

ARE THERE COWANS IN OUR MIDST?

Our Masonic teachings remind us to observe the approach of Cowans and Eavesdroppers; see that none pass or repass except such as are duly qualified and have permission of the Worshipful Master.

The definition of an Eavesdropper is widely known and accepted but how do we define a Cowan? What instructions do we give our Tylers to enable them to prevent a Cowan from gaining entry? Is it only the Tyler who must endeavour to observe the Cowan's approach? Could it be that a Cowan might enter through the door of the preparation room, a door we do not tyle?

Just who the Cowans were and are - if they exist - are questions which I have contemplated thoughtfully for some time. Perhaps many of us will agree that the idea of Cowans can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of those things which can hinder our own spiritual growth, the building of our own temple as well as those things which might be detrimental to the well being of a lodge.

While endeavouring to find answers on this subject I did not restrict my studies to Masonic writings but used available history texts and recalled visits to rural Britain, the land of the Cowans whose work convinced me that, at one time, the Cowan was as professional in his work as the stone mason was in his.

Should you visit rural Britain you will soon notice that in many places stone walls were, and are, used to divide fields or to indicate property lines. These walls are from three and a half to five feet in height and are built without mortar. Stones have been cut or broken along their natural fissure lines and each piece is placed in such a way as to interlock with its neighbour. Some of these stone walls have existed for centuries.

The building of stone walls is an art going back to long before the Roman conquest. It is the art of the Cowans. Most English farmers know how to build stone walls or at least know how to maintain them, but at one time these wall builders were recognized as skilled tradesmen though they practised this work only as a sideline to their regular work.

The Cowans also built cottages. Cottage walls were constructed in the same manner as the field walls by using interlocking stone without mortar. Five-foot walls would be surmounted by rough wooden rafters to hold sod or thatching. No doubt many of the villagers had at one time or another stood against the outside of a cottage at night with their heads up in the eaves of thatching and

there listened or perhaps even watched as to what went on inside the cottage: hence the term eavesdropping. For some reason the reputation or eavesdroppers stuck to the Cowans themselves though they probably didn't eavesdrop any more than anyone else.

These country stone workers, or Cowans, often had their own stone quarries and built-up reserves of stone pieces ready for the next project and at the same time claiming this practice as their right. Generally, the work was carried out as a service and in exchange for services performed, bartered for goods, crops, or livestock.

In the towns, however, there was a different kind of stone worker. Here were the stone masons; men skilled in the art of cutting stone into blocks and using mortar to secure the stones to each other. At first, they used limestone which was easier to cut and also the limestone dust provided the first cement for their mortar.

As time went on these stone masons learned to cut other stone and with the use of their mortar were able to build large buildings. The skills learned were kept secret and passed on only to their apprentices. They formed tight-knit guilds through which they were able to maintain firm control over the members of their craft.

Conflict did not seem to exist between the Cowans and the stone masons since they seldom came into contact with each other.

It was at this time that the Bubonic plague, commonly known as the Black Death, was spreading rapidly across Europe. Its cause and much less, methods of control were unknown to man. It was the church hierarchy who first observed that those people in the country seemed to have a better chance of avoiding the disease than the town and city dwellers.

It was for this reason that the church decided to build their new cathedrals and monasteries out in the country. This is why some of the old churches which are now surrounded by towns and cities have such names as St. Martin's in the Fields.

But all was not serene in the country. It was the year 1066 and the Battle of Hastings and the victor, William the Conqueror was causing much unrest amongst the English populace.

With bands of Saxons carrying out hit-and-run guerrilla warfare against the conquering Normans as well as fear of further attack from France, the Norman Barons ruled with an iron fist and fortified their castles against attacks. Here is where most of the stone masons had come, and under contract to the Normans, were held responsible for maintaining their fortifications.

The stone masons soon formed their guilds and built lodges which became their homes- away-from home and which also served as their union halls. They jealously guarded their trade secrets and only recognized members of the craft were allowed into their lodges. During meetings and meal hours the lodge was closely guarded by Tylers. The Tylers were the lowest echelon of skilled labour recognized by the stone masons. They worked only in the quarries where they cut rough stone into tiles or building blocks. The more skills a stone mason acquired, the further he moved away from the door of the lodge towards the East end of the lodge where only the most skilled sat, presiding over the others. These highly qualified men were actually the architects and designers.

Because of the strict rule of the Norman barons, the stone masons were not allowed to leave their home guild to travel or to follow another vocation. It was like the Selective Service during the Second World War which designated certain civilian jobs as essential to the war effort. If you were in such a position, you couldn't leave even to join the Military without permission to do so.

In order for the church to obtain working rights of the stone masons they had to pay off the Normans or grant special religious dispensations in return for the freedom of the required number of stone masons to build cathedrals who then became "free masons". Likewise, it was forbidden to hire or to accept a stone mason outside the jurisdiction of his home guild unless that stone mason could show evidence that he had his freedom. Thus, a stone mason employed in the construction of a cathedral had to be "free and accepted".

Now for the first time we had qualified stone masons and cowans working in the same area.

The Cowans saw these stone masons come to their countryside and take all the work associated with the construction of cathedrals, using rock from their quarries, and earning wages they had never dreamed of. They wanted their share of the work and a trade war started. the Cowans could never have built a great cathedral as they were without the necessary training and skills. Eventually they were granted menial tasks in the quarries or as helpers, but they were not allowed to enter the guild lodges.

This was a real sore point because the Cowan's art was older than the stone mason's and they really wanted recognition as workers in stone with full privileges in the stone masons' lodges.

The cathedrals each took three or four hundred years to build with many generations of masons playing their part. The stone mason trade was kept within family lines and so the local Cowan was never allowed to become an apprentice. However, as the cathedrals neared completion fewer masons were needed and many returned to the more lucrative business in the cities and towns.

As the guild lodges at the cathedral sites gradually depleted, some lodges gave in to the pleas of the Cowans to be granted membership and eventually even allowed them to take office. Where this happened and the Cowans became the majority, the lodges collapsed because the Cowans were not steeped in the stone masons' traditions and, having obtained recognition only when it was too late, the Cowans felt no real loyalty to the lodge.

Some stone mason lodges took a different stand and never accepted the Cowans for membership but instead, admitted the landed gentry as associate members. It became quite stylish even for the aristocracy to patronize these lodges. It was these non-operatives who started using tools and terms of stone masons in symbolic ways, particularly when many of these noble men were knights who had returned from the Crusades. Their influence can still be seen in Freemasonry today.

With the reformation of the church, it was inevitable and quite natural that purely speculative masonic lodges should be established in the cities by men who had been associated with the earlier craft lodges - lodges which had remained steadfast in their determination to never admit Cowans.

Now, you may think that this historical review of the beginnings of the Order is a roundabout way of getting to the question - Are there Cowans in our Midst? - but I feel that an understanding of the past is necessary if we are able to recognize the Cowans of today.

Like the Cowans of long ago, modern day Cowans are not necessarily evil or violent, nor do they wish to destroy Freemasonry, or are they even interested in stealing our secrets. As the Cowans of long ago wanted to be admitted into the stone masons' lodges, the Cowans of today want to join an Order. They want recognition and prestige by being members of an organization of men whom they

envy. They believe the old stories about fraternal preference; they think that membership in the Order will somehow secure their future.

But what makes the Cowans of today? It is their lack of faith and spiritual values. It has been said that just as the Cowan of long ago could never build a cathedral because he built without mortar, the man of today cannot build the spiritual temple of his life if he does not have faith and spiritual values, and therefore should not be admitted to Freemasonry. Unfortunately, a man's ability to appreciate things of a spiritual nature is not easily seen and examined other than saying to an applicant that he must have a belief in God. When we ask the question - In whom you put your trust? the candidate knows the answer we want to hear, often through prompting, and is going to answer accordingly whether he believes or not.

Remember, this is one of the Landmarks of Freemasonry we are speaking of. If we admit a non-believer, a candidate without faith or spiritual values, we are admitting a Cowan. It has nothing to do with having, or not having, masonic knowledge, or acquiring masonic knowledge later as he progresses through the degrees. A Cowan initiated, passed, and raised, is still a Cowan, just as admitting the Cowan of old into the stone masons' lodges didn't make him a skilled stone mason. Freemasonry, through its lessons may lead a man to think more deeply about his own place in the scheme of things and so enhance his faith but if he is without faith when he joins, can Freemasonry provide it for him? Sadly enough, as the membership in our order depletes, we tend to panic, and we are reluctant to reject an applicant. Consequently, we accept the simple "yes" to a most important question, even though it may permit a Cowan to join our ranks.

The Cowans in our lodges have never posed any real threat to the Order up until now because they have always been in the minority. Usually, they will drop out entirely or just stop attending meetings when they finally realize that the material benefits, they expected are not there after all.

Quite frequently, they will go through the chairs of their lodges, and they may fulfil the duties of their offices quite faithfully, even through their year as Worshipful Master because the prestige and recognition is a reward in itself. But after the term as Master, you seldom see them in lodge. Cowans show themselves in many ways but as the fundamental principles of Masonry are kept alive, so long as our landmarks and traditions are maintained, Freemasonry will continue to live, untouched by the presence of the Cowans in our midst.