RITUAL REVELATIONS

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Almost since the day the Masonic Order hung out its shingle, people have been writing "exposés" on what they perceive goes on at lodge meetings. Masonic ritual is not under copyright because you can't copyright something that is not in "copy." You can write what you think is ritual, and copyright that document or book, but if it is not sanctioned by a Grand Lodge, then it is not "official." As Grand Lodges don't condone general publication of lodge ritual, there is no such thing as OFFICIAL Masonic lodge ritual in print, despite what writer's claim.

Certainly, individual lodges can create lodge ritual books for the benefit of their members, but these are private publication under copyright to the particular lodge. Very few are printed (generally just for officers) and these are passed down to new officers (strict records are kept). In all of these publication specific information is withheld.

I do recall one sort of general lodge book in British Columbia made available in the 1950s, but the information provided was so limited it was deemed useless (and on top of that there were many errors).

The bottom line here is that if one wants to know what goes on at lodge meetings, there is no alternative but to become a Freemason.

Nevertheless, many "exposé" type books have been published. When a Grand Lodges refer to such books, they say they contain ALLEGED ritual. For certain, if something is not official, then it is "alleged."

A very old anti-Masonic publisher in Chicago, Ezra A. Cook Publications Ltd., was notorious for publishing Masonic exposé books. Cook was a founding member of a now defunct radical Christian organization that was totally against Freemasonry. He evidently hunted down exposé and anti-Masonic literature and published it for his "cause," but certainly reasoned that he could profit in the process.

The main Masonic ritual exposé writers of the 1800s were William Morgan and Edmond Ronayne, both Masons, and both had an ax to grind. Ronayne was supported by Cook's Christian organization. A third was Ralph P. Lester, but his work on the Ancient or American ritual was definitely not an exposé. Every effort to trace Lester has failed. We don't even know if he was a Freemason. Whoever he was, he did not go by that name. According to his Preface, he wrote the book with good intentions. Cook got hold of it somehow and published it along with all his other "acquisitions."

Ironically, Cook did us a favor here. Lester really did his homework so we can reference his book to see very early text and processes. Over time ritual work, which differs from lodge to lodge on various points, has a tendency to go off track, so we can "check with Lester" and see what he had to say. It does not always work in resolving differences of opinion, but aids in arriving at a compromise.
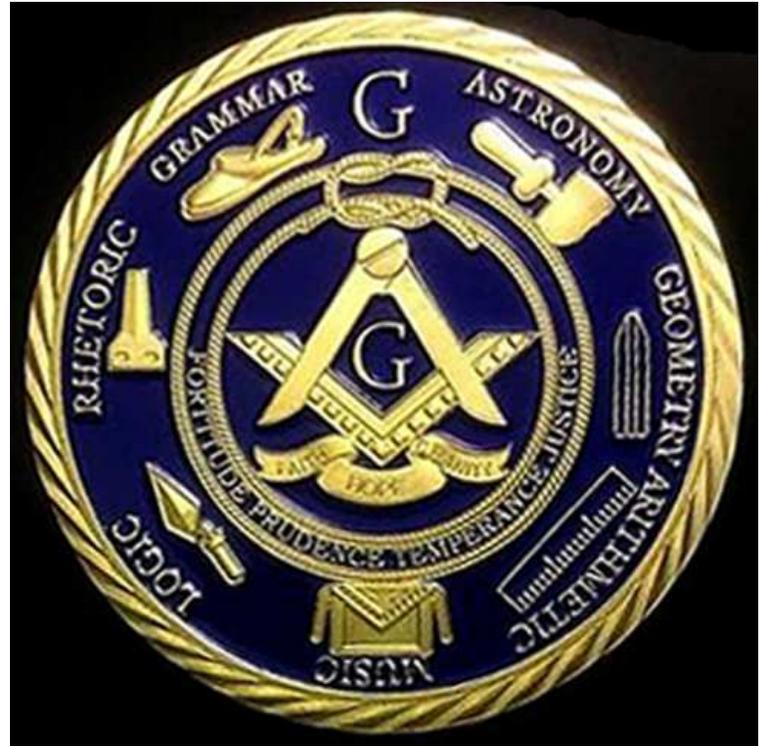
Whatever the situation with Masonic ritual, it is simply private material that we wish to keep confidential. Naturally, this leads to curiosity and speculation, and often absolutely absurd claims.

Lodge ritual needs to be experienced to both understand and appreciate it. Trying to imagine the process by reading an exposé of any sort is essentially useless.

In composing ritual books for local lodges in the mid and late 1980s, I got an appreciation of just how methodical one must be to do this kind of work. When I became a Past Master (1987) this certainly helped. I worked on a committee with highly experienced lodge members. I would say that about 6 or so drafts were needed to get everything correct. I don't think any exposé writers, save perhaps Lester, had any assistance of this nature.

As I have often pointed out, anything written about Freemasonry by a non-Mason (regardless of credentials) should be simply ignored. If such material is written by an ALLEGED Freemason, you need to confirm that he was a Freemason, and if so, check the circumstances. Unfortunately, members sometimes stray and suffer from strange influences (as I believe was the case concerning Edmond Ronayne).