



History Of The Craft Ritual-Part 2

“Preston And His Book”

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Illustrations of Masonry, by William Preston, ranks just behind Anderson's *Constitution* as the second most important Masonic book ever published. Its influence on our ritualistic standards can't be over estimated. Preston conceived of Masonry as a great educational force. He was the first to give the Fraternity a complete system of formal lectures.

His was the first book published containing the lectures, forms and ceremonies of the Lodge. Prior to Preston's day lodges were primarily conviviality clubs for the enjoyment and merriment of the Brethren. Preston looked and found something deeper than sociability. His book and lectures were designed to teach moral lessons and improve the character of its members.

Preston was born in 1742. His father was a lawyer and his circumstances were comfortable. Early schooling of six to eight years consisted mostly of English, Latin and Greek. He also became a clerk to a celebrated linguist. At age 14, he was apprenticed to a printer. At age 18, he went to London in the service of the King's printer. There he spent most of his adult life working as a corrector of the press and editing the *London Chronicle*. He became a master of literary style and a friend of England's foremost authors.

In 1762 he became a Freemason in London and was active through out his life. Preston was a member of several lodges and was the master of several of them. He also held an appointment as deputy to the Grand Secretary and compiled an appendix of the 1776 *Book of Constitutions*.

He began systematically reading all of the scant literature and conversing and corresponding with experienced Masons in England and Europe. Preston employed a number of his brethren to search for old Masonic documents and visit Lodges to observe the forms and ceremonies being used at the time. Weekly meetings were held to discuss this work. Preston collected large amounts of information and collated it into lectures and degrees and later into his book. He found it difficult to discard and eliminate information. As a result the lectures were extremely long. For example the First Degree had twelve sections.

In 1772 a "Grand Gala" was held in London where he delivered an oration on Freemasonry based on his findings and opinions. The affair was so successful that the oration was put into book form and became the first edition of *Illustrations Of Masonry*. By 1774 this effort resulted in a system of lectures for the Three Degrees. The improvements in the ritual created renewed interest and raised the reputation of the Fraternity. Frequently he was invited to lecture and attend schools of instruction.

Preston shaped his lectures as instruments for instruction so they could be memorized and delivered as formulated. He introduced the idea of a fixed standard, which has persisted and remained a goal of Masonic rituals. His principle purpose was to express more fully and elegantly what the officers of lodges were delivering in halting and variable phrases.

While the word "Illustrations" is used in the title no pictures or drawings were used. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines the word "Illustration", as used in those days as meaning: make clear or evident, to illuminate, to beautify or adorn. That is what Brother Preston sought to do.

His principle contribution was enriching the lectures and expressing them in the metaphorical English of his time. It must be stated however, that rather than factual exactitude he had a propensity to accept almost any statement as fact and to enlarge upon it.

He stated "It is beyond the power of any man or body of men to make any innovation in the body of Masonry". An extraordinary statement that no Grand Lodge today would agree to with.

In 1777, Preston and others offended the Grand Lodge of England by returning from a church service publicly wearing Masonic dress. The Committee of Charity expelled them in 1778. He argued, unsuccessfully that the Lodge of Antiquity possessed 'peculiar powers' and was not subject to the normal rules. Preston, largely because of his obstinacy, went into the Masonic wilderness for a time. After ten years the matter was satisfactorily resolved and he was reinstated.

At his death in 1818 he willed his entire estate for Masonic purposes. One purpose was to provide for an annual lecture. The Prestonian Lecture is held under the authority of the United Grand Lodge of England. Originally the Lecturer was a well informed Freemason who delivered an annual lecture on the First, Second or Third Degree. Now the Lecturer is free to pick his own Masonic topic. In 1965 Quatuor Coronati Lodge No.2076 published *THE COLLECTED PRESTONIAN LECTURES* from 1927 to 1960.

Cohn Dyer's, *William Preston And His Work*, unfortunately now out of print, is an excellent source of information about him. It is a pity that his name is virtually unknown by most today.

Sources:

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