



Royal Arch Freemasonry

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W.N. Nash, Grand Lecturer. April, 1996.

The four principal Banners and the twelve Tribal Banners or Ensigns all have a Biblical background. However, there are other factors which make the subject a difficult and compli-



cated one, which would require several long papers to deal with it adequately. Moreover the information is extensive, detailed, scattered and rather disjointed. We will therefore concentrate on the biblical Background.

The Emblems on the Tribal Banners are the distinctive bearings of the twelve Tribes of Israel and are figurative of a peculiar blessing bequeathed to each by the patriarch Jacob. Details are recorded in the forty-ninth Chapter of Genesis, which describes how Jacob, shortly before his death, assem-

bled his sons together for that purpose. In this Chapter Jacob gives a very frank and sometimes uncomplimentary estimate of the characters and qualifications of his sons; and predictions as to the future of themselves and their descendants.

The devices on the Banners are based on the descriptions contained in Genesis Chapter forty-nine, which is well worth study. The Tribes are further mentioned in the second Chapter of the Book of Numbers. After the Exodus from Egypt, Moses took Levi out of the line of Tribes and made members of the Tribe the Priests. Consequently Levi has no Banner.

The four principal Banners represent the leading Standards of the four divisions of the army of Israel. They bear the devices of a Man, a Lion, an Ox and an Eagle. These devices are derived from two of the mystical books of the Bible, namely Ezekiel and Revelation. The Lion represents the Tribe of Judah, the Man that of Reuben, the Ox, Ephraim and the Eagle, Dan. The Lion represents strength and power, the Ox patience and assiduity, the Man intelligence and understanding and the Eagle, promptness and celerity. The Book of Revelations represents the Emblems as four distinct beings; the Old Testament represents them as one being with four faces.

The Ensigns arranged around the Altar are said to commemorate the Children of Israel during their forty years travel in the wilderness, in the course of which the Banners were regularly setup and the Tribes assembled and pitched their tents around their own individual Banner.

The principal factor involved beside the Biblical background is mediaeval chivalry. The Banners come into Freemasonry from ecclesiastical and high civic custom. Great significance attends the display of the Banner in the Chapels of certain Orders of Knighthood. Other factors are Masonic history and practice in relation to the use of Banners in Chapters; a study and comparison of the Banners used in individual Chapters which involves a



considerable amount of detail; and the connection (if any) between the Tribal Banners and the Signs of the Zodiac.

A study of this subject involves a good deal of mystical speculation -probably fruitless -and cannot be pursued here.



Newsletter by:

MEC B Visser
Hon 2nd Grand
Principal, SGRAC

webmaster@dgrac-sa.com

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The twelve Tribal Banners

A writer of a series of articles on "The Royal Arch Banners" stated that the rebuilding of the Temple under Zerubbabel, Haggai and Jeshua was one of the last events in the history of the ancient Hebrews as a nation and from shortly after that time they have been a dispersed race.



He says:

"Such being the case, this event proved a suitable culmination point for the summing up of a chain of events from which lessons for succeeding generations could be drawn. This no doubt accounts for the brief retrospect given of Hebrew History, Allusion in made to the Banners of the Twelve Tribes, although they have no direct relationship to the events commemorated, nor did their interpretation more than lightly touches upon, merely pointing out that these Banners bore the distinguishing bearings of the Twelve Tribes of Israel and were figurative of the blessings bestowed by Jacob



upon each of his sons".

The antiquity of Royal Arch Banners is a difficult subject to discuss because very few documents sur-

vive on this subject.

The Royal Arch Apron

If we wish to learn something of the history and origin of our Royal Arch apron, we must first of all look briefly at the history and origin of the Craft apron, for the Royal Arch apron evolved from the Craft apron.

The Craft apron is the direct descendent of the long leather apron worn by our ancient brethren the operative masons who built the cathedrals, the churches, the abbeys, the castles of medieval England.

There was nothing special about these aprons. They were just a piece of leather, probably sheepskin, cut roughly to shape, and worn to protect the wearer's clothes as he went about his daily work, cutting stone to shape and size, putting the stone *in* position, and so on. They hung from the neck by a strap or thong, and were tied around the waist by two more straps or thongs.

They commonly reached from the chest to below the knees. Similar aprons are still worn in some trades today.

In the course of time, non-operative or speculative masons joined the operative masons' lodges.

The first one we know about was one Elias Ashmole, who joined an operative masons' lodge in 1646. It is fairly well established that Elias Ashmole and other non-operative masons of that time wore the same long leather apron that the operative masons wore. But in the course of time, the apron changed, probably because the non-operative masons thought that they should have something better than a rough old sheepskin apron.

But whatever the cause, by about 1700, aprons were shorter, reach-

ing only to the knee instead of below the knee, and there was a tendency to make them of fine white leather instead of plain tanned sheepskin. Some aprons no longer hung from the neck of the wearer the top part was allowed to hang from the waist. The flap or fall we have on our aprons today *is* the direct descendent of this early practice of allowing the top part of the apron to fall and hang.

By about 1730 or a little later, aprons with hand painted or embroidered or printed Masonic symbols on them began to appear. The aprons themselves were by this time made of white leather, silk, satin or fine white linen, and the practice of having a decorated apron became widespread in the next seventy or eighty years. The most popular decorations included the All Seeing Eye, the Columns, the Square and Compasses the coat of arms of Grand Lodge, but any Masonic symbol or design



could and did appear on these aprons. It was later said that it was quite within the power of any mason to invent for himself virtually any apron he pleased. It is probable that the custom in a particular lodge, and the wealth and social standing of the particular Mason were the deciding factors.

However, all this changed with the formation of the United Grand Lodge of England in 1813.

Prior to this, there had been two Grand Lodges in England, the original Grand Lodge, formed in

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The Royal Arch Apron



1717, and a second Grand Lodge, formed in about 1750. They were known as the "Moderns" and the "Antients" respectively. After arguing for many years about many matters, common sense finally prevailed, and they finally united in 1813. Naturally, many matters were discussed prior to the union. Amongst these were aprons, and it was decided that there should be a standard apron worn by all Masons. This standard apron was very nearly the same as aprons worn in Craft lodges today in both England and Queensland. The only real change was that tassels, as found on a Master Mason's apron today, were added in 1841. Aprons were originally tied to the wearer's waist with two strings or tapes, just as the old operative mason's apron was tied on with straps or thongs. The practice developed of bringing the strings or tapes to the front, of hiding the tie under the flap or fall, and of allowing the ends of the strings or tapes to hang. The ends of the strings were decorated with fa6y tassels. Later, instead of strings or tapes, the strap we use today to fasten our aprons became popular, but by this time, the tassels used on the strings or tapes had become so popular that tassels, similar to those in use today, were put on to the aprons. It appears that Grand Lodge bowed to public opinion, and the tassels were officially made part of the apron in 1841.

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Having looked very quickly at Craft aprons, it is time to look at Royal Arch aprons. When the Royal Arch was first worked in

1750 or a little earlier, it was conferred in the Craft lodges of the day. There was no special apron for the Royal Arch, those who had taken the degree continued to wear their decorated Craft aprons both in the lodge and the chapter. Quite often, those who had taken the R.A. degree added a red border to their apron to indicate this, or they added an arch to the symbols already on their apron, or did both. Later, Royal Arch aprons appeared.

These followed the decorated pattern of the Craft apron, but had an arch as the main symbol.

This was placed in the centre of the apron. Both styles of aprons were worn in the Craft lodges coming under the jurisdiction of the Antient Grand Lodge men-



tioned earlier. The Antients considered that the Royal Arch was part of Craft masonry, and they continued to confer the R.A. degree in their lodges right up until the union between the two Grand Lodges in 1813.

The situation under the Modern Grand Lodge was quite different. This Grand Lodge was officially opposed to the Royal Arch, and would not agree to it being conferred in a Modern Craft lodge. Nevertheless, many officers in the Moderns Grand Lodge, as well as ordinary Craft masons in the Moderns lodges took the R.A. degree. Further more, the degree was often conferred in the Moderns Lodges, in spite of the official opposition to the degree. Those who had taken the degree were forbidden to wear a Royal Arch apron in

a Moderns Lodge.

Thus, the ground was prepared to set up a Royal Arch Chapter where the Moderns could legally work the Royal Arch degree. The Excellent Grand and Royal Chapter was set up in 1765 for just this purpose. This Chapter (and later, its daughter Chapters) was the only organisation which confined itself entirely to the Royal Arch degree.

It was therefore considered necessary for the Chapter to have regalia for the Royal Arch degree only, and one of the resolutions adopted at the first meeting of the Chapter was as follows: "5th.

That all the companions wear aprons (except those appointed to wear robes) and the aprons shall all be of the one sort or fashion viz. White leather indented round with crimson ribbon with crimson ribbon and strings of the same with a thin gold properly displayed on the bib, and purple garters indented with pink."

"his apron was fairly large, being about two feet long and 18 inches wide (about 610 mm by 460 mm). Our modern apron is 12 to 14 inches long and 14 to 16 inches wide (305 to 355 mm long and 355 to 406 mm wide). Red (or crimson) had been used for some years to indicate that the wearer of the apron had taken the RA degree, so that this was an obvious choice for the border of the apron. This crimson edge had a saw tooth pattern along its inside edge, with a peak occurring about every two inches (50 mm). The flap or fall had a similar edging. The T H was a capital T on top of a capital H. It was very similar to our present triple tau, but was distinctly two separate letters. In the course of time, the two letters joined and formed the triple tau we know today. The letters T H were the initial letters of "Templum Hierosolymae", two

"Ask and it shall be given you; seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you."



The Royal Arch Apron

Latin words which mean "The Temple of Jerusalem."

The purple garters indented with pink quietly disappeared within twelve months. In 1766, a new resolution concerning the aprons was passed. This read as follows: "Thirdly Every Companion shall wear according to ancient custom an Apron indented with Crimson and the Badge properly displayed thereon and also the indented sash or ribbon of the Order." This is the first mention of the sash or ribbon of the Order. It is probable that the sash was white, indented around the edges with red in the same way as the apron. Unfortunately, we have no illustrations or surviving examples of this sash. The apron and sash remained almost unchanged until 1796.

In that year, the apron became much smaller, being reduced in size to about ten inches by twelve inches (about 255 mm by about 305 mm). The flap or fall was no longer pointed (which is the style we know today) but had the point



cut off. The indented edge to the apron was changed also. It was now alternate red and purple in essentially the same pattern as used today. The red triangles pointed inwards as previously, the purple triangles pointed outwards, and the complete border was one and three quarters of an inch wide (about 45 mm). The sash was also red and purple, about three and a half inches wide (about 90 mm), and looked very much like our present day sashes. The T over H was in the centre of the flap, as

previously, and was of spangles on a piece of purple satin.

This apron and sash continued in use until 1823. You will recall that Grand Lodge had decided in 1813 that Craft masons should wear a uniform apron instead of the wide range of decorated aprons that had been in use up till that time. In 1823, Grand Chapter decided that the Royal Arch apron should be the same size as the Craft apron, that is, from 14 to 16 inches wide (355 to 405 mm) and 12 to 14 inches (305 to 355 mm) long. The flap or fall was once again pointed, and indented with crimson and purple one inch wide. The apron had an indented border of crimson and purple two inches wide. The T over H had by now become the triple tau, and it was on the flap in a triangle of white, red or purple silk, depending on the rank of the wearer.

This apron was very much the same as the apron we wear today, but it lacked the tassels found on our aprons. Grand Lodge made the tassels officially part of the Craft apron in 1841, and Grand Chapter followed by adding tassels to the Royal Arch apron in 1843.

It will be realised that what has been described is the English Royal Arch apron. For all practical purposes, the English Royal Arch apron is the same as the apron we wear in Queensland, so that, in effect, we wear the apron adopted by Grand Chapter in England in 1843.

Thus, it will be seen that the Royal Arch apron is a development of the long leather aprons worn by our forefathers, the operative masons. Their long leather aprons became the shorter, white aprons of the early 1700's, which in turn became the decorated aprons of the 1730's onwards.

The first Royal Arch aprons were Craft aprons with a red border or an arch upon them. Then in 1765

appeared the first true Royal Arch apron. Various changes in the apron took place, and finally, the Royal Arch apron we know today appeared in 1843.

R. Jeffery, P.G.J. Grand Lecturer. January, 1990.

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