

[Paper delivered to the Canberra Lodge of Research and Instruction in February 1971, and published in the notice paper for June 1971.]

## THE MASTER'S BOARD: A SPECULATIVE NOTE

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The preparation of this note has been prompted by the reference in the June 1970 Transactions of the Lodge of Research, No. 216, S.A.C., to the practice in many South Australian Lodge Rooms or temples of including amongst the furnishings on the floor of the Lodge a small board, called the Master's Tracing Board, depicting an architectural design, and to the ritual custom of pointing to this board during that part of the ceremonial lecture on the Tracing Board, which states that the "Tracing Board ... (is) ... for the Master to lay lines and draw designs on."

The inclusion of a board of this kind amongst the Lodge furnishings is quite unknown to Lodges working under the New South Wales Constitution. However, most Tracing Boards in use are, or are based on, Harris designs which include on the First Board a sketch of a rectangular drawing board showing the floor plan of a building. During the presentation of the Explanation of the First Tracing Board, the Brother giving the Lecture points to the sketch when referring to the purpose of the Tracing Board.

It is interesting for an "outsider", without knowledge of the working or workings from which the South Australian ritual has been derived, to speculate as to the origin of the South Australian practice. This requires a consideration of the historical background to the ritual reference.

It is widely accepted that during the early years of speculative Freemasonry there were no Tracing Boards as we know them. Nevertheless, it is clear that there were boards of a kind used in Lodges, although it seems that not all Lodges had these, nor were they described as Tracing Boards. Pritchard's *Masonry Dissected*, of 1730, states that it is the "Trasel Board" which is "for the Master to draw his Designs upon", whereas the Wilkinson MS., held to date about 1727, states that this is the use for the "Mosaick Pavement".

The use of the term "trasel board" in this context persists in English Masonic and pseudo-Masonic writings—including amongst the latter the "exposures"—at least until the second half of the 1760s. In the 1766 edition of *Mahhabone, or the Grand Lodge Door Open'd*, for example, part of the catechism runs as follows:

“What are the immovable jewels?”

“The Trasel Board which the Masters drew their designs upon ...”

Whether the past tense in the reply to the question is significant or not, it is impossible to say, but it is reasonable to suppose that the “trasel board” was still, about this time, a standard part of the lodge-room furnishings and one appropriated specifically to the Master’s duties.

The wording of the ritual in its older catechetical form suggests that at least in earlier days the “trasel board” had a function somewhat different from the present-day prepared Tracing Boards. Being for “the Masters to draw designs upon”, it was probably blank and, perhaps with the assistance of the compasses and square, the Master drew architectural designs which he used as a basis for teaching practical or moral lessons. Later, possibly associated with a ritual change which meant that the Master was no longer required to demonstrate the drawing of designs on a board, the “trasel board” seems to have become an item in the Lodge-room furnishings with no particular function and at this stage designs of the floor plans of buildings or other architectural drawings were permanently traced on it.

There is a very interesting article by H. Hiram Hallett on “‘The Euclid Proposition’, and ‘Alms’ boards, or the Drawing or True Tracing Board of the Master” which appeared in the 1944 *Transactions* of the Somerset Masters lodge No.3746 EC. This describes boards in the possession of two old English Lodges. These boards show, amongst other things, a hand holding a pair of Compasses, and what was probably intended to be the ground plan of King Solomon’s Temple.

Hallett advances the theory that in ancient times, after the Master had drawn his plans on the drawing board, full-sized details were then worked on the floor of the workroom for the guidance of the workmen, and consequently when the operative mason gave way to the speculative, both these features were retained, the Master’s Board, and the employment of chalk or charcoal to depict “the form of the Lodge”, etc., on the floor of the Lodge room. He considers that both of the boards he described were made towards the close of the eighteenth century, and were used in the respective Lodges for some years, but were discarded and replaced when it became the vogue to have a set of three Tracing Boards. It may be that boards such as described by Hallett represented the final stages of evolution before the Master’s drawing or trasel board went out of favour.

From the latter part of the eighteenth century, the ritual references change. The “trassel board” disappears, to be replaced by the “tracing board” with the same purpose as its predecessor. Some writers, including such authorities as Knoop, Jones and Hamer in *The Early Masonic Catechisms* equate the “trassel board” with the “tracing board”, but others question this. The earlier American writer, Mackey, strongly argues that the trestle-board (= trassel board) and the tracing board are entirely different: “The trestle is a framework for a table: in Scots, *trest*, the *trestle-board*, is the board placed for convenience of drawing on that frame. It contains nothing but a few diagrams, usually geometric figures. The *tracing-board* is a picture formerly drawn on the floor of the Lodge, whence it was called a floor-cloth or carpet. It contains a delineation of the symbols of the degree to which it belongs. The *trestle-board* is to be found only in the Entered Apprentice’s Degree. There is a *tracing-board* in every degree, from the first to the highest. And lastly, the *trestle-board* is a symbol; the *tracing board* is a piece of furniture or picture containing the representation of many symbols.” (from *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*).

It is possible that there was a genuine misunderstanding on the part of the men who worked on the ritual in the later eighteenth century concerning the two terms, explainable perhaps by the fact that the “trassel board” had all but disappeared from English Lodges by then, and furthermore the two terms are not greatly different in pronunciation. And this misunderstanding has persisted subsequently.

Bringing the threads together, the history of the various boards seems to be:

- Initially there was a blank trestle, or trassel, board on which the Master drew designs from which he found inspiration for the explanation of moral lessons.
- Perhaps contemporaneous with this, or perhaps a little later, there was also in use a “drawing of the lodge”.
- As the “drawing of the lodge” gave way to the floor-cloth, with permanent designs for “moralising upon”, the need for a trestle-board became even less apparent.
- With the progressive introduction of sets of three Tracing Boards, the trestle-board became completely redundant, especially as the ceremonies became standardised and no longer called for the teaching of moral lessons through the use of designs drawn by the Master.

- The trestle boards themselves finally became no more than ornaments in the Lodge room with their own designs and having no part in the ceremonial.
- The late eighteenth-century writers tended to confuse the trestle board with the tracing board, and this may have hastened the disappearance of the tracing board from most lodge rooms.

If this is the history of the “trassel board” or the drawing board of the Master, how is it that it is retained in the furnishings of many South Australian lodge rooms? For, at the time when Freemasonry came to that State in the middle of the 1830s, the Tracing Board was well established as a regular feature of English lodge rooms. The explanation may lie in the Masonic backgrounds of the men who formed the first Lodges in the new colony. Some of them may have been members of Lodges still using or displaying separate masters’ boards and, in bringing Freemasonry to South Australia, they may have brought with them a custom of one or more of their mother Lodges.

This does seem to be an interesting field for investigation.

Footnote: This note was presented to the Lodge by the Preceptor at the February meeting of this year. A copy was sent to the Lodge of Research, South Australia, for comment.

While our South Australian brethren cannot be certain of the origins of the practice of placing a “Master’s Board” on the pavement in some of their Lodges, their feeling was that it may have arisen from an old ruling by the Grand Lodge of Scotland, which forbade the use of the Tracing Board. Payneham Lodge, one of the South Australian Lodges which displays a “Master’s Board”, had a number of foundation members who were members of a Lodge St. Andrews, working under the Scottish Constitution. It was suggested that Payneham Lodge may have adopted the practice from Lodge St. Andrews.

No mention of the “Master’s board” is made in the “Arrangement of the Lodge room” in the present S.A. Ritual book.