



THE EAGER JEWEL

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There are few towns in Ireland with a record comparable to that of Downpatrick. Its streets have been trodden by Saints, and in its neighbourhood the light of Christianity first dawned on our land.

The "Annals of the Four Masters" almost two thousand years before the Christian era, record the clearing of the woods of Lecale, the barony in which Downpatrick is situated, so one might assume the town or settlement would date from about the same period.

PTOLEMY, about the year 130 A.D. includes it as "Dunum" in his list of Irish towns.

In 1177 A.D. Sir John de Courcy, in his conquest of Ulster, built his first Castle at Downpatrick, the last remains of which were removed around 1848 A.D.

About 1640 A.D. Lord Cromwell erected a wooden bridge over the "Coil" river just east of the town. This bridge was replaced in 1679 A.D. by a stone bridge, still in use, with six arches, by the Earl of Ardglass, and since that date navigation of the Quoile river, as it is now called, stops at a large basin with quay and substantial warehouses just downstream of the bridge.

Around 1731 A.D. when work commenced on the Newry to Lough Neagh Canal the same civil engineer, Richard Castle, was responsible for the construction of a "New Cutt" between the Downpatrick basin and the sea.

In the Autumn of 1689 Schomberg, the Williamite General, landed in Ireland. A section of his army, Sir John Lanier's regiment, now the first Dragoon Guards, was stationed in the Military Barrack at Downpatrick and one of the soldiers was a German mercenary called ... EAGER. This regiment was later engaged in the defence of the Maiden City. When King James II was finally defeated by King William III, Eager obtained his release from the army, returned to Downpatrick and built a house at Quoile Bridge. This house is still standing and is at present being renovated by Samuel Edgar (EAGER).

The Eagers prospered and in a Property List published in 1708 A.D. of the town of Downpatrick:— "IRISH QUARTER No. 14 and No. 15 Widow Eagers tenement, Principal Tenent Thos. Eager. A strong stonewall thatched house with malt house and kiln backwards 43' x 436'" A scale map of the town published in 1729 A.D. shows the exact site of this property, part of which is now the new G.P.O. building in Market Street, just opposite to St. Patrick's Avenue.

In 1745 A.D. to protect his estates from flooding, one Edward Southwell erected an embankment with gates across the river Quoile just below the bridge. The Eagers were appointed lock-keepers and continued in this occupation to around the 1950's when a new Barrage at Hare Island was formed some few miles downstream of the original locks.

The original lock gates were washed away and replaced in 1800-01 but these were not an unqualified success as they were not of sufficient capacity to discharge the floodwaters of some 57,000 acres Irish, subject to flooding.

The writer was one of the Civil Engineers employed in the construction of the Hare Island Barrage in the 1950's and to this day the marsh around Downpatrick is still not in an ideal condition during the winter months although a considerable area has been reclaimed.

While it is not yet possible to establish when Masonry was first worked in Downpatrick, it is apparent from reading the early lodge minutes of Saint Patricks Lodge No. 367, which holds a Warrant dated 4th June 1761, signed by the then Grand Master, the Earl of Charville, that the Order was working in Downpatrick long prior to that date.

The members of Lodge No. 367 are fortunate that they still have in their possession almost complete records of their transactions since their formation, and I wish to record my thanks to the W.M., Wardens and Brethren and in particular to their Secretary, W. Bro. William Mitchell, for granting me permission to study these priceless relics in private.

The first recorded association of the EAGER family with the Masonic Order appears on page 21 of the 1765-1783 Records where one Archibald Eager was — "Entered and Passed 25th Jan. 1779".

He first attained the Chair in 1784 and subsequently held that office again on five other different years until his death in 1838. He received the degree of Knight Templar and four of his sons were also members of the Order.

On page 18 of the 1806-1814 Records we find:— "On March 2nd 1807 Robert Eager, son of Archibald Eager, was reported by his father who paid five shillings and five pence. Entered and Passed Fellowcraft, paid same time Two Shillings and Two Pence for F.C."

On March 16th he obtained his Master Masons degree, no payment was recorded in this instance though the usual recorded fee was Eleven Shillings Four and One Half Pence. Charges for Blue degrees varied from 2/2, 3/1½, 14/7, 15/10 to £1.2.9. at this period in this Lodge.

On page 69 it is recorded:— "Cannadates for the Subelimat order in Masonary.

Faby 20th 1809 Brother Names Bro. Edw Reily paid 7-7
 Bro. Robt EAGER paid 7-7
 etc.
 etc.



The Eager Jewel.

Pass Master Excellent Super Excellent Royal Arch Mason and Sir Knights Tempellars. This Encampment Closed Half Past Ten O'Clock. All in good Harmony and To a great Satisfactision to the Brothers Present."

Robert Eager was the great grand uncle of the late V.W. Brother Richard E. Parkinson, B.Sc., P.S.G.D.(Hon) P.M. and Editor of the Lodge of Research C.C. also an elected member of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076 E.C.; whose major opus was Volume Two of the History of the Grand Lodge of Ireland, published by the Lodge of Research in 1957. V.W. Brother Parkinson and my father, W. Brother J.B. McKeown, were both for many years Assistant County Surveyors of Down and when my father retired I got his job, so that V.W. Brother Parkinson has known me for my lifetime.

The late V.W. Brother Parkinson informed me that the Silver Jewel reproduced obverse and reverse, on page 351 of Volume One of the History of the Grand Lodge of Ireland, was presented to Robert Eager by his Lodge No. 367 Downpatrick on the eve of his departure for the Peninsular Wars on 20th February, 1809, and he gave me a list of the battles in which Robert fought.

The details of this presentation are not recorded in the Lodge records which only entered very sparse accounts of its meetings, but it is recorded that Bro. Andrew Willimson was paid £1.4.2 for the "Jule" and on same line "the Lodge paid for Bro. AGAR certificate 3/9". I assume that this was for the Knight Templar demit found on the body. (See later.)

How did Bro. Eager come to join H.M. Forces? When Lord Castlereagh was appointed Secretary of State for War in 1807, he found the army to be seriously under-manned, and two methods of recruitment were employed:—

1. "The poverty and ignorance of Ireland and some British agricultural districts could be exploited and criminals and young men with no pleasurable future often took the Kings shilling".

2. A local militia, some 200,000 strong was formed in 1809. This force was originally intended for local defence. It was recruited both by Volunteers and by Ballot and received some 28 days military training each year, and served as a recruiting ground for the army.

This would appear to be not unlike our own Home Guard of 1940 and my own introduction to H.M. Forces.

In 1809 Sir Arthur Wellesley was in charge of troops at Cork and he took charge of a "NEW BRITISH ARMY to fight in the Peninsular Wars and amongst his troops were the ignorant Irish Volunteers".

It is also recorded that on:— "26th April 1809 Sir Arthur Wellesley landed at Lisbon with a fresh British Army of some 30,000 men".

R.E. Parkinson has recorded:— On 12th May 1809 Bro. Eager was engaged in the battle in which General SOULT was defeated at OPORTO.

On 27th-28th July 1809 Bro. Eager was engaged in the battle in which WELLESLEY defeated Marshal Claude VICTOR and General Horatio SÉBASTINI at TALVERA. As a reward Wellesley was created Viscount Castlereagh.

On 27th September 1810 Bro. Eager was with the Artillery with which WELLINGTON defeated Marshal André MASSENA at the battle of BUSSACO and later in hot pursuit the same General at TORRES VERDAS.

Between 3rd and 5th May 1811 due to the failure of NAPOLEON to ensure the protection of MASSENA'S communication and supply route, GENERAL MASSENA was finally defeated by WELLINGTON at FUENTES de OÑORO. It is recorded that MASSENA had in his command 68 guns, 5000 Cavalry and 30,000 Infantry.

In January 1812 Eagers artillery were present when PORTUGAL was finally cleared of the French invaders and the fortress of CIUDAD-RODRIGO was captured.

On 6th April 1812 during the capture of the key fortress of BADAJOL poor Eager fell. The fall of the fortress lead to the final defeat of NAPOLEON by WELLINGTON at WATERLOO.

It is recorded that after the battle the burial party, upon searching the body and finding this Jewel worn under the fallen soldier's tunic, and his Knight Templar demit in his knapsack, he was reverently buried by his Soldier Brethren, including the Officers of his Corps, with full MASONIC honours, and the Jewel and Demit sent home to his relatives.

Brief description of the Jewel:— Undated silver oval some 2½ " x 2". Reverse engraved with Craft and Royal Arch symbols which need no explanation except for the three Crowns. During the early 1800's a 'Royal Arch Super Excellent Mason' certificate was signed by three Grand Masters, originals of which are symbolized by the Three Crowns on the Jewel.

The obverse displays High Knight Templar symbols, most of which are still used in these islands in our ceremonies. Those not now actively employed and where still surviving in Chapter Rooms, are now merely historic reminders of early working. Conspicuous among these is the Scythe, which was carried by Father Time, The Great Reaper.

When the Brethren of Downpatrick Lodge presented Bro. Eager with his Jewel, little did they realize the trials he would face or that this humble Irish Mason with his Jewel under his army tunic would contribute in no small measure, not only to the Modern History of Europe but also of the World.

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