

MASONIC EDUCATION

An Address by

James H. McKERGOW, D.G.M.

*Deputy Grand Master of the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge
A. F. & A. M. of British Columbia*

*Past Master and Honorary Member, Landmark Lodge, No. 128,
A. F. & A. M., Vancouver, British, Columbia*

*Past Master, Walter F. Meier Lodge of Research, No. 281,
F. & A. M., Seattle, Washington*

*Life Member, Lodge St. James (Newton-on-Ayr), No. 125,
A. F. & A. M., Newton-on-Ayr, Scotland*

*Honorary Member, Dunbar Lodge, No. 145, A. F. & A. M.,
Vancouver, British Columbia*

*Former Chairman, Committee on Masonic Education and Research,
Grand Lodge of A. F. & A. M. of British Columbia*

Former Editor, Masonic Bulletin, Vancouver, British Columbia

(Delivered before The Twenty-third Annual Inter-Provincial Conference
of the Officers of the Four Western Masonic Jurisdictions of Canada
at Banff, Alberta, September 6-7, 1963.)

FREEMASONS may well ask, "What is the future of Freemasonry?" Why is it that, in spite of all the effort that has been made, and repeated publicity of the transactions of various research bodies, we are still grossly ignorant of the meaning and purport of the Craft? What does the average man know of life? Nothing! Even the greatest scientific mind, working on a worldly level, knows so little that the term "nothing" is the only one capable of describing its infinitesimally small amount. Life is not to be found at the circumference of anything. Life transcends, permeates, and yet is the center of all things.

Freemasonry has existed from time immemorial, but we must remember that everything advances, improves and broadens, and Freemasonry must keep step with the march of mankind and adapt itself to the demands of the age in order to fulfill the purpose of its existence. If, therefore, our young men are to serve Freemasonry and make it effective, they must be taught what Freemasonry is, whence it came, what it brought from the remote past and what it is trying to accomplish, so that we can apply its spirit and teachings to the problems of the day. This requires a program of education.

Most of us, I think, will agree that very little investigation is necessary to realize that we do little indeed to enlighten the mind of our prospective candidate. His education should commence as soon as he has stated a wish to become a member of our Fraternity. The information given at that time should be very general, but should

point out that the Masonic Order aims to inculcate in its members high ideals, and emphasizes belief in the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. No so-called Masonic secrets should be given at this time. As a result of the information given him, the petitioner would then be aware of the nature of the organization which he is aspiring to join. The brethren sponsoring his application into our Order, should, as far as possible, make certain not only that he can answer pertinent questions satisfactorily, but also that he has had explained to him some of the symbolisms of Freemasonry, and impressed upon him the high moral standards outlined in the Antient Charges.

It is an old and true saying that first impressions and first teachings remain with a person for a long time; hence it is essential that a favorable impression should be created on a prospective candidate at the time of his application, and prior to his receiving the degrees. It is my belief that every candidate, before receiving his first degree, is entitled to, and should receive, an orientation on what lies before him.

Freemasonry is not such a secret organization after all. We have only to refer to the definition of Freemasonry, as contained in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, where we find that five full pages are devoted to its history and meaning. This can be read by anyone, even though he has not the slightest interest in our Craft.

It is interesting to see how this important subject is dealt with in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. It states that Masonry is a word used to describe the beliefs and practices of Freemasons, and the way in which local units, called Lodges, are governed and linked together. A Craft, rather than an order, it is secret only in having rituals and other matters not to be divulged to non-members; a society with secrets, but not a secret society. Its places of meeting are prominently identified, and its governing bodies publish annual Proceedings.

In order that the nature and development of Freemasonry may be explained, some account must be given of the following subjects:

1. The meaning of the word Freemasonry.
2. The organization of the medieval building operations.
3. The connection between Operative and Speculative Masonry.
4. The foundation in 1717 of the Mother Grand Lodge, from which orthodox Freemasonry in its modern form is derived.
5. The relation of Freemasonry to religion.
6. Masonic ceremonies.
7. The diffusion of Freemasonry after 1717.

You see, my Brethren, the great amount of material for Masonic education which can be taken from the Encyclopaedia Britannica. There is enough material in it to keep a Lodge busy in educational work for many meetings.

About all that is hidden from the profane are our modes of recognition and words. The candidate should thoroughly understand the seriousness of the step he is about to take. We should endeavor to remove from his mind all thought of nervousness which he naturally feels prior to his initiation. If a candidate can enter the inner door in a

state of mind which will enable him to follow his guide and fear no danger, he is then receptive to, and ready to appreciate, what is to follow. When a candidate is properly prepared and advised in the anteroom, the ceremonies inside will take on a deeper meaning. This confidence and understanding can best be obtained if some well-informed and devoted brother in the Craft takes the candidate in hand, answers his questions, and creates in him a further desire to understand and practice the great virtues of Freemasonry.

I propose to examine the question of Masonic education in some detail, and for this reason have divided my paper into three parts:

1. Why is Masonic Education Necessary?
2. What is the Subject Matter Involved?
3. How Masonic Education of the Brethren Can Best be Achieved.

1. Why is Masonic Education Necessary?

The more thoughtful members of the Craft have at all times urged the importance of giving the brethren a greater instruction. One very eminent Freemason has written, "What we require is to put more Freemasonry into men, and not more men into Freemasonry."

This statement, however, is so broad in its possible interpretations that, without a more precise definition, it is not easy to determine exactly what it is intended to imply. I think the inference is that the teachings of Freemasonry should become better known among men generally, and that the principles of our Craft should be the guiding principles of all men. But I believe that his words are also capable of the interpretation that those who have already been formally initiated into our Order should become more fully aware of the real meaning and purpose of Freemasonry. In other words, "Put more Freemasonry into Freemasons."

Accepting this interpretation, it would seem to indicate that the teachings of Freemasonry must be instilled into the brethren, and, in order to do this, some form of education is obviously not only desirable, but also very necessary.

We might start the discussion with the question, "What is a Lodge of Freemasons?" The answer is stated: "An assembly of Brethren met to expatiate on the Mysteries of the Craft." To "expatiate" means, I think, something more than a mere recital of ritual, and "the Mysteries of the Craft" would, I think, indicate that there is something more important than the surface meaning of the ritual to be studied and sought after. I would suggest, therefore, that the answer to the question, "What is a Lodge of Freemasons?" would indicate that there is definitely something which has to be taught to the brethren at the Lodge meeting. In one of the Antient Charges given in an old Book of Constitutions we find a statement worded in very similar terms: "A Lodge is a place where Freemasons assemble to work and to instruct, and to improve themselves in the Mysteries of the Antient Science." But, for the moment, I wish only to draw your attention to the fact that in these words there is a definite charge that the work of the Lodge shall consist of "instructing and improving" the brethren.

The references which I have just made pertain to the work of the Lodge generally, but if we consider the various charges which are given personally to the candidates, we find:

1. In the Entered Apprentice degree, it is suggested that the candidate should feel himself "called upon to make a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge."
2. In the Fellowcraft degree, he is expected to "extend his researches into the hidden mysteries of nature and science."
3. In the Master Mason degree, he is invited to "reflect on a certain awful subject."

Now Brethren, whether it be the daily advancement of the Entered Apprentice degree, the researches of the Fellowcraft degree, or the reflections of the Master Mason degree, a candidate must have assistance in his labors-his efforts must be guided. In other words, he needs to be educated.

In the charge given to the newly installed Worshipful Master on the night of his installation, it is stated:

"In like manner, it will be your province to communicate light and instruction to the Brethren of your Lodge. Forcibly impress them with the dignity and high importance of Freemasonry, and charge them to practise out of the Lodge those excellent precepts which are ever inculcated in it."

There can be no misunderstanding of the duty contained in these words. It is a direct instruction given to the Worshipful Master at the most important moment in his whole Masonic career. It places on him a responsibility to give proper instruction to all the brethren of the Lodge, and also to see that each new candidate, as he passes through his degrees, is given that light and understanding which are so vitally necessary to make his progress not only possible but fully justified.

The following is an excerpt from an article in the New South Wales Freemason, which states the position very clearly:

"It is not the primary function of Freemasonry to initiate candidates, or to enlarge its membership. Were it so, there would be no basis for our laws against proselytising. The ordinary function of a Masonic Lodge indeed the primary function of our Craft-is to train its members to an understanding of the truths which its Rituals and its Ceremonies are calculated to inculcate. Therefore it should be the duty of every Masonic Lodge to put into action a plan for the education of its members in Masonic history, symbolism and philosophy, devoting more of its meetings to this much neglected function."

Within the time available, I cannot deal more fully with this aspect of the problem, but I hope I have said sufficient for you to appreciate the reasons why Masonic education is necessary.

2. What is the Subject Matter Involved?

As already stated earlier in this address-and which I consider should be emphasized-candidates come into our Order ignorant of the Craft and its teachings, both material and spiritual, largely because there appears to be a mistaken impression that one must not tell a prospective candidate anything about the Craft before he is initiated. In my opinion there is much that can be said. In fact, I think it is quite true to say that Masonic education should commence before initiation; whereas in most cases, the candidate has been told practically nothing. The reason for this is probably not difficult to find, because the proposers themselves, in many cases, are inadequately instructed Freemasons, and obviously incapable of giving the required information to the candidate. Usually the limit of their teaching is to fill in the blanks in the candidate's application form, and, later on, in his ritual book.

Thus, it follows that a prospective candidate's ideas of the Craft are often based purely on the social activities of the brethren, probably because he has met many of them at Masonic functions. A prospective candidate must be made to realize that Freemasonry has a spiritual foundation. This might prevent some from joining, but it would insure that those who do join are of the right material.

Listen, Brethren, to the first of the Antient Charges "Concerning God and Religion":

"A Freemason is obliged by his tenure to obey the moral law, and if he rightly understand the art he will never be a stupid atheist, nor an irreligious libertine. He of all men should best understand that God seeth not as man seeth, for man looketh at the outward appearance, but God looketh to the heart. A Freemason is therefore particularly bound never to act against the dictates of his conscience. Let a Man's religion or mode of worship be what it may, he is not excluded from the Order, provided he believe in the glorious Architect of heaven and earth, and practise the sacred duties of morality. Freemasons unite with the virtuous of every persuasion in the firm and pleasing bond of fraternal love. They are taught to view the errors of mankind with compassion, and to strive by the purity of their own conduct to demonstrate the superior excellence of the faith they may profess. Thus Freemasonry is the centre of union between good men and true, and the happy means of conciliating friendship amongst those who must otherwise have remained at a perpetual distance."

There is nothing in that charge which you could not tell a prospective candidate, and I think that there is much in it that you should tell him. Incidentally I would remind you that in the Book of Constitutions, on the title page where the charges are printed, it is stated that they are "For the use of Lodges, to be read at the making of new

Brethren, or when the Master shall order it." Few of us, I am afraid, have ever heard them so read.

Having considered some of the things which might be mentioned to a prospective candidate, we now come to considering the matters which might form the basis of instruction, after he has become a member of the Craft.

Broadly speaking, Masonic education can be divided into three aspects: the material, the ritual, and the spiritual.

Taking these in turn, the material aspect will obviously include information regarding the organization and administration of the Craft. It will deal with its recorded history from the period of the formation of the first Grand Lodge in 1717, down to the present time. It will instruct the candidate of the manner in which the Grand Lodges operate. It will explain the nature and importance of the Masonic institutions, and the part played by them in the cause of Masonic charity. These things may seem obvious to you, but usually the younger brethren are left to obtain this information for themselves, whereas it should form the basis of the elementary education of candidates.

With regard to the *ritual*, there is little that I need say. This aspect of Masonic education is the only one which at present receives any attention. Normally it is well covered by Lodges of Instruction. Suffice it to say that every brother entering the Craft should be encouraged to make himself as proficient as possible in the ritual at the earliest possible moment; otherwise any real progress in Masonic knowledge is impossible.

The third aspect of the study, the spiritual, is the most important, and to this aspect I want to give serious consideration. Much ink has been spilled by Masonic writers—many of them men of great enlightenment—in endeavoring to prove that modern Speculative Freemasonry has developed out of the old Operative Craft. They have spent considerable time in research work, in order to discover how the transition from operative to speculative came about, and who were the first to become Speculative Freemasons.

It took approximately one hundred years for the full emergence of the Speculative from the Operative, and it was not until 1717 that the Speculative came fully into the open, with the formation of the first Grand Lodge.

Brethren must therefore be encouraged to speculate upon the meaning and purpose of the Craft.

Freemasonry is said to be a system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols. Freemasonry has also been said to exist from time immemorial. Any thinking member of the Craft will cast doubts on the latter statement if he regards Freemasonry in its purely material aspect. What has existed from time immemorial is (a) the system of symbolism which the Craft employs, and (b) the hidden truths which lie behind that symbolism. In all ages esoteric truths have always been taught

by means of symbols, partly because mere words are inadequate to impart the message which they are intended to convey, and also because it has been, and still is, necessary to veil certain truths from the profane and those who are not yet entitled to understand them.

The primary landmark of Freemasonry is a belief in the Great Architect of the Universe, and the acceptance of this belief by all who become initiated into the Craft confirms that those initiates should have definite spiritual beliefs. It is obvious, however, that in actual fact not all who become members of the Craft are prepared to acknowledge the essentially spiritual basis of the Craft teachings, and to such brethren a proper understanding of the symbolism of the Craft is difficult, if not indeed impossible.

One is often asked for authority in dealing with the interpretation of symbols. It is asked: "By what authority do you state that such is the interpretation of a particular symbol?" Brethren, there is no handbook for symbolism, no standard textbook which can be quoted by all and sundry. One must be prepared to accept the word of those who, having themselves studied, should be in a position to know. The purpose of symbolism is to make one think for himself.

Symbolism is not something restricted to Freemasonry. Symbolism is as old as life itself, and exists everywhere around us in our daily lives. The very words we speak and write are merely symbols. Many of our actions are symbolical—we shake hands when we meet; we stand when the National Anthem is played; we use flags and standards; we wear rings on our fingers. With all these things, it is not the object itself which is important—it is the ideas which associate themselves with it in our minds.

So it is with the symbolism of Freemasonry; and as Freemasonry is a spiritual science, the symbols of Freemasonry are intended to make brethren think along spiritual lines, so that when working in the Temple the thoughts of the brethren may be raised from a mundane level to spiritual heights, and, when the work in the Temple is completed, these high concepts of right living can be carried out in our daily lives.

Freemasonry is intended to appeal to the thinking man. The ritual is but an outline. To fill in that outline a man who is resolved to become a real Freemason has to do some reading of what thoughtful Freemasons have written about Freemasonry.

Such are the matters to which we should devote our attention in considering the Masonic education of our brethren; and in the final section of this address I want to consider some of the means by which we might be able to achieve this purpose.

3. How Masonic Education of the Brethren Can Best be Achieved.

Broadly speaking, Masonic education can be conveyed to the members of the Craft in three ways: by means of the printed word, by verbal instruction within the Lodge, and by means of study groups.

Many brethren like to pursue their own inquiries and their studies in private-in their own time, and in their own way. This should be encouraged, but it is necessary that a lead should be given to such brethren, in order that they may know where to look for their information. Freemasonry being a science, it cannot be learned without study, and brethren must therefore be prepared to read and to read extensively.

As I mentioned earlier, there are many books which have been written about Freemasonry. Every Lodge should possess a library of books, and should subscribe to at least some of the Masonic journals which are issued both here and overseas, and these books and papers should be under the jurisdiction of a Past Master of the Lodge, whose duty should be to see that they are made available to the brethren of the Lodge.

It is not necessary for me to suggest any particular books on Masonic teachings. The list is so wide and varied that I think it is better for each Lodge to select its own material. Personally, I think that Mackey's Encyclopedia is one of the best books on which any Freemason could start his search for more knowledge.

I would urge every Lodge to adopt this idea of a Lodge library. The second method for the dissemination of Masonic knowledge is for instruction to be given to the brethren at actual Lodge meetings. The difficulty here is that so much time is taken up with degree work that normally there is no time left for this purpose. I feel, however, that this is a problem to which we should endeavor to find a solution. The Temple is the proper place in which instruction should be given, and the atmosphere of the Lodge room is more properly attuned to this purpose than any other place. We therefore have to consider whether it would not be wiser to limit the number of candidates, so as to leave a little time for the purpose of a short paper or talk on some matter of Masonic instruction-preferably on the ceremony which has just been performed. This may necessitate a slowing-up of the intake of candidates into the Lodge, but, if the number of candidates coming forward is so large, the solution to that problem might be the formation of more Lodges.

There is one way which I would like to suggest to you in which instruction can be given at Lodge meetings, at least as far as the young Freemason is concerned. Never let Entered Apprentices or Fellowcrafts leave the Lodge room alone when the Lodge is raised to a high degree. When such brethren withdraw from the Lodge, they should always be accompanied by a Past Master, or well qualified brother, who can utilize the time in giving them some Masonic instruction.

I would also like to suggest that each Lodge (in addition to the usual instructor of the candidates between the degrees) should select a skilled brother whose essential duty it would be to look after the question of Masonic education. This brother would be responsible to see that each candidate, as he passes through his degrees, is given the requisite knowledge to make his advancement not only possible, but justified.

I am well aware that hitherto it has been regarded as the duty of the proposer to instruct his candidate, but to my mind this method has failed, because in the vast

majority of cases, these brethren are not themselves sufficiently skilled to be able to answer any but the most obvious of inquiries. This brother's work would consist in giving such information to the candidate as lies within his capacity; but even more than this, of making known to the candidate where he could obtain further information.

Much of the ignorance which prevails in the Craft is due more to the fact that individual brethren do not know where to go for information, rather than to the fact that information is not given to them directly by their Lodges. Therefore, the brother selected for this particular service must be one who has had considerable experience in the Craft. He need not necessarily be one with profound depth of knowledge in any of the three paths of Masonic knowledge which I have mentioned, but he must rather be one who has the knowledge as to where information can be obtained.

The third method of dissemination of Masonic knowledge for the education of the brethren is through study groups. I believe that there are too few study groups in existence, and I would like to see many more come into operation. Every center where Lodges meet should have its study group.

I realize, however, that until the interest of the brethren within the Lodge is aroused, little can be done. First we must begin to give education in our Lodges, and through our Lodges of Instruction, and then brethren will be encouraged to join study groups, where they can add to their education on a higher level.

My remarks, of course, are more particularly directed to those members of the Craft who are Masters and Past Masters, but I believe that everyone can exert an influence on his Lodge to bring about a greater awareness of the necessity for giving this matter of education more attention.

While speaking of Past Masters, I would like to add that from time to time I heard such brethren say that they welcome any opportunity of service to the Lodge; that they fear that, having passed through the Chair, they are in danger of being "placed on the shelf." Brethren, no Past Master worthy of the name should run any risk of being "placed on the shelf." There is work in Freemasonry for all Past Masters, except perhaps those aged worthies, who after a life well spent in service to the Craft, should be allowed to retire from their labors, and spend the closing years of their life watching others carry on with the work.

I believe that the brethren of the various Lodges can do much to provide the facilities which will make Masonic education more readily available to the brethren of the Craft. I am sure there are many well-known brethren who are sufficiently qualified to give some knowledge to those candidates just coming into the Craft, and that is the point from which we must start.

The best way to learn any subject is to try to teach others that subject, and a vastly increased understanding will come to any brother who tries to pass on his knowledge to others.

I believe that we should all work in the cause of Freemasonry, and our work should be along the lines I have indicated, so that by our united endeavors we may all help to raise Freemasonry to its highest ideals, and thus help it to achieve its true purpose.

I do not suggest that it will be easy, especially in its early stages. I am only too well aware that in many Lodges there will be opposition from some of the older Past Masters at any attempt to alter the old order of things, but, Brethren, I believe that we have now arrived at a period in the evolution of our Craft when the old order changeth, and a new order is coming into being, and that new order can be materially affected, if it is influenced by a proper understanding of the tenets and principles of our Craft.

Moreover, if the members of the Craft have a better understanding of our ritual and ceremonies, the whole of our Lodge work will become uplifted. The officers will perform their duties more intelligently, and the candidates will start their Masonic careers under the most favorable of circumstances.

The members of the Craft as a whole will then realize that Freemasonry is a life to be lived, and Freemasonry will begin to achieve that purpose for which I believe our modern Speculative Craft was formed-that men the world over can learn to live together in brotherly love.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Conference of Grand Masters of Masons of North America.
Conferences of Grand and District Grand Lodges of Canada.
Dormer Masonic Study Club.
Masonic Bulletin, Vancouver, B. C.

Extracted from Masonic Papers
Vol. III No. 18 [November 1963]
Published and Distributed by
Walter F. Meier Lodge of Research No. 281 F & AM
Seattle, Washington.

=====

2008-08-01