

The Royal Arch Enigma

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Ed. In view of the claims being made in a series of current books by Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas. two freemasons who are delving into the origins of the rituals of the Craft, we thought this extract was timely.

The author presents his own version of how Royal Arch came into Craft Masonry after the Union. It is well established that at the time the Antient and Modern (premier) Grand Lodges decided to unite, it was necessary for each side to make some concessions to the other. This gave rise to a number of agreements which are ambiguous and contradictory. Is it really necessary to continue them? Surely after all this time it is possible to give more historical meanings. The necessary corrections could have been made at the time when the Royal Arch was being altered under the banner of necessary Political Correctness. Unfortunately the opportunity was missed (or was perhaps impossible to implement in the climate of the day) and we now have to regard it as the completion of the third degree, but not essential - which seems a contradiction in terms.

Series of Seven.

At the time of the Union the Royal Arch was the seventh in a series of Antient degrees comprising the three Craft Degrees; Mark Master Mason; Excellent Mason; Super Excellent Mason and Holy Royal Arch. The Excellent Mason has come down to us from the Passing the veils, which is still worked under the Baldwin Rite in Bristol. The Super-Excellent Mason appears from contemporary accounts to have been equivalent to the American Past Master's (virtual) Degree (York Rite).

In those days only Installed Masters were admitted to the Royal Arch, hence a form of Past Master's degree was necessary to qualify a brother for admission. Nowadays it is of course no longer required.

Due to some political manoeuvres at a Quarterly Communication in the nineteenth century, Grand Lodge ducked the opportunity to include the Mark Degree into mainstream Craft Freemasonry.

The Excellent Mason is worked in the majority of Constitutions as an essential pre-requisite to the Royal Arch. The ceremony contains much that explains what happens in the Royal Arch. By omitting this Degree, we have deprived English masons of much essential knowledge.

As an example most masons do not absorb the Royal Arch grip when they are a candidate, and accordingly fail to give it correctly when they in turn act as PS - but this grip is explained and developed in the Veils ceremony. The latter concludes by giving the candidate the password needed to enter a Royal Arch Chapter.

It should only be given to an Excellent Mason who has passed the Veils; instead the candidate for the Royal Arch is told the password which he must give (but is not given the token) to enable him to proceed. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that we will ever decide to reintroduce the Veils ceremony into Royal Arch working; not merely because only Mark Master Masons are eligible to receive it, but more especially because this Degree is now confined as one of the Appendant Orders of the: H RA K.T.P.

The Compromise.

The situation at the time of the Union, was that one Grand Lodge (the Antients) insisted on retaining the Royal Arch Degree - the seventh of their series; while the premier Grand Lodge (the Moderns) insisted that Pure Ancient Masonry comprised 'three degrees and no more'.

But as a result of the Union, the Installed Master (Super-Excellent Mason) ceased to be regarded as a separate degree, with the result that the full working of the Installed Master ceremony is seldom performed - and then only after explaining that it is not "The proper ceremony"

The result was a - probably inevitable- compromise between the two Grand Lodges, to the effect that the Royal Arch -- would be included in the Masonic system -- provided it was regarded as part of the third degree.

If it is part of the third, then surely it should be controlled by United Grand Lodge and not a separate body - Supreme Grand Chapter.

The Royal Arch contains knowledge which a Mason lacks; so do the Mark and Veils ceremonies. The Royal Arch, completes the series (of seven), but with the intermediate degrees omitted; it does not complete the Master Mason's knowledge.

Briefly, to 'Facilitate the Union', the Grand Lodges agreed on a laboured compromise to satisfy each other, that: 'Pure Ancient Masonry consists of three degrees and no more, including the Holy Royal Arch,'

Surely the time has come to agree that the Royal Arch is the Supreme Degree of the Craft system; and is a separate degree in its own right. Then we could remove from the ritual the accepted but inaccurate statement that: 'You may think that today you have taken a fourth degree in Masonry. You have not, it is but the third degree completed.'

Ed. - I would presume that the U.G.L.E. looked upon this contribution with a smirk. The hierarchy would have no more intention of changing the ritual or accepting this suggestion than 'flying to the moon'.

Yet the author is so right. The entry in our own U.G.L.Q. Constitutions of Article 1 reads

"1. It is declared and pronounced by the United Grand Lodge of Queensland that pure Antient Masonry consists of Three Degrees and no more viz., those of the Entered Apprentice, the Fellow Craft. and the Master Mason. and Grand Lodge recognises no other degrees save those of the Honourable Degree of Mark Master Mason, and the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch.

There needs to be a clarification and amendment of the ritual so that mainstream Freemasonry does not have these anomalies.