



# DARKNESS Over ALL



## john robison and the birth of the illuminati conspiracy

by *Mike Jay*

**A**t the beginning of 1797, John Robison was a man with a solid and long-standing reputation in the British scientific establishment. He had been Professor of Natural Philosophy at Edinburgh University for over twenty years, an authority on mathematics and optics, and had recently been appointed senior scientific contributor on the third edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, to which he would eventually contribute over a thousand pages of articles. Yet by the end of the year, his professional reputation had been eclipsed by a sensational book that vastly outsold anything he had previously written, and whose shockwaves would continue to reverberate long after his scientific work had been forgotten. Its title was *Proofs of a*

*Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe*, and it launched on the English-speaking public the enduring theory that a vast conspiracy, masterminded by a covert Masonic cell known as the Illuminati, was in the process of subverting all the cherished institutions of the civilised world and co-opting them into instruments of its secret and godless plan: the tyranny of the masses under the invisible control of unknown superiors, and a new era of ‘darkness over all’.<sup>1</sup>

The first edition of *Proofs of a Conspiracy* sold out within days, and within a year it had been republished many times, not only in Edinburgh but in London, Dublin and New York. Robison had hit a nerve by offering an answer, plausible to many, to the great questions of the day: what had caused the French Revolution, and had there been any logic behind its bloody and tumultuous progress? From his vantage point in Edinburgh he had, along with millions of others, followed with horror the lurid press reports of France dismembering its monarchy, dispossessing its church and transforming its downtrodden and brutalised population into the most ruthless fighting force Europe had ever seen – and now, under the rising star of the young general Napoleon Bonaparte, attempting to export the same carnage and destruction to its surrounding monarchies, not least Britain itself. But Robison believed that he alone had identified the hidden hand responsible for the apparently senseless eruption of terror and war that now appeared to be consuming the world.

Many had located the roots of the revolution in the ideas of Enlightenment figures such as Voltaire, Diderot and D’Alembert, who had exalted reason and progress over authority and tradition; but none of these mostly aristocratic *philosophes* had advocated a revolution of the masses, and indeed many of them had ended their lives on the guillotine. In the early 1790s, it had been possible to believe that the power-hungry lawyers and journalists of the Jacobin Club had whipped up the Paris mob into their destructive frenzy

as a means to their own ends, but by 1794 Danton, Robespierre and the rest of the Jacobin leaders had followed their victims to the guillotine: how could they have been the puppet-masters when they had had their own strings so brutally cut? What Robison was proposing in the densely-argued and meticulously documented pages of *Proofs of a Conspiracy* was that all these agents of revolution had been pawns in a much bigger game, with ambitions that were only just beginning to make themselves visible.

The French Revolution, like all convulsive world events before and since, had been full of conspiracies, bred by the speed of events, the panic of those caught up in them and the limited information available to them as they unfolded. The Paris mobs, cut off from the outside world by their heavily guarded city walls, had been convinced that counter-revolutionary forces had joined together in a *pacte de famine* to starve their communes to death. The French aristocracy, in turn, were convinced from the beginning that the King was to be kidnapped and murdered; rumours swept the army that they were being betrayed by their high command; the cities of surrounding countries hummed with rumours of plots to incite their own peasants to revolt against them. In Britain, enemies of the revolution such as Edmund Burke had claimed from the beginning that “already confederacies and correspondences of the most extraordinary nature are forming in several countries”,<sup>2</sup> and by 1797 most believed – and with good reason – that secret societies in Ireland were plotting with Napoleon to overthrow the British government and invade the mainland. The power of Robison’s revelation was that it identified within this buzzing confusion of conspiracies a single protagonist, a single ideology and a single overarching plot that crystallised the chaos into a concerted drama and elevated it into an epic struggle between good and evil, whose outcome would define the future of world politics.

### AN IMPOSING SHADOW OF LITTLE SUBSTANCE

Robison's vast conspiracy needed an imposing and terrifying figurehead – a role for which Adam Weishaupt, the founder of the Bavarian Order of the Illuminati, seemed on the surface of things to be an unpromising candidate. Obsessive and domineering, Weishaupt had from the beginning found difficulty in attracting members to his secret society, where they were expected to adopt mystical pseudonyms chosen by him, jump through the hoops of his strict initiatic grades and take up subservient roles in his messianic but unfocused crusade for world domination. Nor did the appeal of his Order translate easily into the world beyond his small provincial network. Catholic Bavaria was held tightly in the grip of the Jesuits, under whom Weishaupt had been educated and whose influence his Illuminati aimed to counter and subvert; but the 'secret knowledge' of enlightenment with which he lured initiates was mostly secret only in Bavaria, where the philosophies of Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot were still suppressed. Elsewhere, and particularly in France, their works had long been freely available: French Masonic lodges, particularly the Grand Orient, already offered congenial surroundings and company for discussing such ideas, and had shown little interest in the Bavarian Illuminati's attempts to infiltrate them. After 1784, when the Order had been exposed and banned by the Elector of Bavaria, Weishaupt had exiled himself to Gotha in central Germany, since when he appeared to have done little beyond producing a series of morose and self-justifying memoirs of his adventures.

Yet there was also much in the career of the Illuminati that offered, to Robison at least, a view of a far more expansive and sinister scheme. Weishaupt's grandiose sense of his own mission and the Order's extravagant structures – its nested grades of Novice and Minerval, Illuminatus Minor and Major, Dirigens and Magus, and the portentous pseudonyms of members such as Spartacus, Cato and Pythagoras – all hinted at a far larger organisation than that

which had been exposed. Weishaupt's subsequent publications had also revealed an ideology more extreme and politically reckless than most of the enlightened philosophies of his day. While most of the leading apostles of reason, such as Voltaire, had envisaged that their programme would eventually generate benign rule by an educated elite, Weishaupt had espoused a radical programme of egalitarian reforms, including the abolition of all private property, inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's belief that the exercise of reason would free humanity from its chains of servitude and restore the natural life of the 'noble savage'. This was perhaps, in the 1780s, not so much a revolutionary plan for the future of politics as a wistful, even reactionary hope of a return to an idealised and imaginary past; but since the French Revolution had erupted, it had begun to read ever more suggestively as a prophecy of the anarchy and bloodshed that had followed.

The suppression of the Illuminati, too, had generated a furore quite out of proportion to the danger it represented. It had become a lightning-rod for pervasive anxieties among the supporters of church and monarchy, about the project of reason and progress that was being seeded across Europe by the confident vanguard of philosophers and scientists, and the members-only network of Masonic lodges through which it was being propagated. Most representatives of this world were discreet about their activities and conciliatory about their beliefs, but Weishaupt's exposure – and with it his cloak-and-dagger strategy of covert infiltration, and his doctrine of the perfection of human nature by the destruction of government and religion – offered dramatic confirmation of the traditionalists' deepest fears. It was in the interests of neither side to play down Weishaupt's ambitions or take a sceptical look at the threat that he actually represented, and the Illuminati furore had generated hundreds of screeds, polemics, handbills and scandal sheets, all competing to file the most damning charges of godless infamy. It was these sources that Robison had spent years perusing intently for scraps, anecdotes and telling details

to mould into the proofs of the conspiracy that he now presented. To the dispassionate observer, Weishaupt and his Illuminati might have been a suggestive precursor or an eloquent symbol of the forces that were now reconfiguring Europe; but for Robison they had become the literal cause: the centre, thus far invisible, of the web of events that had consumed the world.

### DRUG-ADDLED DELUSIONS OF A NEW WORLD ORDER

Robison may have been a distant spectator of the Illuminati furore, but he was no dispassionate observer. While *Proofs of a Conspiracy* came as a surprise (and in most cases an embarrassing one) to his friends and scientific colleagues, there were many reasons why the Illuminati had presented itself to him in particular, in the form that it did. It was a discovery that resolved long-standing suspicions and conflicts in both his private and professional life, and one that chimed in particular with his own curious adventures in freemasonry.

By 1797, Robison's character had taken a grave and saturnine turn, far removed from the cheerful and convivial temperament of his youth. In 1785 he had begun to suffer from a mysterious medical condition, a severe and painful spasm of the groin: it seemed to emanate from beneath his testicles, but its precise origin baffled the most distinguished doctors of Edinburgh and London. Racked with pain and frequently bed-ridden, by the late 1790s he had become a withdrawn and isolated figure; he was using opium frequently, a regime which according to some of his acquaintances made him vulnerable to melancholy, confusion and paranoia. As the successive crises of the French Revolution shook Britain, with rumours of massacres and threats of invasion following relentlessly upon one another, the nation was gripped by a panic that was particularly intense in Scotland, where ministers and judges whipped up constant rumours of fifth columnists, traitors and secret Jacobin cells. Tormented, heavily medicated and constantly assailed by



John Robison (1805)

terrifying news from the outside world, Robison had all too many dark thoughts to elaborate into the plot that came to consume him.

Political events had also thrown a deep shadow across his professional life. The physical sciences, too, were in the grip of a French revolution, led in this case by Antoine Lavoisier. During the 1780s, Lavoisier had overthrown the chemical theories of the previous century with his discovery of oxygen, from which he had been able to establish new theories of combustion and to begin the process of reducing all material substances to a basic table of elements. Lavoisier's revolution had split British chemistry: some recognised that his elegantly conceived and minutely recorded experiments had transformed the science of matter, but for others his new and foreign terminology was, like the French metric system and the revolutionary Year Zero, an arrogant attempt to wipe away the accumulated wisdom of the ages and to eliminate the role of God in the physical world. The old system of chemistry, with its mysterious forms of energy and its languages of essences and principles, had readily contained the idea of a life-force and the mysterious breath of the divine; but in Lavoisier's cold new world, matter was being stripped of all such imponderable properties and reduced to inert building-blocks manipulated by the measurable forces of pressure and temperature.

This was a conflict that had not spared the University of Edinburgh. Its professor of chemistry, Joseph Black, had long been the most distinguished chemist in Britain: in 1754 he had been the first to isolate and identify 'fixed air', or carbon dioxide, and his subsequent study of gases had enabled his friend James Watt to develop the steam engine. Lavoisier had built on Black's discoveries to formulate his new chemistry, and Black had been quick to recognise its validity. Robison, however, found Black's capitulation humiliating: he had never accepted the new French theories, and by 1797 had worked the new chemistry deep into his Illuminist plot.<sup>3</sup> For him, Lavoisier – along with Britain's most famous experimental chemist, the dissenting minister Joseph Priestley – was a master Illuminist, working in concert

with infiltrated Masonic lodges to spread the doctrine of materialism that would underlie the new atheist world order. Madame Lavoisier's famous salons, at which the leading Continental *philosophes* met to discuss the new theories, were now revealed by Robison to have been the venues for sacreligious rites where the hostess, dressed in the ceremonial robes of an occult priestess, ritually burned the texts of the old chemistry.<sup>4</sup> Implausible though this image might seem, it was all of a piece with other proofs that Robison had assembled in his book – for example, the anonymous German pamphlet that claimed that, at the great *philosophe* Baron d'Holbach's salons, the brains of living children bought from poor parents were dissected in an attempt to isolate their life-force.

But if the Illuminati seemed to be crowding into Robison's professional life, his most personal connection with their conspiracy came through Masonry itself. He had been a member of the Scottish Rite for decades without ever regarding its lodges as more than "a pretext for passing an hour or two in a fort of decent conviviality, not altogether void of some rational occupation";<sup>5</sup> but his career had frequently taken him abroad, where he had been shocked to discover that not all masonic orders were so innocent. In 1770 Catherine the Great had requested the British government to supply some technically-minded naval officers to modernise her fleet and Robison, who had previously supervised a trial of John Harrison's longitude chronometer on a voyage to the West Indies, was offered the chance of secondment. He spent a year at Catherine's court in St. Petersburg, learning Russian and lecturing on navigation, and during the course of his travels he had met with other masons and visited lodges in France, Belgium, Germany and Russia.

What he saw had shocked him: by comparison with the Scottish Rite, the Continental lodges were "schools of irreligion and licentiousness". Their members seemed to him consumed by "zeal and fanaticism", and their religious views "much disturbed by the mystical whims of J. Behmen [Jacob Boehme] and Swedenborg – by

the fanatical and knavish doctrines of the modern Rosycrucians – by Magicians - Magnetisers - Exorcists, etc.”. He had returned to Edinburgh with the chilling conviction that “the homely Free Masonry imported from England has been totally changed in every country of Europe”;<sup>6</sup> now, thirty years later, as he recalled the occultism and freethinking to which he had been briefly but unforgettably exposed, he had no doubt as to the source of the destruction that had engulfed the Continent.

### A BROTHER IN ARMS

Shortly after the publication of *Proofs of a Conspiracy*, Robison’s theory received striking corroboration from the first volumes of the Jesuit Abbé Augustin de Barruel’s monumental *Memoires pour Servir a l’Histoire de Jacobinisme*, published in French in 1797 and swiftly translated into English, German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch and Portuguese. Barruel had fled to London after the dissolution of the Jesuit order during the French Revolution and had, like Robison, spent years assembling the most lurid denunciations of the Illuminati into a polemic arguing that the apparent chaos of the revolution had in fact all been “foreseen, premeditated, plotted, planned, resolved; everything that happened was the result of the deepest wickedness, because everything was prepared and managed by men who alone held the threads of long-settled conspiracies”.<sup>7</sup> Even the guillotine had been designed (by Dr. Guillotine, the well-known Freemason) in the shape of the Masonic triangle. Adam Weishaupt, according to Barruel, had pulled together the threads of atheism and anarchy that had emerged over the previous century – the sceptical philosophy of Spinoza, the demonic conjuring of Mesmer and Cagliostro, the godless fact-gathering of the French *philosophes* – and injected them into French masonry and the Jacobin clubs, from where they had radiated out to the ignorant and mesmerised French masses. Robison

regarded Barruel’s synthesis as ‘a very remarkable work indeed’,<sup>8</sup> and added a postscript to the second edition of his book that spelt out the extraordinary similarities between them.

Barruel’s work rolled out in volume after volume, each wilder and more vituperative than the last, and rapidly established itself as a founding text of conspiracy theory for the nineteenth century and beyond. In almost every way, he and Adam Weishaupt were perfect foils for one another: Weishaupt the lapsed Jesuit whose Illuminati were established in the image of his nemesis as shock troops for reason and liberty, and Barruel the attack-dog for the deposed *ancien régime* who sought to turn the ‘black legend’ of Jesuit conspiracy and brutality back on the enlightened forces that had generated it. The power of each depended on ramping up the threat that the other represented; each colluded in concocting and feeding fantasies of secrecy and potency; but each also saw deep into the hidden heart of his adversary, externalising and parading his secret dreams.

However, this was a drama that had less potency in Britain, and though *Proofs of a Conspiracy* became a handsome bestseller, the Illuminati conspiracy never gripped the imagination of the British political class as it did in Continental Europe. Edmund Burke, for example, though he welcomed Barruel cordially to London and deplored the persecution of Catholics and Jesuits in revolutionary France, was careful not to endorse his extravagant theories. Although some conservative voices would later attribute this to superior British common sense, the fact was that Britain at the time had more serious threats and conspiracies to contend with. Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man*, a far more incendiary and radicalising work than any of the Bavarian Illuminati’s ‘secret texts’, had sold over two hundred thousand copies in its cheap sixpenny edition, a number that far exceeded what until that point had been considered the entire book-buying public. Nor was the existence of malign conspiracies a matter to be theorised about or argued over. By the winter of 1797, the British government had estimated that the United Irishmen, an illegal society recruited by

the swearing of a secret oath, had 279,896 men recruited and armed with home-made pikes: by May 1798, when the Great Rebellion broke, the conspiracy would erupt all too visibly from the shadows. With the British fleet convulsed by mutinies and the government struggling to contain mass protests and riots, it was hardly surprising that the doings of a long-disbanded Bavarian lodge seemed less than a pressing concern.

### A 'WORLD REVOLUTION'

But the nation where Robison's book had a profound and enduring impact was the United States of America. Here, the polarised forces of revolution and reaction that had swept Europe were playing out in a form that threatened to split the Founding Fathers and destroy their fledgling Constitution. While the likes of Thomas Jefferson saw themselves as cousins of a French republic that had thrown off the shackles of monarchy and with whom they traded amid British naval blockades, other founders such as Alexander Hamilton, whose Federalist party favoured a powerful state geared towards protecting the interests of its wealthy citizens, feared the infiltration of the radical ideals of the French revolution. In an overheated political milieu where accusations of conspiracy and treason were hurled from both sides, *Proofs of a Conspiracy* was seized on eagerly by the Federalists as evidence of the hidden agenda that lurked behind fine-sounding slogans such as democracy, anti-slavery and the rights of man. Robison's words were repeated endlessly in New England pulpits and pamphlets through 1798 and 1799, and Jefferson was publicly accused of being a member of Weishaupt's Order, but the substance of the charges failed to stand up to political scrutiny.

The 'Illuminati Scare' petered out and the Federalists lost power, never to regain it; yet the scare had touched a nerve deep within the American political mindset, and it has been woven into many

subsequent paranoias and panics. Many on the isolationist right continue to believe Robison's theory to this day: the official John Birch Society line, for example, remains that Weishaupt's Illuminati "was the ancestor of the Communist movement and the model for modern subversive conspiratorial movements".<sup>9</sup>

Robison's ideas would continue to flourish, to be rediscovered and reinvented, and to influence modern politics in curious ways. In 1919 the *doyenne* of modern conspiracy theory, Nesta Webster, published the first of her many polemics against the ongoing "world revolution". This had begun, she claimed, in the Bavarian lodge of the Illuminati; its first act had been the French revolution, the second the Soviet, with the third waiting in the wings. For Webster, however, the Illuminati were in turn a smokescreen: the true conspirators were the 'Jewish peril' whose agenda had, she believed, been accurately exposed in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Although Webster later consigned herself to the margins by joining the British Union of Fascists, her support at the time was more broadly based, and she even won admiring citations in the journalism of Winston Churchill. "The conspiracy against civilization dates from the days of Weishaupt", Churchill wrote for the *Sunday Herald* in 1920; "as a modern historian Mrs. Webster has so ably shown, it played a recognisable role in the French revolution".<sup>10</sup>

### "A DEGREE OF CREDULITY..."

After Robison's death in 1805, his Edinburgh colleague, the pioneering geologist John Playfair, wrote a respectful memoir that focused on his scientific achievements but was unable to avoid mention of the work for which he was best remembered. "The alarm excited by the French revolution", Playfair suggested tactfully, "had produced in Mr. Robison a degree of credulity which was not natural to him".<sup>11</sup> It was a credulity, he stressed, that had been shared by many

who were unable to believe that the revolution had been a genuine mass movement reacting to the oppression of a tyrannical regime; they had clung to their belief that it must have been orchestrated by a small cell of fanatics, and that the lack of evidence for any such conspiracy was itself evidence for the conspirators' cunning in concealing their operations from public view.

There was much plain sense in Playfair's analysis, and it could equally be applied to many who subsequently came to believe in Robison's theories, and who continue to believe them today. Indeed, in the postscript to *Proofs of a Conspiracy*, Robison explicitly argues for his conviction that the social order is not broken, and has no need of any revolutionary scheme to fix it. "There is something that we call *the behaviour of a gentleman*", he insists, that "the plainest peasant or labourer will say of a man whom he esteems in a certain way". Despite the mass protests, riots and mutinies of 1790s Britain, and the draconian emergency laws drafted to suppress dissent and free speech, he maintains that "I do not recollect hearing the lower ranks of the state venting much of their discontent against the Peers, and they seem to perceive pretty clearly the advantages arising from their prerogatives". While Britain had become to many an oppressive, militarised state, waging war for profit abroad and gagging the protests of its own citizens at home, for Robison it remained a beacon of the ancient system of *noblesse oblige*, "the happy land, where the wisest use has been made of this propensity of the human heart".<sup>12</sup>

But if the shock of the modern world erupting into existence before his eyes had unbalanced Robison's judgement, it had also given him a vivid, even visionary perspective on the new dangers that might result from wresting politics away from the church and monarchy and placing it in the hands of the people. Forged in the same crucible as every modern political ideology from nihilism to conservatism, anarchy to military dictatorship, the Illuminati conspiracy has become a modern myth – not just in the dismissive sense that its factual basis evaporates under scrutiny, but as a

potent shapeshifting narrative capable of adapting its meaning to accommodate new and unforeseen scenarios. Since the 1970s, it has been gleefully satirised as a baroque folly of conservative thought by counterculture figures from Robert Anton Wilson onwards, yet this has only increased its fame and mystique: Dan Brown's *Angels and Demons* demonstrates that today's readers will still lap up Robison's unreconstructed version of the story in their millions. In popular culture and old-time religion, satire and nationalist politics, the Illuminati conspiracy still resonates with a timeless warning that the light of reason has its shadows, and even the most open and enlightened democracy can be manipulated by hidden hands.

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