

The Great Dissension (or Schism)

What follows is the text of an address given by Wor. Bro. E. J. E. McLagan,
a member of the Hobart Lodge of Research, on the 21st. July , 1967.

I now address the issue of the Great Dissension which occurred in the 18th. century, culminating in Freemasonry in England being divided into two factions bitterly opposed to each other. These rivals became known as the "Antients" who formed a rival Grand Lodge in 1751, and the "Moderns", who loyally adhered to the original Grand Lodge constituted in 1717. Until comparatively recently the "Antients" have been apt to be described as "Seceders" or "Schismatics" , but both terms are quite unjustified seeing that not one of the first dissidents belonged to any lodge under the jurisdiction of the Premier Grand Lodge, and also that their ritual and customs differed scarcely at from those of their Scottish and Irish Brethren, whose Grand Lodges, as we shall see later, were to recognise the so called "Antients" as the Grand Lodge of England.

Freemasonry, as we know it today, does not claim to be a religion, but a "Way of Life" open to all men irrespective of colour, race or creed, who believe in the G.A.O.T.U. as the Supreme Being and regard Brotherly Love , Relief and Truth as the standards by which a worthy Mason should endeavour to live. The "Moderns" however , regarded no man as worthy unless he professed himself to be a Christian, though, from studies made, there are very grave doubts that for many the sincerity of their claim was merely words, not actions.

The Grand Lodge of 1717 cannot be claimed to be a truly united lodge of all lodges practicing in England at the time of it's formation, but was in reality only a joining together, of six lodges, meeting in London, combining together for the furtherance of the Craft as practiced in London at that time, and, as history has revealed was nothing more than a club for aristocratic gentlemen , enrolment being limited to men of substance or royal birth. Money and birth were the qualifications to become a Freemason in the lodges under the banner of the Moderns. The first Grand Master, Anthony Sayers Esq. , was fortunate in having under his jurisdiction two men who played an important role in the furtherance of Freemasonry in England, I refer to Dr. Desaguliers and the Rev. Dr. James Anderson, to whom we are all indebted for a book known as " History, Charges, Regulations and Masters Songs". Anderson attempted to trace the history of Masonry back to Adam, and he was convinced that Geometry or Masonry began with Lamech before the time of the Great Flood, from which only Noah and his family escaped. The early Grand Lodge recognised only two degrees E.A. and F.Cs. Anderson certainly allowed his imagination to enter into his History of the Craft, as he includes in his list of Grand Masters Moses, Nebuchadnezzar , Alfred the Great, Cardinal Wolsey and Sir Christopher Wren, claiming a universal Grand Lodge existed centuries before the Grand Lodge of England was formed in 1717. The death of Dr. Anderson in 1739, Masonry gradually fell into decline and unscrupulous Innkeepers used their Taverns as Lodges displaying signs "Masons made for 2/6". The famous writer Hugh Walpole, himself a Mason, claimed in 1743: "The freemasons are in low repute

in England. I believe that nothing but a persecution could bring them into vogue again." There was no persecution, but a fierce dissension in their ranks took place in 1851, when the "Antients" and the "Moderns" formed rival grand Lodges.

What was the cause of these dissension's ?

They were many, consisting of variations in ritual and beliefs. These variations can be traced to a book "Masonry Dissected" by Samuel Prichard, first published in 1730, which exposure proved so popular that it run to three editions; raising great panic among the Freemasons of the period. The weak administration then governing G.L. attempted to stem the exposure by denials and variations in their ritual. The G.M. at that time was Lord Raymond, 22 years of age, who during his reign of five years attended Grand Lodge on three occasions, whilst the same Officers and Stewards remained in office throughout the whole period. The Points of dissension can be stated with some certainty to be as follows :-

1. The de-Christianisation of Freemasonry, which had started as early as 1723.
2. Neglect of the days of St. John as special masonic festivals t. John's day was the traditional birthday of John the Baptist, June 24th. Between 1730 and 1753 not one G.M. was installed on that day. Amongst 18th. century F.M.s this was regarded as a most serious matter.
3. Transposition of the modes of recognition in E.A. and F.C. degrees.
4. Denied any claim of Freemasonry being Universal, thus destroying a Landmark.
5. Abandonment of the esoteric part, slight though it was in the ceremony of installing a Lodge Master.
6. Neglect of the catechisms attached to each degree. These catechisms are not in use today, though short ones are used as questions to be answered by a candidate prior to passing to a higher degree.
7. Difference in Password in F. C. and M. M. degrees
8. Difference in word for M.M. degree.
9. The Methods of placing the three lights and the Wardens.
10. Employment of Deacons in Lodges. These Officers were used by the "Antients" and had been used in Ireland as early as 1727.
11. Refusal of Grand Lodge to recognise the Royal Arch Degree.

When exactly the Grand Committee, which represented the G.L. of the Antients was formed is not known, though some historians put it as early as 1739. What we do know, however, is that a General Assembly in July, 1751, was held when the "Rules and Orders to be Observed by the Most Antient and Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons" were agreed by five members including a Grand Secretary. Next year we find the Grand Committee an established fact of "nine" duly numbered lodges, "all the Antient Masons in and adjacent to London." There was undoubtedly a large Irish element in these lodges, whose members were mainly Mechanics or Shopkeepers.

In December, 1753, Robert Turner Master of Lodge No. 15, was appointed G.M. With the election of Grand Wardens the transformation to a G.L. was complete. The minutes of 1752 record the appointment, as Grand Secretary, one who has been characterised as the "Most remarkable Mason that ever existed" - **Lawrence Dermott**, who was born in Ireland in 1720. Initiated in Dublin at the age of 20, he was Master of the Dublin Lodge in 1746, and the same year was exalted in the Royal Arch, the allusion to this in the Antient records, being one of the earliest known references to this degree. He came to England in 1748, as a Journeyman Painter (working 12 hours a day at his trade). He first joined a Lodge under the "Moderns" but quickly transferred his allegiance to the "Antients." He later became a wine merchant and prospered exceedingly . He was a dynamic personality with a good education including Latin and Hebrew. Such was his force of character, he was the life and soul of the "Antient" movement, and more than a match in debate for any of his "Modern" antagonists.

In 1756, mainly through the efforts of Lawrence Dermott, the Earl of Blessington was persuaded to accept the G.M.'ship of the Antients (In proxy) as the four years of his term of office were to be continued. His absence can be accounted for by the fact that the Seven Years War (1756 - 63) made it necessary for him to be in Ireland. Getting a member of the aristocracy as G.M. , was an undoubted boost to the Antients and it is said, that to get him to accept the office, Dermott discreetly dedicated his book "Ahiman Rezon" to him. Ahimon Rezon (Hebrew words, when freely translated, meaning "Help to a Brother" in which he laid down the rules and regulations of the "Antients " ritual, together with 118 poems and songs to be used by Masons. Through Dermott's efforts prominent men were induced to join the Antients thus lessening the hold of the Moderns, and in 1767 Thomas Matthew (a wealthy man) became the G.M. He was a Roman Catholic, but in spite of the Papal Bulls of 1735 and 1751 forbidding Catholics to become Masons (classified as Heretics), he was a most ardent freemason, and held lodge meetings on his estate and insisted that all his servants were members of the Craft; but, in spite of his actions, he was never excommunicated from his Church. Some claim his great charity to the church saved him from having to suffer such indignity. The Duke of Atholl became the G.M. in 1771 and Dukes of Atholl continued to reign as G.M.'s until 1813, thus the causing the "Antients" to be known as Atholl Masons.

At the height of the feud between the Antients and the Moderns both Grand Lodges fulminated against a member of the rival body being admitted to one of their lodges, even as a visitor, and to do so a brother had to permit them to remake him before he could be allowed to enter the lodge. This rule was carried to ridiculous lengths, as in the case of the Provincial Grand Master of Quebec, being refused admittance to an "Antient" lodge, because his lodge owed it's existence to the "Modern" G.L. of England, who had granted it's charter.

In 1742, one of the "Antient Lodges" initiated a young man of 20, William Preston, who was destined to play a big part in the reconciliation of the two Grand Lodges. He composed and delivered lectures, which were so ably written they earned him the title of "Little Solomon".

The fight for supremacy in England, was not limited to the Antients and Moderns two other Grand Lodges claimed the honour, they were the Grand Lodge of York (who claimed the title of The Grand Lodge of All England) and the grand Lodge of England , South of the Trent (1779 - 89). The Moderns endeavoured to take over control of York and were met with such antagonistic opposition that they were forced to abandon their attempts. The Grand Lodge of England, South of Trent was really the lodge of Antiquity, first of the 'Four Old Lodges,' and was the mainstay of the First Grand Lodge, but owing to differences had broken away from the G. L. and set up as a rival organisation.

In 1810, the Atholl Grand Lodge (The Antients) resolved that a Masonic Union on principles equal and honourable to both "Antient' and "Modern" lodges, and preserving the Landmarks of the Ancient Craft would be expedient and advantageous to both Grand Lodges. Meetings between the earl of Moira (G. M. of the Moderns) and the Duke of Atholl (G. M. of the Antients) took place, and a committee was formed to discuss reconciliation. The formation of a Lodge of Promulgation resulted in the adoption of a method of working acceptable to both parties, though the "workings" were mainly those in use by the "Antients," notably the use of Deacons, and the recognition of the expression "Board of Installed Masters" for the installation of a Wor. Master.

In 1813 the Duke of Atholl, whose family had ruled the Antients since 1774 was succeeded as G. M. by the Duke of Kent, father of Queen Victoria,. In the Sam year 21 Articles of Union between the Antients and the Moderns were signed and sealed by both Grand Masters. The second Article lays down that "Pure and Antient Masonry consists of three degrees and no more, viz. those of E.A., F. C. , and M. M., (including the Supreme Order of the Royal Arch). The Articles of Union were soon ratified by both G. L.'s and the Grand Lodge of York, thus was born the present United Grand Lodge of England. The first Grand Master was the Duke of Sussex, who was proposed for the office by the Duke of Kent, thus happily concluding a feud that had lasted for sixty years. This re-union was to prove of inestimable benefit to Freemasonry, and raised the Craft to the highly respected status that has been maintained to the present day.