

Degree of Mark Master

(Author unknown)

THE origin of this degree is very much in doubt. Some say it originated in Scotland about 1750 A. D.; others that it was at one time a side degree of the Scottish Rite. Dr. Oliver claimed it was originally a preparatory degree for the Master's chair; and still others that it was formerly a part of the Fellow Craft Degree. All this is speculation and in each theory there may be some truth. For instance as to Scottish Rite origin, there is no doubt that at one time the degree was occasionally conferred in Scottish Rite bodies and in 1802 the Scottish Rite authorities charted a Mark Lodge in Charleston, S. C.; but this does not prove Scottish Rite origin. During the latter part of the eighteenth century there were thousands of detached degrees called Masonic which sprang into existence following Ramsey's oration in 1737. Most of them were worthless and soon sank into oblivion, but many of them were valuable and were gradually arranged into groups or rites. In this grouping process the best parts of many degrees might be taken and modified to form one degree and the discarded ones still be conferred as detached degrees. There is no evidence, however, that any part of the Mark degree found its way into the Scottish Rite and its use by this Rite was simply incidental. It was simply one of the many detached degrees which were occasionally conferred by Scottish Rite authorities on the then accepted theory that the possession of a legal warrant to confer Masonic degrees carried with it authority to confer on those qualified to receive it any of the detached degrees.

Thomas Smith Webb is generally credited with being the author and inventor of the system of Masonic degrees conferred in the United States of America under the name of the York Rite. He did not invent the degrees themselves, but taking existing degrees as a basis he revamped them and arranged them into a system which is universally practiced in the United States. Jeremy L. Cross, a pupil of Webb, speaking of Webb and his associates says: "Taking the 'Ancient York Rite' for a standard, they selected from the 'Scottish Rite' those things which approximated the former, and out of the two systems they formed a very perfect and complete set of Lectures, which are beautiful in themselves, and have been preserved entire to the present hour." (1851.) Whether Webb, in arranging the Mark degree, used anything in the degree as conferred by Scottish Rite authorities we do not know, but there are differences in the English and American work of the degree, which may have been made by Webb, and if so we have no means of tracing their source. For instance Mackey quotes Bro. G. F. Yates as saying, "the symbolism of the rejected stone in the present Mark Degree is not in the original Mark Master Mason's Degree, out of which Webb manufactured his ritual, but was introduced by him from some other unknown source."

Thus the Mark Degree as now worked is of modern construction and yet it forms one of the closest links connecting the old operative Masonry with the present speculative system. In the old operative Guilds each newly admitted craftsman was required to select and record a mark amid impressive ceremonies. In the minutes of Kilwinning Lodge for December 20, 1678 is an entry of two apprentices being entered who "paid their binding money and got their marks." In an old Scotch Masonic lecture is the question, "Where got you that mark?" and the answer given is, "I laid down one and took this one up." Meaning that he paid his registration fee and received the

mark. Another question was, "Where does the Master put his mark upon the work?" answered by, "Upon the S. E. corner." An old poem written prior to 1717 has this verse:

"Observe you well the rule of three
And what you want in Masonry
Thy Mark - and M shall make thee free."

While the earliest record of the Mark Degree is about sixty years after the formation of the Grand Lodge of England, there is a register of marks in an old Aberdeen lodge dating from about 1670.

At one time there were two Mark degrees - Mark Man and Mark Master. Mackey says, "According to Masonic tradition, the Mark Men were the Wardens, as the Mark Masters were the Masters of the Fellow-Craft Lodges, at the building of the Temple. They distributed the marks to the workmen and made the first inspection of the work, which was afterward to be approved by the overseers. As a degree, the Mark Man is not recognized in the United States. In England it is sometimes, but not generally, worked as preparatory to the degree of Mark Master. In Scotland, in 1778, it was given to Fellow-Crafts, while the Mark Master was restricted to Master Masons. It is not recognized in the present regulations of the Supreme Grand Chapter of Scotland. Much of the esoteric ritual of the Mark Man has been incorporated into the Mark Master of the American System." Supporting this statement of Mackey is the statement in 1778 in the minutes of a lodge at Banff in Scotland that the Degree of Mark Man was worked on Fellow Crafts and Mark Master on Master Masons. Commenting on this Bro. R. J. Meekren says, "And here it must be noted that the original name of our Degree was Mark Man, and that the Mark Master mentioned above was an entirely different and rather feeble affair. What appears to have happened is that the name of the latter was transferred to the former while the name of the former was dropped and the original Mark Master ceased to be worked. After these two first records Mark Masonry appears to have become quite generally and favourably known. In considering these dates we must remember that it is unlikely that we have the first record of its being used. There would almost certainly be a period of trial and tentative effort before the Degree could have attained a form that would have warranted its mention in the minutes of a lodge as part of its regular work."

Bro. W. J. Hughan of England says of Mark Masonry,

During the centuries which immediately preceded the establishment of the premier Grand Lodge of England and the World, the "Mark" was directly connected with operative and speculative Freemasonry, and from time immemorial it has been the custom for the skilled Craftsman to chisel his distinctive mark on the stones he fashioned so as to indicate his workmanship.

It is this fact that differentiates the Mark Degree from all other ceremonies additional to the first Three, and justified the formation of the Mark Grand Lodge, nearly fifty years ago, so as to take under its wing those lodges which worked that interesting and suggestive ceremony, the English Craft agreement excluding it from the formally recognized series, according to the Articles of Union of A. D. 1813-14

The antiquity of Mark Masonry cannot be doubted, operatively, considered; and even speculatively, it has enjoyed special prominence for centuries; records of the custom being followed by speculative brethren, according to existing records dating back to 1600, in which year on the 8th day of June, "Ye principal warden and chief maister of maissons, Wm. Schaw, master of work to ye Kingis maistie," met members of the Lodge of Edinburgh (now No. 1) at Holyrood House, at which meeting the Laird of Auchinleck was present, and attested the minutes of the assembly by his mark, as did the operatives, in accordance with the Schaw statutes of December 28th 1590, which provided:

"That the day of reassaying (receiving) of the said fallow of craft or maister be ord'lie buikit and his name and Mark inserted in the said buik."

That theoretical Masons selected their marks just as the operatives did during the seventeenth century is abundantly manifest, by an examination of the old Scotch Records of that period. One of the most noteworthy instances out of many is the Mark Book of the Lodge of Aberdeen (now No. 1 tris) which started in A. D. 1670, and is signed by 49 members, all of whom but two have their marks inserted opposite their names.

The Master of the "Honourable Lodge of Aberdeen" in that year was Harrie Elphingston, Tutor of Airth and Collector of the King's Customs, and only a fourth part of the members were operative Masons, the roll of brethren including the Earl of Findlater, the Earl of Dumferline, Lord Pitsligo, the "Earl of Trrolle," a professor of mathematics, several ministers, doctors, and other professional men and tradesmen, such as wrights (or carpenters), slaiters, glaziers, etc.

The names of the apprentices were entered in another list, the marks chosen by such being evidently similar to the fathers' in several instances.

When a special and elaborate ceremony (with a distinctive leg end) was first used it is not possible to decide, but probably about the middle of the eighteenth century, soon after the arrangement of the Royal Arch as a separate degree. The oldest preserved records date from the year 1769 and there is no lack of evidence as to the observance of the custom in speculative lodges during that century and later, either in separate lodges or under the wing of the Royal Arch. The Mark continued to be worked in England as an unauthorized ceremony until the year 1856, when the Mark Grand Lodge was founded and has proved a conspicuous success, having ultimately secured the support of all the "time immemorial" and other lodges in the country, besides having warranted several hundreds of lodges to work the degree in England and the Colonies and dependencies of the British Crown.

From this it is evident that the Mark Master's Degree was not governed as a distinct body in the United States until the organization of the Grand Chapter in 1797 nor in England until the formation of the Grand Lodge of Mark Masters in 1856. Prior to these dates the Mark degree was worked in a Craft lodge or other Masonic body as an extra or side degree.

The Mark degree has never been included in the chapter degrees in England. In the United States it was so included about 1797. In Scotland about 1800 when the Grand Lodge of Scotland cut it

off from Craft lodges. There is, however, at least one record of the Mark degree having been conferred in a Royal Arch chapter in England. The minutes of Phoenix Royal Arch Chapter No. 257, at Portsmouth under date of Sept. 1, 1769, read as follows:

At a Royal Arch Chapter held at the George Tavern in Portsmouth on First September seventeen hundred and sixty-nine, Present - Thomas Dunckerley, Esq., William Cook, "Z", Samuel Palmer, "H"; Thomas Scanville, "J"- Henry Dean Philip Joyces and Thomas Webb;The Pro. (an abbreviation for Provincial) G. M. Bro't the Warrant of the Chapter and having lately rec'd the "Mark" he made the Bre'n "Mark Masons" and "Mark Masters" and each chose their mark, viz., W. Cook, Z; S. Palmer, H; T. Scanville, J. H. Dean, Philip Joyes T. Webb. He also told us of this man'r of writing which is to be used in the degree w'ch we may give to others as they be F. C. for Mark Masons and Master M for Mark Masters.