

THE MASONIC APRON.

No doubt many Brethren, when they were invested with this distinguishing badge for the first time, must have pondered over the eulogistic terms in which it is described.

Yet a moment's consideration should suffice to convince us that the "badge of innocence and bond of friendship" when sincerely worn and considered as such is something beyond compare.

In general the wearing of an apron, as an emblem of purity and sacrifice, has ever been associated with mystic religious rites from the earliest times; it may well be, therefore, that its perpetuation by the Craft is a direct link with those days.

Some authorities however, hold that the speculative Masons adopted their aprons from the Operative Lodges or Guilds, from which they suggest the Speculatives gradually evolved, emerging as a separate body in the 17th Century.

Aprons worn by the Operatives were obviously intended to protect their clothing and as such extended below the knee. It is not without interest that the early speculative Masons did in fact wear a much larger apron than that at present in use, as can be seen from old engravings and pictures in the Library and Museum at our London Headquarters; which notion is correct is not material to the present paper, so we will proceed with the apron as we know it today.

The Apron of the E.A. is of white lambkin unornamented, the lamb being a symbol of sacrifice and white an emblem of purity of heart. It indicates that the wearer has been dedicated to the work of building spiritually within himself a temple to T.O.A.O.T.U., silently and unostentatiously even as Solomon's Temple was erected without the use of metallic tools.

At the investiture the triangular flap should be pointed upwards to represent the mystic symbol of fire. It should here be remembered that in ancient times the triangle was regarded as a sacred symbol. When shown standing on its base it symbolised the sacred fire and when standing on its apex, water. Here, therefore is the apron with the flap raised symbolising an altar with the sacred or sacrificial fire.

Again the raised flap and apron together produce a five sided figure, which is a symbolic reference to the five who hold a Lodge, the five Pts of F and the five senses of man.

The F.C.Apron is similar in design and substance but has two pale blue rosettes on either side of the point of the flap which is now worn down. The flap in this position represents water, which is one of the elements depicted with the E. of C. in a F.C.Lodge, and which together symbolise the minimum requirements to sustain human life.

The choice of blue as the colour for the rosettes is believed by many to derive from the use of this colour by the priests of Israel in their sacerdotal garments. We find this question of the ancient significance of certain colours referred to in "The Manual of Biblical Antiquities" by Dr.Cox as follows;-

"To be clothed in white was a mark of honour and white was regarded as an emblem of purity and joy. Kings and Princes were clothed in purple and scarlet was also worn as a mark of royalty and power. Blue was held in great estimation, was regarded as the sacred colour and was much used in sacerdotal vestments and the hangings of the Temple".

Those who are aware of the different colours used in the various grades of the Craft will observe how closely this distinction of colour is preserved to this day.

W.Bro. J.S.M.Ward, the well known Masonic writer, states that "Light blue was the colour of the Goddess Isis and later became the color of the Virgin Mary and the rose is her emblem"; he suggests that the use of these blue rosettes signifies that all below the rank of W.M. symbolise the passive or feminine as against the creative or masculine aspect of the Creator which latter is represented on the W.M's apron by the tau cross.

The two rosettes stress the dual nature of man and suggest that the F.C. is not yet a complete and united being. Body and Soul are in union, as indicated also by the Ks of this degree, but they are not in complete accord with the spirit as in a M/M.

We now come to the M/M apron which is ornamented with a border of light blue ribbon, three rosettes, two seven-strand tassels and is

fastened with a buckle in the form of a serpent.

The colour of the trimming has already been explained; the two tassels are probably evolved from the pendant ends of the tape by means of which aprons were originally secured. Their seven strands serve to remind us that seven was always a sacred number; hence the seven who form a perfect Lodge, the seven steps to the E, and the seven times ten the allotted span of human activity; the seven liberal arts and sciences, seven days of the week and many more of like nature.

Many early 18th Century aprons without tassels had paintings on the leather, in some cases these depicted the two Pillars B & J and this may possibly have influenced the modern designers when adding the tassels. This is all the more probable when we remember the importance attached to these two pillars in our ritual as well as in all ancient rites. The Egyptian Book of the Dead refers to two pillars "Tat" and "Tattue" having the same signification as in the days of Solomon. In different ancient rites they represented male and female, light and darkness, good and evil and many similar contrasting meanings.

The number of rosettes is now increased to three, the last being within the apex of the triangular flap; this signifies that the spirit has assumed control of the soul and body, a superior condition to that of the P.E.

We also find a reference to the three columns Wisdom, Strength and Beauty. Wisdom is depicted by the serpent on the buckle, strength by the triangular flap (a triangle being the strongest structure known) and Beauty in the association of light blue ribbon and white lambskin.

In short the apron should remind us that we have promised to subdue passion, to avoid moral evil, to forgive and overlook the failings of a brother, to relieve the distress of others, to realise that it is a duty to sacrifice ourselves on occasions that others may be helped thereby and to value spiritual and intellectual attainment above worldly possessions.

I cannot better conclude than by quoting another passage from the recent work "The Freemason's Craft" by W. Bro. S. M. Hills from which most of the foregoing observations have been extracted.

"This book has been written with the idea of stimulating

"interest in our ceremonies and not with a view to expressing
"pedantic views upon what was or was not the idea of those who
"formed our ritual in the early days. It is neither suggested
"nor to be assumed that everything here said was the original
"idea of those who first decided what form the apron should take".

Acknowledgement must also be made to W.Bro.J.S.M.Ward to
whom I am indebted for many extracts from "The M" M's Book"

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AN EARLY PAINTED APRON.

In volume IV (1891) page 108 of the Transactions of the Lodge Quatuor Coronati No. 2076, a hand-painted Masonic apron is described and illustrated by J.E. Green F.M. 1489.

This apron was given to Bro. de Wet of Johannesburg by his father Bro. Jacobus Petrus de Wet, of Cape Town, who was a member of the Good Hope Lodge, and who received it from the late Surveyor General Hertzog.

This apron was exhibited in 1887 at the Exhibition of Huguenot Curiosities, and was catalogued as a Masonic Apron over one hundred years old. It is made of kid or lamb skin, is lined with green silk, and bound with green ribbon; the lower part is semi-circular, like the Dutch Rose Cloth Apron, instead of being square. All the various designs are hand-painted and finished with marvellous skill and accuracy.

In the front are all the symbols of Craft Masonry; the gavel, trowel, square, 24 inch gauge, heavy maul, rough and perfect ashlar, sword, torch, beehive and bees, shovel, crow, level, plumb, compasses, Volume of Sacred Law, and scroll. There are also a trough and a serpent coiled round a cushion. On the left of the Apron is the Pillar B., and on the right the Pillar J. On these two pillars are painted six tableaux.

Above the Pillar J. is depicted the starry firmament with the moon; and above Pillar B. the sun. On the flap of the apron is a five pointed star, with the letter G. in its centre, with seven five pointed stars in the firmament around it. At the back of the Pillars are trees, which are either Acacia or Cassia.

In the centre of the Apron is the tessellated pavement, and seven steps leading to the portico of a building supported by six pillars. In the centre between the two middle pillars, is a pedestal on which rests the Volume of the Sacred Law, open,

THE MASON'S APRON.

The following is an address delivered by W. Bro. H. Vernon Tovey, P.M. of the Perfect Ashlar Lodge, No. 1178, at the May meeting of the Gallery Lodge No. 1928, of which he is a member, presided over by the Master, W. Bro. Clifton Robbins:-

In the days before coarse linen or canvas was available, all artificers' aprons were made of animal skins. The old-time "Flesher" skinned the carcasses for sale in his shop, and tanned the hides for various purposes. The skins were taken off from the neck downwards, including the forefeet, which were used as "ties" to keep the apron round the waist, and the skins, being both cheap and tough, were used to protect the clothing of the operative mason from chafing against the edge of his bench or the sharp projections of the stone he was shaping. Originally, these aprons were long, coming down to the ankle, and in that form they were adopted by the Speculative Mason in the early days of the Craft.

In this early form a buttonhole was cut in the upper corners of the bib or neck part so as to fasten in over the chest. Another cut was made in the lower corners so that the ends could be drawn up, clear of the feet, when the Mason was not at his bench. As time went on, the Speculative Mason made the shape of his apron more ornamental though less useful, thus marking the transition from Operative to Speculative Masonry.

In some of the earlier specimens of the apron to be seen in the Museum at Freemasons' Hall, the apron was rounded at the top of the bib and spread out fan-wise, towards the bottom and cut shorter than the earlier ones. Others, again, were much smaller, being only about 14 inches by 10 inches or so, whilst many were formed without bibs. There were no tassels or rosettes, and no turnover at the edges.

In Dr. Anderson's first Book of Constitutions there is a picture of a Master with an ankle-deep apron, one corner turned up and tucked inside the bib or strings. These strings are, no doubt, responsible for the present-day tassel, for, as the strings became

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collars, and, so far as can be traced, this seems to have been the first time that any mention was made of the respective Jewels each Warden should wear.

In 1731 Dr. Desaguliers proposed that Grand Lodge Stewards should be distinguished by a red lining to their apron, and a collar of the same hue, and that all Masters, Wardens and Masons should wear white. Yet, in 1734 we find the Grand Master's Sword Bearer wearing an apron lining of deep yellow. When, however, he was made an Officer of Grand Lodge this was abandoned for blue.

Provincial Lodges followed their own inclination in the colour of their collars and linings, for, in 1740, the York Lodge issued an instruction that the linings of the aprons of Masters and Wardens should be white and that the aprons of F.C.'s and E.A.'s were to be unlined. About this time Grand Lodge adopted the fringe to the apron, but in 1772 it was done away with.

During the latter part of the 18th century we find another change. Aprons were rounded at the corners and were ornamented with Sq.'s, L.'s, P.H.'s, C.'s, copies of the Pillars which stood in the porchway entrance, and other emblems of the Masonic Craft. Indeed, some went much further, and some splendid specimens of needlework, engraving, etc., are to be seen in the Museum. Other aprons were hand-painted or printed, and Jacob's ladders, illustrations of the sun, moon and stars, with special ornamentations, according to the skill of the housewife or her approval or otherwise of the Masonic Craft, were worked on them.

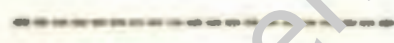
The signs of several Degrees were also all combined on one apron, so that members of the Craft, Royal Arch, Mark Masons, etc., etc., had need of one apron only, whatever Lodge they might be attending. Sprigs of acacia were embroidered on the flap and round the edges. There is even one apron, of noble dimensions, which is fringed with a handsome black silk fringe and "worked" in black instead of colours.

In 1778 the Country Stewards Lodge, whose duties consisted in arranging the country or summer outing for Grand Lodge to Roxton

Islington or Canonbury, petitioned Grand Lodge for permission to be allowed to wear a green lining and collar in recognition of their "arduous" labours. This favour was granted, but was taken away again soon after.

United Grand Lodge, in 1814, decided upon the present pattern of apron, and that and the colour of the lining and collar remain the same to-day as then.

For gaudily decorated aprons one has to go to the Continent. Those in France were, if not things of beauty, at least a joy to their owners, as they were ornamented with golden suns, rays in the colours of the rainbow and decorated in many ways. In the French F.C. Degree the flap of the apron was buttoned up, while in the Master's apron it was turned down.



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