

This paper was originally delivered to the Masonic Study Society, London in 1923

THE WORKING TOOLS OF AN OLD YORK MASTER

By W. Bro. W. L. Wilmshurst, P.A.G.D.C.

In certain Lodges in Yorkshire and elsewhere, where the impressive "Old York working" still lingers, three other Working Tools are known besides those allotted to the Three Degrees. They formerly belonged to the now obsolete Past Master's Degree or Degree of Installed Master and were presented and explained to a new Master of a Lodge on his installation, Brethren below that rank remaining ignorant of them.

After the union of the two rival Grand Lodges in 1813 the Constitutions provided that only the three Degrees of Apprentice, Fellowcraft, and Master Mason (plus the Royal Arch) were to be recognised. The Degree of Installed Master was therefore unfortunately dropped and the enthronement of a Master of a Lodge now takes place in the Third Degree, though in the presence of a "Board" of Past Masters only, the working of such "Board" being the emasculated remains of the old Degree of Installed Master.

Notwithstanding the abandonment of the latter Degree, many old pre-Union Lodges, jealous of their traditional ritual and unwilling to accept abridged modern standardisations such as the "Emulation" working, stubbornly clung to some valuable pieces of traditional teaching and brought them over into what is now the Installation Ceremony, where they are still worked (not always with the approval of critical but not well-enlightened formalists of to-day). One of these is the three Working Tools of an Installed Master; tools specially associated with the office of a Brother called to undertake the responsible office of Master of a Lodge and to serve as a Ruler in the Craft.

The first of these tools is a Plumb-line, a cord depending from the fingers, with a plummet at the lower end, to enable the Master to determine the uprightness of a given stone or building. (On the walls of the old Lodge-room at York, where once the Grand Lodge of England met, may still be seen the biblical reference to the use of the Plumb-line in Amos 7, 7-8. Similar references are to be found in Zech. 4, 10; Isaiah 28, 17; whilst Rev. 21, 15-17 is of similar moment).

The second is a Trowel, an implement for spreading mortar, with which (in its moral sense) the Master is to spread the cement of love among his Brethren and bind the living stones of his Lodge into unity.

The third (and most significant) is a Plan, containing secret designs to which an Installed Master must work; it is, as it were, a symbolical blue-print of the Great Architect's plan for building the Temple of a perfected Humanity, a plan of such privacy that it is entrusted only to those qualified to know it and to co-operate in its execution.

Note here that the first of these tools (the Plumb-line) forms a vertical line; the second (the Trowel) involves a lateral horizontal spreading movement; and that these two in combination make a Cross. Of this Cross we will say more presently.

The rich significance and deep propriety of these three supreme Tools needs no emphasis here. It is a thousand pities that this luminous piece of Masonic tradition has passed out of general use and that these tools and their implications are now largely unknown among Masons. For are they not emblems giving completeness and final point to the whole series of Working Tools from the First Degree upwards; adding crowning dignity and beauty to the entire structure of Craft symbolism, and throwing a strong illuminating beam of light upon the purpose of Initiation and upon the goal to which it leads men, first from darkness to light, and then from light to active collaboration with Deity in the creative work of building new heavens and a new earth? Masonry being "a progressive science" must needs involve the use of progressive Working Tools, of which these three are the most advanced.

There is another reason for regretting their disuse. Were they known and their significance taught and appreciated, the knowledge would go far to counteract the utterly false and unworthy notion that installation in the Throne of Wisdom is a personal compliment to the new Master or that the office is due to him by virtue of seniority or routine or popularity, or because he has been an efficient officer or is good at ritual. The prospective occupant of the Chair would learn, on the contrary, that he is placed in it not for his own or his Lodge's glory or to make a great feast for himself and his friends, but to advance the glory of God and the cosmic work of building the world into the divine image.

For consider. By being entrusted with the Plumb-line he is impliedly delegated to be the skilled tester and rectifier of the souls of those committed to his charge. How shall he be qualified to use it if he himself cannot pass the test of that Tool or be unconscious of his own soul ending as a "silver cord" from the fingers of the Almighty and in direct communion with Him?

As to the Trowel, how shall he be able to use it or hope to spread the cement of love among his Brethren unless his own soul has become a burning centre of love whose radiance subtly welds them into unity, knitting their separated persons into an inseparable group-soul and "making them to be of one mind in an house"?

Lastly, but chief of all-the Plan. How can a man of any imagination or spiritual sensitiveness think of himself being made privy to the secret counsels of the Almighty and permitted to become a co-worker with the Most High and His heavenly hierarchy, without the deepest sense of awe, unworthiness, and self-abasement?

But apart from this general sense the Tools signify much besides. Tools not merely express abstract ideas; they are implements with which some practical work must be done. How, then, does an Installed Master use these tools? What sort of work does he perform with them? Well, here we get to secrets; those "secrets of the Master's Chair" which every new W.M. is sworn to preserve but of the nature of which he is usually completely ignorant. Can any P.M. who reads this say what those secrets are, Save for certain formal ones, pretty certainly he will have to say "no."

They cannot, of course, be discussed here but one hint can be given. It was said above that the vertical Plumb-line and the horizontal line of motion of the Trowel combine to form a Cross, thus + or the Hebrew Tau-Cross T. The latter form is displayed on every P.M.'s apron; it appears on the badge with which every newly installed Master is invested, and implies that he knows its meaning and is expected to make use of it. Moreover its component lines are exhibited separately in the two columns on the Wardens' pedestals, one of which is always erect and the other horizontal. No column appears on the Master's pedestal. Why? Because he is the synthesis of the Wardens' columns, combining their properties in himself. The Master is a Cross, a living Cross, and therefore wears the sign of the Cross upon his clothing. The profound implications of this must be left to personal reflection.

We refrain here from religious discussion and from reference to Christian associations. We are dealing with the Cross as a philosophical conception long antedating Christianity and taught in the mysteries of both the East and the West through the ages and perpetuated in our system. As Plato and others voicing the ancient secret doctrine taught, the world itself is built upon the principle of the Cross, and is a manifestation resulting from the conflict of two opposed principles (spiritual and material) which have to be resolved into a unity transcending the dualism (just as the W.M. absorbs the functions of his two subordinate Wardens and transcends them). To "take up one's Cross" is deliberately to engage in the work of resolving the crux of life by reducing the spiritual and the non-spiritual elements in oneself into balance and harmony. That is the "Great Work," it is Masonic "labour" in its highest sense; in proportion as one achieves it in oneself one becomes qualified and able to help in the task of world-building. Moreover, a Master of the secret science employs the sign of the Cross for many purposes; "Per Signum Tau" is an ancient formula used in connection with constructive and beneficent work done by such a man, unknown to his less advanced fellows.

It may be useful to sum up about the Working Tools generally as follows :

1. The use of the Tools is to effect the conquest of one's lower nature and will by the powers of one's higher nature and the spiritual will. One who is not master of himself and of his lower faculties cannot function on loftier levels or understand the nature of cosmic work. "He who is faithful in small things shall become ruler over great things."
2. The understanding and the use of the Tools are progressive and become disclosed more and more as one advances. It is hopeless to understand the more advanced Tools (those of the Third Degree and of an Installed Master) until the use of the First and Second Degree Tools has become the habit of one's life.
3. The First Degree Tools provide a rule for outward objective conduct; the Second Degree Tools a rule for the mental subjective life and include all forms of abstract thought (not necessarily religious), meditation, prayer, and mind-control, leading to perception of supra-mental truth and illumination of the lower mind. The Third Degree Tools are only for those whose consciousness has become "raised" above the life of common reason and every-day events; and these, in turn, open the way to the "secrets of the Master's Chair" and to knowledge of "The Plan," that Divine Building Scheme at furthering which labour principalities and Powers, Angels and advanced men. Hence the Plan is the supreme Working Tool of our system and the last to be communicated ceremonially, since it is the final all-sufficing revelation to flood the intelligence of the aspiring Mason. When one knows that Plan, knows oneself to be part of it and as called to collaborate with it, and sees everything around one as moving gradually though unconsciously to its fulfillment, one's life-difficulties are at an end, The rest is easy, for, vast as still remains the unfinished work, that work is frictionless and joyous because it is identified and in harmony with the Almighty Will that steers the universe to its consummation.

Let me finish with a story illustrative of the use of the Tools. A man seen loitering and apparently idle in a lonely district was asked what he was doing there. He replied that he was building, a temple at a city many leagues away. "Do you think it necessary" (he said) "for me to be there in person and working physically? Others are doing that who know nothing of me, but who are unconsciously influenced by the directive control of my thought and will." That man was a Master Mason.

Now it will be real and useful Masonic exercise (1) to think out clearly and in detail how that man made use of the Third Degree Working Tools, and (2) to realise that the Great Architect has built and sustains the universe upon the same principle and by like methods. You are unlikely to reach a solution all at once, but careful persistent thought upon such a subject opens out the mind and enables the inward Teacher to reveal things one has hitherto thought impossible and inconceivable.

Treat the story as fanciful and incredible if you will, but reflect that a few years ago any form of telekinesis (action at a distance) was so deemed; yet to-day telegraphy, telephony, "wireless," and telepathy, are commonplace facts. Now if by his merely natural will and surface-wits man has produced these mechanical marvels, what greater miracles must be possible to him when the higher creative potencies dormant in his soul are awakened and he becomes able to wield his spiritual will and faculties, to manipulate cosmic energy and to mould it into building new heavens and a new earth and a new social order. It is certain we are left to do these things for ourselves; we should never appreciate them if they be done for us. But the Power with which to do them will always be provided and available to us.

"Coming events cast their shadows before." "First the natural; afterwards the spiritual." Evolution is being speeded up at the present time. The scientific mechanical inventions of our day are shadow's and advance-omens of greater truths yet to be learned and practised upon a higher level by the still latent supermechanical faculties in us. Is there not an old promise: "Greater things than these shall ye do" . For this reason Masonic "science" and the understanding of spiritual building-principle, and working tools are to-day of momentous value and privilege to Masons individually and, through them, to the world at large.