

## JOHN FOWLER, 1769 -1856

*Inaugural lecture delivered to The Lodge of Research, No. 200, by the newly installed Worshipful Master, Wor. Bro. W. J. Fowler, P.J.G.D., 11th February, 1989.*

Gleanings from the History of the Grand Lodge of Ireland Volume I (Lepper & Crossle), Vol. II (Parkinson), the History of Lodge No. 620 (Geoghegan) and the History of Lodge 2 (Crossle).

The name of John Fowler deserves to be held in reverence by Irish Masons second only to Lawrence Dermott himself. Thus commented R. E. Parkinson the historian, on the life of one who, during the sixty-four years that he was associated with the Craft, was involved in almost every important event which occurred during that period in its history.

John Fowler, born 1769, the youngest son of a weaver, and a schoolmaster by profession, was Entered and Passed on the same evening in the First Volunteer Lodge No. 620, Dublin, in 1792. He served as Worshipful Master of that Lodge in 1794. Within five months of his initiation he gave some hint of his potential by addressing the Brethren of Lodge 620 with 'a few words on the First Degree of Freemasonry'. His early training as a schoolmaster had given him a retentive memory and his diligent pursuit of Masonic history fitted him ideally to become the pupil of Sisson Putland Darling, an eminent ritualist who had been the pupil of William Rainsford who had, in his turn, been the pupil of Edward Spratt, Grand Secretary 1743 - 1756, and acknowledged as the leading exponent of the genuine ritual in his day. It was this ritual that Lawrence Dermott, another pupil of Spratt's, took with him to England. Towards the end of the century, Fowler was ranked together with Rainsford and Darling as the leading authorities on matters of ritual.

Although Brother Geoghegan's history of Lodge 620 makes scant mention of a Brother who was to achieve such great distinction in the Craft, he has recorded an event which gives testimony to the high regard in which Fowler was held by the Brethren of the Lodge. It relates to his presentation, in 1814, of a box and steps to the Lodge, '..the value of which was much enhanced by being his own

workmanship'. In return, the Lodge presented Fowler with a silver cup and an address in which he was alluded to as 'The Pillar of his Mother Lodge and the Capital and Ornament of the Masonic Order in Ireland'.

Fowler was also an affiliated member of Lodge 2, Dublin, a 'Time Immemorial Lodge', which can make the proud boast that it is the oldest surviving Regular Lodge in the Irish Constitution, having been warranted on 22 May 1727. In 1818 the Lodge had not attracted any candidates for some twelve years and many resignations in the preceding eight years had brought its fortunes to a sorry state; so low, that Grand Lodge had threatened to give its Warrant to the Second Regiment of Foot. It was then that Fowler, together with five other members of Lodge 620, affiliated to Lodge 2 and directed his energies towards the solution of its problems with such success that, by the end of that year, the Lodge had cleared all outstanding Grand Lodge dues and fines and had been launched on a period of progress and prosperity. This kindness so gratified the members of Lodge 2 that they put forward an Act of Union between their Lodge and Lodge 620. The Act of Union was ratified in January 1819 and under its provisions the Brethren of the two Lodges, amongst other things, shared a joint Lodge fund and enjoyed reciprocal membership. This arrangement was to continue until 1831 when Lodge 620 removed to Salt Hill, Kingstown. Fowler attended the meetings of Lodge 2 regularly, absenting himself only when more pressing Masonic duties dictated the necessity, and working indefatigably in the interest of his Brethren.

In 1843, when a portrait of Fowler was offered for sale to Lodge 2 by the artist. Brother Nelson of Lodge 810, a subscription was quickly opened to make the purchase. This painting, depicting a man of benign countenance, now hangs in the Museum of Freemasons' Hall, Dublin.

As was to be anticipated, Fowler did not long escape the notice of Grand Lodge and, as early as January 1793, he was appointed to the committee charged with the duty of composing a circular letter for forwarding to all Irish Lodges, requiring them to observe the regulation which forbade the introduction of subjects of a political or religious nature at Lodge meetings. This was to combat the activities of some Brethren with leanings towards the United Irishmen - a proscribed organisation - who had been holding their meetings under the guise of Masonic Lodges.

In 1800, when controversy raged round Walter Wade - champion of the privileges of Grand Master's Lodge and a rather unpopular Deputy Grand Master — Fowler was a member of the committee deputed to wait on the Grand Master, Lord Donoughmore, to present reasons why Grand Lodge believed that Brother Wade should no longer continue in office.

During the chaotic period which prevailed in Irish Masonry from 1805 until 1808, when many worthy Brethren felt themselves at odds with the manner in which Grand Lodge affairs were being conducted, the situation deteriorated to the extent that, in 1806, they set up a rival body calling it THE Grand Lodge of Ireland\*. At a meeting of this body in May 1807, presided over by Brother Wade, one of those who was accorded their thanks was John Fowler. The presence of a former Deputy Grand Master, and a future Deputy Grand Master, at such a gathering, gives some indication of the depth of feeling which divided the Brethren at that time.

In 1813 the Duke of Leinster succeeded Lord Donoughmore as Grand Master and in 1818, following the resignation of the Honourable Abraham Hely-Hutchinson as Deputy Grand Master, Fowler was appointed in his stead. It was a happy choice, for the Grand Master and his Deputy shared a mutual regard which was to last throughout the remainder of Fowler's lifetime and which was to redound to the great benefit of the Craft. It was said that the Duke of Leinster seldom gave a decision on Masonic rulings without first consulting Fowler. At the time of his appointment, Fowler was already regarded as the leading ritualist in the Irish Constitution, as evidenced by the Grand Lodge order of 1817 that 'Brother Fowler's mode of Initiating Obligating being the Ancient Usage of the Order, be observed in future and no other and not departed from'. Following his appointment, Fowler became the virtual dictator of procedure and ritual in the Irish Constitution.

Although regarded as an arbitrary chairman, Fowler presided in Grand Lodge with great tact, and, even in controversial matters which vitally concerned his own interests, he was forebearing and courteous.

Fowler resigned the office of Deputy Grand Master in 1824, and, although no reason was given in Grand Lodge, it appears that he was at that time financially embarrassed and, under the harsh laws of that period, was even held for a time in the debtors' prison before arrangements were made for his release by the Duke of Leinster.

On the death of the Deputy Grand Secretary, Brother William Francis Graham, in 1827, Fowler was appointed to the joint offices of Deputy Grand Secretary and Deputy Grand Treasurer. He was to hold the former office until his death in 1856. He took up office when the fortunes of Grand Lodge were in a precarious state and when the country was in a state of political unrest. Undeterred by the immensity of the problems, he travelled the country far and wide, bringing encouragement to the Brethren and consolidating the links which bound them to Grand Lodge. In his dealings with the Lodges overseas, he continued the policy of his predecessor by keeping them fully cognisant of all that was happening at home, to such good effect that, in his lifetime, he had the gratification of seeing the spread of Irish Masonry in Canada, Australia and elsewhere abroad.

In his extensive private correspondence with the leading figures of the Sister Constitutions, Fowler kept alive the spirit of the International Compact by ensuring a ready exchange of information among the three Grand Lodges.

Working in close co-operation with the Duke of Leinster, he sought to bring the various Masonic bodies in Ireland under a central authority, and finally had his efforts rewarded by the enactment of a law forbidding all assemblies in Ireland, purporting to be Masonic, unless held under a Warrant from Grand Lodge or from one of the other Grand bodies in Ireland recognised by it. This was to lead to a great uniformity in working, and preclude the introduction of spurious and unnecessary degrees.

Amidst all these activities, it is interesting to discover that Fowler still found time to exercise another of his many gifts, by setting certain of our ceremonies to music, and it was he who, at the request of the Duke of Leinster, penned the Masonic version of the National Anthem, to mark the accession of Queen Victoria to the Throne. This latter work is still included in the Book of Odes used in many Irish Lodges.

At the meeting of Grand Lodge held in February 1856 it was announced that John Fowler had died on the 25th of the preceding month. The Deputy Grand Master, with the concurrence of the Duke of Leinster, had ordered that the funeral expenses be paid from Grand Lodge funds and had authorised the wearing of Masonic costume by Brethren attending the funeral, [it was proposed that an immediate subscription be raised to make provision for Fowler's children and it was further proposed that Grand Lodge should erect a

suitably inscribed tablet to Brother Fowler's memory. The memorial to Fowler was later erected in Mount Jerome Cemetery.

But it is for his services in transmitting the ancient Irish Craft Ritual from the exponents of the eighteenth century to his pupils, and through them and the Grand Lodge of Instruction, tons, whereby it is the pride and boast of the Grand Lodge of Ireland that its ritual is older and has suffered less than others from the attentions of over-enthusiastic revisers, that his memory should ever be preserved.

