

Cowans and Eavesdroppers

By W..B.. Rick Carver

If you hang around the Internet long enough, you are bound see or hear just about everything.

Mark Twain wrote that. I am pretty sure that he did. I read it on the Internet. I read a lot of Internet forums, especially Masonic ones. They are a great source of learning and an equally great place to ask questions or to float a new idea. I was somewhat disturbed to visit a forum that I had been absent from for several years only to find it had at times been engaged in much disagreement and turmoil. One such conflict revolved around the definition of the word *Cowan*; a word I *thought* I understood.

We hear about Cowans and Eavesdroppers in our ritual as the duties of the Tyler are specified. He is tasked to keep off the Cowans and Eavesdroppers and to assure they are not admitted into the Lodge. That seems like a fairly cut-and-dried sort of task, provided he knows exactly what a Cowan is. If you ask most Masons for the definition of a Cowan, they might correctly or incorrectly assume that a Cowan and an Eavesdropper is the same thing. They are not. Well, at least, sort of not the same thing. Allow me to explain.

An Eavesdropper is a person who, in terms of Operative Masonry, would position himself near a qualified Stonemason to watch and to listen. Through observation, he could learn just enough about some tasks of the craft that eventually he might be able to pass himself off as being a skilled Mason himself. Likewise, he could carefully listen to instructions being given and note any “secrets” spoken between Stonemasons that might be used for him to pass himself off as a qualified Mason. In Speculative times, these imposters engage in less observation of the actual Work, but still remain alert for any slip of a sign, word or token they might utilize to pass themselves off as a Mason and gain entry into our Lodges. Some eavesdroppers have no intention of gaining entry, but instead choose to clandestinely gather actual or false information they can use against the body of Masonry. These are perhaps the most dangerous form of eavesdroppers, and are the ones Speculative Freemasonry should vehemently guard itself against

30 giving any information. For the purposes of our discussion, we will say that an Eavesdropper is a
31 fraud who tries to pass himself off as a Mason under false pretenses.

32 To find the definition of a Cowan, I consulted the dictionary.

33 *One who builds dry stone walls (i.e., without mortar); a dry-stone-diker; applied*
34 *derogatorily to one who does the work of a mason, but who has not been regularly*
35 *apprenticed or bred to the trade.ⁱ*

36 Other definitions from other sources go on to say:

37 *A stonemason who has not served a regular apprenticeship; A person who attempts*
38 *to pass himself off as a Freemason without having experienced the rituals or going*
39 *through the degrees; A sneak; an inquisitive or prying person; uninitiated, outside,*
40 *profane.ⁱⁱ*

41
42 *A man who practiced Masonry, usually of the roughest character as in the building*
43 *of walls, who had not been regularly trained and initiated, corresponding in some*
44 *sense to "scab" as used by labor unions. If a man has learned the work by some*
45 *illegal method he is a cowan. An "eavesdropper" is one who spies on a Lodge, and*
46 *may be such without having learned anything about it before. A "clandestine" is*
47 *one who has gone through initiation ceremonies but not in a regular Lodge.ⁱⁱⁱ*

48
49 *Cowan is an essentially Scottish trade term, and it belongs to the time when*
50 *lodges, as trade-controlling bodies, put restrictions against the employment of*
51 *Cowans, in order to protect the fully-trained men of the Craft from competition by*
52 *unskilled labour. The earliest official ban against Cowans appeared in the Schaw*
53 *Statutes in 1598.^{iv}*

54 Clearly, there seems to be two different definitions. In early times, there was a class of workers
55 called Cowans, just as there were Stonemasons, Blacksmiths, Excavators, Carpenters and so on.

56 It is likewise clear that during this time the classification of Cowan referred to a much lesser
57 skilled version of the Stonemasons. They were allowed to perform only very basic tasks that
58 amounted to little more than rough stone stacking. They did not (or more likely, were not
59 allowed to) use working tools to face rough stones into any other shape. They did not bond or
60 cement these rough stones together to give them greater stability. This limited them to essentially
61 basic wall building with very limited height and possibly some flatwork, such as laying
62 walkways or cobblestone roads.

63 Such basic and undisciplined labor was sure to be held in great contempt by the highly skilled
64 Stonemasons who had undergone years of rigorous apprenticeship just to reach journeyman level

65 as Fellow Craft. They would likewise be held in even greater contempt by Master Masons who
66 likely needed to receive no mandate from the Schaw Statutes to avoid hiring Cowans as equals to
67 their craftsmen.

68 Brother Mackey points out that the word Cowan may originate from the Greek meaning for a
69 dog; and referred to the fact that in the early ages of the Church, when the mysteries of the new
70 religion were communicated only to initiates under the veil of secrecy, the uninitiated were
71 called dogs, a term probably suggested by such passages as:

72 *Give not that which is holy unto the dogs^v*

73 or:

74 *Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision^{vi}*

75 In the Middle-East, as well as in Scotland and even through much of ancient Europe, dogs were
76 considered an especially lowly and unclean animal. Any comparison made between Cowans and
77 dogs would be considered to be an exceptional insult.

78 Unquestionably, this craft known as Cowans was held in very low esteem by Freemasons. They
79 were specifically mentioned by name as being unwelcome in a Lodge of Masons, perhaps even
80 more despised than any other trade or craft on the work site.

81 This leaves us with the more modern dictionary definition of a Cowan. Since it is a more modern
82 version and is what appears in print in the current dictionaries it is much more widely accepted
83 today. This definition specifically mentions passing oneself off as a Freemason. This sounds
84 remarkably close to the definition of an Eavesdropper or a fake Mason. It is easy to see where
85 the confusion exists and it depends more upon whether you govern your thinking on the old
86 definition or the new one.

87 Let us again compare Brother Mackey's definition with that of Daniel Webster, who was himself
88 a notable Mason. The bold emphasis added to these definitions is mine.

89 *This is a **purely Masonic term**, and signifies in its technical meaning an **intruder**,*
90 *whence it is **always coupled with the word eavesdropper**. It is not found in any*
91 *of the old manuscripts of the English Freemasons anterior to the eighteenth*

92 century, unless we suppose that lowen, met with in many of them, is a clerical
93 error of the copyists. It occurs in the Schaw Manuscript, a Scotch record which
94 bears the date of 1598, in the following passage: "That no Master or Fellow of Craft
95 receive any cowans to work in his society or company, nor send none of his
96 servants to work with cowans." In the second edition of Anderson's Constitutions,
97 published in 1738 (page 146), we find the word in use among the English
98 Freemasons, thus : "But Free and Accepted Masons shall not allow cowans to work
99 with them ; nor shall they be employed by cowans without an urgent necessity;
100 and even in that case they must not reach cowans, but must have a separate
101 communication." **There can be but little doubt that the word, as a Masonic**
102 **term, comes to us from Scotland, and it is therefore in the Scotch language that**
103 **we must look for its signification.**

104 Now, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition:

105 *A stonemason who has not served a regular apprenticeship; **A person who***
106 ***attempts to pass himself off as a Freemason** without having experienced the*
107 *rituals or going through the degrees; **A sneak; an inquisitive or prying person;***
108 *uninitiated, outside, **profane.***

109 Note that in Webster's definition, no real consideration is given to the ancient tradecraft of
110 Cowans and it only mentions the Masonic usage of the word common to circa 1828.

111 I propose for your consideration that the "new definition" exists because Freemasons have given
112 it this new meaning. I am the first to admit that I have absolutely no proof or documented facts to
113 support this theory other than what I have already presented. Consider what we do know:

- 114 • The word Cowan has an unknown root origin—*possibly Scottish, possibly Greek.*
- 115 • The word Cowan has an uncertain spelling—*Cowan, Cowen, Kowen, Kowen, et al.*
- 116 • The word Cowan had a specific ancient meaning referring to a certain tradecraft, but
117 other than in Freemasonry, is not a word in common usage in the modern English
118 lexicon.

119 This leads me to postulate that since Freemasons are the only ones who actually use the word
120 Cowan today, it has come to be defined as what we Freemasons say that it means. This would
121 not be the first case where a dictionary meaning has been so altered to reflect its current usage
122 and to become readily accepted as such. Consider the words "troll," "classic," "tweet," or if you
123 really want to make blood shoot out of your eyeballs, look at what Millennials have done with
124 the word "literally."

125 Understating the terms and conditions of this dual- meaning have led some to propose that in
126 modern and Speculative terms:

127 *A Cowan could be considered a Brother who has gone through the degrees, and*
128 *never ever bothered to study what the rituals mean, or even the allegory or*
129 *symbolism behind them.*

130 I would not argue the existence of such Masons, but I am not certain having this trait makes them
131 a Cowan. Were a Mason to be recognized as such, he could not be admitted into any regular
132 Lodge of Masons. Another Brother confirms this point when he states:

133 *The problem with this is Cowans are to be excluded from the Lodge. A Brother,*
134 *once he has gone though the degrees, has a right to attend his Lodge. It isn't a*
135 *right that is predicated on if someone judges them proficient, it is a right [sic] of*
136 *passage by having gone through the Degrees.*

137 I am in total agreement with this statement, other than one minor technicality. In my jurisdiction,
138 as is the case in most jurisdictions, someone (or a committee) *does* judge a Brother's proficiency
139 before he is allowed to advance. Advancement to the next Degree is not a matter of being an
140 automatic rite of passage. In fairness to the Brother that posted this, I think he probably meant
141 that once proved proficient and advanced, no Brother has the right to say that another doesn't
142 really understand ritual and is not duly and truly qualified to enter his Lodge.

143 Another asks:

144 *The good ol' boy system promotes friends regardless of their proficiency or*
145 *mastery. So you are saying just because a man shows up and gets pushed through*
146 *a ceremony or three, he is not only worthy, but entitled?*

147 The reply that follows hits the nail right on the head but is quickly lost in the outbreak of
148 background noise that ensues:

149 *Yes that is exactly what I am telling you. If someone goes though the Degrees they*
150 *are a Mason, not a Cowan. If they went through without learning something then*
151 *shame on both him and the Lodge, but it doesn't change the fact that he went*
152 *through the Degrees.*

153 Bravo! A Mason is not a Cowan and a Cowan is not a Mason. Let us move past all this and
154 recognize the significant truth that there are Masons who are being advanced that do not know or
155 understand the Work. THAT IS THE PROBLEM! Whether or not someone wishes to label them

156 as a Cowan or not is just so much balderdash. Another Brother reinforced this sentiment by
157 posting this:

158 *First, the West gate needs to be guarded, and if it is done properly, those charged*
159 *with educating and proving proficiency will prevent a Cowan from becoming a*
160 *Master Mason instead of just going through the paces and allowing any candidate*
161 *to advance just because they show up for a degree.*

162
163 *The Tyler's job along with the JD is to allow none to pass except by order of the*
164 *WM. if the WM doesn't prohibit it, then you get the Cowans in your midst.*

165 From this point on, a long argument ensued as to whether these uneducated Masons should be
166 called Cowans or not called Cowans and whether the Tyler had the means to deny someone
167 entry. It was further argued about the definition of a Cowan and accusations weighed about
168 made-up facts. It became quite ugly, and frankly, it became very un-Masonic in both the tone
169 and rhetoric it contained. It not only upset me to see such behavior between Brothers, but even
170 more so to see that each and every one of them was so busy defending his position and out-
171 trumping what the others said that they failed to address the real issue at hand. It does not matter
172 *what* you label these Brothers that are advanced without understanding the Work. **The problem**
173 **is that there are Brothers allowed to advance without understanding the Work!**

174 Our duty as Masons is not only to learn the Work, but to teach the Work. It is also our duty as
175 Masons to allow none to pass or repass except those who are duly qualified. We do this by
176 presenting Masonic Education in the Lodge and outside the Lodge. We do this through
177 Mentoring and by committed Internership to our new members and to each other. We do this by
178 electing a WM who will never give his permission to pass anyone who is not duly and truly
179 qualified.

180 *We do this not by showing them the Light; we do it by being the Light.*
181

182 Mark Twain did NOT write that. I'm Rick Carver, and I approved this message.

ⁱ Oxford Dictionary

ⁱⁱ Merriam-Webster Desk Dictionary of the English Language

ⁱⁱⁱ MasonicDictionary.com

^{iv} Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, *Cowan*

^v Matthew 6:6

^{vi} Philippians 3:2, *see also* Revelations 22:15

BIOGRAPHY

Rick Carver is the Past Master of Inner Quest Lodge 456 (a Traditional Observance Lodge) and the current Secretary of Shawnee Lodge 54 in Kansas. He is also a member of the AASR, York Rite, Knights Masons, AMD and some other super-secret mystical organizations with sparkling jewels and bright shiny medallions. His accolades and regalia are so awesome, they rival all but the sun. He can be reached at rickcarver@kc.rr.com