CHAPTER 4

The Origins of Freemasonry

Scotland

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Introduction

By the seventeenth century Scotland possessed a network of permanent institutions calling themselves lodges. Membership, at first, consisted almost entirely of stonemasons, but over time men of other occupations and social statuses were admitted, from craftsmen to noblemen. Within lodges there was brotherhood, but also a division into two ranks or degrees: entered apprentices and fellow crafts (also known as masters). Members had secrets, collectively known as the Mason Word, into which they were initiated by elaborate rituals. These contained references to historical traditions relating to the mason craft and lodges, and included secret recognition codes by which initiates could identify each other. Compasses and the square played a part in their symbolism. By the second half of the seventeenth century, and probably much earlier, Scottish lodges had copies of the fifteenth century ‘Old Charges’, which encapsulated the lore of medieval English stonemasons. As well as seeking to regulate the Masons’ trade, lodges had charitable funds to help members who fell on hard times. Thus by 1600 Scotland had clearly developed a form of Freemasonry—though it is true that the members of the lodges did not call themselves Freemasons, but simply Masons (see Stevenson 1988; Stevenson 2001).

Scottish medieval Masons, like their English counterparts, had long before the seventeenth century had lodges associated with individual building sites, made up of the Masons working on them. Though the word ‘lodge’ originally meant simply the shelter in which Masons worked, in time the word came (as in the Old Charges) also to denote the collective body the Masons on the site formed. Some such lodges only existed while major building works were in progress, but in many cases they may have come to exist semi-permanently, catering for the core of Masons who remained to deal with the routine maintenance and repairs necessary for major buildings. Traces of such lodges are very rare, but in Dundee in 1537, when the town authorities appointed George Boiss to be mason for life at the parish church and other town property, he was instructed to work according to “the auld use and
The consuetude of Our Lady Luge of Dundee had and usit befoire” [the old use and custom of Our Lady Lodge of Dundee had and used before] (Mylne 1893: 63–64; Knoop and Jones 1939: 61–62). The lodge may only have comprised Boiss and an apprentice or two, but it was clearly regarded as an institution with an agreed body of traditions and regulations.

The Protestant Reformation of 1560, and the long period of political instability that followed it, must have severely disrupted the Masons’ trade. Many ecclesiastical buildings were destroyed or left to fall into ruin, and employment opportunities must have been limited. But by the end of the century stability was returning, and both the crown and landowners were becoming more adventurous in their building projects. It is perhaps merely a coincidence, but just at this time the survival of a scattering of written records produces a sudden explosion of information for historians about the organisation of Scottish masonry. First, in 1590, King James VI appointed Patrick Copland of Udoch to the office of warden over the “airt and craft of masonrie” in three counties in the north east of the country (Aberdeen, Banff and Kincardine). Copland’s father, allegedly, had held the office before him, and was said to have been appointed with the consent of the majority of the master masons in the region (NAS, PS1/61, f. 47r, quoted in Lyon 1900: 4–5). As warden he could hold justice courts for Masons. Scottish legislation dating back to 1427 had ordered that in rural areas barons (landowners) like Copland should be appointed as wardens over craftsmen (APS 1844–1875, ii, 15.), but apart from this one reference there is no evidence of such appointments actually being made.

However, a rival claimant to jurisdiction over Scottish Masons soon appeared. William Schaw (c. 1550–1602), a courtier, had been appointed to the office of master of works to James VI of Scotland in 1584, a post that made him the supervisor of all building projects for potentially the largest employer of Masons in the country, the crown. In 1598 Schaw issued the so-called ‘First Schaw Statutes’. These regulations were addressed to all master masons in the land, over whom Schaw claimed to have authority as general warden. They were issued on 28 December, the day after St John the Evangelist’s day. The ‘Second Schaw Statutes’ were issued in 1599 on the same day. As St John’s day was one on which Masons in many countries met traditionally, it seems likely that Masons had assembled in Edinburgh on that day in two successive years to meet Schaw, and had discussed with him the statutes he was to sign the next day.

The Masons over whom Schaw claimed jurisdiction were to be organised in lodges, and it has become clear that these were lodges that already existed. That is, Schaw was not founding them, but was introducing standard regulations for them, partly derived from the Old Charges. In the Second Statutes