

Those Pesky Knights Templar

by **John Belton**

In the 20th and 21st centuries we have grown accustomed to our Freemasonry being in a state of good order, so we can easily fall into the trap of thinking that it was the same yesterday as it is today. Actually, Freemasonry is always on the move, and often a warrant from some distant place may serve well enough to move matters forward and address some need - the recent formation of a new Grand Priory of the Reformed and Rectified Rite of the United States of America (CBCS) is a typical example. One could almost say that such things are part of Masonic tradition, however unpopular they are with the establishments who face competition.

If we go back to the period of 1750 - 1800, the situation was almost totally chaotic. There were two Grand Lodges in England (the Antients and the Moderns), and in Scotland and Ireland as well, but they only looked after the first three craft degrees. Rather, there were first of all two degrees, and a third made its public appearance in Samuel Prichard's exposure, *Masonry Dissected*, in 1730. After this, the initiative seems to have passed to France, and it is generally agreed that the oration of Chevalier Ramsey had a significant effect upon thinking, for in the final paragraph he wrote:

"After his [Hiram's] death, King Solomon wrote down our statutes, maxims, and mysteries in hieroglyphic figures, and this ancient book is the original code of our order. After the destruction of the first temple, the great Cyrus, who was initiated in all our mysteries, instituted Zorobabel [sic] Grand Master of the Lodge in Jerusalem and ordered him to lay the foundations of the second temple wherein the mysterious book of Solomon was deposited. This book was preserved for twelve centuries in the temple of the Israelites, but after the destruction of this second temple under emperor Titus and the dispersion of this people, this authentic record was lost until the time of the crusades when it was partly recovered after the taking of Jerusalem. This sacred code was deciphered, and although the sublime spirit of all the hieroglyphic figures it contained were not fully understood, our ancient order was revived..."

Thus he started a chain of events which led to Germany whereby the Knights Templar, pretty much as we know it today, was unleashed upon the Masonic world. It spread far and wide quickly and was very popular from the 1760s onward. Probably much of its popularity was in military lodges - because a military man and a brother would probably like nothing more than to be a Sir Knight!

While I write only about Ireland, the situation was much the same in Scotland, although slightly less so in England. In Ireland Lodges worked whatever degrees they chose, and the Lodges claimed to be able to do so by the words used in Irish Craft Warrants from the Grand Lodge of Ireland. The Grand Lodge disputed this, but in reality did not have the power to enforce its contrary view. The first of the additional degrees, the Holy Royal Arch, (and it seems to have appeared in Ireland, Scotland, and England at much the same time - the mid 1740s) seemed to Lodges to be part of what they did. This was especially

true of the Holy Royal Arch, and it had become the practice of every Lodge that, as the Irish researcher William Chetwode-Crawley noted in 1897, "For each Lodge was accustomed to get what it could out of each candidate for the Royal Arch, and to render account to no man. All such fees would be pocketed by the Lodge under the existing system."

The route to become a Knight Templar, then as now, was to have completed the three Craft degrees and then (after passing the chair) to get the Royal Arch Degree. This alone qualified one to become a Knight Templar! It seems to have been assumed that the Royal Arch was merely some sort of extension of the Craft degrees, and in Scotland and Ireland it was simply worked by Lodges. In the English Antients Lodges, the Royal Arch was formally included and stated to be "The heart, root, and marrow of Freemasonry" by the Antients Grand Secretary, Laurence Dermott. The establishment of the Moderns Grand Lodge (the one created in 1717 in London) had mainly set itself against the Royal Arch, and it took some initiative by the then Grand Master, Lord Blayney, to create a Grand Chapter in 1766.

However, the Knights Templar arrived on the scene perhaps rather like a thunderbolt. Because it was new and not integrated into Freemasonry, some enterprising individuals set themselves up offering warrants for Knights Templar, and because nobody was offering warrants for the Royal Arch - of doing that as well. It must have been at this point, around the period 1790 to 1810, that the (Craft) Grand Lodges realized that their authority was becoming seriously undermined and that they had to establish their authority. Scotland took advantage of the Unlawful Societies Act of 1799 to require all Lodges to pay their dues each year and provide a list of members, and they also banned all and every degree apart from those of Apprentice, Fellowcraft, and Master Mason. The penalty of a failure to comply was to have ones warrant withdrawn! England was starting to think about a union of their two Grand Lodges and would not take any action until 1813.

As is often the case with things Irish, the circumstances were different and complicated - and the story is one worth telling. At some point, a group of Sir Knights applied to the Scottish Lodge "Mother Kilwinning" for a warrant for a Lodge, and this Lodge was to be called "The High Knights Templars of Ireland Kilwinning Lodge." Mother Kilwinning in Ayrshire is quoted by numerous writers as being the traditional source of higher degrees, although the Lodge itself remains silent upon the matter. Either way, the warrant was granted in 1779, and it seems that they quickly established the giving of the degrees of Excellent, Super Excellent, Royal Arch, and Knights Templar. However, there was also an Early Grand Encampment in Dublin which in 1805 claimed to have been in existence for over a century, but it is not clear how active it was.

As an aside, it is remarkable that wherever early references to the Royal Arch or Knights Templar occur, they have appeared soon after the arrival of a marching regiment with an Irish warrant in its baggage. Recently, while talking to a member of Lodge Glittering Star No. 322, Irish Constitution (This Lodge still retains its original travelling warrant and still meets near Birmingham in England!), their secretary was proud to tell me that they, the regiment, were in Fredericksburg, Virginia just before the first mention of the Royal

Arch there and in Boston, Massachusetts at the time of the first recorded Knight Templar meeting. In many ways, this sort of history has great romantic appeal to all of us as individual Brothers and Sir Knights, but maybe we should spare a few thoughts for the situation in which the Grand Lodge of Ireland found itself at the start of the 19th century.

The Grand Lodge of Ireland only "approved" of the first three degrees of Craft Freemasonry, but probably from around the mid 1740s, Lodges had been working the Royal Arch degree simply as part of what they did. Then around the 1760s, the Knight Templar orders arrived but had no traditional place, and while they were worked in and by Craft Lodges, they did so under a warrant from some Knight Templar body. In effect, the Grand Lodge of Ireland was having its authority nibbled away from underneath by other bodies, and it needed to do something about this (just as did the Grand Lodges in Scotland and England).

The degree to which Ireland felt it had to take action is perhaps well encapsulated by the letter of August 1805 from John Boardman, Grand Treasurer of Ireland, writing to Thomas Harper, Deputy Grand Master of the Antients in England, in which he writes:

"We have another degree, styled Knight Templar which is very prevalent among the lower kind of Masons and military Lodges throughout the Kingdom - who act wholly independent of the Grand Lodge, obtain warrants, and are registered and chartered by persons wholly unauthorized but who assume a pretended power of doing so; nay warrants for Knight Templar degree have come to my hands under the signature of persons who were suspended from Masonry by order of the Grand Lodge for gross misconduct. To put a stop to many evils which have arisen and are likely to arise from such proceedings, it has been submitted to take this degree under the cognizance of the Grand, not only as a measure of regulation but also of finance, for I think that the funds of the order will derive near £500 by it."

So perhaps here we have it in a nutshell. Elements considered undesirable by those in the Grand Lodge in Dublin had been issuing warrants for Knights Templar, and because there was no body extant for the Royal Arch of issuing those warrants, essential because being a Royal Arch mason was a requirement to become a Knight Templar. More than that, these practices were becoming very prevalent among the "lower kind of Masons" and distant "military Lodges" which was enough to cause consternation among the "Masonic establishment" in Dublin.

Events moved on apace, for hard on the heels of Boardman's letter of mid-August to Harper followed resolutions in Grand Lodge in Dublin on the 5th of September 1805, which created both a Grand Royal Arch Chapter and a Grand Knights Templar Encampment. By the end of September, both the Chapter and Encampment were formed and some warrants issued.

All this process however had been entirely generated by those in Grand Lodge and in Dublin without any involvement of those involved in either the Royal Arch or Grand Encampment, and this was to lead to a great explosion of anger that would last for a decade. A toxic cocktail of Northern Irish under representation in Grand Lodge, a total

ignoring of those involved in the Royal Arch and Knights Templar, personal antagonisms between Boardman (Grand Treasurer and Dubliner) and Seton (Grand Secretary and from Ulster), and of course worse, an attempt to restrict traditional Lodge freedoms and finally worse still to extract more money from Lodges! Crisis loomed.

However, tempers were rising and many people were greatly upset by the actions of Grand Lodge. At the 1st of May 1806, meeting of Grand Lodge, the Grand Secretary was defeated while seeking re-election. Seton was outside the door of the Lodge waiting, and when Boardman appeared, he then proceeded to publicly horsewhip him in front of the Brethren. Open Revolt was brewing!

At the meeting of Grand Lodge on Thursday the 5th of June 1806, at 7 p.m., a large number of "unknown" Brethren appeared at the meeting. These were delegates who had come down from Ulster to demonstrate their displeasure. They rescinded a resolution passed against their submissions at a previous meeting, and the resolutions regarding the Royal Arch and Knights Templar of the previous year were annulled. The Deputy Grand Master closed the meeting at 1 a.m. the next morning and left with the Grand Officers. The "Northerns" remained, reopened Grand Lodge, and passed a whole host of resolutions, only closing later that morning. From then until March of 1808 there were two Masonic bodies in Dublin, both claiming to be Grand Lodge and both appealing to the same Grand Master for his support and then until 1814, a Grand East of Ulster before it faded away.

It is perhaps hard to comprehend how such events occurred, but they do so repeatedly in Freemasonry. In this case, it is the activities by the Knights Templar that brought the crisis to a head in the Craft Grand Lodges of Britain, and it also partly explains why the structure of English Freemasonry is so different from that in the United States.

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