

50 Years in Freemasonry

Talk to the James Watt Lodge No. 5546

19th January 1978

Worshipful Master, Brother Wardens and Brethren,

In giving this talk on 50 years in Freemasonry, I intend to try and answer questions I have put to myself over the years, and which may be of interest to the Brethren.

The information I have collected in Masonic travels from west to east enables me to do this and forms the main part of this paper.

The history of the James Watt Lodge has been written and covers 40 years of this time (1935-1975) but my talk will begin at the end of the 50 years. It will be in reverse order 1978-1928 while events are fresh in my mind, particularly with regard to the founding and consecration of a new lodge in the Seychelles in 1977. The sequence of events was quite simple, I was in Mauritius in 1970 and 1971 where my son-in-law was stationed at the R.N. base and attended the dedication of a building by the Lord Bishop who was resplendent in his robes of office at the ceremony in 1971.

The following night I visited an English Constitution Lodge, "The Lodge of Friendship" and arriving early heard someone playing 'Nellie Dean' on the organ - it was my Lord Bishop, The Reverend Edwin Curtis who gave the address in Westminster Abbey on Jubilee Day. He suggested that as I was going to the Seychelles I should look up two brethren who were interested in forming a new lodge and make myself known to them.

Travelling by slow cargo boat I was seen off by members of a Scottish Constitution lodge - another "Lodge of Friendship" which I had visited in Port Louis and where I was the only white man present. This is referred to in a paper given to this lodge called "A Visitor Abroad - Mauritius" in 1971 and is available, in the Library, to the brethren.

There are over 10 Lodges directly attached to Freemasons Hall London including the English Constitution Lodge of Friendship at Phoenix Port Louis. Provincial Grand Lodge however as we know it is called O.G.R. or Overseas Grand Rank.

The Seychelles comprise of about 92 islands in the Indian Ocean with about 60,000 population, 90% Roman Catholic, 8% Anglican and about 20 whites, 1400 miles from Mombasa and 1000 miles from Maruitius. The vast majority are of French African origin. Mahe is the most important island where the Lodge meets. Praslin Island, about 20 miles away, is the home of the unique coco-de-mer palms, the nuts of which are shaped and as large as a female torso and is known as the original Garden of Eden.

Much further away is the island of Aldebra with the giant tortoises in a wild state which are protected as are the turtles. About 200 years ago it was a pirates refuge and formed part of the slave trade with the first settlement on St. Annes Island about 5 miles from Mahe.

It has taken more than 12 years to form this lodge which was consecrated on 14th September, 1977 with West End working. The Seychelles Lodge No. 3789 operates under the District Grand Lodge of East Africa at Nairobi whose Officers all paid their own expenses for the visit.

Over these years there were many frustrations and disappointments in finding suitable places to meet with a transient fluctuating membership. They formed a club - The Four Square Club which met monthly, which the Lodge does now, for the benefit of overseas visitors.

There is no record of a previous English Constitution Lodge but I suspect that there has been a previous French Lodge, as there is a Lodge Road in Mahe. I can remember at my visit 7 years ago an old timber building with steps at either side of a verandah with two imposing columns which looked as if the decoration had been plastered over at the top. This has now been demolished. My visit last year I spent some time looking for obvious signs of a temple, such as the square and compasses which you will find on some keystones on old buildings in Mauritius, but this was of no avail.

The islands became independent in 1976. In 1975 the Grand Secretary, Worshipful Brother Stubbs, visited the island and informed the brethren there would be no objection to meeting regularly as a lodge in the house of a brother where they had had a monthly get together for over 3 years. There were many obstacles, chiefly with no building to meet in. However, this brother kindly gave a piece of his garden for the brethren to build a lodge room which they did themselves.

Then came the political comm. The new President was approached and gave the go ahead for plans to found a lodge as the Secretary Designate had previously explained to the Planning Committee that we were not a secret society, the principles of Freemasonry can be discussed quite freely and openly. The so-called masonic secrets relate only to the ceremonial and symbolism by which they are taught and expounded.

Many of the petitioners were now scattered over the world, as you can well imagine, and the work fell upon the Secretary to collect signatures and clearance certificates for the Petition which was passed around. Pieces of the lodge furniture were smuggled out of Uganda where lodges disappeared under Amin's regime, with the surrender of warrants, the collar, cuffs and aprons bear the name of the Kampala Lodge. The gavel was made from timber which housed the slaves in the old days of piracy, by the 1st Worshipful Master.

The story is told of a cruel slave trader taken sick, the only remedy being judicious blood letting which was performed with excessive enthusiasm!

If any brother finds himself in this part of the world he will be made most welcome to the lodge at Bel Ombre, he should also make a visit to St. Annes Island the original settlement in the ketch "Twiga", swahili for giraffe, built and owned by the 1st Worshipful Master. He will be able to obtain a drink and a curry in some ancient buildings whose walls are covered with the names of visitors in many languages from all parts of the world.

There you will find the names of some of the 29 Founders and an outline of the ketch now named Seychelles 8789 surrounded by the Square and Compasses among the graffiti on the walls.

A mile or two from the Masonic Hall along the coast you will find lines cut in the rock drawn from an old map handed down as the site of pirates hidden treasure. In 1971 I had a long chat with the treasure hunter, a Mr. Wilkins from Zanzibar, who had spent over £42,000 in 22 years in his efforts without success in excavating and pumping the site. I understand that about 1870 there was a tremendous storm which caused heavy damage and dislodged gigantic granite boulders covering the site.

The Festive Board presents problems with the tiling of the room as you would expect in the tropics.

I was much impressed by a speech of the District Grand Master in which emphasis was laid on the difficulty in maintaining contact with lodges in countries where the border had been closed, namely Tanzania and by a visiting brother from Nairobi who stressed that we had a tendency to keep too much to ourselves from the outside world which should know more of what we do and our principles. It is up to each individual brother in his conduct to emulate the teachings of the craft. So much for the Seychelles Lodge.

I would now like to refer to words which are used in connection with the entrance of every candidate to the Lodge room. The Tyler's duties are to keep off all cowans and intruders and he is provided with a sword for that purpose. Now who or what is a cowan? The Tyler's duties are regarded as most important, in many lodges they are in the hands of an experienced Past Master.

It seems that the word has come to us from Scottish Operative Masonry of long ago. In Scotland the word "cowan" denoted a dry dyker - a man who built walls of stone held in position by their own weight and not by mortar. As he did not use mortar on prepared stones in his trade, he was looked upon as an inferior type of artisan by the operative mason and as such was denied admittance to a Mason's Lodge - which in those days probably meant a group of operative Masons engaged in some building project. So conscious were the operative Masons of the need to keep cowans out that the early Tylers - who, as their name suggests, were those who placed roofing tiles in position after the masons had completed the walls and the carpenters the rafters - from their lofty perch in the roof were charged with the additional task of reporting the imminent approach of cowans.

This presumably was intended to give the Masons time to band together to keep off the cowans and intruders. This was pure snobbery - the cowan was probably just as skilled as the Mason. Nevertheless, the distinction persisted, for records of operative masons dated 1460 speak of cowans, while it was not until 1688 that there is any record of a cowan being admitted as a member of a Mason's fraternity - John Syme "an honest old man and a cowaner" was admitted to the Commongate Lodge in that year.

Over 100 years later a stone dyker was admitted as an entered apprentice in the Stonehaven Lodge which consisted of "Operative Masons, Speculative Masons and one Cowan".

Over the years the word "cowan" seems to have undergone a change when used by our ancient brethren, the Operatives. Instead of referring only to "dry dykers" it came to include -

- (1) those who had never served an apprenticeship to the Masons trade,
- (2) those who had not completed an apprenticeship.

It would appear that Operative Masons jealous of their skill and status, had far more reasons to exclude such persons as those described in (1) and (2) than the true cowan.

Finally, what has Speculative Masonry made of the cowan? In the early 1700s there are records showing that the early Speculatives were if anything more bitterly opposed to the admission of cowans than even the Operatives had been. As early as 1738 the "Constitutions" laid down that "no full and accepted Mason shall work with, be employed by, or teach his trade to a cowan". About this time the import of the word underwent a further change for it came to include any person not a brother.

Before the end of the century it also applied to the "eavesdropper" - one who listens to conversations not intended for his ears. The word comes from the practise of lurking between the eaves drop (the line along which the rain ran off the eaves) and the wall of the house while listening. An old catechism speaks of "a cowan or listener" being punished "by being placed under the eaves till the water runs in at his shoulders and out at his shoes".

So it appears that Speculative Masonry has dealt more harshly with the "cowan" than even Operative Masonry did - the old Operatives may have excluded him because of his alleged lack of skills and training, but at least they did not use the word as we do. We could, with justice apply it to anyone not a Freemason, but we are on much more uncertain ground when it is used as a term of reproach.

You should carry your Certificate. I hope these few words of the meaning of the word cowan will be of interest.

And now a few words of explanation of the tassellated border adjoining the black and white square pavement which you see in front of you at every Lodge Meeting. The square pavement symbolises the joys and sorrows of man's chequered existence and is referred to in the presentation of the Grand Lodge Certificate. The triangular stones you see at the edge of the square pavement are referred to in an official publication in South Africa regarding the activities of certain organisations in 1965 which included Freemasonry.

The report of the Committee of Enquiry concluded that there were no irregularities whatever and went on - the stones have all the same shape and are therefore interchangeable for every part of the border and that a Freemason symbolically is not bound in any particular place. The Freemason as such is a cosmopolite and the tassellated border represents the whole brotherhood dispersed over the surface of the earth. Every brother in whatever country he is placed should endeavour to form part of the tassellated border and carefully avoid any irregularities which would unfit him for that position.

Here are a few notes on Firing which have the Authority of different Grand Lodges at the Festive Board. One Authority states that this custom is derived from the celebration of an important toast by a discharge of musketry. Thus, at the celebration of Preston Gild in 1682, the Mayor's procession halted at the principal Bars (gates) and the Market Place. At each stop a barrel of happy ale was broached and the health of King, Queen and nobility drunk, the toast being attended by a volley of shot from the musketeers.

This firing was continued in Lodges by a suitable demonstration of clapping or banging of drinking vessels, firing glasses being designed strong enough to stand the strain. It is interesting to note that the "P.L.R. Point Left Right" or "London fire" is not extensively used in northern countries, its place being taken by "three times" the appropriate number and traditional choruses "Prosper the Art", "Worthy Mason, he" etc.

Another Authority says that the custom of accompanying a toast with "fire" obviously of time immemorial, did not apparently originate in the bringing together of hands but in the crashing down on tables of a drinking vessel. Hundreds of years ago it probably had a link with other drinking customs, possibly with the intentional smashing of a glass after drinking a toast of more than unusual importance or solemnity.

"Firing" is a custom known in many countries. In early French Lodges drinking a toast was called feu (fire). German students had a custom of drinking a toast in strict order and time by the whole company. They then ground glasses in a circular path and finally crashed them on the table at the same instant.

It is reasonable to assume that the terms "fire" and "firing" were derived from the crashing down of glasses with the double purpose of honouring a toast with noisy enthusiasm and proving glasses empty. But it is possible that the first part of masonic fire is a survival of soldiers custom of firing salutes after important toasts. These two Authorities do not refer to "P.L.R." which could be attributed to French Lodges.

At a time when Freemasonry was launched in France, brethren met in what was, as far as the public and especially Officials were concerned, merely social gatherings. They made sure, however, that only members of the Order were present, at the Festive Board they adopted a procedure which would be something like this. The person giving the toast, would, with glass in hand and looking to his brethren in front of him say "I give a toast my friends to you -" looking to his left and carrying the glass to his left side "and to you" and turning to the right "and to you". Thus with glass in hand, he would give what would be to them, a reminder of the E A sign. This indicated that although not meeting as a Lodge, they were still Freemasons.

When this was taken to England and adopted at Festive Boards, the movements were done without glass in hand, but as before P (to the front) L and R given level with the throat and in a horizontal plane thereby perpetuating the reason for the French custom.

The handclap part of firing which follows is to indicate and honour the status of the person being toasted. The 7 x 2 is simply the 21 gun royal salute so divided possibly to give a masonic flavour. It also helps in counting and timing. There are many variations in the procedure adopted by different Grand Lodges, it is well established and has a definite purpose and is worth doing well.

There are also variations in the Tylers toast, in some Lodges the brethren remain seated and in silence, in others the fire is given three times - you will help a distressed Mason with your "hand", your "heart" and your "pocket"! In some there is no toast, none to the W.M.

Today notwithstanding business and political pressures in the outside world we meet as other Lodges do, all strife and contention without is excluded in the pursuit of light and knowledge of the signs, token and word and their significance in the order.

The order has existed under one name or another as a compact well organised body long before the building of the oldest pyramid, it is older than any religion known today. Our belief in the existence of a supreme being is of sound judgment when we consider the many examples of Stonemasons work like Stonehenge or the Avebury circle and their purpose, or the Pyramids of Egypt, the effigies on Easter Island or examples in Central America and Peru, the power and forces which must have been used in their construction and for which we seek an explanation.

Brethren I hope the reading of this paper will stimulate your interest in the pursuit of light and knowledge of the signs, tokens and words in our order and of their significance. When we realise that there are only 2 Masons in each 1000 of the world's people and that despite all talk of brotherhood recent figures show a world wide trend of decreasing number, it behoves each and every brother by his behaviour outside the Lodge that he has received the warmth and benefit in the sanctuary of a good lodge where he can be at peace with himself and his brethren and where all strife and contention from without is excluded.

May I quote a characterisation of Masonry by a Mr. H.W. Percival who wrote a chapter in Masonry in his book "Thinking and Destiny" he was not a Member of any Masonic body - "The brotherhood of Freemasonry is the largest of the bodies in the world which are outposts to prepare possible candidates for an inward life. The order existed under one name or another as a compact well organised body long before the building of the oldest pyramid - it is older than any religion known today. It is the extraordinary thing among organisations in the world. This organisation and the system of its teachings with the tools, landmarks, emblems and symbols have always been substantially the same - there are not better and no more advanced teachings available to human beings than those of Masonry".

In this atomic age and the present trend for conquering outer space it is interesting to note the emphasis which our Ancient Brethren placed upon the science of astronomy and it is not to be wondered that this science appeared both expressed and hidden in the symbolism of modern Speculative Masonry. Masonry's reverent search for all truth must include the science of the stars and the author of Masonry and its Symbols - Mr. Percival reveals an aspect of masonry that most writers have ignored.

Mr. Percival thus proclaims the universality of Masonic science by certain references to the signs of the zodiac and draws man's attention away from earth to the glories of God and the wonders of his firmament.

Brethren, when we think that at this present moment, men are out in space hundreds of miles away, circumventing the earth every few hours and that men have landed on the moon many thousands of miles away returning safely to earth, we must pause to consider our thinking in terms of time and the universe with its celestial and terrestrial globes which form part of our Masonic teaching.

With the time at my disposal I hope I have given the brethren food for thought and research. There are many men with beliefs and thoughts such as our own and the approach to a suitable qualified person who measures up to our high standards is permissible and has the approval of Grand Lodge.

The James Watt Lodge is a strong Lodge with a well established daughter Lodge, The Brandwood. The war years are vivid in my memory with emergency meetings at different times when the P.M.s were prepared to install and give the addresses to the W.M. wardens and brethren and adhere to the ancient landmarks of the order.

If you hold an office try and perform it to the best of your ability, the social contacts you have in the Lodge and at the Festive Board will give benefit and satisfaction with common ideals and goals as men.

The ladies to whom we are indebted for their support in facilitating our attendance at Lodge Meetings enable us to live a full and richer life with benefit to the community and gatherings outside the Lodge where our conduct will be an indication of our aims and principles.

It has been a privilege and pleasure to convey fraternal greetings and good wishes from the James Watt Lodge to Lodges in the bush, Sydney and Toronto under the New South Wales constitution, Brisbane under the Queensland constitution, Cairns under the N. Queensland and Gulf of Carpentaria constitution, Darwin in N. Territory which comes under the South Australian constitution. To make contacts in Alice Springs where some of the brethren travel over 1000 miles to attend their Lodge. To visit the Zetland in the East Lodge in Singapore where one of our brethren was initiated.

To convey greetings to Acacia Lodge in Winnipeg under the Grand Lodge of Manitoba which had a secretary of 54 years service, only 5 times absent and the St. Johns Lodge with over 20 brethren with 50 years service.

To be shown around the beautiful Lodge rooms of Provincial Lodge in Bergen, Norway by an English speaking brother where Lodges operate in 10 degrees.

After the formation of the First Grand Lodge in 1717 visiting among Masons was encouraged. In the first Book of Constitutions issued in 1723 there was a regulation which stated "All particular lodges are to observe the same usages as much as possible, in order which and for cultivating a good understanding among Freemasons, some members out of every Lodge should be deputed to visit the other Lodges as often as shall be thought convenient".

Then as Masonry spread and new Lodges were formed we find in the early 18th century, occasional bye-laws and regulations set up by Lodges governing the practise of visiting and it is out of these that there has grown our present custom.

My visiting Lodges abroad has been mainly due to contacting the Grand Secretary of the United Grand Lodge in the first place, to ascertain and confirm that the constitutions were recognised by U.G.L. Every brother contemplating a visit abroad should do this and take his certificate with him, also be prepared to be examined.

It is possible you may have a friend living in a far country and desirous of joining a so called Masonic order. It would be advisable on his behalf to check with United Grand Lodge before doing so, that it is a duly recognised order. It is a wonderful experience to visit other Lodges at home and abroad when you will appreciate the amenities and comfort of your own building after having seen how other Lodges operate.

I have found it most interesting since first occupying your chair to observe the progress of the younger brethren. I'm sure that if the other Founders were here they would agree that the Lodge has progressed to their satisfaction.

I think it is worth recording that Grand Lodge was 50 years old in 1767 when James Watt, born 1736, experimented with his steam engine. He was probably one of the finest scientific minds that this country has ever produced. This Lodge is honoured by taking his name.

W.M. it seems a coincidence that I should be giving this talk this evening when you are the last fully qualified steam engineer for the foreseeable future to occupy the chair. You were initiated 25 years ago in the Broadsmithy Lodge Liverpool, I was initiated 50 years ago in the Acacia Lodge Liverpool on the same day I qualified as a Steam Engineer.

I am most grateful to you and the brethren for giving me the opportunity to give this talk on the twentieth anniversary of the day you joined this Lodge.

John Mason. P.P. J.G.W.

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