

Meditations on the Rites of Masonry

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1 The Origins of the Rites

I would like to say a few words on the subject of the Rites of Freemasonry; their meaning and relevance to Masons.

The rituals of operative freemasonry, primitive though they seem to have been, contained something that appealed to the intellectuals of the 17th Century, who had little in common with the men who worked with stone.

The first recorded instance of someone unrelated to the Craft being received into a Lodge was that of Elias Ashmole. He was made a Free Mason at Warrington, Lancashire on Oct. 16th, 1646. Ashmole was an antiquarian and an astrologer. He was the founder of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. There have been earlier references to the making of Masons which could have referred to the receiving of non-operative members, but these have not been as clear nor as verifiable.

Subsequent to 1646, many more non operative members were received, or accepted, as they called it. So popular did the Craft become that in the London area especially, accepted Masons started outnumbering the operative ones, and soon there were Lodges consisting solely of accepted Masons.

At that stage, there was no central authority to determine Lodge legitimacy, or to control ritual conformity so each Lodge decided for itself what its ritual would be. Even after the formation of the first Grand Lodge in 1717, little attempt was made to enforce ritual conformity, and thus there are many rituals in use in Lodges under the United Grand Lodge of England today.

In addition to the early Craft degrees, many diverse rituals evolved, indeed, the third degree, itself, did not exist prior to about 1730. The seeds of what would later develop into the Royal Arch, the Mark, the Royal Order of Scotland, and the Ancient and Accepted or Scottish Rite arose in the 1720 to 1740 time frame.

In those days, Lodges performed any degrees that came into their possession. Eventually, however, Grand Lodge gained sufficient authority to insist that no "Higher" degrees should be worked under Craft Warrants. That gave rise to Grand Bodies to control those other degrees.

What was it that caused these "Higher" degrees to be developed and to become popular? The answer to this is as elusive as the question of what drives a man to petition to join the Craft in the first place.

What is it, in the soul of man, that makes him seek the unknown, the mysterious, the face of God? There is no simple answer to this.

The drive is personal and is reflected in the myriad diverse religious, fraternal and social structures that man has built around himself; indeed, it is to be found in the whole structure of the world and of the societies within it, to the extent that man could exert any control. Thus the same forces within the Masonic context have given rise to degrees and bodies which we could term symbolic, academic, mystical, philosophic, militaristic, chivalric and religious, in nature; reflecting the diverse characteristics of Man; the diverse needs of men.

2 Freemasonry in Maitland a Hundred Years Ago

As a local example of that force, consider the Masonic empire that was set up in Maitland in the 1870's.

In 1960, M.W .Bro. R. V. Harris presented a paper to the Canadian Masonic Research Association entitled "George Canning Longley and His 300 Degrees".

George Canning Longley was born at Maitland, Ontario in 1827 where he spent the greater part of his life. He was initiated in 1852 in Ogdensburg Lodge #128 in New York State and later affiliated with what is now Sussex Lodge #5 in Brockville. Five years later he organized St. James Lodge (now #74) and became its first Master. In fact, he was Master for a total of 6 years and was made a Grand Steward of Grand Lodge in 1863.

From 1870 on, he became very active in organizing and running Masonic bodies in all branches of the Order. In fact, in the space of less than 10 years, he had organized 30 bodies holding 282 degrees. All of this was available for less than \$200 with the total annual dues of \$6.50. Unfortunately, or perhaps otherwise, this massive Masonic structure collapsed under its own weight shortly after the death of Longley in 1885.

3 The Meaning of Freemasonry

What does all of this say about our humble Masonic Arts? What did all those bodies and degrees mean to those who organized them and to those who joined?

Obviously, the whole range of human motivations is involved. Freemasonry, being composed of humans and meeting human needs, has developed to satisfy a large subset of those needs.

The motivations of some men may not be noble, and of others, may not be wise, but the symbolism of Freemasonic degrees is inspiring to higher values and to the exploration of the human state and of oneself.

Men obviously belong because they want to belong and they attend because it makes them feel good or useful or inspired or, even, just less bored. It meets some need or interest.

The variety of the Rites & degrees is useful to meet the variety of needs and interest in men. I guess what bothers me are the number of men who

have the idea that just belonging to something, or even, to everything, confers some blessing upon them as individuals. I would rather say that membership confers responsibilities on its members.

But even that I wouldn't carry to extremes. Our needs and interests do change with time, and we cannot know, in advance of joining, just how we will relate to particular degrees or bodies, although we may know something about them.

All of Life's Experiences, and Masonry is one of those, are essentially solitary trips. Others can point the way and give advice but we, ourselves must tread the path; at the end of which we alone will be accountable for our actions, or lack of them.

4 To the future

The mistake is not that degrees and rites exist outside of the three Craft degrees, but, rather, that we, perhaps, do not look closely enough at those we invite to be members of these other bodies; or, perhaps even more to the point, that we, as those members, do not look at our own interests and needs, and also those of the Rite or Order, so as to be more selective in what we involve ourselves, for the good of ourselves and others.

5 Appendix

Some of the bodies set up in Maitland by George Canning Longley in the 1870's were:

1. St. James Conclave #41, Knights of the Red Cross of Constantine
2. Morton Edwards Lodge #24, Royal Ark Mariners
3. Orient Chapter # 1, Order of the Eastern Star
4. Gondemar Preceptory (now #16) of Knights Templar
5. Raymond Dupuis Priory of Knights of Malta
6. Khurum Council #5 Royal & Select Masters
7. Immanuel Tabernacle #1 Knight Templar Priests
8. McLeod Moore Chapter Rose Croix
9. Sphynx Lodge and Temple of the Primitive and Original Rite of Phremasonry, or Swedenborgian Rite
10. Salem Commandery # 1, Knights of St. John the Evangelist in Palestine
11. Maitland Chapter #68, R.A.M.
12. Lebanon Tabernacle # 1, Knights of the Palmtree
13. Melchizedek Council # 1, Order of High Priesthood
14. Chorazim Convocation #1 who controlled - the Ark and Dove - Mediterranean Pass - Heroine and Knights of Jericho - Secret Monitor - Knight of Constantinople - Knight of the Three Kings
15. Craticula Lodge #1, Masonic Order of St. Lawrence and
16. Dominion College #1, the Rosicrucian Society of Canada.

As if this were not enough, he went on to found the Rites of Memphis, Mizraim, the reformed Egyptian Rite, the Royal & Oriental Order of Sikha, the Sat B'hai and the Royal Order of Eire.

Thus, about 300 degrees were available run by about 20 men in a village of 300 persons.