

WILLIAM PRESTON
AUTHOR UNKNOWN

WHEN we hear the name of William Preston we are at once reminded of the Preston lectures in Freemasonry. It is to Preston that we are indebted for what was the basis of our Monitors of the present day. The story of his literary labours in the interest of the Craft, and how they aided in making Freemasonry one of the leading educational influences during the closing decades of the eighteenth century, is one of absorbing interest to every member of the Fraternity.

William Preston was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, August 7th (old style calendar July 28th), 1742. His father was a "writer to the signet," a law agent peculiar to Scotland and formerly eligible to the bench, therefore a man of much educational standing. He naturally desired to give his son all the advantages which the schools of that day afforded, and young Preston's education was begun at an early age. He entered high school before he was six years old.

After the death of his father Preston withdrew from college and took employment as secretary to Thomas Ruddiman, the celebrated linguist, whose failing eyesight made it necessary for Preston to do much research work required by Ruddiman in his classical and linguistic studies. At the demise of Thomas Ruddiman, Preston became a printer in the establishment of Walter Ruddiman, a brother of Thomas, to whom he had been formerly apprenticed.

Evidence of Preston's literary ability was first shown when he compiled a catalog of Thomas Ruddiman's books. After working in the printing office for about a year, a desire to follow his literary inclinations prevailed and, well supplied with letters of introduction, he set out for London in 1760. One of these letters was addressed to William Strahan, the king's printer, with whom Preston secured a position, remaining with Strahan and his son for many years.

Preston possessed an unquenchable desire for knowledge. As was common to the times in which he lived, "man worked from sun to sun." The eight-hour day, if known at all, was a rarity, and Preston supplemented his earlier education by study after his twelve-hour working day was over. The critical skill exercised in his daily vocation caused literary men of the period to call upon him for assistance and advice. His close association with the intellectual men of his time was attested by the discovery after his death of autographed presentation copies of the works of Gibbon, Hume, Robertson, Blair and others.

The exact date of Preston's initiation is not known, but it occurred in London in 1762 or 1763. It has been satisfactorily ascertained that his Mother Lodge was the one meeting at the White Hart Tavern in the Strand.

This lodge was formed by a number of Edinburgh Masons sojourning in London, who, after being refused an application for a charter by the Grand Lodge of Scotland, accepted a suggestion of the Scottish Grand Body that they apply to the Ancient Grand Lodge of London. The Ancients granted a dispensation to these brethren on March 2nd, 1763, and it is claimed by one eighteenth century biographer that Preston was the second person initiated under that dispensation. The minutes of the Athol (Ancient) Grand Lodge show that Lodge No. 111 was constituted on or about April 20th, 1763, William Leslie, Charles Halden and John Irwin being the first Master and Wardens, and Preston's name was listed as the twelfth among the twenty-two on the roll of membership.

It was not uncommon in those times (and the custom still prevails in England, Canada and other countries, and among several Grand Jurisdictions in the United States) for Masons to belong to more than one lodge, and Preston and some other members of his Mother Lodge also became members of a lodge chartered by the Moderns, which met at the Talbot Tavern in the Strand. These brethren prevailed upon the membership of Lodge No. 111, which in the meantime had moved its meeting place to the Half Moon Tavern, to apply to the Modern Grand Lodge for a charter. Lord Blayney, then Grand Master, granted a charter to the members of Lodge No. 111, which was constituted a second time, on November 15th, 1764, taking the name Caledonian Lodge No. 325. This lodge is still in existence, being No. 134 on the present registry of the United Grand Lodge of England.

The constitution of the new Caledonian Lodge was a noteworthy event because of the presence of many prominent Masons of the day. The ceremonies and addresses on this occasion made a deep impression upon Preston, being among the factors which induced him to make a serious study of Freemasonry.

The desire to know more of the Fraternity, its origin and its teachings, was intensified when he was elected Worshipful Master, for, as he said, "When I first had the honor to be elected Master of a lodge, I thought it proper to inform myself fully of the general rules of the Society, that I might be able to fulfill my own duty and officially enforce obedience in others. The methods which I adopted, with this view, excited in some of superficial knowledge an absolute dislike of what they considered innovations; and in others who were better informed, a jealousy of preeminence, which the principles of Masonry ought to have checked."

Preston entered into an extensive correspondence with Masons at home and abroad, extending his knowledge of Craft affairs and gathering the material which later found expression in his best known book, "Illustrations of Masonry." He delved into the most out of the way places in search of Masonic lore and wisdom, by which the Craft was greatly benefited.

Preston was a frequent visitor to other lodges. He was asked to visit the Lodge of Antiquity No. 1, one of the Four Old Lodges which formed the Grand Lodge of England in 1717. On that occasion, June 15th, 1774, he was elected a member of the lodge and also Worshipful Master at the same meeting. This unusual action is additional evidence of the regard in which he was held by the brethren of his day. While he had been Master of several other lodges, he gave of his best in time and energy to the Lodge of Antiquity, which thrived greatly under his leadership.

He became an active member of the Grand Lodge, serving on its Hall Committee, a committee appointed in 1773 for the purpose of superintending the erection of the Masonic Hall which had been projected, and was later appointed Deputy Grand Secretary under James Heseltine. In this capacity he revived the foreign and country correspondence of the Grand Lodge, an easy matter for him because of his extensive personal correspondence with brethren outside of London.

In 1777 occurred an event which was momentous in the Masonic affairs of the period. On account of the mock and satirical processions formed by rival societies the Modern Grand Lodge of England had forbidden its lodges and members to appear in public processions in regalia. The Lodge of Antiquity, on December 17th, 1777, resolved to attend church services in a body on St. John's Day, the following 27th, selecting St. Dunstan's Church, only a short distance across the street from where the lodge met. Some of the members protested, saying it was contrary to Grand Lodge regulations, with the result that only ten attended, these donning gloves and aprons in the church vestry, and then entering to hear the sermon. At the conclusion of the services they returned to the lodge without first removing their Masonic clothing. This action was cause for debate at the next meeting of the lodge in which Preston expressed the opinion that the Lodge of Antiquity had never surrendered its privileges and prerogatives when it participated in the formation of the Grand Lodge in 1717, and held that it could parade as it did in 1694. The Grand Lodge, however, could not afford to overlook such an opinion, especially when expressed by the leading Masonic scholar of the day, and consequently Preston was expelled.

Because of this action of the Grand Lodge of Moderns, the Lodge of Antiquity severed its connection with that body, after dismissing from its membership three brethren who had made the original complaint against Preston, entered into relations with the revived Grand Lodge of All England at York, and formed what was known as the "Grand Lodge of England South of the River Trent." The controversy with the Grand Lodge of Moderns was settled in 1787, and Preston was reinstated, all his honours and dignities being restored, whereupon he resumed his Masonic activities. He organized the Order of Harodim, a society of Masonic scholars, in which he taught his lectures and through this medium the lectures came to America and became the foundation for our Monitors.

To fully grasp the significance of Preston's labours we must understand the conditions in England at the time he lived. The seventeenth century had been one of marked differences of opinion on the subjects of government, religion and economic conditions. The eighteenth century, following the accession of Prince George of Hanover to the throne of England as King George I, witnessed an era of peace and prosperity in that country. With the exception of the wars against the French, and later the Revolution in America, England met no obstacles in her conquests of trade. The strife of the opening years of the century calmed down, and the people became adjusted to their new conditions. It became a period of formalism.

Literature, which thrived under the patronage of the wealthy, partook of an ancient classical nature, spirit being subordinated to form and style.

Detailed perfection of form was insisted upon in every activity, and undoubtedly the insistence for a letter-perfect ritualism, still so apparent in Freemasonry, had its origin in the closing years of the eighteenth century.

While the well-to-do classes lived in comfort and ease, the labouring and farming classes had not yet entirely emerged from the adverse conditions confronting them for so many decades. True, the cessation of wars, and the development of domestic and foreign trade also had an influence in the circles not actively participating in the new development. A spirit of freedom and independence continued to express itself. Public education as we know it today, however, did not then exist. The schools were for the children of the wealthy only, being conducted by private interests and requiring the payment of tuition beyond the purse of the common people. Yet education was eagerly sought. Knowledge was looked upon as the key which would unlock the door to intellectual and spiritual independence.

While Preston began his schooling at an early age, even with this excellent start he extended his education only by diligent work and the burning of much midnight oil. Imbued with the spirit of the day, he was anxious to place the available knowledge of the times before his fellow men.

Therefore, when he discovered a vast body of traditional and historical lore in the old documents of the Craft, he naturally seized upon the opportunity of modernizing the ritual in such a way as to make accessible a rudimentary knowledge of the arts and sciences to the members of the Fraternity.

From 1765 to 1772 Preston engaged in personal research and correspondence with Freemasons at home and abroad, endeavouring to learn all he could about Freemasonry and the arts it encouraged. These efforts bore fruit in the form of his first book, entitled "Illustrations of Masonry," published in 1772. He had taken the old lectures and work of Freemasonry, revised them and placed them in such form as to receive the approval of the leading members of the Craft. Encouraged by their favourable reception, and sanctioned by the Grand Lodge, Preston employed at his own expense lecturers to travel throughout the kingdom and place the lectures before the lodges. New editions of his book were demanded, and up to the present time it has gone through twenty editions in England, six in America, and several more in various European languages.

After his death, on April 1st, 1818, it was found that Preston had provided a fund of three hundred pounds sterling in British Consuls (British government securities, the word being abbreviated from "consolidated annuities"), the interest from this fund to be set aside for the delivery of the Preston lectures once each year.

The appointment of a lecturer was left to the Grand Master. These lectures were abandoned about 1860, chiefly for the reason that they had been superseded by the lectures of Hemming, in the approved work of the United Grand Lodge of England, when that body was formed by the reunion of the Ancient and Moderns in 1513. The Preston work still survives, however, in the United States, although greatly modified by such American ritualists as Webb, Cross, Barney and others.

Had Preston not attained Masonic eminence through his efforts in other fields, his work in revising the lectures alone would entitle him to the plaudits and gratitude of the Craft. Considering these old lectures in the light of our present day knowledge, and granting that they might be corrected and revised, it must be remembered that Preston's work was a tremendous step forward when we consider

the spirit and conditions of his day. He was one of the first men to influence a change from the social and convivial standards which prevailed in the old lodges, and to make them centres for more practical and enduring efforts. His own progress in the Craft is an illustration of its democracy, and an illustration of the equality of opportunity existing for those who will apply themselves to the problems confronting the Fraternity in our own times.

From a position as the youngest Entered Apprentice standing in the northeast corner of his lodge, he progressed step by step until he reached a place where he was recognized as the foremost Masonic scholar of his generation. While he did not wear the purple of the Modern Grand Lodge in its highest stations, his contemporaries who had that honour have been forgotten, while the name of William Preston is still preeminent in the annals of Freemasonry.

Equality of opportunity, as Freemasonry stands for it, means equality of opportunity for service. The honours of office are not the Masonic test of service. He who contributes to the Mason's search for light, light that will enable the Craftsman to more intelligently and efficiently serve his God, his country and his neighbour, is rendering the highest and most enduring quality of service. This was true in Preston's time. It is equally true in ours. Fortunate is the lodge that has a modern Preston in its membership, who seeks to lead the Craft into a clearer understanding of the symbolism and teachings of Freemasonry to the end that Freemasons of today may sustain the high standard of effective and unselfish service to mankind which has characterized and distinguished the Fraternity in the generations and ages gone.