

1717 and all that

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In November 1985 I was installed as Master of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge. That event being the start of the centenary year of the lodge my inaugural address was a review of what had, or had not, been achieved in the area of Masonic history with some suggestions of what could be done in the future. I was slightly taken to task by some of the more senior members of the lodge in that I had had the temerity, as the then youngest member of the lodge in actual age, to suggest that we should not simply accept the writings of those we regarded as the greats in Masonic research but should question their work and ourselves go back to the records they had surveyed to see if we came to the same conclusions. Thirty odd years later I stand by that view and firmly believe that we should periodically review what has gone before. In that, I share the views of Professors Prescott and Sommers in their original paper for the Cambridge Conference and in its present iteration that historical research progresses by challenging received wisdom, re-examining the previous evidence and re-assessing it in the light of new evidence. It will not be a surprise if I say I do not agree with most of the rest of what appears in both of their papers.

From both versions of their paper my reading is that they do not believe that the Grand Lodge came into being in 1717 because there is no contemporary evidence for it in the way of press reports, minutes, notes or other documents and that the only “evidence” available to us was written down long after the event and therefore not trustworthy. So, let us look at what evidence we have.

The only evidence for the event on 24 June 1717 is Anderson’s account in his 1738 edition of the *Constitution*. Professors Prescott and Sommers believe the story to be a fabrication by Anderson. They rather brush aside the suggestion that it would have been impossible for Anderson to have made such a fabrication because there were still people around in 1738 who would have been involved in the early years of Grand Lodge, not least Dr Desaguliers and George Payne who were still regularly attending, but come up with no convincing reason as to why Anderson should have invented the story. If the Grand Lodge had not existed before 1721 would not its “revival” in that year under the Duke of Montague have been a much more glorious start than that under an unknown figure such as Anthony Sayer in 1717?

I have said on many occasions in the past that I am not surprised that there was no press report of the 1717 meeting at the Goose and Gridiron. No major figures were involved, Freemasonry was little known and had not drawn the attention of the press at that point. As

Professors Prescott and Sommers rightly state, the Installation of the high profile Duke of Montagu as Grand Master made Freemasonry a hot topic for journalists and writers. Having seen, over the years, what appeared in the press and in pamphlet form between 1721 and 1738 I am not surprised that there is no mention of 1717 and the Goose and Gridiron as most of the press reports were of meetings at which leading figures in society were made Masons or of the annual Grand Feast, or attempts to expose the secrets of Freemasonry and the pamphlets were either exposures or rejoinders, none giving any sort of context or recent historical background to the subject.

Suggesting that the Grand Lodge was formed in 1721 and not in 1717 denies Anthony Sayer, George Payne and Dr Desaguliers their place in Masonic history as the first three Grand Masters despite the fact that they were honoured as such throughout their lifetimes. I find it difficult to understand why our two professors should dismiss the evidence of the list of Grand Masters, Deputy Grand Masters and Grand Wardens in the first Grand Lodge Minute Book as evidence because in their opinion it was compiled post 1731. I am not an expert on handwriting or inks but would be fascinated to know how their claim that “the handwriting and colour of ink shows that the list was inserted by Reid in the minute book sometime after 1731 and as possibly as late as 1734”. There is no doubt that it is in the hand of William Reid who was Secretary to the Grand Lodge 1727 – 1733 (the title did not become Grand Secretary until 1737) who was making an official list for the record.

The fact that none of the original three is mentioned as a former Grand Master in the Grand Lodge Minutes until 1728 has a simple explanation. From 1723 to the end on 1727 the minute of each quarterly communication is headed by the presiding officers i.e. the Grand Master, Deputy Grand Master and Grand Wardens, or those who were acting for them if absent. No one else is mentioned in the minutes unless they spoke or were the subject of a matter under discussion. It was only in 1728 that the minutes began to be headed by a list of all the senior brethren present. Unlike today when having served as a Grand Officer you become a Past Grand Officer and are entitled to attend and vote in Grand Lodge the same did not apply in the early days of Grand Lodge. The introduction of the idea of Past Grand Officers was slowly introduced in the 1720s.

The Minutes of the quarterly Communication held on 21 November 1724 include the following:

The question being put that all who have been, or shall at anytime hereafter be Grand Masters of this Society may be present and have a Vote at all Quarterly Communications and Grand Meetings. Agreed nem. con.

The same privilege was extended to those that had served or would in future serve in the office of Deputy Grand Master at the Quarterly Communication held on 28 February 1726. And, finally, at the Quarterly Communication held on 10 May 1727 the Duke of Richmond himself proposed that the same privilege be granted to those who had served as Grand

Wardens or who would do so in the future. This last factor probably explains why Rev Dr James Andersen did not appear in Grand Lodge after his time as a Grand Warden as only the actual Grand officers and the Masters of Lodges were entitled to attend and vote in Grand Lodge.

I find it equally difficult to understand why the letter of the Duke of Richmond to Martin Folkes, now in the Royal Society Archivesⁱ should be dismissed as evidence because it is undated but probably dates from the 1730s. Its content is quite unequivocal. Folkes had apparently written to Richmond to borrow a portrait of the Duke to be engraved as part of a planned series of portraits of former Grand Masters. The Duke responded:

As You say, our brethren will never be satisfy'd. How can fellows be such fools? Yett a positive negative I need not give, butt I have to great a regard, you may say, to the Dukes of Montagu & Bucccluch, and to those who were my Predecessor[s], to have my print done first, butt after they have got theirs, the D: of Whartons, & the three that go before them viz: Ant Sawyer, Geo: Payne, and Dr. Dessys, for I insist upon theirs being done first; then I will consent to your lending my picture, butt positively not before those six are finish'd...

In the 1723 List of Lodges in the first Grand Lodge Minute Book, Richmond is listed as Master of the Lodge at the Horn Tavern Westminster (now the Royal Somerset House and Inverness Lodge No. IV), with George Payne as his Deputy Master. He was Grand Master 1724-25 and in the 1725 List of Lodges Desaguliers and Rev James Anderson are listed as members of the Horn Tavern Lodge. Payne and Desaguliers were clearly well known to Richmond, why would he state they had been amongst his predecessors as Grand Master if they had not held that office?

The comments about Stukeley and his initiation seem to me to be a red herring. In his diary Stukeley simply records that he was made a Mason on 6 January 1721. His comments on the state of London Masonry are not in his diary but come from his commonplace book at the end of an entry dated 5 June 1726 in which he gives his reasons for leaving London and moving to Grantham. He felt greatly let down by those whom he had met in the various societies he had been a member of, particularly as none of them had helped him to any positions which would have provided an income. Perhaps his comments on Freemasonry had been affected by those circumstances.

Equally it is difficult to square his comment on the difficulty of getting enough brethren together to be able to make him a Mason in January 1721 with the fact that six months later it was reported that a great number of brethren attended the installation of the Duke of Montagu as Grand Master at Stationers' Hall on 24 June 1721. By that stage in addition to the original four lodges there were two newly created lodges who, if Stukelely's comments were true must have worked night and day to make Masons to attend the installation!

I am very familiar with the BOOK E in the records of the Lodge of Antiquity, having worked on it with the late Brother Colin Dyer, probably the greatest expert on William Preston and his ritual system. We both believed that the list of members and the account of the Duke of Montagu's installation were contemporaneous with the events but, after comparing them with various examples of Preston's handwriting, that the excerpts from the early minutes of the lodge were by Preston possibly compiled as an aide memoire when he was putting together his case that the Lodge of Antiquity as one of the parents of the Grand Lodge retained certain inalienable rights with which the Grand Lodge could not interfere.

I was aware of the passage in the report of the Duke of Montagu's installation in which it is stated that representatives of the London lodges gave up their independence to the Grand Lodge. I have always regarded it as a clever ploy by Payne and Desaguliers, having secured a noble Grand Master, to move control from the individual lodges to the Grand Lodge itself, thus completing the work begun in 1717. They would both be aware that the lodges would not have surrendered to either of them as Grand Master but a noble Grand Master was a different matter. We tend to forget the power and authority that aristocrats had in the 18th century. To the brethren of that period the effect of having a noble Grand Master would be seismic and move the Craft, as an organisation, into a different status.

After more than forty years of thinking about our development as an organised body I am convinced that 1717 did happen and that what might have turned into a loose association with an annual feast was gradually turned into a governing body. I firmly believe that Payne and Desaguliers saw an opportunity to create something bigger, Dr Berman's paper goes into the reasons why, but realised that it needed major figures at the head if it was to have any success. With Payne's administrative skills and Desaguliers contacts they laid the groundwork which enabled the early noble Grand Masters, assisted by Payne, Desaguliers and others, to change the Grand Lodge into a national governing body.

If one accepts the arguments put forward by Professors Prescott and Sommers for Anderson having invented the events of 1717 and what happened before 24 June 1721 then one has to accept that there was a major conspiracy going on involving many people. Anderson may not have got all the detail correct but his basic facts about what happened on 24 June 1717 and the subsequent elections of Payne and Desaguliers as successors to Anthony Sayer have not been disproved. I go back to my original question: why must evidence written down years after the event be suspect or discounted simply because of when it was written down? If the events before Montagu's installation on 24 June 1721 were a fabrication what was the reason for their fabrication?

What we seem to be having is a semantic argument over what constitutes a Grand Lodge. In 1717, 1718, 1719 and 1720 Grand Feasts were held at which those present elected a Grand Master and Grand Wardens. They were not Masters and Wardens of Lodges but Grand Masters and Grand Wardens which implies that the Grand Feast was considered to be a Grand Lodge. That it was not yet seen as a regulatory body is neither here nor there. It

was something new and rather more than an ordinary lodge meeting. As I have stated above, the change from a Grand Feast to a Grand Lodge as we would recognise it today was a gradual evolution carefully forged by Payne and Desaguliers no doubt requiring great tact and skill to achieve. Montagu set the seal but the development continued with his successors. Indeed it still continues today as Grand Lodge continues to adapt itself in a changing society. What was given birth to on 24 June 1717 was the start of a continuing evolution and that date is, therefore, rightly considered as the birth date of the Grand Lodge.
