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The Bee Hive & the Stock of Knowledge

In 1874 a new Masonic magazine began publication in San Francisco. *The Craftsman's* opening article bears these very strong words:

The day is past when the ignorant Mason can shine. The time has come when more is demanded of a 'bright' Mason than the knowledge of the Ritual. The Mason who claims to be 'well posted' must read; he must inform himself of the origin, the history, the philosophy, the laws and literature of our art, or he is a drone on our hive, and only valued for the dollars and cents he pays into the treasury of his lodge. Knowledge makes prosperity, and prosperity freedom; and he who has not these three qualifications is not a fit Craftsman, and can not be used on the building of that Temple Masonry intends to erect.

A statement like this reminds us that the Bee Hive, like the other monitorial symbols of the third degree, holds very serious and somber connotations—even a hint of **warning**.

We are quick to remember that "The Bee Hive is an emblem of industry, and recommends the practice of that virtue of all created beings, from the highest seraph in heaven, to the lowest reptile of the dust." But this symbol is no mere reminder to "keep busy," as so many desire interpret it. Our ritual is clear:

Thus was man formed for social and active life, the noblest part of the work of God; and he that will so demean himself as not to be endeavoring to add to the common stock of knowledge and understanding, may be deemed a **drone** in the **hive** of nature, a useless member of society, and unworthy of our protection as Masons.

Each Mason knows that he has certain obligations to every "worthy brother." While it is popular to equate worthiness with obedience to society's legal standards, this is nothing more than the same ever-shifting standard of the non-Masonic world. The ritual itself has something else to teach us. It refers to unworthiness exactly twice:

first, in reference to one who refuses to conform to the initiatic process, and later to anyone who demeans himself through intellectual laziness.

The harshness of the Craft's teaching that drones are "unworthy of our protection as Masons" is based on a fact of nature: when fall arrives or resources are scarce, drones are expelled from the hive by the worker bees in order to conserve food. Drones do not build the hive, nor do they make honey. A drone's only real purpose is to mate with the queen bee, which is fatal to him. That means that any drones still in the hive as winter closes in are the ones who never mated. They are physically pushed out, banished from the protection, warmth and honey of the hive. The authors of our lectures chose a harsh reality to explain to us that Freemasonry is no mere destination to be passively enjoyed. It is something that must be continually maintained through mindful endeavor and ever-increasing knowledge. Neglect of this task can make us worthless to the Craft, little more than liabilities to our Order's noble mission, however contentedly we dine and toast.

What is required instead? Good bees and strong hives. A 1724 exposé on Freemasonry (actually written by Bro. Jonathan Swift) tells us that

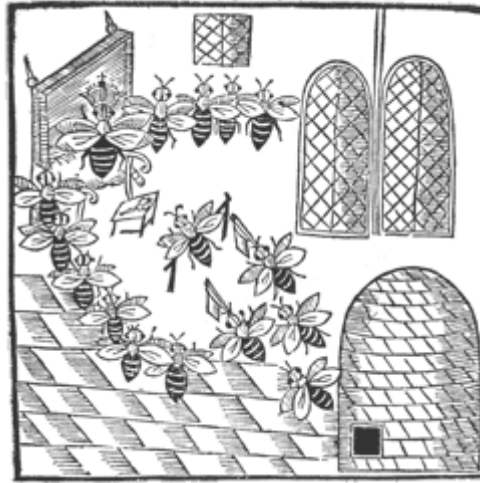
A **Bee** has in all Ages and Nations been the Grand **Hieroglyphick** of **Masonry**, because it excells all other living Creatures in the Contrivance and Commodiousness of its **Habitation** or **Combe**... What **Modern Masons** call a **Lodge** was for the above Reasons by Antiquity call'd a hive of Free-Masons, and for the same Reasons when a Dissention happens in a **Lodge** the going off and forming another Lodge is to this Day call'd swarming.

So the Bee Hive is actually one of the oldest Masonic symbols. Its use within the early lodges is further evidenced by the last few whimsical lines of a Masonic song penned in 1762 by Christopher Smart, the "bedlam poet":

Then fill up the Glass and be funny,
Attend to due Method and Form;
The Bee that can make the most **Honey**,
Is fairly the **Flow'r** of the **Swarm**.

And so it is that we have a choice of destinies. While being a mere drone does not mean physical death for us Freemasons, it does lead to a deadened awareness, intellectual poverty and ultimately failure to fulfill our Masonic potential and sworn duties. It is up to us whether our hearty festivities will be those of a merely empty and oblivious contentment, or celebrations of real wisdom gained. Those lodges that "make the most honey" will enjoy the sweetest delicacy of all: more light.

Shawn Eyer, P.:M.:
March 9, 2007



from John Daye's **The Parliament of Bees**, 1641

[...H]ighest of all in rank, we must place that industry which is devoted to the acquisition of knowledge. This every one may combine with that necessary for his support; and every one is elevated to a higher position by every increase of knowledge that he makes. Even manual labour is best performed by men of intelligence; but knowledge leads to far better results than this, and as the mind is expanded by it, new sources of delight are opened, which never cease to flow. (Chalmers L. Paton, **Freemasonry: Its Symbolism, Religious Nature and Law of Perfection**, 1873, p. 184)