

## **LAURENCE DERMOTT 1720 - 1791**

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Brethren, the lead up to this paper started in mid 2005 when my R.W.M. Keith Thomas requested that I prepare and present a paper. Bro. Keith it has been a great honour and a labour of love. The subject of my paper is the late Wor. Bro. Laurence Dermott 1720-1791 P.D.G.M. and P.G. Secretary of the Grand Lodge of the Ancients.

I picked this subject because Laurence Dermott:

1. Was an Irish Freemason,
2. His legacy is still evident,
3. When asked about this past brother, some seemed to minimise his contribution,
4. Having heard his name expressed by other researchers there seemed to be little evidence available concerning him to present.

Throughout this paper I refer to the different Grand Lodges as follows:

### **Moderns 1717**

1. Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of England,
2. The Modern Grand Lodge
3. The Regular Grand Lodge
4. The Grand Lodge under the Prince of Wales

Referred to by the slang name of the “MODERNS”

### **Ancients 1751**

1. Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons According to the Old Institutions
2. Grand Committee
3. Grand Lodge of the Ancients
4. Atholl Masons

Referred to by the slang name of the “ANCIENTS”

So let me first introduce you to Laurence Dermot. Prior to my research, the only tangible source I was aware of was a document called the Ahiman Rezon, and some intimations by Irish Masons that he had played a key role in the setting up of the Grand Lodge of England. After carrying out my research to date, I now believe that his contribution to our beloved Order was indeed immense. Therefore, let us now look in detail at one of the most remarkable Freemasons that has so far existed.

While carrying out my research I have come to realise that Laurence Dermott was a very private man and when this paper is completed, presented and filed I hope other inquiring minds will assist and try and fill some of the gaps left by me.

In Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076 (Q.C.) Transactions Volume 98 in a paper entitled *Let a Man's Religion - Be What It May* by Bro. John Reid, dated 9th May 1985 it is indicated that Laurence Dermott was probably the son of Thomas Dermott, of Francis Street, Dublin, a merchant who had a country residence at Stokestown, Co. Roscommon. He would then have been the elder half brother of Anthony Dermott of Ushers Quay, Dublin, a merchant. The Dermott family were friends with a Thomas Mathews who was later appointed Grand Master of the Ancients.

Reeves believed that The Mathew family and the Dermott families were Roman Catholics. However Lepper and Crossle could not verify Dermott's religion, but confirmed that Thomas Mathews was a Roman Catholic.

Dermott was survived by his loving and dear wife Elizabeth, who received the benefits of his will on 15th July 1791. The address given on his will document was in the parish of Saint Botolph, Aldgate, Middlesex, England. Apart from this his last known address was in Mile End Old Town, Stepney. As stated previously he died in June 1791 but the date of his death and his burial place remain unknown.

The first relevant record I could find was a reference to Mr. Laurence Dermott, an Irishman being initiated into Lodge No. 26 at Dublin in 1740. He served in all the offices of the Lodge and he was also Secretary. He was installed W. Master on 24th June 1746.

Little is known of him while in the Irish system but more is available after he went to England. We know that he was:

1. Born in 1720,
2. Joined the craft in 1740 aged 20 years,
3. Received the Royal Arch Degree in 1746 in Ireland (after 6 Years),
4. Was active in Freemasonry for 11 years in Ireland,
5. Went to England in 1751, joined the Moderns, then the Ancients in whose ranks he spent 40 years.

He died in June 1791 after 51 years in the Craft.

In a number of Q.C. transactions his educational qualifications are questioned but if we consider his ability to satisfy the brethren with his literary skills throughout his term with the Ancients he must have been better educated than some care to admit.

In Reece's document he refers to the incident where following a question from Dermott then Grand Secretary the Most W. the Grand Master answered in Latin, Dermott then replied in Latin. There are a number of references to Dermott conversing with brethren in Hebrew. I would respectfully suggest that this brother was well educated considering the educational levels of both Ireland and England at that time.

Latin was a language commonly used at those times but the Hebrew most certainly was never a common language in any western country,

His listed profession at the early stage was that he was an assistant to a master painter. It is not known if the painter was a house painter or a canvas painter. Nothing is known about who the painter was. At a later stage of his Masonic career he describes himself as being a wine merchant.

Throughout his Masonic career his health was a grave concern, especially later in life when he had been diagnosed as suffering from gout. An entry in the document relates to an incident when Dermott got out of bed and travelled to a committee meeting without shoes, breeches or even socks. Gout was one of the main health problems of the era.

Throughout the research for this paper it cannot be ignored his ability to true and disciplined administration. His minutes were detailed. It is evident that Dermott was a very enthusiastic and competent lecturer on all things Masonic, from the history of our Craft to the Degrees.

He was an able songwriter and an accomplished poet. The research documents indicate that Dermott entertained his brethren with songs composed by him and poems which he had written.

In Q.C. Transactions Volume 84 1971 a papers written by Bro. Brig. Jackson entitled *The English Exposures of 1760/62* (p. 151) says:

*The minute of the grand lodge of the ancients makes this clear. Though the grand lodge had been formed for some years, it was necessary on the 13th march 17.57, for the grand Secretary (Dermott) to have "traced and explained the 1St, 2nd and 3rd part of the ancient craft and settled many things (then disputed) to the entire satisfaction of all brethren present, who promised to adhere strictly to the ancient system and to cultivate the same in their several lodges.*

A further entry from that same paper states:

*Bro. James Bradshaw (and others) protested against any thanks or approbation of the secretary's conduct, who instead of being useful, had actually sung and lectured the brethren out of their senses.*

The Grand Lodge of the Moderns was established on 24th June 1717 and the Grand Lodge of the Ancients was founded on 17th July 1751 at the Turks Head in Greek Street, Soho. I believe it is important to review how many members were in favour of such a split.

In 1751 the Moderns dominated 181 Lodges while this new Ancient Grand Lodge or Committee started with, just 5 lodges and a total of eighty members. In 1755, 4 years later, there were 269 Modern lodges while the Ancients had only 46 Lodges.

In 1757, 2 years later, 25 of the 46 Ancient Lodges sat in London The task ahead was immense for this fledgling Grand Lodge.

On the 5th February 1752 Laurence Dermott was appointed as Grand Secretary of the Grand lodge of the Ancients and it was clear to all that they were the minority. Being appointed to that office at this particular time would have horrified most mortal men but it seemed to inject a massive dose of enthusiasm into the newly elected Grand Secretary.

It is obvious to the researcher that as the new Grand Secretary, he had to work miracles and put in place enough doubt to sway the older believers that the Modern methods were flawed. He set out to invent and expose corruption within the system as laid down by the Grand Lodge of the Moderns. Whether this was morally correct is open to debate but it should be noted that the majority of the Ancients at this time were Irish and Scottish Masons. It should be considered that Dermott was Secretary to a band of brethren who may have received their degrees in their mother constitutions and on looking at the Moderns recognised the move away from the old ways. It is impossible for us in the modern day to understand the reasoning of that yesteryear.

It is also evident that Dermott and the Grand lodge of the Ancients were very possibly practising the Munster workings.

In Q.C. Volume 98 in a paper entitled *Some Problems of the Grand Lodge of the Ancients* by Bro C.N. Batham dated 22nd June 1985 he lists the charges, which Dermott laid against the Moderns:

1. Preparing candidates incorrectly
2. Abbreviating the ceremonies
3. Omitting the lectures
4. Omitting to read the ancient charges to initiates
5. Omitting prayers
6. Transposing the means of recognition of the First and Second Degrees
7. Using an incorrect word in the Master Mason's Degree. Including using the pass grips and passwords in the actual ceremonies instead of as a preliminary to them,,
8. De-Christianising the ritual
9. Ignoring the Saints' days, especially the 24th June St. John the Baptist's Day and the 27th Dec. St. John the Evangelist's day.
10. Arranging their lodges incorrectly
11. Not having Deacons as officers of the lodge.
12. Neglecting the ceremony of installing the Master.

It should be noted that in 1813, when the Union was instituted, and the United Grand Lodge of England came into being, the Ancient Grand Lodge was on a par with the Moderns and therefore had to be incorporated as an equal (after 62 years).

Dermott was the driving force behind the Ancient Grand Lodge from 5th Feb 1752. He set the scene and led the fight from the front. He worked tirelessly to keep the brethren interested by giving lectures and set in place a strong disciplinary code, which he administered from the top. He did everything he could to get a member of the aristocracy into the position of Grand Master. If he could not find a suitable member of the local nobility he imported someone with the necessary credentials. On one occasion, following the death of the reigning Grand Master, the Ancient Grand Lodge could not find a candidate for the post of Grand master. For two years the Ancients worked under Dermott's leadership until Dermott found a friend from Ireland, a Thomas Mathews who was a landowner of renown who he presented and later installed as Grand Master

Dermott also used the Royal arch as a weapon by arguing that the Royal Arch was an integral part of pure, ancient Masonry which had come down from time immemorial therefore giving it authority and antiquity. Some argue that the Royal Arch came to England with the Ancient grand Lodge. This is impossible as there were Royal Arch Masons in England prior to formation of the Grand lodge of the Ancients. Some say that it was inspired by the Ancients; well the Irish Masonic fraternity was a very strong fraternity even before the formation of the Grand lodge of the Moderns. It is also evident that the Ancients used the Royal Arch to further their aims, possibly because the Moderns declared themselves to be 'neither Arch, Royal Arch or Ancient', basically denying the existence of such a Degree. The Moderns did not bar their brethren from joining or taking this Degree but would not recognise it as a part of the Craft system.

An interesting point for further research comes to light in Q.C. Volume 98 in that it is evident that the Ancients used the Zerubbabel legend for the Royal Arch rather than the Josiah legend, a difference from our present system (we Irish use the Josiah legend for the Royal Arch today).

It has been said on many occasions by different Irish Freemasons that Dermott brought Deacons to England; well this is unlikely as an article in Q.C. Volume 89 entitled *The Deacons* refers to deacons being used in Modern lodges prior to the

formation of the Ancients. The article also refers to the use of Deacons in Ireland in 1726. Yes, it is possible that the Irish custom of using deacons had travelled to England but much earlier than 1752. In *Masonic Reprints and Historical Revelations*, in an article entitled *Defence of Freemasonry* it is stated:

*That this Grand Lodge do agree in opinion with the committee of charity that it is not necessary any longer to continue in force those measures which were resorted to in, or about, the year 1739 respecting irregular masons, and do therefore enjoin the lodges to revert to the ancient landmarks of the society. (Modern Grand lodge minutes dated April 12 1809)*

I agree with the author of this article that the Moderns had moved away from the ancient landmarks of the Order at that time. Dermott was correct in his charges. The two Grand Lodges shared the same principles of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth but the Moderns had a hope of absolute supremacy over all, while the Ancients were just struggling to survive.

The ancients were labelled rebels etc. but it is evident that the Ancients were predominately Irish and Scotch working the old Irish/Scotch Ritual. It is pointed out in the *Defence of Freemasonry* document that it is also possible that there were a number of older English Masons who did not believe in changing the landmarks. This is supported by the *First Register* of the Ancients which indicates that most of the members were from the artisan class, while the Moderns although practicing a similar ritual allowed and encouraged diversity from the old ways. The Ancients refused to accept these changes and the quote above supports these findings.

Dermott encouraged gentry to join and he set up a communication system with the Grand Lodge of Ireland and the Grand Lodge of Scotland. It is recorded that Grand Secretary Dermott used his position to communicate with his mother Grand Lodge.

In the *First Register* (p.18) it says that the Grand Master refused to support them but on 2nd June 1762 the Grand Secretary of Ireland's letter that was in reply to Grand Secretary Dermott seeking a constant Correspondence read

*Ordered that a constant correspondence shall be kept with the grand lodge of Ireland. And whereas and firmly resolved not to admit any Sojourner from England (as a Member or Petitioner) without producing a certificate (of his*

*good behaviour) under the seal of the Ancient Grand Lodge of London. It is hereby ordered and declared, that from and after the first day of July in the year of our lord one thousand seven hundred sixty two all and every sojourner or sojourners from Ireland shall produce proper certificates or other necessary recommendations from the Grand Secretary of Ireland before he or they can be admitted as a member or receive any part of the general charity.*

Reece's paper shows that in 1758 a letter was read from the Grand Lodge of Ireland announcing 'a strict union with the Ancient Grand Lodge in London'. He also informs the reader that on 3rd May 1773 the G.L.O.S. gave a similar reply. Now this statement is important as it proves that Dermott was in communication with Dublin but he was preparing the ground to ensure that the Ancients were being supported from abroad. It is also still the practice that anyone wishing to affiliate to other Grand Lodge jurisdictions they must have the necessary clearance from their Mother Grand Lodge's Grand Secretaries. It is also recorded that Dermott also set up a good communication system with the Grand lodge of Scotland. The support from these two Grand Lodges was necessary and would add pressure for the Moderns to seek unity.

The cause of the split in the Grand lodge of all England has been discussed and debated in great depth by other well known researcher's of the Craft, so I am not going to dwell on it except to offer a possible reason.

The Grand Lodge of England (Moderns) was constituted in 1717 and in the course of their growth started to gather more Irish and Scots, who identified that the Moderns had changed the ritual to further the English cause. They would also have had an increase in charity requests owing to the influx of these ignorant tribes.

Received these demands and fearing that the outsiders would in turn take over so to speak, the Principle Officers started to refuse entry and reject charity demands. The possibility of the 'unwashed' taking over the Grand Lodge of England was totally unwelcome so a decision was taken to purge them. The Irish and Scots then considered the situation and decided to establish a Grand Committee where the ancient ritual would be practiced. This would have infuriated the English, as they would see this as an insult to their superiority.

In 1751 the Grand Committee with its 5 Lodges was no serious threat until in 1752 a committee appointed W.Bro. Laurence Dermott as Grand secretary, and he

declared them to be a Grand Lodge. He then started taking the fight to the Moderns. The fact that they had moved from the Ancient landmarks is evident so the charges levied by Dermott added to the dilemma. The Moderns had two choices, they could deny these charges but their own older members would know they were guilty or they could say nothing, hoping that someone would come to their defence. It is established in Reece's, paper that the Moderns were accepted largely the big names

*On one side, we have a grand lodge with an unbroken existence from the year 1717, and a roll of about 200 lodges whose members and adherents include many who had distinguished themselves in the service of the country on land and sea, others who had attained eminence in the pursuits of Art, science, and literature and a large proportion distinguished by nobility of birth: in short I may say it was in a measure supported by the wealth, wit and wisdom of England. On the other side, we have a comparatively few mechanics, journeymen, painters, shoemakers, and tailors a majority of whose constituents were even lower in the social scale than themselves.*

I believe that the above shows that one of the factors affecting the split may have been the Moderns changing the system so they could become gentlemen's clubs, of a sort. This would of course have caused great offence to the lower classes. The disaffected would most certainly have been welcome in the Ancients.

This crossover also happened in the opposite direction as well as is shown in these old manuscripts, a Former Ancient deserted to the Moderns, his name was Wm. Preston. A Scot at birth, a printer by trade he arrived in London in 1760. He was a member of a group of Scottish freemasons who solicited the G.L.O.S. to constitute a Lodge in London but were refused. However, the G.L.O.S. advised them to seek a warrant from the Ancient Grand Lodge. The dispensation by the Ancients was granted on 2nd March 1763 and Wm. Preston was the 2nd person initiated. This Lodge was No.111 on the roll of the Ancients. They later petitioned to constitute under the Moderns. On 15th Nov 1764 the petition was granted so the Lodge No. 111 of the Ancients became the Caledonian lodge No 134 under the Moderns. Hence a war of wills had started. The associated war of words was between Wm. Preston and Laurence Dermott.

A little more about Preston, at this stage, he had set himself up as a Masonic lecturer. Obviously his lectures about the Ancients were greatly resented saying the

least. Preston joined the Lodge of Antiquity No.2 (Moderns) and it is evident that his attitude towards the Ancients and others caused great concern, even to the Moderns. So much concern and pain that they were expelled. However, after a number of years were readmitted to the Moderns. Preston was a great lecturer and could have risen to the high ranks of the Ancients had he stayed, the result being he never aspired to high office in the Moderns either.

During this time the war of words between him and Dermott continued. Reece's paper concludes that Preston's failings appear to be his love for notoriety and excess of Masonic zeal. He was on a par with Dermott in both literary ability and educational terms and was just as enthusiastic a mason but when he realised that he had joined a society made up of the working class he immediately decided to change his station so to speak. He was duly welcomed into the Moderns and after a spell was used as Assistant Secretary but further advancement in his Masonic career had ended.

It is interesting that when placed as the Grand Secretary of the Ancients, one of the first things Dermott did was to implement by-laws. His new by-laws were similar to the Dublin Lodge No 26 by-Laws. He no doubt brought into vogue some of the old practices from the old country. The modern by-laws of lodges are an example.

There are a large number of entries in QC Transactions about Dermott and the introduction of the Royal Arch. Owing to the fact that the Moderns refused to accept it, the Ancients gave it a home and it has thrived throughout since.

On 27th December 1755 St. John's Day a memorandum by Dermott reads 'This year, 1755, the moderns begin to make use of Certificates: though the ancient Masons had granted certificates from time immemorial'.

### **Ahiman Rezon**

It is believed that there were eight editions of the Rezon printed however having spoken to the Grand lodge secretaries it is believed that there is little or no difference in them except minor administration changes. I have no definite proof of this, as I have not had the chance to read and compare these 8 editions. I have attached the Dublin copy to this presentation. I would like to point out that this document has the date in Roman Numerals MDCCLX (1760).

The Ahiman Rezon was published or copied as follows:

1756 London

1760 Dublin

1764 London 2nd Edition

1778 London 3rd Edition

1780 Dublin 5th Edition

1782 Belfast

1790 Dublin

1791 Virginia

1798 Massachusetts

1800 London 5th Edition

1801 London 6th Edition

1803 Dublin 7th Edition

1804 Dublin

1807 London 7th Edition

1807 South Carolina

1807 Dublin

1813 London 8th Edition

1816 Dublin 3rd Edition

1817 Dublin 3rd Edition

1820 and 1836 Dublin 4th Edition R.A.C.

1827 London U.G.L.E. 2nd Edition

1817 & 1823 Maryland

1825 Pennsylvania R.A.C.

1845 New York

The editions as they appeared were as follows:

1756 London

1760 Dublin Attached to this paper

1764 London 2nd Edition

1778 London 3rd Edition

1800 London 5th Edition

1801 London 6th Edition

1807 London 7th Edition

1813 London 8th Edition

It is recorded that the 1st Edition was never published.

Dermott stated:

*The next step was to furnish myself with a sufficient quantity of pens, ink, and paper: - This being done, I immediately fancied myself an Historian, and intended to trace Masonry not only to Adam, in his fyvan lodge of Paradise, but to give some account of the craft even before creation: and (as a foundation) I placed the following works round about me, for as to be convenient to have recourse to them as occasion should require, vi Dr. Anderson and Mr. Spratt directly before me, Dr. Affgny and Mr. Smith on my right hand, Dr. Defagulier and Mr. Pennell on my left hand, and Mr. Scott and Mr Lyon behind me: A copy of (said to be in the poffeffon of Mr. John Clack, in Paris) and in England, together with the pamphlet printed at Frankfort in Germany, I tied up in the public Advertiser of Friday, October 19, 1753 and threw them under the table.*

He also records that within a few days he had penned the first volume of the history of Freemasonry, wherein was a full account of the transactions of the first Grand Lodge particularly the excluding of the unruly members as related by Mr. Milton of Paradise Lodge Whoever they were?

The debate reference the origin and meaning of the words connected with the Rezon will continue for many years and different theories will be advanced. But a few that are not as common were found and attached to this paper, as it is open to many interpretations and warrants a full paper on these two words alone.

### **Lodge No. 1 the Grand Master's Lodge.**

In Richard Reece's paper he puts a foreword about Dermott and the Grand Master Lodge. When the grand committee formed into the Grand lodge of the ancients in 1751 they were leaderless and then Dermott was appointed Grand secretary in 1752. From then on he issued warrant/certificates allowing the brethren to assemble but he, when numbering them refused to give out the number 1, this number was held for a special purpose and only when the time was right did Dermott issue it and only when he had the commitment that it would be staffed and run as the Grand Masters lodge. I cannot establish if this was a copy of the Irish practice but some writers have already pointed to this possibility.

The warrant No. 1 was hand written and is was the only warrant where Dermott attempted to ornament and embellish it himself. It was presented to R. Wor. Bro. James Perry, Junior Grand Warden of England in the Grand Lodge on 5th Sept 1787 with directions to assemble and institute in the name of the Grand Master Randel William Earl of Antrim. A vast array of my research material came from writings, of senior members of this lodge. Dating from 1884 forward.

Dermott was quite a competent Administrator and it is voiced by many of that time that he was an articulate man with lots of zeal for Freemasonry. Worked (by his own admission) 12 hours a day as an assistant to a painter, then carried out the many duties of a Grand Lodge Secretary, followed by his contribution of lectures and Degree giving. At one stage it was decided that the grand secretary was too busy to carry out the other arduous duty, of delivering the summonses. It poses a question, could any of our present Grand secretaries cope, with the demand on their official and private duties.

A vast number of questions spring to mind during the research of this paper. These questions in most cases are unanswerable without a great deal of further research in both England and Ireland.

1. Where was he buried?
2. Is it possible that he was repatriated back to Ireland like so many of the people at that time? That would explain the fruitless search for his resting place.

3. Dermott joined Masonry at 20 years. Considering that the system only allows candidates of 21 years or older to, join, or a candidate over 18 years but must be a Lewis (the son of a mason) Was Dermott's father a mason?
4. Why Go to England without support?
5. Why would a older son of a well placed Merchant from the main merchants belt in Dublin, who also had a younger half brother, who was also a well placed merchant in Dublin not support him in following into the merchants trade?

Possible answers may lie in the fact that it records that he had a younger half-brother. Indicating that his father was married twice,

1. Therefore a possible family feud
2. Or that he deserted the family religious background whereby he would have been removed from the family as was the practice during those times. Evidence of this is supported by the fact that he was friends with a Thomas Mathews, a deep and dedicated Roman Catholic.
3. If his family in Ireland were successful Merchants why would Dermott arrive in England with limited funds?

The name of Spratt creeps into some of the research items that I have viewed, which now needs to be looked at in greater depth. We know that he was the Grand Lodge Secretary or, assistant Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Ireland from 1742 to 1756. He was the editor of two books of Constitutions of the Grand Lodge of Ireland. The one published in 1744 is very rare. The other was published in 1751. The family is recorded as being closely associated with Mitchelstown, Co Cork. There is also a vast array of the Spratt name being admirals and Minister of the cloth so I would deduce that the Spratt Family were an influential family at that time.

I would suggest that when Dermott took over as Grand Secretary of the Ancients Spratt was mentoring him. Spratt was a Competent Secretary, Lecturer, and I believe an able mind that was assisting Dermott, to keep the old ways Pure. It is recorded that When Dermott wrote the Rezon Spratt hand book was placed along side

the author of the old Constitution Dr Anderson and Dermott kept them in front of him while he penned the Masterpiece known as the Rezon.

Spratt was also in a perfect position to assist Dermott in getting the recognition required. He was also in a position to suggest to Dermott possible candidates for the post of Grand Master. Remember a number of the Grand Masters of the Ancients were or, past Grand Masters of the G.L.O.I. or G.L.O.S.

I believe that the sponsor and supporter of Dermott throughout was Spratt. However, I have no proof to date but research on this matter has now begun.

Let me summarise this paper on Rt. W. Bro. Laurence Dermott by saying that he will be remembered as the author of the Ahiman Rezon, but it is evident to the researcher that he was a truly dedicated Mason who worked very hard to ensure that the old ways were kept intact. He was a keen lecturer, songwriter and poet. He dealt with all criticism head on and he showed that he held no malice to his enemies, of whom he had many. He was I believe the true architect of the present United Grand Lodge system. Unfortunately he failed to survive to see the fruits of his labours.

He was a truly remarkable mason and one that should be openly praised for his contribution to our beloved Order.

Now let me introduce you to the lineage of my research for this paper. Special thanks must be given to the Librarians of the Most Worshipful the Grand Lodges of Ireland, Scotland and England, for their patience and assistance to me. I also thank my friends in The Irish Lodge of Research Lodge 200 for their support and guidance throughout my 'confinement' writing this paper. Lastly, I thank those who sent me copies of information which they found 'surfing the net'. This includes brethren as far away as Australia.

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