

## **"GUIDE AND PROVIDE"**

### **An After Dinner Speech On The Occasion Of The 2002 Symposium**

Bro. David Wishart P.G.M. Fife and Kinross

Dysart, 4th May 2002.

Thanks to Lodge Hope for organising the symposium - thanks for their genuine effort to raise awareness of Freemasonry and awakening a desire for increased Masonic knowledge in the Province.

When he invited me to speak after dinner, your Secretary suggested that an appropriate theme might be two-fold firstly an expression of my vision for Freemasonry in the Province during the term of my Commission, and secondly, my thoughts on the future of a Lodge of Research in Fife.

Now my Commission is only two days old and, as we know, any new-born is inclined to be noisy, demanding, and totally oblivious of the consternation it causes around it, so perhaps you will bear this in mind this evening, in my first expedition out, as Provincial Grand Master.

Firstly, my vision for Freemasonry in the Province during the next five years. Now, five years is a very small cog in the very large wheel of the history of the Craft, but my vision for Freemasonry does not differ much from the vision of Freemasonry over 300 years ago. Freemasonry came into prominence in the early 18th century, at a time of great moral laxity, dishonesty and corruption (some cynics amongst us might say little has changed!) and into those unpleasant times, came Freemasons, and Freemason's speculative Lodges; and into these Lodges came men who promised to improve society; who promised to obey, not just the law of the land, but also the moral law; who promised to trust and assist each other and who promised to give generously to help others in genuine need. These honourable ideals proved very popular, and many educated, talented, creative people were only too keen to become Freemasons. Masonry proved to be a tremendous inspiration to many of our famous writers, poets, artists, sculptors, architects, doctors, musicians their talents were enhanced by the great principles of the Craft, and, in turn; the Craft benefited from their enthusiasm and endorsement of the organisation.

It is this quite exceptional two-way exchange of benefits, between men and Freemasonry, which has kept the organisation alive, and made it so attractive to good men everywhere in the civilised world. Today, it is all too easy to forget that

Freemasonry was not designed to be a selfish, inward-looking, narrow-minded organisation - it was designed to be useful. Useful to provide a haven of intellectual peace and harmony and, useful to enable one group of people to do something beneficial for others less fortunate. So, why, if Freemasonry is so good, are we experiencing a decline in numbers and new recruits, and a decline in respect for the organisation?

I certainly do not think that the fraternity itself is at fault - its traditions, principles and values are as sure and steady as always, and God only knows, these priceless assets are needed today just as much as they ever were.

A few weeks ago, I was at a Masonic function in another Province, and one of the speakers said that "Freemasonry was at a crossroads". Is it?

I don't think so. Rather, I think that society is at a crossroads. Society must decide which way it is going whether we follow the road of decadence and indiscipline or whether we get back to the way of decency and respect for each other.

Today's society is much more selfish. more demanding, less tolerant and less patient than it was, certainly when I became a Freemason some 35 years ago.

But it is also a more sophisticated society and a society, with much more choice, so we do have to take a look at how Freemasonry fits into such a society and if we find that we have to adjust. to make the Craft an acceptable choice for a man to make, then this is what we have to do.

Some Brethren will throw up their hands in horror at any mention of change to our ritual but we have to remember that many parts of our current rituals are fairly recent innovations in our long and colourful history, and nothing in our constitution say we cannot consider that society no longer requires certain things. These were human innovations and humans can change them if they so wish.

Is it wrong to consider this? Of course it isn't. I see nothing wrong in considering and reviewing procedures which **did** meet the requirements of society 150 years ago, but which are quite unsuited to our way of thinking today. It is quite simply adapting to what is regarded as acceptable today. It is certainly not change for change's sake but change which makes people more comfortable with our organisation and change which may even mean the survival of our Craft.

Change, but not drastic change. Each generation has its own customs, fashion, music, ideas, rebels - but Freemasonry cannot, like each generation does, change on transient whims - the glory, the solid foundation, the dignity and serenity of

Freemasonry **must always and will always** be paramount - but it will do no harm to look at how we get our message over today.

Brethren in Fife and Kinross, know that we have the most envious tradition and history of almost any Province or District in the Scottish Constitution. We have several Lodges which pre-date Grand Lodge - Lodges which have been part of the very foundation of Freemasonry in Scotland - four to five centuries of proud tradition - 50 Lodges spread throughout the Province, covering every community large and small. So it is not surprising that the word "community" keeps cropping up, in relation to freemasonry in Fife and Kinross.

Many Lodges meet in Community premises and many small communities in Fife are still proud of their Masonic traditions, and Freemasons in these communities are proud of their record of usefulness and service, in times of poverty, deprivation and distress.

It has, for many years, been the message of Lord Elgin that we make a particular effort to improve our image in our communities, by showing and practising compassion and kindness and in doing so, build up respect for ourselves and for the Craft, as our predecessors undoubtedly did. It will therefore come as no surprise to hear that I fully intend to carry Lord Elgin's message of increasing community involvement, forward into my Commission. It will be a commitment to see that our Lodges improve their image, by the work we do in, and for, the community - to show by example, the pleasure Masonry can bring to the individual, to his family, and to his friends and neighbours, by becoming involved together.

It is also my intention to try to make better use of our time -bearing in mind the heavy demands and many restraints on people's time.

Provincial Grand Committee decided, at its meeting on Monday, that, in April and October, Committee would not meet on the day of Provincial Grand Lodge Communication Meeting on different days would have two main advantages - one, the Committee would have more time to discuss, not just the business of Provincial Grand Lodge, but other matters which members of Provincial Grand Committee may like to talk about and, secondly, it will enable us to spread the meetings of Provincial Grand Lodge and Committee, a little wider and enable us to visit Lodges which do not have the facility to accommodate both Provincial Grand Committee and Provincial Grand Lodge on the same day.

It is also my intention, again bearing in mind the demands on their time, to call together, the Masters of our Lodges, at least once a year, to talk over matters of mutual interest to the Lodges and Provincial Grand Lodge. Another two-way exchange of views and opinions - so important in keeping everyone up to date and involved.

I will also encourage the Commissioned Office-bearers to visit and give support to Lodges at Regular Meetings, other than Annual Visits and Installations, so that we can meet less formally than on Annual Visits.

It would also be extremely useful to talk to the Heads of Masonic side degrees in Fife, to discuss how our Masonic experience and expertise can be of benefit to each other. As Provincial Grand Master, I will need all the help I can get, to ensure that the Craft Lodges get it right.

Like the Head of a primary school, it is my responsibility to see that the basic education is properly communicated, because no matter how "grand" we think we are, no matter how many offshoots of Craft Masonry we join, it all begins in the Lodge - as each candidate kneels at the altar and takes his three obligations, that is the start of every man's progress in Freemasonry - and that is why it is so important to get it right in the Lodge, because if we don't, then every aspect of Freemasonry suffers, and the future is much less bright. An important point made by Dr. Ian Thomson this afternoon also reminded us that as you move on, it is vital that you do not forget your Lodge - just because you move into upper school, you never forget where your education began.

I would also like to give notice that there will be no sympathy for childish, petty behaviour or individual feuds or vendettas. I really do not wish to hear about Brethren who take the huff because they have not been asked to take part in an Installation, or who have not been asked to sit at the top table. Freemasonry is not a selfish organisation and any selfish behaviour only diverts valuable time and energy away from the important things which we have to do.

As I have mentioned, if we are to improve the public perception of Freemasonry, we have to work at projecting our charitable message in our own communities, and I would like to conclude my vision for this Province by leaving you with a few thoughts of ways in which you can help - and many of these things can be achieved without digging into your pockets.

By supporting self-help groups already in the community - by opening the doors of our Lodges for the use of community groups (play groups or senior citizens

clubs, because community centres are becoming quite expensive) - by arranging Masonic help groups for the sick, or disabled or the elderly - by providing transport or a befriending facility for old people who live alone - by helping elderly or disabled people to do their shopping, to attend doctor's or hospital appointments - to allow respite for relatives to get away for a few hours on their own - by helping old folks with their garden - by providing park benches, play areas - by brightening up small areas of waste ground with plants and flowers - the list is endless, and I am sure that all of you would be able to come up with many other ideas.

We are not looking for financial gain - just an appreciation of the fact that these are activities provided for the community, through the principles of Freemasonry, by good Freemasons. And I can assure you Brethren, an added advantage would be the satisfaction which you, as individuals, would gain from helping others - I, personally, can tell you that I get a tremendous satisfaction from the voluntary work which I do in hospitals and hospices.

Just a few thoughts, which I hope the Brethren of this Province will consider in the next few years, and in some way, try to bring back the respect which communities used to have for Freemasons. There are many big hearts of gold in Fife and Kinross - let's bring them out into the open.

Just a final thought about image - it has been suggested that we consider the example of the Women's Institute, who, in an attempt to improve their image, produced a nude calendar - I do not intend to take up that suggestion!

My first thought on a Lodge of Research in my Province, is that, to do it proper justice, it takes a tremendous amount of hard work, but I also think that, although Research Lodges are rare, the second biggest Province should be able to sustain such a Lodge.

However, I also realise that it is not easy to manage a Lodge of Research, because it does need lots of enthusiasm, ideas and Brethren who are committed to the cause. And it is not just research, because I do not think you can easily separate Masonic research from Masonic Education - they are inextricably linked. Are we not told that the light of a Master Mason is but darkness visible? We can also say that the light of a Master Mason is also a constant search for more knowledge, to bring ignorance from its native darkness.

There are many Lodges where the accent is on ceremonial work and the vanity of ritualistic excellence - but this can be worth little if we ignore the additional need

for teaching, counselling and education of the young, new Mason. Lodges who have a consistent stream of candidates, often lose out by not having, or making, time to consider lectures, detailed additional explanation of ritual or Masonic papers. Whereas a shortage of candidates gives a Lodge the opportunity to bring in speakers, to consider papers on Masonic subjects, or just simply to make time to discuss matters of Masonic interest. Ironically these latter Lodges will be better educated Masonically.

A Lodge of Research can guide and provide in such instances - and I suggest, Lodge Hope, that you take this up as your catchphrase - "guide and provide".

Our Province dates from 1745, a momentous year in Scottish history, and for reasons other than being our Provincial birthday - a year worthy of a research paper in itself.

This is a Province so rich in history, so steeped in tradition and custom, with Freemasonry woven into every fibre of its existence - going back even further than the history of the Provincial Grand Lodge - at least 500 years of Masonic endeavour exists in Fife.

These five centuries contain many passions, mysteries and myths - could Lodge Hope begin to unravel some of these mysteries?

Many industries spawned candidates for our Craft - the rich fishing grounds round our coast - the mining industry - the silk and linen industries requiring buildings and machinery, which masons supplied - agriculture - farmers and landowners were particularly attracted to the Craft. Would it be possible to look at the reasons for decline in these industries and what it has meant for Freemasonry?

Equally, the importance of the Province in Scots history, religion, education, medicine - prominent Freemasons played an invaluable role in all of these things. Lodge Hope has so many rich, inspiring, fascinating seams to tap, that you are spoilt for choice - I would even suggest that you re-name yourself the Fife Masonic Research Lodge.

William Schaw, the founder of modern Freemasonry, lived, worked and is buried in Dunfermline. Would it be possible to take part of his life, and create a dramatised episode, leading to the Schaw Statutes?

Just take a look at the list of our past Provincial Grand Masters –there have been only 13 Provincial Grand Masters since 1745, including Lord Elgin. Men of learning, religious men, men of law, men of skills, men who helped build this Province, men whose love for Freemasonry and its principles, guided them through

their lives and who influenced the lives of many others by example and precept. There are many things I would like to know about these men - which Lodges they belonged to - how they nurtured these Lodges - their service to these Lodges, to Provincial Grand Lodge and indeed to Grand Lodge, as five of the thirteen were also Grand Master Masons. What an intriguing story the lives of these men would provide. Another challenge for Lodge Hope to consider?

Ritual is something that every Lodge does, in one form or another, but has anyone ever looked closely at the differences in ritual in our Lodges? - no two are the same. A showcase of rituals in use in Fife and Kinross, with explanatory notes as to why different Lodges use different rituals - how their individual traditions and customs led Lodges to choose one book rather than another. Just another suggestion.

I have already said that I would be very interested in a paper on the dormant Lodges in Fife's history.

A Lodge of Research in any Province is an exciting prospect, not just for Masonic scholars, but for every Brother who loves and takes a pride in Freemasonry, but while it is good to hear about wider, esoteric issues and further reaching theories, I can't help thinking that with such a wealth of material on your doorstep, staying nearer to home may just be more attractive to your local Brethren. Presentation of material of local interest always stimulates spirited argument, because there are always locals who think they know more than you do.

But wouldn't it be a splendid occasion if Lodge Hope arranged a Fife Symposium taking in these topics I have mentioned - the year 1745 - industries in Fife - William Schaw - Past Provincial Grand Masters - Fife rituals.

Brethren of Lodge Hope, you asked for my thoughts and I have obliged - but whatever direction you decide to take, I wish you success and happiness in your Freemasonry, and I look forward to supporting you as your Provincial Grand Master, and thank you for your hospitality and for allowing me to speak to you and your guests here this evening.