

A Short History of the Grand Lodge of Ireland

by

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When discussing Freemasonry's origins, attention is normally focused on two locations: England and Scotland. England, for its part, possesses some tantalizing clues about the fraternity's ancient past. England can also claim the world's first Masonic "grand lodge", the "Grand Lodge of England", which was founded in London in 1717. Scotland, on the other hand, has produced some of Freemasonry's most important historical records. It is from Scottish documents, dating to the late 17th Century, that the transition from "operative" to "speculative" Freemasonry is most clearly seen. Moreover, Scotland has its well-publicized Rosslyn Chapel. But Ireland, too, has had its part to play in this story; one no less important, but curiously omitted, from most Masonic histories.

Ireland is known for its medieval castles, monasteries, and cathedrals. Not surprisingly, its Masonic ties are early and well-documented. One of Irish Freemasonry's prized relics, the "Ball's Bridge Square", dates to 1507. Discovered in Limerick in 1830, it bears the Masonic inscription: "I will strive to live with Love & Care Upon ye Level By ye Square." In 1629, Bishop Bedell, who was Bishop of Kilmore and Provost of Trinity College, Dublin, recorded in his diary: "The petition of the Freemasons and Bricklayers of Dublin answered." By 1688, a lodge of speculative Masons was meeting at Trinity College, Dublin. A "Tripos" or speech, dating to that same year, includes the notation: "From Sir Warren, for being Freemasonized in the new way, five shillings." A catechism, known as the Trinity Manuscript, bears the endorsement: "Free Masonry February 1711". It is the earliest known document to recognize three classes of Mason, each with its own secrets.

The Grand Lodge of Ireland is the world's second oldest Masonic grand lodge. Its first known meeting occurred on June 26, 1725. According to the Dublin Weekly Journal, more than one hundred "gentlemen" met at "the Yellow Lion in Warbrough Street" and later went to "King's Arms". The procession included "the Masters and Wardens of the Six Lodges of Gentlemen Freemasons, who are under the jurisdiction of the Grand Master and the Private Brothers all in coaches", it being a rainy day. A new Grand Master, Rt. Hon. the Earl of Ross was then elected. The election of a "new" Grand Master, of course, implies that the Grand Lodge of Ireland was in existence *before* 1725. Just how long before, however, is not known.

During the 18th Century, Ireland had hundreds of Masonic lodges throughout the countryside. While the Grand Lodge met in prominent civic and guild hall buildings in Dublin, such as the Tailor's Hall in Back Lane, the Cutler's Hall in Capel Street, and the Assembly Rooms on South William Street, most lodges met in inns, taverns, and coffee houses. Military regiments at this time carried Irish Freemasonry around the world, establishing lodges and creating fraternal ties that last to this day. A few examples are illustrative. Lodge No. 218, attached to the 48th Foot, brought Freemasonry to Cuba in 1763. Irish Masonic lodges were chartered in Jamaica in 1767. In 1769, Br. Jeremiah French, a Captain in the 29th Foot and member of Lodge No. 322, became the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts' first Senior Grand Warden. In 1775, Lodge No. 441, attached to the 38th Foot in Boston, initiated Prince Hall and fourteen African-Americans into Freemasonry. It was through an Irish Masonic lodge, therefore, that "Prince Hall" Masonry came into being. In 1781, Br. Brownrigg, a member of Lodge No. 441, became the Grand Lodge of New York's first Senior Grand Warden. In 1783, an Irish Masonic lodge was established in Barbados. Irish Freemasonry's influence, clearly, was far reaching. It even altered the course of English Freemasonry and helped introduce a new Masonic body, the "Royal Arch", to the world.

English Freemasonry, during the early 18th Century, was suffering from neglect. In 1751, it was divided into two Grand Lodges: the Antients Grand Lodge (properly titled the "Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of England according to the Old Institutions") and the premier Grand Lodge of England (derogatorily referred to as the "Moderns"). For many years, Masonic scholars accused the "Antients" of being a splinter group. This was not the case. The Antients Grand Lodge was formed by London-area Irish Freemasons who were denied admittance to local English lodges. The Antients, though less "aristocratic", proved better organized and very popular. It also aggressively chartered its own lodges throughout the British Empire. The Antients undeniable success resulted in its merger with the Grand Lodge of England in 1813. Much of the Antients' Irish-based ritual went on to replace that of the "Moderns" in the new United Grand Lodge of England. It should also be noted that the term "Ancient", when used today in "Ancient, Free, and Accepted Masons", is a nod to the Antient (Ancient) Grand Lodge and, consequently, Freemasonry's

underlying Irish heritage.

The Royal Arch's origin, like "Craft" Freemasonry, remains a mystery. It is believed to have begun sometime around 1730, but whether in Ireland, England, or even France is debated. Nevertheless, the Royal Arch's earliest, undisputed appearance is in Ireland and it was Irish Freemasons, and the Antients Grand Lodge in England, who championed it. According to Lodge No. 21's records, the "Royal Arch" was carried in a procession by "two excellent Masons" through Youghal, Ireland, on December 27, 1743. Similarly, in Fifield Dassigny's "A serious and impartial enquiry into the cause of the present decay of Free-masonry in the Kingdom of Ireland," published in Dublin in 1744, it is recorded that:

...a certain propagator of a false system some few years ago in this city [Dublin] who imposed upon several very worthy men under a pretense of being Master of the Royal Arch, which he asserted he had brought with him from the city of York; and that the beauties of the Craft did principally consist in the knowledge of this valuable piece of Masonry. However he carried on this scheme for several months and many of the learned and wise were his followers, till at length his fallacious art was discovered by a Brother of probity and wisdom, who had some small space before attained that excellent part of Masonry in London and plainly proved that his doctrine was false.

The Royal Arch proved very popular. In 1749, the Grand Lodge of Ireland issued warrants to Lodges 190 and 198 to establish "Royal Arch Lodges". To this day, Royal Arch chapters (as these lodges were later renamed) are attached to, though worked separately from, Irish Craft lodges. In England, the Royal Arch was worked as a fourth "degree" in Antients lodges ("Modern" lodges worked only three Masonic degrees) and enthusiastically exported by the Antients Grand Lodge to India and the Americas (the first known minutes recording its conferral are from a "Craft" lodge in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and date to 1753).

By the early 19th Century, Irish Freemasonry spanned the globe. Back in Ireland, however, it was about to face two serious challenges. The "Famine" struck Ireland in 1823. Not only did the population suffer starvation and emigration, there was also political unrest. Indeed, some Masonic lodges became focal points of nationalist sentiment. Consequently, Freemasonry, together with other "secret societies", was suspended in Ireland until 1825. The next assault came from the Roman Catholic Church. Rome's criticism of Freemasonry was not new. That had begun in 1738 with Pope Clement XII's "In Eminenti". Subsequent Popes Benedict XIV and Pius VII issued their own condemnations in 1751 and 1821. But "Quo graviora", issued by Pope Leo XII in 1826, was different. It was widely publicized in Ireland and many Catholic Freemasons, threatened with excommunication, were pressured to resign. Daniel O'Connell, an Irish patriot and ardent Catholic, was one of these.

Notwithstanding such difficulties, the Grand Lodge of Ireland persevered. To better administer its worldwide lodges, the Grand Lodge delegated some of its authority to subordinate, "provincial" grand lodges in 1868. In 1869, "Freemasons' Hall", located on Molesworth Street in Dublin, was completed. This was the first Grand Lodge space specifically built for Masonic meetings. It remains the seat of Irish Freemasonry to this day.

There are some 850 lodges presently operating under the Irish Constitution. The Grand Lodge of Ireland supervises all provincial grand lodges (Northern and Southern Ireland and overseas), the Metropolitan Dublin lodges, and all foreign and military lodges operating outside a provincial grand lodge. There are thirteen provincial grand lodges in Ireland and twelve overseas (Bermuda, Far East, Ghana, India, Jamaica and the Bahamas, Natal, New Zealand, Nigeria, South Africa (Northern), Southern Cape, Zambia, Zimbabwe). Unlike other Masonic jurisdictions, Irish Craft Masonry recognized four Masonic degrees: Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, Master Mason, and Installed Master. There are no ciphers or study-aids for learning Irish Freemasonry's rituals. It is still done, as it has always been done, "mouth to ear". Toward that end, the Grand Lodge of Ireland and its provincial grand lodges hold "Lodges of Instruction" to ensure that Irish Freemasonry's traditional working is maintained.

More information about Irish Freemasonry (including its four "higher" degrees, the Royal Arch, Council (Knights Masons), Order of the Temple, and Ancient & Accepted Rite for Ireland) can be found on the Grand Lodge of Ireland's official website. A "virtual tour" of the Grand Lodge building is also available.

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