

GRAND CHAPTER RITUAL OF THE LATE 18TH CENTURY

by E. Comp. A.R. Hewitt, PGStB

Introduction

The origin of the R.A. is a matter for conjecture, very little being known of it before 1744, the year in which the first printed reference⁽¹⁾ to it occurred. By the 1750s, however, the degree was being increasingly conferred in England, Ireland and Scotland. The founding of Grand Chapter in 1766 and its subsequent development is well documented and records of its subordinate Chapters, constituted since 1769, exist in the Grand Lodge. There is, however, a great lack of source material on R.A. Ritual of the 18th Century. Exaltations and rehearsals took place in Grand Chapter itself and the minutes contain frequent references to the fact that the "different sections" were given or the "usual sections" were gone through, clearly indicating that, when the ritual was rehearsed, it took the form of a catechism, a series of questions and answers, arranged as a so-called lecture and divided into sections, as in the Craft.

Mention is also made of the lecture in minutes of some early private Chapters⁽²⁾ but neither Grand Chapter records nor Chapter minutes disclose, naturally, the content of the lecture or give any indication of the form which the ritual took — for that we must turn to other sources, namely, MSS. (or copies thereof) mainly in the Grand Lodge Library but some in other hands.

Reference to the R.A. Lecture or Lectures must not be confused with the three Principals' Lectures so familiar today. It is as well to stress that the Masonic lectures, or catechisms as they should really be called, are not the ceremonies as actually performed during the conferring of degrees, but are demonstrations or exercises for the instruction of brethren — an expert brother; asking the questions, a selected brother or brethren giving the answers, with the remainder as audience. Before the advent of the now familiar printed books of ritual instruction by lecture or catechism was the normal method by which Masonry, particularly the speculative aspect, could be learned.

Grand Chapter came into being in 1766 as the result of the Charter of Compact signed on July 22 of that year. The Chapter from which this Grand body emerged was formed in 1765 and one of its rules "for the regular conducting of the Chapter" made provision for the ceremony to be observed in the opening; it reads: —

"On Chapter Night, the Companions being discreetly convened in the Antichamber the PH ZI & J together with E & N and the Principal Sr shall go into the Chapter Room, and being properly invested shall open the Chapter in due form. After which they shall come forth to the Companions in Order, who shall receive them with proper respect."

Unfortunately we do not know, and shall probably never know, what was meant by "due form". It will be noticed that the Three Principals, two Scribes and the Principal Sojourner opened the Chapter in private and then joined the Companions. There is no reason to believe that this ceremony changed when the Chapter became The Grand Chapter little more than a year later. That it did ultimately change, sometime before the 1780s, is obvious from the ritual in use towards the end of the century, as will be seen in a moment.

There are five principal sources⁽³⁾ giving R.A. ritual in use at the end of the 18th and in the beginning of the 19th centuries. They include the ritual of exaltation (or initiation as it was frequently called), the lecture or

catechism as demonstrated for instructional purposes and the opening ceremony of the "Grand and Royal Chapter", a term seemingly used indiscriminately for both the Grand Chapter and private Chapters. Reference is made therein to the presence of Past Grand Officers. There could have been few such officers in those days and, as it seems unlikely that they would, in general, have been present in private Chapters, I am of the opinion that the ritual was then common to both the Grand Chapter and private Chapters.

Opening Ceremony

Let us now go through the ritual of opening Grand Chapter, observed from the 1780s until the reorganisation of 1817 and the years immediately following, perhaps even to the time of the revision of the ritual in 1834/35. In doing so I shall use the present tense which makes the ceremony easier to follow. I ought also to explain that, in early days, Grand Chapter consisted of Three Principals (not then referred to as Grand Principals), Officers of the Grand Chapter and those either exalted therein or elected to membership. The Principals were sometimes referred to as "Grand Masters" and sometimes by their R.A. names. In the following ritual references to "Companions" mean all those other than the Officers, i.e. those who had been exalted in Grand Chapter, the elected Members and visitors.

The present and past Most Excellent Grand Masters, robed, and the rest of the Companions with their insignia, staves, etc., assemble in the anteroom. The Scribes take up positions on either side of the door leading to the Temple or Chapter Room, the Companions forming two lines, the Past Grand Officers first according to seniority. The present Principals with the Sojourners are at the end of the room. The Companions in two rows turn left and right so that they face inwards. The Principals, J. Leading, advance to the door which is opened by the Scribe E. who, after the Principals have entered, closes it.

On entry into the Chapter the Principals immediately bow as in the s. of salutation. They then advance to the place of the Sojourners and bow a second time. Changing their staves (note "staves", not sceptres) into their left hands and laying the right hand upon the heart they say, in sequence:—

- Z. In the beginning was the word
- H. And the word was with God
- J. And the word was God
- Z. Omnipresence
- H. Omniscience
- J. Omnipotence

followed by, in unison :—

"before whom we three do agree in love and unity the sacred word to keep and never to reveal it to any in the world unless it be when three or more than three such as we do meet and agree."

They bow a third time, advance to their places and, standing on the "footsteps of their chairs, Z. says :—

"I declare this Chapter open in the name of God."

Then each laying his right hand upon his heart they severally pronounce the word ELI [Eloi?], they bow and

sit down. At this point the ritual notes that "this is considered as a renewal of their obligation for the time and that the purpose of their assembling is to promote the Honour and Glory of the Creator and the happiness and welfare of the creature."

Z. now gives a signal and the Organist, robed, enters, gives the s. of salutation, advances to the organ, gives the s. a second time to indicate he is ready. (You will note that the Organist is "robed", probably wearing a white surplice.)

Z. gives another signal, the music (a solemn march) commences and the Companions enter two and two and give the s. immediately. Advancing to the Sojourners' place they give the s. a second time, file off left and right to their seats and, after the Sojourners are in place, give the s. a third time and sit down. Thus the ceremony of Opening was completed but according to one source⁽⁴⁾ some additional ceremonial followed. After the Companions had entered Z. questioned each Officer as to his place and duties in the Chapter. The Principals then formed a Δ , repeated the recitation "We three" etc. followed by three words, including the two we share, as Principals, today, Seven knocks were given, whether by Z. alone or by all three in sequence, it is not clear. Then followed a short Q. & A. conducted by Z. and answered the PS., a Prayer, a repetition of "In the beginning" etc., and ending with Z asking the other two Principals "Most Excellent Chiefs, what are the great attributes of those words", to which H. replied "Omniscience", J. replied "Omnipotence" and Z. concluding with "Omnipresence, to the All Wise, All Powerful and All Present Being, around whose Throne may we hereafter encircle. In the name of the Great J. I now declare this Grand and Royal Chapter duly open". Knocks were then given.

After the opening of Grand Chapter, the Minutes were read and confirmed or rejected, followed by the business of the meeting which might include an exaltation or, in the absence of a Candidate, a rehearsal. It will be noticed that in 1765/66 the Chapter was opened by the Principals in the presence of the two Scribes and the Principal Sojourner but, by the 1780s only the Principals were present. It is assumed that the same practice was observed in private Chapters but at some time towards the end of the 18th century all Past Principals were present. I may add here that Companions were not admitted to the opening ceremony in private Chapters until 1902.

Closing

Of the closing ceremony nothing is known. In 1765 and 1766 the Minutes state that Grand Chapter was "adjourned". At the end of 1766 it was ""adjourned" or "closed in due form". Later, it was "solemnly closed & adjourned", "closed & adjourned", "closed in Antient form" or "closed in Antient Form and Perfect Harmony". As none of the known early ritual sources include a closing ceremony we are still in ignorance of the form which that ceremony took. Let us hope some future discovery will tell still more of the ceremonies practised by our R.A. forefathers.

(¹) D'Assigny's *Serious and Impartial Enquiry*, etc., 1744.

(²) E.g. Chapter of St. James, No. 2; Chapter of Nativity, No. 126, Burnley; and ihcCi Chapter, No. 1 16, Colne.

(³) The St. George, Oepford; the Banks, Deptford; the Ipswich; the Dovre and the Bruce Oliver MSS.

(⁴) Bruce Oliver MS