

[Masonic “fire” is a custom widely practiced by English brethren as an accompaniment to toasting at the festive board. The following paper appeared in *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* Vol. 111 (for 1998) of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076, London, England, pp. 162-166, and its digest version, “Masonic ‘Fire,’” was featured in the March 2000 issue of the *Short Talk Bulletin* of the Masonic Service Association of North America.]

Notes on Masonic ‘Fire’

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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 (1623-1690?) 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 barrs, where he and his attendance are entertained with a speech made by one of the chief Schollers 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 remainder¹.

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 health².

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 metaphor³.

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 practised 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 Frey-Maçon* (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 W.M.], 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 other movements it is set down perpendicularly on the Table, they clap their hands three times & each of them cries three times *Vivat*⁴.

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 a-cross 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 Left-hand Breast-high, and clap Nine Times with the Right, their Foot going at the same Time: When this is done, they all sit down⁵.

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 Twelve⁶.

However, just because the earliest reference to masonic 'fire' is found in French exposures 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 practised 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 recognition⁷. 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 routine⁸.

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:

One of them, which involved clapping the hands on different parts of the body, was almost a gymnastic exercise, requiring a degree of agility by no means conducive to good digestion⁹.

In one Lodge in Shrewsbury the 'fire' is given by using small gavels, about three or four inches long. They are used for 'firing' in much the same way as hands are used elsewhere. They are employed for the PLR and then banged for the 'one, two, three'. They are also used for 'running fire'. After a toast, the Master may announce, 'Running Fire, Brethren!' and gavel once. The Brother who is sitting on his left gavels immediately, followed on the one on his left and then so on round the tables, ending with the Master. It is noisy but sounds quite good¹⁰. The same kind of 'running fire' is also conducted with 'firing' glasses in some Lodges.

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.

Masonic 'fire' is the completion of the toast and it is part of the honours accorded to whoever is the subject of the toast. Thus there is no reason for its omission after the toast with the exception of 'silent fire'¹¹. However, needless to say, not all Lodges practise masonic 'fire'.

Given by tapping one forearm with the fingers of the other hand instead of clapping, so-called 'silent fire' is a variation (or even an aberration) of masonic 'fire' and is not so popular.

It is uncertain when or where 'silent fire' was adopted first. Cartwright stated that many years ago certain Tylers adopted the practice of calling for 'silent fire' 'merely with the idea of marking the toast proposed by them with a special characteristic. In fact, it was a case (...) of "giving themselves airs"'¹². Generally, it is believed that it grew out of the practice of quiet 'firing' to the memory of deceased Brethren and that it turned into 'silent fire' in due course. It is a contradiction of words, however, because masonic 'fire' is supposed to be a joyful, noisy salute. According to another Brother, in his early masonic days, i.e., in the early part of this century, the then Deputy Grand Registrar used to say that 'silent fire' was not formal in character but was given because the Tyler had left his place outside the door of the banquet room and that there might be eavesdroppers outside listening to the ordinary noisy fire¹³. Citing an example of a Lodge in Sussex that has adopted 'silent fire' because its festive boards are held in a room adjacent to other non-masonic customers in a public house, Mead commented that this may also be the historical reason for some other Lodges using this type of 'fire'¹⁴.

'Silent fire' has been witnessed after the toast for 'Absent Brethren' in some Lodges or after the Tyler's toast in others. Many masonic writers are against 'silent fire' being given on such occasions.

In 1885, one writer observed:

I would deprecate the recent absurd innovation for which no authority can be found, of accompanying reception (of the Tyler's toast) by actions partially of a funeral character, alien in every respect to the true sentiment of the toast itself. The wish expressed for 'relief from suffering', and 'safe return', and is not at all in the nature of sorrowful regret, unmixed with hope. Sympathy for present circumstances should be accompanied with cheerful anticipations and best wishes for future prosperity; not with despondent condolences and grievous lamentations¹⁵.

Another commented that it used to be the custom in his Province (Northans. and Hunts.) to have 'silent firing' until it was forbidden by Provincial Grand Master, Lord Euston, who said, 'It was quite bad enough for them to be in distressed circumstances, we do not want to bury them'¹⁶.

There are Lodges that do use 'silent fire' after toasts to deceased Brethren. Some Brethren approve of 'silent fire' but for this purpose only thus:

- The only appropriate time for 'silent fire' is when we drink to the memory of a departed Brother¹⁷;
- If indulged in on rare occasions only, it adds a peculiar solemnity to a toast with which some sadness of thought or memory is associated¹⁸.

The effect of 'silent fire' will be heightened by contrast with the noisy 'fire' of the preceding toasts. But it does not really belong to any other occasions. Carr observed:

If one were drinking to the memory of a departed Brother, that might well justify the omission of the fire altogether, but after a lengthy search I must confess I was unable to find a single argument that could explain or justify 'Silent Fire'¹⁹.

And there are others who maintain that 'silent fire' has no place in 'after proceedings' at all and they oppose its use at the masonic festive boards²⁰.

By the way, in 1986 the Board of General Purposes (UGLE) made the following recommendation about the presence of non-masons at 'after proceedings' and it was adopted formally by the Grand Lodge:

... whilst it is desirable to exclude all non-Masons from the dining room before the commencement of the toast list, it is not strictly necessary but 'fire' should not be given in their presence.

In some Lodges, clapping is used instead of masonic 'fire'. For example, at the end of a speech, the Director of Ceremonies might stand and announce, 'Brethren the Honours are ...' and, depending on the rank of the speaker, will knock once for those who have not been installed as W.M. and three times for all those who have been so installed. All present join in by striking the table²¹.

Then there are still some other forms of 'firing' observed at some masonic and non-masonic gatherings. Here are just two examples to illustrate this point.

- There is Regimental 'fire' adopted by the members of the Honourable Artillery Company. It is also given in the FitzRoy Lodge no. 569 (Finsbury, London), which is made up of members of the Honourable Artillery Company, but only to and by members of the Lodge. After the toast, a command is given, 'Regimental Fire, ready present!' Then the members of the Regiment raise their right hands and swing them across their bodies nine times, at the same time shouting 'Zay!' The call 'ready present' represents the lighting of a fusee and the swinging of their hands across their bodies represents their attempt to keep it alight. The ninth 'throw' represents the throwing of the grenade and the shouted 'Zay' the explosion²².
- Then there is 'Kentish fire' which is said to have originated in reference to meetings held in Kent in 1828-9 in opposition to the Catholic Relief Bill, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. This 'fire' is given by the members of the 'Men of Kent' and the 'Kentish Men' Associations. It is given in the form of rhythmic clapping made to the beat of 1...2...345, which is often started by a few determined members during the first burst of the more usual 'ragged' applause after a speech or a performance²³.

The following description illustrates a case in which 'Kentish fire' was used by freemasons in the 19th century. At the banquet which followed the Annual Meeting of the Provincial Grand Lodge of Kent held on 18 July 1859, the then PGM, RW Bro. Charles Purton Cooper, rose to propose a toast to the health of HM the Queen but, before doing so, he told this anecdote:

Before her Majesty's marriage, in leap year, she courted Prince Albert, who after a little difficulty thought proper to accept her. On consulting her ministers upon the subject, they informed her that they held themselves responsible for her Majesty's acts; but as for the young man, they could not be answerable for what he might do, or might leave undone. The Queen said she wished that her Albert should be made a Freemason; but her uncle, the late M.W. Grand Master, the Duke of Sussex objected, on the ground that, as a royal husband, the Prince was bound to have no secrets whatever from the Queen. Her Majesty having urged the point in vain, as the old duke was inflexible--replied that as her husband could not be made a Mason, her first son should be one²⁴.

In fact, HRH Prince Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, did become a freemason and eventually was elected to serve as Grand Master (1874-1901). Two other sons, HRH Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught, and HRH Prince Leopold, Duke of Albany, also became freemasons and the former served as Grand Master for 38 years (1901 to 1939) after his elder brother assumed the throne.

After relating the above anecdote, the PGM proposed 'the health of the Queen and the Prince of Wales' and it was received with loud cheers and 'Kentish fire'. Before the toast the ladies, who were accompanying their husbands, had returned to their places at the tables from 'their meagre collation in the anteroom'. The evening's proceedings were carried out without any masonic ceremonial whatever. The PGM made some additional remarks and proposed a toast to 'the health of the Rt. Hon. the Earl of Zetland, MWGM' which was drunk with 'Kentish fire' too. He then gave the toast to 'the health of Lord Panmure, RW Dep.GM and the rest of the Grand Officers' which was followed by another 'Kentish fire'.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1. Kuerden's *Description* was published by I. Wilcockson in 1818. See also *Miscellanea Latomorum*, vol. 20 no. 3 (October 1935), p. 43.
2. *Miscellanea Latomorum*, vol. 3 no. 1 (August 1915), p. 8.
3. *Ibid.*, vol. 17 no. 2 (September 1932), p. 22.
4. Carr, Harry: *French Exposures* (1971), p. 8.
5. Jackson, A. C. F.: *English Exposures* (1986), p. 61.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
7. Carr, Harry: 'Masonic Fire', *AQC* vol. 79 (1966), pp. 278-279.
8. Haunch, Terrence: *The Loyal Toast & Masonic Fire* (Q.C.C.C. Recorded Talks 4).
9. Carr: 'Masonic Fire', *AQC* vol. 79 (1966), p. 280.
10. Spurr, Michael J.: Personal correspondence with the present writer (3 August 1993).
11. Carr, Harry: *Freemason at Work*. (1992), p. 121.
12. Cartwright, E. H.: Article in *Miscellanea Latomorum* vol. 18 no. 9 (June 1934), p. 136f.
13. *Ibid.* vol. 19 no. 1 (July 1934), p. 9.
14. Mead, Jonathan C.: *The Masonic Festive Board* (1992), p. 28.
15. *Miscellanea Latomorum*, vol. 18 no. 9 (June 1934), p. 137.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Cartwright, E. H.: *Commentary on the Freemasonic Ritual* (1985), p. 81.
18. Jones, Bernard E.: *Freemasons' Guide and Compendium* (1956), pp. 483.
19. Carr: 'Masonic Fire', *AQC* 79 (1966), p. 282.
20. Carter, Charles J.: *The Director of Ceremonies* (1989), p. 49 and also personal correspondence with the present writer (19 January 1996).
21. Spurr: *Ibid.*
22. Carr: 'Masonic Fire', *AQC* vol. 79 (1966). p. 282.
23. Shepherd, E. W.: Comment in the *Masonic Square* (March 1982), p. 37.
24. *Freemasons Magazine and Masonic Mirror*, vol. 1 (July to December 1859), p. 55.