

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

An Address by WBro Dan Staley, PDistGDC

**Delivered on behalf of the Hawke's Bay Research Lodge No 305
To Lodge Turanganui No 1480, EC, in Gisborne
Saturday, 24th July 2010**

When considering a suitable topic to speak about today I was interested to choose a subject that had special significance to Gisborne Brethren. I realise that we are geographically isolated from the main centres of Freemasonry but this in no way makes our area lacking in special features. Gisborne combined lodges held the first Freemasons' lodge meeting of the present millennium in the world. We are also the only small centre that can boast having three different constitutions operating within our midst.

It is the second of these special features that led me to the topic I wish to introduce this afternoon.

We Freemasons in Gisborne consider ourselves fortunate, in that within our fair city we have lodges operating in three different constitutions. We look on this favourably because it does add variety to our involvement in the Craft. At each of our craft lodge's installation ceremonies we normally expect representatives from the English, Scottish and New Zealand Grand Lodges. Sometimes we are also favoured with visits from Irish Grand Lodge brethren. Our relations with brethren from the different constitutions are both fraternal and enjoyed by the Gisborne Masonic brethren in general.

My short talk today is entitled "The French Connection". I have decided upon this topic because I wonder just how close New Zealand was to having a fifth Grand Lodge operating within our shores.

If a small group of prominent Wellington Freemasons had managed to have their wishes adhered to, there would have been lodges operating under the French Grand Orient constitution from the latter part of the 19th century.

There had been some French involvement in Freemasonry in New Zealand in the very early days of the colony, mainly involving members of the French Navy in their visits to the settlement at Akaroa. The attempt to introduce a French Grand Lodge was due to a Freemason who was also twice Prime Minister of New Zealand, first, for just twelve days in August 1884 and then later that same year, from September 3rd until 1887.

Our man, Sir Robert Stout, was born in Lerwick on the Shetland Isles in 1844. At the age of thirteen he was a pupil teacher and graduated to a full teacher at sixteen. In 1864 he left Scotland and arrived in New Zealand to teach at the Dunedin Grammar School. In 1871 he became a lawyer and three years later he entered politics as the member for Caversham.

When and where he was initiated into Freemasonry is not known by me but in 1880 he was appointed as a Past Assistant Grand Director of Ceremonies in the English Constitution, and by 1889 he was the Deputy District Grand Master of Otago and Southland, English Constitution. He also belonged to an Irish Constitution lodge in Dunedin. In 1893 he wound up his law business in Dunedin and moved to settle permanently in Wellington.

Sir Robert Stout was involved with some of the early attempts to form a New Zealand Grand Lodge, where he advocated that there should be a Grand Lodge in the South Island and a further Grand Lodge in the North Island. There is some speculation that when Sir Robert's suggestion was beaten in a ballot, he became disillusioned with the idea of a New Zealand Grand Lodge and began a series of actions that eventually ended his Masonic career.

On the 29th April 1890, in Christchurch, the Grand Lodge of New Zealand was constituted. The opposition from the English Provincial and Scottish District Grand Masters did nothing to assist the brethren who were attempting to ease the setting up of this new Grand Lodge. Thankfully the Grand Lodges in Australia came to their assistance and recognised the new New Zealand Grand Lodge, but it was a further nine years before it was recognised by all the Grand Lodges in Britain.

At about the same time that moves were afoot to constitute a New Zealand Grand Lodge, Sir Robert Stout, John Balance (another man destined to become Prime Minister) and others, began communicating with the

Grand Orient of France to form a French Constitution lodge in New Zealand and on June 30 1890 a new lodge was opened in Wellington under the Constitution of the Grand Orient of France The lodge was called Lodge L'Amour de la Ve'rite' (Love and Truth). Sir Robert was the first Master and John Balance the Senior Warden. One can only imagine the animosity that this venture would have created and the correspondence it would have generated between the various Grand Lodges.

This action, along with an application to The Grand Orient in France to constitute a Grand Lodge in New Zealand, may have in some way caused the New Zealand Brethren to push ahead with the constitution of our New Zealand Grand Lodge In fact there is correspondence from the Grand Lodges in Australia encouraging the New Zealand brethren to quickly constitute a Grand Lodge before the French Grand Lodge was up and running.

The Grand Orient of France did not require a man to believe in a supreme being as a requisite for membership. The English Grand Lodge would therefore not recognise nor allow its brethren to be members or to visit lodges working under the Grand Orient of France's Constitution. Sir Robert, who stated that he was a freethinker, was deprived of his English Grand Lodge rank but it should be noted that he was not deprived membership of the craft. He subsequently resigned as Deputy District Grand Master of the Otago and Southland District and from his Irish lodge and apart from visiting a research lodge on one or two occasions he did not attend a lodge meeting again.

Sir Robert Stout was an intelligent man and the arguments he makes to justify his actions make interesting reading. He makes the point that a man is entitled to belong to other fraternal organisations, such as the Oddfellows, Foresters and Buffaloes and still be a Freemason. One can only speculate what would have happened if his application for a French Grand Lodge to be constituted in New Zealand had been approved prior to 1890. Maybe we would have the opportunity to see representatives of five constitutions at our installation ceremonies in Gisborne.

On reflection, I doubt it.

Bibliography:

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