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FIRST ANTARCTICA LODGE No.777 – A MASONIC MYSTERY SOLVED.

By R.W.Bro.Ross Hepburn,Editor

Through the joint efforts of the Editor and Bro. R. Pugh-Williams (especially of the latter) we have succeeded in solving the mystery of “First Antarctica Lodge No.777,mentioned in Bro. Pugh-Williams' paper “Freemasons, Aviators and the Air’ published in our Transactions Volume XVII No.1 for January 1973. This has involved some very interesting research.

When the paper was submitted, it contained a reference to the above Lodge as “No 777 N.Z.C”. I queried this as The Grand Lodge of New Zealand has so far chartered only 440 Lodges and this Lodge could not possibly be a Lodge under the New Zealand Constitution. Bro. Pugh-Williams agreed to the deletion of the words N.Z.C.” and this was accordingly done before printing.

The paper produced a reaction from W. Bro. J. Fairbairn Smith, Editor of the “Masonic World”, Detroit, Michigan U.S.A. who kindly sent me a photostat copy of a facsimile of the Attendance Book used at the meeting of LodgeNo.777 referred to in the paper and also a photostat of an article from an American Masonic magazine discussing the meeting.

We are grateful to W. Bro. Smith who sent this information to supplement Bro.Pugh-Williams' paper. This has enabled us to ascertain the true facts in connection with Lodge No. 777 which previously were obscure.

We commenced an investigation into the facts with the following results. I wrote to R.W. Bro. F. G. Northern, our former Grand Secretary, who was the author of the History of the Grand Lodge of New Zealand 1800-1969 enquiring whether he knew anything about this Lodge which is not mentioned in his History of Grand Lodge.

R.W.Bro.Northern replied advising that he had made an index of the Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of New Zealand and also of the Minutes of the Board of General Purposes and that here was no reference in either of these sources to First American Lodge No.

777. He also stated that the Grand Masters at the time (1935) namely Lord Bledisloe and Colonel Esson were most meticulous and would not have issued dispensations for any Lodge of this kind without due investigation and satisfying themselves that everything was in order, and in any event that Antarctica is outside the jurisdiction of Grand Lodge.

I also wrote Bro. Smith enquiring as to the source of his information and particularly as to the location of the "Masonic Craftsman" the first Masonic newspaper to publish a copy of the Attendance Register of the meeting. Bro. Smith replied advising that the Masonic Craftsman is of Boston, Massachusetts and is now defunct. The number 777 was selected symbolically, but was also used because it was thought that the New Zealand Constitution was never likely to reach that number. He contended that it was definitely a Craft Lodge and not (as I suggested) a Masonic Club and that the meeting was held on the Antarctic mainland and properly tyled. He doubted whether a charter was issued. It was more likely he thought, that there would be a dispensation which in America would serve the same purpose.

From information available, it appears that the reference to Lodge No. 777 being under the New Zealand Constitution, first appeared in the Centenary History of New Zealand Pacific Lodge No. 2 (Wellington) whence it has been copied into other Masonic publications.

Eventually Bro. Pugh-Williams and I had reached the conclusion that the meeting in question was merely a ship-board meeting and not a Craft Lodge.

No one appears to have ever seen the charter, so far as we can ascertain. This conclusion was finally confirmed when Bro. Pugh-Williams succeeded in contacting W. Bro. J. S. Sissons who had acted as Senior Warden at the meeting of Lodge No. 777 held in the Antarctic.

W. Bro. Sissons wrote to Bro. Pugh-Williams and supplied a full written statement of the circumstances which he remembers quite well.

He is an elderly retired Chief Postmaster still residing in New Zealand. He was formerly employed by the New Zealand Post Office and was given leave of absence and went on two voyages to the Antarctic as radio officer on the Jacob Ruppert. He assisted in organising the meeting on board the Jacob Ruppert on the second voyage and acted as Senior Warden.

The meeting was purely an informal ship-board meeting and nothing more. There was no charter from any Grand Lodge and Bro. Mitchell, the Master was not in fact an installed Master. The number 777 was merely the invention of the Brethren concerned. To give the meeting some semblance of Masonic flavour they gave the proposed Lodge a number and appointed officers for the sole purpose of opening and closing the Lodge.

The officers were limited to members of the ship's crew as rehearsals had to be held beforehand, but Bro. Byrd and others on the ice were invited to be present and attended the meeting.

The Lodge was opened in the First Degree and Bro. Mitchell gave a lecture on the First Tracing Board. The Lodge was then closed and most of the evening was spent in the refectory where many experiences and reminiscences were exchanged.

Bro. Mitchell afterwards lectured extensively about the meeting in U.S.A. and appears to have exaggerated it considerably, including his own part in the proceedings. Bro. Sissons spoke several times in Wellington after his return and always explained that the meeting was quite an informal one and had no authority from any Constitution. He is now a Past Master.

The facts are much as expected and I was always suspicious because the officers all listed the names and numbers of their own Craft Lodges after their signatures, which suggests an informal meeting. It is fortunate that the information could be obtained while W. Bro. Sissons is still living and available. Bro. Pugh-Williams is to be congratulated on the diligence with which he pursued his enquiries, and on the success of his efforts.