

The DaVinci Code

A Book Review of 'The DaVinci Code' By Dan Brown. Corgi Books, 2003, 605pp, ISBN 0552 14951 9, £6.99

When Michael Baigent and his co-authors published *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* in 1982 they expected – and received – both popular acclaim and scholarly derision. The public reacted only, and inevitably, to the first of these and the book became a runaway best-seller. But such success carries a price. Despite definitive demolition, by way of television documentaries, of the flimsy evidence on which the book's theses – the supposed bloodline of Christ and the shadowy Priory of Sion that existed to protect it – that same public prefers to maintain its belief in fantasy rather than reality. The consequence of this has been a twenty-year stream, more of a roaring flood, of variously pale or crazed derivatives of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. All of these books have common denominators: a desire to rewrite history in line with their own bizarre fantasies, and a willful refusal to accept the reality of documented history. They are also widely read and widely believed to be true; but now comes their apotheosis in a work of overt fiction.

It must be admitted that Bro Baigent and his co-authors sincerely believed in their theses, but it is unthinkable that Dan Brown believes one word of his creation, for *The DaVinci Code* is so riddled with factual errors that no rational, literate author could both assemble and believe such a catalogue of nonsense. The novel is a thriller predicated on the current existence of the Priory of Sion, but it can in no sense be described as homage: the warped and murderous villain is named (by way of an absurd anagram) after poor Bro Baigent. Nor does the book live up to the sycophantic reviews printed on the flyleaves. It is neither a 'masterpiece' nor 'enthalling' – it is simply a formulaic and predictable thriller with an irritating undercurrent of special pleading. More to the point, it does not contain 'massive amounts of historical and academic information'. Why, then, bother to review this book at all? There are, alas, good reasons but these must wait until some of the most egregious errors have been exposed. I will confine these to subject areas likely to be of most interest to our readership, but it should be stressed that they are not confined to history, masonic or otherwise: they extend, for example, into biography, art criticism, science, comparative religion, symbolism, archaeology, architecture and biblical studies.

The DaVinci Code begins with a leaf headed 'Fact', under which the author states that 'The Priory of Sion ... is a real organization' and that 'All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.' It is not, and they are not. Consider first the 'secret rituals'; the ceremonial doings of the Priory of Sion are not drawn from the spurious 'Dossiers Secrets' that allegedly verify it, but from the film version of Dennis Wheatley's *The Devil Rides Out*. As to the Dossiers themselves, they have never been 'authenticated' by anyone, let alone by 'many specialists', and they cannot 'incontrovertibly' confirm anything at all. Now let us consider some of the historical errors. The bible was not 'collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great': the Canon of Scripture of the Christian Church was established in the second century AD. The Dead Sea Scrolls do not contain any Christian gospels, while the Nag Hammadi codices are not 'scrolls' but bound leaves. And while on the matter of religion, biblical

scholars would be amazed to learn that ‘the sacred name of God’ – YHWH – is ‘in fact derived from Jehovah, an androgynous physical union between the masculine Jah and the pre-Hebraic name for Eve, Havah’. In fiction perhaps, but not in fact. Inevitably we come to the Knights Templar. For Mr Brown they were, of course, pagans and heretics, wiped out in one day in 1307 (thus telescoping a decade of examination and trial) by Pope Clement. Presumably ‘Superpope’ for he seems to have ‘killed and interred hundreds of Knights Templar’ and to have ensured that those burned at the stake – in Paris, in the real historical world – were somehow ‘tossed unceremoniously into the Tiber’. Then Brown comes to Britain. The architecture of the Temple Church in London is ‘pagan to the core’, while ‘Few people even know it’s there’. Except the multitude of tourists who flock to see it. Rosslyn Chapel was designed and built by the Knights Templar, in 1446, ‘as an exact architectural blueprint of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem’; it has a ‘massive subterranean chamber’ unknown until recent years; and it lies ‘precisely on the north-south meridian that runs through Glastonbury’. All of which is utter rubbish, as rational guide books and any atlas will confirm. Freemasonry is treated in an equally ludicrous fashion. One of the ‘best-kept secrets of the early Masonic brotherhood’ was the use of the ‘wedged keystone to build a vaulted archway’ – presumably secret only to the blind – while progress in Freemasonry involved members ascending ‘...to higher degrees by proving they could keep a secret and by performing rituals and various tests of merit over many years. The tasks became progressively harder until they culminated in a successful candidate’s induction as thirty-second degree Mason. (p. 279) A surprising discovery, especially for those American masons who have risen from initiation to the Scottish Rite in one weekend!

This litany of absurdities could be extended, alas, almost indefinitely, so let us now consider the rationale for this review. The DaVinci Code – overt fiction, remember – has become a world-wide bestseller, endorsed by a host of wholly unqualified reviewers and fellow ‘best-selling’ authors. It is not only widely read, its central thesis – the existence and purpose of the Priory of Sion – is also widely believed by an ignorant and uncritical public. This ignorance extends to the Templar and masonic themes of the novel. It is, sadly, an ignorance that is largely our fault as informed and educated Freemasons. We are now, courtesy of such books as The DaVinci Code, widely perceived as a secret society dedicated to promoting a hidden and subversive agenda orchestrated by an inner cabal of heretics. Unfair and unjust this may be, but such a perception should concentrate our minds wonderfully. If we do not educate the public – from whom our potential membership is drawn – as to the real nature and history of Freemasonry, then we shall either fade into a shadow of our past glories, or face an even worse scenario: inundation by candidates who desperately want the fiction to be true.

R.A. Gilbert, *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* Volume 116, Review pp.286-7.