

# Bacstrom's Rosicrucian society

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### Adam McLean

Dr Sigismund Bacstrom was one of the most important scholars of alchemy in the last few centuries, being active at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Little is known of his life, except that he was probably of Scandinavian extraction, and that he spent a deal of his early life travelling around the world as a ship's surgeon. Later he was to settle in London and gather around him a small circle of contacts (including Ebenezer Sibley and General Rainsford), amongst whom he circulated a number of his own translations of alchemical texts from Latin, German, and French into English. This select group of people provided the vehicle for Bacstrom's impulse to reconnect people with the ancient wisdom of the alchemical tradition, and it seems that spiritually he sowed the seed for the rebirth of interest in alchemy later in the nineteenth century, which developed through Thomas South and his daughter Mary Anne Atwood, and later Frederick Hockley (1809-85) who seems to have had copies in his own library of some of the Bacstrom manuscripts. Hockley's scholarship and library was in turn passed on to Ayton, Westcott and Mathers, and must have provided some of the material that was worked into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. At much the same time, Madame Blavatsky also had access to Bacstrom material (particularly Bacstrom's translation of the 'Golden Chain of Homer', which she printed in 1891 in the theosophical journal *Lucifer*).

Many volumes of his manuscripts are still extant and some are in private hands at present. It would be of the greatest value if some of this material could be made available to the public once again.

It is important to realise that at the time when Bacstrom was collecting and translating alchemical material, there was little available in the outer world. Most of the great public collections and libraries only came into existence later in the nineteenth century. Bacstrom's material and his access to sources was of the greatest import, and he must have been one of the most knowledgeable men at that time in the alchemical tradition. It may be that he could not have achieved this without the aid of certain Rosicrucians with which he had definite connections.

On 12th September 1794, Dr Sigismund Bacstrom was initiated into a Societas Roseae Crucis by Comte Louis de Chazal, on the island of Mauritius. The Count, then a venerable old man of some 96 years, seemed to

have recognised in Bacstrom, his greatness as an hermetic student, and offered to take him on as a pupil and teach him the great work, and during this period, Bacstrom was allowed to perform a transmutation under Chazal's guidance and using his substances. Chazal seems to have obtained his own alchemical knowledge while he was in Paris in 1740, and J.W. Hamilton Jones in his edition of *Bacstrom's Alchemical Anthology* (1960 Stuart and Watkins, London) even suggests that his teacher was the Comte de St Cermain.

When Bacstrom settled in London, one of his more important pupils was the scotsman Alexander Tilloch, the editor of the *Philosophical Magazine*, which concentrated on papers and articles of early scientific research.

In 1980 I discovered Tilloch's own copy of his admission document to Bacstrom's Rosicrucian Society, which is signed by Bacstrom, in the Ferguson Collection at Glasgow University Library. I decided to print this admission document in its entirety as it gives a valuable insight into the type of organisation and principles which Bacstrom worked within. It is likely, considering the possible Comte de St Cermain connection, that this was the kind of Societas Roseae Crucis which was operating throughout the eighteenth century. There is attached to this document in the Ferguson Collection a further item of Rosicrucian Aphorisms - the Process of creating the Stone, which I will publish subsequently.

When undertaking research for this article, I realised that A.E. Waite had in fact already reprinted this document in his *Real History of the Rosicrucians* (1887), as the submission of Bacstrom to join the Societas Roseae Crucis of Chazal, and which is signed by Chazal 1794, however, since this book of Waite's has been out of print for many years, and he does not give any reference as to sources, I have decided to go ahead and print the Tilloch version which is an exact copy of that which is found in Waite.

This initiation document consists of fourteen promises or obligations, most of which are quite straightforward. One important item is the fourth obligation, which has a long concluding paragraph on the equal rights of women in regard to membership of the Societas Roseae Crucis. This is very important when seen against the historical background. It seems to indicate that the

Rosy Cross remained a separate stream from the Freemasons, which was (and still is) quite strongly patriarchal and would not allow woman as members. In article 9 there is an indication of a rather critical attitude towards the established Church of the time. However, the charity of the brotherhood in curing the sick is curious restricted in obligation 13.

Bacstrom translated many volumes of alchemical texts, and one wonders just where he obtained his source material. Perhaps we have in Bacstrom a direct connection through Chazal and the Comte de St Germain with a continuing stream of Rosicrucian mystery wisdom. We should come to see that Bacstrom did not found his little alchemical school on his own resources, but that behind him lay this esoteric Order of the Rose Cross which provided him with the material and impulse to continue and develop the alchemical science. All students of alchemy in the twentieth century owe a profound debt of gratitude to the unseen work of this little-known man, Bacstrom, in gathering and translating alchemical material, and inspiring others to work with the wisdom he recognised in the ancient alchemical texts.

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In the name of Jehovah Elohim  
the true and only God manifested in Trinity

I do hereby promise, in the most sincere and solemn manner, faithfully to observe the following articles, during the whole course of my natural life, to the best of my knowledge and ability; which articles I hereby confirm by oath and by my proper signature hereunto annexed.

One of the worthy members of the August most ancient and most learned Society, the Investigators of Divine, Spiritual and Natural Truth (which Society, more than two centuries and a half ago, did separate themselves from the Freemasons, but were again united in one spirit amongst themselves under the denomination of Fratres Roseae Crucis Brethren of the Rosy Cross - that is the Brethren that believe in the grand atonement made by Jesus Christ on the Rosy Cross, stained and marked with his blood for the Redemption of Spiritual Nature \*) having thought me worthy to be admitted into their august society, in quality of a Practical Member and Brother (one degree above a

Member apprentice) and to partake of their sublime knowledge, I hereby engage in the most solemn manner.

[\* Laying naked at the same time our universal microcosmical subject (ChADMH), the best magnet for continually attracting and preserving the Universal Fire of Nature, in the form of incorporeal spiritual Nitre, for the regeneration of matter.]

1. That I will always, to the utmost of my power, conduct myself, as becomes a worthy member, with sobriety and piety, and endeavour to Prove myself grateful to the Society for so distinguished a favour as I now receive, during the whole course of my natural life.

2. I will never openly publish that I am a member of this august Society, nor reveal the name or Persons of such members as I know at present or may know hereafter, to avoid derision, insult or persecution.

3. I solemnly promise that I will never during my whole life prostitute, that is publicly reveal, the secret knowledge I receive at present or may receive at a future Period from the Society or from one of its members, nor even privately, but will keep our secrets sacred.

4. I do hereby promise that I will instruct, for the benefit of good men, before I depart this life, one person, or two persons at most, in our secret knowledge, and initiate and receive such person (or persons) as a Member Apprentice into our Society, in the same manner as I have been initiated and received (in quality of a Practical member and brother); but such a person only as I believe to be truly worthy and of an upright well meaning mind, blameless conduct, sober life and desirous of knowledge.

And, as there is no distinction of sexes in the spiritual world, neither amongst the blessed Angels nor among the rational immortal spirits of the Human race; and as we have had a Semiramis, Queen of Egypt, a Myriam, the prophetess, a Peronella, the wife of Flamel, and lately a Leona Constantia, Abbess of Clermont, who was actually received as a practical Member and Master into our Society in the year 1796, which women are believed to have been all possessors of the Great Work, consequently Sorores Roseae Crucis and

members of our Society by possession, as the possession of this our art is the key to the most hidden knowledge. And moreover as redemption was manifested to mankind by means of a woman (the Blessed Virgin), and as salvation, which is of infinitely more value than our whole Art, is granted to the female sex as well as to the male, our Society does not exclude a worthy woman from being initiated, God himself not having excluded women from partaking of every spiritual felicity in the next life. We will not hesitate to receive a worthy woman into our Society as a member apprentice, (and even as a practical member or master if she does possess our work practically and has herself accomplished it), provided she is found, like Peronella, Flamel's wife, to be sober, pious, discreet, prudent, not loquacious, but reserved, of an upright mind and blameless conduct, and withall desirous of knowledge.

5. I do hereby declare that I intend with the permission of God to recommence our Great Work with my own hands, as soon as circumstances, health, opportunity and time will permit, that I

first - I may do good therewith as a faithful steward

second - that I may merit the continued confidence which the Society has placed in me in quality of a practical member.

6. I do further most solemnly promise that (should I accomplish the Great Work) I will not abuse the great power entrusted to me by appearing great and exalted, or seeking to appear in a Public character in the world, by hunting after vain titles of Nobility and vain glory, which are all fleeting and vain; but will endeavour to live a sober and orderly life as becomes every Christian, though not possessed of so great a temporal blessing.

I will devote a considerable part of my abundance and superfluity (Multipliable infinitely) to works of private charity, to aged and deeply distressed people, to poor children, and above all to such as love God and act uprightly, and will avoid encouraging laziness and the profession of public beggars.

7. I will communicate every new or useful discovery relating to our Work to the nearest member of our Society and hide nothing from him, seeing he cannot, as a worthy member, possibly abuse it or prejudice me thereby. On the other hand, I will hide these secret discoveries from the world.

8. I do moreover solemnly promise (should I become a Master and possessor) that I will not, on the one hand, assist, aid, or support with Gold or Silver, any Government, King, or Sovereign whatever, except by paying of taxes, nor, on the other, any populace, or particular set of men, to enable them to revolt against their Government. I will leave public affairs and arrangements to the Government of God, who will bring about the events foretold in the Revelations of St. John, which are fast accomplishing. I will not interfere with affairs of Government.

9. I will neither build churches, chapels, nor hospitals and such public charities, as there are already a sufficient number of such public buildings and institutions, if they were only properly applied and regulated. I will not give a Salary to a Priest or Churchman as such to make him more proud and indolent than he is already. If I relieve a distressed worthy clergyman, I will consider him in the light of a Private distressed individual only. I Will give no charity with the view of making my name known in the world, but Will give my alias privately

10. I hereby promise that I will never be ungrateful to the worthy friend and brother who initiated and received me, but respect and Oblige him as far as lies in my power, in the same manner as he has been obliged to promise to his friend who received him.

11. Should I travel either by sea or by land and meet with any person that may call himself a Brother of the Rosy Cross, I will try him whether he can give me a proper explanation of the universal fire of Nature and of our Magnet for attracting and manifesting the same under the form of a salt, whether he is well acquainted with our work, and whether he knows the universal dissolvent and its use. If I find him able to give satisfactory answers, I will acknowledge him as a member and a brother of our Society. Should I find him superior in knowledge and experience to myself, I Will honour and respect him as a Master above me.

12. If it should please God to Permit me to accomplish our Great Work With my own hands, I will Give praise and thanks to God in humble prays: and devote my time to the doing and promoting all the good that lies in my power and to the pursuit of true and useful knowledge.

13. I do hereby Solemnly promise that I will not encourage wickedness and debauchery, thereby offending God, administer the Medicine for the human body, nor the Aurum Potabile to a patient or patients infected with the venereal disease.

14. I do promise that I Will never give the fermented metallic medicine for transmutation, to any Person living, no not a single grain, unless the person is an initiated and received Member and Brother of the Society of the Rosy Cross.

To keep faithfully the above articles as I now receive them from a worthy member of our Society, as he received them himself in the Mauritius, I willingly agree and sign the above with my name and affix my seal to the same, so help me God. Amen.

In testimony that I have initiated and received Alexander Tilloch Esq. in quality of Practical Member and Brother, a degree above a Member Apprentice, on account of his practical knowledge and philosophical acquirements, I have hereunto set my hand and seal,

Sigismund Bacstrom

M.D. London April 5. 1797.