

## ONE, TWO, THREE OR MORE

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Personal reflections on the development of the degree systems within Scottish Freemasonry.

The Master's Lecture 2004

When examining the work done by our predecessors in the organisation and structure of the craft one is consistently appreciative of the comprehensiveness and coherency of the constitutions and laws under which we operate and administer our lodges. At one time not so long ago, as secretary of another lodge in the province, it fell to me to help sort out the bungling ineptitude of recent generations, who in their desire to improve upon the legacy of their forerunners, had so chopped and changed the byelaws as to make them contradictory and inoperable – in fact they came close to being in conflict with *Constitution and Laws* of Grand Lodge.

It was at that stage that help was given by the Past Provincial Grand Secretary, using all his experience from similar situations. “KISS”, he said to me. “Keep It Simple Stupid. Go back to what was written by the founders and try to keep to minimal change.” He was right. The original byelaws plus one or two small alterations solved the problem. So Right Worshipful Brother Hugh thanks for your advice - although in terms of KISS I'm not sure whether that places you or me higher on the list. But here is another one for you to interpret.

The founders of this Lodge had it built into the byelaws that it was the duty of the reigning Master to present a lecture to the Lodge each year. Brethren it is a bald statement – each year whoever the Master is, he will present a lecture to the lodge. There is no qualification as to the merit of the Master as a researcher and likewise no reference to his abilities as a speaker. (This is the bit where I get my excuses in early!)

The other part of the byelaws state that this should be done at the Annual Visitation of Provincial Grand Lodge. So Brethren you can see that our predecessors did have a plan – if we are to be landed with a “numpty” as Master then Provincial Grand Lodge will suffer as well. In mitigation I should add that another part of our byelaws asks us to ‘work the unusual and investigate the peculiar’. In that spirit Brethren I present to you the Master's lecture for 2004, and as one of the stupid I will try to keep it simple – or did you mean short Brother Hugh?

“One, Two, Three, Four or More” – how many degrees are there for brethren in Scotland? And what are their origins? I started to look at this topic because of two events.

Firstly I got sight of the early minute books of St. Cyre Lodge of Auchtermuchty, covering the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. They make interesting reading in comparison to the way today’s minutes are constructed.

The second was a visit to Grand Lodge where I met with a Brother from Glasgow who was celebrating 50 years through the Chair - an impressive record for any Brother. His delight was compounded by the recognition given to this event by the Grand Master Mason. Indeed the coincidence went further in that it was the Grand Master’s father who had installed this worthy Past Master into the Chair of Solomon that half century ago.

The conversation moved to enquiries about the health of Freemasonry in Fife, and it was then Brethren that I put both of my feet in it. I mentioned the Royal Arch. This provoked an animated and what to me seemed an irrational response. The Royal Arch was the root of all that was evil in the world, far less Freemasonry. In this worthy past master’s view all masons should have their origins in Orange Lodges. “I came through the Orange Lodge. The Arch people will destroy Freemasonry”. On a personal level I cannot subscribe to these views but it did force me to think about why we have all these levels of degree working and where they came from and why some Brethren are not content with just the Three Degrees of St. John’s Masonry.

To return to St.Cyre, not only are the minutes beautifully written in copperplate hand writing but also they demonstrate a literary style that can only be described as minimalist in comparison with that which is the norm for today. Put it this way Brethren it would not have taken the Brother Secretary half an hour to read the minutes and intimate the correspondence.

Except for the Annual meeting on St. John’s Day, most of the early minutes are 2 or 3 lines.

Lodge room July 2<sup>nd</sup> 1804 the following members paid their quarter dues viz. Donald Melvile, Andrew Halkerston, William Adamson in all 4/-.

Lodge Room December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1805 David Leven and David Ritchie, weavers in Dunshelt, being both recommended were entered apprentices, having paid the dues. At the same time David Ritchie was passed and raised to Master.

It was this two-track system of degrees that stood out. Some Brethren only ever received one degree. Whilst at the same meeting others got all three.

Brother David Currie PM, former Grand Librarian and Archivist of Grand Lodge, confirms in his paper on Glasgow Kilwinning No. 4 that there were different grades of Mason. Some only ever became EA`s while at the same meeting on the same night others were entered passed and raised.

Currie also cites the case of one Rodionete Rodber, a musician. He was Entered as an apprentice in August 1735, passed to Fellow Craft in 1741 and raised to be a Master Mason in 1754. But he then went on to join the lodge in 1756. Not quite the way that it is done today. Rodber was what was that that time called a Mason of St. John. These brethren were inducted into Freemasonry, usually in their own homes, by legitimate lodge office-bearers, in this case the Master of No. 4 and five other Brothers, but did not belong to a specific lodge. This was done to avoid the financial requirements that lodge membership would impose. As the Brother became wealthier he could then pay all his dues and take up full membership

Professor David Stevenson likewise reports this concept of different grades of mason in the same lodge at the same time in his book *The First Freemasons*. Stevenson is not a mason but was given access to the extensive library and archive of Grand Lodge as well as access to many early Lodge minutes.

To quote Stevenson 'Freemasonry in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century was based upon Lodges, semi-secret organisations of initiates, combining sociability and fraternity with elaborate secrets and efforts to regulate entry to the craft of stonemason and its working practices. As the century progressed increasing numbers of non-stonemasons were accepted as members and a few lodges became dominated by such men.'

The earliest unbroken records, from Aitchison`s Haven and Mary`s Chapel dating from 1599 unfortunately only contain limited information but they do record the initiation of EA`s and FC`s. It is not however clear what the status and occupation of these early members was therefore it is difficult to determine to whether any of

these early masons were speculative or “gentlemen” masons. The minutes do hold references to trade issues together with the amounts paid in `box fees` and of course the arrangements for the St. John’s Day annual dinner. You will also notice at this stage that there is no mention of three degrees in the earliest minutes. To explain this it might be useful to examine the relationship between Lodges and Incorporations or Guilds, as they are more commonly known in England.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the Burgesses in each burgh around Scotland controlled trade. Many burghs delegated their regulatory powers to the Incorporation – a body that represented the tradesmen of a particular craft – and had the head of the incorporation as a member of the burgh administration. Where the burgh was small or the trade membership was small different trades would be joined to make incorporation. It was quite common for the mason trade to be part of the wright’s incorporation.

But inside the incorporation was a much more secret group – the Lodge. The lodge was represented within the incorporation by one of the Wardens, who often was Master of the lodge.

The Lodge however recognised no subordination to the Incorporation. Both could claim control of the Mason trade – the Incorporation through the power delegated to it by the Burgh – the Lodge through its ability to regulate the trades own affairs independent of any external authority.

Masons’ careers would pass in a zigzag pattern through the parallel structures of the Incorporation and the Lodge.

An Apprentice would be “booked” with the Burgh and incorporation – and then initiated as an Entered Apprentice with the lodge. Expiry of the apprenticeship converted the mason into a wage earning journeyman, while in the lodge he could become, on the payment of a fee, a Fellow Craft or Master Mason. For the vast mass of masons their progress in the Incorporation is now over. Only the very lucky or the well connected would go on to be Master of the Incorporation and a Burgess.

It is now that there is clear evidence of the ‘secret Lodge’. This is supported by evidence from the Court of Session who were asked to rule in the case of the Journeyman Masons Lodge versus the Incorporation of Masons in Edinburgh. The circumstances of the case devolve around the relevant authority of the Lodge or the

Incorporation to regulate the Craft. A bid to cut out the Lodge by the Incorporation was resisted by the Journeymen and the resulting court case gave the 'new' lodge legal identity for the first time.

A minute of 27<sup>th</sup> December 1804 at Auchtermuchty shows that this rivalry within the craft was not confined to Edinburgh. 'Anent Apprentices having no vote in electing the Master and wardens. Carried.'

This is also the period when the 3-degree system becomes firmly established. During the period 1599 to 1750 there was to be a dramatic growth in the number of lodges and a veritable explosion in membership of non-operative members. The age of the Speculative Lodge with its "gentlemen masons" was upon us and with it came the growth of degrees.

### **The Higher Degrees.**

As Bro. Dr. Ian Thomson, Past Depute Grand Master Mason will tell you, there is no higher degree than that of Master Mason but that did not stop other brethren adding to the existing three degrees. Bro. George Draffen, Past Grand Librarian of Grand Lodge and author of the *Triple Tau* the seminal work on the Scottish Royal Arch, claims that 'We do not know how or when the RA degree came to Scotland..... but I hold that it is not indigenous to Scotland.' He goes on to describe how the degree came to Union Chapter, Dundee in 1773. Edward Brereton, Grand Master of the Super-Excellent Royal Arch Lodge, No. 52, held in HM 37<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot exalted the first Super-excellent and Royal Arch companions, using an ambulatory warrant from the Grand Lodge of England according to the Old Constitutions (The Antients). Irish wool-comber travellers in January 1765 constituted the Chapter at Montrose. The first reference to a degree working in the Royal Arch comes from a sworn declaration 'duly attested as copied from the original record *then existing*, deposited with Grand Scribe E.' However, in this very hall last December the present Grand Scribe E. was candid enough to cast doubts about the authenticity of this document. None-the-less this 'lost record' tells us that on July the 30<sup>th</sup> 1743 in 'the lodge of Stirling Kilwinning, being met in Brother Hutchisons house and being petitioned by Mungo Nicol, shoemaker and Brother James McEwan, student of Divinity at Stirling, and being found duly qualified, they were admitted Royal Arch Masons of this lodge.'

The first public reference to the RA is in Faulkner's Dublin Journal of 14<sup>th</sup> January 1744 describing a Masonic procession in Youghal, County Cork: 'Fourthly the Royal Arch carried by 2 Excellent Masons, fifthly the Masters with all his proper implements, his rod gilt with gold, his deputy on his left with the Square and Compasses.'

Irish Masonic scholars also show that by the 1720's the degree system available in Ireland was as follows:

Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft, Master Mason

Past Master, Excellent Mason, Super Excellent Mason, Arch Mason and Royal Arch Mason

Mark Mason, Mark Fellow Mason, Mark Master, Link or Wrestle, Babylonian Pass or Red Cross of Daniel, The Jordan Pass and Royal Order or Prussian Blue

Black Mark, Templar (4 Grades), Mediterranean Pass, Malta Red Cross of Patmos and finally Knight Patmos.

Brethren, the degree system inherited by the Supreme Grand Royal arch Chapter of Scotland in 1817 was not substantially different. 20 degrees beyond the 3<sup>rd</sup> were available in lodges across Scotland. Not every lodge offered any or all of them, but they were there for the inquiring Brother.

### **Development of 'other degrees'.**

Freemasonry was also developing across the continent of Europe. In France of this time there were at least 15 grand lodges of some shape size or form but how many of these would be regarded today as regular is open to question. But it is here that a Scotsman, made a mason in a London lodge, was to be held responsible for the continued growth of degrees not only across Europe but also America.

Chevalier Andrew Michael Ramsay was to make famous his oration extolling the virtues of freemasonry to the European aristocracy. These degrees, known as the Scottish Rite, are said to come from the Rite de la Vielle Brethren, founded at Toulouse by Bonnie Prince Charlie and which he called Ecosais Fideles in honour of the reception given to his ADC Sir Samuel Lockhart by freemasons in Scotland.

Ramsay authorised the Lodge at Arras to offer his own degrees of the Eagle and the Pelican in addition to the Scottish Rite degrees. These were to multiply and from 9 original degrees covering symbolical masonry, the masonry of the crusades and then scientific masonry to degree systems offering 33 then 90 and then 95 degrees. In the patchwork of states that was to become Germany, Karl Gotthelf, Baron Von Hund, in 1755 introduced a new form of Scottish Rite, rectified masonry, more commonly called `Strict Observance`. It was allegedly directed by `unknown Superiors` and appealed to German pride in a time of growing Nationalism. John Augustus Starck joined the movement and developed from it another pseudo Masonic movement the Illuminati.

The aim of these German societies was revealed to be much more than `fraternal` - in some cases it was to have the aim of taking over the state. In Bavaria the society was proscribed and its members forbidden to meet or recruit on pain of death. This prohibition was to be extended to all Masonic organisations.

In addition the German societies kept in touch with their parent bodies in France and indeed the language of ritual in the `Higher Degrees` was French, not German. It takes little imagination to understand the concern that governments would have with secret societies meeting and possibly plotting during the time of the most dramatic social and political change in the known world – the French Revolution. The monarchies of Europe looked with horror as the terror of the Jacobins swept through France and Madame Guillotine worked her bloody way through the French “Aristos”.

But what was happening in Scotland? If you look to Masonic references the French Revolution is a non-event. It had no impact on Scotland. Even the second Jacobite Rebellions scarcely registered, despite the fact that many eminent Masons were Jacobites. Notable figures like Lord Kilmarnock a Jacobite and Mason was to lose his head but it was more common, as Currie describes in his research into Glasgow No. 4, was for the lodge to go `off minute`. Meetings were held, candidates were made masons and in due course registered at Grand Lodge but all the time the Minute Book remained strangely silent. Currie attributes this to lodge members probably being sympathetic to the Stuart cause and fearful of government reaction and so kept their heads well below the parapet. It seems to have worked for them. A gap after the `45 and the lodge resumes with minutes in 1754.

So what was happening to the people of Scotland post 1745? Major changes were taking place in all the burghs and in the general government of Scotland. Remember Brethren, Scotland had its own independent parliament up to 1707, which passed Scots Laws, of in contradiction to or at least separate to the Common Law of England. But with the Act of union of 1707 the government of Scotland moved to London. Separate provision remained for us, when needed and when it could be fitted in. But Scotland was to be run by the monarch's Scottish adviser, Harry Dundas, Keeper of the Signet, Solicitor General and then Lord Advocate was to keep Scotland quiet during this period. By 1790 Dundas had served in 3 governments, each of a different political hue and of the 41 parliamentary constituencies in Scotland, Dundas, aka Harry the Ninth, was to directly control 32.

More importantly he was to become President of the Board of Control of the East India Company. Between 1784 and 1801 he was to put his placemen in government posts in Britain or in India – and Brethren most of these were Scots. They were to receive over one quarter of all government pensions and Scots were to occupy over one third of all state sinecures. Not bad for a race the makes up one sixth of the British population. This development was to satisfy the gentry and keep the landowners reasonably content.

By the way I don't know whether Dundas was a freemason or not. He certainly exhibited some good Scots qualities – a noted drinker, especially in the company of Pitt the Younger, the Prime Minister – both of whom could drink many of the government of the time under the table.

But in the burghs prosperity was growing, especially for masons. The expansion of towns and building in stone was accelerating. The new rich wished solid monuments to display their wealth and this led to an increase in demand for tradesmen. Remember Brethren that the burghs controlled the regulation of the Merchant Guilds and the Trade Incorporations. In short prices and quality control lay within the 66 burghs scattered across Scotland and in addition the 66 burghs as part of the Act of Union chose 16 MPs to go to London. 'Corruption and venality were rife', writes T. M. Devine in *The Scottish Nation*. 32 people in Edinburgh had the vote. To be a Burgess of the Incorporation with the vote carried with it many major benefits – including the ability to line your pockets by controlling the prices. It may be for this

reason that many gentlemen found that membership of the Lodge, with its close connection to the Incorporation was desirable because of its ability to influence Trade. Currie tells us that Brethren better known to history as “The Tobacco Lords” dominated the membership of Glasgow No. 4 in this period. These men, dominating the lucrative Virginia trade, were to become fabulously wealthy. Currie claims that the reason that they did most of their business in the Lodge and not the Merchants’ Guild was the level of secrecy. The lodge kept secrets - both Masonic and trade - the guild did not.

The point that I am trying to make is that although major change was taking place in Scotland there was very little civic disruption. Freemasonry continued to develop. Speculative masons joined lodges – possibly for personal gain or in order to influence trade, but there was little questioning of lodges and lodge members. They were not seen as some of the Brethren on the continent were as potential revolutionaries or as in the case of the Illuminati and Strict Observance in Bavaria as a direct threat to the state and required to be proscribed. However, this happy state was not going to last.

Much of the civil administration of Scotland did not change with the Act of Union but instead were guaranteed survival by it. In particular the Kirk, for the vast mass of people, was the visible arm of government. The parish collected and distributed poor relief, punished minor civil as well as religious offences, educated most children and buried the dead.

The Law, as represented by the Solicitor General and the Lord Advocate, together with the Lord Justice Clerk formed the Scottish Executive, though in theory responsible to the Home Secretary were given a great deal of leeway, as was the Court of Session, who were able to adjudicate in trade disputes between the incorporations, burgesses and the merchants, under an Act of 1661.

But as the trades grew in wealth they found that they did not have a similar growth in their ability to influence the political situation within the burgh. Resentment was expressed by a rich Edinburgh merchant, Thomas McGrugar, who, writing as Zeno denounced the closed corporations because they did not give any say to the new rich, intelligent and propertied classes.

The impact of the French Revolution and its “Enlightenment” ideas of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity was now to change the fairly supine challenges to the established order in Scotland.

The publication of Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* which advocated universal franchise, free education for all, old age pensions and allowances of £4-0-0 a year for every youngster under 14 – the Scottish Parliament has now cottoned on to this – and the subsequent banning order, galvanised the population into political debate.

Attempts to reform the burghs were again rejected by parliament in 1792 but this time instead of indifference the population reacted by rioting. These anti-Dundas riots raged for 3 days in Edinburgh and extended to Aberdeen, Dundee, Perth and Brechin. Devine suggests that Scots of relatively humble origin, including masons, wrights and weavers were starting to form ‘Societies of the Friends for General Reform’. However, as the events in France were to take a much bloodier turn so to were events in Scotland to become more violent.

By 1792 local societies of Friends of the People had been formed in all towns south of Aberdeen and in many of the major villages of Central Scotland. Wealthy and respectable tradesmen and merchants, many of whom had to be Masons, formed them. What was to worry the authorities most was the outbreak of spontaneous riots that were to break out along the towns of the East Coast. These were not the work of the common mob but a genuine outpouring of pent up frustration at the poor level of representation that had existed in Scotland. Two weeks of rioting in Dundee was only quelled by deploying two troops of Dragoons.

The government now reacted. William Dalrymple of Fordell in Fife and Thomas Muir, two fiery Edinburgh lawyers were arrested and accused of sedition. Tried by Lord Justice Braxfield, the outcome of the trial was a foregone conclusion. Braxfield is famous for his introductory remark to Muir that “Ye`r a gae bonnie chiel, but nane the waar o’ a guid hingin”.

The trial led to a bungled attempt at revolution – the ‘Pike Plot’. Robert Watt, a former government spy and agent provocateur was found with Pikes in his house that allegedly belonged to the Society of Friends of the People. Watt was to hang for this attempted sedition.

This was to be the high point of rebellion. It was now that Dundas took the gloves off. Habeas Corpus (The Act for Wrongful Imprisonment) was suspended and a general round up of all suspected radicals began. But it was shock at the bloody events in France with the death of the king at the guillotine that led to a change in Scottish opinion. They saw the revolution to be against their interests and rounded on suspected radicals.

Calm reigned between 1792 to 1797 when a new factor was to change the way Scottish society was to view secret societies.

The United Irishmen were a republican group across the North Channel, which had close ties with the Ulster Scots and of course with their brethren, and I don't mean Masonic, on the mainland. A similar group the United Scotsmen with close ties took root in Fife, Ayrshire, Stirlingshire and Forfar. All were bound by secret oaths. Migrant wool combers and weavers maintained communications. Remember the way the Royal Arch was spread on the East Coast of Scotland?

Rebellion broke out in Ireland in 1798. It was brutal and bloody. But instead of getting support from Scotland, 13 of the 20 British regiments raised to quell the revolt were raised in Scotland.

One of the reasons that the United Irishmen had hopes of support were the Militia Riots that spread over Scotland in 1797. The Militia Act had been introduced in Britain to increase the supply of men for the army, which was getting thumped by the French. Local people feared that if they joined they would be sent overseas. When it was made clear that this was not the case the riots subsided.

In the St Cyre minutes there are two references to the militias. In 1811 it is recorded that 'Local militia or yeomanry or volunteer corps of this county... shall not be considered exempt from quarter dues save and except when embodied in actual service.' But even then, the caution of the mason comes in, they shall not be entitled on becoming disabled and 'shall have nolike to aliment or provisions for ordinary members'.

The second reference is contained in a minute of January 13<sup>th</sup> 1813 when 'Sergeant Major James Allan, Sergeant Christopher Cheesbrough and James Adams, soldier in the Durham Militia, at present quartered here. Entered, passed and raised as honorary members'. This is at the height of the Napoleonic Wars and obviously the

level of security is acute and the militias are being used in Britain to prevent any threat of uprising.

But to return to the subject of degrees, in 1799 the Government introduced the Unlawful Societies act as a supplement to the Secret Oaths Act. It would now become a criminal offence to belong to an organisation with a national organising committee and which held its meetings behind closed doors. This act would have outlawed freemason lodges and the Grand Lodges of England, Ireland and Scotland.

The personal intervention of the Dukes of Moira and Atholl with Prime Minister Pitt produced an amendment to the Act, which saved the day, at least for Craft freemasonry. If a roll of all members were to be communicated to local magistrates the lodges would be allowed to continue.

This produced legal anomalies between the practice in England and that of Scotland. The Premier Grand Lodge was to claim that the first 3 degrees in freemasonry including that of the Holy Royal Arch were to be included in its returns.

However in Scotland Grand Lodge was to stake a claim only for the three degrees of St. John's Masonry. Whether this was from fear of the law and the interpretation that Dundas and his placemen might put on it or for some other reason I am unable to say.

The anomaly is compounded by what Bro. Bob Cooper claims as 'The Operatives Revenge'. Having established that only three degrees can be worked Grand Lodge were petitioned by a West Coast Operative Lodge, who claimed the Mark Master Degree had been worked from 'time immemorial' and that they insisted on their right to continue. Needless to say Grand Lodge stuck to their principles and sort of gave in. This is why there is still a difference of opinion today over the ownership of this degree between Grand Lodge and Supreme Grand Chapter. In England the position is clear – they have a separate Grand Mark body.

Brethren you will be pleased to know that this is the final section. Scotland can claim to have introduced the first speculative lodges. They worked a series of degrees – most likely 2 to start with, but in accordance with the practice in the incorporations, many only took but one degree and received the Masons' Word. Masonry gradually moved from operative to speculative and has added much to its form. But these additions have not altered the plan and purpose of our glorious craft –

to teach a system of pure morality, by allegory and symbol and to inspire in our members a veneration and reverence for God so that we may fulfil our destiny on earth and may be found worthy of being raised to the sublime degree of perfect manhood in the eternity of heaven.