

# **WHITHER THE ROYAL ARCH?**

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I am not an historian. I am certainly not a Masonic historian, and, in particular an historian of the Royal Arch. I do not have the time, wherewithal or interest to be an historian. Indeed, I may not have sufficient ability to undertake historical research. I am convinced that ascertaining WHAT happened at sometime in the past is relatively easy. I use the word "relatively" because determining WHY it happened is most certainly not easy. But endeavouring to ascertain why something happened is interesting to me and if I can use it to further our understanding and promotion of the Orders and philosophies we hold dear then I am prepared to devote my time and what abilities I have to that end. In this sense I am speculative in my Masonry and the real beauty in this is that our speculations are opinion and our opinions are never wrong, are we?

In this paper I present some minor research thoughts occasioned by a discussion I hosted while First Principal of Piako Chapter. I wish, then, to comment on some aspects of the history, philosophy and excellencies of the Order; and then to draw some conclusions as to how we might manage our future.

## **Piako Chapter April 2001**

At the April 2001 meeting of the Piako Royal Arch Chapter No 48 I convened a discussion which considered the issues and problems confronting Royal Arch Masonry and to seek solutions to them.

RE Comp Jim Anderson PGSupt spoke about the history of the Order; RE Comp Les Borrell PGSupt spoke about the philosophy of the Order and its future.

A number of issues and thoughts were canvassed, but essentially they all reduced to one single comment: the membership of the Order is diminishing. The question then becomes one of survival. But of what? The Royal Arch or Freemasonry in general?

Basically the survival of the Royal Arch depends on the survival of

Freemasonry. If the Order has a membership problem it probably has two causes: the membership problem of Freemasonry; and the way in which the Order gains and retains its membership from Craft Masonry.

Why would the Order not be able to gain members from Craft Masonry, and equally importantly, why would the Order not be able to retain its members?

There appears to be three main reasons:

- Understanding and knowledge
- The pursuit of excellence.
- Encouragement

### **Understanding and Knowledge**

RE Comp Les Borrell made three distinct points:

- Philosophies such as Christianity and other religions, and Freemasonry are flawless: it is people, and their interpretation of the philosophies that introduce flaws.
- The physical, intellectual and spiritual qualities of life come from within persons—they are not successfully imposed from without.
- Freemasonry, although not a religion, has a spiritual element and those who miss that element, miss the point of Freemasonry.

Other contributors concluded that an understanding of these points by Companions is essential to the well-being of the Order. If the Companions of the Order do not understand the philosophy, the symbols, and the allegories of the Order, how can they ever hope to encourage new membership or retain existing membership?

### **The Pursuit of Excellence**

Perhaps this should really be entitled “The failure to pursue excellence.”

RE Comps Anderson and Borrell, and others emphasized a feeling that Freemasonry appears to be slipping into mediocrity: that it has drifted away from the desire for excellence.

It is, perhaps a malaise of society in general, rather than the Masonic Orders in particular, that excuses are offered for not attempting to excel at ritual, or understanding of the philosophies of the Orders. There may be reasons why individuals find it difficult to learn ritual – limitations on the time they can make available, pressures of work and family commitments, and failing memory processes being just a few. However, these are reasons – they are not excuses.

Thus there is an increasing tendency for people to read their ritual, rather than learn and recite it, and this leads inevitably to a lowering of standards.

## **Encouragement**

Many speakers identified a malaise that appears to be affecting attendance at meetings. Experience seems to indicate that many Companions are drifting into inactivity because their interest is no longer stimulated. This is not restricted to Royal Arch Masonry, but is seen as a malaise that is affecting society at large and Freemasonry in particular.

A feeling was expressed that new members are too often drafted into office too soon, sometimes discouraging that Companion. However, it is an individual matter – too soon for some may be just right for others.

## **Solutions and the Future**

The meeting concluded that there were solutions:

- Strive for excellence
- Seek new membership and revive flagging interest
- Encourage the use of mentors
- Create enthusiasm
- Promote the philosophies of the Royal Arch

I will deal with some of these later in this paper but now I wish to turn to some thoughts on the appeal of the Order.

## **The Appeal of the Royal Arch**

What is it about Freemasonry that attracts men to such devotion?

What is it about Royal Arch Masonry that attracts Companions to give of themselves for such a long time?

Is it the funny crowns we aspire to wear when we get to sit up in the East? The funny little hats that are so precariously balanced that we daren't move too rapidly?

Or is it those heavy robes that feel so comforting in winter – but subject us to sauna like conditions in summer?

Is it the colours which always seem so much more vibrant than the blues of Craft Masonry?

Is it the poignant plays by which we introduce new members into the order? The strong messages which are carried by our rituals?

Or is it the atmosphere of a Chapter which always seems somehow friendlier than a Craft Lodge?

Many of you are better able to answer those questions than me – I am still a relatively “new boy” on the block.

I know only that the lessons we endeavour to teach through our ceremonies extend the philosophical bases of Freemasonry so strongly that, for me at least, they are very hard to ignore. That they answer some of the questions posed by Craft Masonry – and open up further fields of study which we can all use to make that daily advancement we so treasure.

Rule 71 of the Book of Constitution of the Grand Lodge of New Zealand states:

#### **71. Degrees Recognised as Antient Freemasonry**

Grand Lodge recognises only the degrees of Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft, Master Mason, Mark Master, Excellent Master, and the Royal Arch, as being pure Antient Freemasonry.

This makes us, as an Order of Freemasonry, politically very hard to ignore. As hard, perhaps, as it is to ignore the lessons of our rituals.

So, are we important?

Do we count for anything?

Or are we a funny little anachronism with some quaint ceremonies?

Laurence Gardner’s Book “The Shadow of Solomon”<sup>[ii]</sup> carries some fascinating commentary on the history of Freemasonry and an overview of the influence of alchemy, the philosophers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (particularly those who founded the Royal Society) and of the Stuart and Hanover dynasties.

His reference to the Royal Arch is fascinating. In his introduction he writes:

“We shall also discover that a time-honored aspect of the Craft known as the Royal Arch Chapter holds the ultimate key to Freemasonry. Although the Chapter is optional to Brethren, it is within this particular ritual (as distinct from the three primary degrees) that the light of Masonic heritage truly shines – yet the all-important Royal Arch was totally ignored by the Grand Lodge establishment for

96 years from its foundation.”

Later he writes that when a Candidate enters a Lodge for the first time he is likened to the Rough Ashlar which will eventually become smoothed and perfected.

“It is at this stage that the prospect of being admitted to the ‘mysteries and privileges of ancient Freemasonry’ is potentially very exciting. Progressing through the three Craft degrees, however, concludes with the immensely disappointing Hiram legend, and it is not until one joins the Royal Arch Chapter that the excitement builds again – but this time with a better purpose.”

Gardner writes that Christopher Wren was as enthusiastic about the mathematical mystique of Solomon’s Temple as Isaac Newton and that, therefore, when Desaguliers became the Grand Master of the Moderns in 1719 it was little wonder that they focused on it.

“As a Fellow of the Royal Society he would have been fully aware of ongoing research from the society’s published Transactions. It was worth creating a whole new degree just to cement the new-style Freemasonry to this Solomon tradition – and that is precisely what happened after 1724, when the 3rd degree was formulated”

Unfortunately, writes Gardner, instead of developing the thrust of the first two degrees by incorporating Newtonian or other Temple philosophy, the fictitious legend of Hiram Abif became the focus. But, he writes:

“... a rather more than adequate 3rd degree already existed. It was much older, and had evolved quite separately from Craft Freemasonry, with records of a Scottish working as far back as 1590 in Stirling. Laurence Dermott, Grand Secretary of the Antients, explained to the Moderns that he knew of this degree, which existed quite independently of the Craft, and that he firmly believed it to be the ‘the root, heart, and marrow of Freemasonry’, but he was ignored.”

Much later the Antients included it as a formal aspect of their ritual, in 1772, but the Moderns did not relent until after amalgamation in December 1813 – their own membership had applied pressure for something better than Hiram Abif.

Gardner writes that Dermott had been correct – that it was indeed far more substantial than the established 3<sup>rd</sup> degree but that it was too late to make a substitution because to allow more than 3 degrees would, in effect, demote all the existing Master Masons. The Holy Royal Arch was therefore added as a Chapter extension of the 3<sup>rd</sup> degree to give the Craft brethren something of a culminating consequence.

Rosslyn Chapel does not escape the history either. Written on a lintel of the south aisle in the Latin lettering of Lombardy is an inscription:

*Forte est vinu; fortior est Rex; fortiores sunt mulieres' sup on vincit veritas.*

*Wine is strong; the king is stronger; women are stronger, but above all truth conquers.*

Where does this come from? The Royal Arch ritual deals with a particular aspect of Israelite history which is based on chapters 5 and 6 of the book of Ezra which describe the Decree of Cyrus and the actions of Darius allowing Zerubbabel to lead the descendants of the captives out of Babylon and rebuild the Temple. The peculiar events leading to this are described in the first book of Esdras:

{3:4} Then three young men, that were of the guard that kept the king's body, spake one to another;

{3:5} Let every one of us speak a sentence: he that shall overcome, and whose sentence shall seem wiser than the others, unto him shall the king Darius give great gifts, and great things in token of victory:

{3:10} The first wrote, Wine is the strongest.

{3:11} The second wrote, The king is strongest.

{3:12} The third wrote, Women are strongest: but above all things Truth beareth away the victory.

Wine, because it intoxicates and so dominates the drinker. The king, because he has dominion over everyone and everything. But:

{4:15} Women have borne the king and all the people that bear rule by sea and land.

{4:16} Even of them came they: and they nourished them up that planted the vineyards, from whence the wine cometh.

{4:17} These also make garments for men; these bring glory unto men; and without women cannot men be.

{4:18} Yea, and if men have gathered together gold and silver, or any other goodly thing, do they not love a woman which is comely in favour and beauty?

{4:19} And letting all those things go, do they not gape, and even with open mouth fix their eyes fast on her; and have not all men more desire unto her than unto silver or gold, or any goodly thing whatsoever?

{4:20} A man leaveth his own father that brought him up, and his own country, and cleaveth unto his wife.

{4:21} He sticketh not to spend his life with his wife. And remembereth neither father, nor mother, nor country.

{4:22} By this also ye must know that women have dominion over you: do ye not labour and toil, and give and bring all to the woman?

{4:23} Yea, a man taketh his sword, and goeth his way to rob and to steal, to sail upon the sea and upon rivers;

*{4:24} And looketh upon a lion, and goeth in the darkness; and when he hath stolen, spoiled, and robbed, he bringeth it to his love.*

*{4:25} Wherefore a man loveth his wife better than father or mother.*

*{4:26} Yea, many there be that have run out of their wits for women, and become servants for their sakes.*

*{4:27} Many also have perished, have erred, and sinned, for women.*

*{4:34} O ye men, are not women strong? great is the earth, high is the heaven, swift is the sun in his course, for he compasseth the heavens round about, and fetcheth his course again to his own place in one day.*

*{4:35} Is he not great that maketh these things? Therefore great is the truth, and stronger than all things.*

*{4:36} All the earth crieth upon the truth, and the heaven blesseth it: all works shake and tremble at it, and with it is no unrighteous thing.*

*{4:37} Wine is wicked, the king is wicked, women are wicked, all the children of men are wicked, and such are all their wicked works; and there is no truth in them; in their unrighteousness also they shall perish.*

*{4:38} As for the truth, it endureth, and is always strong; it liveth and conquereth for evermore.*

*{4:39} With her there is no accepting of persons or rewards; but she doeth the things that are just, and refraineth from all unjust and wicked things; and all men do well like of her works.*

*{4:40} Neither in her judgment is any unrighteousness; and she is the strength, kingdom, power, and majesty, of all ages. Blessed be the God of truth.*

*{4:41} And with that he held his peace. And all the people then shouted, and said, Great is Truth, and mighty above all things.*

*{4:42} Then said the king unto him, Ask what thou wilt more than is appointed in the writing, and we will give it thee, because thou art found wisest; and thou shalt sit next me, and shalt be called my cousin.*

This was none other than Zerubbabel, who then claimed his prize:

*{4:43} Then said he unto the king, Remember thy vow, which thou hast vowed to build Jerusalem, in the day when thou camest to thy kingdom,*

*{4:44} And to send away all the vessels that were taken away out of Jerusalem, which Cyrus set apart, when he vowed to destroy Babylon, and to send them again thither.*

*{4:45} Thou also hast vowed to build up the temple, which the Edomites burned when Judea was made desolate by the Chaldees.*

*{4:46} And now, O lord the king, this is that which I require, and which I desire of thee, and this is the princely liberality proceeding from thyself: I desire therefore that thou make good the vow, the performance whereof with thine own mouth thou hast vowed to the King of heaven.*

*{4:47} Then Darius the king stood up, and kissed him, and wrote letters for him unto all the treasurers and lieutenants and captains and governors, that they should safely convey on their way both him, and all those that go up with him to build Jerusalem.*

*{4:53} And that all they that went from Babylon to build the city should have free liberty, as well they as their posterity, and all the priests that went away.*

Gardner cites a 1744 Masonic ritual of the Holy Royal Arch as indicating Moses as the first biblical Grand Master. Moses was considered to have been a primary guardian of the hermetic wisdom which came out of Egypt (from Hermes, who is considered to be the founder of alchemy and geometry).

There is much more to be considered in the importance of the Royal Arch to the whole framework of Freemasonry but a few more words from Gardner are perhaps apposite.

*"Although attached as a Chapter to the 3rd Degree of the Craft, Royal Arch Freemasonry emerged from a very different culture, which had nothing to do with Hiramite ritual. Royal Arch members are styled Companions rather than Brethren, and its tenets and symbols have a positive alchemical aspect which is more akin to Rosicrucian metaphysical philosophy. ... It has a distinct crypt legend as its theme. It is partially rooted in Old Testament lore, but also has a parallel origin from Templar Europe in much later times, with elements of a tradition concerning knights of the crusading era who discovered a secret vault in Jerusalem."*

The inference to be drawn here is that the Templars spent more than a Century burrowing below the ruins of the temples (Solomon's, Zerubbabel's and Herod's) whilst ostensibly offering services to travellers to the Holy Lands. That their wealth was amassed by their merchant banking operations of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries has led to speculation that they must have got a start somewhere and that start may have been treasure discovered during their excavations.

This is but a brief glimpse into the background and importance of the Order and, possibly, why it inspires passion and loyalty in its Companions.

Looking at more modern times, the establishment of Royal Arch Masonry and its development in New Zealand is well covered in Ian Nathan's excellent book "A Centennial History of the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of New Zealand 1892 – 1992". I wish only to comment that since 1890 there have been 105 First Grand Principals and 60 Grand Masters, 17 Pro Grand Masters<sup>[iii]</sup> and 21 appointments to the rank of either Past Grand Master or Past Pro Grand Master.

What is interesting are the statistics of those appointments. Has there been a close relationship between the Craft and the Royal Arch?

Of those 105 GZs, 19 have held the position of GM, ProGM, PGM or PProGM. 12 GMs, 4 Pro GMs, 3 PGMs and 3 PProGMS have held the rank of GZ. Some of these were the same persons so there is a little overlap.

In most cases the person was GZ before achieving high rank in the Craft.

E.T. Gillon was GZ in 1892 and was appointed PGM in 1894.

H. Thomson, the first GM (1890) became GZ in 1894.

C.J.W. Griffiths was GZ in 1908 and GM in 1911.

S.C. Bingham became GZ in 1909 and PGM in 1922.

J.J. Esson was GZ in 1914 and GM in 1936.

T. Ross was GZ in 1916 and GM in 1922.

J. H. Harkness was GZ in 1918, Pro GM in 1920 and PGM in 1934.

C. Flavell was GZ in 1921 and GM in 1946.

Col. Sir Stephen Allen as GZ in 1924, Pro GM in 1932 and GM in 1948.

G. Russell was GZ in 1925 and Pro GM in 1926.

T.M. Rankin was GZ in 1926 and PProGM in 1940.

Sir Charles Fergusson was GZ in 1928 and GM in 1929.

E.C. Smith was GZ in 1936, Pro GM in 1944 and GM in 1945.

Viscount Galway was GZ and GM in 1938.

Sir Cyril Newall was GZ in 1942 and GM in 1944.

W. J. Girling was GM in 1947 and GZ in 1953.

N.B. Spencer was GZ in 1956 and PProGM in 1960.

A. Burns was GZ in 1960 and PProGM in 1980.

The latest, of course, is ME Companion Barry McLaggan (2001) who was installed as Grand Master in November 2006.

So, the question arises, where do we go from here and how can we ensure the survival of this superb Order of Freemasonry?

## **The Way Forward**

I indicated, in writing about the discussion in Piako Chapter in 2001, that we concluded there were five solutions that could lead us to the desirable outcomes: to encourage excellence; to seek new members and revive flagging interest; to promote the use of mentors; and to promote the Order.

In many ways the final point really summarises all the others but it is worth exploring all the others in some depth.

## **Striving for Excellence**

Chapters should always strive for excellence, responding to a challenge to improve in every way – in the conduct of its business; in the education of its Companions; in promoting itself to potential members; and in its performance of its ceremonies.

It should aim for perfection in its openings and closings; in its reception of visitors; and in the manner of conducting degree ceremonies.

Its challenge should be to get its ritual right and in doing so, enjoy it!

The benefits of this are seen to be threefold: well performed ritual is impressive; the participants get a great thrill from being part of it – and tend to talk about it outside of Chapter; everyone in the Chapter, including visitors finds enjoyment in the meeting.

Therefore striving to achieve excellence is likely to make the business of the Chapter more enjoyable to its members; revive the interest of inactive Companions in the Chapter; promote the character of the Chapter and the Order; and encourage new membership.

## **Seeking New Members and Reviving Interest**

The so-called membership malaise facing Freemasonry affects recruitment into the Royal Arch. The problems of membership of the Order are therefore those of the Craft, and the solution is essentially one of finding new

members for the Craft. Solve that problem and the membership of the Order is likewise solved. Therefore a prime objective for every Companion must be the introduction of suitable men for initiation into the Craft.

But the problem is not restricted to falling membership. It also applies to failing membership. So a second challenge facing all Companions of the Order is create the conditions that will revive the interest of inactive members and encourage them to attend meetings once again. And how is that achieved? More than likely the solution will be to make meetings interesting, stimulating and exciting – by striving for excellence.

## **Mentors**

The concept of mentors is not new, and has been attempted in the past with varying success. Grand Lodge attempted to impose it on Craft Membership but there is little sign that it was ever successful probably because the role is not understood. It has worked very successfully where individuals have shown themselves to be willing to take responsibility for another, "junior", Companion but many may be discouraged because they consider themselves ill-prepared to take on such a role. It needs to be understood that the role of a mentor is not to "teach" or "instruct". The role is to be a guide and the only knowledge required is to know where and to whom to direct questions.

It ought to be an objective of a Chapter to foster the concept and encourage its Companions to take on the role. And that objective may be assisted by a program of education—assisting every Companion to make that daily advancement in Masonic Knowledge.

## **Creating Enthusiasm**

The enthusiasm of its Companions will be enhanced if the Chapter strives to make its meetings exciting and educational and its ritual and ceremonies as close to perfect as is humanly possible. If the enthusiasm and excitement of active members is enhanced, that enthusiasm will be transmitted to less active members. It will encourage their return to active participation. Equally importantly, it will be transmitted to members of the Craft who are interested in furthering their Masonic knowledge and understanding.

The prime responsibility for lifting enthusiasm probably lies with those who have vision and understanding but it is by no means restricted to them.

## **Promoting the Order**

Promotion of the Order is primarily educationally based. That is, communicating the idea that the lessons of the Order continue the lessons of Craft Masonry. It provides answers to questions that are left hanging for a Master Mason.

Promotion takes several forms:

- Individual promotion by Companions to other members of Freemasonry. But to be successful it is essential that the Companion be able to answer questions from an interested person, or know where to direct that person if he is unsure of the answer. So the individual Companion needs knowledge, understanding and excitement.
- Promotion by a Chapter: providing header boards to be placed on Craft Lodge notice boards is a start, but is not all a Chapter can do to promote itself to its host Lodge. Honours Boards, photographs of Companions (and not just First Principals), and lists of noteworthy achievements are possibilities which can be explored.
- Promotion by Grand Chapter in such publications as "The Freemason".

## **Conclusions**

- We have an Order which provides an extension and widening of the philosophical and moral code which underpins Freemasonry.
- Its ceremonial and rites provides answers which are left hanging after the first three Degrees.
- The survival of the Royal Arch depends solely on its membership.
- The responsibility for Royal Arch Masonry lies with the Companions and the direction is upwards from the grassroots – not from Grand Chapter down.
- Where an individual Companion sees a need to improve things he must take responsibility and accept the challenge.
- Questions from Companions must be encouraged to assist with education and understanding.
- Promotion of the Order is the responsibility of every Companion, Chapter and Grand Chapter.
- The education of Companions is the responsibility of themselves, their Chapter and Grand Chapter.

However one Companion cannot achieve success on his own: success will be achieved by a team effort, and the size of the team depends on the size of the objective. It may be a small group within a Chapter; it may be a Chapter; it may be Grand Chapter; or it may be the Order. And success will largely be determined by the excitement and enthusiasm each of us shows to our Brethren in Craft Masonry and, indeed to those outside the Craft. We need them to say "That looks so exciting that I wish to be part of it!"

## Notes

[i] Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of New Zealand

[ii] Laurence Gardner "The Shadow of Solomon" Harper Element 2005 ISBN 13 978 0 00 720761 9, ISBN 10 0 00 720761 1, p 193.

[iii] In the New Zealand Constitution a Pro Grand Master was usually appointed to carry out ceremonial duties when the present Grand Master held a position which precluded him from performing them. Typically this occurred if the Grand Master was also Governor General or Prime Minister.