

THE "OLD CHARGES"

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The Charges of a Freemason. In our Constitution (Ontario) in Section 371, we read the words. 'Every newly initiated candidate shall be presented with a copy of the Book of Constitution...' One hopes that a new Mason will become familiar with our regulations by reading through this book. But if he does so, he may be puzzled by the first section of Part VI, which is entitled, "The Charges of a Freemason. Extracted from the Ancient Records of Lodges throughout the World, for the use of Lodges"

In this section, he will find some parts that sound familiar. a bit like the ritual "The persons made Masons and admitted members of a lodge must be good and true men.. free born, and of a mature and discreet age and sound judgment, no bondsmen. no women, no immoral or scandalous men, but of good report"

But what is he to make of other portions? "The Master, knowing himself to be able of cunning shall undertake the lord's work as reasonably as possible."

Such rules as this cannot apply in any literal sense of most of us. Why then are they printed for every Mason? The reason is historical. In its present form most of the wording of this section goes back two hundred and seventy-five years. In 1723. the Reverend James Anderson, with the approval of his Grand Lodge, published the most influential work on Masonry ever printed. The first book of The Constitutions of the Free-Masons. He included a section called the Charges of a Free-Mason, extracted from The ancient Records of lodges beyond Sea, and of those in England, Scotland, and Ireland, for the Use of the Lodges in London." Apart from a number of tiny changes, the modern wording is identical.

Anderson's Sources. But here too we must ask the same question. Why did this book of Constitutions. designed for nonoperative Masons, include rules that apply to operative masons? And where did Anderson find this material? The second edition of his Constitutions, printed in 1738. tells a bit more at the Annual Festival on 24 June 1718, when the Grand Lodge was one year old, the Grand Master "desired any Brethren to bring to the Grand Lodge any old Writings and Records concerning Masons and Masonry in order to show the Usages of ancient Times; And this Year several old Copies of the Gothic Constitutions were produced and collated."

And in September 1721, the Grand Master and the Grand Lodge, "finding Fault with all the Copies of the old Gothic Constitutions, order'd Brother James Anderson. A.M. to digest the same in a new and better Method." The end result of his labours was the book of Constitutions, which was duly approved by the Grand Lodge, and printed in 1723. And James Anderson did make use of the old manuscripts that he called "The Old Gothic Constitutions." We can tell from the wording of his text that by the time of his second edition he had obtained access to at least six of them, and that he quoted and paraphrased them quite extensively.

The Old Charges: Number, Date, Location, Form. But what are these "Old Gothic Constitutions" also known as the "Old Charges" and the "Old Manuscript Constitutions"? In all, 119 copies have survived, all going back to the same original, and there are references to 15 more that are lost. New versions are turning up all the time; In the last ten years, six more have come to our attention

Nearly two-thirds of them are earlier than the first Grand Lodge of 1717-perhaps as many as 75. Fifty-five go back before 1700 Four were written about 1600, one is dated 1583, one is about 1400 or 1410, and one goes all the way back to 1390

Most are located in England; London alone has more than fifty. Thirteen are in Scotland-none of them earlier than 1650; four are in the United States; one was last heard of in Germany; and one has wandered to Canada-the Scarborough Manuscript. of about 1700.

The Old Charges present various aspects. About fourteen are known only from printed transcripts. A few are written on separate sheets of paper or vellum; about thirty-three are written on sheets that are fastened together in book form; but the typical form, represented by more than fifty versions, is a scroll or roll of paper or parchment, between three and fourteen inches wide, and anything up to fourteen and a half feet in length.

Contents. Let us summarize the contents, with a review typical examples of the wording.

They nearly all begin with an Invocation: "The might of the Father of Heaven, with the wisdom of the glorious Son, through the grace and goodness of the Holy Ghost, that be three persons in one Godhead, be with us at our beginning, and give us grace so to govern us here in our living that we may come to His bliss that never shall have ending. Amen."

Then comes an announcement of the purpose and contents, followed by a brief description of the Seven Liberal Arts or Sciences, one of which is Geometry, or Masonry. Then we have a proof of the fundamental nature of Geometry.

[Then there is an extended Traditional History of Geometry, Masonry, and Architecture, taking up over half of the text. It is based in the first instance on the Bible. The art of building was invented, we are told, before Noah's Flood by Jabal and metal founding was discovered by his brother Tubal-cain. They knew that God would send destruction for sin so they wrote their arts on Two Great Pillars, that were found after the Flood. Then we hear about Nimrod and the Tower of Babel: and how Abraham went to Egypt and taught the Liberal Arts and sciences to the Egyptians; and how he had a student Euclid; and then how King David loved Masons well; how Solomon built the Temple, with the help of King Hiram and his Master Builder. One man who worked at Solomon's Temple later went to France, and taught the art to Charles Martel; subsequently the Craft was brought to England, in the time of Saint Alban: and finally about the year 930, Prince Edwin called a great assembly of Masons in the city of York, and established the regulations used "from that day until this time."]

(Note: Read this section as an ancient document, but remember the evolution of Masonry is not historically accurate.)

Next we have the manner of taking the oath: "Then let one of the elders hold the Book, so that he or they may place their hands upon the Book, and then the rules ought to be read."

Then comes the admonition: "Every man that is a Mason take right good heed to these charges, if that you find yourselves guilty in any of these, that you may amend you against God. And especially ye that are to be charged, take good heed that ye may keep these charges, for it is a great peril for a man to forswear himself upon a Book."

Next come the regulations or Charges proper. Some are to administer the trade: "No Master shall take upon him no lord's work, nor no other man's work, but that he know himself able and cunning to perform the same. . ." These are the ones that are still quoted in "The Charges of a Freemason." Others

do not concern trade matters at all, but are intended to regulate behavior. No doubt they were essential in a community of tradesmen who were thrown together in close proximity for twenty-four hours a day. Still, they are unexpected, and serve to mark the masons lodge as different from most other craft organizations. "No Fellow [is to] slander another behind his back. to make him lose his good name or his worldly goods." And also that "no Mason shall play at hazard or at dice."

Finally comes the Oath: "These charges that we have rehearsed. and all other that belong to Masonry, ye shall keep, so help you God and Halidom, and by this Book to your power. Amen."

What were they used for? In its most common version, the text is about 3,500 words long. To copy it out by hand represents a substantial investment of effort, and yet it was copied repeatedly. In the circumstances it is fair to ask what the Old Charges were used for. To begin with, the rules and orders served a practical purpose. They clearly were intended to regulate the Craft.

We also know that occasionally the manuscripts were treated like a Warrant or Constitution. One early Scottish lodge had a copy of the Old Charges, written on a single sheet of parchment had been mounted and framed, and the members believed that their meetings would not be legal unless it was exhibited in the lodge room.

In a sense, the Old Charges also served as The Work, because they described certain procedures that were to be followed when any man was made a Mason, and they included little bits of ritual, such as the Invocation and the Obligation.

We see then that they provided ordinance, authority, and ritual, three practical matters. But as well they must have had a psychological effect. They inculcated in masons a sense of respect and reverence for their craft They told how it went back before the Flood, how it was connected with famous buildings in the sacred Writings, and how it could number among its votaries even monarchs themselves. This was no servile trade of recent devising, but an ancient and honorable institution.