

Old Romance Unknown

“Old Charges” – “Manuscript Constitutions” – Manuscript Rolls” – do these sound forbidding, only for students and delvers into musty antiquity? They should not, for in their withered pages and faint inks of days long gone lies old romance of Freemasonry, a genuine thrill for him who finds joy in being one of a long, unbroken line of brethren which stretches back into a dim and distant past.

Some seventy-six of these old manuscripts are in existence; nine more are printed versions of ancient lineage, and thirteen others are known to have existed. Whether these latter have been destroyed, or will yet be found, only time will tell.

The oldest of Freemasonry’s documents is the “Regius Poem,” sometimes called the Halliwell Manuscript. It dates from the fourteenth century; it probably was written A.D. 1390; antiquarians are fairly well agreed that while it can hardly be from earlier, and it could be from a few years later.

It is the only one which is wholly in verse; an especially interesting circumstance in view of its age.

Before the invention of printing, when writing was an art known only to a few learned men, it was common practice to pass important information from man to man by means of song, doggerel, sayings with some meter or rhythm which made them easy to remember. As the Regius Poem is obviously a copy of some older document, or documents, its form bears out the contention of critics that its antiquity of substance is much greater than the date of its writing. Never a Freemason attends lodge who does not utter the closing words of this ancient poem, which so far as evidence goes, are thus the oldest words in our ritual... “Amen – So Mote It Be.”

The manuscript is beautifully hand written, on sixty-four pages of vellum, some four by five inches in size. The script, is old English, and many of the words are difficult for the non-antiquarian reader to understand.

For instance, the first two lines are:

Whose wol bothe wel rede and loke
He may fynde wryte yn olde boke

Which is literally:

Who will both well read and look
He may find written in an old book

G.W. Speth, famous English Masonic authority, compiled a glossary of the old English words of the poem, invaluable to those who wish to translate this oldest document of the Craft.

The Monk or Priest – which the writer probably was – embellished his work with red shading on all initial letters. The “Fifteen articles,” and “fifteen point” – “articulus” and “punctus” in the poem – are also in red. The verse is written in couplets, the majority of which are bracketed at the right hand side in red.

The poem has seven hundred ninety-four lines, of which the first five hundred seventy-six are Masonic, the rest being a sort of sermon, with a distinctly Roman Church flavor, including references to “the sins seven,” “the sweet lady” (Virgin Mary), “holy water,” etc.

The document is of intense interest to Freemasons for many reasons; the fifteen articles and points, repeated with variations in a large number of the older manuscripts, are incontrovertible evidence that Masonry even in those early days endeavored to inculcate morality, clean living and right thinking; develop character, thus having a speculative side in operative days. Indeed, Robert Freke Gould, famous Masonic Historian, initiated a controversy that has not yet ended when he commented on this poem as follows:

“These rules of decorum read very curiously in the present age, but their inapplicability to the circumstances of the working Masons of the fourteenth or fifteenth century will be at once apparent. They were intended for the gentlemen of those days, and in the instruction for behavior in the presence of a Lord at table and in the society of ladies – would have been equally out of place in a code of manners drawn up for the use of a Guild or Craft of Artisans.”

In other words Gould thought the “code of manners” was intended for speculative Masons, and that gentlemen, not engaged as Craftsmen, had already joined the Fraternity as Speculatives. This has been denied by other scholars, who maintain that men of good families (gentlemen) joined the Craft in the early days as operative Masons. The articles and points, both in this and later manuscripts. are the foundations of many speculative teachings of the Craft as know during the “historical period” from 1717 on. Moreover, internal evidence in this as in other manuscripts seems to indicate that the articles or points were read and recited to new brethren, just as modern Masons give a charge at the end of each degree, to impress the initiate with his duty as a Mason.

Almost as old, and fully as important as the Regius, is the Matthew Cooke manuscript, so called because it was prepared for publication by that scholar in 1861. The whole is dated with considerable assurance by scholars as about 1450, but the latter part seems older, perhaps almost contemporary with the Regius Poem.

Like the Regius, the Cooke manuscript is written on velum, forty folios, each about four and one-half by three and one-half inches in size, nine hundred sixty lines. It is embellished with handsome initial letters in red and blue, in considerable contrast to the brown ink of the old English text. The book is bound in oak covers, which bear the remains of a clasp.

The English is considerably easier to read than that in the Regius Poem, but it is still difficult. The commences with the seven liberal arts, continues with an explanation of geometry, includes a fanciful but romantic history of Freemasonry (to be found in many other of the Old Charges or Manuscript Rolls) and ends with “nine” articles and “nine” points, and a charge, concluding with the familiar “Amen, So Mote It Be.”

Papers without end have been written of this precious old document; briefly, it is highly important because it seems definitely to show that it is a copy of an old document, which was copied by a member of the Craft. He not only wrote his own words, but added the “Booke of Charyges” as it had been written and commented on by still older writers. The word “speculatyf” occurs in its present Masonic sense. The nine articles seem to be legal enactments; the points, matters enforced by the Craft in ordinary Guild life. A Grand Master existed in fact, if not in name, presiding over “congregations” of Masons only for the duration of the assembly. Finally, this document is obviously the source of many present usages, and even ritual.

Custom and ritual come not only from the Cooke manuscript but from many of the older of Freemasonry’s documents. Masons today require that a man be “free born.” This is “not” a modernism designed to prevent Negroes from being permitted in the Craft. The fourth article of the Cooke manuscript reads: (words modernized) “That no Master shall for any reward take as an apprentice a bondsman born, because his lord to whom he is bondsman to, from his art and carry him away with him out of the Lodge, or out of the place he is working in. And because his fellows, peradventure, might help him and take his part and thence manslaughter might arise; herefore it is forbidden. And there is another reason, because his art was begun by the freely begotten children of great lords, as forsaide.”

“The doctrine of the perfect youth” is increasingly under fire in these times. More than one Grand Lodge has modified the ancient idea that only a physically perfect man can be made a Mason, changing a custom which has five hundred years of antiquity behind it. The sixth article of the Matthew Cooke Manuscript reads: (Words modernized)

“That no Master from covetousness or for gain shall accept an apprentice that is unprofitable; that is, having any maim (or defect) by reason of which he is incapable of doing a man’s proper work.”

The ninth article, Cooke Manuscript, will have a familiar ring to all Master Masons; (words modernized)

“That no Master shall supplant another. For it is said in the art of Masonry that no man can so well complete a work, to the advantage of the lord, begun by another as he who began it

intending to end it in accordance with his own plans, or (he) to whom he shows his plans.” The word “lord” of course, refers to the employer, not to Deity.

No man become a Mason who will not or cannot express a belief in Deity. The first point, Cooke Manuscript, reads: (Words Modernized)

“To wit; whosoever desires to become a Mason, it behooves him before all things to (love) God and the holy Church and all Saints; and his master and fellows as his own brothers.”

All Masons obligate themselves in loyalty to the laws, edicts and resolutions of the Grand Lodge, the by-laws of their own Lodge. Compare the Cooke fourth point: (Words Modernized)

“He shall be no traitor to the art and do it no harm, nor conform to any enactments against the art nor against the members thereof; but shall maintain it in all honor to the best of his ability.”

From whence comes a Master’s autocratic power in the Lodge, by which he controls the brethren with the stroke of a gavel to do his pleasure in all that pertains to work or refreshment, debate or business? Read the Cooke sixth point: (Words Modernized)

“In the case of a disagreement between him and his fellows, he shall unquestioning obey the Master and be silent thereon at the bidding of the Master, or of his Masters’ Warden in his Master’s absence, until the next following holiday, and shall then settle the matter according to the verdict of his fellows; and not upon a work day because of the hinderance to the work and to the lord’s interest.”

Modern Masonic appeal from a Master’s decision is to the Grand Master, or his representative, or Grand Lodge. The “verdict of his fellows” is as binding today as in 1450.

Masons today must obey a summons. Modern Lodges which forfeit their charter must give their resources to Grand Lodge. In the day of the unknown Mason who set down the articles and points of the Cooke Manuscript, the law ran: (Words Modernized)

“Therefore be it known; if any Master or fellow being forewarned to come to the congregation be contumacious and appear not; or having trespassed against any of the aforesaid articles shall be convicted, he shall forswear his Masonry and shall no longer exercise the Craft. And if he presumes to do so, the sheriff of the country in which he may be found at work shall put him in prison and take all his goods for the use of the King until his (the King’s) grace shall be granted and showed him.”

Solar references in Freemasonry are numerous – circumambulation for instance, and the frequent references to the rising and setting sun. In an old manuscript in the possession of Lodge Scoon and Perth, Scotland, appears this:

“That sea lon and the sun ryseth in the East and setteth in the West, we would wish the blessing of God to attend us in all our wayes and actions.”

In the H.F. Beaumont manuscript, dated 1690, now in the West Yorks library, is a Latin description of “The Manner of Taking an Oath at the Making of a Free Mason.”

This is translated as follows:

“Then one of the elders holds out a book and he, or they, (that are to be sworn) shall place his, or their, hands upon it, and the following precept shall be read.”

The Colne and Clapham manuscripts (both of the second half of the seventeenth century, probably about 1660 or 1670) explicitly state that the right hand must be used. The Clapham manuscript refers to “the Bible,” the Dauntessey Manuscript (1765) to the “holy Bible,” and the York Manuscript, No.2 (1704), to the Holy Scriptures.”

So many manuscript Constitutions have references to secrecy that a catalog might be wearisome; two, however, are of especial interest. In the Harleian Manuscript (somewhere between 1650 and 1700) appears this:

“There is seuerall (several) words and signs of a free Mason to be to be revealed to yu wch as you will ans: Before God at the great and terrible day of Judgmt yu keep secrett & not to revail the same to any of the hears of any pson, but the Mrs. (Masters) and fellows of the said Society of free Masons so helpe me God xt.”

In the Dumfries-Kilwinning Manuscript, No.4 (about 1765) appears this:

“ ... you are under voues take hee yt you keep ye ath and promis you made in the presence of Almighty God think not yt mental reservation or equivocation will serve for to be sure every word you speak the whole time of your Admission is ane oath.”

In the same manuscript is a reference to modes of recognition: “Nimrod taught ym signs and tokens so that they could distinguish one another from all the rest of mankind on earth.”

Again in this manuscript we find a caution for the Tiler and an admonition to “learn the work.”

“No lodge or corum (quorum?) of Massons shall give the Royal Secret suddenly but upon great deliberation first let him learn his questions by heart then his symbols then do as the Lodge thinks fit.” So this Bulletin may continue for many more pages. But enough has been said to show that the old, old pages, dimmed by time, the ink faded by the passage of hundreds of years, hold ancient romance for the Freemason. As he does, so did his Masonic ancestors. As says he, so said they; if not in the same language, at least with the same intent. Brethren of an old day, long before the formation of the first Grand Lodge, held high the Holy name of Deity, exhorted to brotherhood, taught morality, mutual help, charity. benevolence, read lessons from the working tools, tried to “square their actions by the square of virtue.” But each, from the youngest to the oldest Mason, may catch, if he will, the sweet faint perfume of days that come not back; and thrill anew, as have so many uncounted and unknown, that he does today as did “all good brothers and fellows who have gone this way before.”

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