



HISTORY OF THE CRAFT RITUAL

An Address By Dr. Bing Johnson,
Orator of the Montrose Lodge of Perfection
Delivered October 15, 2001
To The Grand Junction Scottish Rite Bodies

Adapted for the Grand Junction Scottish Rite bodies from:
Carr, Harry, *Six Hundred Years of Craft Ritual*, Grand Lodge of Missouri

I had always known that Masonry was very old and believed that the ritual and customs that I experienced on the night of my initiation had always been that way since the beginning of Masonry.

Of course this was not correct as Masonry is constantly evolving and undergoing change. This was elegantly demonstrated by the late Bro. Harry Carr, Past Master of Quatuor Cornati Lodge, in his lecture entitled *SIX HUNDRED YEARS OF CRAFT RITUAL* given to the Victoria Lodge of Research and Education in 1977 which I will summarize shortly. Research into the early years of Masonry is difficult because for much of that time very few could read or write and no records were kept. Later when records were kept many were lost or destroyed. Old English is difficult for most of us to understand and the meaning of many words has changed with the passage of time. Many copies of early records were copied incorrectly and there were also many fraudulent documents. Bro. Carr was extremely rigorous in his examination and preparation of research information. Now on to *SIX HUNDRED YEARS OF CRAFT RITUAL*.

There are some who feel that our ritual came straight from heaven to King Solomon. They are equally certain that it was engraved on two stone tablets, so that not a single word could ever be changed.

It all started in 1356, when there was a great argument in London between the men who cut the stone and the men who actually built the walls. The exact details of this quarrel are not known, but as a result twelve skilled master masons, came before the Mayor and Aldermen at Guildhall in London and drew up a simple code of regulations.

The document, which still survives, says that they had come together because their trade had never been regulated in such a form as other trades were. This document is an official guarantee that this was the first attempt at a Masonic trade organization. The very first rule they drew up states, "that every man of the trade may work at any work touching the trade if he be perfectly skilled and knowing in the same." In other words, if you knew the job you could do the job, and no one could stop you.

Within twenty years, the London Masons Company, the first trade guild of Masons evolved as the real beginning of Freemasonry. The London Masons Company was not a lodge, it was a trade guild. In the 1390's and 1400's guilds were favored by towns because each of the guilds elected two representatives to the Common Council which formed the city government. But the mason trade did not lend itself to town organization as most of their work was far out side of town, such as at castles, abbeys, monasteries and defense works. It is believed that it was in those places where the

work went on for many years and where there was no other kind of trade organization that lodges formed in imitation of the guilds. That allowed self government on the job while they were far away from all other forms of trade control.

The first factual information about lodges comes from a collection of documents known as the "Old Charges" or the "Manuscript Constitution" of Masonry. They begin with the Regius Manuscript c. 1390 and the Cooke Manuscript c. 1410. There are 130 versions of these documents running right through the 18th century.

The oldest version of the Regius Manuscript is in rhyming verse. It begins with an Opening Prayer, Christian and Trinitarian, and then goes on with a history of the Craft, starting in Bible lands and times, and then traces

the rise and spread of the Craft across Europe and then across the channel to England. The historical perspective was, of course quite inaccurate and a history professor wouldn't believe it, but the Masons believed it. This was their guarantee of antiquity and respectability.

Then, after the historical part we find the regulations, the actual charges, for masters, fellows and apprentices, including several rules of a purely moral character.

Apart from these three main sections, prayer, history and charges there a few words which indicate the beginnings of Masonic ceremony. All of the information can't be found in a single document. But when studied as a collection it is possible to reconstruct the earliest ceremony of admission to the Craft.

It is known that the ceremony began with an opening prayer and then a 'reading' of the history. In those days almost no one could read, so it is felt that they selected particular sections of the history which they memorized and recited.

Then there is an instruction in English or Latin that says: "Then one of the elders held out a book (Bible) and he who is to be admitted, places his hand thereon." In that position the regulations were read to him, he took "the oath of fidelity to the King, to the Master and to the Craft, that he would obey the regulations and never bring the Craft to shame."

The oath becomes the heart of every Masonic ceremony. The Regius Poem emphasizes the importance of the Mason's oath and is the key to the admissions ceremony.

Masonry, the art of building began thousands of years before this but, for the antecedents of our own Freemasonry, we can only go back to the direct line of history that can be proven, and that is 1356 in England.

The documents indicate only one ceremony or degree. There is ample evidence to believe that the ceremony for the degree was for a fully trained man or fellow craft, not an entered apprentice. There are many law suites that show that in the 1400's an apprentice was the chattel of his master and could be bought and sold. Consequently it is impossible that an apprentice had any status in the lodge. Labor laws were changed by 1530.

The Harleian Manuscript No.2054 c. 1650 which is a copy of the Old Charges from about 1550, gave the first hint of two degrees. They probably began with a prayer, followed by an obligation and instruction of the secret words and signs, which are still unknown.

The Edinburgh Register House Manuscript dated 1696, found in the Public Records Office of Edinburgh, is the earliest description of the actual ceremonies of the

two degrees It began by saying "The Forme Of Giveing The Mason Word" which is one way of saying it is the manner of initiating an entered apprentice, followed by the Master Mason or Fellow Craft Degree.

We are told that the candidate "was put to his knees" and after a great many ceremonies to frighten him "he was made to take up the book and in that position he took the oath."

This was the earliest version of the words "indite, carve, mark, engrave or otherwise them delineate." There was no penalty, just an obligation to secrecy. After the obligation the candidate was taken out of the lodge by the last previous candidate, there given the sign, postures and words of entry. When he came back he gave the words of entry and greeted the Master. It ended with the words "under no less pain than cutting of my throat" and "you must make the sign to say that." This is the earliest documentation of the entered apprentice sign.

For operative masons the lodge was either a room attached to a pub or a shed attached to a big building. There were probably no more than a dozen in attendance.

After giving the sign the candidate was brought to the Master for 'entrusting'. The instructor whispers the word into the ear of his neighbor, who in turn whispers it to the next man and so on until it comes to the Master who gives it to the candidate. A biblical footnote shows that the word was not one word but two. B and J, two pillars for the entered apprentice in the two degree system.

That floor work was followed by fifteen questions and answers. The section is headed "SOME QUESTIONS THE MASONS USE TO PUT TO THOSE WHO HAVE YE WORD BEFORE THEY WILL ACKNOWLEDGE THEM." Some of the questions were: "Are you a Mason? How shall I know it? Where were you entered?"

After about seven years the candidate came back to be made a fellow craft or master. Inside the lodge those two grades were equal, and both were fully trained masons. Outside the lodge, one was an employer, the other an employee.

So, after the end of the apprenticeship, and serving another year or two for board plus wages he came back for the second degree. He was "put to his knees and took the oath anew. Then he was taken outside by the, youngest master and taught the sign, posture and words of entry (we do not know what they were). Then he was brought up for the entrustina. This was similar to the first degree, except the Master, on the five points of fellowship, which was almost identical to that of today, gave the word to the candidate. There were only two test questions.

The two degrees were well described in the Chetwode Crawley Manuscript c. 1700 and the Kevan Manuscript c. 1714. But these documents couldn't be trusted because they were written in violation of an oath. It would have to be proven that these documents were actually used in a lodge. By a happy fluke that was possible

In 1702 a group of Scots decided they wanted a local lodge. The scribe copied all of the Scottish rituals on the first ten pages of a ledger. But he had to put the last twenty nine words of the degree on top of page eleven. Because he was Scottish, he then used the rest of the page for the minuets of the first meeting under-heading "The same day". During the next sixty one years, some one saw the ritual part in the minuets book and ripped out the first ten pages. However, they left the first minuets which included those twenty nine words of ritual at the top of page eleven. Those twenty nine words were identical with corresponding portions of the Edinburgh Register House Manuscript and

its two sister texts. This guaranteed that the documents were identical.

The Sloan Manuscript c. 1700 found in the British Museum showed the various "gripes" and a new form of the mason's oath which contains the words "Without equivocation mentall reservation." It also gave the points of fellowship and the missing word and the manner it was to be given. The word was "Maha Byn"

The Dumfries Manuscript c. 1710 mentioned the cabletow and that it was a rope "to hang me by if I should betray my trust." It lists the penalty, "My heart taken out alive, my head cut off, my body buried within ye sea mark."

The earliest hints of the third degree appear in exposes like the Trinity College, Dublin Manuscript, found in the papers of Sir Thomas Molyneux, as well as those documents previously mentioned. Another expose was the Graham Manuscript dated 1726.

The earliest minuets recording a third degree took place at the London Musical Society in 1724. During a meeting at the Queen's Head Tavern, the members who were the most prominent of London's musical, architectural and cultural society, decided to found a musical and architectural society. One of the rules was that any one could attend, but if they were not a mason they had to be made a mason. The Society's records of May 12, 1728 show that Bro. Charles Cotton and Bro. Papillon Ball were regularly passed as masters. Now we have the date of Cotton's initiation, his passing and

raising; there is no doubt that he received the three degrees. But that was a musical society, not a lodge, even though the Grand Master, The Duke of Richmond and several Grand Lodge officers were present.

However, within ten months the records of the founding meeting, of the Lodge Dumbarton Kilwinning No.18 on Jan 1726 showed that seven master masons, six fellow crafts and three entered apprentices were present. Three months later on March 1726 the minuets showed that a founding fellow craft renewed his oath, which means he took another degree. And, if a Scotsman paid for it you can bet your life he got it. This is the earliest absolute record of a third degree.

Two years later Lodge Greenock Kilwinning prescribed separate fees for entering, passing and raising.

In 1730 Samuel Prichard published "Masonry Dissected", an expose which claimed to describe all three degrees. Prichard's expose contained much information. It had three sets of penalties (throat cut, heart torn out, body severed and ashes burned and scattered to the winds of heaven). It mentioned the middle chamber, the winding stairs and a recitation on the letter G. The masters degree contained the earliest version of the Hiram legend, including the murder, the discovery and the raising.

The Hiram legend didn't come into the ritual all ready made; it was the result of at least two or three separate streams of legend.

The Third Degree was not a new invention. It arose from a division of the original first degree into two parts, so that the original second degree with the five points of fellowship and the word moved in to third place. Both the second and third degrees acquired additional material between 1711 and 1725.

The ritual had been fully developed by 1745. All of the principal elements were in place, even those mentioned in the English and French exposes of 1760. But the rituals were still very crude.

Polishing of the ritual began with the writers Wellins Calcutt and William Hutchinson in 1769 and William Preston in 1722. Preston towered over the others. He was a born teacher and was constantly writing and improving his work.

From 1751 to 1813 there were two rival Grand Lodges in England and they hated each other with true zeal. Their differences were mainly over minor matters of ritual, views on Installation and the Royal Arch. The bitterness continued until 1809 when reconciliation took place.

In 1797 Thomas Smith Webb of Albany, NY published his Freemasons Monitor or Illustrations of Masonry. It was based largely on Preston's Illustrations of Masonry. Carr states that in many respects the American ritual is really older than the English in that it preserves material unchanged for American rituals to a much larger extent than the English ritual and that it gives a fuller explanation and interpretation of the symbolism.