

THE LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

The educators of the Middle Ages taught seven branches of learning in their school and these were divided into two groups, the first of which was called the "trivium" (meaning "where three roads meet"), and the second, "quadrivium" ("where four roads meet"). Grammar, rhetoric, and logic, comprised the former group usually, and it was these subjects that the young student in college first studied: the latter group included arithmetic, music, astronomy, and geometry. When all of these subjects were mastered the man was said to have a "liberal education" and the school in which they were taught was called (as it still is) a "college of liberal arts."

This educational system was in vogue when the earliest Operative lodges were practising, and it was inevitable that the Masons, who refused to permit their guild to become a mere labour organisation, should incorporate the Liberal Arts and Sciences into their schemes of study and in their literature. Brother Conder informs us that as early as the fourteenth century the London Society of Masons "required the Master Mason to be acquainted with the seven liberal sciences." In the "Ahiman Rezon," a book of constitutions much used by the "Ancients" in the eighteenth century, we have a reminiscence of this in the following bit of doggerel:

"The grammar rules instruct the tongue and pen,
Rhetoric teaches eloquence to men;
By logic we are taught to reason well,
Music has claims beyond our power to tell;
The use of numbers, numberless we find;
Geometry gives measure to mankind.
The heavenly system elevates the mind.
All those, and many secrets more,
The Masons taught in days of yore."

This doggerel is really a free paraphrase of a few lines from the oldest of our Manuscripts, The Regius Poem or Halliwell manuscript, written about 1390, and it goes to show that for four or five centuries the arts and sciences had held a prominent place in the thought, as well as in the ritual and constitutions, of Freemasons.

During the so-called Dark Ages what few scholars there were in Europe devoted themselves almost entirely to studies that had little or no connection with human life; they debated such questions as, What are the attributes of Deity? What are angels? What are demons? What is being? What is existence? How many angels can stand on the point of a needle? etc. After the great Revival of Learning had come, with its rediscovery of history, of nature, of human life, and of classical literature, the scholars turned from the old subjects to themes that were nearer to life — history, the arts, science, politics, and so on. The men who took up these studies were called Humanists because they were more interested in questions related to the life and needs of humanity than they were to the dry-as-dust discussion of metaphysics; and they urged in favour of their new studies that they would "humanise" men who would pursue them.

Besides, knowledge of them, even a little knowledge of them, can make us more useful to the lodge. The brother who understands enough grammar to write a paper to be read to his brethren; who has studied enough rhetoric to learn how to speak well in open lodge; who has so disciplined his mind by logic as to think straight and clear without prejudice or passion; who has an appreciation of a fine art like music so as to be mellowed and softened by the charm it throws about one's personality; who has had his mental outlook broadened and his store of knowledge enriched so as to have useful information to place at the disposal of the Craft; such a brother, it seems to me, is one who exemplifies the Masonic love of light.

We may go a step further. Suppose a lodge member is critical, captious, fault-finding, prejudiced, and ignorant; he adds nothing to the Brotherhood and he is a cause of trouble. If the lodge could persuade him to ascend the seven steps of the arts and sciences consider how it would affect him; his prejudice and vanity would drop away, for these are fruits of ignorance; his captiousness would vanish, for that comes from a lack of culture; his enlarged mind would make him more tolerant of others' opinions and more patient with others' faults, for great knowledge always begets humility. The man who has captured even a little vision of the wide world of knowledge can never be bigoted or vainglorious because he has learned how little he himself really knows. Masonry needs the Arts and Sciences for the sake of brotherhood itself!

In the Ancient world the Liberal Arts and Sciences consisted of grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy; at least, the standard histories of education thus list them, though it is doubtful if Greek and Roman Schools rigidly adhered to that list or to its nomenclature-the Athenian schools of a certainty did not, because Aristotle and his successors taught zoology; neither did the schools and universities which were built in Europe after Charlemagne for the university at Salerno specialized in botany; the one at Cologne, in stenography and bookkeeping; one at Paris in law; etc.

The Medieval Freemasons were so devoted to the Liberal Arts and Sciences that when the author of the first of the Old Charges east about among the pages of the polycronicons or histories of the world then being circulated in MS. form for the grounds on which a Charter had been given to the Fraternity, he gave prominence to an old legend about two pillars on which the "secrets" of the Arts and Sciences had been preserved through Noah's Flood. This close and boasted connection between Operative Freemasons and the Arts and Sciences has long been a puzzle. Masons did not teach their apprentices each of the seven subjects. Why should a Craft of workmen boast of possessing what belonged to a few universities?

Nevertheless they did boast, and because they did, they considered themselves apart and above the populace, which was illiterate. Even the clergy was uneducated? And among the prelates only a few could read and write. The majority of the kings, princes, and upper nobility knew so little about books or studies that they almost knew nothing; even as late as 1700 Louis XIV of France, the Sun King, the Grand Monarch, could only with great labour sign his name or spell out a few sentences.

The answer to the puzzle is that the Gothic Freemasons who built the cathedrals, priories, abbeys, etc., practiced an art which of itself required an education; education was an integral part of it. To be such a Freemason was to be an educated man. Thus the connection between Freemasonry and the Arts and Sciences was not a factitious one, but a necessary one. In a period without schools an education could not be called schooling, college or university; it was called the Liberal Arts and Sciences. Since the Freemasons employed the phrase merely as a name for education, the fact that the classical curriculum had consisted of seven subjects is irrelevant to their history, and has no significance for interpretation of the Ritual. After the system of Speculative Freemasonry was established in the Eighteenth Century the emphasis on education as not only retained but was magnified, and it was called by its old name. The two pillars were retained; a prominent place was given to the Arts and Sciences in both the Esoteric and the Exoteric portions of the Second Degree. Twentieth Century Freemasons feel as by a kind of instinct that education inevitably and naturally is one of their concerns; they take the motto, "Let there be light," with seriousness and earnestness.

This is a striking fact, this continuous emphasis on education by the same Fraternity through eight or nine centuries of time! The memory of that long tradition, the sense of continuing now what has been practiced for so long, is alive in the Masonic consciousness. Masons have seen education persist through social, religious, political revolutions, from one language to another, from one country to another; they are therefore indifferent to the labels by which education is named (else they would substitute "education" for "Liberal Arts and Sciences"), and they are likely to believe, as against pedagogic experimentalists and innovators, that the imperishable identity and long-continued practice of education means that at bottom there is the curriculum, not countless possible curricula; and that it universally consists of the language, as it is written or spoken and is its structure, of mathematics, of history, of science, and of literature; an apprentice in life must begin with these; what else he learns in addition is determined by what art, trade, or vocation he is to enter.

The fact that education belongs essentially to the nature of Freemasonry and ever has, possesses a critical importance for the history of the Craft; is one of the facts by which the central problem of that history can be solved. There were hundreds of crafts guilds, fraternities, societies, skilled trades in the Middle Ages; a few of them were larger, more powerful, and far more wealthy than the Mason Craft, and they also had legends, traditions, officers, rules and regulations, possessed charters, took oaths, had ceremonies, admitted "non-operatives" to membership. Why then did Freemasonry stand aside and apart from the others? Why did it alone survive the others? Why did not they, as well as it, and long after the Middle Ages had passed, flower into world-wide fraternities? What unique secret did Freemasonry possess that they did not? It is because it had in itself, and from the beginning, had so much for the mind; so much of the arts and sciences; its members were compelled to think and to learn as well as to use tools.

It possessed what no other Craft possessed, and which can be described by no better name than philosophy, though it is a misnomer, for the Freemasons were not theorizers but found out a whole set of truths in the process of their work; and these truths were not discovered or even guessed at by church, state, or the populace. When after 1717 the Lodges were thrown open to men of every walk and vocation, these latter discovered in the ancient Craft such a wealth of thought and learning as must ever be inexhaustible; and they have since written some tens of thousands of books about it, and have expounded it among themselves in tens of thousands of speeches and lectures. Furthermore they found that from the beginning of Masonry, education had never been considered by it to be abstract, academic, or detached, a luxury for the few, a privilege for the rich, a necessity only for one or two professions, a monopoly of the learned, and something in books; they found that education belonged to work; this connecting of education with work, this insistence that work involves education, was not dreamed of in Greece and Rome, was not seen in the Middle Ages, and would have aroused a sense of horror if it had been, and even in modern times is only beginning to be seen.

The uniqueness of this discovery explains in part the uniqueness of Freemasonry then and thereafter.