



"The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder."
(Ralph W. Sockman)

Freemasonry is, and always has been, an educational institution, and properly considered, a Masonic lodge is a Temple of Learning where Masons seek "enlightenment" illumined by the lessons enshrined in the Ritual Charges and Lectures and embodied in the traditional history and dramatic allegories of this Ancient and Honourable Society. Masons, as individuals, endeavour to extend their personal experience in order to gain a deeper insight and study to expand their knowledge to achieve a fuller understanding of the eternal verities. Masonic knowledge is cumulative and learning is sequential, and like the Operative Stonemasons of old, we "build from the ground up". In the course of our schooling in the lodge, as in all institutions of higher learning, "*degrees*" are conferred "*according to merit and ability*" to mark the student's progress. In the **Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry** there are no less than thirty-three degrees!

....(Someone has calculated that there are at least 110 in the various rites, orders and appendant or concordant bodies of modern Freemasonry!)

The significance of the several degrees in Freemasonry may be symbolized in the simple mathematical instrument: **the protractor**; the small semi-circular device we all used in elementary school to measure angles in *degrees*. No, it is not one of the symbolic "*Working Tools*" employed in Masonic Ritual, but look at it for a moment through the eyes of a Mason. First, observe that the lines radiate from a central point, the point where we stand at the centre of our Universe. Secondly, as the circle of our experience grows ever larger, the radiating lines spread apart or diffuse. The farther we extend the lines defining the angle, the broader the horizon and the wider our outlook. Thirdly, the more degrees we add, the closer the circle approaches completion. However, even with all the degrees available in Freemasonry, we cannot expect to achieve "perfection," because our Quest will continue to the end of time. In this life we press toward the mark of our high calling.

Before you put the protractor back in its case, place it on the table and look down at it from above. Do you see the outline form of a spiral stair like those constructed by medieval operative masons in the walls of the gothic cathedrals? Does it not resemble the "Winding Stair" by which we ascend by *degrees* toward the Ideal? Finally, flip it over. Now the circle is completed. You still stand at the centre, but the world of Freemasonry is all around you, and you are surrounded and supported by a full circle of men you know as your Brethren all over the globe.

"The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne."
(Geoffrey Chaucer 1340-1400)

Freemasonry has the innate capacity to be "*all things to all men*" and each man takes from the Craft that which serves his singular needs and satisfies his peculiar desires. **William Preston** (1742-1818), while admitting that no one person can ever fully comprehend the meaning, philosophy, and theology embodied and taught in the lodge, urged each one of us to pursue his studies to the fullest extent of his abilities, and encouraged us not to be daunted by the enormity of the undertaking. In the mediaeval university, the curriculum was arranged in two levels as the *trivium* and the *quadrivium* - the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences. To-day, modern education is compartmentalized into elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities. In Freemasonry, while there are many *degrees* conferred in the various lodges, chapters, councils, conclaves, preceptories, and consistories, there is only one degree of a Mason, the ***Sublime Degree of a Master Mason***; all others merely interpret, illustrate, explicate or expand on its lessons. (Hence, the designation "*higher degrees*" in common use is inaccurate and inappropriate.)