

William O. Ware Lodge Research

BOOK REVIEW

YORK MYSTERIES REVEALED

UNDERSTANDING AN OLD ENGLISH TRADITION

Reverend Neville Barker Cryer

Reviewed by William J. Lorenz, Past Master and Research Fellow

Y*ork Rite Mysteries Revealed* is more than a good book. It is a great book! Jam-packed with information on the ancient City of York and its surroundings, the 484-page book is nearly everything anyone ever wanted to know about Northern England and its relationship to Freemasonry. This multifaceted book contains an in-depth study of the magnificent Gothic architecture in York and the surrounding area, including the less prominent, but historically important, building designs of the almshouses and hospitals. Early records of the famous York Minster are revealed. Building on G.Y. Johnson's records, it is a "who's who" of Masonic families of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including their involvement in the lodges in West Riding, York and East Riding.

The book travels back to the early York legends as are found in Anderson's Constitutions, and previously in the early Masonic manuscripts. It adds formerly unknown references and facts to bolster the legend's actuality, and discards the probable corruptions that have been added or misinterpreted. These legends are found in the Cooke Manuscript (circa 1440). The traditional stories of St. Amphibalus bringing the Masonic craft into England and communicating it to St. Alban; as well as how King Athelstan and Prince Edwin held meetings in the years 925 and 926, resulting in the installation of Prince Edwin as Grand Master of Masons, are both covered. Brother Cryer does all this by asking simple questions, and then seeking out the facts and then, with reason, addressing them. This he does very well.

The book also rewrites history, with respect to the belief that symbolic Masonry began in Scotland, basing a portion of the evidence on the fact that the first non-operative Masons were found in Scotland around the year 1600. Antiquarian Elias Ashmole was thought to be the first initiate in England at the Lodge of Warrington in 1646, as was recorded in his diary. How long the lodge existed before that date is unknown. Neville Cryer's research has pushed that date back, and dispelled part of the Scottish claim, with the discovery of at least two non-operatives that were initiated in a Masonic Lodge in York, England prior to Scotland's assertion, *viz.*, a furrier in 1569 and, in 1571, a fishmonger.

Drama as presented in today's Masonic degrees is a teaching element carried over from "The Mystery Plays" according to Neville Cryer's research. It is very well known that the Masons, as well as other guilds, took part in the Corpus Christi pageants at York, Beverly, Coventry and other cities. The pageants were popular between the 14th and 16th centuries. The various guilds were referred to as the "mysteries," thus the name "mystery plays." The public plays were almost always processional, that is six wheeled wagons carrying certain scenes would roll in front of the audience. There were many different plays presented in and around York, and it appears that the guilds would select one of particular interest to them.

One humorous event led the Masons to complain and request a different play. They were in charge of presenting "Fergus." The play detailed the bier of Mother Mary, the principal saint of the Mason's company, being carried by the Four Apostles. There were also roles depicting two Jewish attackers and an angel. Fergus attempts to upset the bier with his hands. The hands dry up to the elbows and come away sticking to the bier. The Apostle Peter asks if Fergus believes that the body (corpus) of Mary is the Mother of Christ (Christi), and if so, to show his belief by embracing the body. This he does, and, miraculously, Fergus has his hands and arms restored. Dramatics and costuming being what they will, unfortunately, laughter seemed to be the end result. The Masons were involved in several religious/symbolic plays.

The Rev'd Cryer discusses the five-degree system used by the operatives in an attempt to make a connection with modern Masonic ritual. The operatives existed into the 20th century, so some of their practices can still be found. The question is of course, "When did the operatives adopt the 5-degree system?"

Cryer's in-depth examination of the ceremonies used by the Masonic guild and their contribution to the "Old York Working" and in turn the "Old York Working's" contribution to the London's early eighteenth-century degrees, the York Grand Lodge and later American ritual, is provided. How Ancient Masonry and the "Moderns" of London differed in ritual and operation is thoroughly reviewed, including how each organization was favored in the United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE) union of 1813.

Personally, I find most fascinating the extraordinary differences in the ritual of Ancient York Masonry compared to the Moderns before the union of 1813. There is just too much to cover in this limited space. I do recommend reading this book. You will be far more knowledgeable in Masonry for having done so.

The Rev'd Neville Barker Cryer was no stranger to York Masonry, having authored many books on the development of the ceremonies and their meanings, including *The Arch & the Rainbow*, *Masonic Halls of England and Wales*, *I Just Didn't Know That*, *The Royal Arch Journey* and numerous others. His credentials consist of Past Grand Chaplain of the United Grand Lodge of England, Past Master of Quatuor Coronati Lodge of Research and then its secretary and editor of "Transactions" for a number of years. He was named Prestonian Lecturer in 1974, and Batham Lecturer in 1996-98. Neville Cryer was a member of the oldest Lodge in York and very active in the

SRIA. He certainly was the right person to author this book. His death on July 2, 2013, was certainly a great loss to the fraternity.

York Mysteries Revealed – Understanding an Old English Tradition is available to purchase on-line, both new and used, or at any good bookstore. It is also available for reading at the Covington, KY Masonic Library as are many of Rev'd Cryer's books.