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Some Thoughts on the Origins of the Royal Arch

**A presentation by E Comp John Hamill, PGSoj
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Companions, whence come you?' is not only the first question Zerubbabel asks of the three Master Masons from Babylon but a question that Masonic researchers have been asking about the origins of our Order for more than one hundred and fifty years. As with the Craft, the problem which faces anyone looking into the origins of our Order is the paucity of evidence available. In brief, all that we know for certain is that:

In 1744 the quaintly named Fifield Dassigny in his serious and impartial enquiry into the cause of the present decay of Free-Masonry in Ireland refers to a dispute 'some few years ago' involving a 'Master of the Royal Arch', the reference implying that the Royal Arch was then known in London, Dublin and York

Laurence Dermott, Grand Secretary of the Antients Grand Lodge stated that he was made a Royal Arch Mason in Dublin in 1746

The Antients Grand Lodge Minutes for 4 March 1752 refer to a case of impostors making 'Royal Arch Men', and the Minutes of the same body for 2 September 1752 record that Dermott lectured the Grand Lodge 'on every part of real Masonry, except the Royal Arch'

We also know that in the Minutes of Lodges in Coleraine (1741-59); Fredericksburg, Virginia (1753); Dumfries (1757); Bristol (1758-59) and Youghall in Ireland (1759) there are references to Royal Arch Men or Royal Arch Masons

In 1765 there was an independent Chapter meeting in London the members of which on 22 July 1766 signed the Charter of Compact which brought into being the first Grand Chapter.

Surprisingly, little is known of the early Royal Arch Ritual. Some French manuscripts said to date from the 1760s give the skeleton of a ceremony centring on the discovery of a vault containing the Sacred Name but the earliest English manuscript ritual dates from as late as 1780. Nor can we rely on printed exposures for the Royal Arch did not attract the same publicity and curiosity as the Craft and the earliest printed exposure is Richard Carlile's of 1825.

Theories as to our origins are many, but fall into four main groups which I would categorise under the heads of 'the common pot', 'mutilation', 'invention' and 'completion'.

The 'common pot' theorists believe that the Operative Lodges had an extensive ritual system which gradually dropped out of use when Masonry was neglected by its Grand Masters, but remained in the collective memory as folklore, and when Freemasonry was revived in 1717 was gradually reintroduced as the Craft, Royal Arch and other Orders. Nonsense! There is no evidence that the Operative Lodges had other than a simple entrance ceremony for their members, and certainly no evidence for the existence of Grand Masters, Grand Lodges or non-Craft rituals before the formation of the premier Grand Lodge in 1717. Few Masonic historians today would accept the idea that Freemasonry came directly out of Operative Masonry let alone that the medieval operatives had the cultural sophistication to develop the Royal Arch, the originators of which had a thorough grounding in both biblical studies and post-Renaissance ideas.

The 'mutilation' theorists put forward the idea that at some unidentified time either the Third Degree or the Craft Installation ceremonies were mutilated to produce our current versions of those ceremonies and the Royal Arch. Foremost amongst the proponents of this theory was the Rev Dr George Oliver, the first to investigate our origins. Unfortunately, Dr Oliver was to 19th century Masonic research as the late Barbara Cartland was to the 20th century novel — a prolific writer of romances. If, as we know, the Royal Arch was being worked by 1740 how could it have been torn from the Third Degree which was itself a recent innovation? The earliest evidence we have for the Third Degree being worked is in 1725. The earliest evidence we have for its content is Pritchard's *Masonry Dissected* of 1730, which shows a very simple ceremony, complete in itself and which we would recognise as the basis of our current ceremony. Oliver and others suggested that it was this mutilation of the Third Degree which was the cause of the schism in the premier Grand Lodge that led to the emergence of the Antients Grand Lodge. As we now know there was no such schism, the Antients Grand Lodge not being formed by a breakaway group from the premier Grand Lodge but by disaffected Irish brethren who had been unable to gain entry into lodges under the original Grand Lodge. Equally, had the Royal Arch been a result of a mutilation of the third degree in England how do they explain its early appearance in Ireland and Scotland, both of whose Grand Lodges were originally as hostile to the Royal Arch as was the premier Grand Lodge in England? Had the Royal Arch initially been part of the Third Degree surely all three Grand Lodges would have been aware of that fact, would have agreed to its separation and would have readily embraced the new degree.

The alternative 'mutilation' theory, that the Royal Arch had originally been part of the Craft Installation Ceremony is equally untenable. For that to have happened would have required the existence of a lengthy ceremony with esoteric content. There is no evidence to show that the Craft Installation ceremony before 1750, when we know Royal Arch was being worked, was other than a ceremonial placing of the Master in the Chair without the conferring of additional secrets. Indeed, at the time the Royal Arch was appearing it was not even constitutionally necessary to be a Master Mason to become Master of a Lodge.

Proponents of the 'invention' theory take the easy road out of the problem and simply state that at some time, usually defined vaguely as the 1730s because that happens to fit in with the known facts, a group of brethren sat down and invented the Royal Arch. The cynical in this group argue that the Master Mason degree having become more established and having initially been reserved for the chosen few, the originators of the Royal Arch invented it to have a new 'special' or 'superior' degree.

The less cynical argue that the Royal Arch was a French invention. The simple Craft had been exported to France in the late 1720s. Whilst it had an initial appeal its connection with an artisan group (the operatives) and its lack of colour and drama led the mainly aristocratic French brethren to devise a more colourful rite: the Royal Arch. Others have suggested that it was an invention of the Antients Grand Lodge. Having set themselves up as a rival to the original Grand Lodge they had to find something different to attract new members; hence their insistence on working it within their lodges as a fourth degree. That simplistic view, however, does not accord either with the information in Dassigny or with Dermott's having been exalted in Dublin in 1746. The Antients may have done a great deal to promote and popularise the Royal Arch but they cannot claim to have invented it.

Others have suggested that the Royal Arch was invented by those who disagreed with the gradual de-Christianisation of the Craft. To us that might appear strange, our Royal Arch being as Universalist as the Craft. If we look, however, at the early ritual manuscripts we can see why that idea took root. Up to the first decade of the 19th century the Royal Arch was as Christian as the present Rose Croix and Knight Templar rituals. Prayers were given in the name of Jesus Christ; readings were given from the Old and New Testaments; the words on the scroll were not Genesis but the first verse of the Gospel of St. John; the Companion was raised as a 'Knight Companion of the Holy Royal Arch of St John of Jerusalem'; the ritual was replete with symbolic references to the Trinity; and in two manuscripts the final section of the catechetical Lecture, entitled 'The Mystical Knowledge of the Temple', took the architecture, decoration and furniture of Solomon's Temple and gave them a distinctly Christian meaning. The overt Christianity began to disappear in the early 19th century and all of the overt Christian references were removed in the Royal Arch ritual revisions of 1834-35.

Returning to France, some have suggested that the early development of the Royal Arch as a Christian degree was a result of its originators having come into contact with the remnants of the Rosicrucian movement in Europe. Seeking to preserve that movement they incorporated its ideas into what became the Royal Arch. Today there is not time to argue whether or not the Rosicrucian movement actually existed, but the Rosicrucian Manifestos certainly did and they exhibit a curious form of Christology which is totally absent from the early forms of the Royal Arch.

The 'completion' theorists looked at the content of the Third Degree and that of the Royal Arch and decided that the latter was a natural development to 'complete' the former. The Third Degree ends up with a 'loss' what more natural than that at some stage some enterprising brethren should think up a new ritual 'to find that which was lost'. Certainly if we look at our present Craft and Royal Arch rituals (regardless of which working is used) that would seem to be a logical deduction. The present Third Degree opening suggests that that which was lost is being looked for, and the present Royal Arch ritual states that that which was lost has been found. If we look, however, at the pre-Union Craft rituals and the pre-1835 Royal Arch rituals we find a different picture. In the pre-1813 Craft Third Degree rituals not only is there no suggestion that 'that which was lost' will be looked for but the Sacred Name rediscovered in the Royal Arch vault was used as a word in the degree. In the pre-1835 Royal Arch rituals there is no suggestion that what is found in the vault had anything to do with what was lost by the death of Hiram Abif. The suggestion that the discoveries in the Royal Arch were the lost secrets was a convenient fiction introduced to give force to Article II of the Articles of Union between the two Grand Lodges, which gives the definition of 'pure ancient Masonry' as the three Craft Degrees including the Royal Arch. At no stage before that declaration appeared was there any suggestion that

the discoveries in the Royal Arch completed the Master Mason's degree. Nor will you find the Royal Arch described as such in any other Constitution.

Having outlined, and dismissed, the four groups of theories of our origins it is but right that I should say what I think our origins might have been. I stress 'might have been' because I have no means of proving what follows. I think that our origins were probably a combination of natural development, invention and a desire to complete, but not in any of the ways I have outlined above. Our rituals were not handed down to us as tablets of stone but, in both the Craft and the Royal Arch, had a long period of development. The period from the formation of Grand Lodge to the end of the 18th century saw the development from one to three separate and distinct degrees and the turning of simple entrance ceremonies into a 'system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols'. A 'System of morality' which provided practical rules enabling the individual to lead a life which he hoped would be pleasing to his God and of service to his fellows. But, as I have said in a previous talk to Grand Chapter — and I make no apology for repeating it today - man is not simply a practical being. He has an essential spiritual aspect to his nature. That being so, what could be more logical than for those who developed our Institution having sketched out the practical lessons then turning to man's spiritual nature and devising a ceremony to guide him in that direction. As I said on that previous occasion, that is not an idea which I claim for my own. It goes back to Laurence Dermott. Combining the practicality of the Craft with the spirituality of the Royal Arch we have the complete man. In that sense I think we can say that the Royal Arch completes the Third Degree.

Will we ever discover our origins? In a sense that is an unanswerable question — we have no idea what discoveries might come to light, although it has to be said that it is a considerable time since any new discoveries relating to the early Royal Arch have been made. Do we need to find our origins? The short answer must be no. We are the inheritors of a beautiful system which works without our knowing its origins. Do we want to find our origins? As a historian I should answer yes to this question. Historians, like scientists and detectives, are motivated by the desire to find answers. As an individual, I think that the pleasure of knowing would be far outweighed by a loss — the loss of the innocent pleasure that I and my colleagues in Masonic research have in arguing that fundamental question 'Companions, whence come you?'