

The Symbolism of the White Gloves and Apron

An Address given by Bro Jim Logan, DepM, to the Hawke's Bay Research Lodge No 305 on Monday, 5th November 2018

There is in the wearing of Craft clothing, as in everything else pertaining to Freemasonry, a symbolism. Briefly, white gloves are symbolic of clean hands, and are complimentary to the lambskin apron, the symbol of a pure heart. These two are of equal importance and are really inseparable.

White Gloves:

The custom of wearing white gloves is of great antiquity. In the Christian Churches from the earliest times, white linen gloves were always worn by the Bishops and Priests when in performance of their ecclesiastical functions. The Bishops always wore a thin plate of gold called "a tassel" on the back of their gloves to denote their high rank. The gloves worn by the clergy indicted that their hands were clean and not open to bribery.

In the indenture of covenants, made in the reign of Henry IV, between the church wardens of a parish in Suffolk and a company of Freemasons, the latter stipulate that each man should be provided with a pair of white gloves and a white apron.

While we have no written proof, as far as I know, that our ancient operative brethren did moralise on the white gloves and apron after the manner of the working tools, there is nothing to show they did not. Dr Robert Plot, a non-mason, states in his *Natural History of Staffordshire*, dated 1686, that the "Society of Freemasons presented their candidates with white gloves for themselves and their wives".

In the general regulations of George Payne, GM, approved by the Grand Lodge in London in 1721, Article 7 reads: *Every new brother at his making is decently to cloath the Lodge, that is, all brethren present.* By "cloath" (clothing) it means that the Lodge is furnishing all the brethren present with white gloves and aprons.

In Count Tolstoy's well-known novel *War and Peace* it states that "the newly obligated brother was then invested with a white apron and received a trowel and three pairs of white gloves, two pair for him-self and one pair for the lady he most esteemed, after which the Master explained their symbolic meaning to him".

In the Netherlands ritual the presentation of white gloves is still retained. The candidate for initiation is taken on three journeys; after the second journey his hands are dipped in a basin of water, and a reference is made of the necessity of "clean hands" and the purity of heart and life as a pre-requisite to initiation. On the completion of the third journey he takes his obligation after which he is led to the West, where he is invested with the white apron and is given a pair of white gloves to wear. He is presented with a pair of lady's gloves which he is directed to hand to her whom he considers most worthy to receive them from the hands of a Freemason.

I do not know when the presentation of white gloves ceased to be the general custom but the wearing of them as part of the proper clothing of a brother is still retained in New Zealand by ruling of the Board of General Purposes (Collected Rulings clause 37 - Aprons and Gloves).

Undoubtedly the use of white gloves in Freemasonry is a symbolic idea handed down to us through the ancient and universal language of symbolism and like the apron is intended to denote purity of life and actions.

The White Lambskin Apron:

In the Masonic apron two things are essential for the preservation of its symbolic character - its colour and the material. Its colour must be white, because that denotes purity, simplicity, candour, innocence, truth and hope. The ancient Druids and the Priests, generally of antiquity, used to wear white investments when they officiated in any sacred service.

The white lambskin apron is to us a constant reminder of that purity of life and rectitude of conduct, of higher thoughts and nobler deeds which are the distinguishing characteristics of a Free and Accepted Mason. The material must be lambskin as our ritual informs us the lamb has been from time immemorial an emblem of purity and innocence, but its purity was physical, ours must be spiritual. At investiture the brother is informed that the badge is older than the Golden Fleece, etc. These words are used simply to impress upon a newly made brother the value and importance of the lambskin as a universal and old age symbol. It does not claim that the masonic apron is more ancient than the other orders but that the symbolic apron is.