



THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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R. W. BRO. BISHOP HILLIARD P. D. G. M. 1887-1960

The suburb of Redfern, which often seems to be a trouble spot, was where to-night's masonic personality was born. William George Hilliard first saw the light of day in a modest cottage beside the Railway workshops on the 29th of May, 1887, so he would have been 105 this Friday. Who would have thought from such a humble beginning he would grow up to be a very famous Mason, Bishop, headmaster and cricketer? I am sure you will agree this start in life was in stark contrast to the birth of our last masonic personality, King George VI whose life was presented to us so beautifully by John Armfield.

Perhaps some of you here to-night may remember William George Hilliard (hereinafter called "Bishop"). You may have seen him in masonic regalia, you may have been baptised, confirmed or married by him. I remember seeing the Bishop take a confirmation service at St. Peter's Burwood East when I was a child, and recall thinking "isn't he good looking". Clergy in those days seemed to look rather forbidding but he was different. It was very disappointing, when a few years later I had to settle for being confirmed by Bishop Pilcher the other coadjutor bishop of the Sydney Church of England Diocese.

Like many Australians, the Bishop's great grandparents were convicts whose misdemeanours included burglary and petty larceny. Grandfather, Henry Hilliard excelled at cricket. He became a sporting celebrity and passed this gift on to his grandson. One of the Bishop's most highly prized possessions was a cricket bat his grandfather gave to him for his thirteenth birthday.

The Bishop was the eldest of the family and had two sisters. His father died when the family was young and the mother took in washing to help support the family.

In 1887 the Church of England in the Sydney Diocese was beset with problems - so what's new?. The diocese was divided into two parties, one which was conservative evangelical and turned away from the secular world and its problems

while the second group was more liberal in theology and more ritualistic in churchmanship. As a boy the Bishop was influenced by the second group.

By the age of fourteen he knew Latin, Euclid, and the theory of quadratic equations, and in 1900 won a scholarship to Sydney Boys' High School. His father complained "he never has his head out of a book". Later he applied for a pupil-teacher position with the Department of Public Instruction and was asked to give a fifteen minute talk. He chose the topic "soap", but was stopped by the examiner after only five minutes as the examiner was convinced this student "could talk and teach on anything". Of course the Bishop passed the exam, and began to teach all day and attend night lectures. He realised the ability to remember names meant power and this was to stand him in good stead all his life. Experience in education allowed him to be one of the first clergy invited to take part in the Wyndham Scheme.

About this time the Bishop experienced a vocation to join the ministry. However, he first went to University to complete a Master of Arts Degree having for company there such well known people as Fanny Cohen and George Mackaness. He taught at Fort Street School for eighteen months, then studied at Moore College and was raised to the diaconate in November 1911

The Bishop met his first wife Pearl Wooster while a student, their romance flourishing on walks to lectures and houseparties at the Leura Mountain Retreat. His first curacy was at Holy Trinity from 1911 to 1912, and in 1913 he joined the staff of Trinity Grammar School becoming headmaster later. While there he displayed great ability to work with people and an obsession with sport, and at the same time instilling in the pupils a sense of destiny. While there, he and his wife were expecting their first baby and he thought rectory life would be less arduous so in 1916 he accepted the position of Rector of St. John's Ashfield. It was while he was at St. John's that his masonic career began.

He increased the congregation at St. John's but his sermons were becoming increasingly long and he was known for his unpunctuality. Parishioners recall him running up to the church, robes flying, while the choir was already processing up the aisle. While at Ashfield his wife died, leaving him with a little son, Frank, so his mother moved into the rectory

to help him cope. He later fell in love with a parishioner he was preparing for confirmation, Dorothy Duval and he married her at St. John's in 1927.

From 1926 to 1928 the Bishop was the rector of St. Clement's, Marrickville, described at the time as "the cathedral of the Western Suburbs". He founded the Sunshine Club for lonely people, where clothing and wood and coal were provided. He objected to pew rents and had many a confrontation with the Parish Council over gambling at the church fete. Parishioners resented the length of his sermons and the time given to outside activities such as the Masonic Lodge and complained he did not try to get to know them. At the time it was quite acceptable for clergy to become freemasons, and if they had any theological qualms about its doctrines, they either suppressed them or else kept quiet about them. Principal Davies of Moore College was an exceedingly zealous mason, and he and Rev. Glanville delivered lengthy lectures at the Sydney Lodge of Research on the allegory and morality of Freemasonry. It is said "they were short on theology but long on ancient architecture and the brotherhood of man". The Bishop followed in their footsteps achieving the same office and delivering similar lectures in 1931

The Bishop's prime motive in joining Freemasonry was to achieve contacts - he was ambitious, but at the same time a man of goodwill. The lodge appealed to his extrovert nature and he loved the long and frequent speeches, friendliness and high sounding precepts which abounded there. Masons appreciated his oratory, this being a marked improvement on which they were sometimes obliged to hear.

From 1929 to 1934 he was again headmaster of Trinity Grammar School, and he received a rapturous reception on his return. To keep the school going he begged for endowments and George Henry Bosch who founded the Sydney University Medical School said he would donate £10,000. provided other donors would follow suit by 1930. This sustained the school through the depression. His role at Trinity was one of inspiring boys rather than putting hours in, as he was always absent conducting a funeral or sitting on a committee. Trinity boys were usually patient but if the Bishop went on speaking for too long they would pretend to have an epileptic fit to bring him to a speedy conclusion.

Just try to imagine how busy the Bishop was - Headmaster of Trinity, member of the Standing Committee of the Diocese, on the Council of Church of England Mens' Society, Archbishop's Chaplain to Lay Readers, Grand Chaplain of United Grand Lodge of New South Wales, Canon of St. Andrews' Cathedral, and on the committee of the Anglican Church League. He was committed to a large number of installations and other Masonic functions the length and breadth of Sydney. Because he was so busy he put his mother and his wife's niece in the Headmaster's House so his wife would not be so lonely. They all usually got on well and indeed were expected to do so.

In 1934 he was invited to be the Bishop of Nelson New Zealand, and there he had to adjust to a slower pace. During his term of office he forged close relationships with Roman Catholic clergy and improved conditions and travelling allowances for his own clergy. He joined Rotary, and all this time retained his uncanny memory for names. Freemasons gave the Bishop a great welcome in New Zealand but he delayed joining the Nelson Lodge until December 1935, wishing to settle into church duties first. When he was received into the Nelson Provincial Rose Croix Chapter, the Governor General of New Zealand, Lord Galway attended. This was the first time the Governor General had visited Nelson.

Eventually the onset of war and middle age were factors enticing the Bishop back to Australia, the land he loved. He once wrote "I have gum leaves in my blood". Archbishop Mowll of Sydney wanted another bishop-coadjutor as the present Bishop Pilcher was withdrawn and he and the Archbishop did not appeal to the average churchgoer. Bishop Hilliard with his sense of humour, good looks and common touch would be just the man and he would reconcile the still warring factions within the diocese. But alas, the diocese had no funds so the Bishop would have to take on a parish as well. Two weeks after returning to Sydney and his civic reception at the Town Hall, he was inducted at St. John's church Parramatta.

In a matter of ten days he was speaking at Trinity Founders' Day to get financial support for the school. He was getting caught up in the old pattern of over commitment and decided the role of bishop and rector together was impossible. So he said "I'll give St. John's my weekends and devote the rest of the week to Sydney." His nature was such that even the most dour parishioners were won over by him. The whole of Saturday

was given over to weddings - sometimes twelve weddings in six hours on any given day. He never took a day off except for a holiday in January, work being his relaxation. He composed a poem for just about every occasion and these were of varying merit.

There is no record of the Bishop ever turning down an invitation to speak, or join a committee. He had a compulsive need for work and this motivated him into a frantic round of commitments which threatened his health, his relationships at home and content of preaching. There was never enough time to be alone, to pray, or think or prepare. Gifted and loving man that he was, he gave out far more than he took in.

He gave talks on 2FC, 2CH, and 2UW and gave the address at the first American Service following the Battle of the Coral Sea. Archbishop Mowll rewarded his services by taking him to the Lambeth Conference in 1948 and while there the Bishop toured around England, addressing Masonic gatherings by the dozen plus Rotary Clubs. He and Mrs Hilliard were presented to the Queen at a Buckingham Palace garden party.

At retiring age the Bishop took on the job as Registrar of the Diocese which was an extremely heavy commitment. It was far too much for him as he also had the duties of Bishop and Rector. Apparently he became totally exasperating when matters needed attention, transacting most business over the telephone and failing to make any notes. Letters were lost and unanswered while he was out speaking at meetings, yarning with friends or sitting on one of his countless committees. Uncashed cheques still reside in his archives. He was not a methodical man and he became more vague and unworldly as the years went on, using £1.00 notes as bookmarks when preparing sermons, and forgetting to remove them. Sometimes he was so tired on Sunday evenings he could not stand unaided in the pulpit.

In the 1950's there was mounting opposition to the Bishop as many found his sermons excessively long and repetitive. Later curates found him difficult to approach as a result of declining health, family illness and an impossible workload. He was able to fit in appearances on a television programme "Meet the Press" and to organise a world wide conference of Bishops. It was while he was organising the conference that he collapsed and was taken to hospital - a clot had left him blind in one eye. Archbishop Mowll wanted the Bishop to retire or at least

give up some commitments and sent him on sea voyage to England encouraging him to leave behind his clerical vestments.

The Bishop returned, refreshed without any thought of retirement - absolutely bubbling with enthusiasm. Mowll asked the specialist to persuade the Bishop to give up his peripheral activities, above all his masonic work, but he came out of the doctor's surgery saying " good for another ten years ". Alas, within two months his health began to fluctuate and there were fears he might die on the job. The fears were real as at that time he was the member of twentyfour committees outside the parish. Of course he was unable to deal with detail at meetings and often reduced the meeting time of the Trinity Grammar Council to half an hour as he had to catch the five o'clock train to Parramatta (if only all committee meetings were like that!)

When Archbishop Mowll died in 1958 the Bishop presided over two synods in a month (I don't suppose Womens' Ordination was yet on the agenda, but maybe it was). His name came up at the election of a new Archbishop but he was defeated. Rev. Eric Mortley who died recently, and who was known to us, said he was present at the election and noticed the Bishop "could hardly contain his disappointment". Despite this, he helped the new Archbishop Hugh Gough settle in and refused to join the critics who protested about the Archbishop "enjoying a glass of wine".

The Bishop announced his retirement as Bishop for May 1960 aged 72 years but said he would stay on at St. John's "until they carry me out". His last years were times of personal tragedy as indeed were his early ones. His father died when he was young, he lost his first wife, two daughters in early infancy by his second wife and then his son by his first marriage died prematurely. The Bishop insisted on taking all their funeral services although others had offered to do so.

On the day before his final stroke on 1st March, 1960 he took an Ordination at the Cathedral, and although his retirement had been announced for May, it somehow seemed appropriate he should die as he had lived - "in harness". A fatal stroke occurred while he was walking in the streets of Parramatta and he died that evening in Parramatta Hospital where he had served on the Board for twenty years.

Archbishop Gough preached the funeral oration at St. Andrews' Cathedral, calling him a "man for all seasons", and likened him to St. Barnabas " a good man full of the Holy Ghost and of faith."

So, I wonder then what made Bishop Hilliard "tick" .
What motivated him to achieve all he did? Why did he over-
commit himself so much? He certainly did not spare himself.
Was he a workaholic? Did he push himself so much that he
could cover up some of his bereavement? Perhaps it was his
love of God that spurred him on. It could be a combination
of all these.

I leave these questions with you.

(Terry and June St.Clair)
Talk given 25th May, 1992
at Masonic Historical Society
Masonic Centre Sydney.

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R.W. BRO. BISHOP HILLARD P.D.G.M.

MASONIC CAREER

- 21.6.1920. ; Initiated Lodge Victoria No. 73
meeting at Ashfield
passed 23.8.20
raised 1.11.20.
- J.W. 1923-24
S.W. 1924-25
W.M. 1925-26.
- 1923 exalted in Chapter Ashfield N.S.W.
constitution.
1925. Principal Sojourner Chapter Ashfield.
- 1926 Third Principal
1927. Second Principal
1928. First Principal.
1924. Foundation member Lodge University of Sydney
- 1931 -2-3-4 Grand Chaplain of U.G.L. N.S.W.
1934. P.D.G.M. rank conferred.
1934. Received into Mark Lodge Ashfield New South
Wales Constitution.
1940. Senior Warden Mark Lodge Ashfield
- 1945-56 Grand 1st Principal of Supreme Grand Chapter
of Royal Arch Masons of N.S.W.
- 1949 Foundation Master of Lodge Cathedral meeting
at Redfern (now amalgamated with Lodge
Industrious No. 777)
- 1949 Grand Representative of the United Supreme
Grand Chapter of N.S.W. of Pennsylvania and
Queensland.
- R.W.Pro. Bishop Hilliard P.D.G.M. remained in all lodges
and chapters he joined, until his death
- Circa 1930. Official lecturer for The United Grand
Lodge of New South Wales.
