

The Season of Festivity

*All hail to the days that merit more praise
Than all the rest of the year,
And welcome the nights that double delights
As well for the poor as the peer!
Good fortune attend each merry man's friend
That doth but the best that he may,
Forgetting old wrongs with carols and songs,
To drive the cold winter away.*

Tom Durfey (1653-1723) English dramatist, friend of King Charles II

THE MYSTERIES OF NATURE

From the dawn of human consciousness, the cycle of the seasons has been the source and inspiration for many of our traditional customs and observances. Some scholars suggest that the term 'Yule' is derived from a German word meaning 'wheel.' From time out of mind the turning points of the solar year have been the instigating impulse for communal celebration in rites and ceremonies. The ancient mysteries of Egypt were celebrated at the summer and winter solstices. The mid-winter festival has maintained an enduring place in the hearts and minds of people the world over, withstanding the changing intellectual advancement, social fashion, and spiritual maturation of successive generations. Meanings, beliefs, and customs have evolved and shifted with time and place – holy and profane, public and domestic, child-centered and adult-centered.

*WELCOME YULE, thou merry man,
In worship of this holy day!
15th century carol*

WINTER SOLSTICE

Literally, "sun standing still" – When the sun reaches its lowest point in the sky at noon, the day is the shortest in the northern hemisphere. Finding them difficult to suppress and impossible to eradicate, the established Church wisely adopted and cleverly adapted the 'old ways.' Midwinter celebrations to herald the return of the sun have been incorporated into the traditions of Christmas – light, greenery, and fire.

*Green grow'th the holly,
So doth the ivy;
Though winter blasts blow ne'er so high,
Green grow'th the holly.
The God of life can never die,
Hope! Saith the holly.
16th century carol*

ST. JOHN IN WINTER

The two feast days of the Holy Saints John have long been associated with Freemasonry – St. John in Summer, June 24th and St. John in Winter, December 27th. These days were celebrated by the Craft with music, oratory, and feasting. It was customary in days past for Lodges to hold the annual Installation Ceremony on one or other of the Saint John's Days, and some few still hold to that tradition. The oldest lodge in Ontario, Niagara No. 2, Niagara-on-the-Lake, installs the Worshipful Master on St. John the Evangelist, December 27th, and one of the newest lodges, Royal City Daylight Lodge No. 742, Guelph, on St. John the Baptist, 24th June.

The old crafts and guilds of our operative brethren had 'Patron Saints' and observed their feast days according to the ecclesiastical calendar. Many lodges in Ontario bear the name of a 'Saint,' the most popular among which is Saint John (at present fourteen). The oldest is Ancient St. John's, No. 3, instituted in Kingston in 1794.

Historians have made many attempts to explain the special significance of the Saints John in Masonic tradition. Indeed, many old charges refer to Masons as '*St. John's Men.*' Bro. Albert Mackey points us in the right direction: "*The connection of the Saints John with the Masonic Institution is rather of a symbolic rather than of a historical character.*"

The framers of our Ritual must have been attracted by the opening verse of the Gospel of St. John: "*In the beginning was the Word.*" We recall that, "*Words are highly prized among Masons.*" Furthermore, three verses in the Epistle attributed to Saint John give clear evidence of the close connection between his teachings and the fundamental principles of the Order.

Only the man who loves his brother dwells in light: there is nothing to make him stumble. 1 John 2: 10 – New English Bible

For the message you have heard from the beginning is this: that we should love one another. 1 John 3: 11

Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God. 1 John 4: 7

The close correspondence with Masonic teachings of enlightenment and fidelity could not be better illustrated.

An old charge states the true importance and significance of the celebration of the Saints John to modern Freemasons: "*It is the duty of masons to assemble on these days and by a solemn invocation of the past, renew the ties and strengthen the fraternal bonds that bind the present to the brotherhood of the olden time.*"

*Love and joy come to you,
And to your wassail too,
And God bless you, and send you
A happy new year.*

Yorkshire Wassail Sing

By R.W. Bro. Raymond S. J. Daniels, F.C.F.
for The Curriculum Group
The Committee on Masonic Education
21 December 2006