

# **THE ANCIENT SCOTTISH CRAFT AND THE THIRD DEGREE**

by  
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## **PREFATORY NOTE.**

At the present moment there is a very healthy spirit of enquiry abroad among Freemasons as to the origin of the Craft. I venture to submit the following pages as a slight contribution to the literature which discusses the connection between the Speculative of today and the Operative of bygone centuries.

I sincerely thank the Council of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland for the loan of the blocks which illustrate the paper.

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The evidence for an elaborate system of Freemasonry prior to the end of the seventeenth century and the era of Grand Lodge is so scanty that any addition to it is welcome. Recently, when investigating the history of the Mason Craft, as an operative trade, in the royal burgh of Stirling, I noted two matters of interest to Freemasons. I think them

worthy of careful consideration, but I put them forward tentatively, and with due reserve.

The first of these is embedded in an Agreement between the town of Stirling and its Mason which was drawn up in 1529, and under which the Mason bound himself " to work and labour his craft of Masonry and geometry." The Speculative Freemason of today in one of his charges " explains to the Fellowcraft on his being passed to the Second Degree, that " geometry and masonry were originally synonymous terms." I am not sure that they are synonymous, in the Stirling Agreement, but I believe this is the earliest Scottish document in which the words are found in any sort of conjunction. To that extent they are undoubtedly interesting to those Freemasons who believe that their Speculative system stretches back into the far past.

The other and much more important matter is derived from a tombstone in the Old Churchyard at Stirling. As a Son of the Rock, I have been familiar with the stone since boyhood, and have frequently looked upon the bullet marks with which it is disfigured, and which, according to local tradition, were received from the artillery either of General Monck or Prince Charles Edward Stuart, each of whom, in different centuries, bombarded Stirling Castle under whose shadow it stands. My Masonic interest in it was quickened by seeing it figured in a paper on " The Carvings and Inscriptions on the Kirkyard Monuments of the Scottish Lowlands," contributed by D. Christison, M.D., to volume xxxvi. of the " Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland." Dr Christison's references to the tombstone were illustrated by two drawings from the gifted pencil of Mr F. R. Coles, the blocks of which have been kindly lent to me by, the Council of the Society of Antiquaries. The author of the paper may not have been a Freemason, or, if he was, the possible Masonic meaning of the stone may have escaped his notice. Describing the cast side of it, he says, it might perhaps be classed with the Resurrection stones on the evidence of the figure blowing a trumpet at the top although the figure seems to be rising from the sea, but the main subject in the centre below is too much worn to explain itself The stone displays down the side all the implements of the mason or carver's craft. Describing the carving on the west face, Dr Christison says that it, also, is too worn to enable much to be said about it, but hazards the following interpretation:

"The circular border is formed by an emblem of eternity, the serpent, with its tail in its mouth. Possibly, two subjects are represented here, as a tree-like object running up the centre divides the kneeling figure on the right beginning LORD MY..... from the two on the left, one of

which in profile, with a halo (?) above the head, grasps the other round the waist, the latter stretching his right hand above an altar (?)"

Sometime previous to the publication of Dr Christison's paper, Mr David B. Morris, Town Clerk, Stirling, had examined the stone, and, in a letter to Dr Joseph Anderson, had stated that " he had made out the date 1629 and the name ' John Service'." Mr Morris suggested that John Service may have been the father of a " Johne Service, maissoun," mentioned in the Burgh Records of Stirling, as having made a sun dial which was set up on a house opposite the market cross.

It is at this point that I take up the enquiry. I think it is extremely likely that the man who put up the sun-dial in Broad Street, Stirling, was the man who erected the tombstone which, as it bears his own name, may have been raised in the first instance as a memorial to mark the family burying-ground. John Service was a rather notable mason in Stirling in the first half of the seventeenth century; and I am of opinion that there was only one of the name - not two as Mr Morris suggests. The " John Service " who set up the sun dial and was prominent in other Masonic matters about the same time was, in all probability, the son of James Service, Mason, who on 27th January, 1603, is mentioned in the Stirling Kirk Session Records as having " latelie cum with his household from the parish of Kilmalcolm." If John was the son of James, then he had followed his father's calling, and risen to some local distinction in it, as he was one of the signatories to the second of the famous St Clair Charters, those rather mysterious documents which are alleged to have conferred upon the Sinclairs of Roslin the rank of patrons and protectors of the Masons throughout Scotland. The second St Clair Charter is undated, but is believed to have been signed in 1628. The lodge of Stirling consented to the arrangement set forth and three men signed on its behalf, one of whom was John Service who is described as "master of the Craftis in Stirling." But for this reference, and the allusion to him in the Burgh Records already referred to, John Service is unknown in history. The fact, however, that he attained a position sufficiently important to entitle him to represent his Lodge in what was, apparently, a national conference, indicates that he must have been of some standing among his fellows.

As John Service was alive in 1635, my suggestion, if Mr. Morris is right in his interpretation of the date on the tombstone is "1629," is that the memorial had been erected by Service in memory of his father. In that event, the elaborate carving upon it would be from the chisel that cut

the sun-dial which was considered so attractive by the Town Council as to be purchased by them, and set up on the front of their Town Clerk's house, situated in the principal street, and doubtless one of the chief places of residence in the burgh.

With the exception of the carving on the centre panel, which Dr Christison said was too much worn to be described accurately, the whole of the details of the design, on the east side of the stone, may probably be accepted as conventional symbols of trade and religion such as were frequently carved upon memorials to persons of "substance" who had been identified with one or another of the handicraft incorporations or fraternities. As has been pointed out, Dr Christison suggests that, on account of the presence of the Angel with the trumpet, the slab may not inappropriately be regarded as one of what are called "Resurrection stories, though the fact that the angel appears to be rising from the sea presents a difficulty to his mind in that connection.

One can imagine an enthusiastic Speculative Freemason waxing eloquent over the design, hailing it as a sort of Tracing Board, and interpreting everything in terms familiar to brethren of "the mystic tie." Such an one would probably insist that the central panel --"an oblong square" to use a contradictory term beloved by brethren of the Craft -- represents the "form" of a Lodge while the catenarian arch made by the circle at the top and the slender side panels is an exact representation of the "form" of a Royal Arch Chapter. Further, it might be argued that the "cords" which rise from the narrow panel on the left side, pass under the death's head, form the elaborate design above the oblong, and then, passing through the hand on the right side, fall in graceful lines to form the panel underneath, are connected with the cords which were formerly so significant in Speculative Masonry and the vestiges of which remain in the cord and tassels that form part of the present day Tracing Board or that are frequently seen in Masonic Carpets. Such an one would regard the tools as emblems of morality and dwell specially upon the "keystone" at the lower end of the left panel and the "triangle" almost similarly situated at the right. He might also be able to explain the angel, the sea, and the design in the centre by references to some of the higher degrees with which I am unacquainted.

While, however, even Freemasons might differ as to all interpretation on the lines I suggest, there would probably be greater unanimity among Speculative enthusiasts as to the Masonic rendering which I am going to offer of the circular design on the other side of the stone. In

justice to myself, I ought to say that my firm belief is that the elaborate ceremonial of modern Freemasonry is a thing of comparatively recent growth. I grant willingly that many of the rites may have been borrowed by the brethren from ancient fraternities, but I hold that these fraternities were not Masonic and had nothing to do with Freemasonry. Yet, while all this is indubitably true, here we have what looks palpably like the legend of the Third Degree pictured in a tombstone erected not later than 1629.

Masonic students who reject myth and fable, demanding reasonable proof of the historical accuracy of the statements that are made, with so much assurance, by credulous brethren, favour the view that the Third Degree was invented about 1725. They are willing to admit that, although it was unknown to Freemasonry prior to that date, the materials of which it is composed are older. The suggestion has been made that the Hiramic legend was borrowed from the Rosicrucians. If this could be established, two questions might be prompted by the Stirling tombstone: Was John Service, "master of the craftis" in Stirling, a member of the "Rosy Cross"? and had the "Rosy Cross" any connection with operative masonry? These are questions, however, which I fear, it is impossible to answer at the present stage of Masonic research.

The whole history of the Rosicrucian Society in Scotland is obscure. Curiously enough, what is probably the earliest allusion both to it and to the much debated "Mason's Word" is found in a forgotten volume, entitled "The Muses Threnodie," which was published in 1638, almost contemporaneously with the erection of the Service Memorial. The author was Henry Adamson, of Perth, a man of good education, who was trained for the ministry. In the course of his poem, he predicts that the bridge over the Tay at the Fair City, which had been destroyed in 1621, would be rebuilt by the King. Anticipating that he might be asked how he came by, the gift of prophecy, he adds:

For we be brethren of the rosie cross. We have the mason word and second sight, Things for to come we can foretell aright.

The absolute obscurity which rests upon the doings of the Rosie Cross to which Adamson refers, makes it impossible to interpret the tombstone in terms applicable to that ancient fraternity. In view, however, of the fact that, as I have stated, people believe the Craft of these days to have borrowed considerably from the older association, let us look at the design from the standpoint of Freemasonry. No harm will be done. The point is at least an interesting speculation and, if

later research should conclusively prove a connection between the modern craft and the mediaeval brotherhood, the Service tombstone may be found to have furnished evidence towards that end.

Dr Christison tells us that the enclosing lines are formed by a representation of a serpent with its tail in its mouth. This is a familiar device in symbolic masonry which, according to Dr Oliver, is "an emblem of the fall and subsequent redemption of man."

The circle intersected by a tree is divided into two panels. If it be assumed that the whole presents the legend of the death of Hiram, then the panel on the left might very reasonably be regarded as depicting the attack of the first Fellowcraft who roughly seizes the master architect as he is about to leave the place of prayer. The scroll which issues from the mouth of the person at the altar is, unfortunately, wholly void of any inscription that may have been upon it. The figure on the right side is described by Dr Christison as that of a person kneeling. With equal plausibility, it might be regarded as that of a person falling-- say, the Master Architect after the third and fatal attack. All that is left of the inscription on the scroll, which is much defaced, is ". . . Lord, my . . ." a broken sentence which Freemasons will have no difficulty in amplifying into the traditional ejaculation with which they are so familiar.

Another rendering might suggest that these panels present the opening and closing scenes in Scottish Craft Masonry. Such a point of view would urge that the panel on the left depicts the initiate being taught how to advance to the altar.

Dr. Christison says that the headpiece of the person with his hand round the other's waist may be a halo. An imaginative Freemason adopting that view, would suggest that the halo is a symbol of "light" not wholly unnecessary to or inappropriate in a brother who is teaching a fellow-mortal to advance out of "darkness" into that "light" which he himself has received. If with some such rendering, the panel on the left be regarded as showing the entrance of the apprentice into the Craft, it would involve no great stretch of imagination to suggest that the right hand panel depicts his exit – the closing scene of the grim drama which is the culmination of the Third Degree.



**Service Memorial,  
Stirling Churchyard  
(East Side)**



**Service Memorial,  
Stirling Churchyard  
(West Side)**

**Dundee: T.M. Sparks  
1922**