

‘Convivial Freemasonry’

Written by M.W. Bro. Raymond S.J. Daniels

Delivered in his absence by R.W. Bro. David Cameron to Landmarks/Doric Lodge No. 654

Bro. Chairman and Worshipful Master,

Bro. Wardens,

Brethren,

Tonight we gather to celebrate the social virtues of Freemasonry. These genial ceremonies take us back to the period that historians designate ‘convivial Masonry’ when Lodges met in taverns and alehouses and the brethren there in open Lodge assembled, enjoyed the pleasures of the cup freely passed. The ‘good old days’ indeed!

It is thought that the rituals of initiation in the eighteenth century were comparatively brief, and that the charges and explanatory lectures were delivered around the festive board in festive spirit. Our predecessors understood and appreciated the sentiment expressed by Dr. Samuel Johnson: *“There is nothing that has yet been contrived by man by which so much happiness is produced, as by a good tavern or inn.”* It is no exaggeration to describe such a place as *‘a retreat of friendship and brotherly love.’* Our Bro. Robert Burns, the Bard of Scotland and the Poet Laureate of Masonry, captured the convivial spirit of the time in these lines:

*“Then fill up a bumper and make it o’erflow,
And honours Masonic prepare for to throw;
May ev’ry true Brother of the Compass and Square,
Have a big-belly’d bottle, when harrass’d with care.”*

Following the Great Fire that devastated the city of London in 1666, among the first rebuilding operations undertaken by Sir Christopher Wren were inns and taverns for the lodging and refreshment of his workmen. Ye Old Watling, originally built in 1604, and rebuilt by Wren in 1668 to accommodate the craftsmen engaged in the construction of St. Paul’s, still stands. It is thought that the great architect himself may have lodges there while overseeing work on his great masterpiece. The visitor today may quaff a pint of good English ale in tribute to skill and ability of our ancient operative brethren.

*“Come let us prepare, we Brothers that are
Here met on this happy occasion:
We’ll quaff and we’ll sing; be he peasant or King,
Here’s a health to an Accepted Mason.”*

It is a matter of record that the first Grand Lodge in the world was formed on St. John’s Day, 24 June 1717, when four old lodges met at the Goose and Gridiron Alehouse, St. Paul’s Churchyard, just outside the north-west end of the Cathedral in London. These four Lodges met at and were named for the inn or tavern where they met: 1) the lodge at the Good and Gridiron; 2) the Lodge at the Crown, Parkers Lane, Lincoln’s Inn Fields; 3) the Lodge at the Apple Tree Tavern, Charles Street, Covent Garden.¹¹ The eighteenth century was an age of great sociability

and conviviality and the customs of the day were incorporated into Masonic usage. In the beginning Grand Lodge was a social gathering for the enjoyment of a 'Grand Feast' rather than a regulatory or administrative body that it has since become. The only business transacted was the election of the Grand Master and the Grand Wardens, and their installation.

England is still well served by public houses with names that indicate close Masonic patronage: The Freemasons Arms and the Pillars of Hercules are just across from the Grand Lodge buildings in Great Queen Street. The Widows Son – The Square and Compasses – Three Castles – Three Compasses – Seven Stars – Rising Sun – Goat and Compasses, all may have significance in Masonic symbolism.

As this assembly is convened as a 'Military Table Lodge' a few remarks on that subject may be of interest. Masonry was brought to North America by military regiments carrying 'travelling warrants' many of which were issued by the Grand Lodge of Ireland. The Lodge box containing the Warrant and paraphernalia, was carried with the regiment and carefully protected.

Earlier this week, V.W. Bro. Cameron and I were accorded the great privilege of meeting with W. Bro. Daniel Glenney, Director of Special Projects at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. We were given a private tour of the new Museum opened a year ago, and shown some of the Masonic related artifacts in the collection: a tomahawk from the French Indian Wars engraved with the all seeing eye, the sun, moon and stars; a dirk with the Square and Compasses carved in the handle carried by Brother Sergeant James Thompson of Frasier's Highlanders at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759; the medals of Bro. Lieutenant Alexander Roberts Dunn, the first Canadian to be awarded the Victoria Cross in the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava, in the Crimean War (January 29, 1855); the regalia of R.W. Bro. Sir Arthur Currie, Commander of the Canadian Corps in 1917. It is no exaggeration, as W. Bro. Glenney pointed out, to say that Freemasonry has played a very significant role and has had a formative influence on Canadian history. On the Plains of Abraham that 13th day of September in 1759, when the political future of Canada was decided, both the victor and the vanquished, General James Wolfe and Major-General, the Marquis de Montcalm, were Freemasons.

In the New World, as the land became settled, the wayside inns along the country roads and the taverns in the towns were the principal centres of social life. In Upper Canada, "*inns were much more than drinking and lodging places. ... the local tavern became all things to all settlers.*" The monumental History of Masonry in Canada published by M.W. Bro. Ross Robertson in 1896, gives graphic evidence that many of our early Lodges enjoyed the hospitality of the inns and taverns that formed the axis around which pioneer life in Upper Canada revolved.

The Beehive was adopted by Freemasons as a symbol of organized industry, and while it does not appear in our Canadian ritual, it is found on many tracing boards and charts used by the Ancients, prior to 1813. In Henry V Shakespeare refers to bees as "*singing Masons building roofs of gold.*" Here is a commercial posted outside the Half-Way House in York in 1816. It is worthy of any modern ad man:

*"Within this hive we are all alive,
Good liquor makes us funny;
If you are dry, step in and try,
the flavour of our honey."*

Times change, and yes, believe it or not, Masonry has changed – at least the festive board in North American Lodges has dried out a great deal. Today, only the Grand Piper gets a shot of whiskey on formal occasions when he pipes in the head table guests. We still celebrate the social treasures, but in a rather more abstemious fashion. The bibulous congeniality of our Masonic forefathers may to us appear un-seemingly in a gentlemen’s society, but tonight we recall the former days – the Great Days – when Brethren of the Mystic Tie were learning how to meet together as equals ‘on the Level’ in a class conscious society where otherwise they would never have met.

We ought never to forget the ‘chief point in Freemasonry’ announced so clearly in the General Charge: “*to endeavour to be happy ourselves, and to communicate that happiness to others.*” May we ever celebrate the great social virtues of our Ancient and Honourable Society.

*Come, landlord, fill the flowing bowl
Until it doth run over ...
For to-night, we’ll merry, merry be,
Tomorrow we’ll be sober.*

NOTES and REFERENCES

^I Anderson’s Constitutions, 1723: The Entered Apprentice Song – Bro. Matthew Birkhead

^{II} Hamill, John. **The History of English Freemasonry**. London: Lewis Masonic Books, 1994. p. 45.

^{III} McBurney, Margaret, and Byers, Mary. **Tavern in the Town: Early Inns and Taverns in Ontario**, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987. pp. 3-4.