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Bro. PETER JACKSON - PUGILIST 1861 - 1901

Peter Jackson was born on 3 July 1861 at Christiansted, St. Croix, Virgin Island, West Indies, the son of Peter Jackson, warehouseman, and his wife, and grandson of Jackson's freed slave, Peter. He was well educated to primary level before going to sea. He arrived in Sydney about 1880 where he worked on the waterfront and in hotels before drifting into boxing in 1882 under the tuition of Bro. Lawrence (Larry) Foley. Foley had been made a Mason in 1885 in Sydney in Lodge Rose of Sharon then No. 2055, English Constitution, later No. 116 United Grand Lodge of NSW. He did not complete his degrees.

Between 1883 and 1886 Jackson fought seven times, once with bare knuckles, only losing to the Australian Champion, Bill Farnham in 1884. After two years as an instructor, at Foley's, he easily won the Australian Heavyweight Championship from Tom Lees in thirty rounds on 25 September 1886. Jackson's magnificently trained and proportioned physique, 6ft. 1½ ins. (187cm.) tall and weighing 190 lbs. (86kg.) gave him a rare combination of speed and strength. An intelligent boxer rather than a slugger, he possessed a marvellous feint, strong jabs and a masterly left-right combination. On 18 April 1888 he left for the United States of America and Britain.

Jackson fought twenty-eight of the best men of England and America between 1888 and 1892, losing to none. The nearest he came to defeat was an eight-round draw in Melbourne on 21 October 1890 against Joe Goddard. He was undertrained and on a lightning visit to his adopted country, where he was feted and accepted as an Australian. His most memorable fights were the 61-round, four-hour draw with James J. Corbett on 21 May 1891 at San Francisco and the hectic ten-round victory over fellow Australian Frank Slavin on 30 May 1892 in London. Jackson was one of the finest boxers never to fight for a world championship. John Sullivan refused to defend his title against a black man and Corbett avoided Jackson once he gained the heavyweight crown in 1892.

Termed the 'darkey,' or worse early on, Jackson became known as 'Peter the Great' or 'The Black Prince' in the acceptable jargon of the time. He was always deemed a 'gentleman' and a 'real white man.' His great sportsmanship and modesty reflected his nature, and also was a role forced on him by the exigencies of a black fighter in a white world. His deference, good looks, fine speaking manner and skill made him universally popular. He was one of the few boxers, black or white, allowed to move freely in the National Sporting Club rooms in London.

After 1892, Jackson was unable to obtain fights. Past his prime he was debilitated by fast living and was probably even then tubercular. He taught boxing, worked as a publican, toured as an actor in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and boxed exhibitions. In March 1898 he was sacrificed to Jim Jeffries, who flattened him in three rounds; and next year suffered the third of his losses in thirty-seven fights at the hands of a fourth-rater at Vancouver. Money was raised to send him to Australia, where he toured with Fitzgerald's circus but he was too ill to box. After several benefits he was sent to Queensland where he died of tuberculosis at Roma on 13 July 1901. He was buried with Anglican rites and pomp and ceremony in Toowong cemetery. A magnificent tomb was later erected by subscription with the words, 'This was a man.'

Bro. Peter Jackson was made a Mason at Balmain West in Lodge General Gordon No. 166 on 1 October 1890.

He was passed Fellowcraft on 14 October 1890 and Raised a Master Mason on 23 October 1890.

He had received all three degrees in less than a month.

His age was shown as 26 although this could be a transcription error for 29.

His address was given as Clayton Street, Glebe.

That was not, by any means, the end of the matter.

The first hint of trouble appeared in *The Freemason* published in Sydney on 1 November 1890:

We are surprised to learn that a noted pugilist has been initiated in a Lodge at Balmain. He may be a reputable man, but his occupation is not one to commend him to the tongue of good report. Masonry can surely do without such intrants.

The matter has been reported to Grand Lodge who referred the matter to a committee of the Board of General Purposes.

In March 1891, *The Freemason* reported:

From the sub-committee appointed to report on the initiation of "Mr Peter Jackson, Gentleman," Birchgrove Road, Balmain in General Gordon Lodge No. 166. The report of the committee disclosed grave irregularities, and after consideration the Board decided to recommend to Grand Lodge a drastic remedy,

Elsewhere in the same magazine, readers were told:

The "Peter Jackson, Gentleman" episode in General Gordon Lodge No. 166, has been the subject of comment in the *London Sportsman* and the *South African Freemason*. As the Master is being dealt with by the Board of General Purposes, we refrain from further mentioning it.

The April 1891 issue of *The Freemason* published a letter from Wor. Bro. Leslie Mitchell, the Worshipful Master of Lodge Balmain No. 23:

CORRECTION

To the Editor of the "Freemason."

Dear Sir and Brother, - As Master of Balmain Lodge No. 23 on the Registry of the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales - and late No. 868, E.C. - I request that you would be good enough to permit me, through the medium of your valuable journal, to correct the erroneous statements appearing in several Masonic publications (issued, I am happy to say, outside of our colony) in which my lodge is credited with having admitted Masonic light into Mr Peter Jackson's darkness.

Notwithstanding that Balmain is but a suburb of Sydney, it possesses four Masonic lodges - viz., Balmain, Sir Colin Campbell, Pacific and General Gordon. The latter, No. 166, is the one in which Bro. Jackson was initiated, and, as we have no wish to divide the honour with them, I shall be obliged by your giving this letter publicity.

I am, yours very fraternally,
Leslie R. Mitchell.

Here was the first vague suggestion that the colour of Bro. Peter Jackson's skin may in some minds, have been the problem. Thus far, the written reports of the Board of General Purposes had not specified the nature of the offence committed by the Lodge although it must have been presented verbally at a Grand Lodge Quarterly Communication.

The April 1891 issue of *The Freemason* also reported:

The General Gordon Lodge (No. 166) difficulty has been referred back to the Board of General Purposes for reconsideration and report. We may here state that under the Constitution the Board had no choice of punishment, it being erasure or nothing.

However, "Time tones down feelings" and it may be that, so far as the brethren of the Lodge singled out for expulsion are concerned, that a more merciful view may be taken. We shall be pleased if this proves to be true, as suspension is itself a severe lesson.

The following month, *The Freemason* reported:

A special meeting of the Board of General Purposes is to be held on Friday, 15th day of May to deal with the matter.

When Freemasonry uses words such as erasure of a lodge and suspension of brethren, the matter is of serious concern, so what exactly was the problem with Bro. Peter Jackson's initiation, passing or raising?

There appears to be three possibilities viz:

- 1) His occupation was given as "Gentleman" rather than "Pugilist." This would have breached the regulations regardless of whether Pugilist was, or was not, an acceptable situation.
- 2) The colour of Mr Jackson's skin was unacceptable. The Book of Constitutions is silent, as it should be, on this subject.
- 3) His conferring of his degrees were in breach of regulation No. 121 of the then current 1890 edition of the Book of Constitutions viz:

121. No Lodge shall confer more than one degree on any brother on the same day, nor shall a higher degree be conferred on any Brother at less interval than four weeks from his receiving a previous degree, except by dispensation from the Grand Master, and then not at a less interval than seven days, nor until he has passed an examination in open Lodge in that degree.

In July 1891, *The Freemason* reported:

SPECIAL REPORT

Re Lodge General Gordon, No. 166. - The charges against this Lodge for grave irregularities in connection with the initiation of Peter Jackson, the well-known pugilist in September 1890, was dealt with by the Board of General Purposes, which presented a special report to Grand Lodge at the March Communication, when, after debate, the report was referred back to the Board for further evidence and report. In obedience to this command, the Board heard the evidence of the Wor. Master, the two Wardens, the Secretary, the Treasurer, and other brethren of the lodge, and in its second report recommended the erasure of the lodge omitting its former recommendation of the expulsion of three members of the lodge. Owing to the lateness of the hour, and the absence of the Grand Secretary, whose presence was desirable, the discussion on the report was adjourned till the next Communication.

A rival Sydney Masonic journal *The Freemason's Chronicle*, reported rather more fully in the issue of July 1891:

SPECIAL REPORT RE GENERAL GORDON

The President brought up a special report in regard to this lodge. He said that at the last meeting of Grand Lodge a report dealing with this lodge had been remitted back to the Board for reconsideration. The matter had been carefully gone into, and the recommendation of the Board was now submitted to Grand Lodge. He read the formulated charges, which, as the case is still sub-judice, we may but briefly refer to. The W.M. Wor. Bro. Morbey, Bro. Simpson, S.W., and Bro. J. Reynolds, Treasurer of Lodge Balmain, No. 166, were charged with irregularities in connection with the initiation of Bro. Peter Jackson into Freemasonry on 1st October last.

The M.W. the Pro Grand Master asked the Grand Registrar the proper mode of procedure.

V.W. D. Fisher said that the proper mode was the citation of the brethren charged to show cause why the recommendation of the Board for the erasure of the lodge should not be carried out. If they pleaded guilty, the Grand Lodge would proceed to

pass punishment, if any, and if not guilty the evidence taken in shorthand would have to be read, and the Grand Lodge consider as before.

The M.W. the Pro Grand Master, Most Wor. Bro. Dr. Tarrant, here inquired if Wor. Bro. Mordey, and Bros. Simpson and Reynolds were present.

Bro. Simpson on behalf of Wor. Bro. Mordey said that the summons to attend had been received by the latter in Melbourne only on the previous day, and he had signified his intention of reaching Sydney by train, but he had not come, probably having missed the train. Bro. Reynolds was also unable to attend.

The M.W. the P.G.M., intimated that the case would be deferred until later on.

It seems that the Editor had not read the opposition correction concerning "Lodge Balmain No. 166."

The October 1891 issue of The Freemason contained a report from an un-named journal:

A professional pugilist has been received into a lodge in New South Wales (the General Gordon Lodge), we see it stated. He must have fought his way in! But where was the Tyler's sword - to say nothing of the members' ballots?

At last, the Board of General Purposes specified the nature of the problem in their report to the September 1891 Quarterly Communication of Grand Lodge:

SPECIAL REPORT Re LODGE GENERAL GORDON.- The Special Report of the Board of General Purposes, recommending the cancellation of the Warrant of that Lodge for breaches of Clauses No. 109, 110, and 111 of the Book of Constitutions were read, and also the charge of initiating a candidate without giving the required particulars on the Lodge circulars, to which the W.M. and Wardens pleaded guilty. A lengthy discussion ensued, and eventually on the motion of Right Wor. Bro. John C. Remington, seconded by Wor. Bro. Frederick Lee, it was resolved that the Lodge should be fined £5 and censured.

Regulations 109, 110 and 111 were:

109. Great discredit and injury having been brought upon our ancient and honourable Fraternity from admitting members and receiving candidates without due notice being given, or inquiry made into their characters and qualifications, and from passing and raising Masons without due instruction in the respective Degrees, it is declared that a violation or neglect of any of the following Laws shall subject the Lodge offending to erasure.

110. No person shall be made a Mason without being proposed and seconded at one regular monthly meeting, and balloted for at the next regular monthly meeting, which ballot shall not take place unless his name, age, profession or occupation, and place of abode, with the names of his proposer and seconder, have been sent in the summons to all the members of the Lodge.

111. In cases of emergency, the following course may be pursued:- Any two members of a Lodge may transmit in writing to the Master the name, age, profession or occupation and place of abode of any candidate whom they wish to propose, and the circumstances which cause the emergency; and if in his opinion the emergency is

real, the Master shall notify the proposition to every member of his Lodge, either in the summons for the next regular meeting, or in a summons for a Lodge of Emergency, to meet at a period of not less than seven days from the issuing of the summons, and if the candidate be then approved on ballot, he may be initiated. The Master shall, previously to the ballot being taken, read the proposition, and state to the Lodge the cause of the emergency, which shall be recorded in the minutes.

Finally, a year after Bro. Jackson's initiation, the matter was resolved. The report in *The Freemason's Chronicle* stated:

A very lengthy controversy then took place re the General Gordon Lodge and the initiation of Mr Peter Jackson. The Board of General Purposes, to which the case was on a former occasion relegated for further consideration as to the suspension of the Lodge and the expulsion of some of its members.

Wor. Bro. Fred Lee doubted whether the Board had the power to exclude a pugilist from becoming a member of the Order, any more than a bricklayer or a carpenter. The breach of the Constitution appeared to be in putting on the circular the word "gentleman" instead of stating his occupation. The W.M. of Lodge General Gordon pleaded guilty to that, but it was not done with any intent to infringe the laws. Mr Jackson, it was reported had given up the pugilistic art, and was about opening a business here; also that he was residing at the time at Birchgrove Balmain.

R.W. Bro. J.C. Remington, Deputy Grand Master, spoke very effectively upon the subject, and said, that as Lodge General Gordon having submitted to the jurisdiction of Grand Lodge, a vote of censure and a nominal fine would meet the exigencies of the offence.

Much discussion followed, all of which turned upon the irregularity of the omission of the age and profession of the candidate. This debate gave grand opportunities to loquacious members to air their eloquence and delay the proceedings, consequently, half the number present filed out before its close which was certainly not courteous to the Pro Grand Master, even if they suffered "boredom." However, it was carried that a fine of £5 and a vote of censure would be the punishment. This verdict appeared to give satisfaction to all.

V.W. Bro. Bray defended himself from some of the remarks, made that he granted dispensation for this case without full enquiry. The Pro-Grand Master expressed the fullest confidence in Wor. Bro. Bray's discretion.

Perhaps the Grand Secretary had issued a dispensation to convey the three degrees on the same evening.

The October 1891 issue of *The Freemason* had the last word:

We earnestly hope that the leniency shown will not be misunderstood, either by the offending or any other lodge.

It should be noted that neither *The Freemason* nor *The Freemasons' Chronicle* were official publications of the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales although *The*

Freemason claimed 'Reports by Special Authority' and *The Freemason's Chronicle* was 'The Authorised Record of Masonic Intelligence.'
The 'Authority' was not stated.

So, quite properly, the matter had nothing to do with Bro Jackson being a 'coloured pugilist.'

And what did Bro. Jackson think of all this? We don't know, but he called off on 8 December 1892,

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