

MASONIC "FIRE"

Bro. Yoshio Washizu wrote this very interesting article on Masonic "FIRE" or toasts which was published in Vol 111, 1998 Ars Quatuor Coronatorum Transactions. As you will see from the article (which we had to condense because of space limitations), Masonic toasting after banquets is a tradition, virtually, "time immemorial." -- Editor

Masonic "fire" is an old custom which may be derived from that of firing after toasts. The original practice was modified by our masonic ancestors to suit their needs.

The custom of gun-fire salutes after toasts already existed in the 17th century. Dr. Richard Kuerden (or Jackson) MD (1623-6900?) of Preston in Lancashire, compiled a Brief Description of the Burrough and Town of Preston(1682-6, in which he described a celebration of the Preston Gild Merchant thus:

"...the Mayor, with his great attendance is received in the streets by his guards of Souldiers and Companys of Trade, he makes his procession to the Church gate bans, where he and his attendance are entertained with a speech made by one of the chief Schollars of the School, a Barrel or Hogshead of nappy Ale standing close by the Barrs is broached, and a glass offered to the Mayor, who begins a good prosperous health to the King, afterwards to the Queen, the Nobility and Gentry having pledged the same; at each health begun by Mr. Mayor, it is attended with a volley of shott from the musketiers attending; the country people there present drinking of the remainder."

Here is another example of the 17th century custom of toasting associated with gun-fire. In February 1694 Captain Thomas Phillips, in his account of the voyage of the ship Hannibal, referred to a similar practice thus:

"In this garden [of Cape Coast Castle on the West Coast of Africa] Captain Shurley and I entertain'd the agents, factors, and other officers of the castle at dinner before our departure... where we enjoy'd ourselves plentifully, having each of us six of our quarter-deck guns brought ashore, with powder, &c., and our gunners to ply them; which they did to purpose, _ and made them roar merrily, firing eleven at every health."

Two months later Phillips and some other officers dined with the native chief who occupied Christiansborg Castle, having captured it from the Danes. When they were ascended, the Chief drank to them in a glass of brandy and all the guns in the fort were discharged. After dinner he "drank the king of England's, the African company's, and our own healths frequently, with vollies of cannon."

Some believe, however, that such a practice has nothing to do with the origin of the term, masonic "fire," but that it is rather the conversion into reality of what is really a metaphor.

It is unknown exactly when masonic "fire" started. Anderson recorded in his *New Book of Constitutions* (1738) that Desaguliers, the newly installed Grand Master, "reviv'd the old regular and peculiar Toasts or Healths of the Free Masons" on June 24, 1719. We do not know what those "old regular and peculiar Toasts" were like and whether or not the "firing" was practiced then. It is in French exposures published in the late 1730s and the early 1740s that we find the earliest reference to the practice of masonic "fire." For example, here is an extract from the *Reception d'un FreyMaCon* (1737):

"...this ceremony [initiation] ended, & this explanation given, the Candidate is called Brother, & they seat themselves at Table, where they drink, with the permission of the Worshipful Grand Master [the Will.] to the health of the new Brother. Each has his Bottle before him; when they want to drink, they say, give the Powder, everyone rises, the Grand Master says, charge; the Powder, which is the Wine, is poured into the, glass; the Grand Master says, lay your hands to your firelocks [armes], and they drink to the health of the Brother, carrying the glass to the mouth in three movements; after which, & before replacing the glass on the Table, it is carried to the left breast, then to the right, & then forwards, all in three movements, & in three movements it is set down perpendicularly on the Table, they clap their hands three times & each of them cries three times Vivat."

On the other hand, the earliest reference to such a practice in England is contained in *Three Distinct Knocks* (1760), from which the following description is taken:

"Every Man has a Glass set him, and a large Bowl of Punch, or what they like, is set in the Center of the Table; and the senior Deacon charges (as they call it) in the North and East, and the junior Deacon in the South and West; for it is their duty to do so, i.e., to fill all the Glasses.

Then the Master takes up his Glass, and gives a Toast to the King and the Craft, with Three Times Three in the Prentice's; and they all say Ditto, and drink all together, minding the Master's Motion: They do the same with the empty Glass that he doth; that is, he draws it across his Throat Three Times..., and then makes Three Offers to put it down; At the third, they all set their Glasses down together, which they call `firing': Then they hold the Lefthand Breast-high, and clap Nine Times with the Right, their Foot going at the same Time: When this is done, they all sit down."

The same source notes that the reason for their drinking three times three is:

"...because there were antiently but Three Words, Three Signs and Three Gripes; but there have been Three added, viz. The Grand Sign of a Master, the Pass-Gripe of a Fellow-Craft, and Pass-Word, which is Twelve in all for you to remember, viz. The Word, Sign and Gripe of an enter'd Apprentice is Three: The Word, Sign, Gripe, Pass-Gripe and Pass-Word of a Fellow-Craft is Five; And the Master hath Four, viz. The Sign, the Grand Sign, the Gripe and Word, which is Twelve."

However, just because the earliest reference to masonic "fire" is found in French exposure does not mean necessarily that the custom originated in France. No reference is made to this custom in Samuel Prichard's *Masonry Dissected* published in 1730. During the next 30 years few exposures

were published in England-perhaps partly because of the great popularity of Prichard's booklet. There is no telling if masonic "fire" was in practice in England during that period. It could have been practiced in England first and then exported to France. Or it could have started in France and English freemasons adopted it later. No definite conclusion can be drawn because there are insufficient records available on this matter.

Masonic "fire" with Brethren crashing down thick-based drinking glasses on the table was once a common practice.

The use of such firing glasses is now much less common, however, and the "fire" is more usually accompanied by the Brethren clapping their hands instead.

There is no official form of giving "fire." Basically, it is a variation of ".point-left-right" (PLR) followed by the "three times three" hand clapping-a typical "fire" procedure being **PLR, PLR, PLR**, one (point to the left), two (point to the right), one clap, short pause and three short claps followed by another set of three short claps.

Various theories have been suggested about the origin of the PLR. Listing several different theories, e.g., the Sign of the Cross made by a clergyman in benediction over food or drink, the "Hammer of Thor" sign used in Scandinavia in olden times to appease the great God, the motions made by a bricklayer when lifting cement with his trowel and a royal salute of 21 guns, Carr concluded none of them can be considered its origin and that such movements rather originate from one of the early modes of recognition. Some doubt there is any significance or symbolical meaning in masonic "fire" itself and believe it is a survival of a convivial custom originally carried out as a cheerful, boisterous routine.

The way masonic "fire" is given varies widely in different localities. Carr recalled an Australian freemason's description of several different forms of "fire" in use in that country.

"So there are many variations of masonic "fire." It cannot be said that a certain way of "firing" is the only correct way and that any other way is incorrect. It is a matter of local custom and the particular lodge."