

## **A SHORT HISTORY OF THE CRAFT BASED ON PROVEABLE FACTS**

By

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To compile a reasonably accurate account of the development of our Craft is a task beset by many difficulties. We are, unfortunately, the inheritors of "mystical; magical, and superstitious tendencies" that too often have been presented as established fact. Henry Coil, in the preface to his new Masonic Encyclopedia, sums up the situation in these words, "a great deal that has been written about Freemasonry never happened."

Besides this, we have the utterances of overenthusiastic admirers of the Craft who attempt to connect Freemasonry with people and events of far distant ages. For example, just a few years ago in a paper presented to our Banff Conference there appeared this amazing statement: "Throughout the years Freemasonry has attracted many of the mental giants of each period, for instance, Socrates, Pythagoras, and Plato of ancient times." Whatever idea the writer had in mind, this is entirely misleading.

You will understand, then, my caution, even my reluctance, in undertaking the project assigned to me. I would ask your indulgence, therefore, while I make one or two preliminary comments, simply to remind you of the atmosphere in which anyone must work in dealing with Masonic history.

First, there is a scarcity of masonic records. We have all too little information as to how our ancient brethren conducted their affairs in the operative and accepted periods of the Craft. Here and there have been discovered old documents, or passing references in a letter or personal diary that give brief imperfect glimpses of some customs or practices in a particular area. The records that would reveal to us valuable information either have been lost or were never written. As we all know, there were no minutes kept for the first six years of the original Grand Lodge formed in 1717, and we must depend on Dr. Anderson for an account of the events of those years, and even then it is doubtful if he was present and participated in those events from the beginning.

Second, among the meagre records and references there is the problem of deciding what is provable fact and what is questionable. How far can we go, say, in accepting as literally accurate Pritchard's exposure of the three degrees in his "Masonry Dissected" of 1730? How much of it is guesswork or hearsay and how much is actually true we do not know.

Third, even when certain facts are known, masonic historians do not all agree on their significance. In many areas of the history of the Craft different authorities draw different conclusions from the same evidence.

It is all too evident, then, that a mere amateur can offer no very convincing conclusions. Naturally, I have depended on the researches and opinions of many writers on the subject. I have, however, not thought it wise to burden you with frequent references or quotations from their works, nor have I attempted to add footnotes. Instead, I have listed at the end of the paper the sources which have been consulted.

## **ORIGINS OF FREEMASONRY**

What, then, are the origins of Freemasonry? Many theories have been advanced and argued with commendable enthusiasm, but have had to be abandoned in the face of cold logic and historical facts. I shall mention, very briefly, a few of these theories.

None of us will accept the belief that our history can be traced through devious ways to the building of King Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem. Yet many of our new members, denied proper instruction, are left with the impression that this is actually true.

A theory that began to take form late in the 18th century ascribed our remote origin to the Ancient Mysteries. It was held that from them Freemasonry has inherited some "Secret doctrine." This came to be widely accepted in the 19th century but by the beginning of the 20th century it became obsolete. There is absolutely no historical evidence to show that the supposed secrets of the Ancient Mysteries - and we have no actual knowledge of what they were are in any way connected with our Craft. The Mysteries only persisted in a corrupt form until the 5th century, and then perished. The Old Charges are entirely ignorant of classical Rome or Greece. We may admit the possibility of our Craft degrees having been influenced by individual mystics or Rosicrucians, and at the same time dismiss utterly and completely any suggestion that speculative Masonry is in the slightest degree a survival of the Rosicrucian cult, or that it is the 17th century invention of its adherents, organized or otherwise.

The belief that the so called Comacine Masters had some connection with Freemasonry was rather widely accepted some forty or fifty years ago, and it still turns up occasionally in modern writings. It was stated that through these Comacine Masters the Craft can be traced back to the Roman Collegia. They were said to be builders of a superior class from Como in Lombardy, Northern Italy, who were formed into an association or fraternity. It was claimed that they travelled widely, by permission of the Pope, building churches, and, according to some, reached even to England and Scotland. It has no more basis of proof than many other theories of our origin. Mainly its foundation is just a play on words. Wherever Comacine Masters are mentioned, it was assumed that reference was to Lake Como in Italy. Actually, the word Comacine had been in use long before that time and had a wide application. The late Douglas Knoop, one of the most eminent of our modern Masonic historians, states: "Not a scrap of record evidence has been found to establish the existence of this migrant fraternity, and the basis seems to be mainly a mistaken etymology for "comacinus" probably meant "fellow mason" without reference to Como or any other place."

An attempt has been made to connect Masonry with the Compagnonnage of France. This organization has many similarities to early operative masonry, with an initiation ceremony, secrets and legends. It was essentially a journeyman's organization, its primary concern being with the travelling companions. It remained throughout the 19th century a form of labor organization, and as such could show no relationship with the Freemasonry which had been introduced into France from England in the 1720's and 1730's, and, which was not concerned with the journeyman's interests.

Another organization which some claim to have influenced the growth of Freemasonry is the German Steinmetzen, a craft guild having many similarities with our institution. It had, however, an absolutely independent origin, and its legends were distinct from ours. Just as with the Compagnonnage of France, when Freemasonry was introduced into Germany in the 18th century, there was no recognition of any connection between the two societies.

We come, then, to this conclusion, that our Freemasonry is purely Anglo-Saxon in its origin, and it is to England and Scotland that we must look exclusively for the story of its development.

## **MANUSCRIPT CONSTITUTIONS**

One of the most significant influences in the development of our Craft is that of the Old Charges or Manuscript Constitutions. We can not here enter into a detailed discussion of these documents, but their importance in the growth of our Freemasonry has long been established. There are about one hundred of these manuscripts now in existence, and they are entirely the product of English operative masonry. They date from the end of the 14th century to some time about 1725. Masonic historians agree that even the earliest of these, the Regius MS, to which has been assigned the date 1390, and the Cooke MS, thought to be about the period 1400 to 1410, were copies of still earlier originals unknown to us. As practically all the versions now known have thus been copied and recopied, and even edited or changed, it is not possible to trace their sources.

Each version of the MS Constitutions usually consists of two distinct parts besides the Invocation, these are the legendary history, a highly imaginative account of the origin and progress of the Craft, and the Regulations or Charges. These Regulations were rules to govern the workman's conduct in his relations with his work, his master or employer, and his fellow worker. We cannot, of course, know who were the authors of the original versions of these Manuscripts, but from the close relationship between the building fraternity and the Church, and the fact that the ordinary workman of that time was completely illiterate, it can be accepted that they were written by some monk or clerk connected with the Church. They were meant to be read to the Masons working on some building project. It has been said that they were read to the "Lodge". But there is no evidence of a general organization of masons in the early days of the operative Craft. The "Lodge" came into existence automatically. The Master collected his workmen, and their workroom was their Lodge. When the building was completed the workmen dispersed and that Lodge ceased to exist.

The value of the MS Constitutions lies in this, that they preserved the traditions of the masons' Craft over the centuries. As they were read to the "Lodge" of masons engaged on some building project, so, evidently, they continued to be read in the early Lodges of "accepted" masons. Later, these Charges were replaced by the newer version compiled by Dr. Anderson in 1723. Before the days of Grand Lodge the test of the regularity of any gathering of masons was, it appears, the possession of a copy of the Old Charges. Warrants or Charters did not come into use until later in the 18th century. The first Warrants were issued by the Grand Lodge of Ireland in 1731.

These MS Constitutions give us little information about the organization of the Craft in the Middle Ages. They speak of "assemblies" of masons to discuss the affairs of the Craft as far back as the 10th century. But, from the conditions prevailing at those times there could have been no national assembly for the regulation of trade matters. There may have been regional or local assemblies, but that is a mere possibility, for we do not know with any certainty that such gatherings were ever held.

## **CRAFT GILDS**

Much has been written of the English Craft Guilds and their influence on Freemasonry. The history of the Trade and Craft guilds is complicated and there is much disagreement among historians as to the course of their development. The earliest guilds were religious associations both on the Continent and in England, and over several centuries they kept their close connection with the Church. The Guild was designed to watch over the interests of the skilled workmen but maintained its religious aspect. By the time of the Reformation in the 16th century they were already declining in influence, and lost most of their power when Henry VIII confiscated their money and possessions.

Gilds were essentially city organizations. Each was limited to the craftsmen of one trade within the limits of a city. Thus, from the very nature of a Gild it is evident that Masonry could not have been controlled by such an organization. Practically all the work of masons was carried on outside the city, and the workman had to move from place to place, indeed, might even be impressed to work on some important building. It is generally thought that it was because masons were not governed by Trade Guilds that the MS Charges came into use in the regulation of a very loosely knit fraternity.

## **THE LONDON MASONS COMPANY**

There is but one definitely known exception to this condition just referred to, that is the Masons' Company of London. There may have been masons' Guilds in a few other centres in England, we do not know, and, if there were, there is no positive evidence that they were concerned with the regulations of the trade.

The first reference to the London Company is found in 1376 and it was one of the many Craft Guilds in that city. This organization governed the mason trade in London, and no one could work at this trade without its authority. The influence of the Company declined in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and its monopoly was finally broken by the conditions following the Great Fire of London in 1666. It was not able to control the large number of "foreign" workmen, that is, from other parts of Great Britain, who flocked to the city, and the Company could not cope with the tremendous amount of work required in rebuilding.

The main point of interest to our present fraternity in the London Company is the fact that there was formed a separate organization, connected with the Company, but which was not concerned with trade matters. This was the "Acception", evidence of which is found in an account book of the Company dated 1629. This "Acception" was in the nature of a fraternity or Lodge separate from the parent body, and with no interest in the masons' trade, but having its finances controlled by the Company. Why it was formed we do not know. If it had anything more than a social purpose, we have no knowledge of it. It is, in effect, the earliest known Lodge of "accepted" masons, though its members were not referred to as such until the early part of the 18th century. We have little or no knowledge of its organization or procedure, but it is generally believed to be the Lodge held at Masons Hall which Ashmole states he attended in 1682. Nothing is known of the Lodge after that date.

## **ACCEPTED MASONS**

There is positive evidence, then, that "accepted" Masonry existed in London and was active before the end of the 17th century. There is also evidence of other Lodges of "accepted" Masons in England at that time. We have the entry in the diary of Elias Ashmole that he was "made a mason" at Warrington in 1646, and the statement of Randal Holme that he was "made a mason" at Chester, probably in the 1670's. From these records it would be correct to say that these two men, and doubtless many others, were "made masons", not in an operative Lodge, but in a group of "accepted" masons. Among them may have been some operatives. But such Lodges, whether merely occasional or of a semi-permanent nature, had no connection with the operative Craft. The only known operative Lodges in England outside of London were at Alnwick, whose minutes show that it was in existence in 1701, and at Swalwell, an unattached Lodge of which the first authentic records date from 1725, though it was evidently in existence before that date. As these Lodges were not far from the Scottish border, we are led to conclude that there was a Scottish influence in their practices. No non-operatives or "gentleman" masons were associated with these Lodges before 1730.

## **SCOTTISH MASONRY**

The development of Masonry in Scotland followed an entirely different pattern from that in England. There, the trade was much more closely knit, and we have clear evidence of an organized Craft, with a great deal of cooperation and collaboration in different parts of Scotland. This collaboration centres mostly in the King's Master of the Works, who, along with the Masters of the head Lodges constituted the central authority controlling the various local Lodges.

The Statutes drawn up in 1598 and 1599 by William Schaw, then King's Master of the Works, set out the duties and responsibilities of the workmen. They use the word "Lodge" referring to a body of masons controlling the building activity in a particular town. These will be distinguished from a group of operatives meeting in a Lodge or workshop attached to a building site. The Lodges controlling the trade in a town were under the supervision of Head Lodges, such as those at Kilwinning, Edinburgh, and Glasgow. Such mason trade bodies authorized the admission of apprentices. First, these apprentices were "booked" by the municipal authorities. Later they were "entered" in the Lodge, and thus became part of the local Lodge organization. At the end of their term of training these "entered apprentices", if found worthy, were made Fellows of Craft. There is, of course, much uncertainty about the details of these customs and how these Lodges operated in different counties. The one fact which emerges is the close organization of the masons' Craft in Scotland, working through recognized operative Lodges, a condition which is not definitely known in England except in London.

Records dating from the year 1634 and throughout the century which followed, show that in Scotland many non-operatives, men who were not actual masons, were admitted members of operative Lodges. Mostly these were of the nobility or gentry, and were referred to as "gentleman" masons. They were, in effect, honorary members, though they paid a fee for admission, and this fee would be higher than that paid by an operative member admitted to the Lodge. How much the increasing number of non-operatives or "gentleman" masons contributed to the changing character of the Lodges from purely operative to accepted Masonry is not known. It is generally thought that the change came about through changing social conditions rather than by the influence of the non-operatives.

In England the existence of organized operative Lodges outside the London Masons Company is purely problematical. Operative Lodges at Alnwick and Swalwell in the beginning of the 18th century were, as has been pointed out, undoubtedly influenced by Scottish practice. Consequently, we have no evidence in England of non-operatives joining operative Lodges as in Scotland. Men were "made masons" in the purely occasional or semi-permanent groups having no connection with the masons' trade. Because of this it was in England that "accepted" masonry, as distinguished from "non-operative" masonry developed much earlier than in Scotland, and so finally became the Speculative Craft known to us today. The Speculative Craft was a development of the 18th century.

## **MASONIC CEREMONIES**

It is not possible to give a satisfactory account of the growth of our Masonic ceremonies. The earliest suggestion of ceremony comes from the Old Charges, which contained an Invocation, the legendary history of the Craft, and the Regulations. We can only say that probably, following Gild practice, the reading of a version of the MS Constitutions to the apprentice, and the swearing by him to observe the Regulations or Charges, constituted the whole ceremony of admission among English operative masons in the middle ages.

In Scotland, since Lodges were essentially operative, there were certain ceremonies in "entering" the apprentice as a member of the Lodge some time after he had been "booked" in the municipal records. The only information on these ceremonies comes from several catechisms of the late 17th and early 18th centuries. These show that there was an esoteric content of some kind which was communicated to the new member and which was centered round the "Mason Word." He had to take an oath of secrecy, and then the Word was communicated to him accompanied by certain signs. There are suggestions of some crude "horseplay" in the ceremony. When the Entered Apprentice was admitted a Fellow of Craft, or Master, another oath of secrecy was required. He learned the posture and Signs of Fellowship, that is, the five Points of Fellowship, and was given the word, sign and grip by the Master. Thus two distinct ceremonies were used.

We do not know what the Mason Word was, or how it originated. The earliest known reference to it is in the diary of the Earl of Rothes in 1637, in which he states that he has the Mason Word. The earliest description of the ceremonies connected with the giving of the Word is found in the Edinburgh Register House Manuscript of 1696. The main purpose of the Mason Word was to enable the Mason to prove that he had been regularly admitted into the Craft. It was, if we may oversimplify it, what we might call his Union Card, which would distinguish him from a Cowan, or one who had not been regularly made a member of the organized Craft. The Mason Word is purely Scottish in its origin and use. It was not known in England until some time in the 1600's, just as the MS Constitutions, which were English, did not reach Scotland until about the same time.

It should be emphasized again that Scottish Masonry, until the end of the 17th century and even later, was a trade organization. Its only esoteric content was a secret mode of recognition already referred to. In England, the slender tie with the operative Craft had in most cases long been broken by the beginning of the 18th century. Why men gathered in groups to enjoy fellowship under the name of Masonry we do not know. Something was there which appealed to them, and this was the foundation for the later growth of the Speculative Craft.

## **SPECULATIVE MASONRY**

The story of the emergence of Speculative from Accepted Masonry is one that can not, at present anyway, be fully told. There was the Acception of the London Masons' Company of the 17th century and probably earlier. There were the Lodges, occasional, or in a few places possibly meeting with some regularity, in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Finally, there were the "Four Old Lodges" in London and Westminster which formed the first Grand Lodge in 1717 purely in their own interests.

## **GRAND LODGE**

The formation of Grand Lodge has frequently been referred to as a "revival". Anderson speaking of the first meeting of the four Lodges states, "they constituted themselves a Grand Lodge *pro tempore* in due form, and forthwith revived the Quarterly Communication of the officers of Lodges (called the Grand Lodge) resolved to hold the Annual Assembly and Feast." There is, of course, no evidence that a quarterly Communication had ever been held. The formation of Grand Lodge was a new development, no doubt a natural outgrowth of Masonic fellowship among the members of the four original Lodges. There was no intention on the part of the new organization of controlling the Craft outside London and Westminster, nor could it have had the faintest idea of the significance of this action for Freemasonry in England and beyond its shores.

## **CRAFT DEGREES**

As for the growth of our Craft ritual, again we have little definite information. With few exceptions, Masonic historians agree that there were two steps or degrees in 1717. There are some hints of a third degree before that time, particularly in the Trinity House Dublin MS of 1711. However, all we know with certainty is that by 1730 the Master Mason degree with its legend of Hiram Abif was known and used in some Lodges. Pritchard's "Masonry Dissected", an early exposure, contained the first printed reference to this degree. It was many years before the Master Mason degree was generally accepted. Up until the middle of the 18th century brethren largely regarded the Hiram degree as one which they could take at their leisure, since the Fellowcraft degree qualified them for any office in the Lodge or in Grand Lodge.

Let it be remembered that even after this third degree was established, Freemasonry had practically nothing of symbolism, nor was it "a peculiar system of morality" as we understand it. The symbolism and moral teachings which characterize our present day ritual was a slow growth of the 1700's. During these days our ritual was gradually taking shape. Again, there could be no uniformity of growth. Different areas developed their own particular way of "working" and some would progress more rapidly than others.

## **GROWTH OF GRAND LODGE**

The authority of Grand Lodge in its early years was limited. At first it was local, but, as its influence widened it had to deal with the unwillingness of some Lodges to submit to its rule, and with the practice of "making masons" outside the regulations of Grand Lodge. The remainder of the 18th century brought progress amid many difficulties. Its course, like that of true love, did not run smooth.

There were many developments in the century following 1717 which it is not possible to discuss here in any detail. The greatest challenge to the original Grand Lodge came from the movement which resulted in the formation of a rival Grand Lodge in 1751. This new group, commonly referred to as the "Antients" was not a secession from the older organization which was to become known as the "Moderns." It was a separate movement mainly instigated by brethren from Ireland as a protest against the social advantages of the original body, and against certain changes which, it was claimed, had been made by them in the old customs. The division, at times acrimonious and bitter, ended in 1813 with the union of the two Grand Lodges to form "The United Grand Lodge of England."

There were other disturbances during this period which marred the harmony of the Craft. An old Lodge in the city of York, whose records dated back to 1705, and which was most likely in existence before that time, set itself up in the year 1725 as the "Grand Lodge of All England." It never had much influence, and after a precarious existence faded out about 1792.

There was also formed in London in 1779 "The Grand Lodge of England South of the River Trent." This arose out of a dispute between the Grand Lodge and the time-immemorial Lodge of Antiquity, in which the famous William Preston was the leading spirit. It had a brief existence of about ten years in which it constituted two Lodges in London.

Long before this time Freemasonry had spread widely over the British Isles, over to the Continent, and across to America and other parts of the world. By 1725 the Grand Lodge of Ireland had been formed, and the Grand Lodge of Scotland was established in 1736. These along with the Grand Lodges in England instituted Masonic Lodges in many overseas areas.

## **FINAL DEVELOPMENT**

The final development of Freemasonry into a stable organization with well developed customs, regulations and ceremonies, came with the union of the Moderns and the Antients in 1813. In the preceding century the ritual was taking shape. Countless brethren, unknown to us, made their contributions to it. Some, like William Preston and Dr. Samuel Hemming, left an indelible imprint upon it. The symbolism of Freemasonry grew, and its teachings and principles were clarified. Through the Lodge of Reconciliation, representing both Grand Lodges, and which carried on its work between 1813 and 1816, the content of the Craft ceremonies and ritual was decided. As this Lodge of Reconciliation was not allowed to keep any written records, we cannot now be sure that we know in exact detail the results of their work. There were and are, of course, wide differences in the way this content is presented. But the basic ritual which each of us knows, the organization of Grand Lodge, and the fundamental principles which guide us, were finally determined and definitely established scarcely one hundred and fifty years ago.

Here, then, in barest outline, is an attempt to trace the growth of this Craft of ours through its operative, accepted, and speculative stages. Preparing such an outline might almost be compared to the task of an archaeologist who attempts to reconstruct the civilization of an ancient people from a collection of artifacts.

Yet it is desirable that we make an effort to know the background of Freemasonry. Only by encouraging our members to seek a fuller knowledge of our loved Fraternity will we be able to displace the imaginative theories and narratives that too often pass for Masonic history. Freemasonry regards Truth as one of its fundamentals, and so any member will be the better Freemason for having tried to find, as far as can be discovered, the provable facts of this our Masonic Craft.

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