

A Note upon the History of the
Incorporation of Fleshers

by

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Before saying anything of the history of the Incorporation of Fleshers it will be well to say a word or two as to the historical background within the nation of Scotland and Burgh of Glasgow against which the Incorporation took its rise.

The system of government in Scotland as at the time of our origin as a Craft still largely feudal from the legal point of view, although feudalism, as a result of the spread of commercial activity and of the invention of gunpowder, was rapidly, except as a mere system of land tenure, falling into decay.

The great Queen Elizabeth sat upon the throne of England. William Shakespeare was a lad of about 16. The Battle of Langside was less distant than the close of the Great War is now. The hapless Mary, Queen of Scotland, was a prisoner in English hands; and the young Prince James, afterwards James VI of Scotland and I of England, "the wisest fool in Christendom", at that time a mere lad, exercised nominal rule in Scotland. The Earls of Lennox and of Arran were the real powers behind the throne. The Reformation had swept the land. John Knox "who never feared the face of man" had not long been gathered to his fathers. The Highlands and Islands were still largely Catholic or Episcopal, but the Lowlands were Calvinist. The struggle of King and Parliament, Cavalier and Roundhead, as still to come, but the cloud which was to overcast the sky was as yet no bigger than a man's hand - Tudor diplomacy having most effectually concealed the iron hand beneath the velvet glove. Such was the national setting when in the year of grace 1580 the Fleshers' Craft, as a body corporate, took the stage of history.

Glasgow, on the banks of the sylvan Clyde, a salmon stream on whose waters cobbles came up with the tide, was a rising town inferior to Edinburgh in status, but little inferior in population and trade. The beautiful Cathedral crowned the banks of the Molendinar, or mill stream, and the town was - at least when a little distance "lent enchantment to the view" - one of the most picturesque in the country. In legal status Glasgow was a Burgh of Regality under the superiority of its Bishop, and after the Reformation, of the nobleman who succeeded to the landed heritage of the Church. This feudal superior lurked, as a kind of legal shadow or ghost, behind the more real and practical power of the City Magistrates, then a rather close and undemocratic corporation. Although not yet a Royal Burgh, Glasgow's importance seems to have won for it in practice most of the privileges of a Royal Burgh including the privileges of representation on the Estates of Parliament and of granting "Seals of Cause" by virtue of which the trades of the burgh were incorporated and granted legal constitutions. The citizens of the Burgh were the burgesses, all others being legally "in" but not "of" the town, much like the "outlanders" of Pretoria and of Johannesburg before the Boer War. The burgesses alone were "freemen", that is, they only had the "freedom" of the Burgh and were entitled to carry on business as master craftsmen in their own right. The counterpart of this privilege was the duty of "watch and ward", or, as we would say now-a-days, of policing the city. A late revival of that ancient obligation occurred when, among others, our esteemed Deacon, William Milne, as a Guild Brother and Burgess, and landholder under the City by Burgage tenure in Old Wynd - near adjoining, if not actually including, part of this Incorporation's ancient property - was called up^[CB1] to "watch and ward" in the City as a special constable during the Great War. These feudal "incidents" had long been abolished, but the spirit of the man rose above any legal quibble, and the worthy Deacon took his staff and answered to the call. So does history repeat itself.

Deacon Milne is the last but by no means the first Deacon of the Craft to "watch and ward" in pursuance of the ancient feudal tenure of burgage lands.

The burgesses were of two classes, "Merchants" and "Trades". The "merchants" included all free citizens not definitely attached to one or other of the recognised Trades. The dispute as to the respective rights and privileges of the two classes of burgesses was settled in 1605 in true brotherly fashion by the famous Decree Arbitral which mark the beginning of the Trades House and with usage following thereon settled the representation and precedence of the various Crafts. The representation was, you remember, altered in 1920 by the Trades House Order of that year, which the Clerk reads at each Annual General meeting on Deacons' Choosing Day.

The importance of the Burghs in the national economy was increasing rapidly in the 16th and 17th centuries and the Trades were, one by one, obtaining Charters from the Crown or from the Burghs (as we must suppose, by delegated authority of the Crown) in order to regularise their position, to give them proper legal status, and to enable them to regulate their own affairs. It must be remembered that Burgh organization at that time was crude. Taxes took the form - apart from land revenues from the burgh lands - of market dues. The great public services of cleansing and sanitation, public health, markets, weights and measures, and even of Public Assistance were practically non-existent. The regulation of its own affairs and the protection of the public interest, in so far as it had a bearing on those affairs, was primarily the concern of each individual trade. Municipal interference only occurred spasmodically where there was a breach of the public peace or any obvious and apparent scandal. Hence it was clearly in the public interest, as well as in the interests of the Trades, that matters should be regularised and responsibility fixed.

So it was that on the 6th day of October 1580, upon the Petition of 11 Fleshers the Charter of the Fleshers' Craft of Glasgow passed the Common Seal of the Burgh upon the following preamble - "To all and sundry to whose knowledge these present Letters shall come. The Provost, Baillies and Council of the Burgh and Town of Glasgow, Greeting in God Everlasting with your Universities, that upon the day and date of these presents compeared before us the Craftsmen of the Fleshers, Freemen of the said Burgh: That is Matthew Watson, John Watson, elder, Thomas Herriot, John Brown, Robert Brown, John Dawson, John Friebairn, James Muir, William Muir, Andrew Carmichael, and John Wann, tor themselves, Fleshers of the said Town, came and presented to us their supplication, making mention - That where, through the great increase and multitude of people, the said Craft of Fleshers in that part was unfunded, abused and heavily damnified in default of good rule, and making of good statutes for the weal of the fraternity of the said Town: And all and sundry our Sovereign Lord's lieges repairing thereto. And seeing that in sundry most honourable towns of this realm the said Craft have their Deacons authorised by their power given by them and the Masters of the Craft to visit the faults thereof, relieving the Provost and Baillies of the care and charge thereof; and that this our Town and City being increased in people, and little inferior to Edinburgh, yet has nothing as yet appointed, not to authorise a Deacon in the said Craft as other Towns have, nor had given them laws, nor statutes to be observed thereanent and for relief of the common charges of the Town in which they are freemen and indwellers of the same

every day dwelling. And for the help and relief also of their poor decayed brethern of the Craft in all time coming. Therefore desiring these articles, statutes, and heads underwritten, made for the common weal, to be granted to them, to be observed by them and their successors, kept and defended by us as effeirs, the which articles follow

The Charter provides for a governing body of a Deacon and four Masters. Nothing is said about a Collector. It was not until the 17th century that a Collector appears and at first he was simply a treasurer or cashier having no seat on the Master Court. The office was one of drudgery with little corresponding honour, and was regarded as distinctly one to be avoided. *Tempora mutantur et nos in illis* - times change and we with them. The Collector now takes rank and precedence next to the Deacon and his office is the stepping stone to the diaconate. There was always an officer who had a wage and a suit of decent black clothes every year and occasionally a new wig. This office fell into disuetude about the end of last century. The four masters were later increased to eight, four Dominated by the Deacon and four by the Craft and other sundry changes in course of time brought the Master Court to its present form. The Charter provides for each freeman of the Craft having one apprentice in seven years, and for such apprentice being entitled to set up business for himself on the expiry of his indenture on taking out a burgess ticket and paying an entry fee of five pounds to the Craft. Every person who takes an apprentice is to pay twenty shillings to the "upholding of the said Craft, relief and held of the common charge and the poor decayed brethern thereof". Apprenticeship was the method of recruitment contemplated. It is competent still under our rules, but rarely used.

There are provisions for the inspection of meat and the punishment of malpractices in connection with the selling of same.

Also for the market dues payable by un-freemen bringing their beasts to town, and for their meat being cut up and retailed by the freemen of the Craft.

There are provisions as to tallow and skins, and against throwing out "bags, paunches and tripes" upon the high street. In hot weather it would appear that the principal street must have been "high" in more senses than one. I suppose the local tikes, whom failing cats, whom failing probably rats, mice, crows and other vermin would be the principal civic scavengers.

Then there are provisions tor making the authority of the Deacon effective by fines recoverable by poinding by the officer of the Craft along with an officer of the Town, and for the arbitration of disputes by the Deacon and Masters.

There is a provision for sons of Craftsmen entering at "half upsett", of which our small "Near Hand" entry money at the present day is a lineal successor.

Such are the eminently sane and workmanlike rules of the Charter.

No one but a freeman of the Craft was of course entitled to carry on business as a flesher within the Regality bounds. This Is the Trade Monopoly which gave rise to much dispute and litigation a couple of hundred years later when the great growth of the city and of municipal services had rendered the old organization hopelessly out

of date. But in its day and generation it was absolutely sane and just, and indeed essential, if the affairs of a trade were to be regulated and organized at all. It was no case of mere privilege, but of recognised public right with its counterpart of obligation and of responsibility. It was the ancient counterpart of the modern system of Registration or licence now applicable to so many trades and professions. To practice as a Solicitor I must be enrolled, and that is not so much the grant of a monopoly as an endeavour to ensure uniformity of training and control. The old Craft monopolies may have become out of date in form but their idea was perfectly sound, and is now attained in other ways.

With the passing of the markets into the hands of the Town Council and the growth of the great public utility services and finally, with the abolition of the trading monopoly in 1846 the whole basis of the Incorporation and of each and every one of the original clauses of its Charter, seemed to be swept away. But like the Phoenix of old the Trades Incorporations had the power of rising from their very ashes. One little clause in the preamble mentioned the relief of poor and decayed brethren of the Craft. This obscure stone became the key-stone of the arch. In truth the Incorporation had always risen above its Charter. It is a principle of law that a body incorporated by Royal Charter is not like a body incorporated merely under the provisions of an Act of Parliament, tethered absolutely by the black letter of its constitution. The King's bounty is to be interpreted in no niggard spirit, but like Royalty, itself, as being gracious and all-embracing. The King's majestic prerogative is in a measure imparted to the creature of his sovereign power. So it must have been with the Seals of Cause as well, granted by the Magistrates as Royal Commissioners. In their administrative as well as in their judicial functions they represent nothing less than the Sovereign Power itself. In the hey-day of the Reformation zeal the Incorporation showed its wide interpretation of its functions by taking it upon itself not only to suppress the practices of "blowing mutton" of "packing and peeling with unfreemen" of "scoring mutton" and exposing for sale "bull beef" not clearly marked as such (the true significance of which practices my lay mind has never been able fully to grasp) but it supervised the manners and morals of its members and their apprentices. It "had up" culprits for banning and swearing; delinquents for saucing and speaking "evil words" concerning the Deacon when he booked them for faults revealed in the course of his "orderly officer" rounds of the market stalls, and apprentices who were abandoned enough to indulge in card-playing on the Green during the hours of divine service. It was veritably father and mother to its members and their dependents, and might almost be said to be grandmother as well. But one could never believe that the ruling powers of the Incorporation were ever sanctimonious in their outlook. There is too much practical good sense and broad humanity displayed throughout the old records to suppose that the Master Court was ever composed of "holy Wullies". But like the sensible pater-families it put its foot down sometimes and recognised that there is such a thing as going too far. It followed faithfully the Apostle's precept of "letting its moderation appear in all things".

Mindful of its Royal origin - for I think that the Seal of Cause of the Burgh must be regarded as a Royal Commission granted by lieutenancy - the Incorporation was always distinguished for loyalty to the Crown and to constituted authority. In the troubled times of the Stuarts the Incorporation was always like our national Bard (who when in Glasgow may well have foregathered with the Deacon at the Black Bull

Inn, a favourite howff of the Fleshers) rather Tory and Royalist in outlook, within reason, never abating loyalty to the King although not standing for any encroachment upon the liberty of the subject. During the American War of Independence the Incorporation raised a fund to help suppress this "un-natural rebellion against the King's authority". As Clerk of the Incorporation I know no party nor politics; but as a member of a clan which suffered much in the Royal cause - as witness the graves on the broom-clad moor of Culloden - and as a high Tory in personal sentiment - I raise my hat to these old patriots whose warm hearts .ever took precedence of their heads as well as of the claims of their pockets. In legal affairs, the Circuit Judges, representatives of the Royal Justice, were invariably received in state by the civic representatives including the Deacon, mounted upon a charger, hired for the occasion, or possibly diverted *pro tem* its accustomed task of drawing a delivery van. I opine that the nag thus honoured would hold its head higher among its stable companions for the rest of its life thereafter. It would be a veritable Bucephalus among the commonality, an aristocrat among the hoi polloi. Had it not borne the Deacon himself, and in the train of the Lords Justiciary?

When the City, in manner not unknown to later generations, proposed to ride roughshod over private rights by annexing the Market dung and blood when it took over the Market it was to the House of Lords, as the hereditary Curia Regis or Council of the King that the Incorporation turned, and not in vain. The Second Chamber declined to pass the Markets Bill without provision for the redemption of the Incorporation's rights at a fair price. The Minutes contain a grateful and gracetul record of the Incorporation's appreciation of this action of their Lordships House.

One characteristic activity of the Incorporat1on, which the Charter hardly contemplated, was the institution in 1802 of a School for the benefit of members' children. Before the days of public education - I deliberately say. "public education" not "free education" the training of youth in "the three Rs" was no small problem for parents. But in Scotland parents would undergo any hardship rather than their families should grow up un-lettered and ignorant. The "Meal Mondays" observed to this day in our University are a relic of this old spirit of sacrifice and of iron determination to share fruits of culture. The acumen of the fleshers made provision for the educational needs of their children. The "dung money" of the market was applied to the appointment of a dominie who taught the fleshers' children at very modified fees in the Incorporation's own hall in King Street, adjoining the old market there. Dominie Mitchell, "passing rich on forty pounds a year" was placed in charge later with a sewing mistress for the girls. To this dominie we are indebted for our knowledge of the early days of the Incorporation. At the behest of the Master Court he excerpted the more important Minutes, and the early books of the Incorporation, which had apparently fallen into great disorder, were then, unfortunately, destroyed. The ancient bell, presented to the Craft in 1820, which may have been the Deacon's bell, or perhaps from its formidable size may well have functioned as the School bell, was, as most of you will know, after being lost for many years, found recently by a Glasgow citizen in an antique shop in Canada, and by him very kindly restored to the Craft, and new reposes on a stand presented by Deacon Simpson, in an honoured position in the Clerk's Office.

The litigious character of the Scot asserted itself in connection with the School. There was a "guid-ganging plea" in 1870 between the "operative" or trade members

and the "pendicles" or non-trade members, over the privileges of the educational scheme. The operatives argued that the dung, and therefore the money, came from the animals belonging to the trade members. The pendicles lied that it was Incorporation's money, and all should share alike. They paid their entry fees and quarter accounts and did not benefit from the operative trade privileges. The Court of Session took the broad view, decided for the pendicles and affirmed the unity of the Craft. All were "Jock Tamson's bairns". But the institution in 1872 of the School Boards which were to serve Scotland so admirably, rendered private provision for education unnecessary, and the school funds were brought back again into the general accounts of the Incorporation.

The era of railway transport and the building of St. Enoch Station in the 1870s involved the acquisition by the G. & S.W. (then the Union) Railway of the Incorporation's property in Kind Street, including the old hall. This was a loss from the point of view sentiment, but the golden salve set the Incorporation on its feet financially, and relieved the Master Court of the chief duty which had occupied it for many years before in looking after the properties and checking the factor's intromissions. 100 years ago the Incorporation had practically no funds, but had a good deal of rather troublesome property. To-day its funds amount to some £64,000, inclusive of the late Deacon Edward Watson's legacy of £1000. It is worth remarking that the first Deacon was a Watson, and two of the first eleven members bore that name. Truly the Watson clan has played an honourable part throughout the Craft's history.

For the last three-quarters of a century the Incorporation's functions have been almost entirely benevolent, and its work in that connection you all know. Its distributions in the year now amount to about £2300 or £46 per week. Its membership has risen from the original eleven petitioners to about 600.

From the very first the Incorporation was liberal enough to admit widows of deceased members to trading privileges and to allow them to occupy their husbands' stalls in the market. This explains the appearance of the names of women on the early lists. Women at that time could not be burgesses and their admission to trade was of grace, not of right. To women the bounty of the Incorporation was always extended, and they are by far its greatest beneficiaries to-day. Even strangers did not apply in vain. Grants were made to "a poor man who had lost his all in a fire". To a "poor sailor despoiled by the Turks", and to sundry "puir cratur's" not otherwise designated whose wretched plight had touched the warm heart of the Deacon of the day. The modern grant of quarter's pension after the death of a pensioner towards funeral expenses is paralleled by the old-time grants for the hire of a "mort cloth" or shroud to cover the dead for decent burial where the cost of a coffin could not be afforded.

There then in bare outline you have a resume of the historical activities of the Craft to which you belong. Its functions were originally the organization, supervision and regulation in the general interest and the training of young entrants in the mysteries of the Craft, with the relief of poor and decayed brethren as a subsidiary and incidental function. Then came the long history, not always smooth, of the rise of the civic power and the Town Council's co-operation with and gradual absorption of, the Incorporation's activities, and the Incorporation's fight for the legitimate rights and interests of the private trader, the back-bone then as now of the City's strength and

well-being, against undue public encroachment. For that end the Incorporation has ever stood as a rock.

Then the turning of the Incorporation from active trade politics, which passed into other hands, to purely benevolent ends. In spite of this the Incorporation has throughout the whole of its long history never lost a strongly predominant trade association. The "pendicles" have always been pendicles, meaning of course something which "hangs on to" like the pendulum to the clock. In the Fleshers' Craft the tail has never wagged the dog, or perhaps I should say the ox. But the Incorporation, apart from the tiff over the School, in which it is fair to say that the forces were not divided exclusively on operative and non-operative lines or on lines of merely material interest - many of the most active supporters of pendicle rights being operative fleshers - the Incorporation has always been a band of brothers, truly democratic. It has had far fewer "rows" throughout its whole history than the average kirk in a single decade. Myself of course a pendicle, I am proud to say that the pendicle members have always pulled their weight. They have supplied, as you know, many first-rate Deacons, and have in many ways rendered such loyal service to the Fleshers' Craft; and the Fleshers on their part have never abused their predominant strength nor made fish of the one and flesh of the other. They have never confused the essentially different conceptions of might and right as others, more prominent in world history, but less richly endowed in true wisdom, have done. Some that are first shall be last and the last first. Yet this democracy, which in essence means government by consent, has never descended to the level of "demagoguery". So far as my study of the Incorporation's records goes the dignities and proprieties have ever been observed, and all due subordination of rank and position honoured. Honour has been paid where due. The King has had no more loyal subjects; the Trades no more loyal members; and the Deacon of any Craft no more loyal supporters. The history of the Craft may be said to be undistinguished, almost prosaic. But it has the simple dignity of solid work fully performed continuously, without break, over more than 3½ centuries. If by its fruits ye know it, the seed sown in 1580 has fallen on fertile soil, and brought forth sheaves abundantly. The world has been a better and happier place because of it. It has "fought the good fight and kept the faith". It has ever honoured its "declaration de fideli as use is", and let us hope, as ever will be. When need has appealed I do not find that the Craft has ever asked "Whether did this man Sin, or his parents?" It has looked upon distress as the call for the grace of God to be manifested in it, and has never refused aid where real need and the means to relieve it were concurrent. We cannot doubt that this spirit has blessed and preserved our Craft throughout the whole of its long history. Its quiet record is indeed a nobler one than that of violent alarms and excursions. If it has been uneventful it has been with that peace which is God's highest blessing on work well done. The Craft has lived through difficult times in the history of our Scottish nation, and has "kept a calm sough" and carried on with its task while thrones shook. Its Minutes reveal no panic in times of crisis. Like old Isaac Walton his fishing, the Incorporation has pursued its fleshing unperturbed while the guns rumble. Men must eat though Empires fall. It has passed through trying times in its own affairs. Time was when it had to suspend its pensions for lack of funds. But it has weathered every storm. The Craft has suffered adversity with courage and sustained success with moderation. If, which may Heaven forbid, its epitaph had ever to be written, the Craft has long ago earned the simple and moving tribute which the great Dr. Johnson penned for one who also served a great cause

with a great heart. You read these lines on the tall Celtic Cross which marks the grave of Flora Macdonald on the slopes of the hill above the sea at Kilmuir in Skye "Her name will be remembered; and if courage and loyalty be virtues, remembered with honour". It is indeed almost a contradiction to speak of an epitaph to that which is immortal. "Non omnis moriar" sang the Latin poet - "I shall not wholly die": and surely, if anything is imperishable the spirit of the ancient Crafts must be. So may it prove to be with this Craft of ours.

Such then are the traditions of which we here present are the heirs. It is for us to preserve them and in our turn to pass them and in our turn to pass them on untarnished to our successors