

The Formation of the Three Degree Structure

It is customary today for us to speak of the Three Degrees in Craft Masonry. We just accept this and think nothing about how this all came about. The Three Degree system has not existed from time immemorial. It all came about to our Order over a long period of time and in a somewhat laborious manner. The whole change was not an overnight arrangement, but rather grew up over a period of years. In fact, the early years of this change were times of great turbulence. Much of these historic events have been shrouded, in mystery and confusion. The eventual sorting out period by our Masonic historians was done in the face of minimal historical evidence, and a large amount of reasonable assumption. Even today, some Masonic writers still find it a common ground on which to agree to disagree. And because of this lack of historical evidence it would be safe to say that the perplexing questions of the existence and growth of the three degrees, will remain a Masonic discussion point for centuries to come.

One thing is reasonably certain - prior to the early eighteenth century, **two degrees were worked**, the Entered Apprentice Degree and the Fellowcraft Degree. To confirm the issue, one of the ancient manuscripts, the Edinburgh Register House Ms. of 1696 and the Sloan Ms. of 1659 refer to two degrees, whilst the Trinity College Dublin Ms. of 1711 and the Graham Ms. of 1726 refer to three degrees. And so the argument has carried on for years. In these observations then, we can only give a broad spectrum of the sequence of events that led up to the establishment of the three degree system in our Order.

As our Masonic historians have agreed to disagree on the interpretation of much of the evidence, there is of a consequence no over-riding authority available to say who is right and who is wrong. Let us first look at the word "degree". In its primitive form the word was used by the Operative masons as a method of acquiring different grades of skills, which usually consisted of Apprentices, Journeymen and Masters. (It is pointed out here that later in the sequence of events, one of the big events that caused confusion centered around the interpretation and use of the word Master). To the Speculative mason the word "degree" infers the use of some form of ceremony which would advance the candidate to a higher rank, after he had had communicated to him certain distinguishing words, signs, grip and tokens.

Thus it is reasonable to assume that the Speculative mason attained different ranks of speculative knowledge. Today, the word "degree" indicates a reward of advancing through an esoteric ceremony to a higher degree by the method of communicating words, signs, grips and tokens. A knowledge of the definitions of the words are necessary to make a good foundation towards the understanding of the history of the Masonic degrees.

Although we have a considerable amount of material available to us regarding Freemasonry generally in the pre-Grand Lodge era, there is very little information available to give us an idea of the internal workings of the lodges at that particular time. At this stage it may be as well to remember that at that time in history, when all of this was happening, it was a time of illiteracy. Very few people could either read or write. Hence the bulk of much that happened was handed down by word of mouth. This then was the basic cause of confusion in historical records which resulted. We have seen the results of this in many other aspects of the history of man. Quite a deal of our so called "facts" concerned with these early events have been handed down through the Gothic Constitutions of the seventeenth century. Many of these, fortunately, have been preserved. In some cases to be very valuable historically. But like a great deal of the worlds aging history, some of the confusion is brought back about by the matter of interpretation.

A further source of information is the various Exposures of Freemasonry, that have come to light from time to time. Exposures assumed great prominence after about 1723. Whilst these exposures furnish the historian with valuable historical evidence, as exposures they had little effect on the acceptance of Freemasonry. Other information that one would reasonably expect to

carry unlimited historical events and data, is not as readily available as one would wish. This is Lodge Minutes.

Permit the writer to digress for a short time to emphasise the tremendous importance of Lodge minutes today. They will become the major source of the history of the lodge. Unlike many ideas of our present day, too much information cannot be placed in lodge minutes; and much more care should be given to the preservation of these records.

Lodge Minutes of the early days extend back as far as 1598 and are, in the main, of Scottish origin. Only two English Lodges have minutes preserved of the pre-1717 era, and they are from Alnwick 1701 and Yorke 1712. So much information in this regard is lost forever. So, the major source of information regarding the degrees within the Order were the Manuscripts and Charges. They quite definitely marked the existence of the Two Degree System; the First and Second Degrees. By looking at the dates of the Sloane and Dublin Manuscripts it would appear as though the **Three Degree System began to appear somewhere between 1659 and 1711.**

Stop and ponder for a short while - think of the many similarities of the present First and Second Degree. Think of their general structure and language. Then consider the tremendous difference in the structure and language of the Third Degree. The Hiram Legend, surrounded by the Third Degree, did not happen overnight. This came to fruition over a period of time. There is no cut and dried date for this period of time. The acceptance of the additional degree was not accepted on bloc - for some time it caused great turbulence amongst the Fraternity. In the years prior to the formation of the First Grand Lodge, Lodges were answerable to no central point or control, and consequently they had no uniformity in ceremonial workings.

According to the Graham Manuscript the Third Degree Legend was known in some form in the 17th Century. The phrase "Sublime Degree of a Master Mason" was used on a Grand Lodge Certificate of Ireland in 1754. There is also record that it was used in 1767 by the Lodge of Friendship No. 6. But it does not seem to be in general use until the end of the seventeenth century. The earliest known reference to the degree in Lodge Minutes in London occurred in 1727. So, taking a broad view of the confusing material available, and the reasonable assumptions made due to the lack of historical evidence, it would be, again, reasonable to assume that the Third-Degree System grew up by a gradual process between 1717 and 1730. That is about as precise as we can be.

As a matter of interest, the Third Degree System is said to have been a "fact" in France in 1731

Scotland in 1735

Sweden in 1737

This proved to be a very unstable period in the History of Freemasonry. As one would expect some lodges were openly against the re-arrangement of the Degrees, particularly in Scotland. This of course made the fixing of a precise date of change even more hazardous.

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