

**Preparation, Reception & Obligation**  
***And the work of the Antients & Moderns***

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Presented to New Jersey Lodge of  
Research & Education #1786  
March 2004

This paper was originally supposed to be a straightforward examination of the practices and symbolism of candidate preparation, but grew into something that surprised even the author. As I more closely examined the few available sources of antique Masonic ritual for clues to preparation practices, it quickly became apparent that these practices were intimately connected to other aspects of the first section degree work and could not be adequately discussed in isolation. In a sense preparation is not something that occurs only outside the lodge room. All practices leading up to the administration of the obligation can be considered aspects of preparation since our obligation is what makes us Masons. One source even discloses a ritual where the physical preparation itself occurred entirely inside the room where the degree took place rather than prior to entry.

All aspects of candidate preparation are mentioned in our earliest documentation of ritual, some even from before the first grand lodge was formed, but no single source lists them all together as we know them today until the publication of *Three Distinct Knocks* (TDK) in 1760. Moreover, the ritual exposed in TDK was something of a departure from the ceremonies described in earlier sources. Not only was preparation somewhat different, but the method of receiving the candidate, obligating him, and bringing him to light were all distinctly different from the general run of procedures recorded in other English and French sources up until that point. These earlier sources laid out the ritual of the so-called “Moderns”, the first Grand Lodge of England, formed in 1717, and now referred to in Masonic literature as the “Premier Grand Lodge”. The ritual laid out in TDK, however, was explicitly the ritual of the so-called “Antients”, which followed the ritual practices of Scotland and Ireland rather than the English and those continental ritual systems derived from the English Moderns.

A Grand Lodge of the Antients was established in England in 1752, formed primarily by Irish Masons sojourning in the London area who were excluded from attending lodges of the Moderns. Rather than adopting English practices as they might have done if they were allowed to join Modern lodges, they continued the ritual practices of their homeland. The Moderns understandably took affront at this separate establishment on what they thought of as their turf, and thereafter followed a sixty-year period of ill will between the two English Grand Lodges. Each considered the other to be irregular or clandestine. The Antients defended their legitimacy by asserting that they preserved the true and ancient Masonic ritual, and that the Premier Grand Lodge had made numerous modern innovations. This assertion gave rise to the common names by which we know them today: the Moderns and the Antients. It also gave rise to the notion adopted in this country that ritual purity is the touchstone of Masonic legitimacy, hence any differences in ritual should be eliminated both to ensure further changes do not occur (although they always do), and to prevent discord from argument over who has the right ritual (we all do).

The English Antients and Moderns ultimately merged in 1812 to form the United Grand Lodge of England of today. As part of this merger a model ritual was developed containing elements from both systems although its use was never mandatory. What is particularly relevant for us today in the United States is that our typical ritual is all the ritual of the Antients. The ritual laid out in TDK of 1760 is, with some minor exceptions, identical to the first section ceremonies used throughout the United States today. While there have been some changes over time, the basics of preparation, reception, and obligation (not to mention signs and words, which I will not discuss here) in use today ultimately derive from Scotland by way of Ireland, and not from England.

<p>Ca. 1710 and earlier Dumfries #4 Ms. (Scotland)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• hou [how] were you brought in? – shamefully w<sup>t</sup> [with] a rope about my neck.</li> <li>• what pouster [posture] were you in when you Received? – neither sitting nor standing nor running nor going but on my left knee.</li> <li>• whay a rop about your neck? – to hang me If I should Betry [betray] may trust.</li> <li>• why upon your left knee? – because I would be in too humble a pouster to y<sup>e</sup> receiving o[f] y<sup>e</sup> Royall secret.</li> </ul>
<p>1723 A Mason's Examination</p>	<p>After this , he swears to reveal no Secrets of the worshipful Fraternity, on pain of having his throat cut, and having a double portion of Hell and Damnation hereafter. Then he is blind-folded and the Ceremony of ----- [bringing to light?] performed.</p>
<p>Ca. 1726 and earlier Graham Ms</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How came you into the lodge? poor and penyles blind and Ignorant of our secrets</li> <li>• some reason for that? in regard our savior became poor for our redemption so I became poor at that time for the knowledge of God contracted in the square</li> <li>• What did you see in the Lodge when you did see? I saw truth the world and Justice and brotherly Love ...</li> <li>• who conducted you into the lodge? the warden and oldest fellow craft ...</li> <li>• what poster did you pass your oath in? I was neither sitting standing, going running,riding hinging flying naked nor cloathed shode nor bairfoot</li> <li>• a reason for such poster? in regard one God one man makes a very Christ so one naked object being half naked half colathed half shod half bairfoot half kneeling half standing being half of all was none of the whole this sheweth a humble and obedient heart for to be a faithfull follower of that Just Jesus</li> </ul>
<p>Ca. 1727 A Masons Confession (Scotland)</p>	<p>After one comes in at the door, he that keeps the door, called the <i>warden</i>, looses the garter of his right leg stocking, folds up the knee of the britches, and requires him to deliver up any metal thing he has upon him. He is then make to kneel on the right knee, bare; then the square is put three times round his body and applied to his breast, the open compasses pointed to his breast, and his bare elbow on the bible with his hand lifted up; and he swears, ...</p>
<p>Ca 1727 Wilkinson Ms.</p>	<p>Q: What did you see before you was admitted into the Lodge A: the Iunior Apprentice with a drawn Sword in his hand Q: how was you Admitted into the Lodge A: by three great knocks Q: How did he Introduce you A: Led me Round the Lodge due East &amp; West &amp; presented me to the Senior Warden Q: What did he do with you A: Led me up three great Steps to the Master Q: What did the Master do with you A: Made me a Mason Q: How was you made a Mason A: Neither setting nor Standing Naked nor Cloathed but in due form Q: What is due form A: with bare bended knee to the ground between the Square &amp; my left hand upon the bible, my Right hand Extended with the Compasses to my Naked left breast, taking the Solemn Obligation of a Mason</p>
<p>1730 and earlier Masonry Dissect'd (by Pritchard)</p>	<p>Q: Who brought you to the Lodge? A: An Enter'd Prentice. Q: How did he bring you? A: Neither naked nor cloathed, barefoot nor shod, deprived of all Metal and in a right moving Posture. Q: How got you Admittance? A: By three great Knocks. Q: Who reciv'd you? A: A Junior Warden. Q: How did he dispose of you? A: He carried me up to the North-East Part of the Lodge, and brought me back again to the West and deliver'd me to the Senior Warden. Q: What did the Senior Warden do with you? A: He presented me, and shew'd me how to walk up (by three steps) to the Master. Q: What did the Master do with you? A: He made me a Mason. Q: How did he make you a Mason? A: With my bare-bended Knee and Body within the Square, the Compass extended to my naked Left Breast, my naked Right Hand on the Holy Bible ; there I took the Obligation (or Oath) of a Mason.</p>

The table on the preceding page gives all the references to candidate preparation that I can find up until 1730 when Pritchard's *Masonry Dissected* was published. When examining old ritual, I am constantly struck by the intriguing juxtaposition of familiar and novel, even alien, material. All the elements of traditional preparation are listed in various combinations, but not all in the same document. We do not know whether these early documents are incomplete – we assume they are – or whether what is not mentioned is truly absent.

Notice in these documents that the procedures we commonly think of as preparation to enter the lodge are frequently performed in the lodge itself as preparation for taking the obligation. One can clearly see in these excerpts the diversity of practices and meanings related to preparation for taking the obligation. The Dumfries contains the only mention of a cable tow, but not named as such. In the *Masons Examination*, the candidate is not hoodwinked until after the OB. In the *Mason's Confession*, the candidate is prepared in the lodge itself after his admission, and no direct or indirect mention of hoodwink or cable-tow is made. The *Graham manuscript* directly implies hoodwinking and divestitures, but not the cable-tow. Both the *Wilkerson manuscript* and its close cousin, Pritchard's *Masonry Dissected*, also neglect any mention of the cable-tow or hoodwink. The *Wilkerson* even could be construed to imply that the candidate was not hoodwinked. In response to the question "what did you see before you was admitted to the lodge" one might expect the answer "nothing", but instead the candidate sees the junior EA filling the position of Tyler\*.

These documents also shed light on the varieties of procedures for administering the obligation, which are intimately related to the procedures we call preparation today. The mixing of preparation procedures with other preliminaries to the obligation found in these documents led me to consider other early sources that do not make mention of preparation in order to gain a fuller understanding of the nature of early ceremonies.

Edinburgh Register House Ms. 1696	Innrprimis [ <i>Latin</i> – "to begin with"] you are to take the person to take the word upon his knees and after a great many ceremonies to frighten him you make him take up the bible and laying his right hand on it you are to conjure him, to sec[r]ecie, By threatning that if [he] shall break his oath the sun in the firmament will be a witness agst him and all the company then present, which will be an occasion of his damnation and that likewise the masons will be sure to murder him, Then after he hes promised secrecie They give him the oath a[s] follows
The Grand Mystery Laid Open 1726	What posture were you in when you received the secret Word? I sat on my Right Knee with the Holy Bible at my Breast. Why do you hold the Holy Bible at your Breast? For the Enjoying Secrecy, and because in it is contained the Grand Secret of Masonry.
The Mystery of Free-Masonry 1730	When I came to the first Door, a Man with a drawn Sword asked me, If I had any Weapons? I answer'd, No. Upon which he let me pass by him into a dark Entry ; there two Wardens took me under each Arm, and conducted me from Darkness into Light, passing thro' two Rows of the Brotherhood, who stood mute, to the upper end of the Room, from whence the Master went down the Outside of one of the Rows, and touching a young Brother on the Shoulder, said, Who have we here? To which he answer'd, A Gentleman who desires to be admitted a Member of the Society. Upon which he came up again, and asked me, If I came there thro' my own Desire, or at the Request or Desire of another? I said, my own. He then told me, If I would become a Brother of their Society, I must take the Oath administered on that Occasion. To which assenting, a Square was laid on the Ground, in which they made me kneel bare-knee'd, and giving a Compass into my Right-Hand, I set the point to my Left-Breast, and my Left-Arm hanging down.

\* Notice also the senior FC filling the position of SD

Taking all these references together, we find a strange mixture of familiar and alien in the various procedures for administering the obligation. Notice first of all that both left and right knees are mentioned. The lack of standardization between the left and right knees is a feature of later documents as well. And as we shall see, the same problem will also apply to left and right feet. Notice that many of these documents mention knees only in connection with obligation, not preparation indicating that what we now think of as preparation outside the lodge was simply one of several preliminaries to the obligation. The intriguing reference to “half kneeling half standing” in the Graham manuscript could be a description of the posture we use today, or could refer to something different, which later documents more plainly suggest it might. Both Pritchard and the Wilkerson also mention the candidate’s advance by steps to the place where he is obligated, but the references are clearly not to the procedure we use in New Jersey, although something like it is still used in other jurisdictions today, particularly for higher degrees.

The most significant and explicit departures from current American practice in general, however, are in the position of the hands. The Masons Confession has the bare elbow on the bible with the hand lifted up and the compasses pointed to the breast. No reference is made to left or right. The Grand Mystery has the Bible clasped to the breast, although how this is accomplished is unclear since both left and right hands are accounted for. The Wilkerson manuscript has the left hand on the bible and the right hand holding the compasses to the (presumably naked) left breast. Pritchard has the right hand on the Bible, and the left presumably holding the compass points to the naked left breast. The procedure described by Pritchard continues to be the practice in most English lodges to this day. It is one of those Modern practices adopted by the UGLE mentioned earlier.

The Edinburgh Register House manuscript (ERH), the oldest documentation of Masonic ritual, does not explicitly discuss preparation, but does mention a candidate being on “his knees” (not one knee) and “taking up the bible and laying his right hand on it”. Notice that if a candidate is to “take up the bible” in the manner described, he would necessarily have to hold it in his left hand while his right hand rested on it. The ERH is the oldest member of a family of three Scottish documents, including the Chetwoode Crawley Ms of 1700 and the Kevan Ms. Of 1710, all of which are so similar as to be considered copies of a single document. The occurrence of three so similar documents indicates that the ritual they present was widespread, if not actually standardized among Scottish lodges of the time. Do not forget that the other major Scottish document, the Dumfries #4 manuscript, includes the only reference to the cable tow in this early period.

Finally, we come to the symbolic meaning (if any) ascribed to the procedures. In the Dumfries manuscript, notice that the rope about the neck is a token of threat: “to hang me if I should betray my trust” rather than a means of control as it is understood in American ritual today. The essence of threat is to induce fear, both to punctuate the serious nature of what is about to happen, and to indulge that proclivity for ordeal that men universally share in their initiations across all times and cultures. This intention to produce fear is further amplified in the ERH. The candidate, “after a great many ceremonies to frighten him”, is then threatened with damnation and murder if he should not maintain “secrecy”, after which the obligation containing further threatening penalties is then given.

The ominous if subconscious symbolism of the cable tow in the EA degree is not lost on our candidates even today, although other means, particularly the reception, are used to convey the explicit suggestion of threat. Even today the aura of threat is essential to the ceremony, even though we never would carry out such a threat, as the candidate well knows at a conscious level. But there is nothing like the suggestion of danger to heighten awareness and evoke the candidate's realization that he is engaged in a "serious and awful" (i.e. awe inspiring) undertaking. The immediate physical experience of threat implied by a rope about the neck – or compass points held against the naked breast – lends weight to the words of the obligation. The effect of the ritual would be much diminished without this element of implied danger.

Nowhere in these early sources do we find reference to the reception as practiced today. We do find, however, material that in the due course of time can evolve into the reception. First of all, there is the use of the compasses applied to the naked breast during the obligation, as previously mentioned. Then there is the ERH's insistence on some preliminary to the oath involving those "*ceremonies to frighten him*" and "*conjure him to secrecie*". These could have included the use of a sword, spear, dagger, or some other sharp or warlike instrument. But the document is mute on those particulars so we may never know.

The Wilkinson manuscript is also the earliest explicit mention of the circumambulation where the candidate is conducted around the lodge. Pritchard also contains a rather muddled version of the same procedure. Apparently, this was a widely followed procedure by the late 1720's since it is found in two independent documents of the same period. Neither document gives any particular symbolic significance to this procedure.

Now what is the intended point of the various divestitures as practiced in early ritual? The references are few, but explicit. The candidate is to be humbled. He is brought in "shamefully" and "poor and penniless, blind and ignorant". He is thus attired and divested in emulation of Jesus\* who also became poor and (presumably) debased. He kneels on his left knee to be "too humble" (meaning perhaps very humble?). His poverty evidently is an aspect of his humility since these documents nowhere make reference to any charitable lessons. This humility probably served as an adjunct to fear in reminding the candidate that he is engaged in something important and serious, something larger than himself before which he should be humble. Even in this day, being deprived of the outward symbols a man relies on to show the social status and accomplishments that he has achieved (or aspires to) can have a powerful effect on a man.

For a period of 30 years after Pritchard's *Masonry Dissect'd* there were no further English language sources of Masonic Ritual. Ritual developments in this period can be traced, however, in a number of documents from France. The earliest of these is brief tract titled the Reception of a Free-Mason. The later French sources copy this general description of the ceremonies. These later sources usually contain a comment that it is correct as originally written, or with minor modifications, after which the author discusses matters not included

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\* Masonic ritual of this period is decidedly Christian in its symbolism and assumptions.

in this piece. I have added italic and underline to those particular items that concern the current inquiry.

RECEPTION D'UN FREY-MAICON  
[RECEPTION OF A FREE-MASON]  
1737 (French)

It is necessary, first of all, to be proposed at the Lodge as a suitable Candidate [bon Sujet] by one of the Brethren. Upon his reply [sur sa riponse], one is allowed to present oneself. The Candidate is conducted by his Proposer, who becomes his Sponsor, into one of the Rooms of the Lodge, where there is no light, and where he is asked if he has a calling to be received. He answers yes, then he is asked his name, surname, & status, he is deprived of all Metals & Jewels that he may have about him, such as Buckles, Buttons, Rings, Boxes, &c. His right knee is made bare, he is made to wear his left Shoe as a Slipper, his eyes are bandaged, & he is kept in that condition for about an hour delivered up to his own reflexions, after which the Sponsor goes and knocks three times at the door of the Reception Chamber, where the Worshipful Grand Master of the Lodge is, who replies from within by three other knocks, & orders the Door to be opened. Then the Sponsor says, that a Gentleman presents himself, named so-and-so, who asks to be received: (Note, that there are Brother guardians [surveillans] outside and inside this Chamber, [with] naked sword in hand, to keep off the profane). The Grand Master, who wears about his neck a blue ribbon cut in the form of a triangle, says, ask him if he has the calling, which the Sponsor goes to do; the Candidate having answered yes, the Grand Master orders him to be brought in. Then he is introduced, & he is made to take three turns in the Chamber, around a space marked on the Floor, where a kind of representation has been drawn in crayon, upon two columns, of the ruins of the Temple of Solomon; at the two sides of this space they have also drawn in crayon a great J. & a great B. of which the explanation is not given until after the Reception; & in the middle there are three lighted Candles arranged in a triangle, on which, at the arrival of the Candidate [Novice] they throw either [gun-]Powder or Powdered Resin, to frighten him by the effect which that produces. The three turns being made the Candidate is led to the middle of the marked-out space, as described above, in three movements [en trois temps] face to face with the Grand Master, who is at the upper end, behind an Armchair, on which the Gospel of St. John has been placed. He [i.e., the Grand Master] asks him, do you feel the calling; upon his replying, yes, the Grand Master says, let him see the light [lejour], he has been deprived of it long enough; at that moment his eyes are unbandaged, all the Brethren assembled in a circle take Sword in hand, the Candidate is made to advance in three movements up to a Stool, which is at the foot of the Armchair; the Brother Orator says to him, you are about to embrace a respectable Order, which is more serious than you imagine; there is nothing in it against the Law, against Religion, against the King, nor against Manners; the Worshipful Grand Master will tell you the rest. At the same time, he [the Candidate] is made to kneel on his right knee, which is bared, on the Stool, & to hold the left foot lifted in the air; then the Grand Master says to him, you promise never to draw, write, or reveal the secrets of the Free-Masons, & of Freemasonry, except to a Brother in Lodge, & in the presence of the Worshipful Grand Master. Next, his breast is uncovered, to see that he is not a woman, & a [pair of] compasses, which he holds himself, is put on his left breast; he lays his right hand on the Gospel, & thus pronounces his oath; I consent that my tongue may be torn out, my heart lacerated, my body burnt & reduced to ashes, to be thrown to the winds, so that there may be no further mention of it [? me] amongst men; so help me God. After which he is made to kiss the Gospel. The Grand Master then has him brought to his side, he is given the apron of a Free-Mason, which is of a white Skin, a pair of men's Gloves for himself, and another [pair of] ladies' Gloves, for her whom he esteems the most, & they give him the explanation of the J. & the B. written in the circle ...

There are quite a few notable peculiarities in the ritual described above, which is generally consistent with the ceremonies used in Continental European Masonry to this day. For one thing, there is the "Chamber of Reflection" instead of a mere preparation room. In later European tradition these chambers became elaborately decorated instead of being merely

dark. Interestingly enough, the breast is bared *in* the lodge, and the hoodwink is removed *before* the obligation. Most peculiar is that the brethren surround the candidate with their swords pointed at him while he takes the obligation! This use of swords in the ceremony has several variations in continental ritual to this day, and is not unknown in Britain as well. Something like this was a documented part of the so-called Bristol Ritual from the west of England as late as the 1930's and presumably continues to this day. But we will pick up the sword story again later on.

Notice that once again the right knee is used and the compasses held in the obligation posture. Also, notice that the conductor rather than the candidate knocks at the door and that the circumambulation is made three times. We also find mentioned for the first time that the candidate kisses the bible after the obligation. Amid all these differences, it is interesting to find an earliest mention of a practice known to us.

Despite my earlier caution against inferring either too much or too little from the incomplete records left to us, at this point it is quite plain that a significant aspect of preparation is completely missing from the English and French ceremonies we have examined so far, namely the cable-tow. Moreover, there are consistent differences in the obligation posture: The right knee is used and the compasses are held. Moreover, while there are any number of threatening preliminaries to the obligation, there is nothing like the reception as we know it.

Those very early sources that mention the rope, left knee, and posture without the compasses all are Scottish in origin, rather than English or French. It strikes me that we may be dealing with two different ritual traditions. On the one hand there is the Scottish tradition, which seems to have passed to Ireland as well. On the other hand is the English, which subsequently was passed to France and elsewhere in Europe. There is much overlap between them so far as preparation and other practices are concerned, particularly the divestitures and hoodwink\*.

As an additional side light, the word cable-tow itself may not have originally referred to a rope about the neck. Consider this intriguing quote from the Sloane Ms. # 3329 of 1700:

- (Q) how long is the Cable rope of your Lodge  
(A) as Long as from the Lop of the Liver to the root of the tongue

It appears to be an article of lodge adornment like a light or a jewel, yet it also refers to a Mason's body. It might be best understood in light of several other quotes from antique sources. Consider the following questions from the ERH:

- Where shall I find the key of your lodge, yes [? = Ans] Three foot and an half from the lodge door under a perpend esler, and a green divot. But under the lap of my liver where all my secrets of my heart lie.

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\* The very earliest references to English ritual, particularly Plot's passing comments in his 1660's Natural History of Staffordshire, mention a "dignified" ceremony involving principally the reading of the legendary history found in the Old charges or Gothic Constitutions without any mention of the more physical and ordeal-like procedures found early on in Scottish sources. So it may be that even the English preparation procedures may have come in an earlier wave of importations from Scotland by the otherwise more speculative English Masons.



- Which is the key of your lodge. An: a weel hung tongue.
- Where lies the key. Ans: In the bone box.

Then there is this from Pritchard:

- Q. What are the Secrets of a Mason? A. Signs, Tokens and many Words.
- Q. Where do you keep those Secrets? A. Under my Left Breast.
- Q. Have you any Key to those Secrets? A. Yes.
- Q. Where do you keep it? A. In a Bone Box that neither opens nor shuts but with Ivory Keys.
- Q. Does it hang or does it he? A. It hangs.
- Q. What does it hang by? A. A Tow-Line 9 Inches or a Span.
- Q. What Metal is it of? A. No manner of Metal at all; but a Tongue of good Report is as good behind a Brother's Back as before U Face.

N.B. The Key is the Tongue, the Bone Box the Teeth, the Tow- Line the Roof of the Mouth.

The whole set of questions is quite confusing. We have a cable rope and a tow line, all mentioned in the context of internal body parts. Taken piece at a time, the overall sense of these questions is that we shall keep the keys to the lodge (i.e. words) safe in our breasts (under the lap of my liver) guarded by a silent tongue (the cable tow). It is but a small step to have the rope about the neck "to hang me if I should betray my trust" take on the name of the tongue that hangs silent. Both are symbols of secrecy.

The entire suite of preparation and obligation procedures as we know them is first documented in the exposure Three Distinct Knocks (TDK) of 1760. This was the first English language exposure to appear since Pritchard's 30 years earlier. The relevant portions of Three Distinct Knocks are quoted below, and an extended excerpt is presented in Appendix I which I think American readers will find it very much of interest.

Preparation:

*Mas.* How was you prepar'd Brother?

*Ans.* I was neither naked nor cloathed, barefoot nor shod, depriv'd of all Metal, hood-wink'd with a CableTow about my Neck, where I was led to the Door of the Lodge in a halting- moving, Posture, by the Hand of a Friend, whom I afterwards found to be a Brother.

Reception:

*Mas.* How did you enter, and upon what?

*Ans.* Upon the Point of a Sword or Spear, or some Warlike Instrument, presented to my naked left Breast.

*Mas.* What was said to you then?

*Ans.* I was ask'd if I felt any Thing.

*Mas.* What was your Answer?

*Ans.* I did, but I could see nothing.

Obligation:

*Mas.* What did the Master do with you ?

*Ans.* He order'd me back to the Senior Warden in the West, to receive Instructions.

*Mas.* What was the Instructions he gave you?

*Ans.* He taught me to take one Step upon the first Step of a right Angle oblong Square, with my left Knee bare bent my Body Upright, my right Foot forming a Square, my naked

Right-hand upon the Holy Bible, with the Square and Compass thereon, my Left-hand supporting the same; where I took that solemn Obligation or Oath of a Mason.

This material apparently is the ritual of the so-called Antients. The anonymous author of TDK in his introduction tells how he came to be taken as a Mason although he was never obligated (and therefore feels no qualms about writing his exposure\*), at first in France and then in England, where he became a member of several lodges. He speaks of both Modern and Antient Masons, the latter he refers to as Irish Masons. He notes that the ritual of these Antients “is the subject of this book”.

This accords well with the known facts about the Antients. As a Grand Lodge, they were initially composed of Irish Masons sojourning in the London area who had been barred from attending lodges of the original Grand Lodge of England. The reason for this exclusion is that the original – or Premier – Grand Lodge unilaterally switched the EA and FC words\*\* as a precaution to prevent imposters from passing as Masons after the publication of Pritchard’s *Masonry Dissect’d* in 1730. It has been suggested that social class and ethnic prejudice also may have been at work under the pretext of correct identification. But whatever the actual reason, after 1752 there were two principal Grand Lodges in England: the Antients who maintained close ties the GL’s of Scotland and Ireland and enjoyed their official recognition; and the Premier Grand Lodge of England, founded in 1717 and dubbed the “Moderns” by the Antients.

All of this background is given simply to establish the connection between the ritual material in *Three Distinct Knocks* and the Scottish tradition including the cable-tow, left knee, and obligation posture without the compasses. It also sheds light on some of those ritual differences that were the subject of so much argument between the two English Grand Lodges during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The model ritual adopted at that time added the cable-tow and left knee to English practice, but kept the compass points in the Obligation posture. It also added the reception as used above, and not as later modified in American practice.

The practice of reception as we know it may well hark back to the earliest Scottish practice of “a great many ceremonies to frighten him” as a preliminary to the obligation. The “prick to the flesh” as used in the English obligation posture serves the identical purpose as the reception as used by the Antients. The circumambulation (or procession as we call it today) may well have its roots in the same Scottish preliminaries. The circumambulation can be disorienting to the candidate, especially in light of its accompanying alarms and challenges. The stated reason for it strikes me as an afterthought. Other procedures to alarm the candidate are employed in continental ritual, as previously mentioned, such as gun-powder thrown onto the candles, and the use of swords at various places.

Another detail of the ceremonies, one still practiced today but not recognized as such, is the double swearing to secrecy first found in the ERH. Recall that the candidate was “conjured

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\* The exposure seems motivated by a disgust of the financial demands made by the various Grand Lodges, especially by the GL of Ireland. Hence, Irish (or Antient) ritual is exposed.

\*\* There was also a difference in the MM word, but this difference goes back to the origin of the degree.

to secrete” before the obligation. Some early ritual sources have the candidate swear before the obligation is administered. But most now require only assent to taking an oath to “keep and conceal”.

The ritual of TDK also contained some new developments in the symbolism of the practices. I have also included that part of the lecture when the symbolism is explained in Appendix I. A quick perusal of these reasons will demonstrate that they are essentially the same as we now know them, with the exception of the divestiture of minerals and metals.

*Mas.* Why was you depriv'd of all Metal?

*Ans.* That I should bring nothing offensive, or defensive, into the Lodge.

*Mas.* Give me the second Reason, Brother?

*Ans.* As I was poor any penniless when I was made a Mason, it informed me that I should assist all poor and penniless Brethren, as far as lay in my Power.

The divestiture of minerals and metals is now part of a lesson in charity, where previously it was merely symbolic of humility. Charity was beginning to be a feature of symbolism in this period. William Preston in his EA lecture compiled a decade later included “neither naked nor clothed” as a charitable lesson as well:

- How did you appear? Neither naked nor clothed, barefoot nor shod, but in an humble posture he moves and halts alternately.
- Why did you so appear? Three reasons are assigned for his appearance in this manner.
- The first reason? That he may represent, for a time, a seeming scene of poverty and distress.
- The second reason? That he may never forget the particular manner in which he was first received amongst Masons.
- The third reason? That should he ever discover a Mason reduced by necessity to the same situation, in which he appears from choice; the kindness which he then received may be extended to that brother; pity flow from his breast, and relief without prejudice accompany the feelings of his heart.

This particular lesson was more firmly brought home by the later innovation of the demand, or as the English call it, the rite of destitution performed after the obligation. The exact origin of this part of the ceremony is not clear. It is not included in TDK or any other of the exposures from that period. And Preston gives no hint of it in his lectures where the ceremony is described. It makes its first appearance in Webb in the last years of the 1700's. But it is now a universal part of the present day ceremonies on both sides of the Atlantic, leading me to think that it likely became widespread in the 1780's, some 20 years after TDK was written.

Up until this point I have only dealt with procedures included in the EA degree. This is no accident. Preparation and first section work in later degrees differs only in minor ways from the EA degree, with any attention getting “surprises” occurring elsewhere in the ritual. The overall procedure, then, is generally intended to support the lessons of the first degree, since first exposure is when it will have its greatest effect. As with many things in Masonic ritual, the EA degree contains some of the most ancient material, and it seems likely that it's form is the prototype Masonic degree, even if, as some assert, the Fellowcraft is the original degree in terms of grade. Also, most of our sparse early documentation of degree work relates to the EA.

Beginning with TDK, however, we have some indication of different manners of preparation and obligation for each degree. And as similar as the EA degree may be to contemporary American practices, we find significant differences in the later degrees. Consider the following excerpts:

Preparation for the degrees from Three Distinct Knocks:	
Enter'd Apprentice	I was neither naked nor doathed, barefoot nor shod, depriv'd of all Metal, hood-wink'd with a CableTow about my Neck, where I was led to the Door of the Lodge in a halting- moving, Posture, by the Hand of a Friend, whom I afterwards found to be a Brother.
Fellow-Craft	I was neither naked nor cloathed, barefoot nor shod, in a halting moving Posture, depriv'd of all Metal, I was led to the Door of the Lodge by a Brother.
Master	I had my Shoes taken from off my Feet, with both my Arms and Breast naked, depriv'd of all Metal. I was led to the Door of the Lodge.

Obligation in the degrees from Three Distinct Knocks:	
All	Mas. What did the Master do with you ? Ans. He order'd me back to the Senior Warden in the West, to receive Instructions. Mas.. What was the Instructions he gave you?
Enter'd Apprentice	He taught me to take one Step upon the first Step of a right Angle oblong Square, with my left Knee bare bent my Body Upright, my right Foot forming a Square, my naked Right-hand upon the Holy Bible, with the Square and Compass thereon, my Left-hand supporting the same; where I took that solemn Obligation or Oath of a Mason.
Fellow-Craft	He taught me to shew the Master my due Guard, and to take Two Steps upon the second step of a right-angl'd oblong Square, with my Right-knee bent bare, my left foot forming a Square, my body upright, my Right-hand upon the Holy Bible, my left-arm supported by the Point of the Compasses, forming a Square, where I took the obligation of a Fellow-Craft.
Master	He taught me as I stood in the West to shew the Master in the East my due Guard or Sign of an Apprentice, and to take one Step upon the first Step of the Right-Angle Oblong Square, my other Foot forming a Square. Secondly, I was taught to take Two Steps upon the same Oglong Square, shewing him the Sign of a Fellow-Craft. Thirdly, I was taught to take Three Steps upon the same Oblong Square, with both my Knees bent bare, my Body upright, my right hand upon the Holy Bible, both Points of the Compasses extended to my Right and Left-breast, where I took that solemn Obligation or Oath of a Master Mason.

First, as regards Preparation, notice especially that the hoodwink and cable-tow are mentioned only in the EA degree! This could be mere oversight, or an incomplete explanation. But I think not. There is no mention of “bringing to light in the FC or MM degrees described in TDK. Moreover, the hoodwink and cable-tow are not used in the FC or MM degrees in England or other European jurisdictions to this day. Neither is it likely that the candidate could take several steps and give signs as he advances from the West if he wore a hoodwink. Use of the hoodwink in all degrees appears to be an American innovation. The transition to this practice is documented in the famous Morgan exposure of 1827 that set off the so-called Morgan Affair.

In giving the details of preparation for the FC degree, Morgan notes that the candidate is semi-hoodwinked. In other words, only one eye is covered. For the MM degree, there is

no mention of a hoodwink in the preparation, but in the bringing to light, the hoodwink is “loosened from around his head, slipped over the eyes, and instantly removed.” This procedure is mentioned twice. So the MM candidate wore a hoodwink, but not covering his eyes. Apparently the procedure of bringing to light was deemed impressive enough that it began to be used in all degrees, and the appropriate changes made in candidate preparation. This intermediate transition point in ritual development was documented by the otherwise unfortunate publication of ritual material.

There is one further note regarding the use of the hoodwink that makes sense of another difference in procedure on each side of the Atlantic. During the dramatization of the Hiram legend, indeed during the whole MM degree until after the raising, English lodges are usually in complete darkness except for the light of a single candle. In American work, the candidate is hoodwinked but the lodge otherwise lit, except for a brief period. Morgan notes in his description of this work, however, that either the candidate is hoodwinked or the lodge darkened. In other words, it could be done either way at the discretion of the Master or by the custom of the lodge. The hoodwinking of the candidate rather than darkening the lodge might have been a practical consideration given the number of people moving about the lodge at that point in American work. English work has the legend being reenacted by just the Master and Wardens all standing in place in the East with the candidate. This can be done easily in near total darkness, where American style work would be difficult if not dangerous to perform.\* Morgan again documents a transition point in American style work.

Then there is the matter of the cable tow. Notice in TDK that the cable tow is only mentioned in EA preparation. Morgan, on the other hand notes the cable tow about the body in the MM degree, but twice about the neck for the Fellowcraft. Evidentially yet another transition point in ritual procedure.

Finally, as regards obligation, notice in TDK that the compasses are held to the breast during the MM OB in the same manner as we currently do for the MM reception. But there is no reception on the point of a sharp instrument – square, compasses or otherwise – mentioned in TDK for the FC or MM degrees. By Morgan’s time, the reception in all three degrees was as we currently practice, as was the OB posture. It seems quite apparent then that the application of sharp instruments as a lesson to be remembered has migrated over time from the OB posture to a stand alone reception in all degrees.

All these changes have made the ceremonies of degree conferral much more similar to each other in American work than they once were. All degrees now more closely resemble the EA degree.

A great deal of disparate material has been covered in the course of this discussion of the evolution of first section ritual practices. It would be difficult to summarize so many particular and discrete items and changes in just a few words of concluding remarks. But I

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\* Interestingly enough, lodge lighting has done a complete reversal in a little over two centuries. Where once the EA degree, which emphasized bringing to light, was once performed in a brightly lit room, and the MM degree performed in darkness, now we have a darkened room for the EA, and a lit room for the MM!

believe I can leave you with some organizing thoughts on the nature of our ritual and process whereby it changes.

First, each of our degree rituals is an interconnected system of symbolic practices and steps, which can be rearranged, reshuffled, and even redefined without changing the essential character or lessons of the degrees. Despite the differences in Masonic degree work from place to place and from time to time, the underlying context and principles of the fraternity are clearly communicated and universally understood by all its initiates. These and not the minutiae of ritual performance are the true heart of our work.

Second, changes in practices and changes in symbolism leapfrog each other over time. As practices are given new meanings, the practices change to more fully reflect the new meanings. Thus we have practices originally intended to teach humility being re-defined to teach charity. These lead to further changes in practices emphasizing charity, leaving the older practices available for further re-definition as symbolizing biblical stories regarding Solomon's temple or the book of Ruth.

Third, there is a richness to our ritual that would be entirely lost if everyone everywhere did it exactly the same. It is a shame that we have to travel great distances sometimes to experience the freshness of a different version of our ritual. It is indeed pointless to argue over which version of ritual is "correct" since all current version of ritual consist mostly of innovations accumulated over time. I have found that my understanding of the diversity of ritual practices has added immensely to my appreciation of Masonic ritual. And I hope I have managed to convey some of that appreciation in this discussion.

## Appendix I

*Excerpts From  
Entr'd Apprentice Lecture  
Three Distinct Knocks  
1760*

*Mas.* Where was you first prepar'd to be made a Mason?  
*Ans.* In my Heart.  
*Mas.* Where was you next prepar'd  
*Ans.* In a Room adjoining to the Lodge.  
*Mas.* How was you prepar'd Brother?  
*Ans.* I was neither naked nor cloathed, barefoot nor shod, depriv'd of all Metal, hood-wink'd with a CableTow about my Neck, where I was led to the Door of the Lodge in a halting- moving, Posture, by the Hand of a Friend, whom I afterwards found to be a Brother.  
*Mas.* How did you know it to be a door, you being blinded ?  
*Ans.* By finding a Stoppage, and afterwards an Enterance or Admittance.  
*Mas.* How got you Admittance?  
*Ans.* By three distinct Knocks.  
*Mas.* What was said to you within?  
*Ans.* Who comes there.  
*Mas.* Your Answer Brother?  
*Ans.* One who begs to have and receive Part of the Benefit of this right worshipful Lodge, dedicated to St. John, as many Brothers and Fellows have done before me.  
*Mas.* How do you expect to obtain it?  
*Ans.* By being free born, and well reported.  
*Mas.* What was said to you then  
*Ans.* Enter.  
*Mas.* How did you enter, and upon what?  
*Ans.* Upon the Point of a Sword or Spear, or some Warlike Instrument, presented to my naked left Breast.  
*Mas.* What was said to you then?  
*Ans.* I was ask'd if I felt any Thing.  
*Mas.* What was your Answer?  
*Ans.* I did, but I could see nothing.  
*Mas.* You have told me how you was received, pray who received you?  
*Ans.* The Junior Warden.  
*Mas.* How did he dispose of you?  
*Ans.* He deliver'd me to the Master, who order'd me to kneel down and receive the Benefit of a Prayer.  
*(prayer given)*  
*Mas.* After you had received this Prayer, what was said to you  
*Ans.* I was ask'd who I put my Trust in.  
*Mas.* Your Answer Brother?  
*Ans.* In God.  
*Mas.* What was the next Thing said to you?  
*Ans.* I was taken by the Right-hand, and he said, rise up and follow your Leader, and fear no Danger.  
*Mas.* After all this how was you dispos'd of?  
*Ans.* I was led three Times round the Lodge.  
*Mas.* Where did you meet with the first Opposition.  
*Ans.* At the back of the Junior Warden in the South, where I gave the same three Knocks  
as at the Door.  
*Mas.* What Answer did he give you  
*Ans.* He said, who comes there?

*Mas.* Your Answer?

*Ans.* The same as at the Door, one who begs to have and receive, &c.

*Mas.* Where did you meet with the second Opposition?

*Ans.* At the Back of the Senior Warden in the West, where I made the same Repetition as at the Door. He said, who comes here? One who begs to have and receive, &c.

*Mas.* Where did you meet with the third Opposition?

*Ans.* At the Back of the Master in the East, where I made the Repetition as before.

*Mas.* What did the Master do with you ?

*Ans.* He order'd me back to the Senior Warden in the West, to receive Instructions.

*Mas.* What was the Instructions he gave you?

*Ans.* He taught me to take one Step upon the first Step of a right Angle oblong Square, with my left Knee bare bent my Body Upright, my right Foot forming a Square, my naked Right-hand upon the Holy Bible, with the Square and Compass thereon, my Left-hand supporting the same; where I took that solemn Obligation or Oath of a Mason.

*Mas.* Brother, Can you repeat that Obligation?

*Ans.* I will do my Endeavour, with your Assistance, Worshipful.

*Mas.* Stand up and begin,

*(OB given)*

*Mas.* Now Brother, after you received this Obligation, what was the first that was said to you

*Ans.* I was ask'd, what I most desir'd?

*Mas.* What was your Answer?

*Ans.* To be brought to Light.

*Mas.* Who brought you to Light?

*Ans.* The Master and the rest of the Brethren.

*Mas.* When you was thus brought to Light, what were the first Things you saw?

*Ans.* Bible, Square and Compass.

*Mas.* What was it they told you they signified?

*Ans.* Three great Lights in Masonry.

*Mas.* Explain them, Brother.

*Ans.* The Bible, to rule and govern our faith; the Square, to square our Actions; the Compasses is to keep us within Bounds with all Men, particularly with a Brother.

*Mas.* What were the next Things that were shewn to you?

*Ans.* Three Candies, which I was told were Three lesser Lights in Masonry.

*Mas.* What do they represent?

*Ans.* The Sun, Moon, and Master-Mason..

*Mas.* Why so, Brother?

*Ans.* There is the Sun to rule the Day, the Moon to rule the Night, and the Master-Mason his Lodge, or at least ought so to do.

*Mas.* What was then done to you?

*Ans.* The Master took me by the Right hand, and gave me the Gripe and Word of an Entered Apprentice, and said, rise up Brother, BOAZ

*Mas.* What was the next Thing, that was shewn to you?

*Ans.* The due Guard, or Sign, of an enter'cl Apprentice.

*Mas.* After all this, what was said to you?

*Ans.* I was order'd to be taken back, and invested with what I had been divested of; and to be brought back to return Thanks, and to receive the Benefit of a Lecture, if Time would permit.

### *The entr'd Apprentice REASONS.*

*Mas.* Why was you neither naked nor cloath'd, bare foot nor shod, with a Cable-tow (or Halter) about your neck?

*Ans.* If I had recanted, and ran out into the Street, the People would have said I was mad ; but if a Brother had seen me, he would have brought me back, and seen me done Justice by.

*Mas.* Why was you hoodwink'd?



*Ans.* That my Heart might conceal, before my Eyes did discover.

*Mas.* The second Reason, Brother?

*Ans.* As I was in Darkness at that Time, I should keep all the World in Darkness.

*Mas.* Why was you depriv'd of all Metal?

*Ans.* That I should bring nothing offensive, or defensive, into the Lodge.

*Mas.* Give me the second Reason, Brother?

*Ans.* As I was poor any penniless when I was made a Mason, it informed me that I should assist all poor and penniless Brethren, as far as lay in my Power.

*Mas.* Brother, you told me you gave Three distinct Knocks at the Door: Pray what do they signify?

*Ans.* A certain Text in Scripture.

*Mas.* What is that Text, Brother?

*Ans.* Ask, and you shall have; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it will be opened unto you.

*Mas.* How do you apply this Text in Masonry?

*Ans.* I sought in my Mind; ask'd of my Friend; I knock'd, and the Door of Masonry became open unto me.

*Mas.* Why had you a Sword, Spear, or some other warlike Instrument, presented to your naked Left-breast particularly?

*Ans.* Because the Left-breast is nearest to the Heart, that it might be the more a Prick to my Conscience as it prick'd my Flesh at that Time.

*Mas.* Why was you led Three Times round the Lodge?

*Ans.* That all the Brethren might see I was duly prepar'd.

*Mas.* When you was made an Apprentice, why was your Left-knee bare bent?

*Ans.* Because the Left-knee is the weakest Part of my Body, and an enter'd Apprentice is the weakest Part of Masonry, which I was then entering into.