

Masonic Research: Pick a Subject

The Keynote Address given by WBro Rodney Grosskopff, PSGD (EC) at the Goulburn Symposium on Research, under the auspices of the Grand Lodge of NSW / ACT on Saturday, 24 September 2011

The very first thing to do is, obviously, to choose a subject. There are occasions where the subject chooses you, when you may be called upon to speak on a requested subject, or when necessity calls. I was once asked to produce a pamphlet entitled *Why the Mark?* That took me on an adventure of research that resulted in a fuller paper on that subject.

The convenor of this symposium has asked me to choose the paper to present to you today. Well, I agonised over which to choose. There are three papers, from those prepared for the ANZMRC lecture tour I am undertaking at this time, that I have chosen. Each for a different reason and they are: -

Francois Renier Duminy
The Jameson Raid
The Anglo Boer War

I think it is more often than not; that you will choose your own subject, and then I think it is equally obvious that you should **choose something that interests you**. Those are the subjects that you will readily collect information for, or you probably already have information on. One usually mixes with like-minded people and they also probably have information on it. I was an architect for forty-eight years. I love drawing old buildings and have been doing that for all those years. I have a massive library on architecture, old and contemporary. Of course my first paper was *The Noble Orders of Architecture*, followed, after a while, by *Louis Michele Thibault, South Africa's First Great Architect* whom I discovered was a Freemason.

Choose something that is “**do-able**” - don't choose some obscure subject about which there is absolutely no information. I once decided to prepare a paper on an early Masonic pioneer in the Transvaal, Bro Solomon Herschfield, and I could only find six references to him in all the literature I could lay my hands on. Twenty years later that is still all I had but I did not discard him. He became the narrator in my new book, because so little was known about him, yet he held high offices in Masonry and was Collector of Customs in Paul Kruger's Government.

I had a lot on Thibault. He designed so many beautiful buildings in the Cape Province. We always used to go to Plettenberg Bay for our holidays and we always stayed over at Graaff-Reinet, a cute little Karoo town. We always stayed at the Drosty, a hotel that used to be the Magistrate Governors' house and was designed by Thibault, which I only found out much later. Dr Ziervogel, who was the Charter Master of the local lodge, then bought it. How eerie is that? So I just had to do the paper.

If you can, choose something, which may have a **follow up**. My friend, George Kendal, did a paper on Thibault's chum, Anton Anreith, South Africa's first great sculptor, who was also a Freemason. They were both initiated by Francois Renier Duminy, himself an interesting character (sailor, slaver and stepfather of South African Freemasonry). John Andries Truter succeeded Duminy as Master of the Lodge. Truter was also Chief Justice of the Cape Province and was instrumental in transforming the lodge into an institution capable of attracting the most noble of men in the country, including three Presidents, a few Governors, a Prime Minister and a dozen or more Members of Parliament. Truter was the client who engaged Thibault and Anreith to design “*the most beautiful (Masonic) temple in the world*”, as attested to by a visiting Dutch Deputy Grand Master, Abraham De Mist. That left the builder, Schutte, as a shadowy character in the background, but crumbs of information kept floating up. The presidents obviously had to be researched. Then I went back to ‘do’ Duminy and Schutte. Then, suddenly there were ten papers, some written, some waiting to be written, which finally became a book.

Don't be afraid of choosing a subject that has been **done before** if you have something more to tell. In 1976, George Kendal wrote an excellent paper on *Freemasonry During the Anglo Boer War*, but unfortunately he died soon after. I was called upon, over and over again, to deliver his paper.

This had two effects - firstly; I became quite undeservedly known as “The-Boer-War-Man”. Four lodges that were founded before, during and soon after the War had approached me to write histories of their lodges at the time of their centenaries. Mouldy, rat-eaten records were dumped in my lap, mostly incomplete or illegible, but some incredible stories emerged.

Imagine for a moment, Ermelo Lodge. It was reported that every officer of the lodge turned out to defend their town against the British Army and were killed to a man. Virtually every one was English! This turned out to be a gross exaggeration, but what a story.

When our District decided to celebrate its centenary it was decided to stage a play encapsulating its birth and the pains associated therewith. Being “The-Boer-War-Man” I got to write it. Lord Farnham, the Pro Grand Master from England, was there and it was such a success that when the District Grand Chapter and the District Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons had their centenaries they also had to have plays.

The Anglo Boer War was still not exhausted as my good Masonic friend, David Lewis, found yet more to add to the saga and he and I collaborated on another paper. There was still more to uncover and that led to my book *Raised on Gold*.

Secondly, I became genuinely passionate about the subject. There was literally so much information about peripheral subjects such as the development of Johannesburg, Kimberley, the Union of South Africa, etc, etc, to line up papers for a long time. Once I have my subject and I need some background research, often subconscious, to get even there, then from general reading, discussions with friends, or a lead from a previous paper (of your own or someone else’s), an idea creeps into your head.

The research ...

Research, what is it? From the King’s English Dictionary: *laborious and patient search, as for truth; diligent inquiry or examination in seeking for facts or principles; inquiry; scrutiny; to search or examine with continued care; to seek diligently; to search again; to examine anew.*

Yes! All good stuff, but that is only half the story. I asked Neville Barker-Cryer, an eminent Masonic author, his method of research. His answer was, “I have been blessed with an ability to remember where I read something”.

The most important thing about research is the ability to retrieve your information. You may be blessed like Neville, or stuck with the mind of an engineer who is well organized and who needs to patiently collect his information in advance and then slot it into the plan of his paper, or the artist who has a vague outline in mind and after a fairly short research, launches into the work and adapts as information comes his way.

I guess most of us fall in between these latter two. For me, collecting all information up front is too limiting, how do I know when I have enough information? Often I am not sure where my researches will lead me. It’s a little like saving for a family holiday. I have friends who diligently save until they have enough, whereas I go and pay later. I get away four times more often than they do.

The first thing I do is to assemble what I have already. Usually that requires some effort because a lot of the back ground that lead me to the subject is from some long forgotten book, a movie, bits and pieces of the work of friends or scraps of conversation, and what, for me now, are crumbs and often left-over information that was peripheral to some other researches. Now I hope I can see a story immersing. I let it grow inside my head. I try to find every thing I can about it. AQC publications are always useful, as is the Internet, but I am always careful with Internet information and only use it if I can corroborate it elsewhere. Libraries are the obvious places to go, as are second-hand bookshops and newspapers, that for me, have been a rich source of information.

I am convinced that once the idea is hatching in your head, as if you are walking around with an antenna sticking out the top of your skull, that things will float your way that you had never before noticed.

Talk to anybody who will listen about it, you will be surprised what comes up. Friends often send cuttings, which come through their radar. One of my closest friends, Tom Cloete, a Judge on the Court of Appeals, sends me mad judgements about some of my characters. One of the stars in my latest book is Fritz Krause, the Boer Military Governor of Johannesburg during the Anglo Boer War and treasurer of my lodge. Krause himself went on to be a Judge of Appeal. Later in life, as found out after my book was published, he sued the Receiver of Revenue on the grounds, he maintained, that a Judge’s salary was determined by an Act of Parliament and that it could not be reduced. He argued that asking him to pay tax was in effect reducing his salary; therefore he would not do so. Well, it went right up to the Appeal Court who ruled that he had to pay his taxes because when he accepted the job he did so knowing those conditions. I could not use the information for the book but somewhere there I smell a story for the future.

What do you do with this information?

My old preacher friend, Donald McPherson, collected his wife's stocking boxes. I would never do anything so crude, but in our office we provided presentation boxes cunningly designed to be just large enough not to fit into any filing cabinet, which would force the CEO to keep it on his desk and in front of his nose – clever trick? Well the staff got annoyed and threw them away, so that's what I now use. I know you are thinking - why not simply on his computer? Often the information comes as cuttings, scribbles, notes, pictures or photos, so I prefer hard copy. I find it easier to spread around a table. Before you file me with the dinosaurs, I do have running profiles on my computer on the people that have found their way into my stories. Of some there is very little but of others there is quite a lot. Adopt whatever system suits you, provided always that you must be able to find your information later.

Be careful to record your citations and your bibliography. Citations should have a number in the text with references at the bottom of the page or at the end of the chapter or the paper, even if these do annoy some people, you can always omit them later. When I started my researches I was a little careless with my bibliography, now many years later I rue my omissions. You need to record **Surname** of the author in bold, other names and titles, title of the book (*in italics*), city in which it was published, publisher, and the date (the year in which it was published). Try to be disciplined, even in your peripheral information.

What to record?

Of course you must get down all the details, dates, events, significance, results and conclusions. Don't stop there, delve deeper, and get the smell of it all. Find a picture of your man and describe him in your own words, if he's got a bulbous nose with broken veins he probably liked the odd refreshment. Is he haughty? Is he posh? Is he old, short, fat, or grumpy? That's as much a part of research as finding his birthday. Finding out what was happening around him is also important - who was fighting whom? What would he have eaten and worn? Who were his friends? Find out as many of the quirky things you can about him. I believe that there is some room for speculative research.

By combing through a particular lodge signature book I found three brethren always signed one after the other, always the three next to one another. To me, this indicated that they may have come together and that they were probably friends, which was the hook I was looking for.

In one of my papers I hint that Louis Thibault, the architect, was enamoured of Lady Anne Barnard. He designed two buildings for her, including her own home and she drew the only portrait that we have of him and she refers often to him in her correspondence, which to me looks "intimate". In a court of law this would all be circumstantial but in this context it is a fair speculation provided that you declare your musings.

At a point in time, for me earlier, for others later, you have enough to start writing, and you put down your thoughts. We will come back to this but we have not finished with our researches yet.

Now that you have either one of the following: -

- A first draft
- An outline
- Sketch layout
- A time line

The main research begins ...

Re-look at your initial material, get your nose down in the library, tap every book on your own shelves and those of your friends, and then read, read and read some more. Discuss your thoughts with others and collect every thing you can find about your subject as well as all those parallel subjects. The kings on the throne, the poets, the artists, background events in the country you find your self in as well as its neighbours. As you uncover more and more information, slot it into your story. Don't waste the crumbs.

Pick up the crumbs ...

My friend, Pieter Wessels, prepared a paper on *The Organ at Lodge De Goede Hoop*. He said, "I chose a small subject as my first paper, but as I investigated I uncovered more and more that was very interesting but had nothing to do with my subject". Those are the crumbs. Now of course you should note them down and file them away for easy retrieval.

Yes! Should you live so long! I had an architect friend, Malcolm Willis, a brilliant site administrator who made it his life's work to develop a "Universal Index for the Specification of Buildings". It is true that the

one we architects use dates back to the Middle Ages, and even then they were in a muddle. But it was, and still is, the best we have, even though now it is more available with the help of computers. Essentially it has the same type of problem you will have. You don't know what will crystallise down the track; a whole lot of interesting items might gel and become a piece of research. It may just be an isolated anecdote. Well my friend developed his index but it was so complex that only he could understand it, no one would use it, it was so cumbersome that he never got to use it much and he committed suicide – not because of the index but his whole life was like that.

I have two or three ways of keeping crumbs. I do run profiles on my computer of the people that crop up in my stories, such as the Reformers and the Anglo Boer War people. They are alphabetically indexed. Every time I find anything about them I add it in to the system, some times, scanned articles or notes. Some times a record of where I found it. For me it would be impossible to make a note about every one I read about. Like Malcolm Willis I'd never get down to any real research. I do keep my stocking boxes with labels on them - Lodge de Goede Hoop, Presidents, Boer War, Miscellaneous, Quirky, Funny, Educational and Training. I also keep copies of papers that come my way that are written by others.

What to write ...

I think that we as researchers must appreciate that we are in the entertainment business. Sure we are "serious", we deal in weighty matters, that does not stop it being entertaining. "Edutainment" is one of the biggest businesses in the world today, queue for two hours to see David by Michelangelo at the Academia in Florence, or longer at the Louvre, and it dawns on you that there are a lot of people, more than at the Opera and "Cats", paying, certainly for a South African, a lot of money for culture.

I am reading Bill Bryson's book, *A Short History of Nearly Everything* for the second time, it is pure science, and I can't put it down. People are interested in our order. I speak regularly to the historic societies of Johannesburg and Benoni, usually with a guided tour of Freemasons Hall in Park Town. They have to book at "Computicket" and are sold out within a week of the announcement. Dan Brown has found a lot of interest in our order, so have many other authors like Rudyard Kipling, Robert Carter, Ken Follet, Raymond Khoury, Jasper Ridley, Knight and Lomas.

Right at the beginning I said, "Be yourself". You will not do well trying to think, write and speak like someone else. The topics you choose will be because you are interested in them, the humour will be yours, and the message you are spelling out must be yours. That does not mean you can dash out and write whatever you like. Now that may seem to be a contradiction in terms but let me explain. I believe that one of our weaknesses in Freemasonry is that any one can write anything they like about it. There is no established approval of Masonic output and until a few years ago no one would do anything about it. Now the Grand Lodge of England and other Grand lodges will object and even sue in serious cases. It is also one of our strengths; it encourages free expression and thinking.

After I qualified I went back to art school at night for a year, we knew that we were there to learn a craft, and we tried to send a message out to the world, it was only later that we began to accept that you could not tell the world about life until you had lived, you can't communicate about hunger until you have gone hungry, got off your backside and earned a crust. You have not loved until you have cried together, suffered or lay awake at night after a fight.

As masons we must also cultivate the experience we need before trying to pass it on. We in masonry can find our own symbolism in our rituals and furniture; we are encouraged to do so. That does not give us a license to invent fatuous associations.

Once again let me go back to my art analogy. In the good old days artists were taught by working in a studio, they were encouraged to copy old masters as an exercise (that's why we find so many forgeries, these innocent exercises were thought to be the works by forgers of the master). After a time they were allowed to paint in the backgrounds and the less important figures. We in Masonry should also learn our craft from the old Masters in the lodge. Accept their advice, lessons and even their criticism and once we have grasped the heritage that comes down to us, then we can launch into our own philosophy and expression.

Spiritual and esoteric thought is once again becoming more important in our masonry. I think, as a whole, we have neglected it somewhat. I also believe that a lot of our mystique comes from that side of our activities (as well as from our secrecy). However beware, you are treading where angels would rather not go. The subject is not taboo but it does require careful approach in the beginning. You need the same care that a young

preacher needs when dealing with a new and older congregation. It is often more subjective than you are, you may find yourself trying to teach your Grandfathers how to suck eggs.

That does not mean you must not go for it if it holds your interest. For me, much of the esoteric thought is subjective. I find even the most renowned authors sometimes latch onto a slim conjecture, they talk around it in a chapter then, suddenly, in chapter two, it has become a fact upon which to build further. Because Brahmin, Shiva and Vishnu carried staffs that were positioned in the directions of the rising and setting sun or at its meridian, does not mean Masonry was derived from Hindu traditions. Yet it is an incredibly interesting fact, which, if you could corroborate or find support from another authority, would give you strength to your argument.

Look for interesting anecdotes, such as the above, to flavour your message.

Concluding Message ...

I believe there should be a message in all our papers, and there is always one if we look for it, it will come from your view of the subject, why you became interested in it. I think that we must write a simple narrative with that message in mind. It must be the reinforcement supporting your paper so that there is a clear direction with the interest augmenting it as a cladding.