

The Beehive & the Stock of Knowledge



SHAWN EYER LOOKS AT SOME OF THE CHALLENGING LESSONS OF ONE OF THE THIRD DEGREE'S CLASSICAL EMBLEMS

In 1874 a new Masonic magazine began publication in northern California. *The Craftsman* was edited by Bro.: Charles W. Crocker of Mount Moriah Lodge N^o 44 in San Francisco. Its introductory article bears these very strong words:

The day is past when the ignorant Mason can shine. The time has come when more is demanded of a 'bright' Mason than the knowledge of the Ritual. The Mason who claims to be 'well posted' must read; he must inform himself of the origin, the history, the philosophy, the laws and literature of our art, or he is a drone on our hive, and only valued for the dollars and cents he pays into the treasury of his lodge. Knowledge makes prosperity, and prosperity freedom; and he who has not these three qualifications is not a fit Craftsman, and can not be used on the building of that Temple Masonry intends to erect.¹

A statement like this reminds us that the Beehive, like other monitorial symbols of the third degree, holds very serious and somber connotations—even a hint of warning.

We are quick to remember that "The Bee-Hive

is an emblem of industry, and recommends the practice of that virtue of all created beings, from the highest seraph in heaven, to the lowest reptile of the dust."² But this symbol is no mere reminder to "keep busy," as so many interpret it. Our third degree lecture is clear:

Thus was man formed for social and active life, the noblest part of the work of God; and he that will so demean himself as not to be endeavoring to add to the common stock of knowledge and understanding, may be deemed a *drone* in the hive of nature, a useless member of society, and unworthy of our protection as Masons.³

Each Mason knows that he has certain obligations to every "worthy brother." But the same responsibilities do not necessarily apply, according to this lecture, to a brother who cannot be so described. Our tradition explicitly defines this unworthiness: in the first degree, in reference to one who *refuses to conform to the initiatic process*, and in the third to anyone who *demeans himself by means of a literal or intellectual laziness*.

Although these lessons seem unfamiliar to many, they are not tangential Masonic teachings; they are given good emphasis in the lectures of most American jurisdictions. Even the villains of the third degree are depicted as individuals who are not willing to become “worthy” through labor and expertise, but demand shortcuts to the attainment of Master Mason status, with disastrous results.

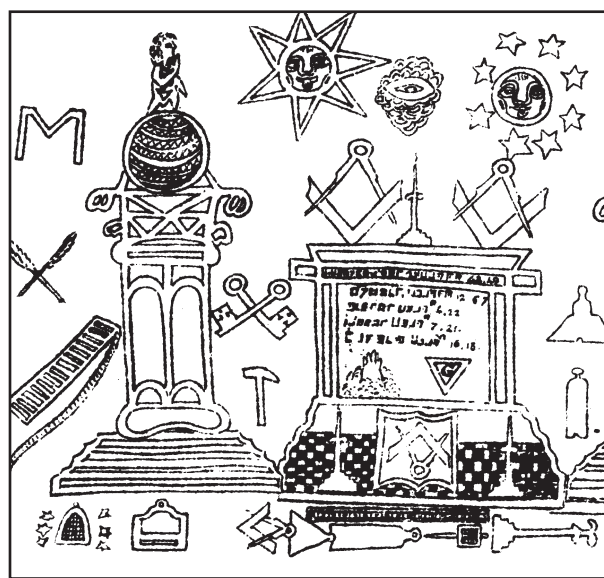
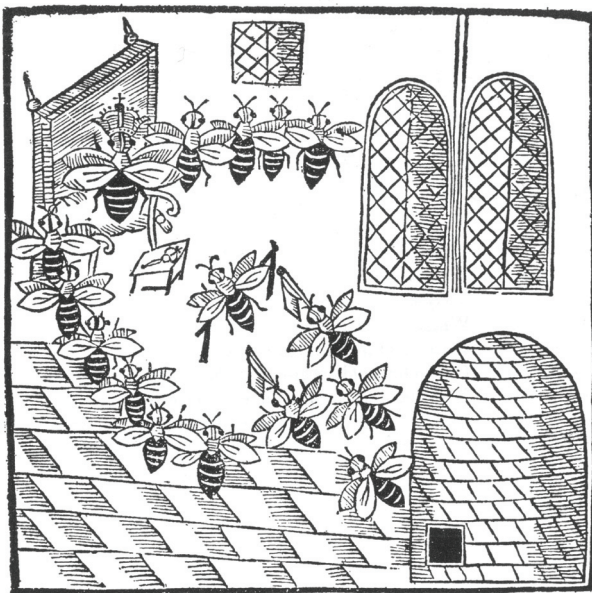
The harshness of the Craft’s teaching that drones are “unworthy of our protection as Masons” is based on a fact of nature: when autumn arrives or resources are scarce, drones are expelled from the hive by the worker bees. Drones do not build the hive, nor do they make honey; a drone’s only real purpose is to mate with the queen bee, which is fatal to him — so any drones still in the hive as winter approaches are ones who never mated. The worker bees, who up until this time have served, fed and defended the drones, expel them. The layabouts are physically pushed out, one by one — banished from the protection of the hive. Even though all

of the bees in the hive (except for the queen) will eventually freeze, still Nature sees fit to proactively dispose of worthless members of the social order.

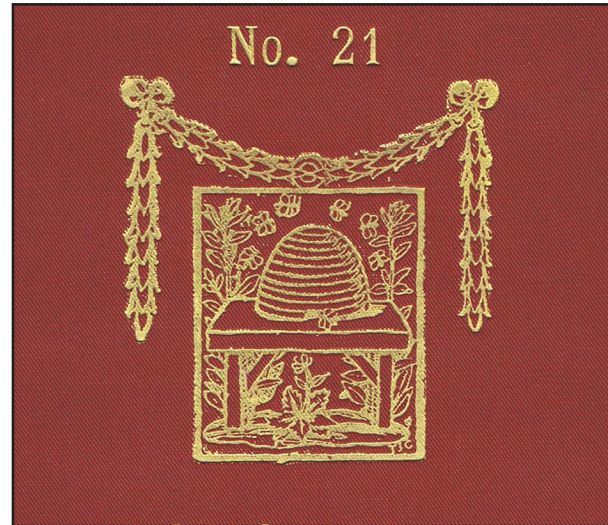
The unknown authors of the lecture chose this harsh reality to impress upon us the fact that our Freemasonry must not be passive. The Craft must be continually re-engaged through mindful endeavor.

Neglect of this can make us little more than liabilities to our Order’s noble mission, however contentedly we dine. This is a lesson that may have been with us since the beginning of modern speculative Freemasonry. A satirical essay on Freemasonry (likely written by Bro.: Jonathan Swift, circa 1725) claimed that:

A Bee has in all Ages and Nations been the Grand Hieroglyphick of Masonry . . . What Modern Masons call a Lodge was for the above Reasons by Antiquity call’d a hive of Free-Masons, and for the same Reasons when a Dissention happens in a Lodge the going off and forming another Lodge is to this Day call’d swarming.⁴



Left: Woodcut from John Daye’s *The Parliament of Bees*, 1641. Right: The Beehive as visible in the Kirkwall Scroll (Scotland, mid to late 1700s). Previous page: Silver medal struck in 1744 by Lodge Jonathan of the Pillar in Brunswick, depicting the Beehive surrounded by a swarm, under a motto meaning, “I abhor the profane mass, and seal myself within.”



Left: Embroidery of the Beehive on an apron of the eighteenth century. Right: The emblem of the Lodge of Emulation № 21, established in 1723, with the Beehive as its central symbol.

Swift's essay blurs the line between parody and fact, but in this particular case it reveals at least something of how this symbol was used at that time. George Bullamore, in a seminal *Quatuor Coronati* paper, documented that the Beehive is well-represented in the iconography of the early Lodges.⁵ Sculptures of the Beehive are found in some extremely old lodge rooms.⁶ Images of bees and hives are found carved into some of the oldest Masonic furniture.⁷ The Beehive figures prominently on a good number of Lodge seals, emblems, medals and jewels of the eighteenth century.⁸ Perhaps most interesting of all, at least one English Lodge is in the possession of a pre-Union third degree tracing board which features the Beehive; this Lodge's ritual even retains an explanation thereof in its lectures.⁹

Bullamore notes that "the symbol was kept from the Entered Apprentices in many lodges," and theorized that it once possessed a lost esoteric meaning that would explain its special association with the third degree.¹⁰ He and others have surveyed a wide range of ancient folklore and contemporary culture in searching for this lost meaning. But when we consider the early Masonic repre-

sentations in which the bees around the hive are swarming in a strongly defensive posture, together with the strident language of the teaching about those brethren who "demean" themselves by failing to enrich the common stock of knowledge, and thus becoming "useless" and "unworthy of our protection as Masons," it seems that the early claim that the Beehive represents the Lodge is sound. Perhaps a better way to express it is that the Beehive represents an *ideal Lodge culture*. After all, bees do what good Masons ought to do: they build their habitation according to the rules of geometry, they guard it from intrusion, they labor in union, they maintain order, they *gather what is scattered*, and within the confines of their temple, transform it into nourishment. A Masonic song penned in 1762 by Christopher Smart alludes to honey as a symbol of wisdom:

A MASON is great and respected,
 Tho Cavillers wrangle and mock;
 His Plan is in WISDOM projected,
 His Edifice built on a ROCK.

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THE BEEHIVE

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Then fill up the Glass and be funny, [happy — Ed.]
Attend to due METHOD and FORM;
The Bee that can make the most Honey,
Is fairly the Flow'r of the Swarm.¹¹

Brethren, we have a choice of destinies. While being a mere drone does not mean exile and death for us Freemasons, it does lead to a deadened awareness, intellectual poverty and, ultimately, the failure to fulfill our real Masonic potential. It is up to us whether our hearty festivities will be those of a merely empty and oblivious contentment, or celebrations of real wisdom gained. Those lodges that “make the most honey” will enjoy the sweetest delicacy of all: MORE LIGHT.

Highest of all in rank, we must place that industry which is devoted to the acquisition of knowledge. This every one may combine with that necessary for his support; and every one is elevated to a higher position by every increase of knowledge that he makes. Even manual labour is best performed by men of intelligence; but knowledge leads to far better results than this, and as the mind is expanded by it, new sources of delight are opened, which never cease to flow.

W.: BRO.: CHALMERS I. PATON, 1873¹²

NOTES

1. Larissa P. Watkins. *American Masonic Periodicals, 1811–2001* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2003), 37.
2. Thomas Smith Webb, *The Freemason's Monitor, or Illustrations of Masonry in Two Parts* (New York: Southwick & Crooker, 1802), 77–78. This is the first known appearance in print of the familiar lecture about the Beehive. However, it may not be the origin of the tradition; there is evidence that suggests an eighteenth century English origin for the passage. See note 8.
3. Webb, *Monitor*, 78.
4. D. Knoop, G. P. Jones & D. Hamer, *Early Masonic Catechisms*, 2^d ed. (Manchester, UK: Manchester: University Press, 1963), 229–39 (pp. 233–34).
5. George W. Bullamore, “The Beehive and Freemasonry.” *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* 36 (1923): 219–46.
6. Bernard E. Jones, *Freemasons' Guide and Compendium* (London: George G. Harrap, 1956), 408. And Bullamore relates reports that sculptures of a Beehive were sometimes used in the floor displays of old English lodges. (“The Beehive,” 232)
7. Bullamore, “The Beehive,” 221. For an example that may be as old as 1750, see Neville Barker Cryer, *Masonic Halls of England: The Midlands* (Shepperton, UK: Lewis Masonic, 1989), 30 (photo, p. 25).
8. Bullamore, “The Beehive,” 220–22; W.T.R. Marvin, *Materials for a Catalogue of Masonic Medals* (Boston, 1877), 16, 30, 65, 67, 69.
9. “The Beehive teaches us that as we are born into the world rational and intelligent beings, so ought we also to be industrious ones, and not stand idly by or gaze with listless indifference on even the meanest of our fellow creatures in a state of distress if it is in our power to help them without detriment to ourselves or our connections; the constant practice of this virtue is enjoined on all created beings, from the highest seraph in heaven to the meanest reptile that crawls in the dust.” From Bullamore, “The Beehive,” 222; in his response, Gilbert Daynes agreed that the passage “clearly denotes a common origin” (236) with the American working. This lecture was still being given in the 1980s; see Neville Barker Cryer, *Masonic Halls of England: The South* (Shepperton, UK: Lewis Masonic, 1989), 14. The Royal Cumberland Lodge's board is reproduced in Julian Rees, *Tracing Boards of the Three Degrees in Craft Freemasonry Explained* (Hersham, UK: Lewis Masonic, 2009), 59.
10. Bullamore, “The Beehive,” 223, 231.
11. Anonymous. *A Defence of Free-Masonry, as Practiced in the Regular Lodges* (London: W. Flexney, 1765), 64; cf. Marie Roberts, *British Poets and Secret Societies* (Totawam, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1986), 22–23. In a similar vein, W.L. Wilmshurst refers to “a high and holy land . . . where the bees of Wisdom hive” — a symbol of the Supreme Grand Lodge which figures so prominently in his work (*The Way to the East* [London: Watkins, 1938], 18).
12. C. I. Paton, *Freemasonry: Its Symbolism, Religious Nature and Law of Perfection* (London: Reeves & Turner, 1873), 184.