

What we may have forgotten about Royal Arch Masonry

In a recent Inaugural address for a Past Principals Chapter an M.E.Z. dealt with the question of how the Royal Arch could be said to complete the Craft 3rd Degree. During his talk he drew attention to some of the anomalies that must strike the attention of any regularly attending Royal Arch Companion but since the main thrust of his paper was towards his chosen topic he very wisely left aside any further comment on these matters and any similar ones. I and others were delighted, however, to have these issues brought to our attention and though I am sure that most, if not all, present will have been instructed in these matters on some occasion in the past I wonder how many of us could have at once delivered up the answers to these queries or whether it was a case of recognizing "what we may have forgotten about the Royal Arch"? Since I believe that answers to these apparent anomalies increase our better appreciation of this Order, and are useful to have in case new Companions quiz us as 'seniors', I dare to offer some answers to the questions he posed.

First, however, let me repeat what it was that this M.E.Z. drew to our attention and then add a few more similar queries of my own.

- a) Why is the candidate not admitted with the 3rd degree knocks?
- b) Why is there different regalia?
- c) Why are we called Companions?
- d) Why are the Craft and Chapter governed separately?
- e) Why at one time were only Installed Masters admitted?

and where the M.E.Z. put etceteras I add:

- f) Why do we have 3 Principals and not the W.M. and his Wardens?
- g) Why do we have to have 'sojourners'?
- h) Why are the staves forced inwards when the obligation is taken?

There are still other matters that could be raised but these will be more than sufficient for one evening. So let us get down to business.

- a) Why are the MM's knocks not used on entry?

The answer is that this was due to a compromise over what was to be kept of earlier practice. The problem with all compromises, as is evident in the continuing efforts at a Middle East peace settlement, is that somewhere along the line unresolved problems begin to reappear. Though the Union of 1813 statement declared that the Order of the Royal Arch was included with the three degrees of the Ancient Craft this was never intended to mean that now, or even in living memory then, the Royal Arch was simply the second part of the 3rd Degree as we now know it.

That it once was so recognized by some English Freemasons is revealed for me in the practice still retained at the old Marquis of Ripon Chapter. The candidate there enters with the cable tow wound round his waist as it is still there worn in the 3rd degree. The link is immediately obvious. Yet by the last quarter of the 18th century the Antient Masons had designated the Royal Arch the Fourth Degree', as the York Masons did in their Grand Lodge of All England. By then, however, it was required, that a candidate must be a Past Master and needed to pass through the ceremonies of the Veils. With these requirements there was little likelihood of it being thought of as simply the Master Mason degree completed. To use the 3rd Degree knocks would have been completely meaningless and literally out of order. Even though we have now dispensed with the intervening 'steps' between the M.M. and this Order it is with four knocks that we have been left if only to indicate the significant step forward we have made. Some historians would say it ought to be 7 knocks.

- b) Why different regalia?

Whilst it might be imagined that the difference between Craft and Royal Arch aprons is a 19th century development the truth is that from the middle of the 18th century the aprons worn by those who had been admitted to the Royal Arch began to have distinctive symbols added to their plain white Craft aprons. Bernard E. Jones provides several examples of such aprons.

These aprons were not uniform however. Visiting the Yarborough Lodge, the older in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, recently I was shown their pre-Union Royal Arch aprons and they are already very distinctive. They have two Corinthian pillars, without globes, but they have the glorious sun pouring its rays down onto a pedestal, the five pointed star on the flap with a C at the centre and an indented red border around both the flap and main body of the apron. One of the three aprons preserved also has an arch, within which is the V.S.L. open, with the square and compasses upon it. They are currently dated as from at least 1790.

When a compromise was reached at the Union of the Grand Lodges and the Holy Royal Arch Order was accepted as an acknowledged part of Ancient Masonry it was clear that this would immediately impinge on the matter of clothing. The Duke of Sussex had been adamant that there must be regularity in Craft dress and nothing should be worn in Lodge, or appear on a Craftsman's apron, that did not conform to the three basic degrees. This meant that aprons displaying Arch symbols — the arch, keystone, the sun's rays or a star such as we have on our jewel — were all banned. Moreover, if there was to be a standard form for Craft aprons then in due course the same principle would have to apply in the Royal Arch order.

In the event a new design was finally agreed and laid down as the norm. It incorporated the same apron shape as in the Craft but it included the colours of the Veils, Red, Blue and White, the radiance of the Sun in its border and the agreed symbol of the Triple Tau, which was explained. What distinguished the new regalia was the incorporation of a sash, which implied that this was 'an Order' though without its sword and knightly status. This was not another 'degree' and the regalia was meant to make this plain.

c) Why are we called 'Companions' and not still 'Brethren'?

The simple answer is that this was another sign that there was, and was intended to be, a clear distinction between those in the three degrees of Craft Masonry and those admitted to the 'secrets' of the Holy Royal Arch. That distinction in itself creates the anomaly of what is supposed to be simply the completion of the third degree.

What is often forgotten is that because the Royal Arch ceremony took place in a lodge its members were called Brethren in most places until the mid 1770s and in some lodges even long afterward.

It is therefore not surprising that even today the link between Craft and Royal Arch leads naturally to the use of 'Brethren' when speaking of Royal Arch members. As was indicated above, the Royal Arch was from the 1830s regarded as an Order and hence in some sense related to the knightly aspects of Freemasonry and not least because it was through the Royal Arch alone that one could become a Knight Templar Mason. As the first step into the Knight Templar Order was to break bread and receive drink it is not surprising that those entering, i.e. Royal Arch Masons, were called 'bread sharers', which is the Latin meaning of 'Companion'. The Freemason who entered the Holy Royal Arch was meant to look forward to his next step, not backward to the Craft. That is different to how it was in the beginning.

d) Why are the Craft and Chapter governed separately?

This is again the result of that compromise about which I spoke earlier. Whilst it was agreed that Ancient Freemasonry embraced the Royal Arch ceremonies there was real disagreement about whether it could share the same government. The Antients Grand Lodge had overseen the Royal Arch because it was practised in their lodges but the premier Grand Lodge had insisted on there being a separate Grand and Royal Chapter. The deal in 1817 therefore was that whilst the Royal Arch was recognized as part of old English practice it must be governed separately. The same applied to Ireland and Scotland but whereas in these two countries the Craft and Royal Arch are totally separate, and have different individuals as their principal officers, we in England 'compromised' once more. We kept the same officers except for the Third Grand Principal who was to be a Brother in Holy Orders, and there was a separate set of accounts and appointments to lesser office. Those who wanted to claim that the Royal Arch was distinct from the Craft could do so — and those who wanted to claim that they belonged to each other were also satisfied.

It's the sort of arrangement that we English are quite clever at achieving.

e) Why at one time were only Installed Masters admitted?

The reason here is because when the third or Masters' degree lost its primary Mason Word — JE HO VAH — this, together with other secrets, were only revealed to those who had passed the Chair. The secrets included the Mark story of the capstone of the Arch, the story of the Exodus and the Ark of the Covenant, the exile in Babylon and the stories of Josiah and Zerubbabel, which described the hidden mysteries uncovered beneath the Temple.

These latter legends and Bible stories had once formed the content of catechisms or lectures shared in the Lodge but as the present Master Mason's degree took hold in England so the items above were restricted to Past Masters. That is how the degrees of Mark Master, Most Excellent Master and Super Excellent Master (or the Veils) found their origin. And that is why, until 1836, only those who passed the Chair were made Royal Arch Masons.

When it was then decided to admit Master Masons it can be understood why the Password changed, the Mark Master degree was declared unnecessary, the Veils ceremony was dropped and only parts of it kept for the Installation of the Three Principals.

That, incidentally, is why we still say, "A full participation in our secrets is not possible until one has passed those several chairs" and only Installed Craft Masters can still be placed in the Chairs of Z., H. and J.

f) Why do we have 3 Principals and not the W.M. and his Wardens? This is indeed a fair question if the Royal Arch is but the completion of the Third Degree. What may interest you to know is that in the earliest chapters the terms W.M. and Wardens were actually used and even as late as 1810 The Duke of Sussex was addressed as "The First Grand Master of the Royal Arch Masons".

Moreover, as Bernard E. Jones pointed out in 1965, "It has long been held, and is expressly laid down in today's regulations, that the Three Principals of a Chapter are to be considered conjointly and each severally as Master; they are [however] equal in status and (that) does not correspond in any sense to that of Wardens in a Craft Lodge. The arrival of the term 'Principal' was not something easily cut and dried.

Of course the use of the term 'Principal' was encouraged to add to the sense of distinction between Craft and Chapter and since there was a long tradition of a 'triple voice', or a sharing to form the Mason Word, the idea of 3 Principals rather than the 3 principal officers, a Master and his Wardens, followed.

Where the concept of 'Principals' came from is still a question without a completely satisfactory answer. Some old Royal Arch tracing boards, additional to those I have been showing around England, portray a series of three rulers — Enoch, Shem and Japheth; Moses, Aholiab and Bezaleel; Solomon, Hiram and Hiram Abif; and Zerubbabel, Haggai and Joshua. This at least underlines the notion of THREE. Whether the notion of 'Principals' as a title came from the three who were the principals of the Sanhedrim, the Chapter of a Monastery or some other pattern, is an issue not yet resolved. This only goes to show how research is still a live issue.

g) Why do we have sojourners?

The answer lies in hearing a section of the Royal Arch ceremony used in many parts of the United States today. It is a point of the Royal Arch Degree not to assist, or be present, at the conferring of this Degree upon more or less than three candidates at one time. If there are not three candidates present 1 or 2 companions, as the case may be, volunteer to represent candidates, so as to make the requisite number and accompany the candidate or candidates through all the stages of exaltation." (Duncan's Ritual: p. 218)

This shows unmistakably that in the early ceremonies of the Royal Arch the candidates were the ones who came to 'spend the day' with the gathered Sanhedrim seeking to help in the labour. (The Latin word 'dies' [pronounced 'dee-ays'] meaning 'day' led to 'diurnus' [dyurnus] meaning 'daily' and then 'jurnus' and journeyman', a worker on a daily wage. Hence came the verb 'to sojourn'.)

As the Royal Arch developed the candidates were obligated and sat down whilst their 'counterparts', more permanent Sojourners, recited the story. Hence developed the passage in the full opening of some of our oldest Chapters. "How many constitute a regular Chapter?" and the answer: "Nine: Three Principals, two Scribes and the Janitor, and three Sojourners."

h) Why are the staves forced inwards when the obligation is being, or has been, taken? The answer has to be because originally, as is still the case in several Yorkshire Chapters, all the Companions had their own staves which were presented to them at their exaltation — or do we forget this?

In other older English and Scottish Chapters the ensigns are hung upon the wall and not placed as we are used to them, around the floor cloth. It is only because most Companions have no wands or staves of their own that they try to use the only ones available. They push them forward to create the sense of a vault or covered passage at the end of which is found the Sacred Masons' Word preserved by the 3 Principals with their equilateral triangle. The symbolism is good. If the Companions had their own wands to raise it would be, and is, more effective.

Such, Most Excellent and your Excellencies, is the best response I can give to the proper and intriguing matters raised by our M.E.Z. That there is more still to be said about them has already been suggested. What I hope is that our memories have been refreshed and our ability to explain to others, renewed.