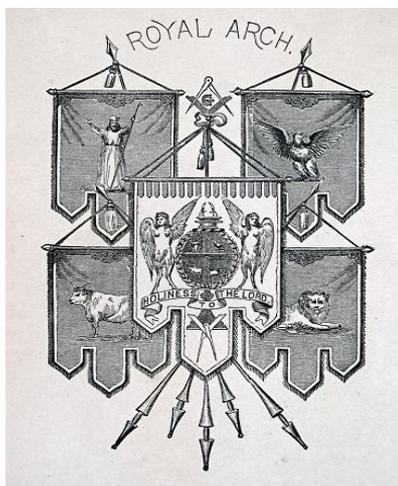


## The history of the Ceremony of Passing the Veils

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The story of the Ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' may be considered as emblematical of the wanderings of the Israelites in the Wilderness, and of their return from Babylon to Jerusalem after seventy years of 'Captivity', focusing on the passing of the four Veils by the three Sojourners. But the core subject of the ritual is none other but the Biblical segments, adjusted specifically for the Ceremony, which refer entirely to Moses and the Egyptian mythology (Exodus, Chaps. 3, 4, 6, 7 & 31). In Constitutions where the Ceremony takes place as an independent degree, the Lodge represents the Grand Lodge of Excellent Masters which convened in Babylon and was constituted by the descendents of the sons of 'Captivity'.

The 'Passing of the Veils', from the early years of its emergence until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was given in the form of a series of philosophical lectures, which later became ceremonies and around 1820 took the form of complete workings with an Opening and Closing formed in rituals. As a ceremony, as well as a degree it appears under different denominations, such as Excellent Master, Super-Excellent or High-Excellent Master, Excellent Mason, Excellent Master, Super-Excellent Mason, The Veils of the Temple, etc.

The degree of Excellent Mason or Excellent Master must not be confused with the degree of the Most Excellent Master of the York Rite, which refers to the construction of the first Temple of Solomon. That degree is based on the old Irish degrees of the Arch Mason and the Most Excellent Master.

In some cases, those degrees were akin to one another having a direct linkage to the Royal Arch, while in other cases they were performed as solitary ceremonies or as completely separated degrees, prior to or after the Exaltation to the Royal Arch degree. We also have the knowledge that in their primary era, the Veils were three, not four as today, and corresponded only to the degree of the Excellent Mason, while the White one, which was added later on, corresponded to the degree of the Super-Excellent Mason. The Veils' degrees were performed either into Chapters or into Encampments.

Although, most of the historians of Freemasonry mention that the Veils' Ceremony first appeared in the mid of 1770's in Ireland, and specifically in Dublin, and was later on introduced to Scotland through the Early Grand Encampment of Ireland<sup>1</sup>, the first written report we have is that in the Minutes of the *Journeymen Lodge of Dumfries* No. 62 on the roll of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, on October 8<sup>th</sup> 1770<sup>2</sup>.

As to the first appearance of the degrees of Excellent and Super-Excellent in Ireland, the first tangible written record is indeed traced to Dublin in 1774 in the Lodge No. 506 on the roll of the Grand Lodge of Ireland, four years after the aforementioned report in the Minutes of the Scottish Lodge No. 62 above.



*The Royal Arch Room in Grand Lodge Headquarters in Molesworth Street Dublin*

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century these degrees were proven to be very popular in Ireland and their expansion within the entire territory was a matter of a very short time. During the same period, those degrees had been given a prominent place in a wider system of Capitulary and Knights Templar Masonry taking form in the country<sup>3</sup>.

From 1800 to almost 1850, most of the Irish Chapters probably used only three Veils and some continued that practice until 1864, when the Supreme Grand Chapter of Ireland approbated that the content of the Excellent Mason and Super-Excellent Mason degrees be integrated in the ritual of the Royal Arch degree and be used as its completion. Since that time and till our days, the Ceremony of 'Passing of the Veils' in Ireland is considered to be the first part of the ritual of Exaltation to the Royal Arch degree.

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Forster, *The Veils in Royal Arch Masonry*, The Chapter of Research No. 222, Transactions 1986-1995, Dublin 2008, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> John Alfred Grantham, *An introduction to Mark Masonry*, Manchester 1934, p. 34. The Minutes refer to the exalting of a Brethren to the Royal Arch degree and display the form of his Masonic diploma as follows:

*«...To all whom it may concern, We the Master etc, ... do hereby assert & certify to all enlightened men that our worthy Brother, having been examined and ascertained that he is dully Initiated as an Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, Master Mason, and Mark Master Mason, was elected by us as Pass the Chair and was thereafter exalted to the Sublime Degree of Excellent Mason, Super-Excellent Mason, Arch Mason, and we do hereby recommend him to, ....»*

<sup>3</sup> The first and most widespread system of additional degrees developed in Ireland in that time was comprised of Pass the Chair, Arch Mason, Royal Arch Mason, Excellent Mason and Super-Excellent Mason degrees. In 1784 a second relevant system was formed, consisting of: Pass the Chair, Excellent Mason, Super-Excellent Mason, Arch Mason, Royal Arch Mason and Red Cross Mason degrees. The Irish system, in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was particularised and comprised of the degrees of Past Master (which should not be confused with the aforementioned degree of Pass the Chair), Excellent Mason, Super-Excellent Mason, Arch Mason and Royal Arch Mason, as well as thirteen additional degrees chivalric and non-chivalric.

Parentetically, we will mention that American Freemasons borrowed several degrees from the Irish Capitular system, and in 1797 mixed them in part and formed the well-known York Rite<sup>4</sup>. The Ceremony of 'Passing of the Veils' is in the second part of our ritual of the Royal Arch degree, integrated with the Exaltation.

As we return to Scotland, we see the Ceremony taking place, perhaps with a few alterations, like in Ireland, within the framework of the degrees of Excellent Mason and Super-Excellent Mason, up to the end of 1817, the year when the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Scotland was established. In 1819 this new Grand Body approved a series of degrees, which would be under its rule, having integrated the elements of the Excellent Mason, Super-Excellent Mason and most probable the Arch Mason in a single degree, that of the Excellent Master, which preceded the Royal Arch degree<sup>5</sup>. This new degree made use of only three Veils, as it took place in Ireland until 1864, but, when in 1845 the Supreme Grand Chapter of Scotland rewrote the ritual of Excellent Master, the fourth Veil, the White, was integrated into it.

In Scotland today, as in 1819, the degree of Excellent Master of 'Passing of the Veils' is a completely separate degree with its own Opening and Closing of workings. It has special knocks, signs and grips or tokens, apron and jewel and takes place in Lodges appending to the Chapters on the roll of the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Scotland.

Freemasons from other Constitutions, who do not possess the two first degrees of the Capitular system, as it is practiced today in Scotland (that is the Mark Master Mason and the Excellent Master) are not permitted to participate in the workings even though they may possess the degree of the Royal Arch Mason.



*The crypt of the R.A. Chapter Canongate Kilwinning No. 56 in Edinburgh*

<sup>4</sup> American Freemasons borrowed the Mark Master degree and the Royal Arch and together with the content of the Pass the Chair, which they re-named as Past Master, and the degree of Arch Mason, which they probably changed and re-named as Most Excellent Master, along with the addition of several Capitular and Knights Templar Chivalric degrees, formed the American Rite or York Rite.

<sup>5</sup> During the 1830s, for someone to be exalted to the Royal Arch degree it was prerequisite that he must have already taken the Mark, Master Passed the Chair degrees, as well as the Excellent Master degrees which contained the ceremony of 'Passing the Veils'. Since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the Master Past the Chair degree was eradicated and to this day the Capitular degrees system of the Scottish Jurisdiction is comprised of the Mark Master, Most Excellent Master and The Royal Arch, as well as the degrees of the Installed Three Principals of Trinity and the Worshipful Master of Mark Master's Lodge.

In England the Ceremony was taking place since the 1790s in the Lodges of the Grand Lodge of the *Ancients*, which was established mainly by Irish who lived in England and their method of workings reflected the Irish practices<sup>6</sup>. It is made clear from the Minutes of several English Lodges, that workings in the degrees of Excellent Mason and Super-Excellent Mason were separate, initiation fees were collected for each degree and whoever bore the degree received a separate jewel and certificate<sup>7</sup>.

With the unification of the two English Grand Lodges, those of the *Moderns* and the *Ancients* in 1813, things changed overnight. According to the second article of the act of Union, it was made clear that Ancient Freemasonry consisted of three degrees and non more, viz. those of the Entered Apprentice, the Fellow Craft, and the Master Mason including the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch. Therefore, all additional degrees which were practised in English Lodges and Chapters were automatically dropped and the Ceremony of 'Passing of the Veils' lapsed. In some cases though, English Masons of the Royal Arch continued to perform the Ceremony, as part of the ritual, especially in Northern England, ignoring the decision of the new Grand Lodge. This odd phenomenon, although in very isolated areas, continued till the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Officially, the part of the Ceremony of the three Veils was severed from the English ritual of the Royal Arch degree many years after the Union of the two Grand Chapters of England, in 1817. In 1833 the Supreme Grand Chapter of England began the revision of the ceremonies and ritual, which was completed in 1836. Until that time, and although the Royal Arch was accepted as part of the unalloyed Ancient Freemasonry, the ritual and its catechisms continued to contain several references of Christian nature.

The Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England and First Grand Principal of the Supreme Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of England, the Duke of Sussex, Augustus Frederick, was appointed as Chairman of the special committee formed to perform the revisions. According to some, he was tolerant in religious matters and his views were ecumenical. He believed and wished to ensure that Freemasonry would be open to every man, regardless of his religion, as long as that man believed in the Grand Architect of heaven and earth and performed the holy duties of morality. On the other hand, he was opposed to any reference of the Holy Scriptures within the rituals.

He was supported in his views by his personal friend the Revd George Adam Browne, a high-ranking member of the English Freemasonry and a high-ranking administrative executive of the Trinity College, at the University of Cambridge. It is almost certain that Browne was a positive influence to the Duke of Sussex on the matter of de-Christianisation of the ritual, as the time of the revision (1833-1836) in both of the grand old English Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, as well throughout most of Europe, was the time that philhellenism and neoclassicism thrived. The ancient writers and Plato in particular were opportune and the Old Testament perceptions on *Theogony* (the creation of gods) were replaced by the values held by the Enlightenment: Freedom, Equality, Democracy and *Orthos Logos* [*Ορθός Λόγος*].

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Forster, *The Veils in Royal Arch Masonry*, The Chapter of Research No. 222, Transactions 1986-1995, Dublin 2008, pp. 33, 37.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 36.

In this atmosphere, a drastic cut of all Christian references in the Royal Arch ritual and ceremonies were unavoidable. One of the symbolism of the four Veils, which referred to the four cardinal elements of nature, namely Air, Water, Fire and Earth, was transferred to the five regular Platonic Bodies. It is from that era that the Tetrahedron [1 Triple Tau – symbolises Fire], the Octahedron [2 Triple Taus – symbolises Air], the Hexahedron (or commonly the cube) [3 Triple Taus – symbolises Earth], the Icosahedron [5 Triple Taus – symbolises Water] and the Dodecahedron [9 Triple Taus – symbol of the Universe] were introduced to the English ritual as well as in the Chapter's regular equipment and were settled in front of the Altar.

The fourth Veil, the White one, is to be symbolically found in the white robes of the three Sojourners, whose places are in the West in front of the door of the Chapter. The three first Veils, the Blue, Purple and Red ones, are symbolically represented in the colours of the robes of the three Principals.



*The Duke of Sussex*



*The Revd George Adam Browne*

Finally, let it be mentioned that the Ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' was re-animated in 1902 by the Royal Arch Chapters around Bristol, where it is performed up until today, most exceptionally and under specific conditions, by special permission granted by the Supreme Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of England. It is a unique case in the English [Royal Arch] Constitution. I would like to note at this point that just a year before the Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters of England and Wales has secured a patent from the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Scotland to confer the degree of Excellent Master (viz. the Ceremony of 'Passing the Veils') to those members who are already in possession of the Order of the Silver Trowel (viz. the Past Thrice Illustrious Masters).

In summary, we now know with certainty that the Ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' was an integral part of Royal Arch Masonry during the first 60 years of its history and today it is integrated only within the ritual of the Royal Arch Mason degree of the American York Rite, as well as in Ireland and Greece, while it is performed as a separate degree in Scotland, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Israel, Canada and elsewhere.

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