

SPECULATIVE CRAFT FREEMASONRY

CHAPTER VI

MASONIC ESSAYS (1998)

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GUILD MASONRY

The origins of Speculative Craft Freemasonry can be traced directly and indirectly to the craft practised by the operative Free Masons, who flourished in the Middle Ages under the auspices of the guild system. The skill of the medieval Free Masons was outstanding and they were renowned for the cathedrals they built. Their work was the pinnacle of operative masonry, reflecting the experience gained by masons throughout the evolution of civilisation over some 12,000 years, working in brick and stone to construct every conceivable building from the humblest dwellings to the stateliest edifices. In the present context Freemasonry distinguishes the purely speculative art from the practical craft that was the province of the Free Masons. However, it should not be inferred that there was no speculative component in the work carried out in the lodges of operative free masons, because they had developed their own rich tradition and ceremonials, some of which were similar in presentation to the Passion Plays of the Middle Ages. As all medieval guilds were highly secretive in respect of the private proceedings of their fraternities, information concerning their ceremonials is somewhat sketchy. Because very few relevant records have survived from before the formative days of purely speculative lodges in England, masonic writers all too frequently have said that operative masonry had no speculative component and therefore that speculative freemasonry could not be a derivative of it. Having regard to the circumstances prevailing in those times, it is remarkable that any documentary evidence has survived and been discovered!

Lodges of operative masons must have worked independently in the earliest days, because travel was difficult and time consuming. However, some time in the twelfth century the operative masons appear to have been organised under the protection of the craft guilds that came into existence to watch over the interests of skilled workers in the various trades. The guilds were known as Fellowships or Fraternities and with the exception of the operative masons their constituent trades worked under the provisions of relevant ordinances. Guilds were also religious fraternities, whose members were required to attend church frequently, if not regularly. Frith, or family peace guilds, existed in London around the middle of the tenth century. The first merchant guild is believed to have originated in Dover around the middle of the eleventh century, when the weaver guilds

also appear to have been formed. There is no doubt that many craft guilds were well established in England during the reign of Henry I, by around 1135. There is evidence that annual assemblages of masons were being held from the 1300s onwards and that they were the gatherings which Henry VI unsuccessfully sought to prohibit by the Statutes of 1436-1437. Under the guild system many families rose from serfdom to become employers in a few generations. The system was highly successful until the Reformation, when Henry VIII enforced the Act of 1547 that disendowed all religious fraternities, including the operative masons. Henry VIII confiscated most of the guilds' possessions. His son Edward VI seized nearly all of the remaining guild funds that had been dedicated to religious purposes, when most guild records were destroyed to conceal the identities of those who might otherwise have suffered persecution. The masons appear to have been the worst affected by the confiscations of property and funds.

As in the other craft guilds, lodges of operative masons were subject to a strong religious influence and their ceremonials had a religious component. Practical work and its related instruction took place in the stone yards, but all moral and ethical instruction and matters relating to general conduct, as well as the modes of recognition, were imparted in the ceremonial lodges held weekly on Saturdays at high twelve. All apprentices were obligated and indentured in the ceremonial lodges, where candidates for promotion also were examined, tested for proficiency in the non-manual aspects of their work, obligated and entrusted. Lodges of operative masons were unique, because the rules and regulations for their establishment and operation were set out in documents called "charges". The possession of an authentic copy of the "charges" was the authority under which a lodge worked. The "charges" included a traditional history, rules governing work practices and codes of conduct for behaviour at church, in the home and in company. The oldest known record of the Antient Charges of operative masonry is a document written by a priest, comprising thirty-three vellum sheets and entitled the "Poem of the Craft of Masonry". It is believed to have been based on a much older document and is known as the Regius or Halliwell MS, No 23,198 in the British Museum. It was discovered in 1839 and was thought to have been written about 1390, which was later revised to 1410. In modern terminology it is classified as dating "from the first quarter of the fifteenth century". The rules and regulations set out in the Regius MS are stated to have been established at a great assemblage of masons ordered by King Athelstan. They are arranged under fifteen "Articles" for ye maystur mason and fifteen "Points" for felows and prentes.

Prior to the Reformation, the guilds and other religious fraternities undoubtedly were the guardians of centuries-old traditions and esoteric ceremonies, carefully concealed from public scrutiny. The guilds that survived the Reformation became the Livery Companies still operating in the City of London. Livery comes from the Anglo-French liver, meaning "handed over", derived from the Latin liber, meaning "to free". Among them was The Worshipful Company of Free Masons of the City of London that had existed for

several hundred years before the Reformation, continued through the Reformation hidden from public view, then resurfaced after the Reformation. Before the Reformation it was commonly called The Fellowship of Masons, but in 1655 changed its name to The Company of Masons. Because all of the Company's books and documents were destroyed during the Reformation, those in existence only date from 1620. Fortunately, various letter-books and other records of the City of London confirm that The Company of Masons had an unbroken existence from late in the thirteenth century until the middle of the seventeenth century.

OPERATIVE INFLUENCES

The unbroken existence of The Company of Masons over some four hundred years maintained the continuity of operative lodges in England, even through the fifteenth century persecutions, which enabled their traditions and practices to be preserved. Possibly other operative lodges also survived, though hidden from public view. Entries in the books of The Company of Masons in 1620 and 1621 show that the membership then included "accepted masons" and "operative masons", but no records have been found to indicate when or why any of the masons were "accepted". Entries in 1648 and 1650 clearly indicate that the Company had an inner fraternity, known as the Acception, that could be entered only on being made a freemason, but there are no details of the ceremonials associated with admission so it is not known whether they were of an esoteric nature. It therefore is a matter of conjecture whether the "accepted masons" were speculative in the modern sense, but it is reasonable to assume that some special benefit of membership was perceived. From 1663 onwards the Company admitted to membership a number who were not craftsmen, including several women. One woman was apprenticed as late as 1713 for the usual term of seven years.

The usages and customs of operative masons that have come down to us in speculative craft freemasonry include various traditions concerning the construction of the temple at Jerusalem, the symbolic use of the working tools to impart moral instruction and the modes of recognition used in the various grades of membership. When persons other than tradesmen were first received into operative lodges, men of learning and public stature no doubt would have been welcomed because of their erudition and the influence they could bring to bear in the community for the benefit of the members. Those who had been received into membership also would have benefited from the widening of their interests in the new avenues of tradition and knowledge that were then available to them. As long ago as the 1500s many Scots lodges welcomed local lairds as honorary members. Although they would not be regarded as speculative freemasons in the modern sense, they were the forerunners of the many who joined Scots operative lodges when work declined. The minutes of the Lodge of Edinburgh record the attendance in 1600 of James Boswell, the Laird of Auchinleck and in 1634 they also record that Lord Alexander, Sir

Antony Alexander and Sir Alexander Strachan were admitted as Fellows of the Craft.

In England the Civil War of 1642-1646 led to the domination of Oliver Cromwell, which was followed by a very turbulent period until the settlement of 1689 when William of Orange and Mary acceded to the throne of England. The few surviving records that have been discovered now show that this was the formative period of modern speculative freemasonry in England. This is in contrast with Scotland, where records reveal that many of the operative lodges progressively became speculative lodges. Of particular interest during that period is the first known initiation on English soil of someone who was not an operative mason. It was the admission of the Right Honourable Robert Moray, General Quartermaster of the Scots army, into the Lodge of Edinburgh at a meeting held near Newcastle in May 1641. The lodge also has the appellation "Mary's Chapel". Robert Moray later became Secretary of Scotland and in 1673 was buried in Westminster Abbey under the name Murray. The earliest known record of an Englishman initiated on English soil is of Elias Ashmole, who was made a mason in a lodge at Warrington in Lancashire in 1646. Nothing is known of the admissions into freemasonry of any of the members at that time, but there is reason to believe that they included Royalists and also supporters of Parliament. There is no record of any of the members being an operative mason, although one may have been.

In England some operative masons, such as the members of lodges engaged on the construction of the York Minster, could work for a lifetime on a single project. Other lodges could work for many years on smaller cathedrals before having to move to a new work site, often in the same district. However, there always were small lodges that had to move frequently, as well as many itinerant masons moving from site to site in search of work. In Scotland the whole mason trade revolved around smaller operative lodges, of which there were many more than in England. The territorial lodges in Scotland were organised under the supervision of head lodges, which were not always in large towns. The repressions of the Reformation were less severe in Scotland than in England, so that a large number of Scots operative lodges were able to become speculative lodges, a development that had no direct parallel in England.

Throughout the Middle Ages and thereafter until well into the eighteenth century, travel in Britain was greatly restricted and very hazardous. Although the more affluent residents could make journeys on horseback or by horse and coach, ordinary persons were usually confined to travelling on foot, commonly called going "on tramp". Robbery under arms was commonplace, so that the general population avoided travel whenever possible, but because of their vocation the operative masons frequently had to travel long distances in search of new work. A unique custom in the craft was that an itinerant mason, when seeking work in an operative lodge, had either to be given employment for an appropriate minimum period or to be provided with sufficient sustenance to reach the

next nearest place of work. To facilitate their travel in safety, the operative masons in those days had unobtrusive distinguishing signs enabling them to seek out members of the craft at roadside hostelries, as well as modes of recognition with which to establish their credentials with a prospective employer. Some masonic researchers hold the view that the possession of masonic credentials for safe travel was a primary objective of those who were "made" masons in the seventeenth century. This has been called the "passport theory" for the development of speculative craft freemasonry and might have been a contributing factor, but it would not explain why the working tools and procedures of operative masons were adopted as the basis of moral instruction in the speculative art.

MODERN SPECULATIVE FREEMASONRY

It is now generally accepted that modern speculative freemasonry began to emerge in the seventeenth century, which is when operative lodges in Scotland already were transforming into speculative lodges, when Elias Ashmole the renowned antiquary was made a mason in England in October 1646 and when The Company of Masons in London had been admitting non-masons to the Acception from around 1648. Of particular interest is a note in Elias Ashmole's diary in March 1682, that records his attendance at "a lodge held at Masons Hall London". He states that he was the "Senior Fellow among them", that six gentlemen were admitted into the "Fellowship of Free Masons" and that afterwards they dined at a tavern in Cheapeside "at a Noble dinner prepared at the charge of the New-accepted Masons". Excepting the new admissions, all but three of those present were members of The Company of Masons, including its Master and several who had been Master in previous years. References in various pamphlets and periodicals between 1676 and 1710 confirm that Londoners then were more familiar with Freemasonry than with The Company of Masons or the Acception. It is not known how many speculative lodges had been formed in England before June 1717, when four or possibly six among the oldest of them assembled in London and established the first Grand Lodge, claiming jurisdiction over all lodges meeting in London and Westminster. Its sphere of jurisdiction included at least sixty-four lodges by 1726, when it had become known as the Grand Lodge of England and its first two Provincial Grand Masters had been appointed. Of the founding lodges, the Original No 1 is recorded as having been constituted in 1691, but it is believed to have had an earlier origin and that its members almost certainly had been members of an operative lodge involved in rebuilding St Paul's Cathedral from 1675 to 1710.

Unlike the situation in Scotland, only one lodge of operative masons in England that is known to have become a speculative lodge is still in existence. Originally it was located at Stalwell in County Durham and accepted a warrant from the Grand Lodge of England in 1735. It continued to work as an operative lodge for another twenty years before becoming speculative and moving to Gateshead, where it still meets as the Lodge of Industry No 48. By way of contrast another lodge of operative masons meeting at

Alnwick in Northumberland, that had been in existence long before the Grand Lodge of England was formed, did not accept a warrant and appears to have ceased to function around 1763. Its minutes from 1703 onwards are still in existence, together with a copy of the Old Charges and a code of rules devised by the lodge in 1701. When Dr James Anderson drafted the original Constitutions for the Grand Lodge of England in 1723, not more than ten copies of the Old Charges were available for his reference, although more than a hundred have now been found and classified. The Cooke MS is the oldest copy of the Old Charges used in the compilation of the Constitutions. It is the second oldest known to be in existence and is in the library of the British Museum. As its date of origin has been assessed to be around fifty years after the Regius MS, it also was in use before the Act of 1547 that disendowed all religious fraternities. These two documents have many similarities, although the Cooke MS was intended primarily as a history. The third oldest copy of the Old Charges is the Grand Lodge MS No 1, dated 25 December 1583. Written after the Act of 1547, it is significant because it reflects a distinct transition from the purely operative nature of earlier documents to include much of a speculative nature.

In 1725 an operative lodge of great antiquity in York, then in the process of becoming speculative, proclaimed itself a Grand Lodge. In the following year it claimed to be the "Grand Lodge of All England" under its "undoubted right", thus disputing the superiority of the Grand Lodge of England, although its authority never extended beyond Yorkshire. It was dormant from 1740 to 1760, and finally ceased to operate around 1792, but was never formally dissolved. In Ireland there is no record of any operative lodge becoming a speculative lodge. The earliest reference to a speculative lodge is in the opening address given in 1688 by John Jones at Trinity College in Dublin. The Dublin Weekly Journal in June 1725 reports that six "Lodges of Gentlemen Freemasons" met and elected a new Grand Master. This is the earliest record of the Grand Lodge of Ireland, because all official records prior to 1760 have been lost. This contrasts with Scotland where most operative lodges continued into the 1750s and even longer, although by then many of them had become speculative. The Masters and Wardens of four old lodges that were or had been operative met in Edinburgh in October 1736 and formed the Grand Lodge of Scotland. Two of those lodges and several others joining soon after still exist and have records substantiating their continuity from operative days. In 1752 the Grand Lodge of Antients was formed in protest against the apathy and neglect being displayed by the Grand Lodge of England which they dubbed "the Moderns", as well as through dissatisfaction with the rituals being used and the ceremonials being practised. The Antients and the Moderns finally settled their differences and their two Grand Masters signed and sealed twenty-one Articles of Union in 1813. These were quickly ratified by the two Grand Lodges representing 647 lodges, thus establishing the United Grand Lodge of England. There can be no doubt that the rituals of modern speculative freemasonry were greatly enhanced under the influence of the Grand Lodge of Antients.

Modern freemasonry has many branches, with a multitude of complementary degrees that are progressive along a variety of paths. The constitutions and laws of modern Grand Lodges usually refer to their members as Antient, Free and Accepted Masons. Most constitutions define Pure Antient Masonry as comprising the three degrees of Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason, commonly with the stipulation that it also includes either or both of the Honourable Degree of Mark Master Mason and the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch, even though the constituent degrees usually are not worked under the auspices of the Grand Lodge. The traditional degrees of freemasonry include all of the foregoing and several others that are based on the story of the construction of King Solomon's temple at Jerusalem; its subsequent destruction when the Jews were exiled to Babylon; and its rebuilding by Zerubbabel under the provisions of the Decree of Cyrus. The narrative of these degrees is woven around a series of events recorded in the Old Testament. Other important orders in modern freemasonry are the Royal Order of Scotland, the Ancient and Accepted Rite, the Red Cross of Constantine, the Knights Templar and the Knight Templar Priests, which have Christian aspects, as well as several others. Of particular relevance is "The Worshipful Society of Free Masons, Rough Masons, Wallers, Slaters, Paviers, Plaisterers and Bricklayers", commonly called The Operatives, which was founded in 1913 by the few remaining members of some English operative lodges that were rapidly becoming defunct, so as to ensure that the traditions and ceremonials of the operative masons would be perpetuated instead of being lost.

THE PURPOSE OF FREEMASONRY

Although the catechism that every initiate in the Craft is required to learn, defines freemasonry as a peculiar system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols, there are many misconceptions about the purpose of freemasonry. A significant factor contributing to this dilemma is the reversal in the roles of two key elements in the practice of the speculative art. The available records clearly show that the founders of Speculative Craft Freemasonry in England regarded a lodge meeting as a forum for philosophical discussion, wherein the members could discourse upon a wide range of relevant topics, more or less in the fashion of meetings of the Royal Society to which many of them belonged. Before an application for membership would be considered, the petitioner was required to demonstrate that his interests were compatible with those of the members. Admission into the various degrees was to ensure that all members had a common foundation for their activities in the lodge, as well as establishing a basis for assessing the credentials of strangers wishing to attend meetings. This followed the precedents established in lodges of operative masons and other trade and religious fraternities that had been in existence for many centuries. In contrast, modern freemasonry places the greatest emphasis on the working of the various degrees, which in the great majority of lodges is almost to the exclusion of philosophical discussion.