

THE REGIUS AND THE COOK MSS.

By V.W.Bro. G.H.Robertson; 3rd June, 1954.

The first Warrant or Charter of a Freemason's Lodge was compiled some six hundred years ago. It was written by an unknown, probably monkish, scribe and was commissioned by a Lodge of Operative Masons or by an Assembly of Masons. The earliest Lodges were brought together for the building of some particular church or castle and were dissolved when that building was completed. During the fourteenth century Lodges were becoming permanent, or semi-permanent, as at York, Westminster and elsewhere in England. They needed to have legal standing in order to fit themselves into the mediaeval structure of society. And so a Warrant or Charter was necessary. Such a document appears to have been drawn up in about 1350 A.D. It opened and closed with acknowledgement of man's duty and of his debt to God; it gave a history of the building industry; it set forth regulations to be obeyed by masters and fellows. This document, probably known as "The Book of Charges," set out to show that Masonry, or Geometry, was ancient and honourable, that monarchs themselves had been promoters of the Craft. Biblical, historical and legendary sources were drawn upon. It was claimed that Masonry already had a charter from King Athelstan drawn up in conjunction with a regular assembly of Masons. The "history" is not scientific by our standards. It was written under the influence of contemporary thought and knowledge and for the particular purpose of impressing authority with the honourable nature of the Craft.

The Book of Charges was copied and recopied for more than three hundred years. No lodge of Operative Masons considered itself regular unless it had a copy of the Old Charges displayed in the Lodge Room, nor if there were not read to every newly admitted brother. These copies have been known as the "Old Charges" or "Ms. Constitutions" of Masonry. They carry all the marks of having been used for the purpose of a charter by the first permanent Lodges and subsequent Lodges had to secure a copy before they could constitute themselves.

"They may be taken as an expression of the conscience and pride of the Craft and of its claim to antiquity and status, to excellence in workmanship and to independence in government." (Knoop, Jones and Hamer).

"They were written and composed by clerks, but they were composed, in large part, of materials current among masons, of customs and, perhaps, traditions which had been orally transmitted from generation to generation." ~ (ibid).

There were two very early copies of the Book of Charges, each made within fifty years or so of 1350. These are the Regius Poem and the Cook Ms., the Regius of 1390, the Cooke of 1420, AD. The Regius Poem is written on vellum in the beautiful Gothic writing of a priest of the period 1385-1445. It was found in a vellum manuscript book, five inches by four inches, which was purchased from the library of a seventeenth century book collector by Charles the Second. George the Third presented this book to the British Museum in 1757. These royal associations led to the later title of "Regius." The book lay unnoticed until 1838, when a non-Mason antiquarian, J. O. Halliwell, chanced to notice that it was a document which had been written for an old Lodge of Freemasons. It is our oldest historical record.

"It proved by documentary evidence that permanent Lodges of Freemasons existed before 1400 A.D.; that Freemasons were in a class apart from other masons; and that our Fraternity had not grown out of the building craft in general, but out of a highly specialized branch of it." ~ (Haywood).

The Cooke Ms. is written in prose, on vellum smaller than the Regius. Nothing is known of the history of the Cooke before June 24th, 1721, when it was produced by the Grand Master, Geo. Payne, at the Annual Festival of Grand Lodge. Both the Cooke and the Regius Mss. are written in English and in the dialect spoken in the South-West Midland area of England in the later part of the fourteenth century. The date ascribed to the Cooke is 1420, later than that given to the Regius, 1390, A.D., but internal evidence shows

that the Cooke Ms. As based on a version of the Old Charges earlier in date than that used by the writer of the Regius. The Cooke Ms. was purchased by the British Museum in 1859. It was reproduced in 1861 by Matthew Cooke, whose name has been given to it.

As fresh versions were made, that is copied by hand, there were mistakes in copying, variations made by the copyist, and additions suitable to the times, as references to later monarchs, and to changed Masonic customs. Nevertheless they remained in substantial agreement with the earliest versions, and therefore, with the first Book of Charges. About 115 versions of these Old Charges or Ms. Constitutions of Masonry have been traced, ninety of them in manuscript. In 1717 the committee of which Dr. Anderson was chairman used those that were available to them in the preparation of the Book of Constitutions. Both the Regius and Cooke Mss. follow a pattern which must have been that of the original Book of Charges. The Regius gives more information about trade usages; the Cooke gives more of the traditional or legendary history. The Cooke begins with a statement of man's debt to God. "Thanks be to God He hath given to man wits and cunning of divers Sciences and Crafts."

Then follows a history of the origin of Geometry or Masonry, "how and in what wise the Science of Geometry first began and who were the founders thereof . . . as it is noted in the Bible and other stories." The Bible was the Vulgate, Latin, version and the material taken from it is quoted accurately; the "other stories" are drawn from named contemporary sources, books of that day, of which the most important is the "Polychronicon." This is described as "proved" ~ i.e. authoritative. The Polychronicon was an encyclopedia, a collection of history, fact and fable, ancient and modern, a huge scrap book of the possible and the impossible, the credible and the incredible. There were many polychronicons, but the best of them was that compiled by Higden, a Benedictine monk who lived in Chester and died in 1636 A.D. Words, phrases, passages, from the Polychronicon appear in the Cooke Ms. and in due time have come into our Masonic vocabulary.

The Cooke Ms. gives the long history of the Craft; the Regius Poem repeats certain portions only, as we shall see later. The long history begins with Adam and with Cain, who built the first city mentioned in the Bible, the City of Enoch. Jabel was "Cain's Master Mason" and his brother was Jubal, or Tubal, the father of such as handle the organ. Jubal "found the Science (music) by the sound and ponderation of his brother's hammers, and that was Tubal Cain." "Tubal Cain was the first founder of the Smith's Craft and of the other Crafts of Metal." The history now deals with the old story of the two pillars (not those at the porch of K.S.T.). God was to visit vengeance on the world either by fire or by flood, and so all knowledge was inscribed on two pillars, one that would not burn, one that would not drown.

"And God sent vengeance by water, and this flood was called Noah's Flood. And after this flood a great clerk that men called Pythagoras found the one and Hermes the Philosopher found the Other; and they taught forth the Sciences that they found therein Written."

Nimrod began the Tower of Babylon (Babel); and he taught his workmen the Craft of Masonry. And Nimrod sent Masons and workmen of the Craft to Asshur, the builder of Nineveh. And Nimrod gave them a Charge:

"When ye come to that Lord, look that ye be true to him as ye would be to me, and truly do your labour and Craft . . . love together as ye were brethren . . . and he that hath most cunning teach it to his brother or fellow . . . and in this manner the Craft of Masonry first preferred and charged for a Science and A Craft."

After Nimrod, Abraham:

"And Abraham, as the chronicle says, was a wise man and a great clerk, and he knew all the seven sciences, and he taught the Egyptians the Sciences of Geometry. And this worthy clerk, Euclid, was his scholar and learned of him Masonry, and he gave it first the name of Geometry."

There is an old Hebrew tradition that Abraham taught the Egyptians arithmetic and astronomy; it was not

until 1122 A.D. that there is any claim that he taught them "geometry". Euclid, of course, came much later in time, but the writer of the history is bringing together two pioneers of traditional knowledge. The classical tradition was that Euclid taught the Egyptian Geometry. The Regius Poem and the Cooke Ms. both tell how Geometry or Masonry was founded in Egypt by Euclid as a means for the children of nobles to make a living:

"And they took their sons to Euclid to govern them at his own will, and he taught them the Craft of Masonry, and gave it the name of Geometry because of the parting of the ground that he had taught . . . and in the time of the making of the ditches to close out the water (of the Nile). And he gave them a Charge that they should call each other Fellow and no otherwise, because they were all of one Craft. . . and he that was most cunning should be governor of the work and should be called Master."

From Egypt the Children of Israel bring the Craft to Jerusalem. King David "loved well Masons and he gave them Charges right nigh as they are now . . . And at the making of the Temple of Solomon's time the King of Tyre was his Master Mason . . . and it is said in old books of Masonry that Solomon confirmed the Charges and himself taught Masons their Manner s(customs) but little differing from the manners that are now used."

The King of France "was a Mason before that he was King. And he loved Masons and gave them Charges and ordained that they would have reasonable pay and that they should assemble once a year."

St. Alban, also, in England, is said to have loved Masons and to have given them Charges. After him came Athelstan, whose youngest son "became a Mason, and purchased a free patent of the King that they should make an Assembly. He learned the practice of that Science in addition to his Speculative, for of Speculative he was a Master."

There is no record that King Athelstan gave a Charter to Masons. There was little building in stone in England in his day. There may have been a masonic tradition. The writer is concerned with establishing the ancient and honourable nature of the Craft.

I have gone over this history at some length for the interest and the importance it carries as the source from which our system of Speculative Freemasonry arose. We should call it tradition or legend rather than history, but it is better stuff than some of the "history" set forth by our not so distant "speculative" masonic writers. Each generation of Masons heard it read at the making of brethren and we can be sure that the masons who worked at Windsor Castle, or Westminster Abbey or Eton College, felt proud to think of themselves as practicing a trade which had been carried on and regulated in the days of King Solomon. The history is as interesting for the omissions as for the inclusions. Here is no mention of Como, the Roman Collegia, or Mystery Religions. Here surely are our real beginnings. How the words of the early Ms. ring in our ears! "Craft, Charge, Master, Fellow, Speculative, Annual Assembly, Tubal Cain, The Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences, Geometry or Masonry, Pythagoras, Solomon, the King of Tyre, the Temple at Jerusalem."

The Regius Poem sets out the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences, the building of the Tower of Babel, the story of Euclid:

"Of great lords and also ladies,
That had many children together, y-wisse;
And had no income to keep them with.
In that time, through good geometry,
This honest craft of good masonry
Was ordained and made in this manner.
The clerk Euclid on this wise it found,
Furthermore yet that ordained he,
Master called so should he be

So that he were most worshipped,
Then he should be so called;
But Masons should call each other Fellows."

The Regius Poem repeats the claim that Masonry came into England in the time of King Athelstan and that it received a Charter from that monarch. This ms. also gives an account of the four crowned ones, "Quatuor Coronati", four workmen, masons, who were martyred for their Christian faith. The Regius Poem has added to it two contemporary poems, John Mirk's "Instructions for Parish Priests" and "Urbanitatis", a poem on social manners.

The two Mss. have most in common in their statement of "Articles" and "Points". Articles are for "Masters" and Points are for "Fellows". The "Master" would be the master of the work, the master mason or mason-contractor, who was architect, surveyor, builder, he servant of his "Lord", but the most important man in the building craft. His employees were "Fellows" or Masons. The "Lord" was the employer for whom the building was being erected, he King, the Church, some large landowner. The Articles and Points are said to have been drawn up at the Annual Assembly or Congregation. This was attended by the Lords, the Burgesses, the Sherriff or the Mayor, by Masters and by Masons and Fellows. These regulations must have been settled some years before the first Book of Charges was compiled and show that already there was some uniformity of Masons' customs throughout the country. This followed from the movement of masons from one place to another as one building was completed and another started. The Masters of the works were mostly royal or ecclesiastical officers and were moved from one undertaking to another. Rarely were they independent contractors. The custom of "impressment" brought masons long distances from their homes. Masons were conscripted and forced to go where labour was scarce. At the building of Windsor Castle in 1360, the King, Edward the Third, ordered the sheriffs of nine neighbouring counties each to send to Windsor forty freestone masons. Nine months later there was a call for 1200 masons more from these counties as well as from counties further afield. A year later we learn that "the masons of the King's works at Windsor . . . are for the most part dead of the last plague so that the King hath need of more."

The Cooke Ms. gives nine Articles and nine Points, the Regius fifteen of each, but most of the regulations are identical in structure and similar in language. The extra sections in the Regius are by way of elaboration.

The Master is to be steadfast, trusty and true; he is to spend his Lord's money wisely and pay his Fellows according to the cost of living, "according to the dearth of corn and victuals in the country"; he must attend the regular congregations of the Craft. His apprentices are to be bound for seven years, they must not be "born of bond blood", they may not be halt or maim; he may not charge his Lord full workmen's wages for apprentices. He shall teach his apprentices well and not take an apprentice for whom he has not sufficient variety of work for his training. The Master is not to harbour thieves; he is not to supplant another master; he is not to start a work that he has not the means to finish; he must not disparage another master. If a more perfect workman offers himself he must replace an imperfect workman. He must not work at night except to study.

The Fellow must love God well and Holy Church and his Master and his Fellows as his own brethren; he is to work truly for his reward and so deserve his pay for his holiday; he is to take his pay weekly; to hele (conceal) the counsel of his Fellows in Lodge and in chamber; if there is discord between him and his Fellow he is to obey the Master or Warden till the next holy-day and then submit it to the disposition of his Fellows; he is to respect the chastity of the wife or daughter of his Master of and his Fellows. If he happen to be a Warden under his Master, he is to be busy in the absence of his Master. If he "seeth his fellow hew on a stone and is in point to spoil that stone, he is to amend it and to teach him to amend it that the Lord's work be not spoiled." Finally, the Fellow is to be subject to the Assembly on pain of expulsion,

and to be true to the King, "and all shall swear the same oath of the masons, be they life, be they loath, to all these points herebefore." The "oath" would be that which we find appended to the different versions of the Old Charges. For instance the Grand Lodge No. 1 Ms of 1583, Elizabeth the First being Queen, a roll of parchment nine feet long and five inches wide, includes:

"THESE CHARGES THAT WE HAVE NOW rehearsed unto you all and all others that belong to Masons ye shall keep so help you God and your halidome, and by this book in your hand unto your power. AMEN, SO MOTE IT BE."

Although Dr. Anderson's first Book of Constitutions include a history of the Craft, and a fanciful one, this was not repeated in subsequent editions. All that we have to-day of the Old Charges is the section printed at the front of the Book of Constitution and entitled "THE CHARGES OF A FREEMASON: To be read at the Making of New Brethren or when the Master shall order it."

We do not know how long the use of the Old Charges persisted into Speculative times. Speculative Lodges did possess copies, and in 1723 Dr. Anderson writes:

"Several Noblemen and Gentlemen with Clergymen and learned Scholars having frankly joined and submitted to take the Charges, and to wear the Badges of a Free and accepted Mason . . . "

What exactly did he mean by "taking the Charges"? In letter we to-day perhaps do not take the Charges in the mediaeval sense, but none the less in spirit and even in language we are one with our ancient brethren and rejoice with them in a system dating back to "time immemorial."

Here is the First Article in the original wording.

Regius Poem:~

The furste artyucul - of thys geometry -
The maystur mason - moste be ful securely -
Both stedfast - trusty and trwe -
Hyt schal hym neuer - thenne a-rewe -
And pay thy fellows - aftur the coste -
As vytaylys goth thenne - wel thou woste -
And pay him trwly - upon thy fay.

Cooke Ms:~

The
fyrste article ys this that euery
Maister of his art schulde be
wysse and trewe to the lorde that he
seruyth . . . and not yefe
more pay to no mason than
he wot he may disserue after the
derthe of korne & vytayle in the
countrey.

By V.W.Bro. G. J. Robertson; Published in United Masters Lodge No. 167
SELECTED PAPERS, Vol. II; Auckland, New Zealand; 1961.

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