French throne. This was a lodge that at least up to 1815 had come to regard aspects of the legacy of the Revolution as deeply problematic. Yet in the same period and under the sponsorship of the reformed grand lodge of France, new lodges were established in the Low Countries (then occupied by France) that challenged local social prejudices and pushed in the direction of the egalitarian.<sup>48</sup>

Clearly, no *la Loge Anglaise* would ever be able to embrace the damaging right-wing myth of a masonic conspiracy being at the root of the Revolution. The myth appeared as early as 1789.<sup>49</sup> But at some later date, when anti-Semitism became codified, the *Loge Anglaise* or some other lodge might have imagined that the Jews had something sinister to do with their own revolutionary emancipation, however much it had been justified as a result of universal human rights. The universalism of the Enlightenment, and then of the French Revolution, could always founder on the privacy permitted, indeed required, for the vitality of the public sphere. While secrecy, privacy, and discretion may protect civil society in perilous times, or shield it from the prying eyes of the state, or permit social experimentation, such habits could also provide a refuge for scoundrels.

One other element flourished within civil society of the late eighteenth century. National sentiments appear in the proceedings of the French lodges as well as in the Dutch lodges I have examined. Steven Bullock also has found republicanism at work in the lodges of the American colonies before 1776 and in the new republic. Orators told French brothers that "the health of the country has been your supreme law. Your personal interest disappears always before the national interest."<sup>50</sup> Perhaps only the power of the state was sufficient to intrude on the privacy so cherished in civil society. As nationalist interests grew in importance—even in the deeply decentralized but discontented Dutch Republic—voluntary associations succumbed to the lure of state ideologies. In town after town, Dutch lodges took sides in 1787 as unrest turned into revolution. In Britain the lodges of the 1790s were aggressive in proclaiming their loyalism. Early modern cosmopolitanism was fragile in the face of the lure of nationalism. Yet the very survival of civil society was perceived to depend upon the triumph of republican values. At the same time,

French, American, Dutch, Irish, even English republicanism could never be effectively separated out from national identity.

### *Secrecy and Modern Political Radicalism*

In the 1790s the practice of secrecy—within the domain of cosmopolitan civil society—gave it new meaning. Its political potential was quickly recognized by reforming groups, paradoxically located in the vanguard of political change. After 1800 subversive societies, often employing secrecy to prevent detection, would vie with conventional ones for the loyalties of citizens. The anarchists led by Babeuf used masonic forms to organize their secret cabals. Where secrecy protected voluntary associations, the potential existed to unhinge the state or to engender in it the paranoid fantasies that fueled—and still fuel—dangerous and inhuman regimes. We have seen in Bordeaux that only personal, private beliefs render people truly tolerant and cosmopolitan, as well as watchful against arbitrary state power, or the prejudices that lurk in the heart. Clustering among the like-minded could promote enlightenment—or, as Les Philalèthes would have said, human perfectibility—only if personal belief in enlightened principles animated the assembled. Secrecy shrouds inner beliefs and in the final analysis, they will prevail over all publicly articulated decrees, even over legally sanctioned freedoms. At best, the brothers in Bordeaux should be seen as reluctant revolutionaries and cosmopolites who struggled to survive with their basic prejudices intact. For the most part they were private men who dipped their toes into the cosmopolitanism that freemasonry offered.

In other settings the importance of secrecy and masonic practices could also inspire. Their virtues dawned on reformers of the late eighteenth century, particularly on people caught in the grip of traditional, nearly feudal forms of belief and authority. On the edges of Europe landed elites and privileged clergy ruled largely unchallenged, and this was nowhere truer than in Ireland. Yet it was also there that enlightened principles of religious toleration were put to their severest test, and masonic forms appeared as the model that would transform the sectarian into the cosmopolitan. From Elizabethan times onward English Protestants had been given strips of land in designated plantations, largely in the northern part of the island. Most of those settlers were Presbyterians, many from Scotland. Lording over them and the entirely Catholic peasantry stood the old Anglican elites with their vast landed estates.



Far from the commercial vitality of a place like Bordeaux, we think of eighteenth-century Ireland as poor and Catholic, and its countryside was often just that. But Dublin with its expanding population of about 180,000 was nearly the size of Amsterdam, and in the 1790s the cities and towns of Ireland—places like Newry, Belfast, and Derry—became hotbeds of agitation that took on the might of the British colossus and the Anglo-Irish ruling elite. The central issue faced by Irish reformers lay in the gap between Protestants and Catholics, between the privileged and the openly discriminated against. Within the structure put in place largely in the seventeenth century, only Anglican, and not Presbyterian, Protestants enjoyed ascendancy. Not surprisingly, discontent festered among Presbyterians, who were often educated, the backbone of the professional classes. Only Catholics fared worse; they were denied the right even to be educated, and the elite among them sent their children to the Continent for schooling.<sup>51</sup> If Presbyterian and Catholic leaders could forge a meaningful alliance, a mighty and dangerous force would threaten British control over the colony. But how to do this?

Inspiration for reform came directly from America in 1776, and then from France in 1789. Irish republicans avidly participated in the international republican conversation of the 1770s and beyond. In the early 1790s large demonstrations erupted in Belfast as they did in Manchester and Edinburgh in support of the French revolutionaries. As one shrewd and alarmed Belfast observer of events in France and their worldwide political implications put it, "if we follow without restriction, the theory of human rights, where will it lead us? In its principle it requires the admission of women, of persons under age, and of paupers, to suffrage at elections; to places of office and trust, and as members of both Houses of Parliament." Speaking at an assembly to support human rights for all citizens regardless of religion, the Rev. William Bruce was clearly alarmed and urged caution against moving too quickly on behalf of Catholics, lest a transfer occur in "every power of government, from the most to the least tolerant, from the most to the least enlightened part of the state."<sup>52</sup> Bruce echoed the widespread uncertainty in Presbyterian circles about Catholics, and assumed with prejudice that Protestants were the more enlightened, tolerant, and cosmopolitan. They had more right to their rights.

Other Presbyterians in Bruce's acquaintance were electrified by the principles of the American and French revolutions and sought to carry them to their logical conclusion—none more so than William Drennan (Figure 8), and his sister and brother-in-law, Martha and Sam McTier. The Drennans belonged by faith and family to the circles of Dissent to be found throughout

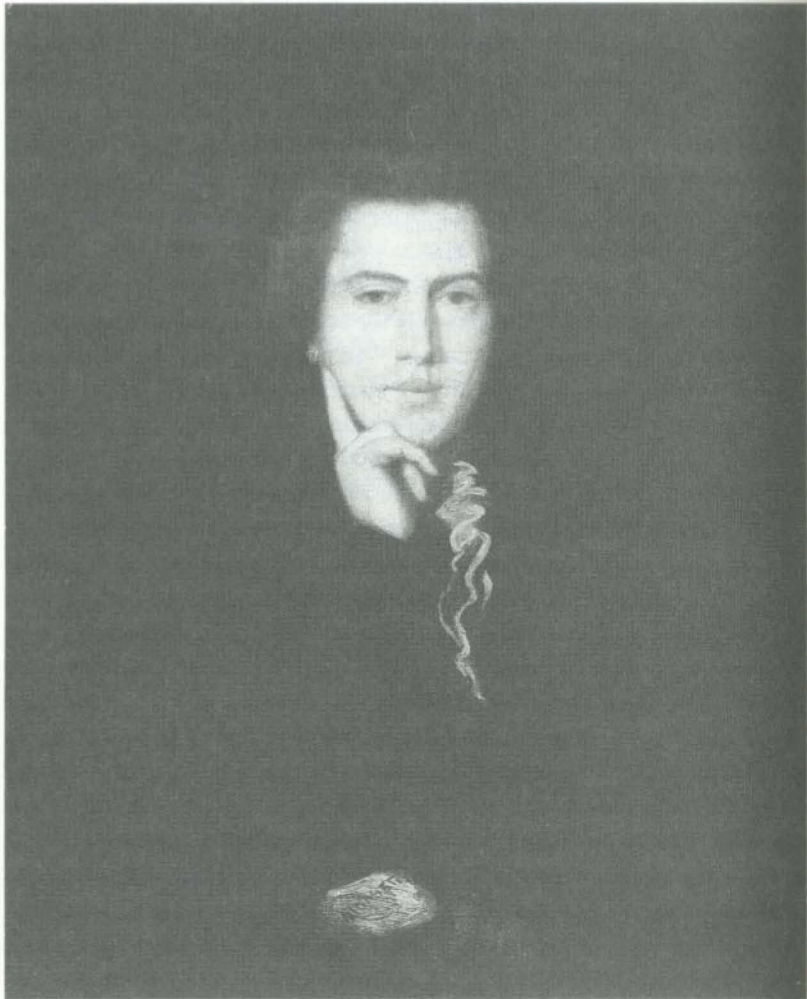


Figure 8. *Portrait of William Drennan*. From a portrait in the Ulster Museum by Robert Hohe. Courtesy of the Ulster Museum. William Drennan (1754–1820) was a medical doctor by training, a cofounder of the United Irishmen, and a patriot. Of Ireland he wrote: “Oh Ireland My country! Shall I mourn, or Bless, / Thy tame and wretched happiness?”

the English-speaking world. Dissenters—Protestants who were generally Presbyterians but never Anglicans—were systematically and legally excluded from the citadels of power, from government offices, from attendance at Oxford and Cambridge, even from local government, unless they were willing to take communion once a year in an Anglican church. Overwhelmingly, they showed a partiality to the American side in the Revolution that began in 1776, and the Drennans were no exception. Partly encouraged by the British government, Dissenters often made their way abroad, to America and to Ireland.

By 1750 in some northern Irish cities Presbyterians like the Drennans had become the majority, and they coexisted uneasily with the indigenous Catholic population and the so-called Anglo-Irish landowners who operated as the governing class throughout the colony. In the circles of Dissent little affection could be found for that "great empire that has thus outlived itself and is now degenerating into a state of political dotage. Great Britain in her dotage forgets her children."<sup>53</sup> Families like the Drennans believed that the future lay in their having access to governance and in granting Catholic emancipation. For much of the eighteenth century all Irish Catholics had been stripped of their land, denied education, and held under a set of rules known as the Penal Laws. These constricted their freedom to worship or to trade. Bitterness between Catholics and Protestants, particularly in northern Ireland, was endemic; remarkably a few liberal and enlightened Presbyterians like the Drennans sought a way out of this predicament.

As an educated doctor with growing political interests, William Drennan ventured forth into more cosmopolitan circles than chapel life normally afforded. Finding himself practicing medicine during the 1780s in the market town of Newry, Drennan sought out masonic membership.<sup>54</sup> He told his sister that Newry was "a contemptible place," and boredom may have led him to the lodge door as did a growing disaffection from the many reform clubs that kept springing up and getting nowhere in the business of political reform—at least in his view.<sup>55</sup> He may also have longed for the cultural life available in Belfast, where scientific lectures and plays were common. Sister and brother shared many affections, but none were more compelling for her than politics. In 1789 she wrote to him about the need to "establish Ireland in her fullest rights." In the same letter she noted the social snubs offered her by the local aristocracy from whose grand balls she was firmly excluded, and confessed, "I do feel it."<sup>56</sup> The Drennans were troublemakers, and William had an established reputation as a pamphleteer intent upon augmenting Irish self-governance. Fatefully given the year, in 1789 William Drennan moved to Dublin and almost instantly joined the circle of Irish radicals including

## Chapter 4

James Napper Tandy and the Emmet brothers. Robert Emmet would be hanged by the British government for his part in the rebellion of 1798.

By 1791, when the surviving correspondence within the Drennan family resumes, they faced the reality of growing Catholic unrest in Ireland. William Drennan saw Catholics as "savages" but also as people who had rights that had to be respected. Since the 1770s and the American Revolution, Dissenters like Drennan had been ardent Whigs. By 1791, in his view, the Whig clubs in Ireland had failed miserably to address the people's plight: "The one here literally does nothing more than eat and drink." The Whigs, he believed, had lost all fellow feeling for the people, and clearly Drennan had come to the view that democracy of some sort was the only course open to the Irish, both Catholic and Protestant.<sup>37</sup> At that moment his experience of freemasonry proved critical.

In the 1790s cosmopolitan idealists like Drennan had to address what he called "the commonality." In that crisis the social model that seemed most appropriate to the task came from the masonic lodges. Fervently, William Drennan wrote to his brother-in-law—not to his sister, for politics in this world or any other at the time was ultimately a man's domain—about his plan of action. First, a new and secret society needed to be formed into which Catholics and Protestants could be integrated: "I should much desire that a society were instituted in this city having much of the secrecy and somewhat of the ceremonial of freemasonry, so much secrecy as might communicate curiosity, uncertainty, expectation to the minds of surrounding men, so much impressive and affecting ceremony in its internal economy as without impeding real business might strike the soul through the senses."

Out of his lodge experience Drennan found a model of cosmopolitan socializing that could strike the heart, move the senses, inspire awe, and in the minds of nonmembers, induce uncertainty tinged with expectation. Its business would be deeply political: "a benevolent conspiracy" "a plot for the people" "no Whig Club" "no party title" "the Brotherhood its name . . . the rights of man and the greatest happiness of the greatest number its end . . . its general end, real independence to Ireland and republicanism its particular purpose."<sup>38</sup> Now in Ireland, late in the eighteenth century, the quintessential of eighteenth-century enlightened socializing had found new meaning. Faced with deep religious divisions, Drennan and his friends took up secrecy and ceremony as the way out of the religious and political impasse that existed in Ireland then—and to some extent now. The new secret fraternity, which became in 1794 the United Irishmen, needed to work "as speedily as the prejudices and bigotry of the land we live in would permit, as speedily as to



give us some enjoyment and not to protract anything too long in this short span of life.”<sup>58</sup> In the early 1790s, all over Europe, time seemed to move more quickly and to be moving inexorably in the direction of reform, if not revolution.

Drennan thought he had the formula for political success: publications “always coming from one of the Brotherhood, declarations, symbols and international communication.” The oaths taken, like their masonic counterparts, would be “solemn and religious compact[s] that must be signed by every member. Then a symbol had to be devised worn by every one of them round their body next the heart. Finally, communication must begin with leading men in France, England and America so as to cement republicanism.”<sup>59</sup> Secrecy lay at the essence of Drennan’s plan, and he self-consciously told his brother-in-law why it was so important, “it gives greater energy within & greater influence abroad. It conceals members whose professions etc. make concealment expedient until the trial comes. I therefore think and insist on your not even mentioning it.” When Drennan wrote those lines he almost certainly desired only reform in Ireland, not revolution. His brother-in-law worried that these ideas would “do mischief in the hands of hot headed people” nor did he want the Secretary of State on their case.<sup>60</sup> Many Presbyterians were by no means as fired up and confident as William Drennan. Acquaintances, like the cautious William Bruce, were even firmly opposed to the use of secrecy precisely because of the radical associations that by 1791 might be put to it. But Drennan, like Tandy and others, believed that some way had to be found to conciliate “the interests of Catholics and Protestants at present.”<sup>61</sup> The aim of the United Irishmen would be to bypass those “aristocratical Catholics who think that the government will take care of them and to galvanize the democratic part of the Catholics in a deeply social alliance with Protestants.”<sup>62</sup>

In Dublin, the United Irishmen began to take shape, but within a few years the authorities in Britain and Ireland shifted into high alert. Even the hierarchy of the Catholic Church feared the republicans, while at the same time many ordinary priests sided with the cause of reform.<sup>63</sup> Faced with the possibility of imprisonment, men like William Drennan drew back. He sat on the sidelines as Irish radicalism, spurred on by the possibility of an assisting hand from the French, became increasingly more vehement. Secrecy became ever more necessary, an essential part of the political fabric of opposition. The landed took fright and saw “the progress of democracy . . . indeed all through the North [of Ireland] . . . [as accompanied by] the systematic plans & resolutions of the committees & affiliated societies.”<sup>64</sup> The authorities in turn

added vengeance and martyrdom to the list of republican grievances, and by 1794 the secrecy imagined by Drennan as bonding had become life-saving. The violence of 1798–99 claimed over 30,000 lives and the forces of repression were swift and bloody.<sup>65</sup> Both sides experienced “universally the terror of being massacred.”<sup>66</sup> Yet others, like Mary Ann McCracken, saw hope for both women and men: “the reign of prejudice is nearly at an end.”<sup>67</sup> Out of the crucible of rebellion, led by the United Irishmen, came the bigotry of the newly formed and equally secret Orange Order and a profound retreat from reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics. The implications of that post-1800 retreat from the cosmopolitan haunt northern Irish history to this day.

Yet more than failure is to be learned from the experiences of the Drennans in Ireland and their less famous lodge brothers in Bordeaux. Secrecy, ceremony, symbol, and ritual belong to the story of the birth pangs of democracy and political resistance. Already in 1766 a masonic orator in Amsterdam told his brothers, “The main reason why freemasonry was so well received among the enlightened: the Natural state of humanity is therein restored perfectly, no disguise will be tolerated.”<sup>68</sup> The dilemma presented by secrecy lies surely in our seeing only disguise, and not transparency, in its practice, especially when combined with arcane ceremonies and expensive rites of passage. Yet the evidence suggests that late in the eighteenth century the lodge had become a place where social egalitarianism could be proposed, the democratic sampled, even fostered. The key to the experiment lay in forms of behavior that blended the assembled, made them curiously anonymous in their aprons, robes, and badges. Esoteric conjured up the universal, passwords whispered from ear to ear made differences give way to a cosmopolitan transparency. Once experienced, democracy could be, and often was, spurned. But its power could not be forgotten. For some people, just as Bruce feared and Drennan hoped, the theory of democracy would seize hold of the imagination and never let go. In their hearts they could secretly imagine themselves to be as good as their betters. Yet the habits of secrecy left another, but sinister legacy. In the hands of those who hate, or who would foster terror—witness Northern Ireland up to 1998—the practice of secrecy became the sine qua non of political and military activism with terrorist associations. Secret and radical political organizations may not be an exclusively Western invention, but in places like Ireland they first showed the world how powerful and dangerous they could be.

The lodges offered another experience of singular importance by the 1770s and beyond: regularly entertaining visitors from abroad. Take a prominent lodge in Amsterdam for which the signed visitors’ book has survived.<sup>69</sup>