

Early History of the American Ritual

His observations of our doings and methods generally are kind and occasionally flattering. Of the reviewer he remarks:

"Another welcome and instructive report emanates from the able chairman of the Correspondence Committee, Companion Bennett, whose contributions have been held by us in deserved esteem, and from which we have always gathered strength and encouragement in our labors.

"We are willing to follow him a long way towards the conclusion that the severance of the R.A. Degree with whatever deficiencies it may have had was productive of confusion in the Masonic system, and might well have been avoided; and we have repeatedly given expression to our reprobation of methods employed on both sides of the ocean to effect its independent establishment. In the adoption of ritual, efforts were made in England as well as in America to weld into the system a chaotic mass of fragmentary matter. In this, our observation has failed to convince us that Dermott and Dunckerly whom Companion Bennett calls "improvers," have accomplished much better work than Webb and others whom he styles "tinkers" of the ritual. For the latter we are no apologist, and had our Masonic life been contemporaneous with theirs we might have opposed the formularies proposed by them, and yet we cannot sympathize with sentiment regarding them that finds expression in declaring their methods "American" in a sense of direct antagonism to those which found favor in the Mother Country; and we believe that there is not a particle of trustworthy evidence that the political motives ascribed to Webb ever existed, and the consideration of them seems too unfounded and trivial to engage our thought."

There is a popular play entitled "Our Boys," in which an old fashioned father, of the bucolic type is discovered welcoming home a college bred son with rather boisterous paternal affection.

"Lor, boy, how you have growned."

The son in a whispered aside corrects him: "Grown, father, grown."

Bewildered, the old man looks about him, and then ejaculates: "I cawnt see nothin' to groan about."

Nor can we. Companion Haines' brief flash of righteous indignation is too much like "concurrent" sentiment to be taken seriously.

It is generally conceded that the early Masonry both of the United States and Canada was that of the "Ancients" or seceders from the original Grand Lodge or "Moderns" as they were then paradoxically distinguished. The rival bodies practised the Royal Arch with the distinction that the Ancients as a Grand body recognized it and permitted it to be worked under the authority of the lodge; the Moderns withheld the official countenance but took to the "innovation" in a left-handed capacity with remarkable avidity.

We must admit inexcusable haste in associating Dermott's name in the connection our Companion refers to because it is an established fact that the Ancients with which he was so intimately allied generally, though not always, practised the Royal Arch as a chair degree. Not so the Moderns who, unauthorized to confer it under the aegis of the Lodge worked it apart as a Chapter and upon Master Masons, as a fourth or completing degree.

The degree with them, remodelled, developed and encouraged by Dunckerley, became so popular, that their numbers, with years, multiplied to remarkable proportions, and that they did not require the "chair" preliminary as a rule, is demonstrated in the fact that an applicant (Modern) for affiliation with the Ancients was compelled to undergo the ceremony *de novo*. Moreover its status under the "Articles of Union" is a convincing proof of the attitude of the Moderns prior to 1813' and their dominating influence at that eventful period.

The ceremony of "passing the chair" which Dermott assiduously advocated as a preliminary to the Royal Arch, was accepted, with occasional lapses, by the Ancients and, until Dunckerley's labours were advanced, by not a few of the Modern organizations. The latter's methods were apparent when union was decided upon and the system came to be determined. Had both bodies practised a similar ceremony it is only reasonable to conclude that dissent to its continuance would have been insignificant. On the contrary, the proposal to eliminate the "chair" qualification could

have developed very little opposition, for the calm atmosphere of deliberation was apparently unruffled when it was agreed to include the Royal Arch, without any preliminary frills, as the sole continuation of the Master's degree and the completion of "pure antient Masonry."

Students of research are agreed on these points and further assert that, even among the Ancients, evasion of the "chair" degree was by no means uncommon. What the original ceremony of the Royal Arch was cannot be determined. It is stated that Ramsay's ritualistic contribution failed to satisfy the seceders though it confirmed in them the necessity for a proper medium to discover that which was lost. Dr. Mackay surmises that it was the legend of Enoch and was at first used by them, "but was," as he pointedly adds, "afterwards changed for the very different legend which is still taught in the English Royal Arch."

That legend adhered to the Biblical narrative of the rebuilding of the Temple and properly gave to Zerubbabel the priority of position. The degree introduced into America by the field lodges and later in 1758 by the establishment of a Chapter in Philadelphia followed, probably, the English working and when forty years later the Grand Chapter of Pennsylvania was formed we find the three Chiefs still designated as Z., H., and J.

It was about that period that Webb and his associates undertook the arduous task of formulating a system for the United States or, as the historian puts it, a "modification" of the English methods. His modification resulted in the displacing of Zerubbabel and elevating the High Priest from third to first place. That achievement alone would entitle his system to be declared "American" whatever may have been the spirit that actuated it. Webb may not have been affected by a sentiment which, naturally enough, prevailed among a people rejoicing in a newly acquired independence, but he may have been doubtful of the success of an institution which continued to have for its chief officer one who bore a title suggestive of their former "dependent" condition.

The sentiment which Companion Haines deprecates, and very properly at this day, was wholly excusable in those "parlous times" and while Webb may not have been actuated by political motives in the sense that his labours were affected by them, it must be admitted that he was indiscreet enough in one instance, if his biographer is correct, to be led by others who cherished no exuberant enthusiasm for the old order of things at that particular juncture, and engaged in a public function, as Grand Master, which present day ideas would term the reverse of Masonic. It is observed that our worthy Companion quotes another Correspondent whose views "are exactly concurrent" with his own, on this subject. But he reproduced more than "views on the subject," and in giving further publicity to an inspiration "born of" wisdom absorbed from alleged Masonic journals and attributing it elsewhere, Companion Haines did not do his own keen sense of fair play the justice it was entitled to.

It may be convenient to brush aside the assumption that Zerubbabel was more than a governor, or that he led in the great enterprise which followed the captivity. The claim to kingly dignity was never in the controversy. The legend of the English ceremonial does not give him that title, and therein the English ritual is consistent. Webb's, on the other hand, like that of Ireland, places him as a king, which he was not, and further allots him the un-kingly position of second to the High Priest, which is hardly nattering to royal power and dignity, as the world regards them. As to who was leader at the rebuilding of the second Temple our great authorities can but be the contributors to Holy Writ and later historians of Jewish antiquity.

To endow the High Priest with supreme authority at the erection of a temple for worship, may be convenient and suit views with which those of Companion Haines are "concurrent"; but would it be improper to ask whether there was any change in the Mosaic regulations in that respect during the interval between the building of the first and second Temples? It appears to the dull lay observer as if King Solomon, in the former instance, was the sole head and front of the undertaking and even in the matter of the ordering of divine worship, and sacrificial offerings, the King of Israel seemed to usurp, not infrequently, the functions of the priesthood.

"The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house ; his hands shall also finish it."

Sources:

Proceedings of the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of Canada at the annual convocation, 1908 report on Foreign Correspondence - NEW JERSEY