

THE ADVENT OF THE CRYPTIC DEGREES

By Comp. E.J. Frew

Over the years there have been countless Masonic Degrees created and a very large number of these were invented in France to meet a demand for more light on the Old Testament story. Many of these degrees usually became known as "So-and-so's Rite" and lasted no longer than the lifetime of the author, who, being seized by a particular legend in current literature, had concocted a ritual for his personal profit.

Others, of less ephemeral appeal, were carried to the United States in the wake of the Rite of Perfection and eventually found their way to Great Britain. Some of these have been absorbed in existing sovereign obediences, e.g. 13 in the A. & A. Rite, two in the Allied Masonic Degrees and four in the Cryptic Rite. In case any Cryptic Mason is getting ready to contradict this number, at this time in history the four degrees were, Most Excellent Master, Royal Master, Select Master and Super Excellent Master.

The origin of the degrees is traced back to the middle of the 18th century. W.J. Hughan, in a note written before 1891 says, "Cryptic Freemasonry has been worked in England, more or less regularly from about 1760, in one form or another, as the degrees are in part, nearly allied to some of the Ancient and Accepted Rite. For those not so advanced in Masonic knowledge this rite is known as 'The Rose'. Of later years these degrees seem almost to have been lost sight of, and the knowledge of their working nearly, if not wholly, died out save in Scotland under the wing of the 'Early Grand Encampment'."

He also has written in the Leicester Lodge of Research "The degrees of Royal and Select Masters are said to have been introduced into the United States of America about 1761, and soon became popular in that country. The combination was known as the Cryptic Rite, in whole or in part under the wing of the Ancient and Accepted Rite. Ultimately the independent General Grand Council of U.S.A. was formed in 1880, consolidating all the separate organisations in the various States.

In America

In The York Rite of Freemasonry published in the United States is a chapter on The Council of Royal and Select Masters which covers the degrees and a history of their development. Although it is from the United States that we have acquired Cryptic Masonry as we now know it, it came to America from France via the West Indies. From this publication I will surmise its evolution.

On August 27, 1761, one Stephen Morin, a French mason, was created Inspector General for the New World by the Grand Consistory of Princes of the Royal Secret in Paris. He sailed to the West Indies in 1762 and in the ensuing years conferred the degrees of the Rite of Perfection on a number of candidates. Those initiates were formed into a Consistory of Princes of the Royal Secret, and a record exists of a meeting in Kingston, Jamaica, in January 1769 with Morin present.

During that period Morin appointed Henry A. Francken a Deputy Grand Inspector General and empowered him to propagate the Rite. At that time the Rite of Perfection consisted of 25 degrees, in addition to a number of "side degrees" aggregating a total of 53. Among those detached degrees

were 'Select Master of Twenty Seven' (afterward termed Select Master) and 'Royal Master'. These degrees had no connection at that time.

Although there is not a complete list of Inspectors-General in existence, Francken however, seems to have appointed Moses Michael Hayes of Boston as Deputy Inspector-General for North America. In course of their various travels, Francken opened a Lodge of Perfection at Albany, in the state of New York in 1767 and Hayes organised a Council of Princes of Jerusalem at Charleston in the state of South Carolina in 1788. Additionally, Hayes appointed Joseph M. Myers, Inspector-General for Maryland and a Lodge of Perfection was organised at Baltimore.

The Lodges of Perfection were primarily concerned in promulgating the 25 degrees of the Rite of Perfection. The "side" or detached degrees were conferred infrequently by individuals having knowledge of them, usually with some authority.

Abraham Jacobs had received the Rite of Perfection in Charleston, S. C. and the additional degrees of the Rite of Jamaica prior to 1790. A certificate exists testifying to this fact and mentions "Select Mason of Twenty Seven". Jacobs conferred the degree on a number of candidates in New York City in 1804, among whom was Thomas Lownds. In 1807 a Joseph Cerneau attempted to open a Consistory of the 32' without regular authority. During the resultant clamour, Thomas Lownds and others extracted the degree of Royal Master from the side degrees and formed "Columbian Grand Council of Royal Master Masons" on September 2, 1810. As a result of this Thomas Lownds has been acknowledged the founder of the first Cryptic Council in the world. The Columbian Council later assimilated a Council of Select Masters on December 8, 1821 and declared themselves "The Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters for the State of New York" and issued warrants for new councils until 1827.

Philip P. Eckel of Baltimore, Maryland, had received the degree of Select Master in the local Lodge of Perfection. In 1816 he conferred this degree upon Jeremy L. Cross, a Masonic Lecturer who was visiting Baltimore. Cross proceeded to travel throughout the States conferring the degree of Select Master upon Royal Arch Masons and issuing warrants, without authority, for Councils of Select Masters. Later, when confronted with a request to produce his authority, Cross produced a document, purported to have come from Eckel, dated May 27, 1817. There is reason to believe that this document was either forged or backdated. In 1817 Cross warranted 33 Councils of Select Masters in 9 States.

In 1818, Jeremy Cross received the Royal Masters degree from Thomas Lownds in New York and within one year had put the degrees together and thereafter warranted "Councils of Royal and Select Masters." Jeremy Cross is acknowledged as the founder of Cryptic Masonry in the world.

From 1818 Councils of Royal and Select Masters began organising throughout the United States, but not without incident. The Supreme Council of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite had been formed from the Lodges of Perfection in South Carolina in 1801 and considered these degrees to be "side degrees" of that Rite. The Morgan incident in 1828 caused some Masonic organisations to go underground in the northern states, while the Civil War had a like effect on the Southern States. In 1858 the General Grand Chapter voted to abandon rights and control of these degrees. The Supreme Council, 33rd degree, Southern Jurisdiction, by edict, relinquished any claim to the "Cryptic degrees" in 1870.

In England

The information I have at hand gives two different versions of the arrival of the Cryptic Rite in England.

The Cryptic Rite by Comp. A. L. Blank, whose information appears to come from the writings of W.J. Hughan, states:

The Authority, now active in England, was derived from the State of New York, and was the outcome of a movement, originated in the Mark Grand Lodge of England, to enable Mark Master Masons to take the Most Excellent Master, Royal, Select and Super Excellent Master's degrees as in America.

The first of these Councils was authorised by M. Em. Comp. Rees George Williams, Grand High Priest, in 1871; and the others were chartered in connection with four Councils to meet in London in the same year, by the Most Puissant James McCredie, Grand Master of the Royal, Select and Super Excellent Masters, uniting to form the Grand Council of England.

From The Cryptic Rite by Col. R.L.L. Wilkinson. O.B.E. the following history is given.

In 1870 the question arose of introducing the Cryptic Rite into England although isolated workings of the degrees had been known in the North of England. Through American masons living in England and other English masons taking these degrees on visits to America, the knowledge of these degrees became known to many influential masons in England. Among these were Shadwell Clerke, Craft Grand Secretary; C.F. Matier, Mark Assistant Grand Secretary and R. Wentworth Little a prominent mason of those days.

Two points to be considered were that an essential preliminary to the Cryptic Rite as worked in America was that the degree of Most Excellent Master was controlled by the State Grand Royal Arch Chapters, and that the Cryptic Rite was controlled by the State Grand Councils. Consequently, petitions signed by the Rev. G.R. Portal, then Grand Mark Master and others were submitted to the Grand High Priest of the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of New York and the Grand Master of the Royal and Select Masters respectively.

In due course, R. Ill. Comp. Jackson H. Chase, a Grand Officer of both sovereign bodies, who is believed to have been in business in England, was deputed to confer the degrees and form Councils.

On the 4th of July, 1871, this distinguished brother, acting upon the appropriate dispensations, opened an emergent lodge of Most Excellent Masters and admitted Comp. Portal with ten others. Subsequently, assisted by a team of American Cryptic Masons, he conferred the degrees of Royal Master, Select Master and Super Excellent Master upon the same candidates.

Following this a Grand Masters Council was formed and on the 4th of August this Council met and conferred the four degrees on Bro. F. Binckes and six others.

Companion Chase then proceeded to constitute three more Councils namely, Constantine No. 2, Macdonald No. 3 and Mark No. 4. It was then resolved to form these four Councils into a Sovereign body under the title of Grand Council of Royal, Select and Super Excellent Masters of England and Wales and the Colonies and Dependencies of the British Crown with Comp. Portal as Most Puissant Grand Master. He, having been duly obligated, proclaimed and saluted, appointed Comp. Binckes as Grand Recorder.

Right Puissant Companion Jackson H. Chase then proclaimed the Most Puissant Grand Council of England and Wales etc. duly organised and constituted.

However, in 1873 the Grand Master of the Cryptic Grand Council of New York wrote pointing out that Comp. Chase had exceeded his authority. He had only been authorised to make cryptic masons and was not empowered to erect a Sovereign Grand Council. In other words Comp. Chase had only formed four Councils subordinate to the Grand Council of New York.

To regularise the situation the Grand Council of New York issued a dispensation to Comp. Binckes to constitute four Councils to be numbered 57, 58, 59 and 60 on the Register of the Grand Council of New York.

On the 2nd June, 1873, this so distant Council met and after the relevant correspondence had been read, Comp. Portal surrendered the chair to Comp. Binckes who then proceeded to constitute and present the Warrants to the four Councils.

On July 29th 1873 the Principal Officers of these four Councils met with Comp. Binckes presiding. In attendance was Ill. Comp. Albert G. Goodall, representing the Grand Council of New York.

The meeting being opened it was resolved that the Councils, 57, 58, 59 and 60 on the Register of the Grand Council of New York should organise themselves as a Sovereign Grand Council for the governance of the degrees of M.E.M.; R.M.; S.M. and S.E.M. This being done Comp. Portal was elected and proclaimed as Most Puissant Grand Master.

In Scotland

The first authentic record of the introduction of the Cryptic Rite Series into Scotland is said to be found in the Proceedings of Grand Council and Select Masters of Illinois in the year of 1878. Therein it is stated that the Grand Master reported as follows: - "On the 24th October, 1877, I appointed Right Illustrious Companion Robert Smith Brown, a Deputy Grand Master of Scotland, endowing him with ample powers as my proxy, to introduce the Council Degrees in Scotland there being no Councils in that country."

Robert Smith Brown was at that time, Grand Scribe E to the Supreme Grand Chapter and he also discharged the duties of Grand Recorder to the Imperial Grand Conclave of the Order of Constantine. He was a prominent mason in Edinburgh until his death in 1910. The history of Brown's efforts to establish the Cryptic degrees is obscure chiefly because he met with little success. He was able to establish three Councils in Scotland, Edinburgh No. 1 in 1878; Aberdeen No. 2 in 1880 and Glasgow No. 3 in 1880.

A Grand Council for Scotland was erected in 1880 and the Charter of Confirmation was issued to the Council at Edinburgh. The Minute Books of Grand Council are lost as also is the first minute book of the Edinburgh Council. However, the Petition Book of the Edinburgh Council is still in existence and from it is learnt that meetings were held once a year until 1885. Thereafter there is a break of some 10 years until 1895 when meetings were resumed at irregular intervals, the last meeting being held in 1909.

On the 15th October, 1915, the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Scotland took the Cryptic Rite under its jurisdiction and provided that (except under special circumstances) every Cryptic Council should be attached to a Royal Arch Chapter. The T.I.M. and D.M. of the Edinburgh Cryptic

Council were still alive and they, along with a number of surviving members and members of the Edinburgh Royal Arch Chapter, petitioned Supreme Grand Chapter for a Cryptic Chapter to be held under the aegis of the Edinburgh Royal Arch Chapter No.1. This petition was granted and the Edinburgh Cryptic Council as an independent body, merged with the Royal Arch Chapter of the same name. Within a few years Supreme Grand Chapter had granted a number of charters for these degrees and approximately a quarter of all Scottish Royal Arch Chapters have Cryptic Councils attached to them.

In New Zealand

At the inaugural meeting of Grand Chapter held in the Masonic Institute, Auckland, on Wednesday 27th April, 1892, the chairman, M.E. Comp. E.T. Gillon, after stating the purpose of the meeting said that as it was agreed that the new body should be governed by the laws and regulations of the Supreme Grand Chapter of Scotland, he would ask the meeting to amend the resolution adopted by the second preliminary meeting in Christchurch, on October 14th, 1891, by including all those degrees recognised and practiced in Scotch Royal Arch Masonry. The second resolution adopted at Christchurch concluded with the words "to embrace the degrees of Mark, Excellent and Royal Arch."

The first of the nine resolutions adopted at Auckland was "That all the degrees as recognised and practiced in Scotch Royal Arch Masonry be included in the constitution of the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of New Zealand. A note in parenthesis says: "These degrees include the Mark, Excellent, Royal Arch, Ark Mariner and Red Cross Knights."

As the Grand Chapter of Scotland had not assumed control of the Cryptic degrees at this time, 1892, they were not considered. It is quite feasible to assume that their action in 1915 would not have become known to many of New Zealand Grand Chapter, although the degrees were occasionally worked by Councils attached to Scottish chapters.

It was to Arch Burns that the adoption of the Cryptic Degrees in 1936 is attributable. In the course of his extensive Masonic readings he had come to know of the Scottish action in 1915. He started talking of this amongst his companions. In 1932 and 1933 at meetings of Principals and Past Principals of Auckland chapters held to discuss proposals to inaugurate a peripatetic system of government of Grand Chapter and other suggested alterations to the constitution, he promulgated the idea and met with no opposition.

When the peripatetic system of government was adopted in 1933 and put into effect in 1934, the first meeting of Supreme Committee to meet outside of Wellington was held in Auckland. As a result of discussions, that Supreme Committee, in its report to Grand Convocation in Wellington on 20th and 21st March, 1935, said "Following on the decisions arrived at, Supreme Committee submitted for consideration by members of Grand Chapter a series of motions advocating: - the advisability of adding certain Cryptic degrees to those at present authorised by Grand Chapter. After all the other points of the Supreme Committee report had been dealt with, the Chairman of Supreme Committee, R.E. Comp. A.C. Hallet moved "That in the opinion of this Grand Chapter it is advisable to add certain Cryptic degrees to those at present authorised." There was strong opposition to this motion, including the whole of the Wellington District and when the motion was put it was lost by 138 to 137.

At the Annual Convocation held in Dunedin, on March 10th, 1936, Comp. Hallet moved "That Grand Chapter authorises the working by chapters under its control, the degrees of Royal Master, Select Master, Super Excellent Master and the chair degree of Thrice Illustrious Master." He added that the chapters in Northland, Auckland and Hauraki were in complete support. It again met resistance from some top ranking Grand Chapter officers, but when the motion was put it was carried by 146 to 129 another close call.

The degrees were at first worked within the chapters, the first being Ara No. 53. On the afternoon of August 6th, 1936, it worked the degrees on ten companions, by three companions who had taken the degree in Scottish chapters. The chair degree of Thrice Illustrious Master was also worked on these ten companions and following this, Arch Burns was elected the first T. I. M. Further meetings were held August 18th and September 23rd when 27 and 34 companions were admitted respectively. The next chapter to follow suit was Celtic No. 42 in Dunedin.

On December 5th, 1936, 21 companions journeyed from Taranaki to take the degrees, although it was some time before they constituted a council in Taranaki.

At the convocation in Christchurch in 1938, Supreme Committee reported that on making application to other world Councils for recognition, objection had been made to our system of not granting separate charters for Cryptic Councils. A letter had also been received from the Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters of Ohio pointing out that two other Grand Councils who had established Councils in a similar manner were not recognised. Consequently, alterations were made to the Constitution and separate charters were issued to Ara No.53, Celtic No.42, Rangitoto No.52, St Augustine No.1, Taku-Hoa No.32 and Southern Cross No.3.

When the Grand Convocation was held in Auckland in 1940, the Ara Council held a special meeting to confer the degrees on any companion from districts in which there was no Council operating. 54 companions availed themselves of this opportunity and became founders of councils in their respective districts.

As there was no official ritual, Arch Burns compiled one based on the Scottish working with some additions from the English. After some discussion with Supreme Committee, and some minor alterations, the Ara Council was authorised to arrange its printing. Ara used this ritual, Dunedin the Scottish and Wellington the English. When the Ritual Revision Committee was sitting in 1953, and dealing with the Cryptic Ritual, it adopted that used by Wellington with several additions from the Ara version.

There are 24 Cryptic Councils working under the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of New Zealand, and others working under the Supreme Grand Chapter of Scotland.

If this paper has aroused the interest of non cryptic masons I ask them to procure a copy of our Book of Proceedings and in it there will be found a list of Cryptic councils and the place of their domicile. You will never regret this action if you do it.