

THE GRAND LODGE OF SCOTLAND AND MOTHER KILWINNING

A STUDY FOR THE ENQUIRING FREEMASON

Many theories have been propounded concerning the origin of Freemasons and Masonic lodges. Some are speculations in the realm of fantasy; others are scholarly theses, carefully constructed from such meagre materials as is at our disposal. Not a little of the evidence is of a debatable character and capable of more than one interpretation.

A contemporary French Monastic, Ralph Glaber wrote that ‘on the threshold of the thousandth year, some two or three years after it, it befell almost throughout the world but especially in Italy and Gaul, that the fabrics of churches were rebuilt although many of these were still seemly and needed so much care; but every nation of Christendom rivalled with the other, which should worship in the seemliest buildings. So it was as thought the very world had shaken herself and cast off her old age, and was clothing herself everywhere in a white garment of churches. Then indeed the faithful rebuilt and bettered almost all the cathedral churches and other monasteries dedicated to divers saints, and smaller parish churches.

This great activity in ecclesiastical building of the Gothic style soon spread across the Channel, and both England and Scotland became infected. From these Cathedral Builders a system may have emanated and may have been the dawn of Freemasonry.

During the Wars of Scottish Independence or for twenty-four years a fierce and unrelenting struggle continued between the two countries with every increasing bitterness. Scotland was forced into the arms of France, and all association with England, cultural, economic and social, was utterly severed. Amongst those affected were, of course, the ‘Cathedral Builders’ and we find that ‘accordingly from the commencement of the fourteenth century the Scottish Masons and Architects were working independently and almost without cognisance of what was going on in the Southern Kingdom! But ‘on both sides of the Border ... they brought forward some features of their common origin which continued into the days of Freemasonry as we now

know it.' And herein lies a wonder, for 'it is a most remarkable circumstance that although the history of Scotland and England is so different (in respect of the conditions out of which the Lodges developed) yet in essentials their Masonry remained to all appearance the same.'

Although the oldest known Masonic Minutes in the world are to be found amongst Scottish records, it was not until nineteen years after England and about twelve years after Ireland had set up Grand Lodges that the Grand Lodge of Scotland was established.

The earliest mention that has been discovered of a suggestion to form a Grand Lodge in Scotland occurs in 1735 and as far is to be expected the suggestion was first mooted in Edinburgh.

Before the foundation of the Grand Lodge of Scotland in 1736, 100 Lodges were in actual being of which no less than 33 were represented at the Grand Election in 1736.

Gould writes that if any surprise is permissible at the Establishment of that body in 1736 it can only legitimately arise from the circumstances that the Masons in Edinburgh allowed the Brethren in York, Munster and Dublin to precede them following the example set in London in 1717. If any one influence more than another conduce to the eventual erection of a governing Masonic Body for Scotland, it will be found, I think, in the fact that within the comparatively short space of thirteen years, six prominent noblemen, all of whom were connected with the northern Kingdom, had filled the chair of the Grand Lodge of England. One of these, the Earl of Crawford, would probably have been elected the first Grand Master of Scotland but declined the honour and was sensible that nothing could be a greater loss to the first Grand Lodge, than the absence of the Grand Master. The Earl of Home, Master of the Lodge of Kilwinning at the Scots Arms, Edinburgh, appears after this, to have stepped into the place of Lord Crawford as the candidate whose election would have been most acceptable to the Lodges. However William St. Clair of Roslin, was subsequently chosen the 1st Grand Master of Scotland.

It is interesting to note that the first Grand Master was initiated at Canongate Kilwinning on 18th May 1736 or nearly 7 months after he was chosen the first Grand Master.

That Mother Kilwinning had exercised the power of granting Charters before 1736 is not in doubt. Lodge Canongate Kilwinning was chartered by Mother Kilwinning in 1677 and St. John's Lodge at Inverness within a few years thereafter at the least. The Lodge at Duns, in Berwickshire, also appears to have been issued with a Kilwinning Charter before 1736.

Between 1743 and 1807, when she rejoined Grand Lodge, Mother Kilwinning continued to function as a Sovereign Grand Lodge completely ignoring and being ignored by, the Grand Lodge of Scotland. During this period in her history she issued approximately seventy Charters, both within Scotland and overseas.

Mention has been made above that Mother Kilwinning issued Charters outwith as well as within Scotland. One of these Charters was issued on 8th October 1779 to the High Knight Templer of Ireland Kilwinning Lodge, meeting in Dublin. The existence of this Charter has been much to support the completely erroneous idea that Lodge Kilwinning worked Masonic degrees other than the three degrees of St. John's Masonry. Early in the eighteenth century there arose the idea that in Scotland in general, and in Lodge Mother Kilwinning in particular, there existed a body of "High Degree Masons."

The one hundred Lodges in existence before the foundation of the Grand Lodge of Scotland were operating under the founder of Mother Kilwinning. The origin of Mother Kilwinning is uncertain, although it most probably began with the building of the Monastery at Kilwinning. Whatever its beginnings, by 1598 it had become one of three Lodges mentioned in the Schaw Statutes of that year. These Statutes, and a further set issued in 1599, were promulgated by William Schaw, Master of the King's Masons and were compiled for the better administration of operative building in Scotland. The order of seniority assigned in these Statutes to the three Lodges at Edinburgh, Kilwinning and Stirling has aroused considerable controversy. Had the existence of these Statutes been known in 1736 it is just possible that Mother Kilwinning would not have withdrawn in 1743 from the Grand Lodge of Scotland at whose birth she was represented. It was not until some years after in 1736 that the Grand Lodge of Scotland assigned any seniority to the Lodges on the roll. Such seniority was based upon records which could be produced as evidence of antiquity. Here Mother Kilwinning was at a disadvantage, for her written minutes did not commence until 1641 and the existence of the Schaw Statutes with their evidence of her existence in 1598

were unknown. As a consequence, the Lodge was placed second on the roll of Grand Lodge – a position which the Lodge resented and declined to accept. The Lodge based its claim for precedence upon the fact that earlier records than 1641 had been consumed by a fire which had destroyed the family seat of the Earls of Eglinton wherein they were stored.

Finding Grand Lodge unpersuaded as to her claim to the prior position on the roll, Mother Kilwinning withdrew her allegiance and resumed her independence and powers of granting Charters. It is open to doubt whether in joining Grand Lodge, she had ever surrendered her chartering powers, though one might reasonably assume that by the fact of adhering to Grand Lodge, she had done so.

The origin of this idea is not known, but it persisted until almost the close of the nineteenth century – and indeed the theory may still be cherished in some quarters. The degrees attributed to Mother Kilwinning were countless, but the most diligent search in her archives by Murray Lyon failed to reveal any reference to degrees other than those which are worked in Craft Lodge the world over. Not even an early record of the Mark Degree has been found. That such records may have existed and been destroyed about 1807 is not impossible, but, if this is so, the destruction has been so complete that not a vestige remains.

From 1743 onwards Mother Kilwinning and the Grand Lodge of Scotland seem to have pursued parallel, but independent, paths in fraternal accord. Both issued Charters and the difficulties of travel would doubtless prevent much inter-visitation between subordinate Lodges of the different allegiance. Such a state of affairs could not be expected to continue indefinitely. The Grand Lodge of Scotland grew rapidly. Mother Kilwinning's jurisdiction grew but slowly. Toward the end of the eighteenth century Grand Lodge prohibited her members from visiting Kilwinning Lodges and forbade her Lodges from receiving Kilwinning Masons as visitors. Mother Kilwinning began to receive letters from her Daughter Lodges protesting at this state of affairs, but there was nothing she could do in the matter beyond advising a dignified silence and instructing her Lodges to "keep themselves to themselves." Not a few of the Kilwinning Lodges came under Grand Lodge from time to time and it soon became clear the Mother Kilwinning's days as an independent Sovereign Grand Lodge were numbered. By 1807 only six of her Lodges, all within Scotland, remained outwith Grand Lodge.

The first move in re-uniting Mother Kilwinning to Grand Lodge came from the latter body who wrote that “the cause of the separation seemed to be forgotten”, and suggested that Mother Kilwinning and her Daughter Lodges might come in to Grand Lodge on terms to be agreed.

With the return of Mother Kilwinning to Grand Lodge it was necessary to re-arrange the Roll of Lodges and Mother Kilwinning was placed at the head, her subordinate Lodges occupying positions in accordance with the dates of their Kilwinning Charters. To this arrangement the Lodge of Edinburgh (St. Mary’s Chapel) raised objection, but the matters were allowed to rest in the interests of fraternal peace. The terms of the agreement between Mother Kilwinning and Grand Lodge were, in the early years after the re-union, the subject of minor contentions between the two parties. The particular cause which seemed to engender most dispute was that which provided for the Master of Mother Kilwinning being ex-officio Provincial Grand Master of Ayrshire.

It maybe added that although the name ‘Kilwinning’ appears in the title of a large number of Scottish Lodges, it most generally indicates an affection for an old Lodge rather than any actual connection with it.

I mentioned earlier that Scotland was forced into the arms of France after the Wars of Independence, so it is perhaps very natural that Scottish Masons should evince a particular interest in Freemasonry in France and in French Freemasonry. The “Auld Alliance” bound Scotland and France together for over three hundred years and many words of French origin are used in our colloquial speech. The fact that one of the largest Masonic rites with the title “Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite” – has nothing to do with Scotland, but is of French origin, adds piquancy to the position.

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This article was sourced, scanned, prepared and type-set for this booklet by Bro. J. Stewart Donaldson, Secretary of Hawick Lodge No.111 for the education of the enquiring Freemason. Where any typo errors occur, I apologise, however, I have kept the original spelling and grammar. This article has been adapted from the original.

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