

WALoR 1999 TRANSACTIONS Vol.49 No.01.3

THE 1998

ROBIN HEWITT MEMORIAL LECTURE

'THE VISIBLE APRON' (Scottish Style)

BY BRO RONALD KIRKWOOD
R.W. I.P.D.G.M. of the D.G.L. of W.A.
under the G.L. of Scotland.

Brethren, I consider myself greatly honoured to be asked to give the Robin Hewitt Memorial Lecture this year, and I thank the Worshipful Master and members of The Lodge of Research for affording me that privilege. There are many papers on the origin of our aprons which I believe is a subject worthy of great consideration, but this address tonight will not go into any great depth on the historical aspect.

Ther's many a badge -that's unco braw

Wi' ribbon, lace, and tape on;

Let kings and princes wear them a'

Gie me the Masters Apron.

Many will recognise the first stanza from Robert Burns's poem about his apron which reveals his love for this great emblem of Freemasonry, 'The Visible Apron'. To me, the more intrinsic value- of the apron, is reflected in the opening lines of the poem 'An Ode To The Apron'.

It is not ornamental; the cost is not great

I have things far more useful, yet, truly, I state

That of all my possessions there is none to compare

With the white lambskin apron that we Masons wear.

This item of clothing, the lambskin apron, is the first article or 'initial gift' which when presented and placed on our person, makes us aware that we are now on our first tentative steps of belonging to Freemasonry.

Why the apron?

We have many worthy Masonic scholars who have delved into the 9ncient past and have come up with many historical and operative usages of the apron in many of the religions of the world, as well as an emblem of authority in different cultures. I think that most of us will acknowledge that the apron, as worn by -our ancient brethren, the 'Operative Masons?', would have had a protective value and originally would have been quite basic. Just a 'pelt' of -an animal, tanned, with strings attached to tie around the wearer's, neck and person, covering him, as old illustrations indicate, from the breast to the ankles to protect his body. For the apprentice, who was required to carry heavy objects, it would protect his normal clothes; for the fellowcraft, as a hewer of stone, it would protect him from the stone chips, and dust, for the master or overseer, it would possibly- have some mark- or markings to denote his special authority.

Over the years, especially when operative masonry turned to Speculative Freemasonry, the apron not only changed its- size and shape but, of course, the purpose or reason why Freemasons wear aprons. At the time of the formation of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, we see that the apron generally reached well below the knees, - eventually diminishing in size to today's standard, being sixteen inches (406mm) wide, fourteen inches (355mm) deep, with a semi-circular flap six inches (152mm) deep at the centre without any ornament.

When the apron is presented to us and placed on our person we are told that

'it is the distinguishing badge of a Freemason, more ancient than the Golden Fleece'.

In Greek mythology, the fleece of the winged ram Chrysomallus, sent by Hennes to rescue Phrixus. and Helle, son and daughter of Athamas and Nephele. After losing Belle and saving Phrixus, the ram was sacrificed to the Gods.

'or the Roman Eagle'.

The Roman eagle was the ensign -of Rome's Imperial Power, the rallying point for the legionnaires when they marched or went into battle.

'more honourable than the Garter'

In some Scottish Lodges, they would say 'the Order of the Thistle'. The Order of the-Garter was-founded by Edward III of England in the fourteenth century as an Order of Chivalry.

'or any other order in existence, it being the badge of innocence and the Bond of Friendship'.

We are told that it is made of lambskin which, to us, is the acknowledged emblem of innocence and purity, which should remind us of that purity of life and actions, which should at all times distinguish us as Freemasons. We are also given the hope that we will be able to wear that badge with pleasure to ourselves, usefulness to the craft, and honour to the. Lodge in which we have been initiated. We are further exhorted never to disgrace it, as it will never disgrace us.

After listening to the excellent investiture- charge, and having that beautiful, but humble, lambskin apron placed around us, how can we compare two such opposites. 'The. purity of life and actions' that the white apron means to us, as Freemasons-, against the sacrificial ram, the warring Romans, and Orders which though professed to be chivalric, were originally given to aristocratic men and who formed themselves into exclusive bodies, and fought for-their 'most times' autocratic King. The lamb is of a gentle and harmless nature- and its white colour is a symbol of purity, cleanliness, good conscience and character, of innocence and immortality. The word 'candidate' comes from the Latin word *Candidus*' meaning white.

The apron is offered to us not only as an emblem to recognise other Freemasons but as a symbol of where we as Freemasons, should conduct our search for those virtues that make us live up to, not only the ideals of the Order, but of all good and just men. The colour of the apron not only reflects speculatively the light of knowledge but. also the cleansing of our souls, when we mortals pass into the Brotherhood of Freemasons.

In many of our Scottish Lodges, a charge is- given after the apron has been presented to the candidate, and is called simply 'The Apr-on Charge.' I now quote that address because I believe that it epitomises all that is good and sets out what fife, as --human -beings, requires of us -as Freemasons.

'The apron, the badge of a Mason, is a Square and its four right angles teach us that Purity, Truth, Sincerity and Honesty are the foundations of morality. Its four equal sides remind us to practice the four cardinal virtues, Temperance in word and deed, Fortitude as a noble purpose, Prudence in wisely ruling and Justice to the noblest and greatest alike. The flap teaches us to relieve a distressed brother and to be kind and friendly in dealing with our fellowman. The two strings are symbols of love and faith which bind mankind into a brotherhood which cannot be broken.

The apron is bestowed by command of the Right Worshipful Master and it may be that, in the coming years, a laurel wreath of victory may rest upon your brow, jewels hang from your breast fit to grace the diadem of an Eastern potentate. Nay more than this, your feet may tread round after round of the ladder that leads to fame, and even the purple of the Fraternity may rest upon you, but never again from mortal hands, never again, until your enfranchised soul shall have. passed through those pearly gates, shall such an honour, so distinguished, so emblematic of purity and perfection, be bestowed upon you as this Apron. Let it be to you a never ending argument for nobler deeds, higher thoughts, greater achievements and, when your weary feet have reached the end of life's toilsome journey, and from your nerveless grasp shall fall the working tools of life, may the record of your life be as pure and spotless as this fair emblem, which has been placed within your hands tonight. It is yours to, wear, through an honourable life, and if you disgrace it, that disgrace will be augmented by the consciousness that in this Lodge you- have been taught- the true principles of Virtue and Morality It is yours to wear so long as your spirit shall animate your body, and when your disembodied soul shall have winged its flight to that house not made with hands, and when amid the -tears and sorrows of surviving friends and relatives your body shall be lowered by the loving hands of sympalhising Brother Masons into that narrow hole prepared for all

the living. It will be yours, should you so elect to be placed with evergreen upon the coffin that shall contain your lifeless remains and with those buried beneath the silent sod of the valley.

Brother may you so wear this Masonic emblem that no act of yours will ever stain its spotless purity or bring reproach upon this ancient and honourable institution, which has survived the birth and death of Kings, the rise and fall of Nations and the mutations of Empires.

In conclusion brother,. let me admonish you so to live, that when the final summons comes for you, to stand before that Great White Throne, may it be your portion to hear from the Supreme Judge, these welcome words, "Well done thou good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord".

When I retraced that wonderful ceremony in which I had participated here came to me, and I hope it comes to many if not all the candidates for Freemasonry, the dawning to our consciousness, that this article of clothing, this first tangible evidence that we are now part of the Fraternity, is not only THE VISIBLE APRON that we wear, but also our first perception of what Freemasonry means and what it is trying to teach us. This teaching, or meaning is, I think, something that from time to time we need to rediscover namely **'Purity'** is the need to strive for the perfection and genuineness of life. **'Truth'** is the honesty and sincerity, that we must at all times attain when dealing with our fellow man. **'Sincerity'** is the candour with which we should at all times express ourselves. **'Honesty'**, is the integrity and uprightness that we have -to show in dealing with the world around us. These four simple words

'Purity', 'Truth', 'Sincerity' and 'Honesty', not only form the foundation of Freemasonry but also have their genesis in our formative years within the bosom of the family home. If we have, or are striving for, these ideals, surely we must thank eternally our mother and father.

'Temperance in word and deed', the quality of temperance, is not only in the control and restraint that we need to perform in the many duties we have in our lives, but of that abstinence of those unworthy elements in our existence, and, of the humility and modesty we should show at all times.

'Fortitude as a noble purpose', that perseverance, tenacity and determination which will enable us, to carry forth those valuable and virtuous plans that we need to share, not-only for-the improvement of ourselves, but also of our Brother Freemasons.

'Prudence in wisely ruling'. If we are to rule wisely don't we need to be taught the foresight of our peers, to have that common sense that is essential in taking any office in life or Lodge, and of learning that great, and valuable lesson of humility and discretion?

'Justice to the noblest and greatest alike'. This is one of those invaluable lessons of life that teaches us that we are all equal, not only in the sight of our God, but in the sight of-man. So, that we must show at a times, our integrity and equity to all, and that we must not only be impartial and equitable, but we need to be seen to be impartial and equitable in all our deliberations where it concerns our fellow man.

'The flap teaches to relieve a distressed Brother'. This teaching is quite significant to us as Freemasons, to be enabled to assist a brother who has some dilemma in his life, to alleviate his sufferings and to give him support that, in times of need in our lives, we assuredly require.

'The two strings are symbols of love and faith, which bind mankind into a brotherhood, which cannot be broken' Here again, it must surely come to the newly-initiated brother, that when the two strings are joined, are united, the strength of mankind, or our Brotherhood, is secure and cannot be broken. That, together with the knowledge that the word 'love', does not only mean the love of your fellow man, but a devotion to all that is good, and that your strength will be a vital cog in the well being, both of your Lodge and also of Freemasonry, and the confidence that your faith, your love of your God will never waver, will give you the strength, the indefatigable energy, to concentrate wholly on making sure that in the many and various countries in which we live, this Brotherhood that aligns us all, will continue, and surely go from strength to strength. Thus we are enabled to-show to our world, that no matter what our religion, our creed or our nationality, we, as Freemasons, strive to make our Order and our family strong, so that we can bring peace, order and stability to those around us.

We are next told that those jewels, those achievements, those honours that we receive in our Masonic career, are . but grains of sand in relation to the honour of wearing a Freemasons' apron and, not until our enfranchised or liberated soul shall have passed to the Grand Lodge above, will we receive such an accolade as that of this pure and perfect white lambskin apron. When we wear this symbol I am sure it will give us that propensity for nobler deeds, higher thoughts -and greater achievements. What are those beneficent and benevolent deeds that we can do? There are, as we all know, many ways for us to rise up and make that extra effort, to plan our strategy, so that by putting- our intellect to it, we should not only be able to aid our fellow man but to raise our own intellect to a higher plain so that we can all strive for that perfection which should always be our predominant aim.

The knowledge that we have so far received, about the symbolism of this apron, should make us all realise that to disgrace it, to stain this magnificent apron is something that our peers would never condone, and to do so would mean that the lessons that we have received about the true principles of virtue and morality, have not been accomplished.

This VISIBLE APRON that we wear with such honour and pride, and which has, with the institution of Freemasonry, survived over hundreds of years, shall, at the end of your life, be able to be placed with that sprig of evergreen on the coffin that contains your lifeless remains and then buried beneath the silent sod of the valley. When this comes to pass, as it surely will, we can stand in humble confidence, that our Creator will welcome us to his bosom.

Brethren I hope this address has demonstrated my deeply personal and very great admiration for our ancient Brethren, who were able to cast a framework of ethical behaviour around the mystical apron that we wear. Can we ever measure up to, or indeed reach that standard of behaviour that they have so circumscribed? I think not, but, if we can at least strive to attain most of its teachings, we cannot but be well along that path, the never ending journey, on the road that awaits us all in our Masonic voyage.

I conclude with the closing words of the poem 'An Ode To The Apron'.
*So honour the lambskin, may it ever remain
Forever unblemished, and free from all stain,
And when we are called, by our Grand Master's love
May we all take our place, in the Grand Lodge above.*

2628 words