

THE HALF HOUR STUDY CLUB

Conducted by J. Hugo Tatsch, P. M., Curator

IV. THE TITLE DEEDS OF THE CRAFT: THE "OLD CHARGES."

STUDENTS familiar with the representative literature of Freemasonry unhesitatingly give William James Hughan the greatest possible credit for his able and fruitful labors on the "Old Charges." This term is descriptive of the manuscript documents upon which the early post-1717 historical treatises of Freemasonry are based, such as the account in Anderson's *New Book of Constitutions*, (1738) which in itself was copied and recopied until a more critical school of Masonic writers rose about 1860.

Of all the writers on the Old Charges, Hughan of England is easily the foremost. Blessed with time and ability, as well as independent means, he devoted his life to Masonic research, specializing on the old documents which have been well termed the title deeds of the Fraternity. He was ably seconded in later years by Wilhelm Begemann of Germany; since the death of these capable brethren, (and their associates, Gould, Rylands, and Speth), the work has been carried on by later members of Quatuor Coronati Lodge, among whom Brothers Roderick H. Baxter, Lionel Vibert and the Rev. Herbert Poole are deserving of special mention.

When Hughan wrote *The Old Charges of British Freemasons* (first edition 1872), about twenty of them were known; in 1895, when a new and enlarged edition of the same work was published, sixty-five had been discovered. Today there are approximately ninety copies extant, with ten more recorded as "missing manuscripts." They range in date from the oldest,

the Regius (Halliwell) MS., circa 1390, to the Tunnah MS. of 1828.

Nature of the Documents

Written on parchment and also on paper, the Old Charges vary in form and size. Some are bound like books; others are in rolls, the sheets forming them having been sewn end to end; they extend to eight feet and more when fully unrolled. Facsimiles of a number of the choicest specimens have been made by Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076 of London, available in six volumes of *Masonic Reprints*, or as the work is better known, *Quatuor Coronatorum Anfigrapha*. Five of the old rolls have also been executed on Japan paper, and are faithful copies in size, form, color and text of the originals. A set of these is available for reference at the Iowa Masonic Library.

Generally speaking, the Old Charges consist of three parts. The first is usually an opening prayer or invocation; the second, a "history" of the Craft, entirely legendary and to be so regarded; the third, text dealing with the duties of Masons, as set forth in statutes, regulations and admonitions.

A typical invocation is the one in the Grand Lodge MS., A. D. 1632:

The Mightie of the Father of Heaven and
ye wysdome of ye glorious Sonne through
ye grace and ye goodness of ye holy
ghost yt bee three psons in one God, be
wh us at or beginning and give us grace
so as to govne us here in or lvyng that
wee may come to his bliss that never shall
have ending. Amen.

Following the invocation (missing from some of the versions), the text goes on with an historical account of

THE
Old Constitutions

Belonging to the

Ancient and Honourable

SOCIETY

OF

Free and Accepted

MASONS

*Taken from a Manuscript wrote about
Hundred Years since.*

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TITLE PAGE OF THE "ROBERTS CONSTITUTIONS"

This is the very rare book of which a duplicate has been purchased for \$1650. Until 1923, the Iowa Masonic Library copy. It was purchased in 1875 for approximately forty dollars.

the Craft, which is purely legendary. The older versions start out very quaintly in somewhat similar form and style; the manuscript just quoted continues:

Good Brethren and fellowes our purpose is to tell you howe & in what mann wise this woorthy craft of massonrie was begun and afterwards howe yt was kept by woorthy Kings and Prynces & by many other worshipful men and also to those that bee helre we will chardge ye by the charges that longith to evy free masson to keepe, for in good faith, and they take good heed to yt, yt is woorthy to be well kepte, for yt is a woorthy Crafte and a curious science, for their bee seavin liberal sciences of ye wh seavin yt is one of them, and ye names of ye seavin sciences be these.

The "seavin sciences" are none other than the ones we hear about today in our Second Degree Lecture, developed by William Preston about 1770. Our scribes went on and told how the worthy science of geometry was "fyrstle begun" and then branched out in a history which begins before Noah's Flood. We come down to the building of King Solomon's Temple, and the spread of Masonry into England by way of France. Then we read of St. Alban, King Athelstan and Prince Edward. We are told how Prince Edward held an assembly at York, and how he made "a booke thereof how ye Craft was founde, and he himself had and commanded that yt should be redd or told when any Masson should be made, and for to give his Chardges." And the Charge delivered at the close of each Degree today is the outcome of the old custom of reading these manuscript rolls.

The Charges to the Brethren

Entertaining as are the alleged historical accounts, and widely as they have been accepted by all generations of Freemasons, it must be granted that they are not to be taken as gospel truth. The legends and traditions in them may have a basis of fact; we

devoutly hope so; but they must not be taken too seriously.

Yet inaccuracies and improbable situations do not lessen the value of the Craft teachings incorporated in these venerable relics of operative Masonic times. They give us an intimate insight into the lives of our ancient forebears, and as we read the regulations, we feel closer to these medieval Craftsmen. One is tempted to reproduce a whole manuscript; space forbids. Hence only a few charges are set forth, and these without comment, such as would make them still more interesting:

Ye shall be trewe men to God and holly Church. **Ye should be leidge men to the King of England, without treason or any other falsehood. **Ye shall be true each one to another. **Ye shall do unto them as ye would that they should do to you. **You kepe all the Counsellis of yr Fellowes truly, be yt in Lodge or in Chamber. **That no Masson shall be a thiefe.

You shall call Massons yr Fellowes or Brethren and none other foule names. And also you shall not take yr Fellowes weif in vyllany nor desyre ungodly his daughter, nor his servant put him to no diswoorship. **No Masson shall be comen player at bussard or at dyce, nor at non other unlawfull playes whereby the Craft might be slandered. **And also that no Fellowe doe into the towne a nighte tymes without there is a Lodge of Fellowes, without he have a fellow with him that he might beare him wytness that he was in honest place. Also that every Mr and Fellowe shall come to the Assembly, that if that it be within fyftie mylles about him, yf he have any warning.

Outstanding "Old Charges"

One of the most highly revered old documents is the Regius MS. This was found by Mr. James Orchard Halliwell in the British Museum, where it had been catalogued as a "Poem of Moral Duties." It was a part of the valuable library presented to the British Museum by King George II in 1757, of which the nucleus was the "Royal Library" collected by King Henry VII. On April 18, 1839, Mr.

Halliwell (who is also known as an eminent Shakespearian scholar and the compiler of *A Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words*, invaluable to students of the Old Charges) read a paper on the newly rediscovered manuscript before the Society of Antiquaries, and the following year published a copy of the poem. German editions also appeared.

In 1889, Bro. Henry J. Whympier, C. I. E. (author of *The Religion of Masonry*) reproduced the manuscript in exact facsimile. Six copies were printed on vellum, perfect duplications of the original. These were distributed among the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII), the Duke of Connaught, H. J. Whympier, W. J. Hughan, R. F. Gould and G. W. Speth. The widow of Brother Whympier presented his copy to Major J. H. Leslie, R. A., and he in turn donated it to the Iowa Masonic Library in 1897.

Following the Regius MS. circa 1390, the next in age is the Cooke MS., to which the date of 1450 has been assigned. It is followed by the Grand Lodge No. 1, A. D. 1588. The following century has been productive of approximately fifty; the remaining versions run into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The Roberts Constitutions

The essence of the Old Charges was incorporated in the Constitution on Books of the eighteenth century, of which the first authorized and official edition appeared in January, 1723. A small pamphlet entitled *The Old Constitutions Belonging to the Ancient and Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons* was printed by one J. Roberts of London in 1722, probably between July and December. It is apparently a copy of an Old Charge, a belief strengthened by the statement on the title page that it was "Taken from a Manuscript Wrote about Five

Hundred Years since." The text of the document also appeared in a London Newspaper of 1722; the original manuscript is lost.

The Roberts print is of peculiar interest to Iowa Masons because the Iowa Masonic Library possesses one of the only two copies known. The second copy came to light in England in 1923, and has given rise to much comment in the Masonic press by being offered for sale at £1650. The Iowa copy was purchased in 1875 at the Spencer Sale, London, for forty dollars, having been bid in by W. J. Hughan for Robert F. Bower of Keokuk. Upon Brother Bower's death, his entire library was bought by the Grand Lodge for \$4000, and through this farsighted purchase, the Grand Lodge came into possession of some of the rarest works known to the Craft.

A facsimile reprint of this rare book was issued by the National Masonic Research Society in 1915 from plates owned by the Research Committee of the Grand Lodge. Brethren in Iowa, or elsewhere, can borrow a reprint by applying for it to the Iowa Masonic Library. Copies are still on sale by the National Masonic Research Society at two dollars.

Necessity for Study

The Old Charges, and the Constitution Books arising in the eighteenth century, are the basis for many of the customs peculiar to the Craft. A knowledge of their contents, and an understanding of the circumstances under which they came into being, would aid Masonic bodies in avoiding actions contrary to Masonic fundamentals, even though such occurrences might be proper in light of otherwise generally accepted procedure. The Old Charges are indispensable to brethren who require a thorough knowledge of Masonic jurisprudence.