

DISCOVERING THE 'ARCH DEGREE'

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In 1759 the Grand Secretary of the Premier Grand Lodge of England wrote a letter to an applicant for charity. The reply is now one of the most often quoted passages in the history of 18th century English Freemasonry. The approach had been made by an Irish Freemason and in his response to this request the Grand Secretary, Samuel Spencer, wrote as follows: 'Our Society is neither Arch, Royal Arch nor Antient, so that you have no right to partake of our Charity.' The petitioner, William Carroll, hailed from Dublin and, finding himself on hard times, unsuspectingly appealed to the Grand Lodge in London which he would expect to respond as did his own Grand Lodge at home. The further implications of this incident, in so far as it indicated the gap between the Premier and Antients Grand Lodges, is not our concern this evening. What is important and never seems to have been fully or satisfactorily explained to brethren or Royal Arch companions is why, in the Grand Secretary's reply, there was a distinction made between 'Arch' and 'Royal Arch' . Was it because, in the appeal made, to this officer, the petitioner made specific reference to the fact that he was a qualified **Arch and Royal Arch Mason**, as well as being a member of an Antients Lodge in England? If that were so then it might partly answer the query though a nagging question remains 'Why did not the Grand Secretary simply explain that as his Constitution was not the same as that of the Antients he could not apply the former's funds to any who were not attached to his Grand Lodge? Instead he refers to **two degrees** that were not approved by the Moderns and therefore of which he could rightly claim to be wholly ignorant. By mentioning them in the same sentence as the Antients Grand Lodge he at least suggests that he is fully aware of their existence, even though membership of them cannot weigh with him in this instance.

From a student's point of view it can only be considered providential that he made such a reply for here we have unbiased acknowledgement of something that, as I have already said, seems to have been largely, if not completely, ignored by most Masonic commentators. That the Moderns Grand Lodge at this date did not recognise the Royal Arch we can fully understand. That was to come 7 years later. But what was this 'Arch degree' to which Spencer also referred? It is in an attempt to unravel that mystery that I have prepared what follows -The Discovery of the Arch Degree.

The fact that the petitioner in the above incident was an Irishman would suggest that it is in that country that we might begin to establish a trail. We can do so with yet another well known fact which has received more but inconclusive attention as regards its full significance. I refer to the item in an Irish newspaper - Faulkner's Dublin, Journal - for January 10th, 1744. Here we have the account of a Masonic procession which took place in Youghal, County Cork on the previous St. John's Day, December 27th. There we read that the Master of Lodge No.21 was preceded by an Arch carried by '2 Excellent Masons'. The two fullest English comments on this incident that I am aware of are those given by Bernard E. Jones in his Freemasons' Book of the Royal Arch (p.45) and Eric Ward in AQC Vol. 88 {pp.20ff). Bro. Jones writes as follows: 'We wish we could be certain that this 'Arch' was not a mere piece of added ornament - arches are not uncommon in public processions - but certainly the inclusion of the term 'Excellent Masons' does incline us to the inference that the procession was indeed one of R.A. Masons.'

It is manifest that Bro. Jones is puzzled by this incident and, whilst having to accept that it was not simply a bit of Irish public exuberance, he cannot do more than associate both the object and its supporters with the only art of Freemasonry that he knows in which an Arch and the description of Excellent Companions are employed. Bro. Ward is more categorical: the Youghal incident is not evidence of the Royal Arch. (p28)

Is there perhaps another way of looking at what was clearly a Lodge occasion? We are told specifically that the arch was carried in front of the Master and since Masonic processions, like ecclesiastical ones, are arranged so that the most significant person at that moment comes last this means that we are here involved in a Lodge occasion. If that is so then why do we have **Excellent** Masons carrying something not normally associated with the Craft degrees? Ward may be right in claiming that the term 'excellent' was simply an 'adjectival superlative' and did not necessarily mean 'installed in a Craft Chair' but surely the presence of an 'arch' , and especially when in this instance the reporter even described it as a 'Royal Arch' , seems inappropriate for a Blue Lodge celebration. Well, such reflections only serve to remind us that perhaps we have still not understood how the speculative Craft was already developing across the Irish Sea even at this early date.

I cannot here tackle the **whole** question as to the origins of our Masonic practices but there are three elements in that process that I believe have been overlooked. The first is that there was almost certainly evidence of operative Masonic practice around - in both the symbolic and administrative sense - when Anderson and Desaguliers inter alia were attempting to reorganise Metropolitan Freemasonry. We even have a statement as late as 1911 which asserts that English Grand Lodge Masonry had its origins in the workings of the prior Operative Craft. It is to that source, in so far as we can uncover it, that we must turn if we are going to make any progress in unravelling Masonic puzzles that have so far bemused, or baffled, us. Which leads to the second point.

In ancient operative practice there were two parallel lines of progress; a career in square or straight work, or a career in arch or curved work. I have provided details concerning this in a further Craft lecture as well as in my new standard work on the Mark degree, and once we begin to accept that this was the case we can immediately begin to solve three difficult queries in early Grand Lodge Freemasonry. These are: (a) Where did the idea of the Arch come from? (b) Why is there no mention of the Arch from the outset? (c) What was the Arch relationship to the Craft?

Simply stated, the organisers of the 1717 stage of English Freemasonry chose only to adapt certain parts of the old Operative practice - apprentice, Fellow of the Craft, and a **reigning Master** degree - and to be discreet in their use of what they knew about the Arch dimension to these stages. Yet the Arch aspect of the old Craft was nonetheless a fact and it was only a matter of time before some one, or some group, was going to insist that if Speculatives were, the true descendants of the old Operatives then one had to pay attention to the full customs of their working. That leads on to the third point.

There were at least two groups of Masons who followed Operative practice on the above basis. One was the assemblage of Freemasons who followed what was to be called the 'Old York' working, claiming that their practices were derived from operative patterns in the York area. The other was the Grand Lodge of the 'Antients' which made one point strenuously. The Craft ceremonies were not complete unless there was an Arch component and to acquire that knowledge you had to have passed through the reigning Chair of a **Master of Square Work**. It is here that I have to remind you that the Antients members were initially almost all of Irish extraction or

from lodges with Irish connections. We have thus come full circle and find ourselves back to connections with the Emerald Isle.

Nor will it now surprise you to encounter what was written by Dr. Fifield D'Assigny, a Huguenot like Desaguliers. In his book, which appeared in 1744, he spoke of 'a certain propagator of a false system some few years ago in this city (of Dublin) who imposed upon several very worthy men under a pretence of being Master of the Royal Arch, which he asserted he had brought with him from the city of York; and that the beauties of the Craft did principally consist in the knowledge of this valuable piece of masonry'. Until 1867 D'Assigny's book was only known through a quotation in Ahiman Rezon, the Book of Constitutions of the Grand Lodge of the Antients. Happily, since that date, copies of the complete work have been discovered and its even greater usefulness recognised. Whilst there is not time here to explain fully this work and its significance the book does contain certain interesting facts that seem relevant to my thesis.

We have first to note that prior to 1744 a Mason from York can propose a form of **Arch** working that clearly linked not only with the Craft in that city but was also acceptable to Craft Masons in Dublin. Moreover, he is for some months able to claim and show 'to the learned and wise who were his followers' that Arch Masonry was the principal object of the Craft and revealed its true beauty. This practice was only queried when someone else comes from London who 'had some small space before attained that excellent part of Masonry and plainly proved that his doctrine was false.' This **must mean** that by 1740 there was a quite different way of viewing and working the Installed or Past Master's degree as between London on the one hand and York or Dublin on the other. Indeed D'Assigny actually goes on to state that in 1744 there were **Arch Masons** in York who were so organised that this step was only possible for those who had passed the Chair and were excellent masons.

It is at this juncture that we need to take on board a fact that is all too often passed over by modern Masons. In their editions of the Constitutions of Masonry Anderson (England 1725) and Pennell (Ireland 1730) included a well known exhortation which ended as follows:-

'...let the Cement of the Brotherhood be so well preserv'd, that the whole Body may remain as a well-built Arch.'

For Pennell and Irish Masons this was much more than a mere expression. It referred to the whole structure and aim of Irish Freemasonry, as the following evidence suggests.

In June 1725 Lord Rosse was installed as Grand Master of Ireland. One of the ceremonies for that occasion was to hang a gold trowel around his neck with the words "not doubting your Capacity and Care to preserve the Cement of the Lodge so that the whole Body may remain as a well built Arch". In 1732 the Grand Lodge of Ireland adopted a new seal with the Trowel as a symbol of that same purpose, and thereafter a spate of lodge seals began to appear, though many of these, like one from Youghal in the 1750s, reveal not only a hand with a trowel but one holding a sword and also a complete Arch with pillars and keystone.

What we are seeing here is a reference, nowadays no longer applied, to an Arch degree - the setting up of a well-built and completed Arch - which was a component part of the three degree system then being established. What in fact was emerging was a new pattern: a first degree in which a brother was Entered and Crafted; a second degree in which he became a Fellow or Master of the Craft; and a third degree in which a brother was given the Master's part as a ruler of his Lodge and in the Craft at large. (This latter was so highly regarded in Operative practice, that until about 1730 this 3° was only conferred in our Premier Grand Lodge where a Grand Master presided.)

When a brother came to the above third degree in Ireland he would find himself in the presence of 3 Symbolical Grand Masters in the East. This is exactly how the reigning Masters of an Operative Lodge would have been discovered when an operative Mason reached the 5th grade (of 7) and was now considered worthy to be a ruler and architect - of square & compasses, of straight and arched work - in the Company. Let me here emphasize the point that this, and what follows, was what was intended as 'the Master's Degree' whereas what Prichard revealed in 1730 was only a part of the whole. The rest, by which he became an Excellent Mason, was literally veiled from him.

Yet the Excellent Mason also found himself faced with something else. (Here we circulate the copies of the Arch picture of Newport)

He would see set up before him a pillared Arch into which he would be instructed to set the keystone that had had been taught to prepare; as his Masterpiece in the completion of the Fellow of the Craft degree. Now we can perhaps begin to appreciate why the frontispiece of both Anderson's, and Pennell's works on the Constitution of , the Craft depicted a **well-built Arch ornamented with a keystone**.

It was that same keystone that the true Master would be taught to remove in order to discover the long-lost writings of the Law as this 3° proceeded. Herein we see the origin of what is **still today** the Irish form of the Royal Arch ceremony and we again see why the Constitutions' frontispiece contained **another** feature. On the pavement shown there is the Greek word - 'Eureka' - the 'I have found' of the recovered Word - whilst placed above the motto is the Pythagorean proposition the square of 3, which was the most important secret of Operative Masonry.

We are now at the point where we can see. the possible emergence of a distinct, if comparatively short, 'Arch' ceremony which would follow the Fellow craft and Mark Man, the Master Mason and Mark Master the Past Master or Excellent Master but would. Anticipate the Super Excellent (or Veils ceremony) and the Royal Arch.' It is as this sequence emerges in the 1750s that the Moderns, and the Ancients, forms of 18th century Freemasonry most noticeably divide. In the last half of the 18th century military and local Lodges of Antients or Irish origin are working all of the above ceremonies. In England there is an evident, though not a clear-cut, distinction between Moderns Craft Lodges that may, or may not have, Chapters attached to them but nothing else, and Antients' Lodges that provide their members with Ark, Mark and Link, a Past Master's, or Passed the Chair, degree, Excellent, Arch and Super Excellent ceremonies prior to the Royal Arch itself. There are, in the Grand Lodge Library in London, examples of ceremonies worked in the south-west of England from 1759 and associated with Dunckerley, which reveal five Arch stages before the Royal Arch. Whilst in 1809 there are eleven Arch points without which 'no Brother can be complete as a Royal Arch Mason'. The fact that one of these latter was the Arch of Noah might even help to explain why the ancient brass plates denoting extra Craft degrees in a Stirling Lodge, and dated c.1743, show the Arch degree as a Rainbow with a keystone at its head. The rainbow, after all, had already been mentioned in an early catechism as the source of the Arch and a symbol of the Great Architect's care.

It may never have been your privilege to experience the presentation of a reconstructed 4° ceremony as it was carried out by Antients Masons before 1865, or as it is still carried out by American Masons in places like Philadelphia to this day. All I would tell you is that at the very outset of both ceremonies, after having confirmed that the candidates or sojourners (and there always have to be three of them) are Past Masters of the Craft, they are led, first of all under a living Arch made up by the Companions and this Arch, or series of arches, is to symbolise the Arches which collapsed without their keystones. Anyone who witnesses this or takes part realises the importance still attached to the Arch in the ceremony that follows.

In your hands you have what, even to this day, is a feature in what was originally an Antients Chapter, meeting at Newport in the Isle of Wight. In Plymouth, one of the mid-18th century Chapters that still meets there has a similar miniature arch in the centre of the carpet (with the altar between the east end of the carpet and the 5 Principals) and under the arch are placed the 5 Platonic bodies.

I now want you to have another picture taken by me in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Canada, in March (1995). As you hold this picture I want you to listen to part of a ritual that is still extant in some parts of that land and the U.S.A. under the title of the 'Most Excellent Master degree'. This follows the Mark Master but still precedes the Veils and the Holy Royal Arch. In England it is one of the subordinate degrees attached to the Order of the Holy Royal Arch Knight Templar Priests though never performed. Its link there with an Arch part of Freemasonry is at least interesting. This is what happens:

The Marshal forms the brethren in a double file in the south facing east. The Master and Senior Warden, lead in an **anti-clockwise** direction three times round the altar and as they march they sing three verses of a hymn, of which this is the last:

'Companions assemble, on this joyful day

(The occasion is glorious) the keystone to lay:

Fulfilled is the promise, by the Ancient of Days,

To bring forth the copestone with shouting and praise.'

The 'Most Excellent Master then says "Craftsmen, nothing now remains to be done for the completion and dedication of the temple but placing the keystone in the **principal arch** and setting in place the ark of the covenant." The two pillars, J. and

B., are now brought forward, set up about three feet apart and a wooden arch, made to imitate blocks of stone, with a place left for the **keystone**, is set on top of them. The Master takes the keystone, steps up on a chair and sets it in its proper place and drives it down with 6 raps of the gavel. There at last is the **ceremony of the Arch degree that we have been seeking.**

That is also why, in most Royal Arch chapters that meet away from London, you will find some kind, of Arch with real keystones or arch stones at the head, and across the arch words such as - Fiat Lux et Lux Fuit. (Let there be Light and there was Light.) In January 1910 we discover an interesting minute in the Minerva Chapter of Kingston upon Hull. It reads: 'A material change and alteration took place in the Chapter this evening, namely the introduction of the Arch with 'Holiness to the Lord' painted in gold letters thereon, in front of the three M.E. Grands. The Pedestal and Master's Level, with appropriate inscriptions in Brass letters thereon, and the Burning Bush **within and under** the said Arch, being the first introduction of these essential requisites in this part of the United Kingdom...'

In his comment on this innovation Bernard E. Jones wrote: 'it is possible that some ideas were being borrowed from a travelling military lodge or were introduced by an Irish visitor.' (p.161) In view of what has already been stated above this does indeed seem a likely suggestion. For those Royal Arch Masons, who have such an item this is an ample reminder of a part of Freemasonry that was once a distinctive and essential element in the Royal Arch ceremonies but which in England and Scotland is now absorbed by talk of **a crypt or vault.**

With all this evidence before us it might be worth considering afresh the earliest form of Arch ceremony to which Dr. Oliver refers in his book, 'Origin of the Royal Arch' (pp. 86ff). In the first section of the Rite he describes the three candidates approaching the R.W. Master's chair with the words:

'Sire, the Temple being now finished and dedicated... we are anxious to obtain that distinguished reward ...of being admitted into the honourable degree of Geometrick Master Masons.'

On the return of Hiram, King of Tyre, this is done and search is made for the absent Hiram Abiff.

Oliver continues:

'After certain ceremonies (describing journeys) the Brethren made their report. Then followed a representation of the Arch, and the recovery of the Lost Word.'

Oliver concludes:

'Such was the outline of the Royal Arch, as a completion of the Third Degree... although the plan was subsequently extended by the addition of the cavern and its mysterious contents..'

There are, before we close, three other pieces of evidence that need to be considered by anyone who might still have doubts about the thesis which I have introduced. The first is that so-called Operative **Lodges** in Scotland invariably use an Arch as the motif for their banners. The second is that in Scottish Chapters to this day a pillared Arch is set up as the focus of their ceremony and an Arch degree ceremony is still listed as being under the auspices of the Supreme Grand Chapter in that land. And thirdly, in the Province of Northumberland, in the 1820s, we have Certificates appointing brethren to Provincial Office showing what look amazingly like the very Arch, Ark of the Covenant and Altar of incense features that suggest an Arch and Royal Arch connection.

What we have here uncovered begins to answer some of those persistent questions which so often puzzle Companions. How is the Royal Arch the completion of the Master's degree? Where does this Arch with its keystone come from? Why do we have an Arch rather than a dome? Why do Irish R.A. Masons still persist in keeping to an Arch and another legend, whilst we follow a different path? Where did the Ark of the Covenant and the ceremony of the Veils fit in? All these things at last begin to be much clearer once you have recognized the Arch Degree.

If you then want to know where the domed vault, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the pedestal secrets came from you are simply asking for yet another lecture.