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THE VALUE OF MASONIC HISTORY.

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I recently heard it said in all seriousness that Masonic history is useless, a waste of time and of no interest to anyone; that it was a dry logical collection of facts and not to be compared in value with many other aspects of Freemasonry.

It is the object of this paper to show the value of Masonic history, its place in the Masonic system and the fact that it is extremely interesting and informative.

History as a general subject has changed its method of presentation over the years. It is no longer just a record of kings and battles, but is now concerned with the life of the common people - what one might call a philosophical approach. It has at the same time through accurate and systematic research ceased to be an art and become a science. It is no longer a matter of King Alfred and the cakes or the beds that Queen Elizabeth I had slept in.

Similarly the approach to Biblical history has changed. At one time it was regarded as exact history. Later it was considered as nothing but the story of man's salvation. Now due to archaeological research we are compelled to revise our opinions. Many events which previously passed for "pious tales" must now be judged historical. Often the results of investigation correspond in detail with the Bible narratives. In Palestine, places and towns which are frequently mentioned in the Bible look exactly as the Bible describes them and lie exactly where the Bible locates them. At the same time it is recognised that the Biblical authors did not set out to write history or to make a complete and continuous record of events, but rather that they selected particular incidents to illustrate the will of God working among men.

Similarly Masonic history which was at one time largely legend plus a certain proportion of fact, is now established on a factual basis thanks to the Brethren like R. F. Gould who founded the Quatuor Coronati Lodge in 1884. Much progress has been made in this direction in recent years, thanks to the Quatuor Coronati Lodge and to Brethren like Professor Douglas Knoop and the Rev. Herbert Poole in the 1930s and 1940s and to Brethren like W. Bro. Harry Carr and W. Bro. Alex Horne at the present time.

Masonic History Old and New.

Bro. Douglas Knoop discusses the change in methods of research and the scientific and factual approach to Masonic history in a paper "Masonic History Old and New" first privately printed and later printed in the Transactions of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge Volume 55 (1942) at pages 285-323.

Bro. Knoop classifies Masonic historians into three groups.

1. The imaginative school which includes writers such as Preston and Oliver and the predecessors from whom they derived their material.
2. The authentic school comprising the group of writers of whom Gould, Hughan, Rylands and Speth were outstanding examples, followed by Vibert.
3. The Rev. Herbert Poole who belonged to neither but was rather the exponent of imaginative theorising.

Actually the imaginative school did not consist of writers utterly careless of their facts, nor ought the verification of facts which is characteristic of the authentic writers, be considered as sufficient in itself, and as excluding all need of imagination.

The version of Masonic history resulting from the labours of these writers is not final, and must be modified as research goes on. In the first place new facts are discovered, and, in the second, inferences from these facts may, with the passing of time, be found faulty. The discovery of well-verified facts, and the interpretation of such facts is by no means the same thing. What is true of general history is equally true of Masonic history.

After reviewing various fallacies (including a number mentioned later in this paper under the heading of "Old Superstitions") Bro. Knoop, suggests that the authentic school for all its excellence, cannot be regarded as having produced a satisfactory version of Masonic history. To that end, a new school now being established, may contribute much.

He offers the following suggestions (now summarised briefly):

1. Following the best tradition of the authentic school, it should pay special attention to the discovery, description and publication of documents, especially to guard against the ravages of time and even enemy action. (Bro. Knoop has contributed to this with the publication of his Early Masonic Catechisms and Early Masonic Pamphlets which are now easily available for Masonic students). Also photographic copies of original documents should be made widely separated places.
2. Organised search is desirable in order to garner every scrap of information of Masonic interest in the literature and historical records of both the British Isles and Western Europe.

3. Investigation of the Institutional history of the Craft and the study of its ritual may be considered as proceeding satisfactorily. But so far little or no attempt has been made to discover the place of Freemasonry in intellectual, cultural and social history. Competent Brethren should investigate the relationship between accepted or speculative Masonry and political, philosophical religious and scientific ideas of the formative period, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

NOTE. This was written thirty years ago and much work on these lines has taken place in the meantime.

The Value of Masonic History.

No institution can be properly understood unless one knows something of its history and Freemasonry is no exception. There are many aspects of the Craft including ritual, symbolism, constitutional practice, ornaments, furniture and jewels, Masonry as an organisation, traditions, education, literature and etiquette, Biblical background, Anti-Masonry, procedure in other countries and words and phrases peculiar to the Craft. Each of these topics has a separate history and cannot be understood without some knowledge of the historical background of the Craft. Even current events must be seen in the light of the past. Masonic history cannot just be written off as useless and uninteresting.

Old Superstitions.

Some of the superstitions about Masonic history still linger on. Recently I heard a lecture by a Past Master who claimed to be an authority on Masonic history. He stated that Freemasonry could be traced back to Roman times. He also quoted the legend about Athelstan having summoned an assembly of Masons and stated that medieval architects were clergymen. He also referred to Sir Christopher Wren as having an important connection with Freemasonry.

These statements have long since been discredited and are incapable of being proved by reliable evidence. Most of them are specifically referred to in Bro. Knoop's paper mentioned above as fallacies which still persist among Masonic students. They are to be regarded as tradition rather than history and cannot be accepted as facts.

Our Masonic Ancestors.

It would be a mistake to think that our Masonic ancestors thought and acted exactly like ourselves or that they were people like us but wearing different clothes. They were in fact bound by the social and political conditions of their time, by the state of knowledge and education and by the conditions of communication and transport.

The men of 1717 have to be seen against the background of the time, which was just two years after the Stuart Rebellion of 1715 (the Old Pretender). Political and religious feelings were running high and a Masonic Lodge could only be successful if political and religious discussion in Lodge were forbidden.

They lived in an age of hackney coaches, heavy drinking, cock fighting, bribery by and of politicians, street gangs, poor accommodation, no police except the Bow Street Runners, no fire brigades except those maintained by the Insurance Companies. Any fire brigade put out fires only in buildings insured by its particular company and each building had a plate or notice stating the company with which it was insured. Scientific discoveries were still in their infancy.

Is Masonic History Dry?

Many Brethren regard Masonic history as something very dry - a mass of old manuscripts and records of an age now dead and gone. They are much more interested in contemporary happenings.

It is my object in this paper to show you that Masonic History is not dry, but that, if presented in the right way it can be extremely interesting, and that it can be made to live. First of all I propose to give you a short description of a Lodge meeting and the Ritual worked in the late Eighteenth Century taken from Ancient Freemasonry and the Old Dundee Lodge 1722-1920 by the late W. Bro. Arthur Heiron. Old Dundee Lodge met from 1763 to 1820 in its own freehold premises at Wapping but afterwards returned to London. It was an English not Scottish Lodge and was named after the Old Dundee Tavern where it had once met.

The candidate was prepared, probably in the early days in a state of semi-nudity, robed in a white flannel gown and was not h-w-k-d at any rate till 1766 when Lord Blayney, Grand Master visited the Lodge and ordered this to be done.

The first part of the ceremony took place in the Making Room, a room 18 feet long by 15 feet wide and 10 feet high (still existing in 1920) when probably only the Master, some P.M.s and the officers would be present. The candidate was obligated, probably at an Altar in the middle of the room. He would then receive his first Masonic instruction by having the form of "The Lodge" (previously drawn by the Tyler on the floor in chalk and charcoal) with various Masonic signs and symbols explained to him, and having been communicated to him, he was made an Entered Apprentice and passed to the Degree of a Fellow Craft by one and the same ceremony. Then the candidate having the "Mop and Pail" handed to him would be instructed to erase from the floor the symbolical drawing

with its Masonic secrets. Then the Master, Wardens and Candidate (together with any Past Masters and Brethren present) would adjourn to the adjoining room 44 feet long by 25 wide and 15 feet high and the ceremony would be proceeded with.

First the Ancient Charges were read to the Initiate out of Dr Anderson's Book of Constitutions (1756) and secondly the Masonic Lectures by the Master and Wardens, for the minutes clearly state that the Lectures were always given except when owing to pressure of business or the lateness of the hour the Brethren voted that the Lectures should be postponed.

For the Lecture the Brethren met in the main Lodge room as already mentioned and sat around an oblong table with the Master in the East and the two Wardens in the West forming a triangle. All the Brethren were present at the Lecture. The table was laid with drinks of various kinds and glasses the Brethren smoked Churchwarden pipes.

The Lecture consisted of a series of Catechisms - that is Question and Answer - on the Degree for the instruction of the candidate and the Brethren. At the end of each Section was a Charge really a Toast, hence the drinks. It will be interesting to revert for a moment to the ceremony of Drawing the Lodge which took place at an earlier stage of the proceedings when the candidate was in the Making Room.

The ceremony of drawing the Lodge was performed by the Tyler who drew a series of symbolic designs in the centre of the floor in chalk and charcoal, including probably square, level and plumb rule, two pillars and other designs of a similar nature. The Tyler usually received a special fee for drawing the Lodge at so much per candidate (e.g. 1/6 or 2/6). The drawing would be done before the Lodge met. The candidate had the design explained to him as part of the ceremony of initiation and was required to erase the Drawing with mop and pail of water to impress on him the lesson of secrecy.

The drawing on the floor was the origin of our modern Tracing Boards. Later the design was done with tape and nails and later still, when Tylers who could draw the Lodge, became scarcer, the emblems were cut in pieces of tin. Later they were painted on floor cloths and finally the Tracing Boards were removed from the pavement as at present.

We are not accustomed nowadays to public processions of masons clothed with the badges of the order. Knoop and Jones in their short History of Freemasonry to 1730 state that the election and installation of the Grand Master in 1721 was accompanied by a public procession in Masonic clothing through the city of London. From 1723 this was replaced by a carriage parade when the Grand Master was escorted in a coach by distinguished Brethren in Masonic clothing, from his mansion in the West End to the particular Hall where the annual assembly was to be held. These processions attracted public attention and undoubtedly lent themselves to the ridicule of humorists, but it was not apparently until the seventeen-forties that mock processions were organised by

opponents. It was probably these burlesques which led to Grand Lodges of England in April 1747 to discontinue the procession to the Grand Feast.

The Grand Master and other Masons also frequently attended plays at the theatre clothed in regalia.

W. Bro. Fred L. Pick Secretary of the Manchester Association of Masonic Research in a Paper entitled "Freemasonry and the Stage" in the Association's Transactions Volume XXIX (1939) discusses the subject very exhaustively.

He says 'Pride of place is given to Ireland on this occasion as we learn that, after the first meeting of the Grand Lodge of Ireland of which we have any record, on 24th June, 1725:

After the entertainment they all went to the Play, with their Aprons, etc., the private Brothers sat in the pit, but the Grand Master, Deputy Grand Master and Grand Wardens, in the Government's Box. At the conclusion of the Play, Mr Griffith the Player, who is a Brother, sung the Mason's Apprentices Song, the Grand Master and the whole brotherhood joining in the Chorus. The Brothers of one Lodge wore fine badges painted full of Crosses and Squares, with this motto: *Spes mea in Deo Est*. Which was no doubt very significant, for the Master of it wore a yellow jacket and blue Britches.

Bro. Pick says, "According to Bros. Lepper and Crossle, for many years after the formation of the Grand Lodge of Ireland, no inconsiderable part of its income was derived from theatrical performances. In 1731, they bespoke the tragedy of Cato, all the male parts were taken by Freemasons, and in spite of advanced prices, "so crowded or brilliant performance had never, at any time, been seen in the Kingdom." It was customary for a special Prologue and Epilogue to be composed for such occasions as these and "The Prologue and Epilogue and Songs Spoke and Sung on Wednesday the 17th March 1735-6 - for the Benefit of Sick and Decay'd Free Accepted Masons" are reprinted in Appendix III to Lepper and Crossle's Great work."

Again, he writes:

"In addition to these state functions, private Lodges frequently visited the theatre, e.g. in March 1763, we read of a play being performed at the Vaults Theatre, Belfast with a Prologue spoken by Mr Parks in the character of a Master Mason and an Epilogue spoken by Mrs Parks in the character of a Mason's Wife 'and the original Masons' Songs and choruses between the acts".

The Grand Masters of England and Scotland during the eighteenth century also attended the theatre officially from time to time often in regalia and frequent descriptions of such events are found including reference to Masonic Prologues and Epilogues. On one occasion there is a description of a visit to the theatre (in Scotland) "with aprons and white Gloves attended with flambeaux".

Such performances continued for a century or more.

Bro. Pick writes:

"When one considers the bespeaking or patronage of performances by private Lodges, the choice of items almost baffles selection. Ten Masonic Playbills were exhibited at a meeting Quatuor Coronati Lodge, 2076, on 1st March 1918. The dates ranged from 1781 to 1856 and the places from London to Newcastle, Leeds and Edinburgh. During the early part of the nineteenth centuries lodges in every part the country patronised the theatre, the brethren generally wearing Masonic clothing.

He refers to the History of Freemasonry in Bristol by Powell and Littleton and says that many examples are given by the authors who "mention an interesting state of affairs in the mid-eighteenth century when in order to avoid the penalties attaching to the performance of Plays in unlicensed premises, they were advertised as Concerts of Musick, the 'Musick' consisting of the ordinary opening music by the band, with the Play thrown in gratis. No evening's entertainment appears to have been considered complete without the Farce, perhaps to send the audience home in good humour."

The following is an interesting item from the Province of Norfolk:

"The Lodge of Unanimity, now 102, went a little too far when they applied in 1830 for permission to appear on the stage in Masonic clothing with the furniture of the Lodge displayed. The D.P.G.M. not only declined to sanction the proposed exhibition, but forbade the bespeak unless it was for a bona-fide charitable purpose."

Every part of the country witnesses Masonic patronage of theatrical productions generally in aid of some benevolent object, Masonic, local or occasionally, the benefit of some actor or manager.

Rochdale Lodges patronised many dramatic performances during the last quarter of the nineteenth century there being examples as late as 1886 and 1891, the Brethren attending the last named entertainment being authorised to appear in full Masonic clothing, Craft, Royal Arch and Mark. This is the latest example of appearance in regalia at a theatrical performance which W. Bro. Pick has been able to find.

Many Brethren will remember the amusing comedy, Are You a Mason? first produced in 1901 and recently filmed. It had many fore-runners as for more than two centuries the stage has reciprocated the interest of Freemasonry sometimes in a friendly, sometimes in a satirical manner.

Knoop, Jones and Hamer in their Early Masonic Pamphlets mention that the first link they have traced between the Craft and the Theatre is The Free Mason's Health or The Enter'd Prentices Song by Matthew Birkhead, which was not infrequently sung on occasions when a play was bespoken by the Fraternity.

They state that it would be a mistake to think that the prologues and epilogues spoken on occasions of Masonic visits to theatres were always especially written. Like most, if not

all of the songs at these performances they were sometimes old friends: on two occasions at least a prologue and an epilogue originally spoken in London were repeated in Dublin.

Knoop Jones and Hamer refer in their Early Masonic Pamphlets to the part played by Masonic songs in early times. To judge by the amount of space devoted to songs in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century Masonic publications, singing by Masons must have been a very common practice. They consider that music and singing played a definite part in Masonic meetings in the early days of the Grand Lodge of England. The fact that the ceremonies were worked in the same room as that which refreshment was served implies that, when Lodges were called from labour to refreshment, the brethren remained seated at the table where they were merely changing their occupation. The clear cut division of today between Lodge meeting and festive board did not exist. Vocal music was probably part of the work of the Lodge and was not merely a relaxation from post-prandial oratory, though possibly the Enter'd Prentices song was in a somewhat different position as, according to Anderson, it was to be sung after grave business was over.

Many of these songs were reprinted time and time again during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The question of Masonic songs and verses is dealt with very fully in a paper by W. Bro. Rev. H. Poole in the Transactions of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge volume 40 at pages 7 to 24 entitled "Masonic Song and Verse of the Eighteenth Century" and from this we learn that the ceremonies of, at any rate the first fifty years of the Grand Lodge of England, were interspersed with toasts and songs. Bro. Poole's views are referred to with approval by Knoop, Jones and Hamer in their Early Masonic Pamphlets.

The following account of the use of music in our ceremonies is given by W. Bro. W. W. Covey Crump in Volume 40 of the Quatuor Coronati Transactions at pages 24-25.

"It is needless to point out organs, harmoniums and pianos were almost non-existent in the early part of the eighteenth century. The Moderns Grand Lodge first acquired an organ when their hall was built in 1775, and even then, accommodation was also provided for an orchestra of other instruments. Prior to that time instrument requisitioned for ordinary Lodges would usually be a violin, flute or French Horn. The Masonic songs and glees were incidentals in the proceedings (the so-called "table Lodge") whilst the Brethren were called off from labour to refreshment – or at all - events were at refreshment - and were interspersed between those catechetical exercises which have now become practically obsolete."

Consequently (he concludes) "we cannot entirely separate even the old drinking songs from what we understand as "Lodge Music" though their more obvious analogy would be to the vocal items which nowadays are introduced during refectory proceedings.

Many more interesting subjects might be discussed but we will finish with two brief references to the Exposures.

The Grand Lodge of England was formed in 1717 and in 1723 the first of the printed Exposures of the Ritual appeared. This was called "A Masons' Examination" and was quite brief and very incomplete. The publication of Exposures continued for over a century, the last well known Exposure being Carlile's Manual of 1825. The Exposures became gradually more complete and Carlile is very close to the Ritual of the present day. One of the best known Exposures, Pritchard's Masonry Dissected 1730, went through three genuine Editions, one pirated edition and two newspaper reprints within a fortnight of its first publication, its popularity being probably due to a Masonic in the absence of printed Rituals.

An amusing description of the reaction of the Craft to the publication of "A Mason's Examination" is given in a pamphlet called "The Freemasons Accusation and Defence" published in 1726.

"I remember when I was last in town, there was a specimen of their Examinations published in the Post-Boy: but so industrious were the Masons to suppress it, that in a week's time not one of the Papers was to be found; wherever they saw 'em they made away with them. They went from Coffee-house to Coffee-house and tore them privately out of the Books. Those they could not come at so easily they bought, even at the extravagant price of 2.2d. and 5s. a Paper. By this means there is hardly one to be met with.

The Freemasons were prodigiously nettled at the Publications of this Post-Boy: yet, according to their wonted Assurance, they put up a good face on the Matter and said there was nothing in it; but at the same time, huddled up the Affair with all the privacy imaginable: and presently put out a sham discovery to invalidate the other. But you may depend upon in the Post-Boy is a genuine Discovery.."

As the object of the pamphlet was to injure the fraternity these statements must be accepted with reserve. The semi-official attitude of the Craft towards the catechism was that of a possible sham discovery.