

A Masonic Minute

“So here’s a hand my trusty friend” – Bro. Robert Burns (1759-1796)

During the latter part of January many lodges hold events celebrating the birthday of Bro. Robbie Burns (25 January 1759). The kilt will be worn, the haggis will be addressed, the pipes will play, and the Immortal Memory of Scotland’s favourite son will be toasted with a dram. Invariably the festivities will end with the singing of his great hymn to brotherhood – *Auld Lang Syne*. It, like so much of his poetry, encapsulates the spirit of Freemasonry that he embraced.

Of all the mythology surrounding our Fraternity, the ‘*secret handshake*’ must rank in first place. Nothing fuels the fertile fantasies of the conspiracy obsessed public more than the simple handshake exchanged when two Brethren meet. It is usually the first question asked in any interview given to the media by a Mason.

Clasping right hands is an almost universal form of greeting when two people are introduced, or when they meet. It may have originated in ancient times to show that both parties had open and affable intentions and that there was no weapon in the hand. The right hand was favoured to carry a sword, axe or lance in battle.

Shaking hands is a symbol of agreement, often used to show goodwill and sincerity by statesmen, diplomats, and politicians. In simpler times, many deals were closed with a simple handshake.

The so-called ‘secret Masonic handshake’ is part of our inheritance from the stonemasons’ guilds of the middle ages from which modern Masonic lodges emerged in the early eighteenth century, and from which we derive much of our terminology and symbolism. In the age of the building of the castles, cathedrals, and abbeys of Europe, when the skilled craftsmen – *Freemasons* – travelled from building site to building site, it was necessary to have some form of identification. In the medieval period there were no trade school certificates, no college diplomas, or union cards to validate the bearer’s training, skill and ability. A system of handshakes, with subtle variations, together with passwords was devised to indicate the skill, experience or proficiency level of the craftsmen. These were kept as ‘trade secrets’ in each level of proven skill and ability. We have retained them as part of our traditional history to honour our ancient operative brethren. They are known as ‘modes of recognition’ and are considered confidential and private matters to be kept within the Fraternity. How anyone can derive a sinister meaning from such a gesture of mutual trust and fraternal affection is beyond reason.

The real significance of the ‘Masonic handshake’ is the sincere bond of friendship – the Mystic Tie – that it symbolizes. Every Freemason is an integral part of this Universal Brotherhood, bound by sincere affection to a Global Fraternity – Brothers

without borders. When we form a circle, join hands, and sing Bro. Burns' *Auld Lang Syne* we celebrate the essence of our gentle Craft.

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