

The Kipling Gavel, or  
An Adventure in Masonic Research  
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When I was a young Mason, like many of the young Masons today I was attracted to books which researched the ancient origins of Freemasonry. Did we evolve from the Templars, the Greek Mystery Cults, the Egyptians? Although interesting, these researches usually end up with an amazing amount of speculation. Besides which, all these things happened (if they happened at all) far away from Canada. The documents, monuments, and wall paintings are all in Europe or the Middle East - not available to the ordinary researcher here in Ontario.

So what do we have here that we can research? Well, how about our own lodge history? Now, before you yawn, despite many poor histories which are little more than transcriptions of the minutes of the lodge, there are interesting things here to be discovered and written about. But like many things in Masonic Education these days, you must approach it from a new angle, make it lively and grab their attention.

Here is a story about an artifact held by my mother lodge, Grand River No. 151 in Kitchener-Waterloo.

Some time after I joined Grand River Lodge I heard a rumour about a gavel which was given to the lodge by Rudyard Kipling, the famous author who wrote *Kim*, "The Man Who Would Be King" and *The Jungle Book*. *Kim* is about a boy, son of a British soldier in India who, Kipling said, had from his deceased father only "three papers - one he called his 'ne varietur' because those words were written below his signature thereon, and another his 'clearance-certificate'. The third was Kim's birth-certificate. Those things, he was used to say, in his glorious opium-hours, would yet make little Kimball a man. On no account was Kim to part with them, for they belonged to a great piece of magic - such magic as men practised over yonder behind the Museum, in the big blue-and-white Jadoo-Gher - the Magic House, as we name the Masonic Lodge. It would, he said, all come right some day, and Kim's horn would be exalted between pillars - monstrous pillars - of beauty and strength."<sup>1</sup>

"The Man who would be King" tells the story of two Englishmen who find the men of a remote part of Afghanistan to be Masons.

'Shake hands with him,' says Dravot, and I shook hands and nearly dropped, for Billy Fish gave me the Grip. I said nothing, but tried him with the Fellow Craft Grip. He answers, all right, and I tried the Master's Grip, but that was a slip. 'A Fellow Craft he is!' I says to Dan. 'Does he know the word?' 'He does,' says Dan, 'and all the priests know. It's a miracle!'<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately the two disregard several rules of the Craft and things eventually go very badly for them.

I do not recall any overt Masonic references in *The Jungle Book*.

Anyway, after some enquiring I found that the secretary had the gavel at his house, in this old envelope box on which has been written "1933. The Kipling Gavel". Here it is. Let me describe the gavel for you.

It is made of four kinds of wood, each of which is mentioned in the Bible. And they are labeled:

Almond - Numbers 17:8 (And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds.<sup>3</sup>)

Carob - Luke 15:16 (He longed to eat his fill from the carob pods the pigs were eating, and no one would give him any.<sup>4</sup>)

Shittim - Exodus 25:15 (And thou shalt make boards for the tabernacle of shittim wood standing up.<sup>5</sup>) The Revised Standard Version calls it acacia wood.<sup>6</sup>

Oak - Ezekiel 27:6 (Of the oaks of Bashan have they made thine oars...<sup>7</sup>)

It also has "JERUSALEM" stamped on the handle. Actually, I have seen another gavel like this before. Apparently they were common souvenirs sold in Palestine in the past.

But this one has further inscriptions on it. On the top is a silver plate which is inscribed "E. A. Snow 1933". On the side is one inscribed "Presented to W. Bro. E. A. Snow by Bro. Rudyard Kipling"

And on the bottom of the head of the gavel, hand-written in ink is "From Rudyard Kipling M.M. [then a bit I can't make out very well. It looks like 783 G.P.] and then 'as Fellow Craftsmen - no more and no less'"

I showed this to Bro. George Mulamoottil, professor emeritus of the University of Waterloo, thinking this significant historical piece would impress him. He asked how I knew it was presented by Rudyard Kipling. I showed him the inscriptions. He said "How do you know it was given by the Rudyard Kipling? Maybe it was just some other guy with the same name? I told him there was an oral tradition passed down by the secretaries of our lodge in whose possession the gavel had been for decades. He pooh-poohed this as proof. He taught his students at the university to question things, to find the facts, to not accept hearsay or legend, to seek out the truth. On reflection I realized that he was right. Should not Masonic research be held to the same standards? If we are ever going to have a Chair of Masonic Studies at a Canadian university we had better start operating at that level! So I started my search.

My first question was whether the famous Rudyard Kipling was alive in 1933? He was born in Bombay, India Dec. 30, 1865 and died January 18, 1936 in England.<sup>8</sup> So yes, he was alive.

Second, was he a Mason? Yes. He was initiated into The Lodge of Hope and Perseverance, No. 782, English Constitution, in Lahore, Punjab, India in 1885. (Maybe that faded number on the bottom is 782? And does the P stand for Punjab?) He was only twenty years old at the time of his initiation, but the lodge was in dire need of a Secretary, and as he was an aspiring young journalist, they got dispensation for him. Right after he was initiated he was invested as Secretary, and therefore had the unique distinction of recording his own initiation in the minutes.<sup>9</sup>

Third, did he visit Grand River Lodge in 1933? Or was he ever even in Canada? His biography says he was born in India of British parents. At five he was sent back to England for school but as soon as he graduated he returned to India to commence his career. He was back in England in 1889. And in 1892 he married an American and moved to Brattleboro, Vermont, where they lived until 1896. Then they moved to Sussex, England, eventually buying a seventeenth century house named Bateman's just south of Burwash in 1902. There they lived until his death in 1936. He did receive an honorary degree from McGill University in 1907, and then travelled by train from Montreal to Vancouver and back.<sup>10</sup> But there is no mention of being in Canada in 1933, or in Kitchener, ever.

A visit by such a personage as Kipling to our Lodge would have been a big deal and therefore recorded in our History, so I checked the booklet published for our centennial. I found that Wor. Bro. Snow was "a former British Army Officer" who "discharged the Master's duties with dignity and diligence in 1933"<sup>11</sup>. But no reference to Rudyard Kipling.

Okay. If he did visit Grand River Lodge his name would definitely be in the Tyler's register<sup>12</sup> because that is a requirement. So I checked the old registers and found the names of many prominent Masons, but I did not find Rudyard Kipling's signature.

Well then, it would surely be mentioned in the minutes. Here is the minute book covering that period. What beautiful handwriting - the secretary must not have been a physician. From reading this I learned many interesting things. Grand River Lodge donated money to The Home for Incurable Children, The Kitchener Orphanage, and Freeport Sanatorium; we paid \$60 a month in rent, \$13 for coal, \$18 for the Junior Warden's Account, and a \$200 honorarium to the Secretary. We visited our daughter lodge, Twin City No. 509 on their 20th anniversary, and received a visit from Levant Lodge No. 967 Buffalo, New York; as well as the usual Past Masters' Night, we had a Sidebenchers' Night, (where the degree was put on by brethren who had never been officers), an Irish Night (where the degree was put on exclusively by Irishmen), and even a night in which all the officers' chairs were occupied by men named "Cunningham".<sup>13</sup> But I found no mention of Rudyard Kipling in the entries for 1933.

A more thorough inspection however revealed this, in January of 1934:

W. Bro. E. A. Snow presented to the Lodge the famous "Kipling Gavel" with the good wishes of the donor and of himself.  
 Moved by W. Bro. W. Downing, seconded by W. Bro. W. M. O. Lohead that the Secretary be instructed to convey to W. Bro. Rudyard Kipling the thanks and appreciation of the Lodge of the gift and with the assurance that it will be used on special occasions in the conduct of the Lodge. Carried<sup>14</sup>

And this, on Sept. 11, 1934:

Communications:

The Secretary read the following:

An application for membership in the Lodge from Frederick Walker Lee, age 39, Assignor ...

2. Letter from Rev. Bro. Gordon McEwan, D.D.G.M. Wellington District [we were part of Wellington District then]

3. Letter from Bro. D.J. Hall

4. Letter from Bro. Rudyard Kipling<sup>15</sup>

Aha! The correspondence. Back to the basement to dig it out. Unfortunately the correspondence has not been kept in chronological order, but it has been kept! And it was interesting reading. We supported widows through the thirties; we sent cigarettes to the troops in WWII (in retrospect not a very good idea, but they appreciated it then); we arranged and paid for a funeral for a brother who belonged to a lodge in New York but died here without family; and we supported brethren who had fallen upon hard times. In fact W. Bro. Ernest Snow had returned to England to care for his aged parents, and by the forties found his situation so desperate that he needed to be supported by the Lodge - a truly Masonic lesson.<sup>16</sup>

And then, this unsigned draft copy of a letter:

11 Elgin St.  
Kitchener, Ont.  
Jan 20, 1936

Mrs. Rudyard Kipling,  
Bateman's  
Burwash, Sussex, England

Dear Mrs. Kipling:

Please accept the heartfelt sympathies of the members of Grand River Lodge, A.F. & A.M. No. 151, G.R.C. upon the passing to eternal life of your beloved husband, the late Brother Rudyard Kipling.

Through our Worshipful Brother, Capt. Ernest A. Snow, a school friend of Brother Kipling, we as a Lodge have taken a personal interest in Brother Kipling. During Brother Snow's last visit to England, Brother Kipling presented him with a gavel which Brother Snow later donated to our Lodge.

Subsequently Brother Kipling in reply to my letter expressed the hope he might visit Canada at some time and sit with us in Lodge.

Hence the news of Brother Kipling's passing filled us all with sorrow and we sincerely trust the Great Architect of the Universe in his wisdom and goodness will comfort and sustain you and yours in this hour of your bereavement. I am

Sincerely Yours,<sup>17</sup>

I wasn't sure if this unsigned letter would be enough proof for George, and I knew from the minute book that there was a letter from Rudyard Kipling himself, so I searched on. And there, in the midst of the correspondence from the forties, was this letter:

Burwash  
Etchingham

Bateman's  
Burwash  
Sussex

Private

20th June 1934

[R. Fisher Esq.,  
11 Elgin Street,  
Kitchener,  
Ontario,  
Canada]

Dear Sir and Brother,

My long absence abroad must be my excuse for not having replied to yours of January 29th till this late date, as I have but recently returned from France.

I am very glad to know that the Brethren are pleased with the little Gavel. I am sure from what Wor. Bro. Snow told me it could not be in worthier hands.

I hope indeed that it may come my way to visit Canada again and sit in your Lodge. But it is only fair to say that I have never passed the Chair. My post in my Mother Lodge was the necessary one of Secretary.

Meantime, I am, with every good wish,  
Faithfully and fraternally yours,<sup>18</sup>

Signed in Kipling's own hand!

(The reference to passing the Chair meant that he was not a Past Master. If you look back to minutes of 1934 you will see Kipling recorded as W. Bro.. Our secretary had this wrong and addressed his letter incorrectly)

So there we have it, the mystery solved, the paper trail uncovered. Rudyard Kipling and Ernest Snow attended school together in England as boys. Snow went on to become an army officer, eventually living in Kitchener, Ontario. Kipling returned to India, fame and fortune. They met again in England after Snow's Installation. And Kipling gave him this gavel which he had picked up in Palestine. Who'd have thought - such a story in our basement.

And what did the famous writer, Nobel laureate, choose to inscribe on the gavel he gave to his old friend? A line from this poem:

"Once in so often," King Solomon said,  
Watching his quarrymen drill the stone,  
"We will club our garlic and wine and bread  
And banquet together beneath my Throne,  
And all the Brethren shall come to that mess  
As Fellow-Craftsmen - no more and no less."

"Send a swift shallop to Hiram of Tyre,  
Felling and floating our beautiful trees,  
Say that the Brethren and I desire

Talk with our Brethren who use the seas.  
 And we shall be happy to meet them at mess  
 As Fellow-Craftsmen - no more and no less."

"Carry this message to Hiram Abif -  
 Excellent master of forge and mine :-  
 I and the Brethren would like it if  
 He and the Brethren will come to dine  
 (Garments from Bozrah or morning-dress)  
 As Fellow-Craftsmen - no more and no less."

"God gave the Hyssop and Cedar their place -  
 Also the Bramble, the Fig and the Thorn -  
 But that is no reason to black a man's face  
 Because he is not what he hasn't been born.  
 And, as touching the Temple, I hold and profess  
 We are Fellow-Craftsmen - no more and no less."

So it was ordered and so it was done,  
 And the hewers of wood and the Masons of Mark,  
 With foc'sle hands of Sidon run  
 And Navy Lords from the Royal Ark,  
 Came and sat down and were merry at mess  
 As Fellow-Craftsmen - no more and no less.

The Quarries are hotter than Hiram's forge,  
 No one is safe from the dog-whip's reach.  
 It's mostly snowing up Lebanon gorge,  
 And it's always blowing off Joppa beach;  
 But once in so often, the messenger brings  
 Solomon's mandate : "Forget these things!  
 Brother to Beggars and Fellow to Kings,  
 Companion of Princes - forget these things!  
 Fellow-Craftsmen, forget these things!"<sup>19</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Kipling, Rudyard, *Kim*
- <sup>2</sup> Kipling, Rudyard, “The Man Who Would Be King”
- <sup>3</sup> Holy Bible, King James Version
- <sup>4</sup> Holman Christian Standard Bible, Broadman & Holman, 2001
- <sup>5</sup> Holy Bible, King James Version
- <sup>6</sup> Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version
- <sup>7</sup> Holy Bible, King James Version
- <sup>8</sup> Edgar, Eric, “Rudyard Kipling and his Masonic Career”, Pietre-Stones Review of Freemasonry, [www.freemasons-freemasonry.com/kipling.html](http://www.freemasons-freemasonry.com/kipling.html), 2004
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> Cook, H. M., comp., *Grand River Lodge History 1861-1961*
- <sup>12</sup> Minutes, Tyler’s Register, and Correspondence of The Grand River Lodge, A.F.&A.M., No. 151 G.R.C.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Kipling, Rudyard, “Banquet Night”