

The History of Warrant 1003

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Warrant number 1003 or the Irish constitution was first issued in January of 1813 to Brothers Pat McGarry, Manus Gillen and Robert Alexander to meet at Turnavidock in Co. Antrim. This information is taken from a Grand Lodge Minute of January 7th 1813. This is noteworthy because the original request for a warrant by these brethren was in 1807, they having paid Alexander Seton, referred to in the minute as "Mr Seton", for the warrant.

Unfortunately the next mention of Warrant 1003 in the records of Grand Lodge is again a minute from Grand Lodge from the year 1818 on January 1st when it is recorded that, Brother Frail, the Worshipful Master of Lodge No. 38, in Ballycastle Co. Antrim reported that the state of Lodge 1003 was such that the ordered Warrant 1003 should be cancelled.

The short and apparently disorganised life of Warrant 1003 was sadly not unique in this time due mainly to the actions of one man, Alexander Seton. In their book, *The History of the Grand Lodge of Ireland* (Volume I), Messrs Lepper and Crossle describe what they term "a period in Irish Freemasonry in which we can take neither pride nor pleasure". They go on to say "it began with a struggle between two separate parties in the Grand Lodge and it ended in the secession, for a time, of a large body of masons in Ulster."

As the records during this period are scant, due in no small part to Seton himself, it is not possible to delve further into the original issue of warrant 1003, however, a brief exploration of the episode around the issuing of the warrant, which Messrs Lepper and Crossle term "The Seton Secession", may serve to illustrate why the first issuing of 1003 was so brief and troubled.

On February 5th 1801, George D'Arcy Irvine, the Grand Secretary made Alexander Seton his Deputy. During the tenure of the previous Deputy Grand Secretary the dues to the post holder had been increased to some £300 a year, no small sum in those times and so the post was a most desirable one. Immediate the appointment drew the ire of the grand Treasurer, Bro William Semple, Bro Semple having been engaged in the task of tidying up the Grand Lodge accounts. The tidying up was required due to the illness suffered by the previous Deputy Grand Secretary Bro. Thomas Corker.

Mr Seton, a Tyrone man, by all accounts set about his new role with energy and enthusiasm as the illness of the previous post holder had left many things neglected. Mr Seton threw particular energy into ensuring that the warrants in operation tallied with the Grand Lodge records and where there were discrepancies, he cancelled warrants, re-issued and set the records straight (Lepper & Crossle 1925 p. 323).

Despite the perceived enthusiasm, the benefit of hindsight is such that it is apparent that Mr Seton was bent on gaining as much as he could from his office. This opinion is declared by the authors of *The History of the Grand Lodge of Ireland* (Lepper & Crossle 1925 p. 324) and borne out by the records of those who voiced their displeasure against Seton as he turned on his accusers with his own accusations of slander and libel.

The manner of Seton's gain from his role is described by Crossle & Lepper as follows, "As Deputy Grand Secretary he received the dues of a great majority of country lodges, who had been accustomed, when they paid at all, to pay this officer" (Lepper & Crossle 1925 p. 324). The inferences from this statement by the authors are clear. Not only was Seton in a unique position to exploit a flow of money, but custom had led to a situation whereby lax procedures were accepted.

Added to this then, was Seton's pursuance of lapsed warrants as a source of income. His practise was to re-issue the lapsed warrants as Lepper and Crossle describe it "for a consideration" (Lepper & Crossle 1925 p. 324). The authors go on to say, that it was Seton's less than scrupulous practise that led to the curious "re-issue of warrant numbers which exists to this very day" (Lepper & Crossle 1925 p. 324).

It was under these circumstances that the brethren in Turnavidock, Co. Antrim declared that they had paid Mr Seton for the 1003 Warrant in 1807, as minuted by the Grand Lodge. And perhaps why the lodge did not succeed and the warrant order was subsequently cancelled.

However, the deeds of Mr Seton go much further than the impropriety around the issuing of warrants. Seton began as early as 1802 to cast aspersions toward his major adversary, the Grand Treasurer John Boardman. At a meeting of the Grand Lodge on the 1st of May, where Irvine, Seton's original appointer, was defeated for the post of Grand Secretary by a rival, Seton waited outside the meeting. When Boardman arrived out, Seton set about him with a horsewhip in the presence of the brethren, Seton accusing Boardman of engineering Irvine's defeat. The first act of the new Grand Secretary was to dismiss Seton from office citing actions so grievous as to have "threatened to overthrow our established Laws and Constitutions, the destruction of the Craft and the diminution of its funds (*Letter to grand Lodge dated 5th March 1807*).

These events were the culmination of a struggle for power which saw the Grand East of Ulster try to distance itself from Dublin within the order and vie for the support of Northern masons. It could be argued that Seton was merely an unscrupulous man who seeing a struggle for power, picked the pockets of the combatants. This is borne out by the fact that no extant records show him to have been a driving force be the secessionists, but rather an agent provocateur among the secessionists fomenting discontent to further his own ends, chaos being the best cover for his antics.

Unfortunately the records for this period are scant and definitive pronouncements are difficult. This is due in no small part o Seton himself because on his dismissal, he refused to submit the papers and records he had had at his disposal, no doubt fearing further incrimination. And so it is that a minute of the 5th of June 1806, the first available since 1801, recorded some garbled events. The Grand Lodge met the grand Master Jaffray in the throne. Many Northern Brethren were present and there ensued a chaotic meeting. It may be summed up that resolutions put forward by the disaffected Northern Brethren were rejected and after much talk, the Grand Lodge was closed. The Northern Brethren, waited for the other brethren to retire, it being now 01:30, and then reopened the Grand Lodge. They declared the previous closing to have been unlawful and then set out re-opening and passing all of the rejected resolutions. For the next nearly two years there existed to bodies calling themselves the Grand Lodge Of Ireland. But this was not so simple as a north south divide, fact many lodges were torn, north and south between support for the two bodies.

The divide was so serious that the Grand Lodge opposed by the body now led by Seton, was deposed from the Tailor's Hall and forced to meet in the Exhibition house in William Street.

The reconciliation of the Grand Lodge, delayed by bickering and the illness of the Grand Master, did not take place until March of 1808. However, it was not until October of 1808 that Seton was finally ousted from his position by the appointment of Bro. William Francis Graham as Deputy Grand Secretary.

Seton unfortunately features even longer in the woes of Grand Lodge, which resorted to Law to pursue both funds and records in Seton's possession. Used to the courts, Seton managed to prolong the agonies through the notoriously slow Irish courts until 1823 when at last all hope of achieving a satisfactory conclusion was abandoned.

Indeed the entire episode is one of which Irish Freemasons cannot be proud, but in the context of the day if not Freemasonry, it may be seen as a fairly normal occurrence. Often prominent men would resort to litigation, where funds would allow, to delay, obfuscate and entrench themselves with their adversaries; such men as Daniel O'Connell himself being a famous practitioner of such tactics. The preponderance of such practises however, does not in any way legitimise or excuse the actions of Seton and his secessionists, but it does pose some awkward questions about the practise of Freemasonry at this time. The letter of the law it seems was wielded above the spirit and used to justify the power struggles of the self-interested to the detriment of the ideal of Freemasonry.

It is a great contrast that the history of the warrant 1003 should include this dark phase in the annals of Irish Freemasonry. Even though, the nineteenth century was to see a great flowering of Freemasonry in Ireland, driven by a renewed vigour in the Grand Lodge, the late twentieth century has again seen

something of a decline. Thankfully, this decline is in no way attributable to the kind of events seen during the secessionist period, but instead due to changing attitudes in modern life as the spiritual is all too often left behind by the material.

Oracle lodge 1003 was set up to try to reinvigorate that part of Freemasonry which looks deeply into our symbols, our ritual, its practise and meaning thereby hoping to deepen our understanding of the wisdom that has been passed so carefully from ancient times. Oracle hopes in doing so, to contribute to an Order making a place for itself in the Ireland of the twenty-first century. However, the creation of Oracle has only been made possible by a climate of self-examination and resultant rejuvenation within the Order instituted by our Most Worshipful, the Grand Master who has been tireless in ensuring that both the public face of Irish Freemasonry and its ancient message have a worthy place in today's world.

Thus we meet here today, honoured by the presence of our guests, to celebrate our first year, under our warrant that re-emerged from a dark past, to the light of our small beginning, as we hope to be a helpful drop in the surge of Irish Freemasonry into tomorrow.

Bibliography

1. *The History of the Grand Lodge of Ireland* Lepper and Crossle, Dublin, 1925.
2. *Grand Lodge of Ireland Minutes* January, May 1801, June 1806.
3. *Letter to Grand Lodge dated 5th March 1807* Grand Secretary Leech 1807 Dublin.