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RIGHT WOR. BRO. JOHN WILLIAMS (1813-1889)

District Grand Master of New South Wales, English Constitution.

One of the most determined opponents of the movement to establish an independent Grand Lodge of New South Wales was Right Wor Bro John Williams, the District Grand Master of the English Constitution in New South Wales. Williams was a man of strongly held principle who, having settled on a position, maintained it to the end unless convinced there were grounds for change. This was a characteristic which was evident throughout the long drawn out argument between the Grand Lodges concerning the future of the Craft in the colony, an argument which was finally resolved by the formation of the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales in 1888.

John Williams was born at Ballymena in the county of Antrim, Ireland, in 1813. He migrated to Liverpool, England, at the age of 17 or 18 years and took employment as a seaman. On a voyage to the west coast of Africa, he was shipwrecked near the Kingdom of Dahomy, where his companions succumbed to yellow fever and he was, for three years, detained as a slave. Escaping from captivity, he returned to Liverpool, where he married. It was in Liverpool that Williams first became involved in Freemasonry. In 1838 he was Junior Warden of Lodge Harmony, meeting in that city, and was present at the Masonic ceremonies associated with the laying of the foundation stone of Liverpool's St George's Hall. The state of his wife's health led him to migrate to New South Wales in 1839, where he engaged in employment as a cooper and ultimately became the proprietor of a large coopering business in Pitt Street, near Circular Quay, Sydney. His wife died soon after their arrival, and he resumed his interest in Freemasonry.

The first New South Wales lodge of which he was a member was the Australian Social Lodge No 260 I.C. For reasons not altogether clear, he found himself at odds with the Lodge and, in 1843, when Junior Warden, he, with three other members, was 'specially suspended' by the Grand Lodge of Ireland for unmasonic conduct causing dissension in that Lodge. He then joined the Lodge of Australia No 820 E.C. The suspension from the Australian Social Lodge was still in force when, in 1846, he became a foundation member of an English Constitution Lodge, The Australian Lodge of Harmony, meeting in Sydney. He was installed as Worshipful Master of the Lodge on 7 January 1847. Williams continued to maintain an unfriendly attitude towards Lodge No 260 I.C. and this appears to have coloured his opinion about Irish Freemasonry during the rest of his life.

Williams became associated with New South Wales Freemasonry, as worked under the English Constitution at a time when there were moves afoot to place its administration on a more satisfactory basis. A Provincial Grand Master of the

Lodges of New South Wales, South Australia and Van Diemen's Land (Wor Bro G.G. Nichols) had been appointed by the United Grand Lodge of England in 1839 but no provision had been made for appointing a Provincial Grand Lodge. In June 1847, at a meeting of representatives of Lodges working under the English Constitution, it was decided that a meeting should be convened for the purpose of discussing the formation of a Provincial Grand Lodge and recommending a Brother as Provincial Grand Master. This meeting was held on 24 August 1847, when it was agreed that the formation of a Provincial Grand Lodge was desirable. A memorial asking the United Grand Lodge of England to establish a Provincial Grand Lodge and to grant a Patent appointing a Provincial Grand Master was sent to London and the United Grand Lodge accepted the suggestion. In the appointments made following the establishment of the Provincial Grand Lodge, John Williams became Deputy Provincial Grand Master.

Williams was deeply read in Masonic lore and a skilled ritualist. He did not find everything in colonial Masonry to square with his own conceptions of the plan and character of Freemasonry. Practices prevailed which he regarded as calculated to impair the purity and efficiency of Masonry. After many fruitless struggles to abolish those practices, he undertook at his own expense, a voyage to England in 1856, with a view to soliciting the intervention of the leading authorities of English Masonry under whose jurisdiction the English Constitution lodges in Sydney then worked. On his arrival in England, he sought and obtained an interview with the Earl of Zetland, who was then Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England, and was allowed to present and argue before the United Grand Lodge the grounds of his differences with his New South Wales brethren. The United Grand Lodge proceeded to take action to remedy the problems, resulting in improvement in the workings of the colonial lodges.

In his role as Deputy Provincial Grand Master, John Williams served under two Provincial Grand Masters. In 1861 he was himself elected as Provincial Grand Master and Grand Superintendent of Royal Arch Masonry and occupied that position until 1867, when he resigned. However, he maintained his interest in zeal for the good administration of the Craft in New South Wales and, in 1877, he once more assumed the highest Masonic post in the English Constitution in the colony, that of District Grand Master (the designation, Provincial Grand Lodge, having by then been changed to District Grand Lodge).

The election of Williams as District Grand Master in 1877 was not without its controversy. The retiring District Grand Master (R.W.Bro W.T. Holroyd) had, for a number of years, chosen as his deputy, V.W.Bro Ernest Octavius Smith, who was himself an aspirant for the District Grand Mastership. In the absence of the District Grand Master, he presided at the Communication at which the new District Grand Master was to be elected. It was, however, apparent that there was opposition to his election and this soon became clear when John Williams nominated the Governor of New South Wales for the office. The Governor was a Scottish Freemason but had evinced no interest in the Craft during his term as Governor. There was debate about the validity of the nomination, as well as its suitability, and, in order to provide an alternative to the candidature of Brother Smith should the nomination of the Governor prove invalid, Bro John Williams was nominated and subsequently elected. The Grand Lodge historians, Cramp and Mackaness, comment that, through this incident, an excellent opportunity was lost for the amalgamation of all lodges under the various Constitutions. They believe that, had the Governor been elected, an atmosphere conducive to unity would have

developed; a regularly constituted Grand Lodge might easily have come about in normal sequence, with all the Lodges, or the majority of them, under the English Constitution, voluntarily yielding obedience to the new organization, and the Governor would have been installed as the first Grand Master. Furthermore, as he was himself under the Scottish Constitution, the members of that District Grand Lodge would presumably have been strongly induced to forego their separate existence and merge themselves into the unifying stream. As it was, the opportunity was lost; another Grand Lodge was formed which, far from meeting with approval, was resented by the older bodies, and for the following eleven years, much trouble, vexation of spirit and recrimination characterised the relations between what should have been fraternal bodies, but which were in actuality contending and hostile institutions.

John Williams was installed as District Grand Master at a Special Communication of the District Grand Lodge on 19 November 1877. The Grand Lodge of New South Wales was formally consecrated on 3 December 1877. Williams was thus faced with the problem of determining the strategy to deal with the new situation. Unfortunately, by reasons both of personality and conviction, he was ill-prepared for the task. A stubborn individual, an Anglophile of high order, he failed to read, or perhaps was unaware of, the lessons of the New South Wales political experience leading to the establishment of responsible self-government in the colony in 1856. In consequence, he was almost individually responsible for the ill-will which characterised Grand Lodge relationships for the eleven years prior to the formation of the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales in 1888.

The forty years from 1860 to 1900 have been described as a period of 'aggressive democracy' in Australia. While this referred in particular to internal events, it is relevant also to relations between the Australian colonies and the government of Great Britain. It was a time when the native-born were beginning to outnumber the immigrants. In 1861 about one-half of the population had been born in the United Kingdom. By 1871 nearly sixty per cent had been born in the Australian colonies, by 1891 sixty five per cent, and by 1901 eighty two per cent. Rapid immigration, a spell of good seasons, tariff protection, and mining discoveries all combined to stimulate the economy, stimulation which encouraged development of a strong nationalist feeling, particularly in politics and literature. Almost until 1890 there seemed to many no limit to Australia's progress. Colonial society developed a strongly egalitarian outlook, lacking the respect for birth, wealth, and intellect which was usual in nineteenth century England. Against this background, the Australian colonies adopted a radical democracy, a central feature of which was an expectation that the British connection would be peacefully severed to the satisfaction of both parties.

There were, of course, those who found this expectation difficult to comprehend, especially those of an older generation who had migrated from Britain. Amongst these was Williams. His attitude was reflected in an 1881 comment which he made on a proposal, addressed to brethren of all Constitutions when working in New South Wales but made without the support of the District Grand Lodge of England, to establish a fund to finance an 'alms-house or an asylum for the reception of aged and decayed Brethren'. He was opposed to the proposal on the ground that it savoured too strongly of 'Communitistic Home Rule', an expression suggesting that not only did he find the egalitarian approach of New South Wales society difficult to accept but equally he did not support any moves for the colonies to become independent of Britain.



Right Wor. Bro. John Williams

Provincial Grand Master, E.C., 1861 - 1866.
District Grand Master, E.C., 1877 - 1888.

This photograph was published in *A History of the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales*, by Cramp & Mackeness, Vol.1, P. 128.

There is also a portrait of Right Wor. Bro. Williams, painted in 1880 by Petrovits, in the museum mezzanine on the third floor of the Masonic Centre, Castlereagh Street, Sydney.

Williams applied the same line of thinking to Freemasonry. His loyalty, and more than that his Masonic obligation, was to the Grand Lodge of England. He could not conceive of a situation where that Grand Lodge would ever wish to break its ties with the Masons of New South Wales. His views he stated succinctly: 'so far from the Grand Lodge of England wanting to sever the connexion with us, the reverse was the case, inasmuch as it formerly required seven to hold a Warrant, but under the revised Book of Constitutions, three were sufficient to do this, and he hoped that the day was far distant when we would cease to hail the Grand Lodge of England as our Mother'. Here he was but echoing a theme of the opponents of self-government forty years earlier, and, despite their fervent hopes, self-government had become a reality in the colony.

Reduced to its¹ simplest terms, legitimacy of origin was the central point of difference between Williams and the supporters of the new Grand Lodge. Williams took the view that no action could be taken to form an independent Grand Lodge of New South Wales unless and until the Grand Lodges of England, Scotland and Ireland had first approved, presumably because the first two, at least, already had Provincial or District Grand Lodges working in the territory. The supporters of the new Grand Lodge, on the other hand, argued that, since there was no independent governing body for Freemasonry in the colony, New South Wales was technically Masonically unoccupied and therefore the ordinary conventions associated with the formation of a Grand Lodge applied. There was no middle position available for a compromise to be effected.

As the dispute between the Grand Lodges dragged on, the United Grand Lodge of England looked for a more pragmatic solution. At the direction of the Grand Master of England, H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, the Pro Grand Master of England, Lord Carnarvon, was despatched to New South Wales with the objective of resolving the situation. Lord Carnarvon discussed the problems with interested parties and evolved a plan for the establishment of a United Grand Lodge of New South Wales, formed by an amalgamation of the several Grand and District and Provincial Grand Lodges, with the incoming Governor of New South Wales, Lord Carrington, as the first Grand Master. As an element of the scheme, Williams would resign from the position of District Grand Master of the English Constitution in New South Wales and, as a temporary measure, Lord Carrington would replace him. The scheme was subsequently adopted and, in due course, the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales was brought into being.

At the meeting of the District Grand Lodge of England held to complete arrangements for its incorporation into the United Grand Lodge, Williams gave notice of his impending resignation from the Craft. He told the meeting: 'I am now an old man, and after serving so long under the English Constitution, will not now sit under any other Constitution than that to which I have belonged for so many years'. He died on 12 June 1889 and was given a Masonic Funeral by the United Grand Lodge. The Deputy Grand Master of the day said:

'Although at first Rt Wor Bro Williams was not warmly in favour of establishing the United Grand Lodge, it was not from any unbrotherly or unmasonic feelings that he did not join in the movement, but from a fear that we were travelling on unconstitutional ground; but when he found that our proceedings were constitutional and legal, and according to precedent, he changed his opinion and expressed his intention to come here this evening, if he were alive. We trust he is

with us in spirit, looking down on us from that Grand Lodge above, where we all hope to join him some day.'

The journal, *The Freemason*, published a rather more dispassionate assessment of the life and work of John Williams. Inter alia, it said:

'To write the Masonic life of Bro Williams is to write a Masonic history of New South Wales for the past forty years, as for that period he has been prominently identified in various ruling capacities with the Craft under the English Constitution. A man of strong will, stubborn character and rugged honesty of intention, he was ill adapted to lead in any great struggle for Masonic reform. He thought that a change of Craft government imperilled the preservation of the principles and ritual of the Order, and opened the door to innovations fraught with danger to the ancient landmarks, hence his sympathies were not in accord with the aspirations of the great majority of the brethren for local self-government; and true to his convictions, he "stood aside" when the United Grand Lodge was established last year with an enthusiastic unanimity that swept away all doubts and fears. Our distinguished brother held aloof from the splendid ceremonies of the installation of our M W Grand Master, not from any spirit of antagonism, but solely, we think, from a conviction he had that the proceedings savoured of disloyalty to the mother Grand Lodges. The prompt recognition accorded by England and Scotland to the United Grand Lodge convinced him of his error, and he admitted as much, as he had promised to be present at the Grand Lodge Communication at which his death was announced. He was an earnest worker, a just ruler, and a "bright" Mason. Those whom he presided over for so many years feel their loss and mourn his death as a loss to the Craft which time alone will mitigate.'

This is fair comment.

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