

Victoria Lodge of Education and Research

650 Fisgard St, Victoria, B.C. Canada

THE ROYAL SOCIETY AND FREEMASONRY

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Some little time ago while I was reading a Masonic article in a non Masonic magazine I came across the following: “We know that the United Grand Lodge of England has, up until a year ago, maintained that “Pure Ancient Freemasonry” consists of three degrees only, including the Royal Arch.”

As a Grand Lodge they were entitled to say this but it is certainly historically inaccurate, and distorts the fact that pure ancient Freemasonic ritual is; quite simply, the ritual that existed in 1717 when the Premier Grand Lodge was founded and everything else has to be an addition or innovation.

I can say this with some certainty having read the “Edinburgh Register House Manuscript of 1696”, “The Chetwode” m.s. (1700) and the “Kevan” m.s. circa 1717. Having studied these manuscripts in detail Messrs. Knoop, Jones and Hammer, the Masonic historians state “These three texts are so alike in minute detail that it is quite certain that they all purport to describe the same procedure. In fact these catechisms have far more in common with our modern ritual than do the old charges.”

In his paper “The Development of the Trigradal System” Lionel Vibert, in his Prestonian Lecture of 1925, states “By the days of Grand Lodge (1717) this had come to be a system of two degrees only, the Acceptance and the Masters Part.

The Trigradal System was established between the year’s of 1725 and 1730 when it was published in Pritchard’s “Masonry Dissected” which became the unofficial ritual of Freemasons for decades.

The noted Masonic historian Murray Lyon notes “that Desaguliers was Grand Master in 1719, Deputy Grand Master in 1722 and again in 1726, the period in which the third degree was introduced into the ritual of the Premier Grand Lodge. Desaguliers was a member of The Royal Society and it just had to be with the aid of his Masonic friends in that society, that it came about. Certain it is that nothing could have been done without their approval.”

Up until reading all of this I had only known Desaguliers as one of the founders of modern Freemasonry. He was of a French Huguenot family who had escaped to Britain when he was a child, why was he being associated with members of the worlds leading scientific organization? I knew that I was going to have dig deeper, so off I went to Wikipedia and became amazed at the diversity of this man. He was elected a member of the Royal Society in 1714 and received the society’s highest honour, The Copley Medal, four times for his work “The discovery of the properties of electricity.” He published a book entitled “A course of Experimental Philosophy;” his degrees from Oxford were as bachelor and doctor of laws. He was also a bit of an inventor and improved on the steam engine design of Thomas Savery by the addition of a safety valve.

Delving a little further I ascertained that on his visit to Edinburgh when he visited and became a member of the Lodge of Edinburgh (St. Mary’s Chapel), he immersed himself in the old Scottish ritual, and came away with the material that allowed him to put together the

fundamentals of the Third Degree. Over and above that he was also performing a surveying commission for the Royal Society, in the city of Edinburgh.

Here was a connection between the New Grand Lodge of England, Scottish Freemasonry and the Royal Society and now I just had to find out more about the Royal Society

I don't want to get into a discussion about the transition of Freemasonry from operative to speculative, but I do want to point out that there were Speculative or Made Masons before the modern Grand Lodge era. James 1st of Scotland and 6th of England was made a Mason in the Lodge of Scoon and Perth in 1610 and both Charles 1st and Charles 2nd have been established as Freemasons. Among the Commoners who are known to have been accepted into Masonic Lodges were Elias Ashmole, Henry Oldenburg and Robert Boyle, to mention just a few.

Going back a bit further I found that In 1597 a college was founded in London by a Sir Thomas Gresham, the son of a Lord Mayor of that city. An unusual college by to-days lights in that it did not confer degrees nor did it offer courses, instead it had eight professors who offered lectures, each in his own field of study, and these lectures were open to anyone who wanted to attend, their salaries were paid from the rents of shops in Exchange Square, which Sir Thomas had built after having spent a few years dealing in the Bourse, in Antwerp. These lectures have continued to be given by Gresham College, to this day, it is the oldest institute of higher learning in London. The original chairs were in Astronomy, Divinity, Geometry, Law, Music, Physic and Rhetoric, do these have a familiar ring to them? History and Psychiatry have recently been added and the lecturers all hold positions in such prestigious institutions as Oxford, Cambridge and Glasgow Universities, The London School of Economics, The World Health Organization, The Open University, The Church of England and in private business. Gresham's Law of Economics is named after him and According to Preston's "Illustrations of Masonry" he became a Mason upon his appointment as General Warden of Masons in the year 1567

When the Civil War started in 1642 it was, more than anything else, a religious war a war between factions of the Protestant faith, fought because any deviation from the extreme dogma of Puritanism which reflected in their eyes "Gods Will" was viewed as a heresy. It was a war in which fathers fought their sons and brothers fought their brothers, a war that rent the nation apart.

Oliver Cromwell ruled Britain for nine years. In the end, reviled by royalists for having their king beheaded, despised by republicans for allowing a modicum of religious tolerance, he died in September, 1658, succeeded by his son. Even as he was being buried, the Army chief General Monk and Sir Edward Montagu of the Navy were orchestrating the Restoration. In 1660 a new parliament was formed and Charles 2nd was invited to return.

Throughout all of this the Gresham Lectures continued and the regular attendees, when they could not all meet in London because of the conflict, would gather for discussions in Oxford. There was a group of these regular attendees who began meeting around 1645 to discuss the ideas of Francis Bacon. When in 1660, a dozen of them met at Gresham College, following a lecture by Christopher Wren, who was the Gresham Professor of Astrology at that time, they decided to found a "College for the Promoting of Physico-mathematical Experimental Learning." Among them were Robert Boyle, John Wilkins, Sir Robert Moray and Christopher Wren himself

This time in history is known to-day as "The Age of Reason" and was the immediate precursor to "The Enlightenment." It was the time of Galileo, Who had to deny his findings that all of the planets revolved around the sun, in deference to the church's view that the Universe revolved around the Earth, This he had to do to save his life. Francis Bacon wrote "The Advancement of Learning," while Guy Faukes was trying to assassinate the king and blow up Parliament, in an attempt to stop any such advancement. Importantly it was also the time when the Stuarts became the Monarchs of England.

Now let us look at some of the original twelve who made up that "Invisible College" and propagated the Royal Society, The first one to consider would be Christopher Wren, who, before

arriving in London had been a Fellow of All Souls in Oxford, a college unique in that it did not accept undergraduates, where fellows were, and are, provided with rooms, a stipend and freedom from all teaching duties, in order that they might pursue their research. He also became a Savilian Professor at Oxford, (a chair endowed, along with one for Geometry by Sir Henry Seville who was a York Mason and Warden of the University), before taking up his position as Professor of Astronomy at Gresham College. Only then did he become an architect and was given the position of "Commissioner for rebuilding the City Of London" after the Great Fire of 1666. As 'Surveyor General of the Kings Works," he rebuilt the cities churches, over 50 of them. Before his retirement he was Comptroller of Windsor Castle and of Greenwich Naval Hospital. During the Civil War he was a friend of Cromwell's, was sympathetic to the Republican cause and he was a Freemason.

We will look next at Viscount Brouckner, the first elected president of the Royal Society. One of the premier mathematicians of his time, I cannot even pretend to understand his algebraic equations. He was a Royalist and he was a Freemason

John Wilkins was a Church man; he had been chaplain to Prince Rupert and to the Palatinate of the Rhine. He was also a cryptologist and wrote a comprehensive work on the subject, just in time for Cromwell to use it during the Civil war. Obviously a Parliamentarian and like Wren and Cromwell, a Mason

We go on to Sir Paul Nealle; his area of expertise was the grinding of glass lenses. Sir Christopher Wren used a telescope with one of these lenses to make his observations of the planet Saturn. He was also a bit of an entrepreneur and was an original member of "That Society of English Gentlemen Sailing into Hudson Bay", or, as we know it, The Hudson Bay Company. He was a supporter of the Stuart Cause and a Mason.

Robert Boyle was the man who invented the vacuum chamber or the vacuum pump. Having created a vacuum he was able to observe, through a microscope, "The minute structure of living things." His literary works included "Some incentives to the love of God". He also was a Royalist and a Mason

A most important member of this group was one Sir Robert Moray. He received his education at St. Andrews University and continued it in France. He became a Colonel in the French Army with the Scots Guard, Quartermaster General of the Scottish Covenanter Army in 1641 and General of the Scottish army which invaded England in 1646, during the ensuing years of the Commonwealth he spent his time abroad in Maastricht and Bruges. In the later years of his life he spent his time participating in chemical experiments and attending philosophical lectures. He was made a Mason in the field at Newcastle in 1641 by twenty odd Masons of Edinburgh Lodge (Mary's Chapel). His initiation was also attended by some English Masons. After that the armies dispersed and no battle was fought. He was the first to be recorded as a Speculative Mason being made in England. Elias Ashmole became a Speculative Mason in 1646 and is recognized by the United Grand Lodge of England as being the first English gentleman to be made a Mason.

The remaining members of the original Twelve were Alexander Bruce, Earl of Kincardine, Dr. Jonathan Goddard, Dr. William Petty, Mr. William Ball, Mr. Laurence Rooke, and a young business man, Mr. Abraham Hill. I could not confirm any of these as having been Masons but that's not to say that none of them were. They brought interests in coalmining, timepieces, medicine, magnetism and geometry as well as a shrewd business mind to the table.

The man who chaired the first meeting was John Wilkins, the son of a goldsmith from Oxford he went on to become the Bishop of Chester. He had received a special dispensation from Cromwell that he might marry Cromwell's sister when he was prohibited from marrying because of his position. He was the designer of wind driven vehicles and thought that travel to the moon was a possibility. Sir Robert Moray chaired the next few meetings of this fledgling organization, until a President had been duly elected and one of the first things that he established was that

neither religion or politics would be discussed while a meeting was in session, that rule, which sounds so familiar to us, as Freemasons, is in effect within the Society to this day. He also insisted that minutes be kept of all the meetings and in the minutes of the first meeting we find the following: “And to the end that they might be better enabled to make a conjecture of how many members of this society should consist, therefore it was desired that a list might be taken of the names of such persons as were known to those present, whom they judged to be willing and fit to join them in their design, who, if they should desire it, might be admitted before any other.”

So it was that a list of forty persons was prepared and each person on it was sent an invitation urging them to become members of the new society and attend the regular weekly meetings. Only three of them are known to have refused their invitation, thus, what was to become The Royal Society was born and at the next meeting Sir Robert Moray was given the task of approaching the king to seek his approval for the venture and request the granting of a Royal Charter to the fledgling organization. He was able to come back to the meeting on the following week and report the Kings enthusiasm for the project and a charter duly came under the Royal Seal, this was replaced by a second charter less than a year later. Trevor-Roper the eminent historian says of this.” At the time of its formation, The Royal Society embodied a new philosophy and a new scientific attitude, and its prompt recognition by the restored monarchy of Charles II, showed a new attitude on the part of the monarchy. For not only was the patronage of scientific research by the Stuart monarchy something new in itself: it was also in this instance, politically surprising.” It is even more surprising when you consider that the man who had, as chairman of the first meeting, been a major player in the seeking of a royal charter, had been Cromwell’s brother in law and a strong supporter of the republican cause. Then consider that most of the scholarly and scientific minds who were original fellows of the society were also Parliamentarians, whereas the Royalist fellows were mostly interested amateurs who provided the funding for their experiments.

What was it that melded these disparate groups into an effective working unit? I could find only one answer and that was the fact that more than half of them from both sides were Freemasons who had taken oaths at their various initiations, to love and support their Brothers, they had a commonality that bound them, to the extent that some would have it that The Royal Society was the real wellspring of modern Freemasonry. From this original group came such things as spring driven timepieces, accurate telescopes, new designs for ships, diving bells, new designs for guns, the first observations of living cells in plants and animals starting the science of microbiology, work was done on solving the problem of longitude at sea. Modern Horticulture had its beginnings with this group who were dedicated, as we are directed in our Masonic rituals, to the study of science and nature.

“The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge” has gone on to become the worlds leading independent, scientific academy, learned society and funding body. Along the way it has lost its Masonic majority of fellows, but still operates within the fundamental bounds of its original Masonic founders. Consider some of its past presidents: Christopher Wren – 1682, Isaac Newton – 1703 – 27, Lord Kelvin whom the Kelvin scale is named after, Lord Lister of antiseptic fame, Henry Dale who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine for his work on Chemical Neurotransmission. It received publishing rights in 1665 and has been producing work of its members ever since. Philosophical Transactions is the oldest scientific journal in publication.

As the Chevalier Ramsey once put it, “Seeking to reunite all men of enlightened minds, gentle manners and agreeable wit, not only by a love of the fine arts but, much more, by the grand principles of virtue, science and religion the interests of the fraternity shall become those of the whole human race.” I think that the Royal Society has come closer to doing that than any other organization.

