

HOW DID MASONIC RITUAL COME ABOUT?

Ironically, most of our early knowledge of Masonic ritual is from the early anti-Masonic literature (exposures) in England and France. The first ritual was probably a simple ceremony of admission, which developed into two degrees and, at about the time when the first Grand Lodge in England was formed in 1717, into a system of three degrees. These early ceremonies were mainly delivered in catechetical form and were evidently briefer and less well structured than the later ceremonies. Early ritual was also Christian in content - indeed the Premier Grand Lodge met on St. John's Day (24th June).

Because of the way that the Craft developed from very early times, there was considerable diversity of practice in England from one part of the country to another, and particularly between the Lodges under the two rival Grand Lodges, the Premier and the Ancient Grand Lodges. To pave the way for the union of these two Grand Lodges, a Lodge of Promulgation was formed in 1809 under the Premier Grand Lodge (or Moderns) to examine the ritual and make recommendations.

Following the union of the two Grand Lodges in 1813, a Lodge of Reconciliation was established to complete the rationalization of the ritual into a form acceptable to both parties forming the newly constituted United Grand Lodge of England. The work of the Lodge of Reconciliation between 1813 and 1816 included demonstrations of the opening and closing ceremonies, the obligations and the perambulations. It was probably also when most of the Christian references were removed. Its other main function was to demonstrate the unified ritual. Representatives of Lodges in London and the Provinces were invited to attend special demonstrations organized by the experts from the Lodge of Reconciliation, which completed its work in 1816.

It was forbidden to print the ritual or even produce written manuscripts, so the communication of the work to the various Lodges relied heavily on the ability, not to mention the memory, of those attending the demonstrations. Their task was then to instruct their own members in the approved practices. It was not until 1835 that the first regular ritual book was published in England by George Claret. This is somewhat surprising because at this time the printing of ritual was still strictly frowned upon by Grand Lodge, and several later authors were firmly admonished for such transgressions.

Towards the latter part of the 19th century, and into the 20th century, an increased number of rituals emerged. Today in England there are some 40 published rituals and several hundred smaller workings, some unique to particular Lodges. Emulation is the most widely used. Some rituals are practiced within certain Provinces, such as the Oxford Working and the Sussex Working, and many others are popular in particular geographic areas. Except for a few Lodges in Bristol and the North of England, which retains more of the earlier practices, the degree of variation is quite small. The UGLE has never officially recognized any particular ritual working.

Lodges are to this day, free to teach and practice whatever ritual they wish, provided the landmarks are not breached.

In the USA, there are several different Craft rituals in use, generally exhibiting only minor variations and, broadly speaking, they are very similar to England. Yet, in a very curious way, the visitor from England who knows his ritual will find that the American versions sound strangely old-fashioned, repetitive, and somehow older than used today in England. Surprisingly, this is true! America got their ritual from Britain, but it is, in fact, older.

American Masonic workings owe their origins, unquestionably, to England, Scotland, Ireland, but the stabilization of their ritual was done by an American, Thomas Smith Webb, who, in 1797 published a book under the title *Freemasons' Monitor or Illustrations of Freemasonry*. What happened in fact was, that Webb took the English Freemason William Preston's book *Illustrations of Masonry* (it was almost a bible to the English Craft), retained sixty-four pages of work intact, word for word, cut out a few minor items, and rearranged others. Although Webb wrote very little of it himself, he may well be described as the father of American ritual.

For that reason, it is fair to say that the ritual used in America, though it came from Great Britain, is actually far older than used today in England, and it is not merely 'old-fashioned,' but also more discursive, and by reason of their Lectures much more explanatory than what is used in England, especially of the symbolical meaning of their procedures. With the creation of the UGLE the ritual in England had been altered, curtailed and polished up, (some said, almost beyond recognition), but not so in the USA where they preserved it.

The American ritual material is essentially the same as in England and easily recognizable. The signs and secrets are virtually the same, except that America uses the Scottish sign for the Entered Apprentices. The second degree is more elaborate and the third is basically the same, but because lodges perform the drama as if it were a play, treating the Candidate as though he were really H.A., the result is occasionally rather rough and frightening, especially in those lodges that pride themselves on the realism of their performance.

The manner in which America safeguard their ritual is also interesting. In England, the Grand Lodge views the ritual as a 'domestic matter,' i.e., a majority of the Brethren in any lodge may decide what form of ritual shall be worked, and unless the Lodge was guilty of some serious breach, the Grand Lodge would not interfere. In the USA, the very reverse is the case. Each Grand Lodge prescribes the ritual that its Lodges shall work, and usually the Grand Lodge prints and publishes the "monitorial" or explanatory portions of the rituals too. Some Grand Lodges also publish the esoteric ritual, in code or cipher, but this is forbidden in others. Moreover, to prevent innovations, the Grand Lodges protect their forms of ritual working by the appointment of officers, called Grand Lecturers, whose duty is not to lecture, but to ensure that the groups of lodges under their care adhere to the official workings

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