

Ruffianism & Crudity

What Happened to Reverence?

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At the beginning of things, before Grand Lodges were in existence, Freemasons discovered the necessity of decorum. Among the Old Charges, to which every candidate was required to swear obedience, a prominent place was given to the portions dealing with 'Behaviour'.

The oldest of our known records— the Regius Manuscript, written about 1390— emphasizes the necessity of paying due respect to the Craft.

James Anderson, in his Book of Constitutions, published by the Grand Lodge of England in 1723, says:

You are not to hold private Committees, or separate conversation, without leave from the Master, nor to talk of anything impertinent or unseemly, nor interrupt the Master or Wardens, or any Brother speaking to the Master, nor behave yourself ludicrously or jestingly while the Lodge is engaged in what is serious or solemn; but to pay due Reverence to your Master, Wardens, Fellows and put them

to worship", that is, pay them the respect due to them. Bearing this in mind, the

Master of a Lodge must be particular to see that nothing boisterous creeps into the ceremonial work of his Lodge. The Degrees must be conferred not only in as perfect a ritualistic form as is possible, but also with impressiveness. The impression made upon a candidate in his First Degree will remain with him throughout his life. Hums of conversation, restless moving about, have no place in the ceremonial work of any Lodge. Particularly in the conferring of the Master Mason Degree must all crudity and ruffianism be cut out. Neither has any place there. ¹

Can we simply dismiss out of hand what these and other early Masonic documents tell us about our behavior and how we should conduct ourselves in lodge? Yes, we apparently can - and do.

Contrary to the guidance from these and other early documents that provide us with the original "operating manual" outlining Freemasonry's complete system, we don't always elect men on their merit to the chairs as the operating manual states ("All preferment

¹ 1966 Year Book an article entitled Masonic Etiquette and Scottish Usage, by Brother George Draffen, was published Grand Lodge of Scotland Year Book 2011.

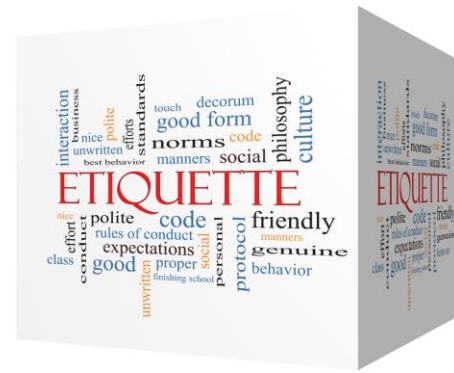
among Masons is grounded upon real worth and personal merit only.")² We certainly do not follow what we learn from *The New Ahiman Rezon* of 1791 – that is to say the particular edition of the *Constitutions of the Free-Masons* as adopted and then modified by the Antients – that makes reference to how a man should dress for Lodge.³

Anderson also tells us in the constitution, “You are to salute one another in a courteous Manner,” and we all know that the slovenly salutes we so often see in lodge today are far from meeting any definition of courteous. We don’t follow our respective rituals that charge us to make a “daily advancement in our Masonic knowledge” nor do all lodges provide “good and wholesome instruction.”

Some glibly say, “Well...things change” and, with striking nonchalance, dismiss these circumventions by claiming each generation has some sort of inexplicit Masonic right to vary from what was originally designed as part of the *system* of Freemasonry. There are others who take the stand that variances like these happen to be the cause of so much casualness in our Craft adding another reason for the decline of our once widely embraced status as *exceptional*.

We don’t seem to have much of a problem either in soliciting membership, relaxing our guard on the West Gate, and slowly allowing many of what was once customary practices to fall by the way side or vanish altogether from our fraternity to the point that some Masons believe a return to what was once a tradition is somehow today an innovation. That view opens the door to talk about the lack of accurate Masonic education in our fraternity today.

The evolving casualness of our society has undeniably bled over into Freemasonry. We too often we hear “that’s good enough” when it



comes to learning and delivering ritual along with a candidate returning a proficiency. This attitude, when combined lax, informal dress codes – many of them well below the definition of casual, are predictors of how other practices in a lodge can easily and eventually move toward casual in other things.

As we have dumbed down many things in society, we find it also creeping into the fraternity. We’ve made it easier for a man to become a member, and in some cases, take men through all three degrees of Masonry in one day. We cling to the ill-founded notion that we must have a steady stream of candidates entering the West Gate if our Craft is to survive. At some point, our appetite for lively discussion of Masonic philosophies and principles during lodge meetings, and festive meals around which fellowship was a driving force was replaced with long, mostly dry, business meetings as our interest in putting forth the labor to organize festive meals and advance the kind of fellowship they established, waned.

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We could continue to make of list of those things that have turned out to be a slippery slope for Masonry, but limited time dictates

² "The Constitutions of the Free-Masons. Containing the History, Charges, Regulations, &c. of that most Ancient and Right Worshipful Fraternity. For the Use of the Lodges." London: Printed by William Hunter, for John

Senex at the Globe, and John Hooke at the Flower-de-luce over-against St. Dunstan’s Church, in Fleet-street.

³ Andrew Hammer, *Observing the Craft: The Pursuit of Excellence in Masonic Labour and Observance*, Mindhive Books, 2010.

that for now, we should select one area and more fully examine it for consideration.

The selection? “Crudity” and “Ruffiansim,” which takes us back to Anderson’s Constitution of 1723.

When Anderson wrote, “Particularly in the conferring of the Master Mason Degree must all crudity and ruffianism be cut out. Neither has any place there,” we may presume he was either making an attempt to pre-empt the opportunity for crudity and ruffianism to creep into our ritual or grave problems of behavior already existed at the time in some form.

Perhaps, he believed by directly noting such behavior as unacceptable in the 1723 constitution, crudity and ruffianism would, if it had been going on, prevented in the future.

Of course, if his writing was intended to scold those whose behavior was to the contrary and admonish those who chose ruffianism and crudity over solemnity, respect, and dignity, then that didn’t work down through the ages as well as he may have hoped it would

Having witnessed the Master Mason degree delivered and the Legend of the Temple performed in several jurisdictions, it must be noted that solemnity and appropriate Masonic protocol is followed today. There are many lodges that conduct their meetings and ritual with dignity, solemnity and without ruffianism or crudity. However, there also exists performances easily characterized as holdovers from the Golden Era of Fraternalism when pranks, references to goats, and a light-hearted

environment endorsed, thus reinforced many forms of rampant horseplay.⁴

The Working Jacket of a Master Mason

Nothing produces the potential for roughness and levity in ritual more than what is referred to as the “working jacket of a Master Mason.” In fact, the very presence of such a jacket signals a sense of levity and can lead to rowdy behavior.

This jacket, typically made of a canvass material reminiscent of a strait jacket, minus the arms crossed and tied in the back, often appears with leather or thick handles or straps sewn onto specific locations on the garment.

Unsurprisingly, there is no mention of “the working jacket of a Master Mason” in any current grand lodge constitution that authorizes its use in any form. The term does not appear in

Anderson’s constitution, or writings by Masonic scholars of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Furthermore, the jacket is not mentioned in the most popular of the Masonic exposes’ of the 18th and 19th century where one would expect to find such a disclosure. In fact, this writing may be the first time anything about “the working jacket of a Master Mason” has been published.

Using this jacket this jacket is often acknowledge, with a wink and a grin. However, aside from the explanation that “we’ve always done it that way,” no one has yet produced evidence that this jacket is anything more than



⁴ William D. Moore, *Riding the Goat, Secrecy, Masculinity, and Fraternal High Jinks in the United States, 1845- 1930, The Strange Case of the Mechanical Goat in the Fraternal Lodge, Winterthur Portfolio, A Journal of American Material Culture, vol. 21, no. 2/3, summer-autumn, 2007. The strange and true*

story of how early 20th-century American men became obsessed with mechanical animal pranks, *The Atlantic*, December 2, 2011.

a prop that leads to or inspires what Anderson calls “ruffianism,” even though ruffianism, has no place in Masonic ritual.

The jacket is presented to the candidate prior his introduction to the character of Hiram Abiff. Abiff is waylaid by three characters identified as “ruffians.” Bestowing this preposterous jacket on a candidate disrupts the flow and sequence of events in this section of the ritual, and since it has no other purpose than to allow the manhandling of a candidate, the ambiance of the lodge room and ritual is defiled.

The act of placing the jacket on a hoodwinked candidate signals an implicit license to some that levity and ruffianism are sanctioned. The only thing designed to avert such a license from being implicit because of the jacket (aside from common sense) is an admonition from the Master prior to this part of the ceremony during which he certainly within his authority to caution against levity and horseplay - if such a statement is given at all. ⁵

There are lodges conducting their ceremony with dignity, proficient ritual delivery, proper decorum, and treat their candidates with respect by never laying an inappropriate hand on them, yet for some reason continue to use this jacket. If there is no intent of jerking, pulling, shoving or unnecessary manhandling a candidate in a ceremony, the question must be asked as to why is the jacket donned at all?

The reason falls into the same explanation of why some parts ceremony and ritual we see performed today continues as it does, as opposed to as it was originally intended or as specifically prescribed. The reasons is we’ve become casual. In doing so, we’ve allowed what was done in the past, regardless as to whether it

was correct, to continue and become what we think is the way it’s always been done.

The belief that the use of the “working jacket of a Master Mason” is *the way we’ve always done it*, has a certain truth to it though, if that is, you consider the “way we’ve always done it” extends only as far back as the previous three, four or maybe five generations of Masons.

According to veteran Masons, the jacket, in some jurisdictions, was in use prior to the 1950s. These same men report, however, that the origins of the jacket was never explained to them, so it was assumed its use was part of the sanctioned practices of Freemasonry. So, the practice continued as the design of the jacket became even more utilitarian over the years – most certainly for the exclusive benefit of those who played the roles of “ruffians” in the degree, and perhaps the amusement of some in the lodge.

Interestingly too, is a recent comment from another veteran Mason in one jurisdiction where the jacket is used. The brother was asked why candidates were approached in such a physically aggressive manner by the brothers playing the roles of three men who confront the character of Hiram Abiff. His response was that candidates “needed” to be put “on edge” by being treated roughly. Furthermore, he continued to express the rationalization that such treatment was warranted by claiming “our ritual says those three men were “ruffians” - so they are supposed to give rough treatment.”

While our fraternity certainly encourages speculation by its members, it does not encourage oblivious guesswork.

⁵ Book of Constitutions of The Grand Lodge of Kentucky Section 142 – Third Degree: The Second Section of the Third Degree constitutes a most solemn and impressive portion of our ritualistic work. In it we are taught the ultimate lessons of Masonic Philosophy – victory over death and the immortality of the soul. Nothing must be allowed to impair the deep impression which should be made upon the mind of the candidate. The Grand Lodge forbids any unnecessary levity,

roughness, horseplay, talking, audible laughter or any other noise which could distract the attention of the candidate. Failure to comply with this provide or any action by any officer or member in violation of inconsistent with this provision shall constitute grounds for Masonic discipline. Any part of the third degree may be conferred on more than one candidate at the same time, except the second section of that degree, which can be conferred on but one at a time.

The word ruffian has nothing to do in that sense with being “rough.” The word originates from Italian (*rofia, ruffiano*) meaning scab or scurf, which is thought to be of Germanic origin. In Middle French (*rufien*), the word describes one who is a panderer, swaggerer, turbulent and unsettled. The word in early Scottish Gaelic refers to a low, worthless fellow or one of valueless character. Later our understanding of the word evolved into a fitting description of a ruthless fellow, ready for any desperate enterprise or crime.⁶ It does not mean the person who plays the role in the ritual must be rough.

In the End

There’s much talk today about returning to traditions in Freemasonry, perhaps as much as the frequently voiced concerns about the lack of protocol, etiquette, and Masonic education in our fraternity. While changing a few things here and there that may seem to stay within the limits of our responsibility not to introduce innovations into the Craft, we have done just the opposite for decades.

Moreover, those things (i.e., the working jacket of a Master Mason) have the potential



⁶ James Stormonth, James Phelps, Etymological and pronouncing dictionary of the English language. P. H. 1874.

to ripple slowly into what many think and ultimately believe is regular practice and a part of Freemasonry.

If we were serious and committed to proper decorum, solemnity in our ceremonies, and appropriate behavior during the preferment of our degrees, the ruffianism and levity we too often witness would not exist.

Every brother contributes to such a setting by doing nothing about it, thus tacitly allowing ruffianism, crudity, and levity to occur, or they participate in such behavior means they condone it. Assuming the voice of responsibility that calls for an end to it and stops it is not widespread.

The talk we hear at Masonic lodges, conferences, and other events about returning to traditions and reintroducing fitting practices, protocols and etiquettes, is likely to continue for some time to come, especially as more men enter the Craft who arrive already better educated about the history and certainly the intent of our institution. Many of those same men bring with them assumptions and expectations of how Masons behave and act. When those expectations fall short we see one of the reasons men exercise their option to disengage from lodge.

The accelerated proliferation of lodges during particular eras in the history of North American Freemasonry brought with it an unintended consequence. The system of Freemasonry, as it was originally designed, intended, and was envisioned to be offered, did not unfold, and spread evenly across the nation. In the absence of suitable instruction, monitoring and enforcement of rules and regulations about anything in any organization, there’s always going to be a tendency for creativeness.

Some say the diversity of our rituals, practices and customs, even the ones that are clearly in contrast to the system and original intent of the fraternity, should be celebrated – because they represent a large cross-section of men in *collective bond*. While attracting men from all walks of life in such a collective bond is indeed an accomplishment to be celebrated, the splintering of practices, the questionable level of competency of ritual delivery, the vanishing of the non-casual approach to such an important undertaking as what the Craft offers can hardly be considered Ancient Freemasonry as it was intended, and therein we find a rub.

Some men are content with Freemasonry as the casual men's club. Some are not and seek a Masonic experience closer to that of days past when non-casual practices were more customary than not.

Regardless of whichever "system" of Freemasonry a man chooses and with which he becomes content, there is still no place in our fraternity for levity, crudity, frivolity, and boisterous behavior during ceremony or ritual - and certainly no room for the invention known as "the working jacket of a Master Mason."