

Education & Enlightenment

A Special Committee of

The Ancient & Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry of Canada



Masonic Margin of Error

The Masonic teachings that have been handed down for centuries have such strong moral meaning and philosophical wisdom that they have survived the test of time basically unchanged. The universal appeal of their implications is just as compelling now as it was when the first degrees were formed. Proper portrayal and execution of that work ensures the message will retain its original powerful meaning for a new candidate and reinforce the intended ideals for those of us who continue down the Masonic path of learning. Most lodges and Masons in general, take justifiable pride in the careful practice and portrayal of their ritual work.

Masons also know that we are not operative but speculative workmen and are taught to take the symbolic tools and apply them to our morals. However a lesson can be learnt from any operative craftsmen in regards to the danger of small errors compounding into a larger one by misuse of their tools.

An experienced carpenter who has tried to make a square picture frame knows that unless the mitres are cut as close as possible to 45 degrees the result will be disastrous and any mason building a wall constantly checks for levels and perpendiculars to ensure a satisfactory result. Construction

managers have a term for a problem that occurs when a project grows outside its original plan and cost due to a compounding of well intended or overlooked details. It is called scope creep. It is possible to have scope creep in Masonry if we allow minor details and misconceptions to pervade or grow within the Craft.

The evolution of language and what meaning is derived from a particular word can change. Care must be taken when making small well intended changes to the ritual work so that the original intent is not lost in translation. Misconceptions can occur from an improper understanding of the symbolism within the lodge or from external sources such as some of the popular movies and novels which have recently drawn attention to Masonry.

An example of a misconception that has become popularly held by many Masons is seen in the movie National Treasure. Based on a novel of the same name, the film infers Masonic symbolism in the famous design of the Great Seal of the United States which is printed on the back of the one dollar American bill. Everyone is familiar with the Eye of Providence which hovers atop the unfinished pyramid and it is commonly believed that it shows the Masonic influence in the founding of the country.

In reality the Eye has been a religious symbol since ancient Egyptian times and can be associated with the 'Eye of Horus'. In Buddhism it was represented as the 'Eye of the World' and expressed as a trinity by surrounding it with a triangle known as the Tiratna or Triple Gem. Many religious Christian depictions from Medieval and Renaissance iconography shows the Eye as a symbol of the all seeing power of God, sometimes as in the Buddhist version surrounding it with a triangle referring to the Christian Trinity.

Masonic symbolism is often seen in the form of an Eye surrounded by clouds or lines of sun bursts known as a glory and usually meant to serve as a reminder that the a Supreme Being or Architect of the Universe oversees our Masonic actions. Interestingly researchers now mostly agree that an actual eye within a pyramid as seen in the Great Seal, is not a true Masonic symbol at all and appears nowhere in the original depictions found throughout Masonry, although it can often be depicted surrounded by a simple triangle or glory. It must be emphasized that a pyramid is not structurally the same as a triangle.

The most likely meaning of the Great Seal is still fascinating without a Masonic context. The pyramid construction shows thirteen steps representing the original thirteen colonies but its unfinished appearance implies further growth and progress. The Latin written above the structure reads ANNUIT COEPTIS which means "God has favoured our undertaking" which explains the Eye looking down on the union. The inscription below the pyramid reads NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM meaning "A new order has begun." In the four year process to arrive at a design there were three different versions proposed by the committee. The only person in that group known to be a Mason was the famous Benjamin Franklin and none of his proposed designs were accepted.

Although there are many other references to Masons being part of the founding of the United States, their effect on the design of the Great Seal has been unfortunately exaggerated and shows how misconceptions can steal their way into a belief system if repeated enough times and accepted without question.

As good Masons we should all strive to do the best work possible and constantly question our success so that the original values and teachings of

the craft remain as they were intended to be; a beautiful system of morality veiled in allegory.

The bar was set high purposely so that the goals are not easily obtained and many of us may spend our entire lives trying to attain that standard of excellence without getting there. Whether or not we ever succeed in our goal is not important. We all can consider ourselves the better for having tried.

There is a saying that ideals are like stars, we may not reach them, but we may chart our course by them. I like to think if we do not let a Masonic margin of error creep into our Craft we will continue to chart a good course.