

The Old Charges

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WHAT THE OLD CHARGES ARE

I have just come from reading an article in one of the more obscure masonic periodicals in which an unknown brother lets go with this very familiar remark: "As for me, I am not interested in the musty old documents of the past. I want to know what is going on today." The context makes it clear that he had in mind the Old Charges. A sufficient reply to this ignoramus is that the Old Charges are among the things that are "going on today." Eliminate them from Freemasonry as it now functions and not a subordinate lodge, or a Grand Lodge, or any other regular masonic body could operate at all; they are to what the Constitution of this nation is to the United States government, and what its statutes are to every state in the Union. All our constitutions, statutes, laws, rules, by-laws and regulations to some extent or other hark back to the Old Charges, and without them masonic jurisprudence, or the methods for governing and regulating the legal affairs of the Craft, would be left hanging suspended in the air. In proportion as masonic leaders, Grand Masters, Worshipful Masters and Jurisprudence Committees ignore, or forget, or misunderstand these masonic charters they run amuck, and lead the Craft into all manner of wild and unmasonic undertakings. If some magician could devise a method whereby a clear conception of the Old Charges and what they stand for could be installed into the head of every active mason in the land, it would save us all from embarrassment times without number and it would relieve Grand Lodges and other Grand bodies from the needless expenditure of hundreds of thousands of dollars every year. If there is any practical necessity, any hard down-next-to-the-ground necessity anywhere in Freemasonry today, it is for a general clear-headed understanding of the Ancient Constitutions and landmarks of our Order.

By the OLD CHARGES is meant those ancient documents that have come down to us from the fourteenth century and afterwards in which are incorporated the traditional history, the legends and the rules and regulations of Freemasonry. They are called variously "Ancient Manuscripts", "Ancient Constitutions", "Legend of the Craft", "Gothic Manuscripts", "Old Records", etc, etc. In their physical makeup these documents are sometimes found in the form of handwritten paper or parchment rolls, the units of which are either sewn or pasted together; of hand-written sheets stitched together in book form, and in the familiar printed form of a modern book. Sometimes they are found incorporated in the minute book of a lodge. They range in estimated date from 1390 until the first quarter of the eighteenth century, and a few of them are specimens of beautiful Gothic script. The largest number of them are in the keeping of the British Museum; the masonic library of West Yorkshire, England, has in custody the second largest number.

As already said these Old Charges (such is their most familiar appellation) form the basis of modern masonic constitutions, and therefore jurisprudence. They establish the continuity of the masonic institution through a period of more than five centuries, and by fair implication much longer; and at the same time, and by token of the same significance, prove the great antiquity of Masonry by written documents, which is a thing no other craft in existence is able to do. These manuscripts are traditional and legendary in form and are therefore not to be read as histories are, nevertheless a careful and critical study of them based on internal evidence sheds more light on the earliest times of Freemasonry than any other one source whatever. It is believed that the Old Charges were used in making a Mason in the old Operative days; that they served as constitutions of lodges in many cases, and sometimes functioned as what we today call a warrant.

The systematic study of these manuscripts began in the middle of the past century, at which time only a few were known to be in existence. In 1872 William James Hughan listed 32. Owing largely to his efforts many others were discovered, so that in 1889 Gould was able to list 62, and Hughan himself in 1895 tabulated 66 manuscript copies, 9 printed versions and 11 missing versions. This number has been so much increased of late years that in *Ars Quatuor*

Coronatorum, Volume XXXI, page 40 (1918), Brother Roderick H. Baxter, now Worshipful Master of Quatuor Coronati Lodge, listed 98, which number included the versions known to be missing. Brother Baxter's list is peculiarly valuable in that he gives data as to when and where these manuscripts have been reproduced.

For the sake of being better able to compare one copy with another, Dr. W. Begemann classified all the versions into four general "families", The Grand Lodge Family, The Sloane Family, The Roberts Family, and The Spencer Family. These family groups he divided further into branches, and he believed that The Spencer Family was an offshoot of The Grand Lodge Family, and The Roberts Family an offshoot of The Sloane Family. In this general manner of grouping, the erudite doctor was followed by Hughan, Gould and their colleagues, and his classification still holds in general; attempts have been made in recent years to upset it, but without much success. One of the best charts, based on Begemann, is that made by Brother Lionel Vibert, a copy of which will be published in a future issue of The Builder.

The first known printed reference to these Old Charges was made by Dr. Robert Plot in his Natural History of Staffordshire, published in 1686. Dr. A.F.A. Woodford and William James Hughan were the first to undertake a scientific study. Hughan's Old Charges is to this day the standard work in English. Gould's chapter in his History of Masonry would probably be ranked second in value, whereas the voluminous writings of Dr. Begemann, contributed by him to Zirkelcorrespondenz, official organ of the National Grand Lodge of Germany, would, if only they were translated into English, give us the most exhaustive treatment of the subject ever yet written.

The Old Charges are peculiarly English. No such documents have ever been found in Ireland. Scotch manuscripts are known to be of English origin. It was once held by Findel and other German writers that the English versions ultimately derived from German sources, but this has been disproved. The only known point of similarity between the Old Charges and such German documents as the Torgau Ordinances and the Cologne Constitutions is the Legend of the Four Crowned Martyrs, and this legend is found among English versions only in the Regius Manuscript. As Gould well says, the British MSS. have "neither predecessors nor rivals"; they are the richest and rarest things in the whole field of masonic writings.

When the Old Charges are placed side by side it is immediately seen that in their account of the traditional history of the Craft they vary in a great many particulars, nevertheless they appear to have derived from some common origin, and in the main they tell the same tale, which is as interesting as a fairy story out of Grimm. Did the original of this traditional account come from some individual or was it born out of a floating tradition, like the folk tales of ancient people? Authorities differ much on this point. Begemann not only declared that the first version of the story originated with an individual, but even set out what he deemed to be the literary sources used by that Great Unknown. The doctor's arguments are powerful. On the other hand, others contend that the story began as a general vague oral tradition, and that this was in the course of time reduced to writing. In either event, why was the story ever written? In all probability an answer to that question will never be forth-coming, but W. Harry Rylands and others have been of the opinion that the first written versions were made in response to a general Writ for Return issued in 1388. Rylands' words may be quoted: "It appears to me not at all improbable that much, if not all, of the legendary history was composed in answer to the Writ for Returns issued to the guilds all over the country, in the twelfth year of Richard the Second, A.D. 1388." (A.Q.C. XVI page 1)

II. THE TWO OLDEST MANUSCRIPTS

In 1757 King George II presented to the British Museum a collection of some 12,000 volumes, the nucleus of which had been laid by King Henry VII and which came to be known as the Royal Library. Among these books was a rarely beautiful manuscript written by hand on 64 pages of vellum, about four by five inches in size, which a cataloger, David Casley, entered as No. 17 A-1 under the title, "A Poem of Moral Duties: here entitled Constitutiones Artis Gemetrie Secundem." It was not until Mr. J.O. Halliwell, F.R.S. (afterwards Halliwell-Phillipps), a non-Mason, chanced to make the discovery that the manuscript was known to be a masonic document. Mr. Phillipps read a paper on the manuscript before the Society of Antiquaries in 1839, and in the following year published a volume entitled *Early History of Freemasonry in England* (enlarged and revised in 1844), in which he incorporated a transcript of the document along with a few pages in facsimile. This important work will be found incorporated in the familiar *Universal Masonic Library*, the rusty sheepskin bindings of which strike the eyes on almost every masonic book shelf. This manuscript was known as "The Halliwell", or as "The Halliwell-Phillipps" until some fifty years afterwards Gould rechristened it, in honour of the Royal Library in which it is found, the "Regius", and since then this has become the more familiar cognomen.

David Casley, a learned specialist in old manuscripts, dated the "Regius" as of the fourteenth century. E.A. Bond, another expert, dated it as of the middle of the fifteenth century. Dr. Kloss, the German specialist, placed it between 1427 and 1445. But the majority have agreed on 1390 as the most probable date. "It is impossible to arrive at absolute certainty on this point," says Hughan, whose *Old Charges* should be consulted, "save that it is not likely to be older than 1390, but may be some twenty years or so later." Dr. W. Begemann made a study of the document that has never been equalled for thoroughness, and arrived at a conclusion that may be given in his own words: it was written "towards the end of the 14th or at least quite at the beginning of the 15th century (not in Gloucester itself, as being too southerly, but) in the north of Gloucestershire or in the neighbouring north of Herefordshire, or even possibly in the south of Worcestershire." (*A.Q.C.* VII, page 35.)

In 1889 an exact facsimile of this famous manuscript was published in Volume I of the *Antigrapha* produced by the Quatuor Coronati Lodge of Research, and was edited by the then secretary of that lodge, George William Speth, himself a brilliant authority, who supplied a glossary that is indispensable to the amateur student. Along with it was published a commentary by R. F. Gould, one of the greatest of all his masonic papers, though it is exasperating in its rambling arrangement and general lack of conclusiveness.

The Regius Manuscript is the only one of all the versions to be written in meter, and may have been composed by a priest, if one may judge by certain internal evidences, though the point is disputed. There are some 800 lines in the poem, the strictly masonic portion coming to an end at line 576, after which begins what Hughan calls a "sermonette" on moral duties, in which there is quite a Roman Catholic vein with references to "the sins seven", "the sweet lady" (referring to the Virgin) and to holy water. There is no such specific Mariolatry in any other version of the *Old Charges*, though the great majority of them express loyalty to "Holy Church" and all of them, until Anderson's familiar version, are specifically Christian, so far as religion is concerned.

The author furnishes a list of fifteen "points" and fifteen "articles", all of which are quite specific instructions concerning the behaviour of a Craftsman: this portion is believed by many to have been the charges to an initiate as used in the author's period, and is therefore deemed the most important feature of the book as furnishing us a picture of the regulations of the Craft at that remote date. The Craft is described as having come into existence as an organized fraternity in "King Adelstoune's day", but in this the author contradicts himself, because he refers to things "written in old books" (I modernize spelling of quotations) and takes for granted a certain antiquity for the Masonry, which, as in all the *Old Charges*, is made synonymous with Geometry, a thing very different in those days from the abstract science over which we laboured during our school days.

The Regius Poem is evidently a book about Masonry, rather than a document of Masonry, and may very well have been written by a non-mason, though there is no way in which we can verify such theories, especially seeing that we know nothing about the document save what it has to tell us about itself, which is little.

In his Commentary on the Regius MS, R. F. Gould produced a paragraph that has ever since served as the pivot of a great debate. It reads as follows and refers to the "sermonette" portion which deals with "moral duties": "These rules of decorum read very curiously in the present age, but their inapplicability to the circumstances of the working masons of the fourteen or fifteenth century will be at once apparent. They were intended for the gentlemen of those days, and the instruction for behaviour in the presence of a lord—at table and in the society of ladies—would have all been equally out of place in a code of manners drawn up for the use of a Guild or Craft of Artisans."

The point of this is that there must have been present among the Craftsmen of that time a number of men not engaged at all in labour, and therefore were, as we would now describe them, "speculatives." This would be of immense importance if Gould had made good his point, but that he was not able to do. The greatest minds of the period in question were devoted to architecture, and there is no reason not to believe that among the Craftsmen were members of good families. Also the Craft was in contact with the clergy all the while, and therefore many of its members may well have stood in need of rules for preserving proper decorum in great houses and among the members of the upper classes. From Woodford until the present time the great majority of masonic scholars have believed the Old Charges to have been used by a strictly operative craft and it is evident that they will continue to do so until more conclusive evidence to the contrary is forthcoming than Gould's surmise.

Next to the Regius the oldest manuscript is that known as the Cooke. It was published by R. Spencer, London, 1861 and was edited by Mr. Matthew Cooke, hence his name. In the British Museum's catalogue it is listed as "Additional M.S. 23,198", and has been dated by Hughan at 1450 or thereabouts, an estimate in which most of the specialists have concurred. Dr. Begemann believed the document to have been "compiled and written in the southeastern portion of the western Midlands, say, in Gloucestershire or Oxfordshire, possibly also in southeast Worcestershire or southwest Warwickshire. The 'Book of Charges' which forms the second part of the document is certainly of the 14th century, the historical or first part, of quite the beginning of the 15th." (A.Q.C. IX, page 18)

The Cooke MS. was most certainly in the hands of Mr. George Payne, when in his second term as Grand Master in 1720 he compiled the "General Regulations", and which Anderson included in his own version of the Constitutions published in 1723. Anderson himself evidently made use of lines 901-960 of the MS.

The Lodge Quatuor Coronati reprinted the Cooke in facsimile in Vol. II of its Antigrapha in 1890, and included therewith a Commentary by George William Speth which is, in my own amateur opinion, an even more brilliant piece of work than Gould's Commentary on the Regius. Some of Speth's conclusions are of permanent value. I paraphrase his findings in my own words:

The M.S. is a transcript of a yet older document and was written by a mason. There were several versions of the Charges to a Mason in circulation at the time. The MS. is in two parts, the former of which is an attempt at a history of the Craft, the latter of which is a version of the Charges. Of this portion Speth writes that it is "far and away the earliest, best and purest version of the 'Old Charges' which we possess." The MS. mentions nine "articles", and these evidently were legal enforcements at the time; the nine "points" given were probably not legally binding but were morally so. "Congregations" of Masons were held here and there but no "General Assembly" (or "Grand Lodge"); Grand Masters existed in fact but not in name and presided at one meeting of a congregation only. "Many of our present usages may be traced in their original form to this manuscript."

III. ANDERSON'S CONSTITUTIONS AND OTHER PRINTED VERSIONS

One of the most important of all the versions of the Old Charges is not an ancient original at all, but a printed edition issued in 1722, and known as the Roberts, though it is believed to be a copy of an ancient document. Of this W. J. Hughan writes: "The only copy known was purchased by me at Brother Spencer's sale of masonic works, etc. (London, 1875), for 8 pounds 10s., on behalf of the late Brother R. F. Bower, and is now in the magnificent library of the Grand Lodge of Iowa, U.S.A." This tiny volume is easily the most priceless masonic literary possession in America, and was published in exact facsimile by the National masonic Research Society, with an eloquent Introduction by Dr. Joseph Fort Newton in 1916. The Reverend Edmund Coxe edited a famous reprint in 1871. It is a version meriting the most careful study on the part of the masonic student because it had a decided influence on the literature and jurisprudence of the Craft after its initial appearance. It appeared in one of the most interesting and momentous periods of modern Speculative Masonry, namely, in the years between the organization of the first Grand Lodge in 1717 and the appearance of Anderson's Constitution in 1723. It is the earliest printed version of the Old Charges known to exist.

Another well-known printed version is that published in 1724 and known as the Briscoe. This was the second publication of its kind. The third printed version was issued in 1728-9 by Benjamin Cole, and known as the Cole Edition in consequence. This version is considered a literary gem in that the main body of the text is engraved throughout in most beautiful style. A special edition of this book was made in Leeds, 1897, the value of which was enhanced by one of W. J. Hughan's famous introductions. For our own modern and practical purposes the most important of all the versions ever made was that compiled by Dr. James Anderson in 1723 and everywhere known familiarly as Anderson's Constitution. A second edition appeared, much changed and enlarged, in 1738; a third, by John Entick, in 1756; and so on every few years until by 1888 twenty-two editions in all had been issued. The Rev. A.F.A. Woodford, Hughan's collaborator, edited an edition of The Constitution Book of 1723 as Volume I of Kenning's masonic Archeological Library, under date of 1878. This is a correct and detailed reproduction of the book exactly as Anderson first published it, and is valuable accordingly.

Anderson's title page is interesting to read: "The CONSTITUTION, History, Laws, Charges, Orders, Regulations, and Usages, of the Right Worshipful FRATERNITY of ACCEPTED FREE MASONS; collected from their general RECORDS, and their faithful TRADITIONS of many Ages. To be read At the Admission of a NEW BROTHER, when the Master or Warden shall begin, or order some other Brother to read as follows, etc." After the word "follows" Anderson's own version of masonic history begins with this astonishing statement:

"Adam, our first Parent, created after the Image of God, the great Architect of the Universe, must have had the Liberal Sciences, particularly Geometry, written on his Heart, etc."

Thus did Dr. Anderson launch his now thrice familiar account of the history of Freemasonry, an account which, save in the hands of the most expert masonic antiquarian, yields very little dependable historical fact whatsoever, but which, owing to the prestige of its author, came to be accepted for generations as a bona fide history of the Craft. It will be many a long year yet before the rank and file of brethren shall have learned that Dr. Anderson's "history" belongs in the realm of fable for the most part, and has never been accepted as anything else by knowing ones.

The established facts concerning Dr. Anderson's own private history comprise a record almost as brief as the short and simple annals of the poor. Brother J.T. Thorp, one of the most distinguished of the veterans among living English masonic scholars, has given it in an excellent brief form. (A.Q.C. XVIII, page 9.)

"Of this distinguished Brother we know very little. He is believed to have been born, educated and made a Mason in Scotland, subsequently settling in London as a Presbyterian Minister. He is mentioned for the first time in the Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of England on September 29th, 1721, when he was appointed to revise the old Gothic Constitutions—this revision was

approved by the Grand Lodge of England on September 29th in 1723, in which year Anderson was Junior Grand Warden under the Duke of Wharton—he published a second edition of the Book of Constitutions in 1738, and died in 1739. This is about all that is known of him."

In his 1738 edition Anderson so garbled up his account of the founding of Grand Lodge, and contradicted his own earlier story in such fashion, that R. F. Gould was inclined to believe either that he had become disgruntled and full of spleen, or else that he was in his dotage. Be that as it may, Anderson's historical pages are to be read with extreme caution. His Constitution itself, or that part dealing with the principles and regulations of the Craft, is most certainly a compilation made of extracts of other versions of the Old Charges pretty much mixed with the Doctor's own ideas in the premises, and so much at variance with previous customs that the official adoption thereof caused much dissension among the lodges, and may have had something to do with the disaffection which at last led to the formation of the "Antient" Grand Lodge of 1751 or thereabouts. The "Anderson" of this latter body, which in time waxed very powerful, was Laurence Dermott, a brilliant Irishman, who as Grand Secretary was leader of the "Antient" forces for many years, and who wrote for the body its own Constitution, called Ahiman Rezon, which cryptic title is believed by some to mean "Worthy Brother Secretary." The first edition of this important version was made in 1756, a second in 1764, and so on until by 1813 an eighth had been published. A very complete collection of all editions is in the masonic Library at Philadelphia. A few of our Grand Lodges, Pennsylvania among them, continue to call their Book of Constitutions, The Ahiman Rezon.

Anderson himself is still on the rack of criticism. Learned brethren are checking his statements (see Brother Vibert's article in *The Builder* for August), sifting his pages and leaving no stone unturned in order to appraise correctly his contributions to masonic history. But there is not so much disagreement on the Constitution. In that document, which did not give satisfaction to many upon its appearance, Anderson, as Brother Lionel Vibert has well said, "builted better than he knew," because he produced a document which until now serves as the groundwork of nearly all Grand Lodge Constitutions having jurisdiction over Symbolic Masonry, and which once and for all established Speculative Freemasonry on a basis apart, and with no sectarian character, either as to religion or politics. For all his faults as a historian (and these faults were as much of his age as of his own shortcomings), Anderson is a great figure in our annals and deserves at the hand of every student a careful and, reverent study.

IV. CONCLUSION

In concluding this very brief and inconclusive sketch of a great subject, I return to my first statement. In the whole circle of masonic studies there is not, for us Americans at any rate, any subject of such importance as this of the Old Charges, especially insofar as they have to do with our own Constitutions and Regulations, and that is very much indeed. Many false conceptions of Freemasonry may be directly traced to an unlearned, or wilful misinterpretation of the Old Charges, what they are, what they mean to us, and what their authority may be. In this land jurisprudence is a problem of supreme importance, and in a way not very well comprehended by our brethren in other parts, who often wonder why we should be so obsessed by it. We have forty-nine Grand Lodges, each of which is sovereign in its own state, and all of which must maintain fraternal relations with scores of Grand bodies abroad as well as with each other. These Grand Lodges assemble each year to legislate for the Craft, and therefore, in the very nature of things, the organization and government of the Order is for us Americans a much more complicated and important thing than it can be in other lands. To know what the Old Charges are, and to understand masonic constitutional law and practice, is for our leaders and law-givers a prime necessity.

(Note: - A study of the Comacine question should have been published in the Study Club this month, but I was prevented from writing it by a rather extended illness, and therefore substituted the present article, already prepared. I shall hope to include the Comacine paper next month or the month thereafter. I ask my readers to let me hear of any errors detected in order that the same may be corrected before this article goes into book form. Also I regret the fact that we were unable to incorporate in the present number Brother Lionel Vibert's Chart of the Old Charges; this will appear in a future issue in the form of a two-page spread, valuable for reference uses and for framing. I have to thank Brothers Vibert and R.I. Clegg for a critical appraisal of this present chapter. H. L. H.)

WORKS CONSULTED IN PREPARING THIS ARTICLE

Gould's History of Freemasonry, Vol. 1, beginning on page 56; A.Q.C., I, 127; A.Q.C., I, 147; A.Q.C., I, 152; A.Q.C., IV, 73; A.Q.C., IV, 83; A.Q.C., IV, 171; A.Q.C., V, 37; A.Q.C., IV, 201; A.Q.C., IV, 36, 198; A.Q.C., VII, 119; A.Q.C., VIII, 224; Hughan, Old Charges; A.Q.C., IX, 18; A.Q.C., IX, 85; A.Q.C., XI, 205; A.Q.C., XIV, 153; A.Q.C., XVI, 4; A.Q.C., XVIII, 16; A.Q.C., XX, 249; A.Q.C., XXI, 161, 211; A.Q.C., XXVIII, 189; Gould's Concise History, chapter V; Gould, Collected Essays, 3; Stillson, History of Freemasonry and Concordant Orders, 157; A.Q.C., XXXIII, 5; The masonic Review, Vol. XIII, 297; Edward Conder, Records of the Hole Craft and Fellowship of Masons; Vibert, Story of the Craft; Vibert, Freemasonry Before the Era of Grand Lodge; Findel, History of Freemasonry; Hughan, Cole's Constitutions; Fort, Early History and Antiquities of Freemasonry; Pierson, Traditions, Origin and Early History of Freemasonry; Hughan, Ancient masonic Rolls; Waite, New Encyclopedia of Freemasonry; Clegg, Mackey's Revised History; Ward, Freemasonry and the Ancient Gods: A.Q.C., Antigapha, all volumes.

THE OLD CHARGES AND WHAT THEY MEAN TO US

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