



Nugget

Ancient Penalties

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Origins of the 'Symbolic Penalties'.

Summary

Origins of the 'Symbolic Penalties' and the inherent symbolism contained within the physical penalties.

Keywords

First-Degree, Symbolic, Penalties

The Ancient Penalties

All those who saw the film Braveheart, will know that those found guilty of treason faced a ghastly death. Watched and enjoyed by vast crowds and talked about for years to come. Punishment was not a thing in itself, but a symbol of justice, a righteous condemnation by the state and a deterrent to all. The criminal was hung, drawn, and quartered, sometimes with an added grisly flourish thrown in - *public castration*.

Similarly, the symbolic penalty associated with the First Degree, is based upon a real legal punishment. One well-fitting those who divulged state secrets, or acted outside their authority. Records in the 15th century and beyond detailed the horrific punishment for any municipal officer who disclosed, *'the King's counsel, his fellow's, or his own'*.

*'He was bound hand and foot to a stake set upon the seashore where the tide ebbed and flowed, his throat was cut, and his tongue torn out through the slit'*¹; sound familiar?

- Tearing out the Tongue was symbolic, by removing the instrument of falsehood used to take, then break, a solemn oath;
- Cutting the throat, was an act normally restricted to the slaughter and sacrifice of animals, *not men*;
- Leaving the body to decay and be consumed by fish, crustaceans, birds and insects, condemned his soul by denying him an 'afterlife'; perhaps the most dreadful punishment of all.

Such punishments were not unusual, even for minor offences; as late as the 18th Century², the law stated: *'That men convicted one day were to be hung the next, and his body being either dissected, or hung in chains in view of the public, until eaten by the ravening birds of the air'*.³

Now you can see that the 'symbolic penalties' appropriated at the birth of Freemasonry, in the 17th and 18th centuries were no mere theatrical devices, but recognised legal punishments common to their time and recognised by everyone; making them a perfect model.

References:

¹Robert Taylor 'The Origins of the Ancient Penalties': www.masoniclibrary.org.au

and locally to Hull where any member of the Court of the Admiralty for the Humber, who broke their oath.

'You shall be had down to low water mark, and then and there this punishment, prescribed by the law shall be executed upon them; that is, their hands and feet be bound, their throats cut, their tongues pulled out, and their bodies cast into the sea'. Their chief officer, 'The Admiral of the Humber' was, and is, the Mayor of Hull. - William Andrews F.R.H.S., (1890) 'Old Time Punishments', Hull Literary Club, Simpkin, Marshall, Kent & Co, London.

² Thomas Wallcot, John Rouse, William Hone, William Blake, offences against the King: treason, 12th July, 1683. *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey* (1674 -1913) - www.oldbaileyonline.org

³ George Neilson, 'Drawing, Hanging and Quartering', 15 August 1891

##END##

Recommended use of Nuggets

Nuggets offer a short, simple and readily absorbed means of progressing Masonic knowledge and an easy way to introduce learning to Lodges and Chapters. It is hoped that they will become a regular feature of Lodge and Chapter meetings as well as a source for private-study.

Nuggets can be included as an item in the summons and read at most Lodge/Chapter meetings. They can be:

- Read by either a new or an experienced Mason with the minimum of preparation and practice; *though ideally, they need to be read a few times beforehand.*
- Themed with the meeting or activity.
- Used to initiate a discussion within a Lodge/Chapter, LOI/COI, or group.
- Read at home and shared as a topic for a future discussion.
- Used as a focus for an unplanned, informal discussion.

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