



Provincial Grand Lodge of East Lancashire

Peerings from within the Royal Arch

A Paper for Companions

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What is the meaning of this Degree? How does it relate, if at all, to the former Degrees, being so different? These are questions with which we have all had to grapple, and they are not easy. No one, it seems these days, has the authentic answer. We all remain mystified.

To try to find an answer it is imperative to look backwards. What was it that our ancient brethren, or, as we would express it now, Companions, were searching for and finding meaning in? Surely, if we can locate that, we can gain some idea of the original impetus for the Royal Arch. What they found valuable might not be what we today would single out...but at least we would be having a base from which to move forward.

The oldest known English ritual for the Royal Arch is kept in Sheffield. It's in a little handwritten book which you can see and handle in the Masonic library there. From internal evidence it seems to date from around 1785. The same story is enacted that we know now concerning digging in the ground for the preparation of the second Temple.

But this is directly linked into authority and interpretation by a preface of two readings from scripture: from the beginning of the first two chapters of the Book of Haggai (1: 1-8; 2: 1-9) followed by the text of the first Epistle of St Peter (2: 1-17). These provide the context to the arrangements for rebuilding the Temple and, by the quotations being placed alongside each other, link this to *...laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious...*, itself a quotation from Isaiah (28.16) and Psalm 118 (v.22). Though sounding technical, this must be mentioned for it expresses the main impetus behind the original fashioning of the Supreme Degree. To understand it properly these pieces should be read.

[? Do so (optional)]

There is also a prayer

"Grant we beseech thee Almighty God that we may be always attentive to thy great and glorious attributes which are all infinitely perfect and that as far as in us lies imitate thy Divine Goodness now and for ever Amen."

Great and glorious attributes... infinitely perfect. We see these symbolised still by a triangle within a circle, all in gold, atop a double cube of white marble in the centre of our ceremonial. We are expected to be attentive to those great and glorious attributes, to acknowledge them specially, and to use all respect and reverence in so doing. Bowing in the Chapter is always towards this symbol in token of humility.

The old commencing prayer tells us that we, as Royal Arch masons, should be aware of being pledged **to imitate Divine Goodness, so far as in us lies**. This is a central message of the Royal Arch which has been blurred through the later adoption of an Anglican Collect that we should, *by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit cleanse the thoughts of our hearts and worthily magnify Thy Holy Name*.

No wonder then that nowadays we cannot make out the vision and ideals which originally caused the Royal Arch to succeed in spite of many efforts of the national UK Grand Lodges to suppress it. And in view of the original exalted dedication of the individual towards divine perfection, quoted above, it is no wonder that among Companions the Royal Arch was to be known as *the root, heart, and marrow* of Masonry. Indeed, the Royal Arch degree appealed

to the heart and soul of 18th century brethren: the three Craft degrees appealed to their heads.

From this old text we also begin to get an idea of why those attaining inner knowledge within the Royal Art deserve to be called 'Excellent'.

Q. How came you to be admitted to that part?

A. First by justly & honestly serving my time as an Enter'd Apprentice, secondly by passing the degree of a Fellow Craft & thirdly by being raised a Master Mason as our great King Solomon caused Master Masons to be finished by the (Installed Master's?) password thereunto belonging.

Then follows the dedicatory prayer previously mentioned. Immediately afterwards occurs the question

Q. How were you prepared to be made this excellent Man?

A. First by a Lifeline about my Middle & next by being properly Hoodwinked & Slipshod.

Q. What was the reason for the Lifeline about your Middle?

A. For a proper signal when I was desirous of being helped out of the Arch.

Q. What was the reason for your being Hoodwinked?

A. As that place was for several ages closely shut up and I being then in [the darkness of ignorance?] when I was let through the first Keystone, shows that the Word was Hoodwinked from me till I pulled out the third Keystone which gave one more light where I found that great and excellent(Name?) which we should always worship & adore.

Here we can see the deeper connection of the Royal Arch with the Craft. First it is necessary to persevere steadfastly through the three degrees of the Craft, to pass the Chair, and to receive the ultimate Craft degree word of an Installed Master [stone-squarer, or excellent mason]. Next, one enters the Royal Arch in what is, in metaphorical terms, a similar way to the entry into Craft masonry but at a deeper level. That is to say, one enters hoodwinked, being in darkness concerning the Name until such time as by more effort additional light is let in. One is metaphorically slipshod until this moment. One is also in two senses at a deeper level than that at the entrance to the Craft: first by being lowered to below ground level, and secondly by attaining a greater depth of knowledge than is communicated through a mere Masons' lodge.

All this has been obscured by the revisions to the English ritual eventually finished in 1834. Several other early versions of RA ritual are known but this earliest one in Sheffield provides some of the clearest clues as to the connection between Craft and RA masonry.

Why was the ritual changed in London? The main reason seems to have been the strong wish of the reigning Grand Master, the Duke of Sussex, to remove all obvious references to Christianity from the Masonic rituals used in England. This was reasonably easy to achieve within Craft masonry. It was extremely difficult to do in Royal Arch masonry. This was because, as we would say today, the USP [Unique Selling Point] of the Royal Arch was a body of esoteric knowledge linking the Jewish bible with the Christian New Testament. This finally culminated in a section entitled *The Mystical Knowledge of the Temple*, focused on explaining why the coming of Christ and the Church was foreshadowed by the Temple arrangements. When possessed of the whole of this interpretation, from the Tabernacle in

the Wilderness through to the three Temples in Jerusalem, with the significance of their respective makers, and the hidden meanings of their contents, one had received a very solid but easily visualised education in abstruse Christian thought [dating back to the Venerable Bede c.700AD]. It was easily learnt because it was largely expressed by a procession of memorable symbols. The Royal Arch provided remarkable revelations to its Companions in a period when schooling was scarce and the Bible was taken, in all its details, as expressing the literal facts of Divine truth, merely requiring interpretation. The Royal Arch in its earliest period gave a satisfying and clear interpretation of the Bible message for Christians.

What can be said of the Chapter now? The layout and the story remain. The central pedestal continues to represent the concept and presence of Divinity, even if the Sacred and Mysterious Name upon it has been subject to some re-shuffling. The three Principals, the three Sojourners, and the three other necessary officers, Ezra, Nehemiah and the Janitor, continue to represent three times three, the symbol of perfection. The signs are largely what they used to be. The clothing is somewhat similar. The visual patterns and symbols, so different from the squareness of the Craft, make a striking contrast. Opinions may vary as to the success with which it communicates the ineffability of the Deity. Doubt may exist over the interpretation of certain abstruse geometrical configurations which have taken the place of the original *Mystical Knowledge of the Temple*; they do not educate the religious spirit to the same extent. But as a degree, enacted in the presence of the Name, and surrounded by symbolical attributes of the eternal, sacred and mysterious the Royal Arch continues to be [no less so to those who continue to delve the deepest]. In this sense it is truly the Supreme Degree for citizens of this world and beyond, and still has the capacity to make its Companions Excellent Men in imitation of the Divinity.

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