



The Lodge of Melrose St. John No. 12

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MELROSE MASONS WALK 27th DECEMBER 2008

ORATION BY

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RWPGM. RWM. WWs. DIST. Br. Br. LADIES & GENTLEMEN

This is the 263rd year that we, the masons of Melrose, have walked with our master to this the greatest monument to our skills. It is 40 years since I was initiated into this my mother lodge and at that time Melrose had a fairly stable population. Many of the male population, aware of their heritage, would join us as part of their passage of life. This is not so today as the population is more transient and for this reason I will take these few minutes to explore my views on our history.

A master mason was an important figure in any community as building required men competent in art, engineering, mathematics, science, geology and immense skill. The Grand Master Mason of Melrose held sway over the work of many lodges, which held charters from Melrose. The tableau on the wall of the south transept informs us of a 14thc. Master, John Morow, Master of works to St. Andrews, The high Kirk of Glasgow, Melrose, Paisley, Nithsdale, and Galloway. This authority continued until Melrose, the last independent Grand Lodge, joined the grand lodge of Scotland in 1891. It was this universal requirement for the breadth of skills of the mason that held him above religion and politics, gave him power over his work and kept him safe from persecution. Although from 1935/45 thousands of European masons were executed and their lodges destroyed, but this is a subject for another time.

When St. Aiden and 12 Saxon monks founded their church on the safe river promontory at Old Melrose, the border had not been formed. Indeed they were in the land of the Angles from Forth to Humber. In those savage times they could not have envisaged the wonderful edifice of this our Abbey, or the wealth it accrued, or the power that the Abbey and its Abbots had over the land of the Scots. The Abbots became super wealthy and were financial advisors to the King.

The Abbey fued its land to tenant farmers and colliers who sublet portions to others, which could then be sublet many times over thus creating universal poverty.

When the reformation came, in the mid 16thc. The Abbey held 55,000 acres of land and had the largest herd of sheep in Europe. It was thought that the lands and collieries would be transferred to the occupiers but they were given by the crown to its friends in the aristocratic classes. Many of whom were not as benevolent as the Abbots. Workers were often held in servitude for life to the new owners and were often only paid in kind. They had to have large families where from the youngest to the oldest they worked to ensure they ate. Despite slavery being abolished this form of contract continued here until the employment acts of post mid 19thc, forced owners to change their employment practices.

The Borders were also disadvantaged by constant internecine battles, wars and passing armies over the centuries. The worst example of this was the rough wooing of Henry VIII, who sent the Earl of Hertford to decimate Scotland. In the borders between 1544 and 1545 he destroyed towns, villages, farms, churches, and monasteries and decimated the population by mass genocide. Out of this desolation came the reivers for to feed your family you rode across the border. Many used this situation to remove the remaining statuary, carvings, wood and lead from this Abbey and many fine houses are built of Abbey stone.

The monastic church had used literacy as their god given right and it was not until the reformation that education started to be available to the general population of Scotland. From my opening thesis and this latter observation it can be understood why it took until 1674 for the first Melrose Lodge minute to appear. The cities were more settled and the speculative Masons there were more likely to be gentlemen of means and intellect and so their minutes appear some 80 years before. The Melrose minutes are continuous to date.

I believe that these matters also give some explanation to the origins of this our annual Masons walk. The Melrose Masons first joined their Grand Master in procession to this their personal monument on 27th December 1745. The Jacobite rebellion was in full swing and the fear of the threat of death and destruction from the highland hordes sent the southern populous to their kirks to pray for salvation. In 1746 the last battle on British soil at Culloden sent the people back to their Kirks to give thanks for that salvation. It was therefore appropriate that this lodge of masons followed suit and continued to date.

When the French revolution occurred its outcome sent shivers down the spines of the landowners and industrial owners and gave hope to the working classes. During the Napoleonic wars, either side of 1800, French POWs were sent on parole to Scotland. Many were paroled to Border towns and French Masons attended some lodges particularly Kelso 58 and the Melrose Lodge. Despite these Frenchmen being their mortal enemies it would seem right that a fraternal hand of friendship be exchanged; indeed a French lodge was formed and attended by many of the Melrose brethren. These meetings in the lodges and towns created a movement for a change in the innocuous historic employment practices. Where, for example, a poor family, on the birth of a child could sell it to an employer for its lifetime. This led to the employment acts of the latter half of the 19th c.

These matters brought to prominence the need for national constitutions. Many countries found the statutes of freemasonry a good and wholesome model on which to base their constitutions. We have always displayed no distinction between country, class or creed, indeed many of us have sat in lodges with Lords and labourers and Muslims and Jews. The greatest use of our statutes is in the constitution of the United States of America.

We freemasons have much to be proud of for we played an important part in the development of this country. So in finishing I will tell you of, what to me is the greatest example. During the 16th c. When executions were commonplace for treason, heresy, witchcraft and of the common man for a rabbit. Freemasons Lodges were one of the few places where philosophy and science could be discussed and developed in safety. So it was a group of Freemasons and others led by Sir Robert Moray who in 1660 formed the Royal Society. They got royal consent from King Charles II making him their first president. This made Britain the most developed scientific country in the world and was directly responsible for us becoming the world's greatest industrial nation.

I read recently that there were many Freemasons amongst the defenders of the Alamo the most famous of these was Davey Crocket and Jim Bowie. I think that the Border Abbeys were our Alamo and so to our ancient brethren who gave us our today we give them our thanks.

Brethren, Ladies and Gentlemen thank you for your attention