THE ORIGINS OF FREEMASONRY

Scotland's century, 1590–1710

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6 Rituals of identification and initiation

The Mason Word

Nearly all that is known of the secrets and rituals of the Scottish masons in the seventeenth century is derived from the catechisms which survive from the end of that century and the beginning of the next. At the centre of the esoteric activities described in the catechisms lay the Mason Word, and it was through talk of it that outsiders first learned that the masons had secrets. Scattered references to the Word occur from the 1630s onwards, and through them something can be discerned of how outsiders perceived the masons and their rumoured secrets.[1] Surveying these references thus takes on something of the character of a progressive revelation of what was known of the esoteric side of the craft. Surprisingly, this handful of references in non-masonic sources to the Mason Word is not accompanied by similar references to the masonic lodges, suggesting that convention among the masons dictated that lodges should not be mentioned to outsiders, but that it was permissible (or gradually became permissible) to intrigue the uninitiated by referring to the existence of the Word – though of course without revealing its secrets.

The earliest of all the references to the Word is also one of the hardest to interpret. Henry Adamson, reader (a sort of assistant to the parish minister) and master of the song school of Perth composed a long and stupendously tedious poem, which was published in Edinburgh in 1638 under the title *The muses threnodie, or, mirthfull mournings on the death of Master Gall.* Adamson had died the year before publication, and had evidently written the poem some years prior to his death. It was certainly composed after 1625, as it

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[1] Nearly all these references are listed in Carr, 'Mason Word'.
[2] SRO, GD.1/552/2, Guildry court book of Perth, 1601–69, f. 60v.

Thus *Gall* assured me it would be so,
And my good *Genius* truely doth it know:
For what we do presage is not in grosse,
For we be brethren of the *Rosie Crosse*;
We have the *Mason Word* and second sight,
Things for to come we can foretell aright.[3]

What is the significance of the grouping together of the three terms brethren of the Rosy Cross, the Mason Word, and second sight? Adamson was addicted to obscure words and arcane references to bewilder and impress the unfortunate reader, but the conjunction of the three terms is not just random. They all involved the ability to see the invisible in some sense. The Rosicrucian brethren were held to be invisible, either meaning that though they existed they could not be identified, or that they were literally invisible. Second sight was the ability literally to 'see' the future, through visual images of future events. It was regarded as specifically Scottish, and Highland rather than Lowland, and only one reference to it is known before Adamson's: in 1616 a Caithness woman accused in Orkney of witchcraft confessed that she had been taught a spell to know and see anything she desired while on a visit to Lochaber as a girl. One example of her power was foretelling that some men were to be executed by 'seeing' them with halters round their necks. In this case second sight was equated with witchcraft, and later references to it reveal prolonged dispute as to whether it was a natural or supernatural phenomenon. At least some of those who took an interest in it linked it with Hermeticism.[4] Thus Adamson's references to the second sight and the Rosicrucian brethren conjure up the world of the occult quest for hidden knowledge and the concept of invisibility. That Adamson introduced the Mason Word in such company suggests that he knew at least some of the properties of the Word, for in a sense it enabled masons to 'see' the invisible by identifying men who were fellow masons by means that others could not understand.

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Adamson's mention of the Mason Word does not necessarily imply that he expected his readers to know what it meant, given his love of trying to impress by being obscure. But the next reference indicates that it was assumed that all would know of the Mason Word. Late in 1637 open resistance in Scotland to the policies of Charles I was plunging the country into confusion. The treasurer, John Stewart, earl of Traquair, maintained contacts with the opposition, and claimed that he did this to try to bring about a settlement in

[3] The whole poem was reprinted in T. H. Marshall, *History of Perth* (Perth, 1849), 499–560, with this passage on p. 520.

[4] 'Acts and statutes of the lawting, sheriff, and justice courts, within Orkney and Zetland', *Miscellany of the Maitland Club*, ii, pt 1 (Edinburgh, 1840), 188–9; J. Aubrey, *Three prose works*, ed. J. Buchanan-Brown (Fontwell, 1972), 50, 54, 94–6, 113–15, 117–25, 284–5; S. Pepys, *Private correspondence*, ed. J. R. Tanner (2 vols., London, 1926), ii, 7–8, 25, 29–30, 37, 223–4.