

Remodelling of the Royal Arch in the United States

M.E. Comp. Geo. W. Warvelle's Correspondence report is much after his usual style. To the Grand Chapters he gives 36 pages and to himself the balance of the sixty-eight. The former comprises what purports to be a review of the Grand Chapter proceedings, and the rest a clever and amusing collation of characteristic views and criticisms on topical matters in which truism is strongly blended with cynicism, spiced with occasional pungent quotation and a sprinkling of humour that now and again descends to the racy vernacular. This rare collection he appropriately brands as "Fragments," and the "picker" in many cases had to journey far afield for something to fill the basket. He even appealed to the Masonic press, and in one instance reproduced a peculiar article, for which he shoulders responsibility and which in the interests of accuracy, if not the amenities, could have well borne re-editing. One relation therein, viz., the Hanmer-Webb incident, was promptly challenged, if memory serves aright, by a contributor to the journal in which it first appeared, but no mention is made of that fact and it is of little consequence anyway.

His statements, so far as the remodelling of the Royal Arch in the United States is concerned, must, in the absence of proof, be considered as daring as his tone is exaggerated. He will pardon us for saying that that kind of assertiveness is not calculated to satisfy those who are earnestly seeking to arrive at the truth and appeal for something more tangible. It is all very well to proclaim that there exists "abundant documentary evidence," but until that is brought to the light of day we must continue to accept the visible testimony.

"I find it further asserted by some of the critics and historiographers, that originally the Chapter workings of the United States were the same as those now practised in England and Canada, but that Webb and his associates, out of their intense hatred of England and everything English, invented a new degree which was not only widely different from the old and genuine article but further catered to the democratic spirit by dethroning the King and making him subservient to the Priest."

It had been suggested that the relegating of the regal member of the Council trio to second place was a matter of expediency and to accommodate the spirit of the times, as no doubt it was. The expression, "intense hatred" is from the local mint and may be included with other original gems. Nor have we observed that it was ever asserted that the U.S. Royal Arch was "a new degree" invented by Webb and his associates. This too must be classed under the head of facetice. What we do say and respectfully maintain is, that the degree as remodelled, not invented, for the U.S. system was not, and is not, the degree as formerly practised in England, that in the latter country the High Priest was not at any period, known as chief officer, so far as existing documentary evidence can disclose, that the early use of that title on this continent is to be attributed to the Irish working, which was propagated by means of the numerous military lodges in British regiments stationed in the colonies, and that Webb and his co-workers in retaining the English legend as the basis, were not justified in officering it from another source, except as a concession to long usage or for other reasons considered expedient at that period.

"Sufficient has been cited to show that before Webb joined the fraternity the Royal Arch degree, with officers as we now know them, was known and worked in different parts of the country and that such degree so worked was a direct English importation."

With that latter rather bold statement we fraternally beg to take issue. It is noted that the above and similar assertions have influenced one or two members of the corps reportorial to accept that ipse dixit and to declare that Companion Warvelle had established his claim. Let us see.

Whatever the source of the U.S. degree "with officers as we now know them," it certainly was not England. Far more likely is it to be found in the Irish field lodges already mentioned, which were constantly being moved from place to place in the then settled country. Ireland's ceremony has always been apart from that of England and Scotland, and down to the close of the early half of the nineteenth century had a High Priest as ruling officer in the Royal Arch. Then its Council (not its Biblical foundation) was changed to King, High Priest and Chief Scribe, but they are not identical with the regal, sacerdotal and prophetic offices of the legend of the Second Temple. There is nothing extant to show that the sister countries ever practised other than the latter "with officers as they now know them," This matter we

have examined into for ourselves "on the spot," and with the aid of brethren whose names are familiar to Masonic readers.

The three principal officers of the first regular Chapter in England, established in London in 1765, were styled "Zerubbabel," "Haggai," and "Joshua." The record is there in clear, legible characters, and all who run may read. This Chapter developed into the Supreme Grand Chapter (Moderns) of 1767, and the lists show similar officers annually from 1765 down to the union of 1817, and are so continued since.

But it was a far cry from England to America in those days, and what was handiest was found to be most convenient. Ireland's initial authority to connect a lodge with a military organization was issued in 1732. England did not follow that lead until 1750. Hence it may be readily divined how much advanced in later years the former's methods and working were in the colonies where those regimental lodges were a great disseminating power, a resultant condition that American recorders of history have not regarded with the importance it merited. Dr. Mackay attaches special value to the work of the lodge in "The Royal Irish Regiment" which, according to that writer, was the ' ' mother of Royal Arch Masonry in America." Had his valuable researches led him to follow the working of the subsequent field lodges much light would have been shed on matters that are now obscure. Diligent burrowing into old lodge chests and discoveries of documents in remote and unexpected places have in recent years elsewhere, served to explode much of the theories and beliefs of Dr. Oliver's time and indeed of that of Dr. Mackay.

What the influence of the Irish ambulatory lodges must have been cannot be estimated lightly. They had their Master and Wardens for the symbolic beginning their High Priest for the Royal Arch, a Captain General for Templar instruction, and where other mysteries were included the necessary titles were not lacking. And all this was practised, as Companion Warvelle correctly states, many years before Webb became a Mason, and in citing certain ante-Webb Chapters, he contributes nothing new nor offers anything in the line of testimony on the point at issue.

He tells us of the Washington Chapter of New York of 1790 or before, which died intestate, but left a progeny, one of whom had a baptismal certificate of 1791, signed H.P. K. and S. This clincher is followed by others, the St. Andrew's Chapter of Boston, and the Hiram of "Connecticut," each working before Webb's Masonic advent, were in the same condition. All of which is familiar to every reader and if Companion Warvelle happens to run short of samples similar to those he quotes, we will be pleased to furnish him with a few of genuine Canadian brand, ancient and guaranteed.

There must have been some, however, who in those days took the trouble to enquire more closely into matters, for is it not on record that the Grand Chapter sanctioned by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, and which was formed in 1795 had its " three chiefs, "Z., H. and J. for officers? This, too, was before Webb's activity as a Royal Arch Mason. That there were others who investigated for themselves and hesitated to apply the official appellations of Ireland to the existing ceremony, is quite possible.

In Canada the same anomalous condition existed and its Masonic history clearly demonstrates the early influence of the travelling warrant. In Upper Canada the first knowledge we have of the Royal Arch is gathered from certificates issued by a lodge in the 8th Regiment of Foot in 1782. This was under an "Ancient" warrant. They were signed by the W. M. and Wardens. The Irish certificates under the field warrants were invariably signed by the High Priest.

Canada, like her neighbor, submitted to custom and custom, while it holds sway, is tyrannical. A period arrived, however, which was to bring order out of chaos. The Grand Chapter of Canada was organized in 1857 and its originators decided, after much deliberation and searching enquiry at the fountain head, to discard the mixed working that they had been accustomed to for so many years and adopt the English Royal Arch and its ancient methods, but to facilitate visitation, resolved to retain the U. S. preliminary degrees in the system.

The groundwork of the Royal Arch as it was formerly crudely worked may have harmonized with the leading title of High Priest, and if its genesis was Irish authority it certainly did. If otherwise, it did not. The basis of the Irish legend was at first, the finding of "the book of the law," by Hilkiah the priest, hence the chief officer, but without departing from the scene and its incidents the details of the discovery developed later into a similarity of operations, familiar elsewhere, but incidental to the repairing of the original Temple under the young king Josiah and it is he who is represented in the Irish ceremony of to-day.

It is a fact beyond peradventure that for at least thirty years before Webb's advent as a ritualist, the chief officer of the English Chapter was not the High Priest. Engaged on a work of such magnitude as the systematizing of the degrees for his country it would be an insult to the memory and intelligence of the ambitious ritualist to suggest that he proceeded with his labors without acquainting himself with conditions across the ocean, but Webb received the degree, according to Companion Warvelle, from "a man named Hanmer," who loomed up from England in 1793 and returned seven years later. How this Hanmer man, an alleged proficient, received it himself, who authorized him to give it away and the precise manner in which he handed it over to his new "acquaintance," Webb, are matters from which the veil of revelation is not removed. It is sufficient for the narrator's purposes that Webb so received the degree in Albany. There is no mention of Lodge or Chapter as a medium. Nevertheless it was in this fashion, Comp. Warvelle tells us, that the subsequently famous ritualist received the degree "direct from England."

This story of Hanmer is old but Dr. Mackay, oddly enough, does not include it in his narrative of Webb's Masonic career. Be that as it may, one is forced to express astonishment that this expert "direct from England" should have discovered the future ritual reformer who was then but a young Mason quietly conducting his business in Albany, and imparted to him the knowledge of the Royal Arch. That Webb should accept it in this left-handed manner when there was abundant opportunity for obtaining it legitimately, is also surprising. But Hanmer apparently clung to Webb, or vice versa, and a few years later they journeyed together to Boston where they showed St. Andrew's Chapter "their manner" of putting on the M. E. M. At a R. A. convention shortly after they were both present and then — exit Hanmer.

We have overstayed our limit but trust Companion Warvelle will not interpret a seeming garrulity into a desire to be contentious. Far from us be any such intention. His very direct remarks touching our, or somebody else's, opinions had to be replied to with equal directness and we stayed right with Illinois to do so preferring that course to retiring to the protecting shelter of the "wood pile." But while defending opinions which we believe to be right, because deduced from the only testimony that, to the present, reading and enquiry have favored us with, there is no thought of being otherwise than fraternal with one for whose ability and attainments we entertain a deep respect.

It is one thing to make a declaration, it is another to back it up with documentary proof. If Companion Warvelle can exhibit a "fragment" of authentic evidence in support of his amazing statement that the U.S. "Royal Arch degree with officers as we now know them" was a direct English importation, we are willing to devour the very meanest kind of confection that this great pie-eating continent can produce.

"In another paper I will endeavor to show that we are now practising in the United States a closer approach to the old English work than at present obtains either in England or Canada."

With this promise of endeavour, he has aroused a spirit of keen expectancy, not only here, but abroad, and we trust that our gifted Companion will not only "show," but prove his claim. That it will create a more than mild sensation in certain quarters goes without saying, indeed his announcement of the object of "another paper" has set sage heads wagging already. Go ahead Companion, and although it will knock all our carefully thought out conclusions into a cocked hat, we will be in the front rank to tender congratulations on being sent to the top of the class for the latest valuable discovery in Masonic history.

"Let us hope then that we shall hear no more of democratic hatred of Kings and other potentates, nor of Yankee skill in framing imitation degrees so as to cast discredit on the genuine originals, and that those of the American scribes who have suffered anguish of soul because of Webb's indiscretions will now dry their tears."

Graciously condescending indeed and enough to impel those "American scribes" who have presumed to venture an opinion of their own, to submissively retire to the seclusion of the corner and blush at their own temerity.

Sources:

Proceedings of the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of Canada at the annual convocation, 1909 report on Foreign Correspondence – ILLINOIS