

Companions - Whence Come Ye?

by

E Comp J M Hamill PGSoj.

Librarian and Curator of Grand Lodge

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Although junior to the Craft, the origins of the Royal Arch are as lost in the mists of time as those of its parent. We know from an Irish pamphlet that by 1740 the Royal Arch was known as far apart as Dublin, London and York, and that it was being worked in lodges. But, the honest answers to the questions when, where and why did the Royal Arch come into being are that we do not know.

The legend of a hidden vault, discovered by three and containing lost treasures goes back at least to the writings of a Greek named Philostorgius (born AD 364) who in his "Ecclesiastical History" describes the discovery of a vault during the rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem under the Roman Emperor Julian. A workman is lowered into the vault, discovers on the pedestal of a column a book, gives a signal to be hauled up and on reaching the light finds that he has re-discovered the lost Gospel according to St. John, to which I will return later.

Masonic ritual, however, is built up of allegory and symbolism and is not literal, historical or biblical truth. It is a means of passing on in a memorable and dramatic way the principles and lessons to be taught in the particular ceremony. Ritual provides no real evidence for our origins.

We are left, then, simply with theories of how the Royal Arch might have developed. My purpose this evening is to look at some of those theories and to suggest an alternative to them.

Masonic scholars in the 19th century believed that there was a body of operative lore from which the present Craft and Royal Arch ceremonies eventually evolved. The problem with this theory is that no one has been able to provide any evidence that operative masons practised anything other than simple entrance ceremonies which were common to many craft guilds and comprised an oath to keep the secrets and mysteries of the particular craft and the conferring of secret signs or words so that a craftsmen when travelling could identify himself to others of his craft, remembering that in those days levels of literacy were low and certificates and union cards were unknown.

The idea that one or more degrees were mutilated to provide the Royal Arch had numerous serious followers. Their mistaken beliefs are more a reflection of the then knowledge of the development of our ritual than of a misunderstanding of what they were dealing with. There are two principal 'mutilation' theories. The first suggests that the third degree was in some way shortened in the 1720s or 1730s to provide the present Hiram legend and the Royal Arch. The second theory suggests that the Installation ceremony was divided to provide the current ceremony and the Royal Arch. The latter is perhaps more understandable when we learn that up to the revision of the Royal Arch ritual in 1834 the qualification for admission into the Royal Arch was to be an Installed Master in the Craft, as the pass to get into a Chapter for exaltation was to give the sign and word of an Installed Master.

How then do these theories stand up? Not very well, it has to be admitted. Research into the development of the Craft rituals in this century, particularly by the late Bro. Harry Carr, shows that initially there was one admission ceremony which, from early surviving evidence, contained elements of all three of the ceremonies we now work. There is argument as to whether what we now see as the first and second degrees were one continuous ceremony or two separate degrees. The earliest reference we have to the third degree comes in 1725, and other evidence shows that it took a long time to be accepted. The important factor was to be initiated and passed.

Once that happened you could enjoy all of the privileges of Freemasonry, including making claims on charitable funds. Indeed, it seems clear from early evidence that it was not necessary to be a Master Mason to become Master of a lodge. We have echoes of that today in the facts that the Master - Elect is presented, answers questions and takes his obligation as Master - Elect in the second degree; and in the fact that one of the qualifications for the Chair is that he be elected "by his brethren and fellows..

Even more conclusive evidence against the third degree having been mutilated to provide the Royal Arch is the early exposures of the third degree which show a very simple ceremony complete in itself. I believe that the theory of the third degree having been mutilated to produce the Royal Arch was born out of hindsight, not an examination of the evidence. What appears internally to support that theory is the fact that in the third degree there is a loss (the genuine secrets of a Master Mason) and in the Royal Arch, after the revision of the ritual in 1834, there is the suggestion that that which had been lost in the Craft was found in the Royal Arch. As the late Harry Carr pointed out, in the pre - 1813 Craft lectures and exposures there was nothing to suggest that that which had been lost would ever be searched for, let alone found. And as I found out in examining the pre -1834 Royal Arch manuscript rituals and catechisms there was nothing in them to suggest that the loss in the third degree had been found in the Royal Arch.

The suggestion that the Royal Arch had formerly been part of the Craft Installation ceremony equally cannot be sustained. In lodges under the premier Grand Lodge (the only Grand Lodge existing in England at the time that the Royal Arch was originating) there is ample evidence to suggest that the Craft Installation was simply a ceremonial placing of the new Master in the Chair. This is borne out by events in 1811. In 1809 the premier Grand Lodge, in preparation for negotiations towards a Union of the two Grand Lodges, set up a special Lodge of Promulgation to compare, and bring into agreement, its rituals with those of Ireland and Scotland.

The Lodge of Promulgation recognised the Installation of the Master as a "true landmark of the Order" and in 1811 held a number of meetings to install properly those Masters and Past Masters who had not gone through any inner working. It is hardly credible, therefore, that a simple chair placing ceremony could have been mutilated to provide an additional ceremony as complex as the Royal Arch.

There are those who have argued that the need for candidates for exaltation to possess the word and sign of an Installed Master shows that the Royal Arch was introduced by the Antients Grand Lodge, as they are known to have had an esoteric installation from their earliest days. That suggestion falls flat when we look at the chronology. The Royal Arch is known to have been in existence from at least 1740 and to have been well enough known in 1744 to merit mention by name alone, without any explanation in D'Assigny's pamphlet. The Antients did not come into being until 1751.

The need for candidates for exaltation to possess the word and sign of an Installed Master caused problems, even in a period where it was the usual practice for lodges to change their Masters and officers twice a year. Both the original Grand Chapter and the Antients Grand Lodge were swift to develop subterfuges to bring forward more candidates for the Royal Arch. In lodges under the Antients Grand Lodge it was the practice on ordinary nights of Installation, once the actual Master had been installed, to allow candidates wishing to go forward to the Royal Arch to 'pass the Chair'. They were literally placed in the Chair for a few moments, had the word and sign conferred then vacated the Chair. The passing the chair ceremony simply qualified them for the Royal Arch, it did not confer on them the status of an Installed or Past Master.

Chapters under the original Grand Chapter were a little more circumspect. If candidates came forward who had not been Masters, at that point in the ceremony when the Principal Sojourner retires to test the candidate he would in those days, take out other Companions with him, open a lodge in the third degree, elect the candidate as 'Master of the previous lodge', install him and confer the secrets on him, after which the candidate would peremptorily resign the chair, which would be retaken by the Principal Sojourner who would close the lodge and prepare the candidate for entry into the Chapter. Not unnaturally, this illegal means of brethren gaining the secrets of the Chair did not go down well with the United Grand Lodge when it was formed in 1813, hence in the Royal Arch ritual revisions of 1834 the Chair qualification was dropped, except in relation to the Principal's chairs, and the present pass words were adopted.

One of the problems of our search for the origins of the Royal Arch is that we have so little early evidence to work with. Although we know that the Royal Arch was certainly known by 1740 it is not until the mid - 1750s that we begin to find evidence in lodge minute books of candidates being "made Royal Arch". Unlike the Craft, the English Royal Arch did not attract public attention so there are no early printed exposures of its rituals. Indeed the earliest English Royal Arch exposure is that by Richard Carlile printed in 1825. The earliest English manuscript rituals we have date from circa 1780, some forty years after we know the Royal Arch to have been in existence. What we do have are the Minutes of the Chapter which became the original Excellent Grand and Royal Arch Chapter, dating from 1765 and continuing after its assumption of the status of Grand Chapter in 1766. From these minutes and the lists of officers present we can deduce that, certainly from 1765, this Chapter was working a ceremony which became the basis of our present system,

Dating before the English manuscript rituals are a series of five French manuscripts, reputedly dating from the 1760s. They are skeletal in outline but describe the finding of a vault and its contents and the discovery of a name and word. This led the late Bro. Cyril Batham to suggest that the Royal Arch was a French invention.

In private conversation I asked him why he thought this. His response was perhaps cynical. English Freemasonry had been introduced into France mainly in aristocratic circles in the late 1720s. He believed that after a while they would have become bored with something which appeared to be based on an English artisan group and, with fertile minds and little to occupy their time, would have begun inventing additions to the Craft to amuse themselves. The French certainly had fertile Masonic imaginations, inventing literally hundreds of degrees and Orders, but I cannot accept that even in its original simple form the complexity of the ideas behind the Royal Arch could have been invented as an amusement for bored aristocrats.

A novel theory was recently promulgated by the authors of two books which have recently sent a frisson through the Masonic world: 'The Hiram Key' and 'The Second Messiah'. Their main thesis is that Freemasonry is the modern descendant of the original 'Jerusalem Church' formed by James the brother of Christ, which fell into abeyance when the Romans sacked Jerusalem in 70 AD. They argue that the rituals of the Jerusalem Church were written down, hidden under the sanctum sanctorum of the Temple where they lay undiscovered until the Knights Templar excavated the Temple site, found the scrolls adopted them as their rituals - leading to their being persecuted by Rome, which had usurped the place of the original Jerusalem Church. When the Templars were persecuted and their leaders executed some of them managed to escape to Scotland with the scrolls, turned themselves into Freemasons to protect their secret and hid the scrolls in the crypt of Roslyn Chapel, near Edinburgh. Taking Masonic ritual as actual history, the authors proclaim that the Royal Arch was invented as a sort of aide-memoire to remind the Templars and their successors how they rediscovered the true history and rituals of the Church.

That the Royal Arch was originally an intensely Christian degree is shown by the early manuscript rituals and catechetical lectures which have survived. Readings were given from the Old and New Testaments. Prayers were given in the name of Christ.

The candidate was raised not as a Companion of the Royal Arch but as a 'Knight Companion of St. John of Jerusalem and the Holy Royal Arch'. The scroll contained not the first verse of the Book of Genesis but the first verse of the Gospel of St. John. The Hebrew characters formerly at the angles of the triangle on the plate of gold on the pedestal represented the Trinity. In the two earliest manuscripts there is a final section to the lectures entitled 'The Mystic Knowledge of the Temple'. In it the architecture, furniture and decoration of King Solomon's Temple is described and given a distinctly Christian symbolism. To some this has suggested that the Royal Arch came into being to counter the de-Christianising of the Craft. But this, again, is a bad guess using hindsight. Whilst non-Christians began to appear in the Craft in the 1720s it was not until much later in the 18th century that the real de-Christianising of the Craft took place, long after the Royal Arch was firmly established in English Freemasonry.

Consideration of religion brings us to what I believe might be the origins of the Royal Arch. I cannot stress so strongly that what follows is only my ideas, which I cannot prove, but which seem to me to be both logical and sustainable.

A little earlier I spoke of the belief by some that the Royal Arch came into being so that that which was lost in the third degree could be found. When I was exalted, back in 1971, and when I was learning my ritual I found it very difficult to accept the statement in the exaltation ceremony that what was found in the vault by the Sojourners was the long lost secrets of a Master Mason. Indeed, and it may be heresy, I had great difficulty in accepting that because Hiram Abif was killed, the secrets of a Master Mason were lost. The way that they were conferred might have been lost by his death (only two of the three needed to confer them remaining) but the actual secrets would have been remembered by King Solomon and Hiram of Tyre. Then I remembered that, of course, ritual is not to be taken literally but is allegory and symbolism to teach us morality and truths. What then does the Royal Arch teach us?

To my mind, the essence of the Royal Arch is to lead the candidate, without transgressing the bounds of religion, to consider the nature of his God and his personal relationship with his God, however he worships Him.

Having come to that view, I then looked again at the origins of the Royal Arch and what early commentators had said about it. The greatest proponent of the Royal Arch in its early days was Laurence Dermott, Grand Secretary and then Deputy Grand Master of the Antients Grand Lodge. Dermott characterised the Royal Arch as "the root, heart and marrow of Masonry". He described the Craft as 'manual masonry' - eminently practical rules of life, which if we follow them would help us to live a life both pleasing to God and of service to man. But man is not just a practical being, he has an essential spiritual aspect to his nature. We begin to glimpse this in the third degree when we are reminded of man's inevitable end and are invited to reflect on the prospect of futurity. That spiritual aspect is taken up in the Royal Arch. Thus the Royal Arch completes the third degree by completing the man. Practicality in the Craft and spirituality in the Royal Arch provide, when combined with the religion that all must possess before they come into the Craft, for the complete man.

Knowing a little of those who shaped the Craft in its earliest organised years I know that little happened by accident, much was very carefully thought out. It would not at all surprise me to find that the scenario I have just described was what actually happened. Having established the Craft they looked for some way of bringing in the spiritual. We forget today how central to life was religion in the 17th and 18th centuries. It seems inconceivable to me that in that great age of enquiry they would not have developed some ritual system to engage the candidates mind on that essential part of his nature but would have simply stayed at the practical level of the Craft.

I stress, Most Excellent, that these are simply thoughts of my own. But they satisfy me, until time or circumstances should prove it otherwise. They certainly explain to me why Dermott should have called the Royal Arch "the root, heart and marrow of Masonry" and why his successors should have been insistent in the negotiations leading to the Union of the Two Grand Lodges that the Royal Arch should be incorporated in the definition of pure ancient masonry.