

The Cowan

So, what exactly is a Cowan? Well, there's a city in Franklin County , Tennessee named Cowan, but I don't believe that is what the Junior Deacon refers to when he is guarding against the approach of all Cowan's. Checking Webster's Dictionary, I found the definition of Cowan as "one who works as a Mason without serving a regular apprenticeship".

The term Cowan is an essentially Scottish trade term, and belongs to the time when lodges, as trade-controlling bodies, put restrictions against the employment of Cowan's, in order to protect the fully-trained men of the Craft from competition by unskilled labor. Historical reference shows that the earliest official ban against Cowan's appeared in the Schaw Statutes in 1598.

In my exploration, I found where the early Scottish Craft was divided into several ranks or divisions that contained various classes of members. This led to specialization, provided exceptional workmanship and caused the Craft, as a body, to be divided into members as follows:

- Honorary, or non-trading; this formed the basis for our speculative Freemasonry we enjoy today.
- Freemen of the Craft, in full membership and with full privileges.
- Servants or operative and skilled employees permanently retained by some freemen as employees.
- Journeymen free of the Craft, operative and duly skilled and open for day-to-day employment; but travelling from one Master to another and not in business for themselves.
- Apprentices, who were learning the Craft trade under instruction of a freeman or trade specialist.
- Cowan's which were freemen or journeymen restricted to one class of work.

The first clear reference I found to restricting Lodge access to a Cowan came from the Lodge of Kilwinning in 1707 which describes a Cowan as a Mason "without the word", or a member of the Craft without full privileges. This reference does indicate that in the early 19th century, Cowan's were employed by Master Masons to perform a wide variety of work, but only if no regular craftsman could be found within 15 miles. I found an interesting reference from the February 1623 minutes of a Glasgow Lodge (known as an "incorporation of Masons") where a Cowan was authorized to work with stone and mortar, and to build mortar walls, but not above an "ell" in height, and without the power to work or lay hewn work, or build with sand and lime. I found that in England, an "ell" was 45" and in Scotland it was 37.2", but no reason for the difference.

I believe it is clear that the term "Cowan" meant something entirely different in the operative years of the Craft than how we use it in speculative Freemasonry. It seems quite clear that the word "Cowan" is of Scottish origin, and is from operative masonry. That the Cowan could become a member of the Masons Craft is also clear; however, they were limited to work with un-hewn stones, could not use lime in their mortar, and were free to work only in the area where their lodge had jurisdiction.

So why guard against the approach of all Cowan's? I think the best reference for this is in how the Lodge of Kilwinning described a Cowan in 1707 – a Mason "without the word". What do you think?

REFERENCES FOR THIS ARTICLE:

Carr, Harry, The Freemason At Work, London & Abingdon; Burgess & Son, 1976.