

‘A DAILY ADVANCEMENT ...’
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THE EMULATION RITUAL SYSTEM

[Taken from the late Colin Dyer’s *Emulation: A Ritual to Remember: Notes on the Men and Times in the One Hundred and Fifty Years’ History of Emulation Lodge of Improvement, 1823-1973* [A Lewis, 1973] pp. 12-15]

Grand Lodge [UGLE] gave approval to a form of Ritual for the three Degree Ceremonies in 1816; this seems to establish the Grand Lodge itself as the only Authority on Ritual matters for the Craft and indicates that any change ought also to have Grand Lodge approval. There was in 1816 and for some years afterwards a complete ban on the publication of Ritual matters and this included the keeping of any official detailed record of what was approved, so that no formal reference back is possible in order to compare practice at a later date with what was approved. Reliance must be placed on notes taken and letters and other documents written in the period and also on the integrity of those who were promulgating the new Ritual in the years that followed so far as it concerns the authenticity of what was passed on.

Ritual may be said to consist of two main parts: the Ritual acts — and this includes the sequence or order in which they are performed — and the verbal communication — the sense intended to be conveyed by the words used, or indeed the particular words themselves. From records which can be attributed to the period there can be little argument about the main Ritual acts laid down or the sequence in which they were intended to come, though there may be a certain amount of doubt on a number of minor matters, for the Ritual certainly underwent some degree of adjustment in the fifteen years following its approval. Adjustment would be a normal feature in any field where something that is produced on a drawing board, so to speak, is then made to suit the conditions actually found in use. Whether such adjustments had any authority is difficult to say, for the method of teaching Ritual was by Lecture and not by rehearsal. The only pronouncement in Grand Lodge about the matter was a general permission to use any suitable words in the Lectures, which included the description of the Ritual acts of the Ceremonies; within a few years of approval there must have been a certain amount of latitude. The Grand Stewards’ Lodge seemed to have some custodian authority under Grand Lodge; at least two references may be found, firstly, to their approving and promulgating changes in the Lectures, and secondly, to their being referred to over a proposed change and refusing to approve it. If a study is made of current

Workings which can trace some sort of history back over 150 years, including 'Emulation', the Ritual will be found remarkably similar in the basic form and sequence.

The words to be used present quite a different problem, particularly in view of the absence of an original official record for constant reference. Reliance on memory or even on limited notetaking will not over a period of years guarantee absolute accuracy of repetition, while it is by no means certain that the use of particular words was intended for all parts of the Ceremonies. The Masonic Press of the 1830s implies that precise words were laid down at least for some parts, but it is equally evident that other parts were probably approved in form only and without particular words, while, in a few places, compromise between the two factions of pre-Union Masonry had been effected by permitting certain alternatives. Openings and Closings and the three Obligations were separately approved and a direction may have been given on the precise words to be used—presumably, provided they could be remembered—but for the rest, it would be impossible even to say what passages were subject to such control, or what the required words were. It seems likely that the Charges, the explanations of the Tracing Boards, and possibly even the moral significance of the Working Tools were not regarded as parts of the basic Ceremonies. Although they were intended to be used, they may not have been subjected to the 1816 approval and were regarded as part of the Lectures, although some of the Charges known to have been in general use just after 1816 are not even in the Lectures.

In most modern printed Rituals the linking procedures between Ritual acts are now covered by specific words, and this applies in 'Emulation', which, because of the need for consistent practice in its demonstrations, now has few areas of optional practice. One of the areas where early records give no specific words is in the directions by the J.D. to the Can. in advancing to the E. in the first Degree. In editions of published Ritual books of the nineteenth century, including those purporting to give the Emulation Working, no specific words were given for this part of the Ceremony. It is perhaps significant that the Emulation Lodge of Improvement Committee minutes in 1906 record discussion on the precise words to be used at this point, and reference was made by letter to the Preceptors of the recognised Lodges of Instruction as to what was taught by them. The minutes indicate that even as late as 1906 there was no set form of words laid down for use at this point.

The Ritual used by 'Emulation', and which has been carried on since those days, went through three distinct stages in the seventy years after the death of Peter Gilkes; he must be assumed to have known what the Ritual was and to

have ensured that it was practised in 'Emulation'. The first stage was under the guidance for thirty years of Stephen Barton Wilson, who stated quite definitely his determination to preserve without change the Ritual he had personally learnt from Gilkes. The Masonic Press of the period commented that it was the meaning of the words that was important to him and that he did not correct small errors provided the spirit of the Ritual was maintained. The first note of any kind of the Ritual which was used in 'Emulation' dates from this time-in the form of a manuscript book recording the Lectures and Ritual taught by William Honey while on a Masonic teaching visit to Birmingham in 1848. William Honey joined 'Emulation' in 1828 and was a direct pupil of Peter Gilkes. He was nominated by 'Emulation' to undertake this visit in response to a request from Birmingham Brethren and had been a leading member for some years. The book was held by successive Preceptors of the General Lodge of Instruction in Birmingham until A. W. Adams, who had been the Preceptor since 1890, presented it to the Warwickshire Provincial Library in 1910 along with notes on the origin and use of this book. Comparison of the words of the Ceremonies with those in use in 'Emulation' today shows a number of small differences with virtually no change of meaning; the form of the Ceremonies is exactly the same as today. The book also contains comments by a later Preceptor, who occasionally visited London and attended 'Emulation', that what Honey wrote was not 'as practised'. There are also some alternative uses given implying that, in some parts at least, word use was not rigid.

The wording used in 'Emulation' today is much closer to earlier manuscript versions which have survived. There are indications that in the 1850s some adjustments of wording were made-in particular the rearrangement of the explanation of the second Tracing Board. It seems likely that Wilson settled the words to be used at this time, when there was a tendency to change, and attempted to revert to what he could find of earlier use, at the same time making some minor adjustments. The addition in the third Degree of the description of signs used in some other places seems to date from this time and the 'Honey' version only refers to those in use on the Continent.

The second stage was under Thomas Fenn, who learnt under Wilson in the last few years of Wilson's domination, and who was rigid in his approach to the question of preservation. Fenn was no mere young pupil of Wilson's-he was forty years old in 1861 and of sufficient status to be made Assistant Grand Director of Ceremonies while connected with 'Emulation' under Wilson. He was also close to Wilson himself in that he became a joining member of his Lodge, Cadogan, and became Master of it. Fenn tended to regard as sacrosanct the words he had learnt as well as the Ritual form in use at 'Emulation', so that

within certain limits of alternative acceptance, there would have been little change between the 1860s and the turn of the century. Fenn's attitude to words tends to confirm that Wilson may have laid down more rigid words for use, probably before Fenn joined in 1857. The third stage was in the latter part of the leadership of Robert Clay Sudlow, who was a pupil and protege of Fenn's and who accepted and continued to put forward most of his views. Sudlow in 1897 introduced the award of the Silver Matchbox for the working of Ceremonies without correction and the very introduction of this award meant that a much more detailed definition must be made by 'Emulation' of what was acceptable in terms of words and actions. It was the development of this last stage from the early 1900s that has made the Emulation Ritual tend towards very rigid standards of what was acceptable and by that time the question of what precise words might have been intended in 1816 was not capable of being answered. The words accepted then had come down through their meaning from the early days after approval, not without some small change in actual words used, but the Ritual form had been preserved without addition or alteration by the expressed will of successive leading members.

So 'Emulation' claim to demonstrate only Ritual forms which have been approved by Grand Lodge. Today, it is impossible to say either what constitutes those parts which were actually approved or what words and actions have come to their present form because of a need to have a standard demonstration. There must have been minor adjustments to fit in with pronouncements and decisions made, such as that in 1847 when the Grand Master, having sponsored the change of qualification from 'free-born' to 'free', stated in answer to a question that if the Lectures were affected they must be altered. Since 1816, Grand Lodge have only made one major pronouncement which has affected the work of 'Emulation' and caused them to make a change in the Ritual. This was the decision in December 1964 to permit an alternative form of reference to the traditional penalties in the Obligations of the three Degree Ceremonies. These Permissive Variations, with the consequential other amendments to make the rest of the Ceremony fall in line, are now worked by many Lodges, and are demonstrated at the Emulation Lodge of Improvement on the second Friday in each month throughout the session.

