



PAPER

Bro. William Preston

Summary: The life and times of William Preston, founder of the Prestonian Lectures.



William Preston

from the 1812 edition of Illustrations of Masonry

Once we hear reference to the annual appointment by The United Grand Lodge of England of the *Prestonian Lecturer*, we are immediately reminded of William Preston. Who was this remarkable man? What is the story surrounding his extraordinary contributions to Freemasonry?

William Preston was born in Edinburgh, Scotland on the 7th August 1742. His father was a man of considerable educational standing and was an accomplished writer himself, in the capacity of 'Writer to the Signet' an office peculiar to Scotland. It was not surprising that he saw fit to give his son all the advantages which schools of that day afforded.

Young Preston's education began at the tender age of six, when he entered High School. It is important to remember that public education, as we know it today, did not then exist. Schools were only for children of the wealthy and required the payment of tuition fees way beyond the purse of the common people; hence very few people could read or write.

Developing this most important historical background to the life and times of William Preston, makes his achievements in his later life to be that more remarkable. William Preston was born in the middle of the 18th Century (1742), and passed to the Grand Lodge above in the first-quarter of the 19th century (1818), aged 76; a good age for those times. He was in consequence a very active Freemason at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. It is reported that he entered into an extensive correspondence with Masons home and abroad. Historically, what does that mean? To begin with, the first postage stamp *The Penny Black*, was issued in 1840, twenty-two years after Preston's death; the mechanical typewriter was invented thirty-four years later in 1874; the telephone was invented fifty-eight years after Preston died in 1876. It gives an idea of how difficult communications must have been for him, and everyone else, in those days. It was also reported that he travelled extensively, particularly in Canada and America to extend his knowledge of Craft affairs. Remember the steam ship did not replace the sail until some twelve years after Preston's death and Louis Bleriot did not cross the English Channel in his airplane until 1909, more than ninety years after Preston passed away. Even before we consider his Masonic achievements in detail; the circumstances surrounding his life at that time makes his accomplishments singularly phenomenal.

Let us revert to his early life. After the death of his father, Preston withdrew from College and took employment as Secretary to a Thomas Ruddiman; a celebrated linguist of his time. Due to his employers failing eyesight, Preston did much research work for Ruddiman in his classical and linguistic studies. Following the death of Thomas Ruddiman, Preston was engaged by Walter Ruddiman, Thomas's brother who was a printer. Evidence of Preston's literary ability became evident when he compiled a catalogue of Ruddiman's books. However, after working in the printing office for about a year, a desire to follow his literary inclinations prevailed, and he subsequently secured a position in London at William Strahan the King's printer; where he remained for many years.

Preston seemed to possess an unquenchable desire for knowledge, and as a result he spent a considerable time supplementing his earlier education by private study, often after his twelve-hour working day was over.

His critical skills exercised during his normal working day attracted literary men of the period to call upon him for assistance and advice. In fact, after his death, many autographed presentation copies of famous works by a wide range of prominent authors were found amongst his many possessions.

Typical of the records of the time, the date of Preston's Initiation into Freemasonry is not known. It seems to have occurred in London in either 1762 or 1763 in a Lodge meeting in the White Hart Tavern in the Strand, when Preston was around twenty; a very young man in any event.

Later the minutes of the Athol (Ancient) Grand Lodge show that a Lodge No. 111 was constituted on April 20th 1763. In a list, Preston's name appears as the twelfth amongst twenty-two on the roll of membership. The following year the Lodge was re-constituted and took the name of Caledonian Lodge No. 325.¹ The Constitution of the new Caledonian Lodge was such that many very prominent Freemasons of the day had joined the Lodge and in consequence the quality of the Ceremonies and the Addresses made a deep and profound impression upon him and inspired him to make a serious study of all aspects of Freemasonry. This desire to know more about the Fraternity, its origins and its teachings was intensified when he was elected as Worshipful Master of the Lodge. On the day, he made a statement that was not too well received by his elders, who considered his proposals to be nothing short of impertinent innovations. This is what he said:

*'When I first had the honour to be elected Master of a Lodge, I thought it my duty to inform myself more fully of the general rules of the Society, in order that I might be able to explain to the brethren under my direction, their utility and importance; and officially to enforce a due obedience in them.'*²

It becomes clear from this that Preston was almost certainly responsible and indeed influential in a change from the social and convivial standards set in the Inns and Taverns in the City of London and elsewhere, to make them centres of more practical and enduring efforts; perhaps now they might even begin to record the minutes of the proceedings!

All these progressive ideas galvanised Preston into a programme of research and correspondence with Freemasons at home and abroad. He delved into the most out-of-the-way places in search of Masonic lore and wisdom. This extension of his knowledge of Craft affairs, and the gathering of such valuable material later found expression in the form of his first book entitled *Illustrations of Masonry* published in 1772. What he had actually achieved was a total revision of the old lectures and craft rituals of the time; he reconsidered

the implications of the ancient charges, and placed them in such format as to receive the approval of leading members of the Craft, and eventually sanction from Grand Lodge. They have, to all extent and purposes, remained unchanged since that date, which is quite remarkable.

From then onwards, Preston's reputation grew in proportion to his zeal and ability. He was invited to attend the Lodge of Antiquity No. 1; one of the Lodges involved in the formation of the United Grand Lodge of England in 1717. Their Lodge records reveal that on that occasion, he was elected as a member of the Lodge and Installed as Master at the same meeting; such was his reputation and high esteem. Preston continued to give of his best in time and energy and in consequence the Lodge of Antiquity thrived greatly under his leadership. He became actively involved with Grand Lodge serving upon its New Masonic Hall Committee, and in 1773 he was appointed as Deputy Grand Secretary.

Encouraged by the favourable reception of his published works, he employed at his own expense, lecturers to travel the length and breadth of the Kingdom and deliver lectures before many Lodges. New editions of his book were demanded, and eventually, over twenty re-prints were produced in England alone. Many European countries translated his works, and of course his efforts had a profound influence in the development of Freemasonry in the Americas.

When he died on 1st April 1818, he bequeathed to The United Grand Lodge of England the sum of £300, the interest from which was to be applied to some well-informed Mason to deliver annually a Lecture upon one of the three degrees of Craft Masonry. The appointment of the Lecturer was to be a matter for the Grand Master. Lectures were delivered from 1820 until 1862, then lapsed for some years, but were revived in 1924 and continue until the present day.

In conclusion a quotation from an unknown source sums up William Preston's contribution to freemasonry:

'He who contributes to the Mason's search for 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'

Fortunate is the Lodge that has a Preceptor, a modern William Preston, in its membership who seeks to lead the Craft and his Lodge into a clearer understanding of the symbolism and teachings of Freemasonry. To the end that the members of our wonderful fraternity may sustain the high standards of effective and unselfish service to mankind which has characterised and distinguished our Order from generation to generation.

References

1. This Lodge is still in existence as Lodge No. 134 on the register of the United Grand Lodge of England.
2. Preston, W., (1887), *Illustrations of Masonry, Reprint of the Rare 1772 Edition*, William Watson, Leeds.
3. Harper, Paul, Famous Freemasons - A Prologue, <https://solomon.ugle.org.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=2084>

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Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
 - Followed by 'any questions'
 - As a precursor to a discussion (in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself)
 - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand).

*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version unless otherwise specified.

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*. Rudyard Kipling

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