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# THE ESSENCE OF SCOTTISH FREEMASONRY

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The following brief piece is written by Robert L. D. Cooper, Curator of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, Past Master of Quatuor Coronati Lodge of Research No. 2076, and one of the most respected Masonic scholars in the world today. Brother Cooper writes under the commission of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, to offer for the first time the rationale behind why the Grand Lodge of Scotland does not explain most, if not all, of the aspects of (Scottish) Freemasonry. Its purpose is not to present a 'mission statement', but an attempt to encourage Freemasons to realise that they are undertaking a personal journey.

We have included it here to inform Masons, who might not otherwise be aware, that not all Grand Lodges in the world operate in the same manner. Indeed, the Grand Lodge of Scotland—despite being relatively late to form in 1736—represents what many would argue is the origin of speculative Masonry itself, and as such operates in a very different manner than North American Grand Lodges.

—*Andrew Hammer*  
*President, MRF*

Recently there has been some discussion as the 'meaning' of Scottish Masonic Ritual, Regalia and Symbolism. On reading the Constitution and Laws of the Grand Lodge of Scotland (GLoS) one could be forgiven in thinking that there were no opinions on these subjects. The silence on the meaning of all aspects of Scottish Freemasonry not only in the Constitution and Laws but also in other official publications does not mean such opinions do not exist, quite the contrary. Why then are there no official explanations of *any* of the elements of Scottish Freemasonry? This question goes to the crux of what is Scottish Freemasonry.

The GLoS believes that Scottish Freemasonry is a framework in and around which individuals undertake their Masonic journey. This view is created partly by the history and origins of Scottish Freemasonry as well as the psyche of Scots in general. Without going into too much detail it is sufficient to explain that before the GLoS came into being in 1736 there existed a national network of Lodges, from at least 1598 if not earlier, the membership of which was comprised of stonemasons and non-stonemasons. There were Lodges the membership of which was entirely made up of stonemasons (for example, the Lodge of Journeymen Masons, No.8), Lodges which had no stonemasons as members (e.g. the Haughfoot Lodge) and Lodges that had both stonemasons and non-stonemasons as members (e.g. the Lodge of Aberdeen 1<sup>ter</sup>). These Lodges existed independently of each other and without any 'head-office' to direct them from a central point. This system was, and to some extent still is, well suited to the psyche of Scottish Freemasons (if not the population at large). The independence of Lodges before 1736 also translated into a significant degree of independence for Lodges founded after 1736.

Unlike other Grand Lodges, which have, and use, a great deal more power and authority than the GLoS, it functions more as a facilitator and advisory body. This non-authoritarian method of governance is not known to exist elsewhere in the Masonic world and it has a direct impact on the nature of Scottish Freemasonry. First and foremost because participation in Freemasonry is a personal experience which differs from person to person the meaning of different aspects of Freemasonry can also differ from person to person. Although there may be a consensus among

some Scottish Freemasons as to what any particular word or symbol *might* mean there can be other alternative explanations. The letter 'G' will suffice to illustrate this point. A Freemason who is a Christian by faith will usually interpret the letter 'G' as G\_D but a Freemason who is a Muslim might well reject that idea because he cannot accept that G\_D can be reduced to a mere letter of a human alphabet.<sup>1</sup> He will, quite often argue that the letter 'G' stands for geometric or perhaps geometry. For similar reasons a Freemason who is Jewish *might* argue that 'G' stands for goodness – the innate goodness within every human being. There are several other possible interpretations. Once the GLoS expressed an opinion as to the meaning of the letter 'G' it would become the *de facto* interpretation and therefore widely accepted by most Scottish Freemasons. If GLoS provided such interpretations it would, in effect, create a Scottish Masonic Dogma and which could be used to define Freemasonry as a religion – something that Freemasons have always rejected.

Scottish Freemasonry is therefore considered to be an individual experience, or journey, albeit one taken with the help, assistance and guidance of other Freemasons. The meaning and interpretation of Scottish Masonic Ritual, Regalia and Symbolism, for good reason, is not fixed and is left to the interpretation of the individual Freemason. This is one reason why Scottish Freemasonry remains unique in the world and long may it remain so.

Robert L D Cooper  
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1 G\_D is used here in deference to our Jewish and Muslim Brethren who do not render G\_D in the Christian manner.