

History The Wider Membership

By Worshipful (Just a) Brother Pat Trainor

"There is scarcely a case of difficulty can occur in the Lodge in which that book 'will not set you right" - so says the Installing Master to his successor on handing over a copy of the Book of Constitutions. But human nature remains quite unpredictable and refuses to be confined within a given set of Regulations and, as any Past Master will tell you, the case of difficulty not covered by that book was the one that happened during his year of office! Many cases of difficulty exist outside the scope of official Regulations, and some are likely to remain unresolved throughout a Masonic career, not only through lack of guidance but very often because of misdirection from those who, perhaps, should have known better.

In this technological, computerised era of ours today, the search for spiritual values and to make some sort of daily advancement in Masonic knowledge must surely create the earliest case of difficulty for the new entrant. With daily pressures from business, reasonable family demands on time, unremitting repetition of ritual and procedure at Lodge meetings (which become just demonstrations of varying feats of memory or proficiency from Brethren so engaged), it is quite understandable if the new entrant's natural thirst for knowledge is stifled from the outset.

HISTORY

It is quite usual for the history of Freemasonry to be brought into question. What is the source? Does it have its roots in Mithraism? Is there a connection with the Essenes? Has it anything to do with the building of the Pyramids of ancient Egypt? Did it really begin with the building of Solomon's Temple? These are typical questions; and the early writers on the background of Masonry have certainly not helped the literal minds of today; they have traced the path of Freemasonry through all stages of history, real, legendary and imaginary, and we can look with amazement at the sheer invention displayed in the list of Grand Masters credited to it - starting with Adam! Folk lore, creation legends, instruction by catechism, ethical standards, these things have not been the special property of any one country or any one civilisation; parallels, in whole or in part, may be found in all ancient mysteries.

An examination of a few facts is probably the quickest and most effective way of focusing Freemasonry of today, and for this purpose I have listed seven facts:

1. That stone masons practised a skilled trade requiring a standard of literacy and communication that would enable them to execute the designs of architects.
2. That castles, cathedrals and ornate structures resulted from their combined efforts.
3. That the stone masons took their meals and held meetings in huts on sites where they worked.
4. That by the mid-fourteenth century the working masons had formulated a code of Regulations and produced a system among themselves to protect their interests.
5. That in the mid-fifteenth century two Livery Companies of Masons were listed among the London Guilds.
6. That the working masons-or Operative masons-later accepted among themselves others who were not working masons but were known as Accepted or Speculative Masons. Possession of a copy of the Old Regulations or Charges was justification and a kind of self-bestowed authority for such a group to meet together.
7. That organised Freemasonry, as we understand it, had its modest beginning with the formation of the premier Grand Lodge by members of four Lodges/Pubs, in London, in 1717.

This may be an over-simplification-but these are all basic facts and will clear the path for a better understanding of the development of our present system and to recognise the elements it contains. Many manuscripts of the Old Charges, originals and copies, are still extant, amongst which are the Regius dated in the fourteenth century; Cooke, fifteenth century. Common to the majority of the Old Charges is the linking of Biblical characters with the Craft of the masons; the recording of Old Testament legends and Biblical tradition; the Christian invocations-and in this sense literacy and liturgy were close companions. Much of the basic ritual used in Freemasonry has been built up from elements in these Gothic MS Constitutions. What better vehicle, and what better setting for the Mason craft could have been called into use than the Temple erected by Solomon "for the Glory of the Holy Name", echoes of which have continued no less sophisticated to the present day. Masonic historians of the eighteenth century were certainly not disturbed by anachronisms; decades, even centuries could be discarded quite freely if it suited their purpose to make Biblical characters contemporaries, and what was good enough to record in the old MSS was later quite acceptable for ritual compilers and writers on Masonic history.

THE WIDER MEMBERSHIP

If Christianity had such a strong influence in those early days, how then did Freemasonry grow to such world-wide proportions, opening its doors to men of other religions? Students claim that this really springs from the erection of the premier Grand Lodge in London, the originators of which were quite unconcerned with Freemasons meeting together in other Lodges in England, or for that matter in any other part of London. They elected an overall Grand Master to control the inaugural four Lodges and, with definite leanings towards the convivial, expressed the intention of having an Annual Feast and the hope that they would be able to attract the patronage of a nobleman as their Grand Master.

We have no record of their Proceedings until the first minute book which commences with the meeting of 25th November 1723, six

years after they banded together! The only record of the inauguration of Grand Lodge in 1717 is given to us in an account by Anderson in the second edition of the Book of Constitutions dated 1738 - twenty-one years afterwards! The first edition, dated 1723, gives a clear statement of the attitude towards religion:

"A Mason is Oblig'd, by his Tenure, to obey the moral Law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid ATHEIST, nor an irreligious LIBERTINE. But, though in ancient Times Masons were charg'd in every Country to be of the Religion of that Country or Nation, whatever it was, yet 'tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves; that is to be good men and true, or Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguished whereby Masonry becomes the Centre of Union and the means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons that must have remain'd at a perpetual distance."

This appears as one of the Charges, sub-titled "Concerning God and Religion".

Brother Rev. James Anderson, Junior Grand Warden, 1722, and Brother Dr. Desaguliers, Grand Master, 1719, have been credited with the development of greater religious tolerance and wider scope for membership. Both played very important parts in the formative years. It is reasonable to say that Anderson's Book of Constitutions influenced the course taken by Ireland and Scotland. The Grand Lodge of Ireland issued instructions that each Lodge under their jurisdiction was to obtain a copy and, later, when they compiled their own, it was based largely upon Anderson's work. Scotland was influenced by a visit of Desaguliers in 1724 to a Lodge at Dunblane, where he presented a copy of the English Constitutions. The course taken by the three Sister Grand Lodges was mainly determined by the same publication. The first Masonic book published in U.S.A. in 1734 was Benjamin Franklin's reprint of the same work.

IRREGULARITIES

The rapid spread of Freemasonry must have created its own form of difficulty in management for their premier Grand Lodge. Military Lodges and Colonists carried Freemasonry into other lands, and the second and third quarters of the eighteenth century became a fertile period for irregularities. New degrees, pseudo degrees and new Orders emerged, and in this wider field a lucrative market arose for the sale of broadsheets against the Craft and for so-called exposures, some of which have greatly added to our knowledge of the pattern of development of parts of the ritual. Among the early exposures we have A Mason's Examination, 1723; the following year The Grand Mystery, and in 1730 the important Masonry Dissected: I say important because it is the first printed account of the Hiram legend. A spate of exposures appeared on the continent between the years 1730 and 1760, but little if any in this country between Pritchard's Masonry Dissected in 1730 until Three Distinct Knocks in 1760 and Jachin & Boaz in 1762. J&B ran into many editions and was often used by Freemasons as a manual; we have many examples of this in our libraries all over the country.

It was in an atmosphere of the earlier exposures that Grand Lodge took steps to protect its members and its funds from imposition. Many clandestine Lodges sprang into existence-access to ritual was no problem for the making of irregular Masons. Later on came the charges that Grand Lodge had departed from certain landmarks; that they had made a changeover of certain words; had discontinued the ceremonial for the Installation of Master in private Lodges; and, later still, their persistent refusal to recognise the Royal Arch Degree.

Prominent among the objectors was Laurence Dermott, an Irish immigrant who had been initiated in Dublin in 1741, reached the Chair of his Lodge in 1746 and then exalted in the Royal Arch, all prior to his arrival in London in 1748. A rival controlling body-at first a Committee which paved the way for another Grand Lodge-was set up for the purpose of preserving "Antient forms" of Freemasonry. So we have the anomalous terms of "Antients" to describe a Grand Lodge set up thirty-four years after the original which they dubbed the "Moderns". The progress of Freemasonry under each jurisdiction, however, was strong indeed, but the contradiction in terms persisted until 1813, when the two Grand Lodges joined amicably and became the United Grand Lodge of England as we know it today.

CRAFT RITUAL

Recognisable elements of the ritual can be seen in most exposures, but the settled form that has come down to us is undoubtedly due to the influence of William Preston. He was initiated in 1762-the period of the Three Distinct Knocks and Jachin & Boaz exposures, and ten years later published Illustrations of Masonry after an exhaustive search and study of all phases of Ritual. We owe much of our present ritual to his syllabus of Lectures which followed a co-ordination of the material that he gathered. In 1787, Preston instituted the Grand Chapter of Harodim which had the dissemination of knowledge as its main purpose. Its title is not to be confused with the Royal Arch use of the word Chapter: in effect it was what we call a prominent Lodge of Instruction. In the Freemasons' Vade-Mecum dated 1797, it is listed as follows:

"Chapter of the Order of Harodim, Free-masons' Tavern, Great Queen Street, Lincolns-Inn Fields, 3d Monday from January to April and from October to December. Dine at Five exactly Chapter opens at seven. Visitors admitted by Tickets, which may be had by applying to any Member of the Chapter."

See Preston's Illustrations of Masonry.

It is interesting to note that this entry is followed by a list of Lodges of Instruction which are classified under days of meeting, and that Sunday is divided into afternoon and evening meetings. Preston's Lectures had many Christian references, but most were deleted when the Lectures were revised in 1813 by Dr Hemming. This work forms the basis of the Craft Lectures that are taught in Emulation Lodge of Improvement and sometimes "worked" as demonstrations in Lodges or Lodges of Instruction. Their value is in the explanation of much of the ritual, and it is from the reasons supplied we can understand the thinking of the compilers.

KNOCKS

A ready example of association may be seen in the following snippet of catechism which has this to say of knocks:

Q. How did you gain admission?

A. By three distinct knocks.

Q. To what do these three distinct knocks allude?

A. An ancient and venerable exhortation Seek, and ye shall find; Ask, And ye shall have; Knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

This explanation is based upon St Matthew vi', v.7, although there has been a small amendment. Knocks are referred to in the Sloane MS C. 695: "Another sign is knocking at the door two little knocks and the third a big one." Knocks are also quoted in A Mason's Examination (1723): "When you enter a Lodge you must knock three times at the door, and they'll challenge you." An interesting variation occurs in the Wilkinson MS (1727): "Coming to a house where masons maybe, he is to knock three knocks on the door; a lesser, a more and a more."

Recognisable differences in rhythms existed before the development of a three Degree system, but all are quoted within a Masonic context; they were there waiting for adaptation.

FIRE

The staggered rhythm of the knocks and the rhythmic clapping in Masonic "Fire", however, have only rhythm as a common basis. The "Fire" is attributed to a military or regimental source and was adopted as a form of applause for after-dinner toasting. A lucid account of Masonic "Fire" is given in the French ritual exposure,

"They first strike two blows close together but they leave a slightly longer interval between the second and third, the latter being somewhat louder too. All this is repeated three times. The same graduations of force and speed are observed at table, when they clap their hands after drinking."

ROYAL ARCH

Another case of difficulty for many Brethren is the placing of the Royal Arch in the Masonic system. As the Third Degree grew out of a two-Degree system, so the Royal Arch emerged as a logical development from that and should be viewed as an integral part. It was practised by the Antients under the authority of their Craft Warrants as it was, to them, literally, a Fourth Degree. The premier Grand Lodge, however, doggedly adhered to a stand of non-recognition of the Royal Arch, although most of their senior Grand Officers were members of it and set up a Grand Chapter to control it: they were able to enjoy the best of both worlds. The Royal Arch was just another point of official difference between the Antients' and Moderns' Grand Lodges and, even though it was described in the Articles of Union when the two became the United Grand Lodge of England in 1813 as "part of pure and Antient Masonry", it was nearly four years before its place could be resolved and a union effected between two Grand Chapters.

Many a Masonic career has been marred, or limited unnecessarily, by misdirection on the question of entry to this Supreme Degree. "Don't bother about that until you have been through the Chair of your Lodge" is probably the worst but by no means uncommon advice. I take an entirely different view and say that the time to enter is when a Brother has a sound view of the construction of the three Craft Degrees and, in retrospect, can estimate for himself what the Masonic exercise set out to do. He may well question why certain substituted "secrets" were adopted: he will then have reached another stage of being "properly prepared" and thus be ready to appreciate the part that is played by the Royal Arch-that of completing the Master Mason's quest; seeking for that which was lost.

The difficulty of putting the Royal Arch in its proper perspective is not new; it has been happening since its development. But just as the Third Degree grew out of a two-Degree system, so the Royal Arch emerged to complement the whole, and it must be viewed as an integral part of the construction of the Freemasonry of today.

Most, if not all, of the documents quoted above are available to you for free through my Masonic Research Library. I hope bringing out these condensed facts helps you explain and answer questions the newest among us have. It should never be the case that we give a variety of answers to the same question.