

John Coustos

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As for himself, he would rather suffer death than betray the sacred trust reposed in him.

Some of you may have heard those words somewhere. I want to remind you of a man, now forgotten, who was once regarded as a hero of Freemasonry, because he followed that ideal. Long, long ago, more than two centuries ago, a book was published in London, England. Its title was, in the fashion of the day, amply descriptive. It ran as follows:

The Sufferings of John Coustos, for Freemasonry, and for His refusing to turn Roman Catholic, in the Inquisition at Lisbon; Where he was sentenc'd, during Four Years, to the Galley; and afterwards releas'd from thence by the gracious Interposition of his present Majesty King George II. The book was incredibly popular. It appeared in French and German versions, and went through some nineteen editions over the next seventy-five years.



John Coustos

Editor's Note: It is customary after misspellings and errors to use the term (sic) to ensure the reader is aware that the author did not make an error, but is faithful to the original text. To do so with all of the quotes in this paper would have you (sic) of them before we are finished. Be advised that all spellings like sentenc'd are from the original text.

We might just take a brief look at the story that it tells us. John Coustos was born in Switzerland in 1703, the son of Huguenot refugees who had escaped from France some eighteen years before, when the Protestant churches were banned. As a child he was taken to England, and was trained there to be a diamond cutter. He went to France in 1736, and worked in Paris for five years. Then he went to Lisbon, Portugal. His original hope had been to go to America, to the Portuguese colony of Brazil, where diamonds had been discovered in 1729, and where there are still rich diamond mines; but he was unable to get authorization, so he stayed in Lisbon, plying his trade. While there, he established a Masonic Lodge, with himself as Master; and that was the cause of his troubles. Masonry had been banned by the Catholic Church in 1738, and was illegal in Portugal.

Apparently the wife of another jeweler in the city was jealous of Coustos' success, and in order to remove one of her husband's competitors, she denounced Coustos to the authorities as a Freemason. In March of 1743 he was arrested and taken to the Prison of the Inquisition, where he remained for fifteen months. Let us hear his own words.

A little after, the ... Officer ... bid the Guards search me; and take away all the Gold, Silver, Papers, Knives, Scissars, Buckles, &c. I might have about me. They then led me to a lonely Dungeon, expressly forbidding me to speak loud, or knock at the Walls; but that, in case I wanted any Thing, to beat against the Door, with a Padlock, that hung on the outward Door; and which I could reach, by thrusting my Arm through the Iron Grates (pp. 19-20).

After a few days there, he was shaved, and his hair was cropped, and he was led before the Inquisitors for the first time. After a little beating about the bush, they made it clear that he had been arrested for the crime of Masonry, and that they wanted more information. So he told them that it was a society devoted to Charity, where religious controversy was forbidden. He was examined a number of times, and after each interrogation was remanded to his solitary cell for a longer or shorter period.

During the fifth examination, the following exchange took place.

Inquisitors: [We insist that you reveal to us the Secrets of this Art.]

Coustos: The Oath [I took] at my Admission ... will not permit me to do it; Conscience forbids me; and therefore I hope your Lordships are too equitable to use Compulsion.

Inquisitors: Your Oath is as nothing in our Presence, and we shall absolve you from it.

Coustos: Your Lordships are very gracious; but as I am firmly persuaded, that it is not in the Power of any Being upon Earth to free me from my Oath, I am firmly determin'd never to violate it (pages 34-35).

And so, back to the dungeon. In the ninth examination, he was strongly urged, with threats, to turn Catholic; but Coustos expressed his firm resolution to live and die a Protestant. Finally, he was brought before the tribunal for the thirteenth time. He tells us what happened then.

. . . The President . . . order'd a Paper, containing Part of my Sentence, to be read. I thereby was doom'd to suffer the Tortures employ'd by the Holy Office, for refusing to tell the Truth . . .; for my not discovering the Secrets of Masonry . . .

I hereupon was instantly convey'd to the Torture-Room, built in the Form of a square Tower, where no Light appear'd, but what two Candles gave: And, to prevent the dreadful Cries and shocking Groans of the unhappy Victims, from reaching the Ears of the other Prisoners, the Doors are lin'd with a sort of Quilt . . . At my entring this infernal Place, I saw myself . . . surrounded by six Wretches, who, after preparing the Tortures, strip'd me naked (all to Linen Drawers); when, laying me on my Back, they began to lay hold of every Part of my Body. First, they put round my Neck an Iron Collar, which was fastned to the Scaffold; they then fix'd a Ring to each Foot; and this being done, they stretched

my Limbs with all their Might. They next wound two Ropes round each Arm, and two round each Thigh, which Ropes pass'd under the Scaffold, through Holes made for that Purpose; and were all drawn tight, at the same time, by four Men, upon a Signal made for this Purpose . . . These Ropes, which were of the Size of one's little Finger, pierc'd through my Flesh quite to the Bone; making the Blood gush out at the eight different Places that were thus bound. As I persisted in refusing . . . the Ropes were thus drawn together four different Times. At my Side stood a Physician and Surgeon, who often felt my Temples, to judge of the Danger I might be in; by which Means my Tortures were suspended, at Intervals . . . The last Time the Ropes were drawn tight, I grew so exceedingly weak, occasioned by the Blood's Circulation being stopp'd, and the Pains I endur'd, that I fainted quite away; insomuch that I was carried back to my Dungeon . . .

They were so inhuman, six Weeks after, as to expose me to another kind of Torture . . . They made me stretch my Arms in such a Manner, that the Palms of my Hands were turn'd outward; when, by the Help of a Rope that fastned them together at the Wrist, and which they turn'd by an Engine; they drew them gently nearer to one another behind, in such a Manner that the Back of each Hand touch'd, and stood exactly parallel one to the other; whereby both my Shoulders were dislocated, and a considerable Quantity of Blood issued from my Mouth. This torture was repeated thrice; after which I was again taken to my Dungeon, and put into the Hands of Physicians and Surgeons, who, in setting my Bones, put me to exquisite Pain.

Two Months after, . . . I was again conveyed to the Torture-Room; and there made to undergo another Kind of Punishment twice . . . The Torturers turn'd twice around my Body, a thick Iron Chain, which, crossing upon my Stomach, terminated afterwards at my Wrists. They next set my Back against a thick Board, at each

extremity whereof was a Pulley, through which there run a Rope, that catch'd the Ends of the Chains at my Wrists. The Tormentors then stretching these Ropes, by Means of a Roller, press'd or bruise'd my Stomach, in proportion as the Ropes were drawn tighter. They tortur'd me, on this Occasion, to such a Degree, that my Wrists and Shoulders, were put out of Joint. The Surgeons, however, set them presently after . . . (pages 61-66).

He was remanded back to the dungeon. "The Reader may judge," he says, "of the dreadful Anguish I must have labour'd under . . . Most of my Limbs were put out of Joint, and bruise'd in such a Manner, that I was unable, during some Weeks, to lift my Hand to my Mouth; my Body being vastly swell'd, by the Inflammations caus'd by the frequent Dislocations, I have . . . Reason to fear, that I shall feel the sad Effects . . . so long as I live . . ." (pages 66-67).

Finally, on June 21, 1744 Coustos was taken out and sentenced, being condemned to four years in the galleys. After four months, the British Minister at Lisbon intervened, and got Coustos his freedom. He returned to London, and wrote his book. He died the same year that it was published.

Well, from this summary you can see why Coustos was regarded as a Masonic hero. Here was a Man who remained steadfast to his obligations in the face of the most appalling mistreatment. A real example for us all to follow!

If you know a little bit about British history, you can perhaps see another reason for the popularity of his book. The year was 1745. The British throne was held by George II of the House of Hanover, sixty-two years of age, stupid, graceless, and Protestant; "snuffy old drone from the German hive," as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes called him. On the

continent of Europe, Great Britain was at war with France and Prussia. Bonnie Prince Charlie, clever, charismatic, and Catholic, had landed in Scotland on July 25, and raised the Jacobite standard of rebellion. He routed Johnnie Cope at Prestonpans on September 21, and marched south into England, reaching Derby, a scant 120 miles from London on December 4.

The English countered with the pen as well as the sword. The newspapers declaimed a litany of hatred against the Stuarts, and their Scots Highlander and Roman Catholic supporters. As early as September 7 a proclamation was issued "commanding all Papists, and reputed Papists, to depart from the Cities of London and Westminster, and from within ten miles of the same; and . . . confining Papists, and reputed Papists, to their Habitations;" presumably the authorities were afraid that they would betray London to the invader. Printing presses flooded the country with shrill anti-Romanist propaganda, all duly heralded in the London journals: *A Faithful Portrait of Popery: By which it is seen to be the Reverse of Christianity*, by William Warburton; *The Papists bloody Oath of Secrecy*, by Robert Bolton; *The bloody Cruelties of the Papists against the Protestants*, by "D. W.;" *Popish Intrigues and Cruelty, plainly exemplified in the afflicting Case and Narrative of Mrs. Frances Shaftoe*; and dozens of others. The newspapers were filled with savage comments such as this.

. . . But (for God's sake) shall we seek Liberty amongst a lawless Rabble, the mountainous Men of the North, Men who from the Situation of their Country have all their Days been addicted to Rapine and Plunder? Who are as ignorant of the right Use of that glorious Blessing (Liberty) as brute Beasts, and like them live only in the Abuse of it? Surely no! We are not so far degenerated. Next, let us consider whom they assist: The merciless Sons of Rome, who will be so far from restraining their Fury, that they will exceed them in Cruelty, in Tyranny, in Oppression, and in every lawless Act, to all those who differ from them in Points of Religion, or in Notions of Liberty. Yet these are to be your mighty Deliverers, O Britons! (*The Daily Advertiser*, London, October 11 1745).

Two days before Christmas the newspaper advertised another book that seemed cast from the same mold: *The Sufferings of John Coustos*. What an appropriate time for a good bit of anti-Catholic propaganda! And Coustos' book was certainly that! It is easy to see why the establishment might have encouraged its sale.

But let us leave that. In the past thirty years, a wealth of new material dealing with John Coustos has been found. We now know a bit about the two lodges that he joined in London around 1730. One of them, No. 75, which met at the Rainbow Coffee House, was quite large for those days. It had 63 members, and they included the Honorable James Cavendish, son of the Duke of Devonshire; Vincent LaChapelle, who became Master of the first lodge in the Netherlands, founded in the Hague in 1734, and who also published in 1735 the first collection of Masonic songs in French; Thomas Lance, who translated into French two of the songs in Anderson's Constitutions; Lewis Mercy, a minor composer and recorder-player; Colonel James Pitt, the uncle of William Pitt the elder, Minister of State at the time that Canada became British; Valentine Snow, the trumpeter for whom Handel composed the obligato parts in the Messiah; and Henry Price, who introduced regular Freemasonry to America, founding a lodge in Boston in 1733, and warranting another in Nova Scotia in 1738. Coustos' other London lodge, No. 98, which met at Prince Eugene's Coffee House, worked in French. It included only thirty members. Nine of them came from the other lodge, No. 75, including three whom we have already mentioned besides Coustos -- Vincent LaChapelle, Thomas Lance, and Lewis Mercy. Another member was Louis François de la Tierce, who helped found the first lodge in Frankfurt (1741), and who also published a French translation of Anderson's *Constitutions* in 1742.

In Paris, we have discovered the actual minute book of the lodge to which Coustos belonged; it was seized in a police raid in 1737. It was a large and important lodge, and Coustos was its Master. The 68 members were a very cosmopolitan group, with brethren from all over Europe. They included L'Abbé d'Aunillon, a comic playwright; Charles J.

Baur, a German banker who later became Substitute Grand Master of France; Bontems, the *valet de chambre* of King Louis XV; Count Czapski, a Polish nobleman, and cousin of the Queen of France; Philippe Farsetti, a Venetian nobleman and art connoisseur; Claude Jacquier de Géraudly, a dentist at the Royal Court; Jean Pierre Guignon, a leading violinist; Pierre Jeliotte, an outstanding tenor; Johann Daniel Krafft, a leather-merchant of Hamburg, who founded the first lodge in Germany in 1737; Thomas Pierre LeBreton, a goldsmith, concurrently Master of another lodge in Paris; Prince Lubomirski, Grand Marshal at the Polish Royal Court, and a member of the first lodge in Warsaw in 1744; Jaque Christophe Naudot, a flute-player and composer; Bro. Ricault, a minor poet; Count Carl Fredrik Scheffer, later Grand Master of Sweden, 1753. The list goes on and on: Baron de Bousch, Count de Gatterburg, Count de Swirby, Duke de Villeroy, Baron de Wendhausen. Two features are striking: the number of brethren connected with music, and the number of Masons who were instrumental in spreading Masonry over much of the world. It is clear moreover that Coustos was held in very high esteem by this body of very distinguished Masons. We read as follows in the lodge minutes of 30 April 1737:

Since an ill-founded slur had been cast on our W. Bro. Coustos, that he had not taken the usual Masonic obligation, he took it at the hands of Bro. Baur, S.W., and all the brethren . . .; even though he had been Master of five lodges in England, and though he is the one, so to speak, who brought Masonry here, who has kept regular lodge, and established the Order on its present footing, since it is from him that we hold those admirable Masonic secrets which he possesses to perfection; and we are happy only insofar as we follow his instructions faithfully.

Let me tell you one other interesting discovery that recently came out of these minutes. Both in Paris and in Lisbon Coustos' enemies accused him of being irreligious and of opening his lodge during the season of Lent. In the Paris archives there is an undated unsigned denunciation, that runs like this:

. . . John . . . Custos, and others, in defiance of the laws of God and man, held a meeting in the Rue du Four, and another at Dassy, both absolute orgies --- and that too during Lent, in fact during Passion Week. The whole progeny of turpitude and excess (?) evidently ran riot in the streets: drunkenness, gluttony, fireworks, revelry; the entire village of Dassy turned out. And all this on the pretence of holding a Masonic meeting . . . !

The Paris minute-book sheds further light on this. One entry begins as follows:

Today 30 April 1737 the regular lodge meeting was held. According to the regulations, it should have met on Tuesday of the other week, but was postponed to today, considering . . .

Then follow ten lines which have been heavily scored out in the same dark black ink. The Secretary himself did this, and explained in a note, "Canceled by the advice and order of the brethren." Then he completed the passage held in suspense (" . . . [the meeting] was postponed to today, considering certain reasons known to the brethren"). When I began working on Coustos, the National Library in Paris was good enough to send me microfilm of the minute-book. A few words did in fact seem to be legible between the over-written strokes. I passed the problem back to Madame Florence de Lussy of the National Library. At considerable expenditure of time and effort she eventually succeeded in deciphering nearly every word. The deleted passage runs as follows:

[the meeting] was postponed to today, considering that the Easter weeks are respected by Brother Masons, who do not wish to take their pleasures, innocent though they be, at a time that lends itself to offences of the conscience. Even though a Free Mason need not be of the Catholic religion, nevertheless all Masons are obliged by their tenure to act in conformity with the civil government in all that religion prescribes, since it constitutes the foundation of this [society].

Here we have proof that Coustos, so far from violating Lent, declined to open his Lodge in the two weeks before Easter, out of respect for the season.

Seven years later, when Coustos was arrested in Lisbon, the Paris newspapers reported the fact as follows:

Letters from Lisbon say that the King of Portugal has taken drastic action against the Free Masons. Though they had been forbidden to open lodge during Lent, they had the insolence during that season to hold festival, with rebellious ceremonial. At their head was a man named Coustos, the Master, whom we saw for a considerable time in Paris; along with him, two Frenchmen who, like him, are very good jewellers but very bad subjects. They have got just what they deserved.

It sounds familiar, doesn't it? Coustos the Lent-breaker! Yet we can show from other sources that the Inquisition had already made up its mind to arrest Coustos **before Lent began**. Here we see that twice, in different cities, someone was concerned to spread false rumors about him, and both in regard to the same alleged offence, breaking Lent. It would be nice to know who was responsible. *Author's Note: A note on this discovery will appear in the forthcoming issue of AQC, but you are the one of the first audiences to learn of it.*

But of all the new information on Coustos, most important, the Portuguese archives have yielded up a full record of his trial, with transcripts of the denunciations against him, and a full record of his examinations by the Inquisitors. And this material confirms virtually every statement made by Coustos: the repeated interrogations, the torture sessions, the pressure on him to reveal what he knew about Masonry, his refusal to turn Catholic.

There is one difference, an important one. According to the Inquisitorial Archives, the very first time he was brought before the Tribunal, a week after his arrest, Coustos made a full confession, a full disclosure of the nature of Masonry as it was in his time -- the arrangement of the lodge, the modes of recognition, the penalties of his obligation, the method of initiation, the procedure at the banquet. All there! Let us take an example:

Editor's Note: The author translated from the original, which was written in Portuguese. This has been edited to remove secret work and permit public distribution.

And then the said Master teaches him the signs he should observe so as to be recognised in any part of the World by the other Brethren, and to be able to warn himself against those who are not: . . . (Introduction, pages 17-18).

We know from other sources that these details are correct for that date. It's the fullest description we have of the way in which Freemasonry was conducted in the 1740's. Coustos sang like a canary, and before they even laid a hand on him! And the irony of it all is that they didn't believe he'd told it all. That's why he was tortured.

Now it is my conviction that any Masonic talk that is presented publicly should lead to a fuller recognition of general principles, as well as simply communicating specific facts. That is, in the true sense of the word, it should be educational. Well, then, what do we learn from the story of John Coustos? Two things, as it seems to me. First, that there are still some interesting Masonic stories lurking about for us to root out. And secondly, that perhaps we shouldn't make snap judgments. It is tempting, and easy, to condemn the Catholic Church for torturing Coustos because of his Masonry. His book was, as we have seen, an effective piece of anti-Catholic propaganda. But I would not want you to go away thinking that I was anti-Catholic, or that this talk was anti-Catholic. We have to look at the way of life 240 years ago. In those days torture and harsh punishment were still the custom of the time, even for what seem to us trivial offences. In 1772 a boy named

Peter M'Cloud was hanged in London for an attempt at housebreaking which failed, so that he was caught. In 1789 a woman by the name of Christian Murphy was burnt at the stake in London for counterfeiting. In France in 1757, Robert François Damiens, who had tried unsuccessfully to kill the king, had his hand burnt, his body pinched with red hot pinchers; boiling oil, melted wax and rosin, and melted lead were poured into all his wounds, and then he was torn asunder by four horses. A turn or two on the rack seems mild enough in comparison!

And what of the charge of Freemasonry? Well, the Craft had been condemned by the Church on suspicion of heresy; that means that, in the Church's eyes, Masons were putting their immortal souls in hazard of everlasting hell-fire. Not something the Church could accept without exerting strong efforts for Salvation! What does a little temporary physical discomfort count, when measured against the whole of eternity? Better to suffer a bit on earth than to burn forever in the afterlife. One can even see why Masonry came under suspicion. It came from a Protestant country -- a country of heretics; a country of radicals, which had killed one king (Charles I) and driven out another (James II) within the course of the preceding century. Furthermore, the doors of the lodges were tyled, and the members took an oath to veil in impenetrable secrecy everything that went on. Who could say what pagan rites, what vile orgies, what diabolical plots were being hatched by that bunch of radical heretics! Small wonder the Church imagined the worst!

And what are we to think of Coustos himself? Contempt is the easy first reaction towards a man who so violates the sacred trust reposed in him. Yet the Inquisitors had ways (as the saying goes) to loosen tongues. They had great powers, they knew how to use them, and they saw to it that people realized the extent of these powers. Arrest by the Holy Office was practically as good as a conviction; rare was the prisoner who did not confess whatever was wanted of him. The officials would take him to the torture chamber, and show him all the instruments, and explain their use to him, so that "he would readily

understand how arduous and thorough would be his examination." Again and again they would give him time by himself, to ponder his situation. He could brood about whether he would rather talk now or later. For talk he certainly would. In this century we have seen how effective psychological pressure can be when exerted by a powerful institution against an isolated individual. Certain regimes have honed the technique to a fine art. We hear regularly of the "confessions" of political prisoners in Russia, China, North Korea, and Eastern Europe. The name given to the procedure, "brain-washing," is new; its methods, we see now, are not new. Seen in this light, Coustos' capitulation is quite intelligible; there is no reason to spurn him for his confession, given the extremity to which he was reduced. Which of us would be brave enough to endure the strappado, or the rack, or even the threat of them, without succumbing?

In Coustos we see a man who was a leader of the Craft in three countries. We know from the record that he won the respect and admiration of the lords and barons of Paris. His lodges in London and Paris were the centers from which the Craft spread to America, to Holland, to Germany, to Sweden, and even to Poland. He was a man who, though not an accomplished writer, determined to win his revenge on his tormentors by telling the world of his sufferings. And he did so with simplicity and with a wealth of circumstantial detail. And in these last few years, new sources have sustained him. The very records of the Inquisition serve to establish the main truth of Coustos' narrative. His early death at the age of forty-three, less than two years after his deliverance, was undoubtedly hastened by his torture and imprisonment. He is worthy to be enshrined among those who gave up their lives for a principle. In my books he is still a Masonic hero.