

# What are the Landmarks of Freemasonry?

*Presented in Open Lodge to the Brethren of Oracle Lodge 1003*

*by V. W. Bro. Paul Kenny*

We frequently refer in Freemasonry to the Landmarks of the Order, yet they are nowhere specified or listed. So, what constitutes a Masonic Landmark and is it even possible to list them?

In the Book of Constitutions of the Grand Lodge of Ireland the first of the Laws and Regulations states:

*"The Grand Lodge of Ireland, hereinafter called the Grand Lodge, as representing the whole Fraternity of Freemasons of Ireland, has an inherent right to make new Laws and Regulations, and to alter those already made, preserving at the same time the Ancient Landmarks."*

In Proverbs XXII, 28, is the injunction: *"Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set"* and in Deuteronomy XXVII, 17, is the malediction: *"Cursed be he that removeth his neighbour's landmark. And all the people shall say, Amen."* Frazer's *Folk Lore in the Old Testament* tells us that an ancient statute or custom of Rome directed that if any man ploughed up a boundary-stone both he and the oxen which had helped him commit the sacrilege should be held sacred to the God of Boundaries (Terminus) - that is, that both the man and his beasts should be placed outside the pale of the law, that anybody might slay them with impunity.

A Landmark is any historical event by which we estimate other events and things; it is a point outstanding in a course of advancement or development; but these are only part of what the Freemason has peculiarly in mind. He goes back to the Biblical idea of the rock that cannot be moved; he sees his landmarks as a history or a tradition; as a law, a rule, or a tenet; as a rite or a custom; as a system; as a prerogative or right; as something (to him) fundamental - each and all of them in existence and coming down to him from time immemorial.

Irish Craft ritual contains many references to landmarks among which are:

The Initiate is told in the first paragraph of the Charge to an Entered Apprentice:

*Brother..... as you have now gone through the ceremony of initiation, allow me to congratulate you on being admitted, by the unanimous consent of the Lodge, a member of our Ancient and Honourable Society; Ancient, as embodying principles that have existed from time immemorial; and honourable, as tending to make all those honourable who are strictly obedient to its precepts.*

*(Here I interpret 'principles and precepts' as an indirect reference to landmarks.)*

The Fellow Craft is told in the last paragraph of the Charge to the Fellow craft:

*As a Craftsman, in our private assemblies, you are entitled to offer your opinion on such subjects as are regularly introduced under the superintendence of the Master, whose duty it is to guard our Landmarks from encroachment.*

The Master Mason is told in the second paragraph of the Charge to a Master Mason:

*The Ancient Landmarks of the Craft are to be your constant care, and you are to preserve them sacred and inviolate, and never to sanction an infringement of our customs, or a deviation from established usages.*

Many of the best-known Masonic writers have expressed themselves on the subject of the landmarks. The difficulty of defining a Masonic landmark is admitted by all who have given the

subject serious thought. A hitherto generally accepted definition finds expression in *Principles and Practices of Masonic Jurisprudence (1869)*, by John W. Simons, Past Grand Master of New York:

*We assume those principles of action to be landmarks which have existed from time immemorial, whether in the written or unwritten law: which are identified with the form and essence of the Society: which, the great majority agree, cannot be changed, and which every mason is bound to maintain intact under the most solemn and inviolable sanctions.*

While such a definition has been generally accepted it is not beyond criticism.

To the customs, practices, tenets, traditions, and observances that can be proved to have existed from time immemorial, some Brethren would add any customs, even if not ancient, that are universally acknowledged; but, against this, it is solidly contended that were it possible for the Freemasons of the whole world to come together and agree on a new and common belief they would not and could not by so doing create a landmark. It is held that a landmark can be discovered, but not created; it cannot be changed or altered; it cannot be improved; it cannot be obliterated. Thus, a world concourse of masons, unable to create a landmark, would be equally unable to obliterate one.

William Preston's conception of a landmark was a boundary set up as a check to innovation. That looks well until you remember that the landmarks of masonry were not set up by anybody; they just were and are. A landmark has been defined as a fundamental part of freemasonry, something that cannot be altered without destroying the identity of freemasonry. Axel Poignant in *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* Vol. XXIV, maintains that every tenet of the Craft is a landmark, but an allegory or symbol that teaches or indicates it is not a landmark; further, that a landmark must be part and parcel of the Freemason's peculiar system of morality, and not of the allegory that veils and of the symbols that illustrate it. The teaching or meaning which the allegories convey may be a landmark. His statement, fanciful in some of its details, met with criticism, but was a courageous setting out of an understandable point of view, far more in keeping with the times than the lengthy lists printed in many Masonic books.

We have seen that the Freemason is charged with the duty of observing the landmarks. But what are they? The best writers on the subject are unanimous on two essential points:

1. A landmark must have existed from the 'time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary'.
2. A landmark is an element in the form or essence of the Society of such importance that Freemasonry would no longer be Freemasonry if it were removed.

If these two qualifications are used strictly to test whether certain practices, systems, principles, or regulations can be admitted as landmarks it will be found that there are in fact very few items that will pass this rigid test.

Just as there is no authoritative definition, so no landmarks are named by the Grand Lodge of Ireland, which, in its wisdom, has neither defined nor specified them. It has been well said that "by inference if the landmarks were approved by the Constitutions the same authority could disapprove, whereas landmarks are unchangeable." It should be impossible, therefore, for anybody to dogmatise in a matter in which Grand Lodge makes no pronouncement, and in which experienced masons cannot agree.

Masonic writers have often quoted a list of twenty-five so-called landmarks offered by the well-known American mason, Albert G. Mackey, the original editor of *An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry* (1858), since known in many editions:

1. The modes of recognition.

2. The division of Symbolic Masonry into Three Degrees.
3. The Legend of the Third Degree.
4. The government of the fraternity by a Presiding Officer called a Grand Master.
5. The prerogative of the Grand Master to preside over every assembly of the Craft.
6. The prerogative of the Grand Master to grant Dispensations for conferring degrees at irregular times.
7. The prerogative of the Grand Master to give dispensations for opening and holding Lodges.
8. The prerogative of the Grand Master to make Masons at sight.
9. The necessity of Masons to congregate in Lodges.
10. The government of the Craft, when so congregated in a Lodge by a Master and two Wardens.
11. The necessity that every Lodge, when congregated, should be duly tiled.
12. The right of every Mason to be represented in all general meetings of the Craft and to instruct his representatives.
13. The Right of every Mason to appeal from the decision of his brethren in Lodge convened, to the Grand Lodge or General Assembly of Masons.
14. The right of every Mason to visit and sit in every regular Lodge.
15. No visitor, unknown as a Mason, can enter a Lodge without first passing an examination according to ancient usage.
16. No Lodge can interfere in the business of another Lodge, nor give degrees to brethren who are members of other Lodges.
17. Every Freemason is Amenable to the Laws and Regulations of the Masonic jurisdiction in which he resides.
18. Qualifications of a candidate: that he shall be a man, without mutilation, free born, and of mature age.
19. A belief in the existence of God.
20. Subsidiary to this belief in God, is the belief in a resurrection to a future life.
21. A "Book of the Law" shall constitute an indispensable part of the furniture of every Lodge.
22. The equality of all Masons.
23. The secrecy of the institution.
24. The foundation of a Speculative Science, for purposes of religious or moral teaching.
25. These Landmarks can never be changed.

Although he based his selection on the two essential points or tests noted above, quoting them almost word for word, his list ran to twenty-five items, most of which could never have passed as landmarks if he had applied his own test.

Mackey's list will provide food for thought, but very little basis for agreement. Old writers used to quote the list with genuine approval, but men's minds have moved a long way from the position taken up in the middle of 19th century, and there are but few masons anywhere today who could conscientiously affirm, without mental reservation of any kind, their acceptance of it. The tendency is to reduce the list to just a few landmarks, and even then there is difficulty in finding any real measure of agreement as to which they should be. But it must be stated that Mackey's list has been officially adopted by many, but not all, American Grand Lodges (<http://www.bessel.org/landmark.htm>).

The following is a list of landmarks proposed as acceptable by Harry Carr in *A Freemason at Work* (1976) and that would conform to the two-point test:

1. That a Mason professes a belief in God (the Supreme Being), the G.A.O.T.U.
2. That the V.S.L. is an essential and indispensable part of the Lodge, to be open in full view when the Brethren are at Labour.
3. That a Mason must be male, free-born, and of mature age.
4. That a Mason, by his tenure, owes allegiance to the Sovereign and to the Craft.
5. That a Mason believes in the immortality of the soul.

The first four items listed above are derived directly from the *Old Charges*, which date back to c. 1390 and are the oldest documents in the world belonging to the Craft. The last item in the list, 'immortality', is implicit in the religious beliefs of that period.

We feel that the modern view, with which there is likely to be general but of course not universal agreement that a landmark is that without which masonry cannot exist and which determines the boundary beyond which Grand Lodge cannot go. Anything in masonry that a Grand Lodge has the right to change cannot be a landmark.

A sound statement, but possibly an unpopular one, made by the Editor of *Miscellanea Latomorum* is worthy of note. It is to the effect that when Dr Anderson used the word landmark in the 1723 *Constitutions* (the only reference to landmarks in that publication, and in effect the only reference on which almost three centuries of argument has been based) he was merely using a fine-sounding phrase, as was his custom, without actually attaching to it, or intending to attach to it, any precise meaning whatever. What Anderson said was that the Regulations can be added to or altered by Grand Lodge, provided always that the old landmarks be carefully preserved. "And I fancy," says the editor, "that all the subsequent arguments about what Anderson had in mind, and the attempts to enumerate or define his old landmarks, are largely wasted ingenuity."

While one may have much sympathy with that point of view, we yet know that all thinking Freemasons will want to make their own search for what they will regard as the landmarks, and that what one Brother finds may not exactly agree with what another may discover. With respect we offer one touchstone by which a Brother may prove his result. Would freemasonry remain essentially the same to him were his 'landmark' altered or removed? If the answer is Yes, then he will need to continue his search, but, successful or not, we trust he will find in the search itself its own reward.

## References

1. Grand Lodge of Ireland (2003), *Book of Laws and Constitutions*
2. Bernard E. Jones (1950), *Freemason's Guide and Compendium*
3. Harry Carr (1976), *A Freemason at Work*

A final consideration – what is the contextual significance and relevance of this frequently used Masonic symbol?

