

THE "OTHER" WORKING TOOLS -- THE CHISEL, THE SKIRRET, AND THE PENCIL

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-Editor

The preponderance of triads, or sets of three items, strikes the newly made Mason. In Freemasonry, there seems to be three of everything: three Degrees, three Principal Officers, three Greater Lights, three Lesser Lights, three Immovable Jewels; the list could go on and on. In fact, Freemasonry abounds in so many symbolic triads it is even more striking when a set of Masonic symbols does not come in a group of three. In most U. S. jurisdictions, there are three working tools only in the Fellow Craft Degree; the Entered Apprentice degree has two working tools, and the Master Mason Degree but one. In other countries, notably other English-speaking countries, each Degree has a triad of working tools. Under the United Grand Lodge of England, and in most English-speaking Lodges which work Emulation or some similar or related ritual, the third working tool of an Entered Apprentice is the Chisel, and the Master Mason's working

tools are the Skirret, the Pencil and the Compasses.

Why this difference? In 1832, a meeting known to Masonic history as the Baltimore Convention changed many key practices of U. S. Masonry due to the anti-Masonic sentiments caused by the Morgan Affair. Most Grand Lodges in the English speaking world -- in Canada, Australia, and elsewhere -- are descended from the Grand Lodge of Scotland or the United Grand Lodge of England, and so many Masonic practices in the English-speaking world are very similar; the differences occur in the United States. These "other" masonries have other working tools, which teach important lessons; without considering them, our Masonic journey is truly incomplete. This paper will look at the working tools of the First and Third Degree, paying special attention to the Chisel, the Skirret, and the Pencil, with a discussion of the Trowel, which will be of interest to Canadian brethren.

Under the United Grand Lodge of England, the first two working tools of the Entered Apprentice-- the 24-inch Gauge and the Common Gavel -- are the same as in the United States. It is important to note, that although the explanation of the 24-inch Gauge is very similar to what Masons in the United States know, the explanation of the Common Gavel is slightly different in another Grand Jurisdiction: Scotland. The Scottish ritual explains the Gavel "teaches us that skill without exertion is of little avail, that labour is the lot of man, for the heart may conceive, and the head may devise in vain, if the hand be not prompt to execute the design." This is an interesting contrast to the more commonly known interpretation of the Common Gavel as serving to "divest the heart and soul of the vices and superfluities of life," the Scottish Gavel explanation emphasizes the need for exertion and effort in a timely manner to accomplish our goals.

Although the 24-inch Gauge and the Common Gavel may be familiar to U. S. Craft Masons, the Chisel is not. Emulation ritual explains that the Chisel "points out to us the advantages of education, by which means alone we are rendered fit members of regularly organized Society." This equation of the chisel with education is especially interesting, since we often think of education as a cumulative endeavor, through which we amass certain knowledge, skills, and qualifications. The Chisel, of course, is a tool of great sharpness that cleaves unnecessary rock from the usable stone. The idea that education might pare away the unnecessary while leaving us with only what is vital is a profound and almost paradoxical idea that merits contemplation. Oddly, the chisel seems to be a tool of paradoxes: small, yet powerful; emblematic of education by elimination, and not accumulation. It makes sense, though, when you consider the paradoxical nature of a candidate's preparation: "neither naked nor clad, barefoot nor shod," and, I would add, unable to see and yet not lost. The chisel points, in some sense, to the paradoxical nature of life: just as we "neither naked nor clad, barefoot nor shod," can be small, yet powerful.

The three English Working Tools of a Master Mason are wholly foreign to the American Mason. Although the Compasses has special significance to the Master Mason, the Emulation ritual ascribes and reinforces the use of this valuable tool as taught to the Entered Apprentice in the United States. Emulation states that "the Compasses remind us of [God's] unerring and impartial justice, Who, having defined for our instruction the limits of good and evil, will reward or punish as we have obeyed or disregarded His Divine commands." The circumscribing aspect of the Compasses is here reiterated, with a special emphasis on the idea of justice, and that if we fail to subdue our passions we will be judged for it, even if we escape earthly punishment.

As stated before, while the Compasses are familiar to every Master Mason in the United States, the Skirret and Pencil are not, but neither are their lessons only apt for those who have been raised to the Sublime Degree. The Emulation ritual explains that the Skirret "is an implement which acts on a centre pin, whence a line is drawn to mark out ground for the foundation of the intended structure." This is the operative use of the Skirret, and the ritual goes on to explain that, for the speculative mason, "the Skirret points out that straight and undeviating line of conduct laid down for our pursuit in the Volume of Sacred Law."

The Skirret is a tool to be used in the preparations for laying a foundation. It is similar to a spool of thread with a handle. The loose end of the thread has a loop or ring which will catch the centre pin. The Skirret's thread is allowed to unwind and is kept taut. Once the desired length is reached, a piece of chalk or other marking implement may be used to mark the foundation, the Skirret's thread keeping the chalk in a straight line all the while. It serves a similar purpose to a ruler used when drawing a straight line on a piece of paper. The genius of the Skirret is, in part, its versatility. With the thread wound up, it takes up little space, and could even be carried in the pocket of an apron. When the Skirret's thread is affixed to a centre pin and allowed to unwind, it becomes longer than any practicable ruler or straightedge could be, and just as sure. When we consider these qualities in relation to the Volume of Sacred Law, the Skirret becomes the tool which helps us to understand how the Volume of Sacred Law applies to our own lives. Most of the Volumes of the Sacred Law -- be it the Bible, Tanach, Koran, Vedas, Zend Avesta -- were written millennia ago, in cultures and contexts very different from our contemporary world. And yet we are instructed that the Volume of the Sacred Law as "the rule and guide of our faith." How do we apply the stories and laws of ancient books to our daily life? Through the use of reason and faith, which is here represented by the Skirret.

The third working tool of the Third Degree is the Pencil. For many of us, the pencil was the first writing implement we took into our hands. After playing with finger-paints and crayons, our first arithmetic and writing lessons were done with a pencil. The Canadian Rite ritual explains that the pencil "teaches us that all our words and actions are not only observed but recorded by the Most High, to whom we must render an account of our conduct through life." The pencil reminds us that our actions not only have consequences on earth but also write a record of our conduct by which we will ultimately be judged. If we look at the Pencil more literally, it is, like the Compasses and Skirret, a tool of planning. The Compasses and Pencil can be used to draw designs upon the Trestleboard, and the Skirret then helps the Master Mason prepare the ground for the foundation, before the first Fellow Craft tries the first squared stone, even before the first Apprentice descends to the quarry with gauge, gavel, and chisel in hand. As Masters, we are now overseers of the work -- we are Masters not just of the Craft, but of ourselves. Apprentices are rough ashlar, selected for the building but completely unprepared, unworked. Fellow Crafts are perfect ashlar, made ready by the hands of the workmen and tried by the plumb, square, and level. Masters, however, are stones ready to become part of the building itself. A Master, ideally, has subdued his passions, learned his work, and is now complete. Masonry, if done correctly, will have done its work on the Master, and then the Master takes a step back, to guide the Apprentices and Fellow Crafts; he is part of the Temple, and he will now direct the rest of the Temple to be built. In the same way, Masters are expected to be able to oversee the work of building the Temple in their own souls. It is no longer sufficient to chip away upon the stone, or to try ourselves by Fellow Craft's tools; now, as Masters, we must actively plan and contemplate the building, using the Compasses, Skirret, and Pencil.

Although the Third Degree is the culmination and completion of the Craft Degrees, we see many times in the ritual suggestions that the Third Degree is also a degree of commencement, and of a return to the beginning or foundation of our Masonic journey. The Compasses, Skirret, and Pencil are the tools used before all others. They are tools of planning and design; we are masters of that which we can control; as Masters, we ought to be stones, tried and true, fitting and ready for the Temple, while also helping govern the craft with wisdom, providing strength and support for the other workmen, and adorning the Craft with the beauty of the fine work we will leave behind.

The Trowel is the Master Mason's unique working tool in the United States, he being invested with all the implements of Masonry as well. The ritual tells us that operative Masons used it "to spread the cement that unites the building into one common mass," and that speculative Masonry uses it "to spread the cement of brotherly love and affection which unites us into one sacred band or society of friends and brothers, among whom should exist no contention, except that noble contention, or rather, emulation, of who best can work and best agree." Considered so, the Trowel is an excellent complement to the Compasses, Skirret, and Pencil. While the Compasses, Skirret, and Pencil are used before the first stone is hewn, the Trowel is used to complete the building, both literally and symbolically, uniting the stones and the brethren as well as the disparate elements which make up our very selves.

If the Entered Apprentice's degree symbolizes the physical and the Fellow Craft's degree the spiritual, with the Master Mason's degree introducing some sense of balance, then it would make sense that the complete complement of a Master's working tools would be tools both of beginning, which the 24-inch Gauge, Gavel, Chisel, Compasses, Skirret, and Pencil all are, and tools of finishing, which the Plumb, Square, Level, and Trowel are.

In most English, Canadian, Australian, and Scottish lodges, the trowel is unknown, and in American Lodges, Pencils are absent and Skirrets unidentifiable. Although we all share a common Masonic heritage, these differences indicate a diversity of Masonic practice. One of the greatest things about Masonry is the chance to travel, both within our own jurisdictions and within the greater Masonic world. These are just a few of the differences that we can notice if we travel to a Canadian Rite lodge, or a lodge working Emulation ritual in downtown London.

Canadian Rite lodges would be well-served to consider the Trowel, just as lodges in the United States would profit from considering Compasses, Skirret, and Plumb. In many ways, the best set of working tools for the Master Mason would be all four: tools of planning as well as tools of completion, since Master Masons must oversee the construction of the Temple from start to finish, from the laying of the first stone in the North East corner, to the final touches that complete the edifice of our Temple, our Craft, our lodges, and ourselves.



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