

"the future progress of our knowledge" has been ensured, "by casting off obstacles in the presence of which progress was impossible."¹

It is immaterial whether Wren was or was not a mere *member* of the Society. To my mind, and upon the evidence before us—to which our attention must be strictly confined—it seems impossible that he could have been, but even if he was, we should only have one speculative or geomantic brother the more, a circumstance of no real moment, and unless supported by new evidence of such a character as to utterly destroy the authenticity of that already produced, not in any way calculated to modify the judgment I have ventured to pass upon his alleged connection with Freemasonry. But the consequences arising from the deeply rooted belief in his being—under what title is immaterial—the Grand Master or virtual head of the Society, have already borne much evil fruit, by leading those who have successively founded schools of Masonic thought, to pursue their researches on erroneous data, and as a natural result, to reduce to a minimum the value of even the most diligent inquiry into the past history of the craft. Indeed, a moment's reflection will convince the candid reader that any generalization of Masonic facts, based on an assumption, that the era of "Grand Lodges" can be carried back to 1663—when the famous regulations are alleged to have been made, which I have handled with some freedom in the last chapter—must be devoid of any practical utility, or in other words, that in all such cases the want of judgment in the writer can only be supplied by the discrimination of his readers.

By way of illustration, let us take Kloss. It is certain that this author collected his materials with equal diligence and judgment; but yet, we perceive that in much relating to a country not his own, he was often egregiously misinformed.

I am not here considering his misinterpretation of the English statutes,² an error of judgment arising, not unnaturally, from the inherent defects of the printed copy to which alone he had access, but the inaccuracies which are to be found in his writings, owing to the confidence he placed in Anderson as the witness of truth.

The writings of Sir James Hall may also be referred to, as affording equally cogent evidence of the wide diffusion of error. owing to a similar dependence upon statements for which the compiler of the first two editions of the "Constitutions" is the original authority. In the latter instance, we find, as I have already mentioned, that the *fact* of Wren's Grand Mastership, is actually relied upon, by a non-masonic writer of eminence, as stamping the opinion of the great architect, with regard to the origin of Gothic architecture, as the very highest that the subject will admit of.³

How, indeed—when we have marshalled all the authorities, considered their arguments, examined their proofs, and estimated the probability or improbability of what they advance by the *evidence* they present to us—any lingering belief in the existence of Grand Lodges during the seventeenth century can remain in the mind, is a mystery which I can only attempt to solve by making use of a comparison.

Writing in 1633, Sir Thomas Browne informs us, that the more improbable any proposition is, the greater is his willingness to assent to it; but that where a thing is actually impossible he is, on that account, prepared to believe it!⁴

¹ See p. 4; and Buckle, *op. cit.*, vol. II., p. 82.

² Chaps. II., p. 107; XII., p. 135; and XV., p. 325.

³ Chap. VII., pp. 356-359, 361-2, 365-6.

⁴ "Methinks there be not impossibilities enough in religion for an active faith. I love to lose myself in a mystery, to pursue my reason to an *Altitudo*. I can answer all the objections of Satan

⁵ Vol. II., p. 323, *et seq.*

⁶ Chap. VI., p. 260.