‘The Scotch Diable Boiteaux’, or, The Lame Scottish Devil: Masonic Rebellion and the Rise of the Whigs

By Mark C Wallace

Historically, Scottish freemasonry has been characterized as a loyalist body focused on organizational solidarity and political stability. Indeed, during the eighteenth century, internal politics certainly influenced the trajectory of freemasonry. Some historians have commented that freemasonry was principally a convivial association; more recently, historians such as John Money have argued that the society retained intrinsic radical associations that predictably resulted in internecine struggles over expressions of loyalty and patriotism. While it would be simplistic to conclude that all Scottish freemasons were bitterly divided along shades of political loyalty, during the early 1800s, a polarization of party allegiances occurred within the Grand Lodge of Scotland which ultimately spilled over into several Edinburgh lodges and resulted in the Masonic Secession of 1808. Considering the demise of operative, or traditional, freemasonry by the close of the eighteenth century, it is not surprising that social and fraternal connections established strictly for trade and building purposes gradually collapsed, eventually replaced by Whig or Tory affiliations.

Peter Clark argues that the general discord which resulted from competing political ideologies during the eighteenth century facilitated the rise of unbiased, impartial venues for the expression of ideas, opinions, and general camaraderie. These came in the form of clubs and associations such as the freemasons, where political discussions were in theory prohibited, although Clark maintains that ‘the sound of politics was not so much excluded from […] societies as admitted with the volume turned down’.[1] Despite one lodge’s tenuous and questionable fraternization with the Friends of the People, and several masons’ associations with radical clubs, for the greater part of the 1700s Scottish freemasonry was particularly successful in excluding politics from lodge meetings.

By 1802, however—due largely to the politicization of the Grand Lodge—Scottish freemasonry was gradually splintering along political fault lines. Despite the leadership of distinguished loyalists such as Sir James Stirling and George Gordon it is clear that the Grand Lodge was rapidly becoming a Whig body. Certainly, associations without a clear political agenda might easily find themselves dragged into partisan disputes, more especially during times of domestic turmoil. With the election of the Hon. George Ramsay, 9th Earl of Dalhousie as Grand Master in 1808, the Grand Lodge remained under Whig control until the election of James, 2nd Earl of Roslin, a Tory, in 1810. The Whig Grand Lodge of Scotland was also supported by William Inglis of Middleton, Substitute Grand Master from 1805 to 1828. Inglis was a staunch Whig who attended the Bastille Dinner in 1789 and was a leading masonic cynosure of the early nineteenth century.

Political Exploitation and Masonic Compromise

The roots of the Masonic Secession of 1808 can be traced quite distinctly to a conflict which occurred in the first half of the eighteenth century, and beleaguered Scottish freemasons for almost six decades. In 1737, the Grand Lodge of Scotland—Lodge Kilwinning on the west coast of Scotland, and Mary's Chapel Lodge in Edinburgh—were absorbed in a dispute which challenged the scope of authority of the Grand Lodge and cast doubt upon traditional lodge numbering systems, i.e., the somewhat subjective custom of charter conferral based on tendentious claims of antiquity, often authenticated by oral affirmation or allusions to documents which may not still exist. Though the Grand Lodge perceived itself as the supreme federated masonic institution in Scotland, subsuming all lodges into its orbit and nullifying pre-existing masonic privileges, such declarations of authority rankled older lodges—and these grudges did not disappear. Rather, as we shall see in the case of Mary's Chapel, the lodges seized upon an opportunity in the waning decades of the eighteenth century to discredit, ridicule, and cast aspersions upon the Grand Lodge. Masonic lodges, especially operative lodges, preferred the rather idiosyncratic and arbitrary system of lodge numbering and despite the Grand Lodge's efforts to promote a union of love, it is quite clear that some of these lodges would prefer discord and strife to the challenging of traditional modes of independence and masonic custom.

After the dispute over precedence in 1737, Lodge Kilwinning refused to relinquish its power to grant charters, thus creating a rift between itself and the Grand Lodge. Although this was a minor issue for almost fifty years, it resurfaced in

1794: on 4 August of that same year, the Grand Lodge asserted that the Kilwinning Lodge was to be excluded from all masonic privileges and concessions, a tacit yet highly intentional extrusion from the federal lodge system as it existed under the auspices of the Grand Lodge. Furthermore, the Grand Lodge declared that 'none of the Lodges holding of them ought either to visit or receive visits […] from any of the Lodges holding of the Kilwinning Lodge'.

On 14 October 1807, a conference was held in Glasgow to negotiate terms of settlement and agreement between the Grand Lodge and Lodge Kilwinning. In exchange for renouncing its charter-granting privileges, Kilwinning would be placed at the head of the Grand Roll of Scotland, designated as Lodge No. 0. Furthermore, any lodges warranted under Kilwinning would be placed at the end of the roll pending authenticated proof of its charter, and the Master of the lodge was appointed as the Provincial Grand Master for the Ayrshire District. Although the Grand Lodge granted several dispensations to Kilwinning, it had achieved what was arguably its prime objective: the consolidation of masonic authority under one central body.

The entire affair had been conducted without the participation of No. 1 Mary's Chapel Lodge in Edinburgh. Relegated to the second oldest lodge in Scotland, the members immediately expressed their disapproval over the handling of the situation. On 4 May 1807, the Master of Mary's Chapel, John Brown, and one of his Wardens, George Cunningham, complained to the Grand Lodge over the perceived double-dealing. Given that its main aim was to achieve a settlement with Kilwinning, it is not surprising that the Grand Lodge concluded that Cunningham's objections were immaterial. After a formal written protest was duly ignored, Cunningham again complained about the proceedings, at a Grand Lodge meeting held on 2 November 1807 in Edinburgh. Clearly governed by political priorities rather than fairness, William Inglis at once orchestrated a counter-protest and Cunningham's motion to review the events was discarded. Regardless of a warning from Mary's Chapel that it was determined 'neither to be sold nor compelled to resign [its] seniority, to attempt either of which will undoubtedly lead to a secession',[2] the threats were dismissed as meaningless.

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of Grand Master would be defeated. Thus counterpoised—an overconfident Grand Lodge and embittered Tory minority—the impending explosion within Scottish freemasonry was finally triggered by a request made to the Grand Lodge of Scotland by Dr Mitchell, Master of Caledonian Lodge in Edinburgh, to express the fraternity's appreciation for the king's support of the British people and constitution. Although it is a misrepresentation to describe masonic political allegiances at this time as hostile to loyalism, it is likely that some masons retained a suspicion of the uncritical, slavish adherence to every aspect of the constitution characteristic of the Tories.

Cunningham's nomination and Mitchell's proposed address, although occurring on the same day and during a time of heightened political tension in the Grand Lodge, do not necessarily suggest a Tory conspiracy to undermine Whig sentiments. Masonic addresses to the king were not uncommon and often sent to congratulate the ruling monarch on a variety of issues. However, Mitchell was seen as 'attempting to slap the Whig establishment of the Grand Lodge', and his motion nothing more than a 'flagrant piece of politics, which, if passed, would bring the Grand Lodge into line with other bodies—Tory orientated, who had applauded the King's bigotry'.[3] Mitchell's address also signalled the first rumblings of discontent among the Tories. If the Whigs were to maintain control of the Grand Lodge, any challenges which threatened the balance of power had to be quickly suppressed. Given that the initial proposal was defeated by a narrow margin of twenty-eight to twenty-seven, a re-vote was demanded. On 19 June 1807, the Grand Lodge of Scotland convened to address the issue, stating that it had received a letter from Dr Mitchell of Caledonian Lodge in Edinburgh requesting a re-vote. Despite strong objections from Inglis, the Grand Lodge approved Mitchell's request. Led by James Gibson, a zealous Scottish Whig, the motion to address the King was soundly defeated by a margin of ninety-five to forty-seven. Clearly, political manoeuvring and manipulation had prevented the approval of Mitchell's address to the King.

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reasons for his suspension, discussed at a meeting of the Grand Lodge on 5 January 1808, James Gibson alleged that Mitchell had proposed the secession of the Caledonian Lodge from the Grand Lodge of Scotland, and that he had published a pamphlet which was insulting to the Grand Officers and all Scottish freemasons.

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Despite the best attempts of the Grand Lodge to blame Mitchell for the turmoil, the charges against him were largely contrived in an effort to reassert Whig dominance. The Grand Lodge, though, overreacted to the Tory challenge, and political hatred, lingering resentment over issues of precedence, and outrage over the treatment of Mitchell fuelled the fires of rebellion. Subsequently, its Whig regime and tentative centralized control over Scottish lodges slowly began to crumble. Several Edinburgh lodges published a pamphlet to this effect, claiming that the Grand Lodge had attempted to 'confound the cause of masonic liberty which we are supporting, with the private quarrels of Gibson and Mitchell'.

In addition to negative propaganda emerging from discontented masons, the dispute received attention through the printing of satirical poems, masonic polemics, newspaper articles, as well as the publication of masonic minutes and the verbal and written exchanges among Mitchell, Gibson, and the Grand Lodge of Scotland. A good example of this is the *Petition and Complaint* published by Alexander Lawrie, which contains several anonymous works including 'The Scotch Diable Boiteaux or Asmodeous in Edinburgh: Edited By Zachariah Cleardoubt'. 'The Scotch Diable Boiteaux' is a satirical account of the feud between Gibson and Mitchell, supposedly narrated by a Scottish freemason. Cleardoubt ridicules not only the dispute among the various parties, but freemasons in general. Offering a ludicrous description of the narrator, the author

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This theme of derision was continued in 'The Invocation, in an Inquiry Into the Feuds of Brothers M And G'. In this satire, the author unashamedly ridicules masonic rituals and emphasizes the ludicrous conduct of Mitchell and Gibson:

Say, for the business I would fain discuss,
Whence all thus uproar? whence this mighty fuss?
What makes the Lodge of Scotland thus to shake,
And to her very center trembling quake?
What puts the craft in such a mighty pother,
And sets one mason upon top of t'other?
Say, has the secret, word, or sign, been told?
And does th' unhallow'd world, withstep profane,
Presumptuous dare the mystic rites to stain;
With eye polluted, and with ear untaught,
Imbibing knowledge at each copious draught,
And learning secrets none but masons know,
Without the ordeal masons undergo?
Such dire offences well might kindle ire,
Might set the tamest lodge on earth on fire.[8]

After cynically analyzing the dispute, the author exhorts the Grand Lodge to stand as:

A striking proof to every future age,
How much it deprecates unmanly rage,
And teach the world for once this noble lesson,
That every man who is a genuine Mason,
Harbours an equal love to every brother,
Nor passes one, where he condemns another,
Remove the stigma men would now affix,
And show 'tis love of justice prompts, not POLITICS.[9]

The Secession

The situation had begun to spiral out of control. By May 1808, Dr Mitchell and his supporters were not adhering to the stipulations of the initial suspension, and as a consequence Mitchell was ultimately expelled from Scottish freemasonry for openly seceding from the Grand Lodge of Scotland. Additionally, members of several Edinburgh lodges were suspended for communicating with Mitchell. Although it had no constitutional authority to hand down punishments of expulsion and could not legally bar freemasons from communicating with one another, the Grand Lodge was intent on forcing lodges to comply with its

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Scottish lodges responded differently to the actions of the Grand Lodge. No. 25 St Andrew, for example, recorded on 27 June 1808 that 'from all Circumstances of the case taken together, this meeting cannot help regretting much that ever this Strife and Contention should have been meddled with or that it had been checked effectually in its Origin […]. It would have saved the waste of a considerable sum of the public money […] and it would have tended to the peace and harmony of all the Lodges in Scotland'.[10] Notwithstanding such objections and censure, on 13 June 1808, the Grand Lodge of Scotland expelled all freemasons involved or associated in any manner with Dr Mitchell. As a result, these marginalized masons—led by No. 1 Mary's Chapel—officially seceded from the Grand Lodge and formed the Associated Lodges Seceding from the Present Grand Lodge of Scotland. The establishment of the Associated Lodges effectively signalled the end of Grand Lodge's pursuit of complete constitutional and masonic authority over all freemasons in Scotland.

Intent on upholding the sentences of expulsion and punishing the Seceders, the Grand Lodge of Scotland warned that masonic meetings were permitted only in legally constituted lodges, in accordance with the Secret Societies Act and the laws of the Grand Lodge of Scotland. Furthermore, it threatened to withdraw the charter of any lodge that contravened Grand Lodge rulings, and any unlawful meetings would be sniffed out and forcefully disbanded by the local magistrate.

On 30 November 1808, the Grand Lodge of Scotland submitted an application for an interdict and a Bill of Suspension against the meetings of the Associated Lodges. The Bill of Suspension also stated the intentions of the Grand Lodge to establish itself as the 'only legal, in its fullest meaning, body in Freemasonry in Scotland'.[11] In December 1808, the Courts granted the interdicts. The Associated Lodges appealed to the Second Division of the Court of Session on 11 February 1809, and on 7 July, 1810, the court overturned the Bill of Suspension.

The success of the Associated Lodges was due in large part to their common resentment of the Grand Lodge. In a politically charged address on 14 February 1809, the Grand Secretary of the Associated Lodges addressed the lodges, stating that:

> It has fallen to our lot to live in eventful times—times as eventful in the annals of Masonry, as they are in the history of Modern Europe. We have lived to see a despotism newly akin to the system of a neighbouring Tyrant, attempted to be established among the British Masons. But we have resisted the odious usurpation with a Spirit the Masons of future ages will commemorate […]. They sought to enslave us, by debarring individual Masons from the privilege of going where they pleased […]. We spurned the ignoble bondage [… and] most just, my friends, is the punishment which has overtaken the destroyers of the order.[12]

It is clear that the Seceders felt that the Grand Lodge had overstepped its authority. Although all expulsions were eventually revoked on 31 March 1813, with the exception of Dr Mitchell's, the Associated Lodges achieved their goal of preventing the Grand Lodge of Scotland from gaining complete masonic authority over Scottish lodges.

References & Further Information

A fuller version of this paper appears in the current issue of the *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*.

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Scottish lodges responded differently to the actions of the Grand Lodge. No. 25 St Andrew, for example, recorded on 27 June 1808 that 'from all Circumstances of the case taken together, this meeting cannot help regretting much that ever this Strife and Contention should have been meddled with or that it had been checked effectually in its Origin […]. It would have saved the waste of a considerable sum of the public money […] and it would have tended to the peace and harmony of all the Lodges in Scotland'.[22] Notwithstanding such objections and censure, on 13 June 1808, the Grand Lodge of Scotland expelled all freemasons involved or associated in any manner with Dr Mitchell. As a result, these marginalized masons—led by No. 1 Mary's Chapel—officially seceded from the Grand Lodge and formed the Associated Lodges Seceding from the Present Grand Lodge of Scotland. The establishment of the Associated Lodges effectively signalled the end of Grand Lodge's pursuit of complete constitutional and masonic authority over all freemasons in Scotland.

Intent on upholding the sentences of expulsion and punishing the Seceders, the Grand Lodge of Scotland warned that masonic meetings were permitted only in legally constituted lodges, in accordance with the Secret Societies Act and the laws of the Grand Lodge of Scotland. Furthermore, it threatened to withdraw the charter of any lodge that contravened Grand Lodge rulings, and any unlawful meetings would be sniffed out and forcefully disbanded by the local magistrate.

On 30 November 1808, the Grand Lodge of Scotland submitted an application for an interdict and a Bill of Suspension against the meetings of the Associated Lodges. The Bill of Suspension also stated the intentions of the Grand Lodge to establish itself as the 'only legal, in its fullest meaning, body in Freemasonry in Scotland'.[23] In December 1808, the Courts granted the interdicts. The Associated Lodges appealed to the Second Division of the Court of Session on 11 February 1809, and on 7 July, 1810, the court overturned the Bill of Suspension.

The success of the Associated Lodges was due in large part to their common

resentment of the Grand Lodge. In a politically charged address on 14 February 1809, the Grand Secretary of the Associated Lodges addressed the lodges, stating that:

> It has fallen to our lot to live in eventful times—times as eventful in the annals of Masonry, as they are in the history of Modern Europe. We have lived to see a despotism newly akin to the system of a neighbouring Tyrant, attempted to be established among the British Masons. But we have resisted the odious usurpation with a Spirit the Masons of future ages will commemorate […]. They sought to enslave us, by debarring individual Masons from the privilege of going where they pleased […]. We spurned the ignoble bondage [… and] most just, my friends, is the punishment which has overtaken the destroyers of the order.[24]

It is clear that the Seceders felt that the Grand Lodge had overstepped its authority. Although all expulsions were eventually revoked on 31 March 1813, with the exception of Dr Mitchell's, the Associated Lodges achieved their goal of preventing the Grand Lodge of Scotland from gaining complete masonic authority over Scottish lodges.

(c) The Bottle Imp