

2006/1503

WILLIAM PRESTON

"To the Institution of Masonry, I shall ever bear a warm and unfeigned attachment; I know its value, and I am convinced of its utility. To the Society of Freemasons I profess myself a true and steadfast friend."

Those words were written by William Preston at a most hopeless hour of his Masonic Career, when, as a consequence of his championship of the immemorial rights of the Lodge of Antiquity, he had been expelled by the Moderns Grand Lodge.

Brethren who, and what was this man, who today holds a high place in the Annals of Masonry, and who is remembered annually by the Prestonian Lecture named after him. We must brethren go back ⁴³233 years, when William Preston was born in Edinbrough on July 20th, 1742, the second son and only surviving child of William Preston, Writer to the Signet, in practise in that City. His Father, having been blessed with the advantages of a Liberal education, as one might expect, devoted special care to the education of his son. At the early age of six he had made such progress in his English Education as to enable him to be entered at the Edinburgh High School, where he made considerable progress in Latin. Thence he proceeded to College and was taught the rudiments of Greek.

His father ran into difficult times in the period of 1745, and young Preston was apprenticed to Walter Ruddiman, partner in a printing firm in Edinburgh. He spent a great deal of time assisting Mr. Thomas Ruddiman. This was a great advantage and extension of his educational opportunities, as he was employed reading to a blind scholar, transcribing works not yet completed and correcting those in the press. After the death of Mr. Ruddiman, he went into the office and worked as a compositor for about 12 months, during which time he finished a neat Latin edition of Thomas ^aKempis, and an edition of Ruddiman's standard work, the Rudiments of the Latin ~~Language~~ Tongue.

Thus equipped by birth and education William Preston proceeded to London in 1760 furnished with letters of recommendation and an introduction from his master and other friends to those who would be most likely to help him.

Here good fortune attended him, for on presenting his credentials to his Comatriot Mr. William Stachan, the King's Printer, he promptly found employment in that printing firm, a connection maintained to the end of his life.

A biographical note in the Freemason's Magazine, March 1795, refers to him thus;

"The uninterrupted health and happiness which accompanied him for half a century in the Capital, proves honesty to be the best policy, temperance the greatest luxury, and the essential duties of life its most agreeable amusement."

Soon after Preston's arrival in London, a number of Masonic Brethren from Edinburgh desired to found a Lodge under the Constitution of the Grand Lodge of Scotland. They were informed that this could not be done, as it would be an infringement of the rights of the English Grand Lodge, but the petitioners were referred to the "Ancients Grand Lodge in London."

This body granted the Brethren a dispensation to meet as a Lodge, and William Preston was their second initiate, probably at a meeting on April 20th, 1763, held at the White Hart in the Strand, when the Lodge was formally constituted by the Grand Officers and became No. 111 on the roll of the Ancients. Bro. Preston and some other members, dissatisfied with the status of their governing body, soon became members of a Lodge meeting at the Talbot Inn, in the Strand, under the other Grand Lodge of England (the Moderns). and prevailed on their friends of No. 111 of the Ancients to transfer their allegiance to the Older Grand Lodge. So, under the Grand Mastership of Lord Blaney and for a second time, on November 15th, 1764, the Lodge was constituted in ample form as No. 325 "The Caledonian Lodge", under which it now flourishes as No. 134 on the roll of Grand Lodge today.

We find that he turned his attention to Masonic Lectures, and to arrive at the depths of the science we are informed he spared neither pains nor expense.

Bro. Preston used to meet his friends once or twice a week, in order to illustrate his versions of the lectures; on which occasions objections were stated, and explanations given for the purpose of mutual improvement. At last, with the assistance of some zealous friends, he was able to arrange a digest to his satisfaction the whole of the first Lecture.

In 1772 he organised a Gala Meeting in order to submit his work to the approbation of the Grand Officers and the Leaders of the Craft. An oration which he delivered on this occasion was so well received that he determined to have it printed and with other proceedings, this formed the first edition of his "Illustrations of Masonry", which was published in the same year.

Encouraged by the successful reception of his first venture our Brother proceeded with his plans to complete the lectures of the three degrees. Proposals were issued for their delivery as public lectures to the Craft, which took place at the Middle Tavern, Fleet Street, during 1774. In further support of these revised workings a pamphlet was issued, entitled "Private Lectures on Masonry by William Preston.

He expressed his ideals and objects to the following effect.

No Society has ever subsisted which was raised on a better principal or more solid foundation than Freemasonry. It is indeed true, that in some Lodges the Work of Masonry is much neglected, and little or no regard shown to the fundamental principals of the society; arising partly from the inexperience and partly from the inability of those Brethren who have the honour to preside over them;

Thus men of letters have been discouraged from pursuing a study which might otherwise have proved of public utility; by giving sanction to the Society, and employing their genius in the elucidation of Mysteries, the Greatest Monarchs have not been ashamed to countenance.

As the neglect is owing, in a great measure to a want of method, which a little application might easily remedy, Brother Preston is induced to offer his assistance to ALL REGULAR MASONS desirous of making a progress in the Art. If Brother Preston succeeds in his expectations of giving his Brethren a just idea of Masonry, or promoting an uniformity in the Lodges under the English Constitution, he will be perfectly happy in the attempt he has made, and will spare no pains faithfully to fulfil his engagements with every gentleman who is inclined to encourage his design.

I have already explained that Brother Preston's book, Illustrations of Masonry took its rise from the Grand Gala Performance of the First Lecture on May 21st, 1772.

The first edition of the book differs very considerably from its many successors and is now a very rare volume. The title page bears the following lines by Dr. Blacklock.

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In the preface is explained that the ~~design~~ first design was only to publish the Oration delivered at the Gala, but the entertainment being to be annually repeated, certain particulars were put on record to serve as a precedent for future exhibitions of the same kind. The plan being thus to extend beyond the ~~future future~~ bounds of a pamphlet. Preston explains: "I resolved to select some of the bestpieces on the subject I could find; and to annex a few commentaries to answer the end in view. To this was added an Appendix containing many articles never before published, compiled from the most authentic records, and the best authorities I could procure. The Second Edition of the Illustrations of Masonry appeared in 1775, again with the imprimatur of the Grand Master and his Officers.

In this edition the particulars of the proceedings at the Grand Gala in 1772 " are entirely omitted to make room for more useful matter", so runs the preface, and from being denominated an "entertainment to be annually repeated", it is put aside "as it was a temporary affair".

The book now commences with "A vindication of Masonry including a demonstration of its Excellency", which in later editions came to be headed "The Excellency of Masonry Displayed."; then follows "Remarks on Masonry including an illustration of the lectures", and a great deal of fresh matter especially under the heading of "History of Masonry in England", which carries it from the days of the Druids to the reigning Grand Master Lord Petre. Special stress was laid on the Hall building project in which Brother Preston took great interest.

In the form thus arrived, ~~at~~ Brother Preston's book achieved its success, and did a great ~~great~~ work for the Craft by bringing together scattered matter in a harmonious whole and making it generally available and, by presenting the Institution in a dignified and worthy manner, rendered it acceptable even to those who were not members of the society. There is no doubt it did much to raise the general estimation of Freemasonry, and whilst ~~we~~ must differ from some of its presentments of History and theory, many useful lessons are inculcated equally applicable to our days. There remains, too, above all an engaging enthusiasm, a genuine love for the order and the Brethren and the spirit pervading it, which is at the very roots of our institution and must inspire among Masons and affectionate feeling of gratitude to our worthy Brother for his labours.

He resigned his Secretarial appointment at Christmas, 1777.

Outside the Craft, Brother Preston prospered in his business as a printer and corrector of the Press in connection with Mr. William Strachan's firm, on whose death in 1785 he became recipient of an annuity of £30 for life and took the position of chief reader and superintendent to the son, Mr. Andrew Strachan, who succeeded ~~him~~ to the business. That his literary capacity was considerable is clear, We are told:-

"His skill as a corrector of the press led ~~to~~ literary men to submit to the correction of style; and such was the success of William Preston in the construction of language, that the most distinguished among them honoured him with their friendship as presentation copies in his library include such names as Robertson, Hume, Gibbon, Johnson and Blair bore testimony"

Within the Craft, as we have seen, Brother Preston had now reached an honoured, or what he would have called a, 'truly respectable' position, and was known by his various activities to a wide circle as the Order then existed.

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On the first Edition of his Illustrations of Masonry, the title page bears the following Lines.

The Man whose mind on virtue bent,
Pursues some great by good intent,
With undivided aim,
Serene beholds to angry croud
Nor can their clamours fierce and loud,
His stubborn honour tame.

The quotation is wonderfully apt under the circumstances for already, as Preston himself wrote, the methods adopted had existed in some "AN absolute dislike" of what they considered as inovations, and in others a jealousy which the principals of Masonry ought to have checked.

The book ran through twelve editions during his life, and then under the editorship of Bro. Stephen Jones and finally Dr. Olover, reached the 17th issue in English in 1861. There were published, German; American; and Dutch editions, but no French edition seems to have been called for. In the English Craft it was frequently given to Initiates, and became an almost indispensable Lodge possession, ranking only after the V.S.L. and book of Constitutions.

During the period (1767-1771) he was employed by the Grand Secretary to assist in arranging the general regulations of the Craft. This led to his being appointed Assistant or Deputy Grand Secretary at a salary of £20 per annum in 1769. This post did not amount to Grand Office, but his name was associated with those of the Grand Officers as "Printers to the Society"

He prepared the Historical Appendix to the 1776 Book of Constitutions. He also took an active part in proceedings as a member of the Hall Committee of Grand Lodge, and to this period belong his subscriptions of £20 to the Hall Fund and a like ammount to the Maonic Charity for Girls.

He attended various L. of L. to propogate his system. He had already been Master of Several Lodges when ~~in~~ circumstances which I shall now talk about, led him to the chair of the Lodge of Antiquity No. 1 now No. 2 on the Roll of the United Grand Lodge of England.

Among those taking a leading part in assisting Bro. Preston at his Gala Performance of the first Lecture in 1772 was Bro. J. Bottomley, Master of the Grand Stewards Lodge, who was Master of the Lodge of Antiquity from 1771-1774, when attendance was very poor and the Lodge in a flagging condition. Another member was Bro. John Noorthouk, who joining in 1771, was Senior Warden from 1772-1774. Bro. Noorthouck was in a very similar walk of life to Bro. Preston, and in fact like him largely in the employment of the same firm of printers.

These two brethren Bottomley and Noorthouck convcieved the idea of introducing Preston into the Lodge of Antiquity to retrieve its fortunes by his activity and zeal.

Bro. Preston appears to have attended a meeting of the Lodge in February 1772, as a visitor hailing from the Lodge of Prosperity, when on March 2nd 1774 he was proposed as a joining member.

He was duly elected on June 1st, when he was not, however present, and so was not, as often stated, elected a member and the Master of the Lodge on the same day. It was at the following meeting on June 15th when he made his first attendance as a member and was honoured by election to the Chair. Under his mastership the prosperity of the Lodge was rapidly restored. He was greatly impressed with the importance of his position as Master of the first Lodge under the English Constitution, and threw himself heart and soul into the work in what he conceived to be the best interests of the Lodge.

He studied past records and tried to establish a position by which the fullest prerogatives of a Lodge acting by immemorial constitution might be preserved intact under its allegiance to Grand Lodge. Unfortunately the activities of the new member did not meet with the approbation of the very man who had been responsible for his introduction. He was accused by Noorthouck of having crowded in such a succession of young masons, as totally transferred all power of the Lodge to him and his new acquaintances and enabled him to keep possession of the Master's Chair for three and a half years.

Everdently Bro. Prestons working of the Lectures and powers of memory annoyed Bro. Noorthouck. At a meeting in October, 1776, Preston received the thanks of the Lodge, because he had maintained the precedence of the Lodge of Antiquity No.1. at a Lodge he had visited, where it had been challenged by a member of the Stewards Lodge No. 60. It strikes one as less than generous that Bro. Preston should be blamed for holding the Mastership during a period of three and a half years of happiness and prosperity, when his predecessor, Bro. Bottomley, had occupied the chair for exactly the similar period under depressed circumstances prevailing in the Lodge.

we can gather, then, there was a current of dissension inside and outside the Lodge waiting only for an opportunity to get vent. The pretext arose on St. Johns Day December 27th, 1777 when some of the Brethren of the Lodge went to St. Dunstons Church, Fleet St. They put on their Masonic Regalia in the Vestry and sat together in the same pew; one, at any rate, Preston by his own account, arrived late, and put on his Masonic Clothing when he had entered the reserve pew. It was only a few steps across the street to the quarters of the Lodge at the Mitre Tavern, and so, after the service, the Master queried should they take off their clothing or wear it across to the Tavern? Preston tells us that he said, "I should certainly, I was not ashamed of it, I was then invested and should not be divested till the business of the day was finished." They accordingly returned to the Tavern in jewels and clothing as representatives of the Lodge, preceded by the Beadle but without any formal procession as Masons.

Bro. Noorthouck and Bottomley were not present, but they and their friends alleged

The minutes of Antiquity record a performance of the lecture in the Third Degree with Musical accompaniment on a scale similar to the setting of the first lecture. ~~It~~ In this case, however, Brother Preston officiated as Chief Ruler and was supported by his S & J Wardens as Senior and Junior Rulers.

To Brethren who have not studied the subject the names of the leading Officers may suggest a further step beyond the Third Degree, but in the ancient working carried on by the Lodge of Antiquity and exemplified at the Lodge of Promulgation and by its propaganda so soon as the Brethren had proved themselves Craftsmen the principal Officers become for that, and for the higher Degree, a Chief Ruler and Senior and Junior Assistant Rulers instead of Master and Wardens. These usages disappeared under the working of the Lodge of Reconciliation.

This is the only record of this elaborated ceremony being worked that occurs in the minutes of Antiquity

Brother Preston was for many years Editor of the London Chronicle, and, as has been mentioned, since 1804 a partner in the firm he had served so well. It was said he ~~might~~ might be designated a "pioneer in literature", having conducted through the press of the house of Strachan some of the most celebrated works of the eighteenth Century writers. He certainly was a pioneer in his Masonic Work.

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that the proceedings constituted a public procession of Masons in their clothing, and made this the subject of complaint to Grand Lodge.

Unfortunately, Preston attempted to justify what at the worst was a mere error of judgement by pleading inherent rights peculiar to the Lodge of Antiquity. It was for his championship of the Lodge rights, as he conceived them, that he suffered, for himself he had no consideration, he was simply determined that he would not be a party to betraying the trust of those immemorial privileges. All the same, his theory was incompatible with allegiance to the Grand Lodge as the sequel clearly demonstrated. Procedure and forms were strained against Preston and his supporters, and at last, on January 29th, 1779, they were expelled by Grand Lodge. Yet worst was to follow, for by their action in carrying on the Lodge ~~and~~ independently and in alliance with the Grand Lodge of All England at York, and yet by forming themselves into a New Grand Lodge for England South of the River Trent the offenders seemed to have put themselves hopelessly beyond any chance of future reconcilliation. The two parties of the Lodge of Antiquity pursued their several ways.

In October 1781 he tendered his resignation to the Lodge, and in other respects his masonic activities were in obedience.

Meanwhile, the Lodge got into very low water, but at length the earnest entreaties of his friends and doubtless the warm interest he had felt in the Lodge prevailed on him to rejoin. This was on October 2nd, 1786, and for a second time Antiquity was revived by the accession of Bro. Preston to its ranks. This renewed interest in the Craft led to a special scheme by which Bro. Preston determined to propagate his system of Lectures - the so-called "revival" of the Antient and Venerable Order of Herodim, which in fact was a dignified Lodge of Instruction to render his lectures, inaugurated by a Meeting at the Mitre Tavern, Fleet Street, on Jan 4th 1787.

In 1790 the reunion of both sections of Antiquity was accomplished, and all went well for the Lodge.

William Preston did not invent the lectures, but carried on the old traditions, endeavouring to correct, refine and amplify the old workings, welding them together as lectures, addresses, etc. in a complete system according to his method.

From 1790 he was re-elected Deputy Master Annually, except when another took his place in 1802-1807 due to illness, and when in 1809 the Duke of Sussex accepted the Mastership he appointed him his Deputy Master.

It was in 1813 that William Preston made his will, when his Masonic bequests of £500 Consols to the Girls school, the same amount to the General Charity Fund, and £300 to found the Prestonian Lectureship, showed him, as he had professed, the true and steadfast friend of the Craft to the end of his Life. His last attendance at the Lodge of Antiquity was at the Installation Meeting, January 17th, 1816. He died on April 1st, 1818

The minutes of the Lodge of Antiquity record a performance of the Lecture of the Third Degree with musical accompaniments on a scale similar to the setting of the first Lecture. In this case, however, Bro. Preston officiated as Chief Ruler and was supported by his S. and J. Wardens as Senior and Junior Rulers.

To Brethren who have not studied the subject the names of the leading Officers may suggest a further ~~setting~~ step beyond the Third Degree, but in the ancient working as carried on by the Lodge of Antiquity and Exemplified at the Lodge of Promulgation and by its propaganda, so soon as the Brethren have proved themselves Craftsmen the principal officers become for that, and for the higher degrees, a Chief Ruler and Senior and Junior Assistant Rulers instead of Master and Wardens. These usages disappeared under the working of the Lodge of Reconciliation. This is the only record of this elaborated ceremony being worked that occurs in the minutes of Antiquity. Neither Bro. Bottomley nor Bro. Noorthouck were present.

Preston's own Lectures necessarily cover ~~me~~ very much of the ground of those with which we are familiar today, but there is a good deal of difference in the verbiage and the order of the matter, and there are besides considerable portions which have no exact counterparts today.

The first Lecture consists of Six Sections, the second of Four, and the Third Lecture is prolonged to no less than Twelve Sections. Each Section is further subdivided into Clauses.

After a short introduction the first lecture starts in the usual method of question and answer, and we are taught:-

That a mason is never to ~~use~~ to learn - that the wise seek knowledge and more travel to find it from West to East. The Master is placed in the East. Because it has ever been, and continues to be, and always shall be the situation of the Master when he acts in that capacity.

Clauses 2, 3 and 4 deal with familiar matter and the last enlarges on the symbolism of the Sun at various stations.

Clause 5 defines the key which opens our treasures and which every faithful Brother bears with him.

Section 11 in six clauses carries the Initiate from preparation to the end of the Obligation.

"Union and harmony constitute the essence of Freemasonry; while we enlist under that banner, the society must flourish, and private animosities give place to

peace and good fellowship. Uniting in one design, let it be our aim to be happy ourselves and contribute to the happiness of others. Let us mark our superiority and distinction among men, by the sincerity of our profession as Masons; let us cultivate the moral virtues, and improve in all that is good and amiable; let ~~us perform our part~~ the Genius of Masonry ~~preside~~ ^{preside} over our conduct, and under her sway, let us perform our part with becoming dignity; let us preserve an elevation of understanding, a politeness of manner, and an evenness of temper; let our recreations be innocent, and pursued with moderation; and never let ~~irregularities~~ irregular indulgences lead to the subversion of our system, by impairing our faculties, or exposing our character of derision.

In conformity of our precepts, as ~~a~~ patterns of imitation let the respectability of our character be supported by the regularity of our conduct and the uniformity of our deportment; then as citizens of the world, and friends to every clime, we shall be living examples of virtue and benevolence, ~~and will~~ ^{and will} equally zealous to merit, as to obtain universal approbation.

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The terms of the bequest were acted upon, but for a long time no such lecture had been delivered. In ~~91~~ 1923 Grand Lodge re-instituted the Prestonian Lectures and the first was given in 1923 on the First Degree

~~I end this talk brethren with a quotation from a letter which the M.W.G.M. of those days, H.R.H. The Duke of Sussex, addressed to the Lodge of Antiquity in 1813.~~

I wish to acknowledge the following for the information gained for this Lecture. The History of the Lodge of Antiquity No.2.; The Prestonian Lecture on William Preston for 1927 by Bro. Gordon P.G. Hills; and the proceedings of Q.C.

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~~Aster~~

After an illness of nearly five years Brother Preston passed away at his residence No. 3. Dean Street, Fetter Lane, on April 1st, 1818. The funeral took place at St. Pauls Cathedral, where he was buried on April 10th. An appreciative notice in the Gentleman's Magazine ends by describing the funeral as "of the most handsome description In consequence of the rain the Female Orphans belonging to the Freemason's Charity in St. George's Fields were not able to follow in procession but mustered at the church under care of the Treasurer and returned to the house of the deceased where they partook of wine and cake.

Let us close this talk with a quotation from a letter which the M.W.G.M. of those days, H.R.H. The Duke of Sussex, addressed to the Lodge of Antiquity in 1815, conveying an appreciation of Brother Preston and a commendation of his example equally applicable for us to day.

"Long has the Lodge of Antiquity been remarkable for its zeal in Masonry, and greatly is that Lodge and the Craft indebted to the diligence and example of my worthy Brother your Past Master Preston, whose name must be dear to every admirer and well wisher of our ancient Order. I have therefore only to recommend your following his ~~footsteps~~ steps, when I may anticipate the most glorious Result"