

Published by the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of New Zealand.

24 March 2014

## **“A participative discussion on the Mark Tracing Board”**

A. L. Hart Grand Lecturer

Firstly my thanks for your kind invitation to be with you tonight and to see how we can advance our Masonic knowledge in our particular area of interest. If I waken a few minds to thinking a bit more about the philosophy of our degrees tonight I will count the time well spent.

Brethren, we have tonight witnessed the re-installation of your WMM, Much of the ceremonial for that part of tonight's proceedings is drawn from our English and Scottish background for this particular degree.

However, it and the ceremonial attached to the Mark degree itself differs from those forms adopted by their parent sources. In part this is due to that usual great Masonic attribute, compromise.

The UGLE does not specifically recognise the Mark degree restricting itself to the 3 craft degrees and the Royal Arch. In contradistinction the Grand Lodge of Scotland not only recognises the degree, but its Lodges may also confer it on Fellow crafts or it can be taken as part of their Royal Arch structure.

Following the establishment of the Grand Lodge of NZ in 1890 the various Royal Arch chapters and Mark Lodges attached to the English & Scottish craft Lodges were placed in some difficulty in continuing their existence. The establishment of the SGRAC in April 1892 partially solved that problem although as with all compromises there were some very odd situations which developed.

At that meeting it was resolved - “that all the degrees a recognised and practised in Scottish RA Masonry be included in the Constitution of the SGRAC (these degrees include the Mark, Excellent, Royal Arch, Ark Mariners and Red Cross Knights.)”. [n.b. this not include reference to the Cryptic degree which came on the scene much later around 1917.]

There is also a difference with the Irish (as usual) in that while their Royal Arch includes the Mark degree their Chapters constitute themselves as a Mark Lodge for the evening with separate Mark attendance book (including the attendees Marks), minute book etc.

One of the oddities under our new SGRAC was the establishment of separate Mark Lodges. Initially there were 5 such bodies although 4 faded rapidly leaving only Mokoreta Lodge # 63 which continued until 1934 having held a separate Charter from SGRAC as such and being referred to separately in each years proceedings. But that's another story for another night.

What I suggested to your First Principal was that we take some time now and consider part of our ceremony which is often glossed over and seldom considered fully, the Mark Tracing Board.

You have all seen it turned around by the DC or another officer for the start of a Mark Degree as occurred tonight. But even if you have heard the “Lecture on the Mark Tracing Board” have you actually considered the lessons included therein?

It is of necessity more Scottish than English in both form and words, being again a compromise. The example we see before us tonight is similar in most Mark Lodges although there is some variance in artistic composition, colours etc.

I have printed for you copies of the Lecture as recorded in our ritual and also a colour copy of the board itself [handout]

While you are having a brief look at these items, let me remind you that tracing boards were used by our ancient brethren in the craft and other degrees as a visual aid to their ritual. As such they contain most of the visual cues needed for recitation of the ritual, which for many constitutions was never committed to writing or if so was in a cipher form.

Rather than read through the whole lecture, which I leave you to do so at some convenient occasion, I suggest we just look at several key portions.

Firstly, turn to the picture itself. The key items I suggest we focus on here are the following parts:

The hour glass

the rope & anchor  
the axe  
the cipher and  
“nothing but the key stone is lacking”

The Hour glass is an unusual instrument in building and to my knowledge of the industry does not feature in any part of the edifice. So why include it here? Any suggestions?

[Probably through its statement as being an emblem of the transitory nature of human life. They were extremely important in the naval world and especially so in those voyages of a longer duration as they allowed the passage of time to be monitored and hence an estimation of position in conjunction with the rudimentary magnetic compasses of the time. Allegorically they could also be said to represent the passage of time from the past through the narrow neck of the present into the future. Hence we must “be careful to perform our allotted task while it is yet day for the night cometh when no man can work.”]

The rope and anchor – again an unusual item in masonry being another nautical tool. The ritual indicates its message of hope but that is troubling as such symbolism belongs more particularly to the anchor to our faith. The English lecture ties this to a New Testament message of salvation.

Again - why include it here? Any suggestions?

[Does it perhaps refer to Joppa and its place in the timber being floated on rafts?]

The axe – this is easier as the lecture speaks of its use as part of the lessons of not seeking that to which we are not entitled to – “as it is the hope of reward”.

In other arenas it has a symbolical meaning of power and has been used for Centuries as such featuring in heraldic devices in many nations of Europe. It also has a long standing use in carpentry which is closely associated with masonry and building in general. Our ritual alludes to its reminder of punishment but equally it has a lesson of assistance both in forming and shaping wooden edifices as well as with the supporting structure of masonry. Without its creative use, the cedar would not have been cut in the forests of Lebanon to be used in the building of the temple.

It is interesting that the axe featured in traditional judicial beheading as a punishment in many older jurisdictions such as England with the sword being used only for those of distinction such as royalty. This was not uniform as you will appreciate particularly with Henry & Elizabeth and their treatment of unfavoured ones or the Japanese with their samurai swords.

The cipher – I can understand and appreciate the allegory in our ritual with this aspect but I have a major problem with this in relation to this degrees tracing board. Where is it? Can you see it?

The concept of a cipher is one also of long standing but has little symbolical meaning apart from that associated with concepts of secrecy, security and discretion. A form of a cipher is as old as writing itself including as a means for messages to be conveyed to soldiers/officers in battle in strip form which when wound around a stave of specific measurement becomes legible and intelligible to those it is meant for. The item from “Wikipedia” on the pigpen cipher is a simple but accurate explanation of the cipher you will see in other areas of masonry.

And finally, the keystone without which the rest are naught.

Well almost. Psalm 118, v 22 actually refers to a cornerstone which has a considerably different meaning for any builder being the datum point from which profiles are run to allow the proper form of the structure to be established and kept on track.

The psalm itself is one of the antiphonic series being written in a format our ancient brethren were well familiar with as much of our early ritual was of a catechetical nature being based on a series of questions and responses. In this psalm the reader moves from a situation where Israel is again under threat to its victory in battle and then into prophetic comment about the future of the Nation deriving from it. When in the New Testament the phrase is used in relation to Christ it most often forms part of the move of the writer to legitimise Christ as the embodiment of the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah.

Be that as it may, the message here remains one that that which is discarded as unfit for the structure becomes its most important component without which the rest of the structure will not be complete nor will it be perfect.

As Freemasons perhaps at times we need to recall that it is by repeated efforts alone that we can become fit for the moral and spiritual temple we raise to the glory of God.

Well, V Ex/WMM, Brethren & Companions – have I got you thinking about why we dress up in strange attire and use antiquated words in ceremonies divorced from 21st Century New Zealand realities?