

*History*  
*of*  
*Royal Arch Masonry*  
*in*  
*Victoria*

*Supreme Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of Victoria*

*Henry Burn 1861 Swanston Street from the Bridge*



*Early Melbourne, the building on the right in the shadow was the Registration Office for Births & Marriages and is now the site of Federation Square. Behind it is the original St Paul's church. To the far right is a steam train; while on the far left is the Johnson's Bridge Hotel, now Young and Jacksons.*

1835 John Batman reportedly sailed up the Yarra River and found the ideal site for a village. By December, 1839, a number of the residents of the still small village had met and decided that the colony of Port Phillip should be graced with a Masonic lodge. On March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1840, the Lodge of Australia Felix was consecrated meeting held on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1844, record the reading by the master of a portion of a letter from London, a letter which he refused to release for general perusal because, he claimed, it contained matters appertaining to the Royal Arch. He is also recorded as having read the Royal Arch warrant. The master may well have read the copy of a warrant and the letter probably did refer to Royal Arch matters but it was certainly not the warrant for a chapter in Melbourne, as is implied by the minutes on a casual reading, and there is no confirmation as to the contents of the letter as even the Junior Warden who was a Royal Arch mason, was denied access.

The master was John Stephen. He had had the honour of being elected a Grand Steward of the United Grand Lodge of England by his lodge well out of his turn as he was about to emigrate. (An error the lodge was to rectify). In 1826 he arrived in Sydney where he became a past master and a past first principal. He journeyed to Melbourne, where, while not necessarily the driving force behind the first lodge, he was the consecrating and dedicating officer, installed the master and invested the officers. He was, in 1840, the only past master in Melbourne.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> November, 1844, Stephen chaired a meeting which he had called at the Royal Exchange Hotel, and the seven present voted to apply to London for a Chapter to be attached to the Lodge of Australia Felix. The petitioners now acted quite irregularly in that they commenced work and exalted a number of applicants. The lodges had acted in the same way and it was certainly ignorance that led to the brethren working the degrees before the arrival of the warrant rather than a deliberate breach of the law. The warrant duly arrived in August, 1847, and seems to have inspired the end of a call off which occurred between July, 1846, and October, 1847.

In October, 1850, the chapter borrowed £30 from the parent lodge to meet its debts. In June the following year the era of the gold rushes, which severely depleted the craft lodges, began, and the chapter was all but destroyed. For a few years Royal Arch Masonry lived only as a Chapter of Instruction until the first wild enthusiasm of the gold rushes died and stability returned to Melbourne. Late in 1855 the Australasian Chapter was restored to life. The

effects of the gold rushes on popular history have been extensively examined over the years and nuances are probably still to be discovered. In masonry the effects, while dramatic in extent, are readily determinable. The middle of 1851 saw masonry all but defunct in the colony. The next few years were to see an enormous increase in the rate of immigration as, for example, 1853 saw over 900 ships sail through the Heads. The vast majority of these new arrivals headed immediately for the gold fields but there was never sufficient gold for all to make their fortunes. Each gold field town experienced a vast initial increase in population followed, within a year, but an almost equal decrease as the gold seekers moved on. The new towns then settled down to small but stable communities and, on the average formed a Masonic lodge about four years later. Apart from the fortune hunters, however, a small but significant number of the immigrants were professional or business men and of these a few were very experienced masons. Quickly they made their mark in their new home, imported the correct workings from London and, for the first time, placed masonry in the colony on a correct footing. And, because they were inexperienced, they introduced the degrees beyond the craft.

By mid 1863 the Town of Melbourne had added to the Australasian Chapter the Collingwood, Victorian, Meridian St. John, and South Yarra Chapters, all also under the English constitution, the Duke of Leinster and the Washington Chapters under the Irish and the St. Clair Chapter under the Scottish. Two chapters had been formed in Ballarat while Bendigo and Geelong each housed one.

The Geelong Chapter, St. Andrews in the South, is interesting and important for a number of reasons and could easily form the subject of a lecture in itself. The nearby Barrabool Hills had become the home of a number of 'gentleman farmers', including the first Premier of Victoria, and some of these were members of chapters in Glasgow. They drew up a petition and enlisted the aid of one Thomas Charles Harwood, who had been exalted in London, to personally deliver it to Scotland.

Harwood was again exalted, this time in a Scottish Chapter, and returned with the warrant which required the new chapter to work the preliminary degrees of Mark, Past and Excellent Master and gave permission to work two other, non-compulsory degrees. Traces of the problems caused by these 'non English' chapter degrees exist in Victoria today. Victoria, generally and masonically, went into a decline rush as the Gold era ended around 1865 and stayed there until the 1880's. During this period a number of old lodges and chapters became defunct while others came and went. The 1880's, however, were to see Masonry grow very rapidly.

In 1883 the Grand Lodge of Victoria was inaugurated. The promoters stated as their basic reason the belief that there were faults in the manner in which the local authorities conducted their affairs that the great distance from the seat of control had allowed a certain laxness to creep in. They were largely right. However, the driving reason undoubtedly centred around the fact that there was a growing number of Australian natives or near natives in the sense that they arrived here while very young being initiated in Victoria and these men believed that, firstly, they should control their own affairs and secondly, that masonically all nationalities should merge into a general 'Victorian freemasonry'.

The Grand Lodge of Victoria attracted only some five per cent of the local masons due to a large extent to some spirited opposition from the men who held local positions of control in the overseas constitutions. It was roundly condemned by a small number of brethren and largely ignored by the rest who had become disinterested when faced with the threat of becoming Masonic outcasts if they joined. It was the cause of a possibly disastrous split in Victorian Freemasonry and declared irregular by the three British Grand Lodges. Masonry had just entered upon one of its boom periods. Within six years the total number of lodges in the state increased by around fifty percent. The controversy surrounding the inauguration of the Grand Lodge of Victoria gave an unexpected boost to the Mark Degree. As, under the English constitution, the Mark Degree is not part of pure and antient masonry, the craft authorities were unable to wield influence and have the brethren who had joined the new Grand Lodge expelled from their Mark Lodges as had become automatic in the Royal Arch.

The Grand Mark authorities in London stated that they could not interfere with any action taken by the Mark brethren in the craft although they could



certainly not allow the advancement of anyone who had been initiated in a lodge not recognised as regular by the craft Grand Lodge of England. This ruling meant that the existing Mark lodges were forced to continue the membership of the brethren branded as 'renegades' and the 'loyal' brethren were decidedly upset. The publicity in the Masonic press of some of the less pleasant activities in the Mark degree brought it before the general Masonic eye and it began to prosper.

In Royal Arch masonry the offending companions were forced to retire from their chapters and *peace* reigned but, on the adverse side, the Order began to slip behind the Mark degree in general awareness. However, the Royal Arch was about to grow although not under the British constitutions. The brethren of the Grand Lodge of Victoria were well aware that they could not avoid exclusion from their chapters and very early in its life the Board of General Purposes discussed the possibility of forming a Grand Chapter. This suggestion was discarded as there were very few past principals among the members of Grand Lodge. Instead, the companions looked for a Grand Chapter which would grant them warrants and the lot fell upon Canada. No direct statement has come down to us as to why this choice was made but circumstantial evidence suggests three contributing factors. During the debate the opponents of the proposed Grand Lodge of Victoria had published a pamphlet giving reasons as to why such a step would be inadvisable. One of these reasons was that there was evidence to show that in those jurisdictions where such a step had been taken the brethren had gone from being part of the time honoured parent trunk the Grand Lodge of England to an insignificant body unknown and of no consequence outside its own borders. The Grand Lodge of Canada was instanced as one such example. Secondly, a number of the members of the Grand Lodge of Victoria appear to have known a few of the leading members of the Canadian Grand Chapter. Thirdly, the Grand Chapter of Canada worked the Mark and Most Excellent Master degrees so that bitterness in the Mark degree could be avoided while the initiates of the Grand Lodge could be advanced in the new chapters.

The Metropolitan Chapter opened in 1886 and was followed two years later by the City of Melbourne and the Australasian Kilwinning Chapters. On hearing this news the Grand Chapter of England ceased intercourse with Canada with the claim that its territory had been violated. England held to the view that the Masonic occupation of any colonial territory by the three British Grand Lodges was equivalent to the Grand Lodges being there or, more specifically in the sense of Canada, while the colonies may be granted the right to have their own Grand bodies these Grand bodies were restricted to operating within their own territorial boundaries. Canada, needless to say, did not agree but believed that, as a Sovereign Grand body, it had the right to warrant private bodies in any area where no Grand body existed. Many of the American Grand bodies supported this view. The initial extreme bitterness in regard to the Grand Lodge of Victoria did not last for long and by 1887 all but a few diehards were interested only in Masonic *peace*. Although the new body was still irregular an increasing number of brethren from the three British constitutions were visiting its lodges and the vast majority wanted the division healed. The Grand Master of England was made acquainted with a few of the actions of his Acting District Grand Master in Victoria at the time when the Grand Lodge was being mooted and a number of England's leading masons pronounced these to be un-masonic and un-constitutional. He sent his Pro Grand Master to New South Wales and Victoria apparently to instruct the masons of those states to sever their allegiance with England and form Sovereign Grand Lodges which included all of the masons in their respective states.

In Victoria this was accordingly accomplished on 20th March, 1889 with the inauguration of the United Grand Lodge of Victoria with but one English lodge standing out. On 21st March the Supreme Grand Chapter of Victoria was formed but not, as in the Craft, by the inclusion of all private bodies which wished to join. The formation of the Grand Chapter was a decidedly low key affair, particularly in comparison with the craft. Their meetings had been held from early in 1888 and an executive body worked quite hard but in the Royal Arch the first meeting of any sort, apart from unofficial discussions, was not held until 30th January, 1889 by which time the Grand Lodge was an all but accomplished fact.

In one sense this can be viewed as quite a logical approach as it would have been pointless to worry about a Grand Chapter if a Grand Lodge was not to eventuate but in a truer sense it can be seen as a continuation of the apathy with which Royal Arch Masonry was being treated. In June, 1888 the District Grand Chapter was to meet and it was decided to send circulars to all companions rather than just the first principals in the hope that the Order could experience a revival of interest.

The Canadians were not invited to the January 30th Meeting but they became aware of it and forwarded a letter. The contents were not revealed but it is apparent from comments made that it had expressed displeasure with the treatment the Canadians were receiving and threatened the formation immediately of a separate Grand Chapter. There is little doubt that this could be achieved because plans of this sort had been put in motion earlier and the three Canadian chapters had voted in favour of such a move in October, 1888. The Canadians had postponed these plans because they could see peace in the air. The Victorians almost made the mistake of refusing to talk to the Canadians at all or at least until the offending letter was withdrawn, a motion to that effect being defeated by 8 votes to 6. Instead the two factions met on 4th February and the word quickly spread that all had been settled.

Three possibilities were discussed:-

1. The Canadian chapters to be received by the Supreme Grand Chapter after its formation.
2. The Canadian companions to be received by one or other of the existing chapters carry their principal and past principal ranks, take part in the formation of the Supreme Grand Chapter and the chapter with which they affiliated not to charge any fees.
3. The Canadians form a separate Grand Chapter and the two amalgamate.



Each of these had faults. The first and third were similar in that the Grand Chapter was to be formed before the Canadians were admitted and, to the wary, there was the strong possibility that they would never be admitted. The third is also an extremely interesting example of the way in which some of the leading masons of that era thought. The advocacy of two separate Grand Bodies in the one jurisdiction at the one time with the consent of both must surely be unique in the history of masonry and it does show that the Victorians had drifted away from English practice.

The Canadians were not overly happy about the second alternative either as they did not want to lose their identity but, as evidence that they wished to see *peace* on the whole Masonic scene, they agreed to meet with representatives of the Irish Washington Chapter. The executive for the formation of the Grand Chapter was now quietly convinced that the argument in Royal Arch masonry was finished but the Washington Chapter had other ideas and was insisting upon affiliation fees and refraining from making any promises in regard to future warrants. England had no intention of assisting, as had been done in the craft, as once the Grand Lodge was formed the Chapters would have constitutionally ceased to exist anyway. On the other hand England may well have expected the local companions to take the hint and not place obstacles in the path of peace in the Royal Arch as well.

The Canadians suggested an approach be made to Chief Justice Way in South Australia in his capacity as First Grand Principal but the executive refused. The Canadians approached him anyway but he was too great a diplomat to be involved in a problem which was none of his concern. Consequently the Supreme Grand Chapter was formed with the Canadians excluded.

As it was obvious to one and all that by weight of numbers, if for no other reasons, the regulations of England would be adopted by the Victorian body it could be suggested that constitutional differences caused the problem but the two major differences - the working by the Canadians of the preliminary degrees and the lack of a Canadian rule making it mandatory for an aspirant for the office of third principal to be an installed master could easily have been overcome and quite likely the majority of the Canadians would have accepted the English regulations.

We are thus left with the conclusion that the exclusion of the Canadians was a deliberate act inspired by those few brethren who still entertained bitterness in regard to the 1883 Grand Lodge of Victoria and used the Royal Arch Order to vent their feelings.

A number of the Grand Chapters throughout the world were not impressed by the founding of the Grand Chapter of Victoria and one referred to as being simply a convention of some companions. Indeed, to a number of American jurisdictions the Grand Chapter was irregular as all companions had not been invited to join on terms of perfect equality.

Grand Chapter began its life with thirteen private chapters. Eleven were English, one Irish and one Scottish while standing out were the three Canadian chapters, although one may have been in abeyance, a Scottish chapter in Colac, and two English chapters which were almost certainly in abeyance. With this weight of numbers it was purely a matter of form to adopt, in almost their entirety, the English regulations and Grand Chapter promptly slumbered. Each Chapter was attached to a lodge, the Grand Master and his Deputy became the First and Second Grand Principals and the Craft Grand Secretary and Treasurer occupied the same offices in Grand Chapter.

It was a pity that the Grand Chapter had to be formed as the Order was by no means ready for it. Indeed, in hindsight, one feels that the Order would have been far better served if six months or more had been allowed to lapse after the formation of the Grand Lodge before the Grand Chapter was formed as divided energies saw the Royal Arch neglected. Legally the chapters were in existence until erased by the Grand Chapter of England and even if such had occurred the 'wandering companions' could still have formed a Grand Chapter at a later date.

As it was the Grand Chapter was formed and promptly forgotten. The first Grand Officers served for two years and between March, 1889, and January, 1891, only one convocation was held, and that purely to approve the granting of a warrant. The Committee of General Purposes first met in October, 1890, this lack of activity undoubtedly held back the progress of Royal Arch Masonry.

Late in 1893 Grand Chapter was faced with two problems and did not handle either of them very satisfactorily.

In October it was rumoured that the Canadians were to open new chapters. This should not have been surprising as the two chapters, Metropolitan having taken out a Victorian warrant in 1891 should have been expected to grow and this situation had been anticipated in 1892. Early in that year there was an exchange of letters between the Canadians and Victorian Grand Scribes which had led to the Canadian companion including in his final letter the statement that the Canadian First Grand Principal had 'distinctly stated that it is not his intention to issue any (dispensations) should such application be made'.

Unfortunately for Masonic peace there was an escape from this ruling, as although the next First Grand Principal did refuse to issue dispensations, Grand Chapter voted to grant the warrants. As the Grand Chapter of Canada met only yearly the issue of a dispensation to be later confirmed by Grand Chapter was the usual method of starting all new chapters.

Once it was found that three new chapters had been formed tempers tended to reach boiling point amongst a few of the older members and there was talk of asking Grand Lodge to expel the Canadian companions from the craft. However looking back on the matter from a safe distance of over seventy years, it is apparent that it was the issuing of these warrants which forced peace on to the Royal Arch scene.

Newer companions were now on the scene, particularly many who had not been involved in the 1883 bitterness, and concerted efforts were made to find a peaceful solution. The local Provincial Grand Master of the Mark degree under the Scottish constitution intervened and discovered an honourable way by which the Canadians could open a Mark Lodge under the Grand Chapter of Scotland.

The remaining difficulty revolved around the Victorian requirement of installed master rank for all candidates for the office of third principal. Concessions were made on both sides. All present all *past* Canadian principals would be confirmed as such and all companions elected as principals at the next installation would be supplied with dispensations to allow them to proceed while for the future the Victorian regulations would be strictly applied. Grand Lodge was originally asked to confer the rank of past master on these companions but the motion was rightly ruled out of order and the Royal Arch was left to solve its own problems. The second problem involved the Excellent Master degree.

The St. Andrew in the South Chapter at Geelong, being Scottish, was working the Mark and Excellent Master degrees in 1889 and simply continued to do so. One of its leading past principals was the President of the Committee of General Purposes for the first three years and while he held this office no problem was raised, but 1893 saw the chapter being informed that it must work only the exaltation ceremony.

The Chapter brought a motion to the January, 1894 convocation to the effect that Grand Chapter recognised the additional degrees and permitted all private chapters to work them. This was handled by Grand Chapter passing the procedural motion that it move on to the next business. The Geelong chapter promptly went into abeyance and stayed there for ten years. It was still in abeyance when Grand Chapter removed the necessity for chapters to be attached to Lodges and renumbered all chapters according to the dates on the warrants. This was suggested in 1900 and concluded in 1903 and the Geelong chapter missed out on its rightful place. Other mistakes, incidentally, were made. The question was raised again after the Canadian chapters joined, debated, deferred, again raised and so on for a number of years. However, by this time the ex-Canadians were talking about the Most Excellent Masters degree and confusion tended to reign supreme. The story involved is worthy of and requires a

separate lecture. For the moment we may simply state that very few, if any, of the companions were aware that there were two degrees, that although the adopted regulations referred to the Most Excellent Master degree either was worked for a number of years and it was not until 1912 when First Grand Principal Edward Coulson specified the ritual of Most Excellent Master as being the correct one that all chapters began to adopt the one form.

Our ceremony of the Passing the Veils, contains the core of the ceremony wanted by the Scottish companions. The, individual companion must decide whether we have satisfactorily replied to our Geelong companions' motion. Companions, this is by no means the end of the history of Royal Arch masonry in this state but it is the end of the beginning. By the early 1900's the pattern had been set; the move away from English practice had begun. This is evidenced by the removal of the necessity for certain craft officers to occupy similar positions in the Royal Arch and by the removal of the need for each chapter to be attached to a parent craft lodge.

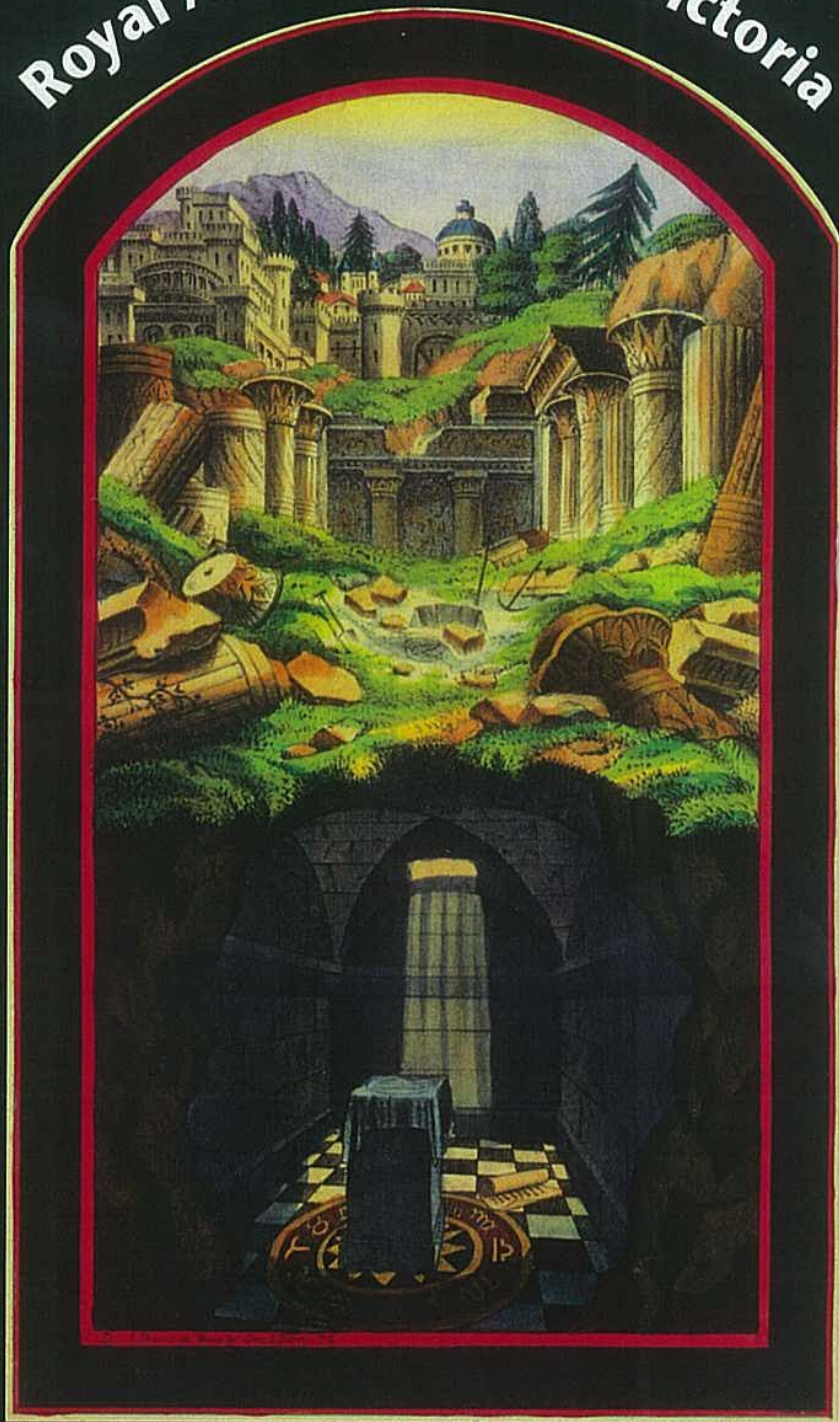
*Delivered at*  
*The Golden Jubilee Royal Arch Chapter*  
*Ex Comp Peter J Thornton*  
*14<sup>th</sup> November 1977*

*There is much more to tell and in particular,  
there is need to refer to the men who played major parts in our history,  
to attach the flesh of personality to the bare bones of historical fact.*

*Unfortunately,  
the rest must wait for another time.*



Supreme Grand Chapter of  
Royal Arch Masons of Victoria



A PATHWAY OF  
ENLIGHTENMENT