

VICTORIA LODGE OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH
650 Fisgard Street, Victoria, B.C. V8W 1R6
1995 - 2

THE GRAND LODGE OF YORK AND THE YORK RITE

A FRESH APPRAISAL

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Were you to question any average English or Welsh Freemason today about the topic of this paper you would, I strongly suspect, be greeted with complete and utter astonishment. This would not be because such a brother could not conceive of there being anything new to be said about the subject but because he would not know anything about the subject at all. If he had done any masonic reading, or been to a certain number of lectures, or even listened carefully when a United Grand Lodge Certificate is presented, he might have grasped that in the 19th century there were two Grand Lodges that were at work in England and Wales - the one started in 1717 and called the Premier (or later, Moderns) Grand Lodge, and another, begun in 1751, which called itself the Antients Grand Lodge. That would be the extent of his awareness of such matters. That there was ever a Grand Lodge of all England at York, let alone a Grand Lodge South of the River Trent, both in the 18th century, and that there is still a YORK RITE, would astonish and confuse him. It might even be having just that effect on some who are present today. Before I therefore start on some of the fresh things that can now be said about this topic, it is well that I introduce you to some of the things that have so far been written. When we better understand just how this York Freemasonry has been regarded we will the more usefully appreciate such new insights as are now possible.

Anyone who has studied the emergence of the Antients Grand Lodge will know that its founders had one principal objective. They sought to restore in England, and especially in the South of the country, a form of Freemasonry that they believed was more in tune with the traditional teachings and practices of the Craft. What those teachings and practice. were and what the Antients did to achieve their aims has been well, and often. told elsewhere and is not our concern here. What is important to record is that in the book of Constitutions acknowledged by the Antients - Ahiman Rezon - Lawrence Dermott says that the 'Antient' masons were called 'York Masons' because of the claim that Prince Edwin obtained a Royal Charter which permitted the first Grand Lodge to congregate in that city in 926 A.D. Of this claim one masonic writer has written as follows: " Dermott was repeating a myth . . . Well aware of the halo surrounding York masonry, he flagrantly borrowed an appellation which he shrewdly believed would render indelible the stamp of antiquity which he had skillfully affixed to the 'Antients' system - a stamp whose genuineness we see no reason to question seriously, but which has not gained added authenticity by association with the white rose of York" (B. Jones p.215) Whilst we must consider this argument carefully in a moment this is not the whole of the evidence. There is also to be considered the opinion of Lionel Vibert, who wrote this: "Yorkshire, perhaps more than any other locality outside London, preserved in scattered communities, remaining in touch with one another, the old traditions and usages of the craft, until the time came when they were to be handed on to those who developed from them our freemasonry as it is today" and he concluded, "If the phrase 'York Masonry' be understood to imply not that the users of it belonged to York but merely that in common with the Brethren of that city, they adhered to the ancient customs of the Order and valued its old traditions, no harm will be taken. We can still talk of 'York Masonry' in that sense; we can recognize that

York, in the Craft, still implies a high standard, a reverence for our time-immemorial Customs, and the preservation of all that is best in freemasonry today."

These statements require to be examined more carefully to see exactly what they are saying. They certainly raise the following questions which we must address:

- 1) Why was there a 'halo surrounding York masonry' especially if the Edwin story was a myth?
- 2) If claiming an attachment to York would not add to the undoubted genuineness of Dermott's claim to the Antients' antiquity then why is he called shrewd in doing so?
- 3) What were these 'scattered communities' that kept in touch with one another and in which 'old traditions and usages' were preserved?
- 4) Who were the people who 'developed' those traditions and into which present freemasonry did they develop it?

I believe that as you allow me to respond to these important queries we shall both get into the heart of our subject and also look at it with fresh eyes and fresh material.

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1) THE SOURCE OF THE YORK 'HALO'.

I begin to deal with this issue by referring to something that is still often overlooked by my contemporaries. It is the fact that already in the period of at least 1725 to 1740 there was a groundswell of dissatisfaction with the development of the newer forms of Craft Masonry. This happened a substantial time before the Antients Grand Lodge came on the scene, and the groundswell revealed itself in two distinct areas - one around the City of London, and one in the northeast of England. The catechisms that developed in the south are today enshrined in the ceremonies belonging to the Royal Order of Scotland, whilst the lectures that developed from the catechisms in the northeast formed the Harodim tradition which, as we shall see, formed a basis for all the subsequent degrees comprising the York Rite. We have therefore in situ by 1743, a whole decade before the emergence of the Antients Grand Lodge, a masonic tradition of working that claimed antique origins, proper preservation of biblical and legendary traditions, and a span of instruction that admitted Apprentices and could also make them qualified Masters of the Craft, including an Arch element.

As the later name of this process in the south implies, the English roots of the Royal Order were eventually taken up more fruitfully in a Scottish clime, but the northern development was, throughout its 18th and early 19th century progress, always acknowledged as being first established on the basis of old York Masonry. Whilst there is sadly neither time nor space here to prove this point, with several quotations from the Harodim document that we possess, I will at least mention that the source of much of the Eastern wisdom that was said to have been brought to our shores was attributed to a man learned in Masonry called 'EBRANC', and when you appreciate that the Roman name for York was 'Ebracum', the source of the legendary figure is not far to seek. Dr. Francis Drake, in his notable book on York, produced in 1730, uses Ebrank to describe both York and one of the ancient local kings.

We move on from this fact to the acknowledgment by early 18th century Irish Freemasons that they obtained their fundamental understanding of the Craft from both some Operative sources and the ancient York traditions. We thus see what were the forces that influenced the next generation of Irish Freemasons who

migrated to England in the 1740's and were largely the founders and promoters of Antients' practice. If we want to know where the HALO of York antiquity came from, then one has not far to look. It came from a conviction that what made Irish Masonry distinctive, as compared with that of the London Grand Lodge, was in part their inheritance from York. That is why Lawrence Dermott and others made their claim. That there was a distinction between the two we have at least one example to prove.

In a book written by a Dr. Fifield d'Assigny in 1744 - you should note the date - we are told of "a certain propagator of a false system some few years ago (i.e. about 1740) in this city of Dublin who imposed upon several very worthy men under a pretense of being Master of the Royal Arch, which he asserted he had brought with him from the City of York; and that the beauties of the Craft did principally consist in the knowledge of this valuable piece of masonry".

What is hardly a surprise is that this claim from York was, shortly after, opposed by a subsequent visitor from London who had attained the 'excellent part of Masonry' and proved that the former's claims were false. What this means in plain terms is this:- Already in York - where, let me remind you, there had been what was called a 'Grand Lodge' since 1705 - they taught, that in becoming an Installed Master you received the Arch degree. In London they claimed this was not necessary for, as a Grand Secretary of the Premier Grand Lodge was still able to assert in 1755, "We are neither Arch, Royal Arch or Antient...". It was in York - even if also elsewhere in the northeast - that the difference already existed by 1740. Here is the basis for Dermott believing that the Grand Lodge of All England Masonry at York had a special quality, a halo, if you like. Here too is the ground for our starting to believe that there could be something that would develop into 'a York Rite'.

There is still, of course, the matter of the Charter of Edwin. Was it entirely myth? If, as we have just seen, there was some substance to the idea of York having some kind of ancient system then why

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should Dermott have risked a threat to his reputation by drawing attention to a spurious document of antiquity? Did he naively trust the claims of the York Masons? Is Bernard Jones' assessment of the Charter due to our having much more evidence than was ever the case in Dermott's day? We must not spend too much time on this issue but as the Grand Lodge of York also made this claim, and its present descendant, York Lodge No. 230, still does, it deserves some examination.

There is a fairly full discussion of this topic in Vol. XXII of the Quatuor Coronati Transactions, and there most of the evidence available by the start of this century has been uncovered. The net result is this: - whilst we must admit that it is historically incorrect to claim that King Athelstan had a son called Edwin, he did have a half-brother with that name and on at least one charter he was described as 'Eaduuine cliton' which could be translated for legal purposes as 'Edwin the king's son'. However, whilst this may be the present historical truth, it is not the truth as it was perceived in the early 18th century

Dr. Anderson, writing his Constitutions for the English Craft in 1723, speaks of Edwin as 'the youngest son' and it is only in the 1738 edition that he changes this to 'Brother of Athelstan'. It is therefore evident that the received opinion at the start of the 18th century was that Edwin was what the York Masons believed him to be- the King's 'son' who obtained for the old York Masons a charter granting them the right to meet annually in Assembly and regulate their affairs.

Bernard Jones is therefore not correct in saying that Dermott was repeating a myth. Moreover, in all discussion as to the true nature of Prince Edwin, which is the correct and Dermott way of describing him, there is never any doubt that Athelstan granted more charters than any other English king and therefore it is not in the least unlikely that the Masons in York were so privileged. In so far as the king was the fount of such privileges it does not invalidate the York tradition even if, as we now know, there was a contemporary misunderstanding about Edwin's true status. That a Charter was granted to Freemasons is more important than by whom.

2)

WAS DERMOTT REALLY SO SHREWD?

To answer this question we have to appreciate what it was that Dermott was attempting to do. Onto the English masonic scene there is projected a new Grand Lodge that seeks to establish itself against the existing Body which has already enjoyed 30 years of noble leadership. The period in which this effort is made is one in which English eyes are focused on the pretensions of foreign enemies, whether it is to be the Jacobites seeking to restore the Stuart monarchy, or the French crown contesting supremacy in Europe, the Americas or India. This backcloth cannot be forgotten as we consider the issue before us,

Dermott and his colleagues had to show, by more than differences in ritual or ceremonial working, how legitimate was their claim to be restoring the old when the new was disfiguring the Craft. They might have urged their Irish inheritance but that had Catholic and Stuart implications, and to have claimed French support for their practices would have seemed well nigh treasonable. Where else could he go for a convincing confirmation of his intentions but to that other and time-immemorial Grand Lodge of the North which was unquestionably English, linked with the English Church, and already the protagonist of that Royal Arch aspect to Freemasonry that he was to call the 'very heart and marrow' of the whole structure. When, as is still printed in the short History presented to members of York Lodge 236 today, you read of 'a Society of Freemasons working under the Chapter of Yorkminster in the year 1370', and that 'Freemasons of those days were a recognized body, with an organization, habits and customs similar to those which now prevail amongst the Order throughout the world' it is hardly surprising that in the 1750's Lawrence Dermott did not hesitate to ally his own new Grand Lodge with such ancestry. The question still is, however, was he shrewd enough? Did he claim as a support what was a faulty framework? Could York Masonry sustain its own claim to antiquity?

Interestingly, these questions impinge on one of the still unresolved aspects of the York Grand

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Lodge of All England. According to our present state of knowledge there is an unaccountable gap when this York body seems not to have met between 1740 and 1760. Yet this is the very period when Dermott first claims that his brethren are the protagonists of that Antient Masonry which descends from York. It is to this at present intractable problem, to which I have lately been giving my attention and to which I shall have to return when my visit to you is over. Let me, however, just point up the fascinating situation that we face.

We have records of the Grand Lodge of York which show that meetings took place up to 1740 and that immediately after 1760 it was so vigorous that it began to produce new subordinate lodges as far west as Cheshire and Lancashire, on the east Yorkshire coast and in what is really south Yorkshire. We have no

indication immediately before 1740 that there is any problem with the Lodge and when records resume in 1760 the minutes read as if they were but a continuation of the previous meeting that year. We even have a manuscript book made in the Victorian period which lists every known York Freemason, local member or visitor, from 1611 to 1820 and this list includes men who are known as Masons in the years between 1740 and 1760.

We have, earlier in this lecture mentioned reference to a Mason from York about 1740 who appeared in Dublin and shared what was there being practiced and there was no suggestion that he came from any defunct body. Finally, we have this claim of Dermott in the 1750's and we can be sure that he would not have lauded the past of a defunct York Body. That would surely not have been very shrewd at all. There is clearly more research to be done.

3. WHAT WERE THE SCATTERED COMMUNITIES THAT PRESERVED OLD TRADITIONS?

Time will not permit me to expand this next part of our fresh appraisal of the York scene but it presents, I believe, a most important new slant on the whole matter. The information came to me whilst I was conducting my close examination of the origins of the Mark Degree, a not unimportant part of the York Rite.

What became clear was that during the 17th century there arose a Guild of Operative Freemasons which, by the first quarter of the 18th century, had its own catechisms, lectures and rituals, and from which the Speculative Masons adapted their own more restricted models. A copy of the workings of the seven grades (an interesting parallel to the 7 degrees of the York Rite) is now in my possession having been handed down from someone who was a member of one of the Operative districts. What is of particular interest for our present purpose is the fact that in 1677 a map of England was prepared which showed the division of the country into 8 areas. These were: 1) The City of London; 2) Westminster; 3) Southern; 4) Bristol; 5) Chester; 6) Island of Anglesea; 7) Lancaster; 8) York.

Within these districts there were individual units that became, in some cases, future speculative lodges and which helped to disseminate the old lessons and practices of the past. These, I believe, are legitimate contenders for the 'scattered communities' which Lionel Vibert referred to but never explained. Moreover, it was in these Operative units that there was offered both Square and Arched work, with the later recognized as the superior attainment for those who were members. Once we appreciate this we can begin to understand another quotation from the 1744 book by d'Assigny (p, 16): "I am informed in that city (York) is held an assembly of Master Masons under the title of Royal Arch Masons, who as their qualifications and excellencies are superior to others they receive a larger pay than working Masons." Some past members of Quatuor Coronati Lodge have thought this to be highly doubtful but perhaps we can now begin to look at it afresh, though to explain to you what kind of Arch Masonry was intended would mean another lecture.

4) WHO WERE THE 'DEVELOPERS' OF THIS MASONRY? AND INTO WHAT?

There is no simple answer to this double question. What I shall attempt to do as I draw this lecture

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to a close is to provide some of the possible solutions, whilst emphasizing at the outset that this has been a fresh appraisal of the York issues but by no means a final solution. What I am more confident about is that we are now better placed to approach a final solution than we were previously and that with but a few further steps of research we shall achieve a more conclusive result.

Meanwhile let me point you to certain areas that I am sure reveal the 'development' of the York system.

The first is in the Grand Lodge of York itself following its re-emergence after 1760. To give you some idea of what began to develop in that Lodge (for it was a private as well as a governing body) I have brought some photographs that will demonstrate fully the way in which York Masonry was going by the third quarter of the 18th century. What you will see on the pedestals and the Secretary's table, still used in that Lodge, are symbols that reveal the practice of ALL the stages at present included in the YORK RITE, and added to those were the stages of Knight Templary. This means that before the Grand Lodge of York had reached the end of its journey in 1792, all the elements for the forming of a YORK RITE were there.

I am not saying, (and please note this carefully), that here was the YORK RITE already in being. I say this because we know that members of the Grand Lodge of York consider the Royal Arch as the 4th degree in Freemasonry and practiced the Red Cross of Babylon degree after that step. Yet the Red Cross of Babylon degree was really a composite one including the Mark Man degree and an early form of one of the Royal and Select Master degrees. In addition they had a form of Arch ceremony which was, first of all, part of the Mark Master in England and Wales, but which was later linked with the Royal Arch working. A form of High Priesthood was also implied in the Knight Templary section.

What is patently obvious, however, and does not seem to have been grasped previously, is that here, in the very heart of Old Masonry in York were the first fruits of a much extended Craft and Royal Arch Masonry that could, with surprisingly little readjustment, be fashioned into the York Rite we know today.

Nor is that the end of the story. What happened in York had also been taking place in Ireland since at least 1740. It would take a further whole lecture to explain this development fully but there is one more passage in the 1744 book of d'Assigny which is revealing. He writes: "I cannot help informing the Brethren that there is lately arrived in this city (again Dublin) a certain itinerate Mason, whose judgement (as he declares) is so far illumin'd, and whose optics are so strong that they can bear the view of the most lucid rays of the sun at noonday, and altho' we have contented ourselves with three material steps to approach our Suumon Bonum, the Immortal God, yet he presumes to acquaint us that he can add three more, which when properly plac'd may advance us to the highest heavens." Clearly development was already afoot.

Even with the evidence which is still extant today we see that by the 1790's the order of progress available to most Irish masons was as follows: Apprentice, Fellow Craft, Master Mason, Past Master, Excellent Mason, Super Excellent Mason, Arch Mason, Royal Arch Mason. When you consider that the 'Arch Mason' was again an early form of the current Most Excellent Master you can certainly see the YORK RITE elements shaping up. When we learn that the Irish Royal Arch then included the Ark, Mark Fellow, Mark Master, Link Mason, and Babylonian Pass (or Red Cross of Daniel) we are even nearer the final outcome.

What, I am increasingly convinced, were the final steps of development towards the YORK RITE were the influence and practice of the military lodges and the determination, by the start of the 19th century, of a more specific Scottish, or Ancient and Accepted, Rite. Indeed, as the steps of the latter become fixed at 18, 25 or finally 33 degrees, so the inclination of others grew to have a more modest but no less fixed RITE. Not surprisingly they called it YORK.

Let us remember that most of the military lodges were warranted by the Irish or Antients Grand Lodges and some even by the Grand Lodge of York. As the members of military lodges settled down
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locally, or local joining members of such lodges set up there own neighbourhood lodges, they still continued the work into which they had been initiated. Would you believe, for instance, that in Beverley, Yorkshire, there is still a 200-years old chapter that does not allow you to stand for obligations, prayers, speeches or greetings because its first military forebears met in tents that prevented that happening? Such is the force of tradition.

Our journey in this lecture must now draw to a close. I dare to believe that what we have shared together may have made more clear a masonic story that has for too long been shrouded in unnecessary mystery. All I can say to you as I finish is this - the decision I made to end my days in YORK and amongst York Masons was more than a coincidence. I believe it was providential.
