

T H E
PHILOSOPHY
O F
M A S O N S.
I N
SEVERAL EPISTLES
From E G Y P T,
T O
A N O B L E M A N.

L O N D O N:
Printed for J. RIDGWAY,
No. 1, YORK-STREET, St. JAMES'S.
M D C C X C.

PRICE THREE SHILLINGS.

Esoteric Odyssey

A Cornerstone Book
Published by Cornerstone Book Publishers
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New Orleans, LA

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First Cornerstone Edition - 2010

www.cornerstonepublishers.com

ISBN: 1-934935-68-9
ISBN 13: 978-1-934935-68-2

MADE IN THE USA

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO THE 2010 EDITION

by Stephen Dafoe and Randy Williams

In Search of Thomas Marryat

One would almost expect that the author of a strange little book full of mysterious ideas would, himself, be strange and mysterious. It will therefore come as no surprise to our readers to discover that Thomas Marryat, or "T.M." as he styled himself in the epistles you are about to read, was such a man; strange in that what few written records remain to preserve his memory show him to have been eccentric in almost every aspect of his life, and mysterious in that, despite his being the head of a famous family – he was the father of the prominent British Parliamentarian Joseph Marryat, the grandfather of famous navy man and novelist Captain Frederick Marryat, and the great-grandfather of writer/actress Florence Marryat – precious little information survives that can be used to paint a complete portrait of the man himself.

Thomas Marryat was born in London, England, in 1730, the son of Zephaniah Marryat D.D., who was descended from Huguenot stock. The young Marryat is said to have been, like his minister father, possessed of a strong memory, a number of natural talents, and an overwhelming love of literature.

This latter talent or passion was regularly exercised at a poetry club to which Marryat belonged in his late teens. Every Wednesday, Marryat would travel to the Strand at five in the afternoon to share and criticize poetry with the likes of Dr. Richard Brookes, Moses Browne, Stephen Duck, Martin Madan and Thomas Madox – all of them men who went on to greater notoriety than did Marryat. Poems that were found worthy of the group's careful scrutiny and criticism were passed on to supply gentlemen's magazines and periodicals of the day. The poetry readings were always followed by a supper and an evening of witty repartée that often ran until the early hours of the morning. Marryat, who is said to have possessed a quick

but coarse wit, kept his fellow poets amused and earned the nickname “Sal Volatile” from Dr. Brookes.

At the age of 24, Marryat, having shifted his focus from poetical books to theological ones, was ordained a Presbyterian minister at the seaside town of Southwold in Suffolk. Marryat’s ordination coincided with the death of his father, who had taught him throughout his ministerial studies. But the young Marryat was hardly a novice at speaking in front of a congregation, having served as a lay preacher at Wymondham in Norfolk for five years prior to his ordination. Even in his ministerial duties, Marryat showed a penchant for eccentric behavior, often preaching in brightly colored clothing rather than the customarily subdued palette of a Presbyterian minister. While at Southwold, Marryat met and later married Sarah Davy, who bore their first son, Joseph, in October of 1757. A second son, Samuel, went on to become a king’s counsel.

Although it has been claimed that Marryat attended Edinburgh University in 1760 to study medicine, there is no hard evidence to support the claim. What is known is that Thomas Marryat lost his spirit for all things theological, gave up the ministry in that year, and pursued a career in medicine – leaving his family and his congregation in Barnet, Hertfordshire without any notice. However, this shift in direction was not a case of Marryat suddenly waking up one morning and deciding it was time to try something new. By this stage of his life, he had already published two books on medicinal matters: *Medical Aphorisms*, published in 1756 or 1757, and *Therapeutics, a New Practice of Physic*, published originally in Latin in 1758 and later republished and retitled as *The Art of Healing*. The book continued in print well into the 1800s and passed through some 37 editions. Some of Marryat’s ideas about medicine, which was hardly a refined science in the 1750s, also found their way into his *Philosophy of Masons*.

Whether Marryat ever visited Egypt, as his mysterious alter ego and *nom de plume* T.M. had apparently done, the minister-turned-medicine-man traveled the European continent in 1762

on an extensive tour of medical schools. He also eventually visited America, offering his medical services wherever and whenever they would be accepted. Returning to the British Isles in 1766, Marryat practiced medicine in Northern Ireland, where, despite his eccentric behavior as a physician, he is said to have been nearly deified by his patients, particularly by those on whom he worked without fee. Setting aside two hours each day to treat patients for free, Marryat would administer large doses of untested medicine on his guinea-pig patients, regardless of their particular constitution. One of his favorite remedies, which he offered as a cure for dysentery, was paper that had been boiled in milk.

In 1774, Marryat and his remedies moved to Shrewsbury in Shropshire, where he operated a practice for more than a decade before moving on to Bristol in 1785. In addition to his medical practices, here Marryat offered a series of well-attended lectures on therapeutics, the subject of his 1758 book. It was also at Bristol that Marryat penned the work you are about to read, a book that combines his notions of philosophy and science with polemics related to his abandonment of Christian ideas for Deistic ones. Although the concepts presented in *Philosophy of Masons*, published in 1790, are – even by today’s standards – controversial, they were nearly heretical in Marryat’s day and their publication deeply offended even his closest of friends. But his friends were far from being the only ones who took umbrage at the book.

In 1791, the Reverend H. E. Holder wrote *A brief, but it is presumed sufficient Answer to the Philosophy of Masons*, a book that rebutted the deistic claims of Marryat’s work and argued that the true philosophy of Freemasonry contained not only the practical doctrines of Christianity and the Cardinal and Theological virtues, but also a firm belief in the atonement of Christ, leading to a resurrection from the dead to a life of eternal happiness. This response was, itself, rebutted by Marryat in 1791 under the title *A Letter to the Rev. H. E. Holder, on his Brief and Sufficient Answer, by a Layman*, prompting the Reverend Holder

to respond one last time with *An Answer to the Layman's Letter*, also published in 1791.

Whether it was because of the seemingly anti-religious nature of his *Philosophy of Masons* or his personal demeanor, Marryat's friends continued to abandon him in his final years, at a time when he needed them most. One biographer said of Marryat: "In his disposition he was, latterly, morose, with a bluntness in his manners bordering upon perfect rudeness, aping the manners, or rather ill manners, of our great lexicographer [Samuel Johnson]. He was, nevertheless, a pleasant companion when he chose to expand himself, but a perfect hedge-hog to strangers, and those whom he disliked." Forced to sit outside the circle of his influence, Marryat once scribbled a note and stuck it on the window of the Bush Coffee-house where he had previously spent time with friends. The note inquired if anyone remembered a person named Thomas Marryat and informed passing readers that "he still lived, or rather, existed, in Horsfield-road."

Although he was by this time reduced to poverty, it seems doubtful that the purpose of Marryat's note was an appeal for financial assistance from his former friends; even during years when his life reached its lowest depths, the man strenuously refused charity from his closest relatives, who offered to support him in his dotage. Despite his eccentricities, and his peculiar and unorthodox ideas about religion and medicine, Marryat was a man of great personal integrity.

There is a particularly interesting anecdote that illustrates both Marryat's eccentric behavior and his code of conduct. Having impoverished means and impoverished credit, Marryat approached a stranger and asked for a place to stay - with a promise to pay for the lodging on a specific date. The man granted Marryat the credit and, at the agreed upon time, he arrived at his benefactor's home to pay the amount promised. However, the man was not home when Marryat came to settle the account, so he left a note: "Why do you make me a liar? I

called to pay you. Send for your money this evening, or I will throw it into the street.”

Marryat’s last days give us another glimpse into this strange and mysterious man. Trained for the ministry, he soon gave up a flock treated with prayer for one treated with paper boiled in milk. And yet, in his final hours, after he had been alienated by his friends for his controversial writing and unorthodox views, Marryat confided in one of his few remaining friends a great desire to ensure that his religious views were properly understood. “The world supposes that I am an atheist, but I am not,” he told his friend. “I know and believe that there is an Almighty God who made me, and will not suffer me to perish, and, therefore I am not afraid to die.”

Thomas Marryat, eccentric minister turned doctor, passed away on 29 May, 1792. Among his paltry remaining possessions was found a beautifully-bound Greek translation of the New Testament. If he had renewed his Christian faith, he kept it to himself.

The Philosophy of Masons

But what of this strange little book that Thomas Marryat left behind for posterity? Far from being another standard volume interpreting Freemasonry’s ritual, as its title might imply, *The Philosophy of Masons* is instead a work of fiction that is packed full of Marryat’s own quirky thoughts on religion, science, medicine and history. Why Marryat put these ideas into the mouths of invented “Masonic” characters is unclear. History tells us that there were a great many Deists who were heavily involved in Freemasonry during the eighteenth century, including several of the Founding Fathers of the United States of America. However, to pass off Deist beliefs as somehow being *the* official “philosophy of Masons” was an incendiary move and went directly against the longstanding tradition of avoiding religious debate in Masonic settings (Marryat references this

tradition early in the book, then gleefully ignores it for the remaining pages).

Marryat proves as eccentric a novelist as he was a minister and doctor. His story is told through a series of epistles, or letters sent from "T.M." in Egypt to an unnamed nobleman in England – but begins with the *second* of the epistles and a note that the first has been "irrecoverably lost." The second epistle is largely taken up with "T.M." complaining because his reader had not cared for the detailed descriptions of the Egyptian landscape or the accounts of T.M.'s "adventures" and "hair-breadth escapes" in the (non-existent) first epistle. The noble reader wants only to hear about the ideas, or "materials for thinking," that T.M. has discovered on his journey – thus freeing up Marryat to dispense with creating a realistic Egyptian setting or providing much in the way of a plot. The third epistle begins with a brief swordfight, but this skirmish serves mainly to introduce T.M. to the two characters with whom he will spend the rest of the book in conversation and lively debate.

These characters are Phtharras, a Jew, and Cnephen, an Egyptian and former "priest of Osiris." These names are not literary allusions to ancient lore; in fact, they seem to be nonsense words invented by Marryat. Phtharras and Cnephen often refer to T.M. as "Hakim," which they claim is an Arabic word meaning "doctor." In fact, the most common translations of the word are "wise" when it is used as an adjective and "ruler" when it is used as a noun. Perhaps this is Marryat's own little in-joke to set up his literary doppelgänger in the story as a wise ruler. As we see throughout the book (and especially the endnotes to this new edition), he is certainly not above playing rather fast and loose with facts and translations to suit his arguments.

Once these three characters have met, they are delighted to discover that they are all "Free and Accepted Masons" who "shall now be able to hold a Master's lodge." For the rest of the book, they are seen "assembling as a lodge" and taking turns making presentations on history, science, medicine, and especially religion. That this lodge follows no known conventions of

Freemasonry (and in fact, rather brazenly flouts a few of them) is beside the point. From here on out, the reader is taken on a wild ride of non-mainstream eighteenth-century thought. Several of the supposedly cutting-edge scientific ideas that Marryat champions, such as the Phlogiston Theory, were already largely discredited by the time of his writing, but his book does provide an accurate glimpse at a transitional era that was poised directly between the revival of interest in alchemy and the beginnings of what can truly be called modern science.

Other passages are less accurate and far more fanciful. Particularly amusing is Epistle the Fourth, in which we learn that Freemasonry dates back to prehistoric times in Egypt and that all of the world's great knowledge can be attributed to the Masons; other great thinkers and philosophers, such as Euclid, Pythagoras, and Aristotle, merely stole and misinterpreted the teachings of Masonry. Plato, in particular, is heaped with scorn for leaving only "a few Masonic jewels" to be found in the "heap of rubbish" that is his life's work!

Make no mistake, Marryat was trying to be amusing. The same "quick but coarse wit" that he exhibited as a young man in the poetry club at the Strand is very much on display here, never more so than in the closing sections of the book that deal directly with the perceived evils of organized religion. This is strong stuff, to be sure, but it is written with a great deal of humor and some delicious turns of phrase. Whatever his failings as a conventional novelist, Marryat did not lack for a singular voice as an author.

The book ends abruptly just as two of the characters are to begin a journey up the Nile in search of still more "materials for thinking." Perhaps Marryat was laying the groundwork for a sequel that never materialized. Alas, publication of this book seems to have pitted Marryat against the mainstream of organized Freemasonry, and all evidence points to his having been forsaken and forgotten by his Masonic brothers in his later life just as he was by the majority of his family and friends.

Critics at the time were also less than kind to *The Philosophy of Masons*. *The European Magazine and London Review* mocked the concept of middle-eastern Jews and “pagan priests” who are well-acquainted with English literature, the letters of Jonathan Swift, and even some obscure bits of British poetry and philosophy “which we thought were totally sunk into oblivion.” More ominously for Marryat, the *Review* opined that his ideas on religion and morality were totally unfit for the public and might be “particularly injurious to youth.” John Murray, writing in London’s *Metropolitan Magazine*, complained that Marryat had “allowed the reins of his judgement to be a little too loose in the hands of his imagination.” And yet Marryat clearly struck a responsive chord with some readers. One of these, Charles Varlo, stole large chunks of the book verbatim and published them under his own name in two different books – *Nature Display’d* (1793) and *The Floating Ideas of Nature* (1796) – merely substituting a “C.V.” for Marryat’s “T.M.” sign-off at the end of each epistle.

But why should we read this “Masonic” book in the 21st century? Perhaps because it provides a fascinating snapshot of the late eighteenth century – which was, after all, a pivotal time for Freemasonry – as well as an especially unrestrained examination of the Deistic strain of thought that existed within the Craft during that era. As quaint and outdated as many of the ideas in this book will seem, the careful reader will not be able to miss the fact that many of the prevailing notions of Marryat’s times, particularly those related to the seven liberal arts and sciences, are still preserved in the language of Masonic ritual.

Thomas Marryat is hardly alone in having published his most heartfelt thoughts on the true meaning of the Craft and its teachings only to find himself more or less completely exiled from the fraternity. In one later example, English Freemason J.S.M. Ward had written several well-received books on Masonry (a few of which remain in print in the U.K. to this day) when he seriously rocked the boat with the 1923 publication of *Freemasonry: Its Aims and Ideals*. Like Marryat, Ward died in

poverty, largely forgotten by his friends and his Brothers. Paradoxically, for all their similarities, Ward wanted to bring more religion to Freemasonry rather than less, as Marryat would have preferred. Even today there are parallels that could be made with modern-day Masons who have published well-meaning position papers about the fraternity and found themselves suspended by their Grand Lodges. Perhaps the final lesson to be taken away from *The Philosophy of Masons* is that our Craft has never lacked for strong dissenting opinions about its teachings or the directions it should take. Let us hope that Freemasonry, which prides itself on accepting men of many different faiths, beliefs, and backgrounds, will learn to make room in this still-young century for the occasional “mad prophet” such as Marryat. Whether or not we agree with them, there is much we can learn from such men, and we would do well to remember that open-minded diversity has always been one of our fraternity’s greatest strengths. The title of this book aside, there will likely always be multiple “philosophies of Masons,” and that variety only makes the Masonic experience all the richer.

A Few Words on the 2010 Edition

As is true whenever one encounters a book from this era, it is truly astonishing to see what “typical” educated readers of the time were expected to know. Without a decent working knowledge of Latin, Classics, Greek and Roman mythology, the Bible, European history (particularly the religious conflicts), and the complete works of contemporary English writers, a reader would have no hope of deciphering all of Marryat’s allusions, aspersions, and wisecracks. That problem is only compounded by the 220 years’ distance between the time Marryat wrote these words and the publication of this new edition.

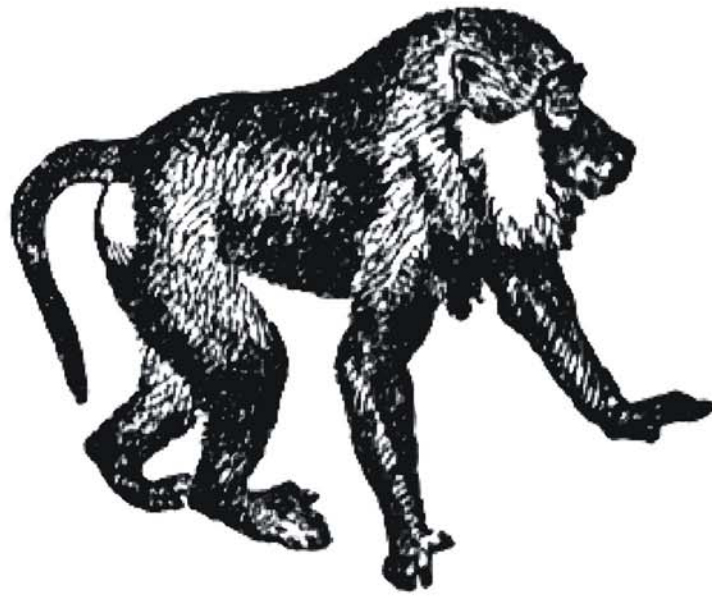
With that in mind, we have gone through the entire book, page by page, and lightly edited the text to make meaning and punctuation clearer to modern readers while retaining as much

of the original language and flavor of Marryat's writing as possible. While each chapter has endnotes, our approach has not been to bog down the text with long scholarly asides but to make the reading experience more "user friendly." The notes are meant to be used as quick guides to assist in the enjoyment of the book by providing definitions of unusual or archaic words, explanations of literary allusions, background on forgotten scientific concepts of the mid-eighteenth century, and context for humorous asides about public figures that might be lost on 21st century readers. A full bibliography of source materials used by the editors appears at the end of the book. Our efforts to bring Thomas Marryat's strange little 220-year-old book back to print have truly been a labor of love, and we sincerely hope that you enjoy your journey through these pages.

Stephen Dafoe & Randy Williams
Alberta, Canada
January 2010

Esoteric Odyssey

Epistle the Second



Papio Cynocephalus

Yellow Baboon

*Epistle the Second*¹

My Lord,

Cairo, October 24, 1750

Your answer to mine struck me at first reading with equal surprise and chagrin. I knew your Lordship too well to think you capable of such meanness, as to assume any superiority from your rank, titles, or property. From what passed between us for so many years, at school and college, I knew to be impossible: You never claimed, but spurned at any advantage that did not originate in intellectual merit. Forgive the injustice of the instantaneous surmise. It was indeed transient, though your cavalier treatment of me was as nettling as it was humiliating.

“Could I find no better employment for my time and money than to ascertain the height of the largest pyramid with more precision than had ever yet been manifested?”² To be sure, an error in a few yards is a matter of no great importance. I have curiosity, my Lord, though it seems, I must keep the gratification of it to myself. “You would hear nothing from me that other travellers have noticed. If they deceive, it is not by design, and *slight* errors in matters of so little consequence are not worth agitating.” If, like Procrustes,³ you thus snip off all superfluities, my letters will be neither prolix⁴ nor mighty numerous.

How mortified was I, at first blush, by the following paragraph: “Let me hear nothing of your adventures, or even your hair-breadth escapes. You have sense enough to keep out of harm’s way. If from a concatenation of untoward circumstances you are brought into a situation truly dangerous, I know you are not deficient in presence of mind or self-possession: You have wit enough to contrive and courage enough to execute an extemporaneous plan for your extrication. If that is impossible, you and I have learned to submit to the law of necessity.” I am more obliged to your Lordship for your high opinion of my mental abilities, than for your expressions of a

tender and enthusiastic affection. To say the truth; the *sang froid*⁵ wherewith your Lordship treats every incident that relates to so respectable a personage as myself, has almost incapacitated me from ever mentioning said personage any more. You are satisfied that I shall make myself as happy as I can be, that it is not in the power of fate to prevent my enjoying every moment of existence. To communicate these matters by the pen can spring only from *Vanity*,⁶ you therefore desire to hear nothing more about them. Very well, my Lord! Now suffer me to set you right, with regard to your opinion of me. Vanity is the most contemptible of all our sensations, of which there is not a single spark in the composition of your humble servant. Pride is a passion as noble as innocent, and strongly impressed by nature on the human heart. Of *this* indeed he challenges as much for his share as would bear competition with his black Highness. These, though so widely different are often confounded as synonymous. Vanity consists in the desire that others should think us possessed of qualities to which we have no title. Pride excites that pleasurable tumidity⁷, which a man feels from pluming himself on those superior excellencies of which he knows he *is* possessed. The vain man's being is in the opinion of others. The proud man cares not a button what others think of him. Swift justly discriminated these, when he said he was "too proud to be vain."⁸

As your Lordship has informed me that you have no desire to know anything at all about me; after having precluded all the usual topics of which letters are composed, it is a great mercy that you let me know how far the liberty of *my* pen may extend and not degenerate into licentiousness: To furnish you with *materials for thinking*. *New and useful* knowledge of things, or of man and manners is not contraband. As gentle a talk as imposed on the Jews, during their residence *here*.⁹ To be sure, I am in a fine country for accumulating such materials as your Lordship requests. As I shall pursue my course to penetrate as far as possible into the interior parts of Africa, if your Lordship has any taste for the natural history of monkeys, I doubt not of my abili-

ties to satisfy you. *Materials for thinking*, truly! In sober sadness, I wonder at the extravagance of your demand. When we made the tour of Europe together, did we find among the most enlightened and best-informed men much novelty, or anything worthy of employing the thoughts of a philosopher? Having beat over the same ground with most of our contemporaries, can we expect that *many* things, which were worth it, have eluded our observation? In short, my Lord, the plants you seek and set me hunting after are mighty scantily sown in Europe. The African Negroes are, to be sure, very pretty gentlemen to learn logic of. But a mummy – nay, a fine piece of porphyry¹⁰ with an immensity of hieroglyphics engraved (demonstrably) previous to the deluge – these, you will say, are materials for fooling away time, not for *thinking*. As matters are thus circumstanced, I have very little hopes of obliging you by anything that may occur in the progress of my journey. If I meet with a Cynocephalus or Pongo¹¹ that can articulate, your Lordship shall be acquainted with all the useful knowledge I may receive from him. As this is not a very probable case, it is time to put an end to your reading *this*, or perhaps any other production of your Lordship’s sincere friend.

T.M.

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NOTES:

1. Marryat’s stated in a note at the bottom of the first page, “The first [epistle] is irrecoverably lost.”

2. Although Marryat's book was published in 1790, the letters are set in 1750 when Egypt was still under Ottoman rule, as it had been since 1517 when the Ottomans defeated the Mamluk Empire. Despite ongoing conflicts between the Ottoman Empire and Europe, English mathematician John Greaves traveled to Egypt in the seventeenth century and undertook the measurement of the Great Pyramid of Khufu. Greave's results were published in 1646 as *Pyramidographia: or a Description of the Pyramids in Egypt*. Greave's study was followed by several others, the closest to Marryat's time being that of his fellow Englishman Nathaniel Davison, who visited the pyramid in 1765.

3. In Greek mythology, Procrustes, a son of Poseidon, was a bandit and a powerful giant who claimed to have a "one-size-fits-all" guest bed that perfectly accommodated the dimensions of any visitors. The bed was not magical – Procrustes either stretched his short guests on the rack or chopped away at his tall guests until they fit the bed exactly. The expression "a Procrustean bed" refers to an arbitrary standard to which precise conformity is demanded.

4. Prolix: Extended to great, unnecessary, or tedious length.

5. *Sang froid* is a French noun which literally means "cold blood," but is more often used to describe "coolness of mind" – a state of being calm and composed.

6. Note the capitalization of *Vanity*, as if describing an outside force or influence. In many classical myths and religious teachings, vanity is considered a form of self-idolatry that removes one from the good graces of God or the universe. The Greek myth of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own beautiful reflection (and gave us the term psychological "narcissism"), is one example from mythology. In Christian teachings, vanity is often considered to be an example of pride, which is one of the seven deadly sins.

7. "Tumidity" is a state of being swollen, puffy or distended; it can also refer to one who is puffed up with arrogance – overbearing or bombastic.