

Freemasonry in Ireland: Understanding our Masonic Heritage

Presented at Oracle Lodge 1003

on

11th October 2004

by

Bro Paul Hearn

Introduction

Ireland and its people have long memories. Great men, and greater deeds, are well preserved in lore. A historian once told me of a presentation made to Wicklow Town Council which detailed events in the area during the Rebellion of 1798. Showing great diligence in his task, the historian omitted no detail from his narrative of certain violent events which occurred. Amid an account of one such episode he looked up only to see several of the councillors blushing and some outright fuming. His presentation cut short, he was led away from his lectern to be told that the protagonists in that particular unfortunate episode had direct descendants in the council before him. However, this long memory can often be less than impartial and worse still, as is the habit of the people of our nation, a good story rarely gets passed on without some embellishment to increase the pleasure of the next listener.

With this in mind, and with the purpose of our lodge set on inquiry into such things, the history of Freemasonry in Ireland must be viewed with a cold eye. In this presentation, I would like to set out some of the markers of the history of the Craft in Ireland, some of which may be well known to the Brethren, and some perhaps not. These markers will form the basis for future papers which will delve further and hopefully yield a greater understanding of Ireland, the Craft and our place as Freemasons in the twenty first century.

The Grand Lodge

As is well known from our recent anniversary celebrations, the Grand Lodge of Ireland was formed in 1725. However due to certain periods of turmoil within the Order and the country, this date does not come from a Grand Lodge record, but rather from the public press. The Dublin Weekly Journal of June 26th 1725 ran a story which covered an event that occurred two days previously on the 24th. The paper in a congratulatory style, details the formation of a procession of the officers of Grand Lodge and the new Grand Master, the 1st Earl of Rosse, that made its way from the Tailor's Hall in Back Lane, off modern Werburgh Street, across the River Liffey and up to the Kings Inns where there was a festive board and fine speeches.

Many details are worthy of note in this account. Firstly, the Tailor's Hall was indeed the headquarters of the Order in Dublin during this period. However, there is no mention made of the Order having recently taken up residence there. Nor is there mention of the Old Grand Master, as

the Earl of Rosse is mentioned as the new Grand Master and indeed the entire event is a celebration of his installation. A full complement of officers is present too. The natural inference from the type and tone of the account then indicates that, though this is the first recorded mention of the Grand Lodge, it may have been in existence some time before the stated date. A tantalising prospect certainly.

Trinity College Dublin

Delving further into the history of the Craft in Ireland we come across the Trinity College Dublin manuscript called "The Trinity Tripos". This manuscript, of uncertain provenance, details a speech made by a college fellow, apparently to a lodge of Free Masons who met within the grounds. This is not as unusual as it may seem. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were few purpose built lodges in the country. As such, public houses and commercial or civic buildings were often used by the Order both in Dublin and through out the country. Alas, Trinity College itself has suffered much and had its fortunes waver during its 400 odd years of existence, with such lows points as that in 1689 when James II turned all of the fellows out and made the place a barracks. So again, records from these early periods are scant if they exist at all. But again, the document yields a tantalising clue as to the existence and workings of the Craft long before the modern period under the Grand Lodge.

The Baal's Bridge Square

Ireland is indeed fortunate to have in the Baal's Bridge Square, evidence of the antiquity of the Craft. Baal's Bridge was built over the river Shannon in 1340 to join the walled towns, English Town and Irish Town, that made up the city of Limerick. Some time in the mid-sixteenth century it was rebuilt and is mentioned completed in the court records of Elizabeth I in 1558. In 1830, Brother James Paine was contracted to dismantle the old bridge and to build a new one. On removing the base of the bridge on the Englishtown side, the square was found amid the stones. It was much corroded, but still in evidence was the pair of holes by which it could be hung on a collar, and the legend:

***"I WILL STRIVE TO LIVE WITH LOVE AND CARE
UPON THE LEVEL BY THE SQUARE"***

A date was recorded too, though this itself is the source of much controversy. The Limerick Southern Chronicle, Clare and Tipperary Advertiser, issue of Saturday, September 25, 1869 gives this description of the date inscribed:

"The year 1317 is engraved on one of the squares, the most illegible character is the figure 3, which might be 5, but history proves it must have been before 1558."

The date was later accepted to be 1517. Though some cast doubt as to whether it may have been secreted at the laying of the foundation of the bridge, or at some subsequent point. The square, after its discovery by Brother Paine, was given to a Bro. Michael Furnell, a Limerick Brother,

whom Bro Paine, in his private correspondence records, “thought much of it”. In a letter from one Bro. Fred W. Furnell of February 8, 1871, cousin of Bro. Michael Furnell, he states: “The date of the Square is undoubtedly 1517. How it got imbedded in the masonry of this old bridge no one can tell. I can only account for it by supposing that at some period after 1517 or about that time that that portion of the Bridge was being repaired or rebuilt and some worthy Mason put it in the place where it was found.”

This letter was part of a body of correspondence between Bro. John Pearson Bell, a Past Provincial Grand master of York and the then octogenarian Bro Paine. It is one of a number of letters in Bro. Bell’s efforts to track down the square in the late 1800s.

The search during this period highlights the questions over the square, namely, how it came to be where it was found and what the inscribed date was. It has been suggested that the antique nature of the font employed, coupled with the effects of age, may have made the elongated “j” shaped figure seem to be the second 1 of 1517, instead of a zero. However, it is arguable that the same may have been said of the first “1” in the inscription. Despite these points, we have today representations of the square which bear the inscription 1507.

These various missives provide a fascinating insight into the finders and the subsequent custodians of the square and their own interpretations of its provenance. The variations on the dates notwithstanding, the artefact is still of paramount importance in so far as it shows a distinct link between the operative and the speculative crafts, whether it dates from the sixteenth or indeed the fourteenth century.

Conclusion

Rather than drawing conclusions from these small accounts, I would rather, pose further questions for there are many such events that are worthy of inquiry in the annals of Irish Masonry. For example there is the case of the missing records, removed by an early 18th century Grand Secretary, Alexander Seton, which may throw some light on the issues mentioned; or how the Craft fared during such troubled times as 1798, or 1803.

Hopefully this brief presentation will have illustrated the kind of inquiry which Oracle Lodge will endeavour to pursue to further our knowledge, to enjoy our past and to understand our future as we make the history of our order in these present times.