

# WILLIAM H. GRIMSHAW'S LEGACY: RE-EVALUATING HIS PLACE IN PRINCE HALL HISTORIOGRAPHY AND SCHOLARSHIP

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Historian, scholar, writer and Past Grand Master William H. Grimshaw of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Washington, D.C. is generally unfairly vilified in contemporary Masonic analysis and literature. In fact, it is an often rather malicious viewpoint and disappointing that he is dismissed out of hand as a fraud. This is too strong a word to summarize his body of work. Similarly, we judge Albert Pike, for the most part, based on a few historical notes and the opinions of those whom we hold (sometimes mostly undeservedly) in high esteem.

Numerous masons, Prince Hall, bogus, mainstream or otherwise, have not read nor sufficiently studied Pike; nor are they intimately familiar with his dazzling Masonic tome, *Morals and Dogma*. In that regard, a must read is Grand Historian Arturo de Hoyos's *Esoterika*. Pike's *Morals and Dogma* is the basis for much of what is commonly referred to as "the higher degrees of freemasonry." In short, numerous moral compasses are off regarding both these highly productive albeit controversial historical Masonic works, the white Pike and the black Grimshaw. This paper is not an apologia for neither Grimshaw nor Pike. Unfortunately, in both cases, the wheat is tossed away for the chaff!

Is Grimshaw blameless in our contemporary view of him? The answer is unequivocally no. But we need not throw the baby out with the bath water! This is a trite but basic truism of life, because whether you are a libertarian or not, contrition is the best path to wisdom and understanding. The body of work and not a single act or publication truly depicts or defines a complex man or his times. It is this complexity that puts legs to our thesis. The same can be said of Illustrious Brother Albert Pike who gave Prince Hall's Thornton Jackson the high degrees, and thus the birth and life of the black Supreme Council! The question of Prince Hall legitimacy or regularity in the court of Masonic law has been asked and answered! Debating that issue at this stage is an exercise in futility and insanity. It's like arguing with a drunk about the nature of the Universe, God, and theoretical subatomic particle physics. You won't get anywhere except perhaps tickets for a journey down the rabbit hole that Alice travelled in Wonderland.

Unfortunately, the uninformed freemason judges Grimshaw's research methodology based almost exclusively on the words of a few detractors of his 1903 tome, *The Official History of Negro Freemasonry in America*; and what disparagers and commentators have said or written about him since then. For many years, what we thought and believed about Prince Hall derived from Grimshaw's seminal work. In sum, this is not only unfair; it is specious, pernicious and signifies slapdash scholarship and reasoning. This uninformed view is the perfect example of what I have coined as "aggressive ignorance." My term adequately describes this unreasonable and dumb evaluation process as it specifically moronically relates to Grimshaw. There is no or little commentary, negative or otherwise, regarding his other ten or twelve books! This is an abnormal assessment algorithm to say the least, simply because his body of work over his lifetime reveals a portrait of a complex and caring individual who devoted his life's work to Negro Freemasonry and Masonic scholarship. How then can we not fling him upon our stout shoulders?

The most common complaint (there are a few regarding the establishment of the National Compact) is that Grimshaw "invented" or colored some of the historical facts about the life of Prince Hall, the founder of what is glibly termed "Black Freemasonry" in America. Actually, despite Grimshaw and a few others aside, there is still much more to learn about Prince Hall, most of all his birth place, biological origins, physical appearance, and possible stint as an indentured servant and a soldier in the continental army! There is much more to learn about the individual lives of his fourteen compatriots! Was African Lodge established in 1775 or 1778 as revisited research suggests.<sup>1</sup> I attempted in a recent published paper to make the case for the "exploration" of the possibility that Hall hailed from England!<sup>2</sup> Additionally, indeed, I argue in my chapter of the *Greatest Prince Hall Mason of the Twentieth Century*<sup>3</sup> that Grimshaw presaged what could be termed the New Journalism as espoused by writer Tom Wolfe in the 1960s! This authentic journalistic movement and valid "literary voice" and device suggest that mixing fact with fiction is a legitimate historical art form! We could rest our case here; thus, I have not and will not back away from that overarching thesis.

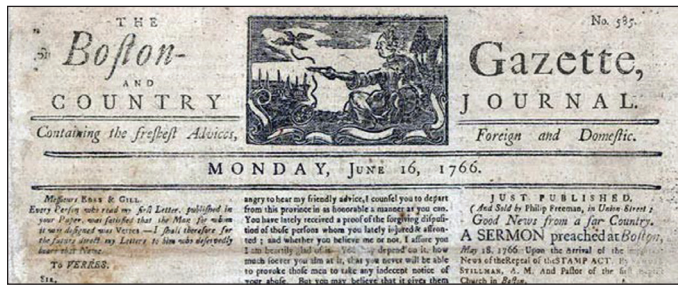
<sup>1</sup> Hairston, John L., *Landmarks of our Fathers*, The Quill and the Sword Publishing, Seattle Washington, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Kearse, Gregory S, *The Phylaxis Magazine*, "Prince Hall's Connection to England: The Case for Examining the Complex Narrative From Whence He Came," 2014, p.23

<sup>3</sup> Kearse, Gregory S, *Greatest Prince Hall Mason of the Twentieth Century*, pp. 183-194.

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Oddly, the Bostonian Prince Hall seems to be the primary focus of the study of Black Freemasonry in America and the world. Grand illusionist and master magician Richard Potter (1783–1835) was Hall’s contemporary. Potter, a forgotten black mason was a member of African Lodge #459 and deserves stringent academic study. Further, we know there were black freemasons long before Hall. John Pine (1690–1756) in England is the most notable example.<sup>4</sup> Pine engraved the frontispiece of the 1723 *Constitutions of the Freemasons* by Anderson. This is an astounding historical reference that needs more stringent exploration!



Most contemporary masons don’t know who Pine was, let alone his son Robert who immigrated to Philadelphia in the mid-1790s as an esteemed portrait artist! We know there were a few Royal Arch masons in Philadelphia and Rhode Island because Hall established lodges there; thus, in the strictest practical and Masonic sense, making Hall Grand Master. I have argued in other published papers that Hall behaved like and was treated in correspondences by the Grand Lodge of England as a Grand Master by 1787. In his 1792 Charge before the Lodge, Hall is listed as Grand Master by the well-known and established printer John Fleet (1734-1806) and his brother Thomas 1732-1797. Also prior to

Hall was the renowned black Frenchman Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (December 25, 1745 – June 10, 1799)<sup>5</sup> who was either in fact a Grand Master or thought to have been a Grand Master. More telling is Hall’s 1797 Charge was produced and published by agitator Benjamin Edes (October 14, 1732 – December 11, 1803) of Massachusetts! Edes listed Hall as Grand Master. While it is not known if Edes was a freemason, he unquestionably was one of the Sons of Liberty and principal architect of the Boston Tea Party! Publishing Hall’s speech, sermon, charge (insert which ever) was counter cultural and deserves further academic investigation. Edes was the publisher and editor of the radical *Boston Gazette* Newspaper, an aggressive and sturdy agitator against the stodgy British system of Government.

Unarmed, the unsophisticated initiate wants to completely excise Grimshaw from the annals of legitimate historiography, specifically as it relates to his “invention” of facts relating to the life of the iconic, complex social critic, political pioneer, agitator, and freemason Prince Hall. The question is how much of Grimshaw’s material was appropriated, and how much of it was factual remains an historic mystery. Hindsight is 20/20 vision because somehow Grimshaw’s prodigious body of work and more than 10 books, and his work at the Library of Congress all go unnoticed or dismissed. Roundtree elegantly wrote and posits the notion that Prince Hall was once a forgotten man.<sup>6</sup> Not only was Brother Grimshaw a forgotten man, he is unfairly maligned by modern day critics, separated by nearly a hundred years. He was misunderstood then and now. There is a depth of character and research capability of Grimshaw that escape modern day essayists and revisionists of history. PGM Grimshaw was a member of Social Lodge #1, essentially the first (and therefore the oldest) research lodge of the Prince Hall family of Lodges established in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere. That story needs to be unfolded and told. We suspect the devil that is hidden in the details explains much about not only Grimshaw but Prince Hall and his posse!

“Judge and ye shall be harshly judged.” The Bard of Avon said it this way, “measure for measure.” The Holy Bible admonishes, “Do not judge, or you will be judged. For with the same judgment you pronounce, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” For the most part, Grimshaw’s detractors don’t seem to have a fraction of the productive output or academic credentials Grimshaw owned. This is not an indictment; rather, it is a sad commentary on the state of affairs of the pursuit of truth and the folks who turn a blind or jaundiced eye towards valid research methodology. Exercising good judgement is not the same as “judging” or being judgmental. Good judgement suggests prudence and reason; it is perhaps even a noble journey of discovery and truth.

John Williams astutely observes, “Of everything written by Grimshaw, the story of Prince Hall and various incidents relating to African Lodge and African Grand Lodge have been subject of controversy, and this amounts a very small portion of his book. Very little of Grimshaw’s massive volume has been discredited by independent evidence, but at the same time, the discredited parts are the only parts that have been subjected to intense scrutiny and have been investigated by a large contingent of competent researchers.”<sup>7</sup>

Does that suggest that Grimshaw had a hidden agenda? Williams says, “...If we examine Grimshaw’s motivation and his methods, we get a better idea how to proceed. It seems clear to several writers that Grimshaw had an agenda that motivated him to adopt the approach he used to write his book. He wanted a manuscript that was complete, that was interesting, and that presented Prince Hall Masonry in a pleasant light. His motivation was excellent; it was his method that brought him disrepute.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Prescott, Andrew. “John Pine: A Sociable Craftsman.” *MQ Magazine*. Issue 10, July, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> La Boëssière, Tessier, fils, (1818). *Traité, Notice historique sur le chevalier de St.-Georges (in French)*. Paris: Didot. p. xvi. Date of birth as affirmed by life long friend.

<sup>6</sup> Alton G. Roundtree, *Out of the Shadows*. Introduction.

<sup>7</sup> Phylaxis Society website.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Historians gather bits and pieces of data, and they use these bits and pieces to reconstruct objectively as accurate a picture as possible of events that transpired. Historians use eye witness accounts and other evidence to establish veracity. Like coroners, historians may be able to piece together a better account of the events than an eye witness can. Grimshaw's point of view, perception, or understanding of history and historical events is no less valid than any contemporary journalist or historian writing about today's presidential race. Is Donald Trump a goat or a saint? One's political, cultural, or social experience will answer that question. Over time, through the decades, what is written now will change, reflect or obscure the cultural lens of tomorrow! For the most part, Grimshaw's detractors were some of his contemporaries who fostered a following one hundred years later. History will view the geopolitical stances of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump through a much different lens! It will either elevate or lower the standard by which we evaluate each of these candidates.

Grimshaw was a doorman at the Library of Congress, so he was surrounded by and had access to the most impressive and comprehensive accumulation of information housed anywhere in the United States, save perhaps, the Massachusetts Archives. Grimshaw's weakness in his quest for a complete accounting is that, "...when gaps appear in his story, he fills them with inventions whose only source was his imagination."<sup>9</sup> Again, in the absence of smoking gun evidence, or direct quotes, it is a viable act of scholarship to suppose and to fill in the gaps by reasonable conjecture. In the publishing industry, it is called narrative non-fiction. Too, any paleoanthropologist will allow the same conjectural path given the dearth of the available physical evidence. Again, the proper measure is against his other published works. Grimshaw was prodigious, so his legacy cannot be fairly judged and evaluated based on one minimally flawed book!

Williams partly agrees with, "We cannot say that the bulk of Grimshaw's book is inaccurate, but this is because we have not given the bulk of the book the kind of scrutiny we have given to the Prince Hall story. We have exposed Grimshaw's methods of invention and it is not unreasonable to suppose that Grimshaw used similar methods throughout his massive work. Grimshaw had the option to omit statements on matters where facts were not in evidence; he chose instead to speak on matters of which he had no knowledge and to pass off his inventions as the *Official History of Freemasonry Among the Colored People in North America*. As a consequence, we will struggle with Grimshaw for years to come looking for verification of his so-called official history."<sup>10</sup>

"On a bright note, the great service that William Grimshaw has done for our Order is to force us to do what historians do: confirm, Confirm, CONFIRM!"<sup>11</sup> Williams best and succinctly makes my point! It encourages us to observe and accurately chronicle what we see and what we find for the sake of future generations. That is Grimshaw's truly most enduring legacy!

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Op cit.

<sup>11</sup> Op cit.

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***If people can be educated to see the lowly side of their own  
natures, it may be hoped that they will also learn to  
understand and to love their fellow men better.  
A little less hypocrisy and a little more tolerance towards  
oneself can only have good results in respect for our  
neighbour; for we are all too prone to transfer to our fellows  
the injustice and violence we inflict upon our own natures.***

— Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961)