

they have hardly an alternative between a simple acceptance of the entire mass of ancient history, or an equally indiscriminate suspicion of the whole. And when it happens that a particular fact is questioned, or the genuineness of some ancient book is argued, such persons, conscious that they are little familiar with the particulars of which the evidence on these subjects consists, and perceiving that the controversy involves a multiplicity of recondite and uninteresting researches; or that it turns upon the validity of minute criticisms, either recoil altogether from the argument or accept an opinion without inquiry, from that party on whose judgment they think they may most safely rely."¹

It thus follows, as a general rule, that such controversies are left entirely in the hands of critics and antiquaries, whose peculiar tastes and acquirements qualify them for investigations which are utterly uninteresting to the mass of readers.² Comparing small things with greater ones, this usage, which has penetrated into Masonry, is productive of great inconvenience, and by narrowing the base of Masonic research, tends to render the early history of the craft naught but "the traditions of experts, to be taken by the outside world on faith."

The few students of our antiquities address themselves, not so much to the craft at large, as to each other. They are sure of a select and appreciative audience, and they make no real effort to popularize truths not yet patent to the world, and which are at once foreign to the intellectual habits and tastes of ordinary persons, and very far removed from the mental range of a not inconsiderable section of our fraternity.

In the preceding remarks, I must, however, be more especially understood, as having in my mind the Freemasons of these islands, for whilst, as a rule—to which, however, there are several brilliant exceptions—the research of Masonic writers of Germany and America has not kept pace with that of historians in the mother country of Freemasonry, it must be freely conceded, that both in the United States and among German-speaking people, there exists a familiarity with the history and principles of the craft—that is to say, up to a certain point—for which a parallel will be vainly sought in Britain.

These introductory observations, I am aware, may be deemed of a somewhat desultory character, but a few words have yet to be said, before resuming and concluding the section of this history which brings us to a point where surmise and conjecture, so largely incidental to the mythico-historical period of our annals, will be tempered, if not altogether superseded, by the evidence derivable from accredited documents and the archives of Grand Lodges. The passage which I shall next quote will serve as the text for a short digression.

"However much," says a high authority, "of falsification and of error there may be in the world, there is yet so great a predominance of truth, that he who believes indiscriminately will be in the right a thousand times to one oftener than he who doubts indiscriminately."³

Now, without questioning the literal accuracy of this general proposition, the sense in which its *application* is sometimes understood, must be respectfully demurred to.

If, indeed, no choice is allowed to exist between blindly accepting the fables that have descended to us, or commencing a new history of Masonry on a blank page, the progress of honest scepticism may well be arrested, and the fabulists be left in possession of the field.

But is there no middle course? Let us hear Lord Bacon:—

¹ Taylor, *History of the Transmission of Ancient Books to Modern Times*, 1837, pp. 1, 2.

² See Chap. I., p. 2, note 4.

³ Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 189.