

**FREEMASONRY**

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**AND WAR**

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**WILLIAM  
HARVEY**



FREEMASONRY AND WAR.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

# FREEMASONRY AND WAR:

## THE MASONIC SIGN ON THE BATTLEFIELD.

BY

WILLIAM HARVEY, J.P.,

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T. M. SPARKS, CROSSWELL WORKS.

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Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland; F.R.S.  
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## PREFACE.

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The object of the following Lecture is to collect some of the allusions, scattered in books and pamphlets, to the alleged use of so-called Masonic signs of distress on the battlefield and in time of war, and impartially to examine the statements with the view of deciding to what extent they may be regarded as accurate. Brethren who heard the Lecture delivered were kind enough to suggest that it deserved a wider audience, and at their request I have put it into print.

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4 Gowrie Street,  
Dundee.

# PREFACE

The object of the following Lecture is to collect some of the opinions scattered in books and pamphlets, on the alleged use of so-called Magnetic signs of distemper on the battlefield and in time of war, and impartially to examine the statements with the view of deciding to what extent they may be regarded as accurate. Lecturers who heard the Lecture delivered were kind enough to suggest that I delivered a wider audience, and at their request I have put it into print.

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# FREEMASONRY AND WAR :

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One of the picturesque incidents of the European War is the story told to illustrate how Freemasons swerve from their loyalty at a sign, and grasp an enemy's hand in friendship on the battlefield. Like the legends of the Angels at Mons, and the Russian Army in Scotland, the story is singularly lacking in corroborative evidence. So far as the war of 1914-1919 is concerned the earliest reference to it is found in a newspaper message from Ostend dated September 1914. Dealing with the Sack of Louvain, the journalist remarked "it is reported" that the Germans seized fifty men whom they proceeded to shoot.

"The firing party were taking aim," he says, "when one of the fifty,

a Freemason, made a Masonic sign. The German officer himself was a Freemason, and just as he was going to give the order to fire, he saw the sign, and recognised a brother. He ordered the Freemason to leave the ranks, and told him to go away.

“‘No,’” replied the citizen of Louvain, “‘my fellow citizens are no more guilty than I am. If you are going to kill them I shall not go away, and I shall be killed with them.’”

“Touched by this act of devotion,” adds the reporter, “the officer ordered the release of the fifty unfortunate men, who thus owed their lives to the intervention of the Freemason fellow-citizen.”

The incident is of the kind of which good journalism is made, and was widely quoted at the time, but it is not too much to say that the story was received with scepticism by many Freemasons, who instantly recognised it as merely the revised version of a myth which had served through many campaigns. Details may differ but in essentials the story is ever the same—

the use of a Masonic sign, the arrestment of a firing party, an enquiry into the person's Masonic *bona fides*, and a saving of life. Let us trace it through history.

During the Boer War, a Canadian colonel at the Modder River, out for a Sunday morning stroll, strayed too far from his camp and found himself covered by a rifle. He stood on his Masonic dignity, gave what the journalist called "the customary sign" and made the rather common-place remark "Don't shoot!" The Boer recognised the sign, and throwing down his rifle, informed the Colonel that he belonged to "de Broederband in Pretoria." Masonic friendship being thus established, they hugged themselves in true brotherly fashion as faithful followers of Hiram Abiff, and, as an earnest of good faith, the Boer begged the Canadian to return to his camp, making him accept a valuable coin as a souvenir of his escape!

Nor is that the only incident of its kind that belongs to the South African campaign. During the summer of

1916, an interesting discussion on this subject was carried on in the columns of "Dundee Advertiser." There was a good deal of beating the air about the business, and the nearest approach to positive fact was made in a letter by Mr J. W. Williamson of Cupar. Mr Williamson, who explained that he was not a Member of the Craft, wrote that a few years before, on the occasion of a parade of the local Territorials, he noticed the Adjutant approach two sergeants and shake hands cordially with them, and that then the three entered into a very friendly conversation. The circumstance struck Mr Williamson as so exceptional that he questioned one of the sergeants upon it next day. The sergeant explained that the Adjutant had been superior officer to him and his comrade in the Boer War, adding "I consider he saved us from being shot." It seems, added Mr Williamson, that their regiment had been under fire at Magersfontein. After the terrible fighting which took place, many unwounded soldiers lay out on the veldt overnight, and the

sergeant and those near him expected that at the break of day they would be shot. This Adjutant, however, approached the Boer commandant making certain signs, and, as the outcome of a parley, they were not allowed to go, but were well treated. He attributed this clemency to the fact that the Captain was a Freemason. The narrator of the story, added the newspaper correspondent, was a man of very high character, and quite unlikely intentionally to exaggerate.

I may confess that I had started the discussion in the "Dundee Advertiser," and I at once endeavoured to get down to the bed rock of facts. I therefore asked Mr Williamson if he would answer the following questions—

1. How many soldiers were allowed to go and were well treated?
2. What happened to those who were beyond the reach of Masonic influence?
3. What regiments did the men belong to?
4. Could Mr Williamson supply names and dates?

The correspondent replied that he could give very few further details regarding the story. He did not know how many soldiers were allowed to go free, nor what happened to those who were beyond the reach of Masonic influence. He was able to tell us, however, that the sergeant who narrated the story was a Sergeant Fleming who had resided in Cupar for some time, and that the other sergeant was Mr W. Wallace, janitor of the Bell-Baxter School in the same Fifeshire town. Both of these men were dead. The Adjutant was Major Stewart who resided at Edengrove, Dairsie. All three belonged to the Black Watch. Magersfontein was fought on the 11th December, 1899.

Writing in reply to Mr Williamson, I admitted that the authentication of the story appeared to be as complete as possible, short of actual testimony on the part of Major Stewart, and I suggested that if the correspondence should come under the eye of that gallant officer he might be disposed to state the facts as he knew them. But Major Stewart—if he saw the corres-

pondence—was not to be “drawn,” and the story therefore rests upon the report of the conversation supplied by Mr Williamson.

Whether it be true or not, it is exactly in line with a story which was in circulation a quarter of a century earlier in connection with the Franco-German War, and which received more than usual credence from the Craft from the fact that, fittingly enough, it was made the theme of a *romance* in an English Masonic miscellany.

Nor does the old world enjoy undisputed possession of the myth. During the American Civil War Masonry is alleged to have been put to the test and and to have come through the ordeal in the same way. The incident has gone freely round on different occasions, and either it, or one similar to it, formed the subject of a paragraph that circulated in the British press during the summer of 1916, when Dr J. Fort Newton was preaching in the London City Temple, with the view of being called to succeed the Rev. R. J. Camp-

bell. Dr. Fort Newton was described as being one of the foremost Freemasons in Iowa, editor of the Journal of the National Masonic Research Society, and author of a History of Freemasonry which had brought him into touch with some of the leading Freemasons in this country. "It is not surprising," added the paragraphist, "to find Dr. Fort Newton an enthusiastic member of the Craft, for his father's life was saved by being a Freemason. Taken prisoner during the American Civil War, Mr Newton was placed in a Federal prison in the North, where the general conditions broke down his health. He remained in a critical condition, and little hope was entertained of his recovery. At length he managed to acquaint the Federal officer (who was a Freemason) that he also belonged to the Craft. The officer immediately had him taken to his home, where he was nursed back to health and strength."

If we return from the new world to Europe and the Crimean campaign, we shall find the old old story of the



Mason and his love. Now a Russian officer is the magnanimous brother who spares an enemy, and proves that as Freemasonry is world wide so Masonic humanity is universal ! But long before the Crimea the legend was current. When Napoleon shook the earth to its foundations and the destinies of Europe were sealed at Waterloo, four English officers who gave " the Masonic sign " were instantly saved by their French enemy, and that simple incident is drab compared with what happened at the battle of Lutzen. There, according to Lawrie, the Masonic Munchausen, " A Scottish gentleman in the Prussian service, was taken prisoner, and conveyed to Prague along with four hundred of his companions in arms. As soon as it was known that he was a Mason, he was released from confinement ; he was invited to the tables of the most distinguished citizens, and requested to consider himself as a Freemason and not as a prisoner of war. About three months after the engagement, an exchange of prisoners took place, and the Scottish officer was presented by the

fraternity with a purse of 60 ducats to defray the expenses of his journey. What happened to the 400 companions Hiram Abiff only knows !

Lutzen was fought in 1813, but six years before that the story was in circulation. Sir Robert Wilson dealing with the capture of 500 prisoners by the Cossacks at the passage of the Alle at Berfried says, "that the French officer in command owed his life to the fortunate incident of his giving the Russian commander the Freemason's grip when seizing his hand just as the lance was about to pierce his breast." Sir Archibald Alison quoted the anecdote in his "History of Europe," and, in that connection, remarked that the "Edinburgh Review" in noticing Wilson's book, had stated that the anecdote was "so incredible that no amount of testimony could make them believe it," but, said Alison, that only showed "the critic's ignorance," and he thereupon adduced a corroborative illustration from his family history. "The same fortunate presence of mind, in making use of the Freemasons' sign," he says,

“saved the life of a gallant officer, the author’s father-in law, Lieutenant-Col. Tytler, during the American War, who, by giving one of the enemy officers the Freemason’s grip, when he lay on the ground with a bayonet at his breast, succeeded in interesting the generous American in his behalf and thus escaped death.” Sir Archibald may have had no reason to doubt the gallantry of his relative, but, as he stood high in Freemasonry and was probably as learned in the mysteries of the Craft as in European history, he must have told the tale with his tongue in his cheek, knowing well that the incident he described with so much assurance was a sheer impossibility! He very obviously confuses the sign with the grip, or is not clear which of these was employed by his relative. What Alison avers as having happened to Tytler is said to have happened to a certain Colonel McKenstry who, according to the legend, was taken prisoner by the Indians. They prepared to put him to a cruel death when he gave “the Masonic sign of distress,” which in-

duced a brother Mason, a British officer, to interfere and save his life.

A generation before this—at the Battle of Dettingen—the anecdote was in circulation. One of the French King's Guards having his horse killed under him was entangled among the animal's limbs when an English dragoon galloped up, and with his sabre was about to deprive him of life when the French soldier "made the sign of Masonry." The dragoon recognised him as a brother, and not only spared his life, but freed him from his dangerous position. The narrator of this incident, anxious to save the English officer from any charge of treachery, adds that the British soldier made the French guard prisoner, "aware that the ties of Masonry cannot dissolve those of patriotism." The author of a curious book entitled "A Winter with Robert Burns," in quoting the incident at Dettingen says that "a similar instance was related by the late Admiral Sir D. Milne as having occurred at sea under his own eye."

The Battle of Dettingen takes us

back to 1743, but some time before that a variant of the story was in existence in America.

Mr Wallace Bruce, who was United States Consul at Edinburgh for several years, delivered an address to Lodge Canongate Kilwinning in 1893, the purport of which was to prove that, although Canongate Kilwinning could not produce documentary evidence to shew that Robert Burns had ever been Poet Laureate of the Lodge, the tradition might still be true. One of the illustrations he used to enforce his argument referred to something that was told to him on the night when he became a member of Lodge No. 7 Hudson, New York. He was initiated, as far as I can make out, in 1867, and what occurred took place 130 years before that date, which I take to be in 1737. At that time Brand, the half-breed Indian, had visited Lodge No. 7 and it had been told, as evidence of Brand's worth as a Freemason, that "once in a massacre when a man was tied to a tree and faggots piled about him, and the flames were beginning to

mount and crackle, that man, thinking no one was present—nothing but the all-seeing eye of God—remembered the hailing sign of distress. In that vast wilderness he made the sign. Brand, the half breed Indian, who had been made a Mason in Canada, rushed into the flames and cut his prisoner free, because he was a brother Mason.”

The date 1737, takes us back practically to the beginning of Speculative Freemasonry, and the incident in which the half-breed Indian figures, as it is the most picturesque so it may be the original of the story that has appeared in one form or another in every campaign during the last two hundred years. But if we are anxious to follow it still further back we have only to join the glorious company of Masonic traditionalists to find ourselves in another and vaster realm of romance. These manufacturers of fable and myth were alive to the value of the death or danger signal. It is the kind of material of which their histories are made. Those of you who are familiar with the

American Ritual of Freemasonry—the green book which alleges to give an account of all or nearly all the degrees—may have seen the interesting reference to what are called the Heroines of Jericho. I trust no brother will blame me for outraging the solemn charge of the First Degree in having sought to “unduly obtain the secrets of a superior degree,” and I mention the matter solely because of its interest as a bit of Scottish history.

Every schoolboy who is familiar with the daring exploits of Sir William Wallace recalls the famous incident of the burning of the Barns of Ayr. The late Marquis of Bute wrote a book to prove that the incident never took place but, in spite of that, the story continues to survive in the popular mind, and serves the purpose of the Masonic author.

Under guise of friendship Wallace and his comrades were invited to a meeting by the English garrison to discuss terms of peace. One by one as the Scottish patriots entered they were seized by the English soldiers

and hanged to the rafters. Wallace came late. As he was posting to the fatal tryst a good woman of Ayr hailed him from her window and informed him of the awful work that was going on in the Barns. Turning his steed, he made for his camping ground, assembled his forces and descended upon the unsuspecting English, firing the Barns and putting every enemy to the sword. The Masonic traditionalist, with an eye to the picturesque, imports the Scottish legend into his history with such modifications as are necessary to make it fit into his general scheme. The Ayrshire guidwife becomes a heroine of Jericho, and she hailed Sir William Wallace by making a sign which he instantly recognised. To make the story plausible it is contended that the saviour of Scotland was what is called a "brother heroine," a term which indicates that, at times, the manufacturers of Masonic myth not only challenge credulity, but defy sex! This story of the far off times of the wars of Scottish Independence is identical with the incident which is alleged



to have occurred a year or two ago in Belgium. Again it is a case of the Masonic sign overcoming enmity and inspiring foemen to be generous towards each other. When the woman hailed Wallace from her window, the brave warrior—in true brother-heroine-of-Jericho fashion—enquired the cause of her distress. She explained that her husband had joined the enemies of Scotland, and that she feared he had either been slain or taken prisoner in a recent engagement. The Scottish patriot who had come to spy the enemy's camp swore the woman to secrecy as to his mission, promising her, in return, that he would do what he could to find news of her missing husband. When he reached his own quarters, he caused enquiry to be made in his camp, the result of which was that he discovered the man whose absence was mourned by the sister-heroine. True to the spirit of the myth, Wallace liberated the prisoner, who returned to his tearful and affectionate wife.

Such is the Masonic legend, and the non-Mason may allege with some de-

gree of plausibility that colour is lent to it by the action of certain Scottish, English, and Canadian lodges during the recent war in issuing cards to brethren vouching for Masonic Membership and asking for the kindly treatment of the holder at the hands of any Freemason with whom he might come in contact. The cards were printed in English, French, Italian, German, and Turkish, and like certain other puerile things in Freemasonry were got up for the benefit of the men who printed them. One of the vouchers—if it was substantial enough—may have warded off a bullet, as a bundle of photographs, or a pack of cards, or a Prayer Book may have done, but the Freemason who valued his life was well advised to place his trust in his rifle.

The story of the sign of distress being given and responded to on the battlefield has been seized upon by writers against the Craft as an example of the pernicious influence of our fraternity. One of the pamphlets issued by the Catholic Truth Society sets forth the reasons why Roman Catholics

cannot have any dealings with Freemasons. Among other things, the writer cites this myth of the battlefield, and exclaims exultingly that "Freemasonry praises such conduct." I believe that statement is incorrect. I cannot imagine any thoughtful or intelligent member of the Craft, who gives the matter a moment's consideration, being favourably impressed by the incident. To me it seems an unwarrantable use of a Masonic sign—a use which no soldier worthy of the name would make, and which no foeman worthy of the name would recognise.

Freemasonry promotes loyalty; it does not foster treason; and the battlefield myth in any of its forms means that somebody betrayed his trust, and forgot his allegiance to his King. Let me illustrate my point by a suggestion of what might have happened in any of our cities during the great war. Suppose in these awful nights of darkened streets, and fear of invasion by Germany's aircraft, some miserable spy had been discovered who was proved

to have given information to the Kaiser. Suppose further, that, having been tried the spy had been found guilty, and, having been found guilty, had been sentenced to be shot. Suppose the firing party drawn out, and just as they were getting into position the miscreant should have endeavoured to save his miserable skin by using the Masonic sign of distress. What would you think of the commanding officer, who, recognising the sign, had refused to give the order to fire? I believe there is not a Lodge in Scotland that would not willingly have supplied a firing party to shoot the officer who had dared to betray his trust.

The Roman Catholic writer against Freemasonry argues that in a case such as I have cited, the officer would have been compelled to respond to the sign and sacrifice the interests of his country at the call of the Craft, if he were not to act contrary to the precepts of Freemasonry, and such a statement circulated broadcast must do incalculable damage to our fraternity.

Freemasons recognise the brother-

hood of man, and, given a voice in any League of Nations would probably be the strongest apostles of peace, but they are not fools. The candidate for our mysteries is informed that vows of fidelity are required of him, but he is also informed that these vows are not incompatible with his civil duty; and in the solemn charge of the first degree he is adjured to be loyal to the laws of any state that may become his place of residence, or afford him its protection, but that he must never forget the allegiance due to the sovereign of his native land. And throughout all our ceremonial we bracket the welfare of the King with the welfare of the Craft. Is it likely, therefore, is it reasonable that in a critical moment on a battlefield, a moment fraught, perhaps with the gravest consequences for his country, a soldier, who happens also to be a Freemason, would throw his allegiance, his honour, his manhood to the winds because the sworn enemy of his country and his King happens to be able to make certain motions with his hands? If such a soldier were found his treach-

ery would be reprobated from one end of the Craft to the other.

And now perhaps some of you may say, if the sign is not to be responded to on the battlefield, under what circumstances ought it to be recognised? I admit that the question is a pertinent one, and, curiously enough, I have an apposite illustration in another incident which is alleged to be drawn from the life of Sir William Wallace. The heroines of Jericho tell the story to illustrate the value of their degree. One day he was walking along the shore of a Scottish loch when his attention was suddenly arrested by the upsetting of a boat some distance from the shore. A large number of men and women were engulfed; there was one awful shriek of despair; they sank and then all was silent. Wallace stood, his eyes riveted upon the scene of destruction. A moment later he saw a hand rise from the surface of the water, holding a handkerchief and giving what he recognised as the grand hailing sign of distress of a heroine of Jericho. Instantly he plunged into the water,

swam to the spot and succeeded in bringing the woman to the shore. Tradition adds that she was the only person who was saved. The story is interesting as illustrating the use of a Masonic or semi-masonic sign, but that man is little to be envied who would only go to the rescue of a drowning person provided that person were able to give a certain signal. Common humanity demands something more spontaneous than that.

Personally, I incline to the view that the grand hailing sign of distress has an allegorical meaning in common with much in our system of morality. There may be occasions—alike in times of war and in days of peace—when the giving of a sign may lead to friendship and ensure brotherly sympathy and attention, but I believe as a general rule our signs must be regarded as largely symbolical. Some wayfarer on life's toilsome journey is buffeted by the storms of misfortune, some lonely soul sailing across the troubled sea of life is in danger from the hidden reefs of poverty or the sinking sands of ill-

health, and, turning to the brotherhood, he claims our companionship and solicits our compassion. To the call of such a brother the true Freemason will respond according to the measure of his means.

The sign of distress can never be said to have its fullest meaning by being confined to occasions when one is in physical danger. What would we think of a brother who had the power to save a man from drowning and excused himself from acting because the man was unable to give a Masonic sign? Or what would we think of a brother who ran to the assistance of a fellow-creature in danger only when and because the man had raised his hand in a particular way? We might say that the brother had observed the terms of his Masonic obligation, but our appreciation of his deed would be tempered by the knowledge that he had hesitated to perform an act of heroism that would have been performed ungrudgingly by many a man who is not a Mason.

In circumstances of distress brought



about by ill-health, poverty, or the uncertainties of life, things are different. The Mason has a clear duty to his brother as distinct from his fellow-man, I know that many would challenge that statement by quoting the old Scripture, "Who is my brother?" and would argue that brotherhood in the real sense is independent of all organisations. Probably in an ideal state that argument would be justified, and as a theory it is of the essence of righteousness. But, as a thing of practice, the world is not sufficiently advanced to recognise it. Just as a man's first duty is to his children and those of his own house, so a man who joins any sort of brotherhood has a duty to the members of that brotherhood and a claim upon the members—a duty and a claim that do not exist between him and those outside. It is in respect of that duty and claim that the Mason gives and is bound to recognise the sign of distress. A brother's business is our business—we rejoice with him when he rejoices, we sorrow with him when he sorrows; we do unto him as,

in similar circumstances, we should wish that he would do unto us.

So long as we recognise this gospel of brotherly love, so long shall we be faithful to the great principles of our grand old order. And, recognising our obligations to each other in the everyday things of life, we may safely leave all bizarre happenings, such as those which are alleged to have taken place on battlefields, to take care of themselves. Let us never forget that in our Lodges we cultivate peace not war ; and if we remember that, we shall recognise in the fullest measure that peace will never come by veiling treachery on the battlefield under the garb of Freemasonry.

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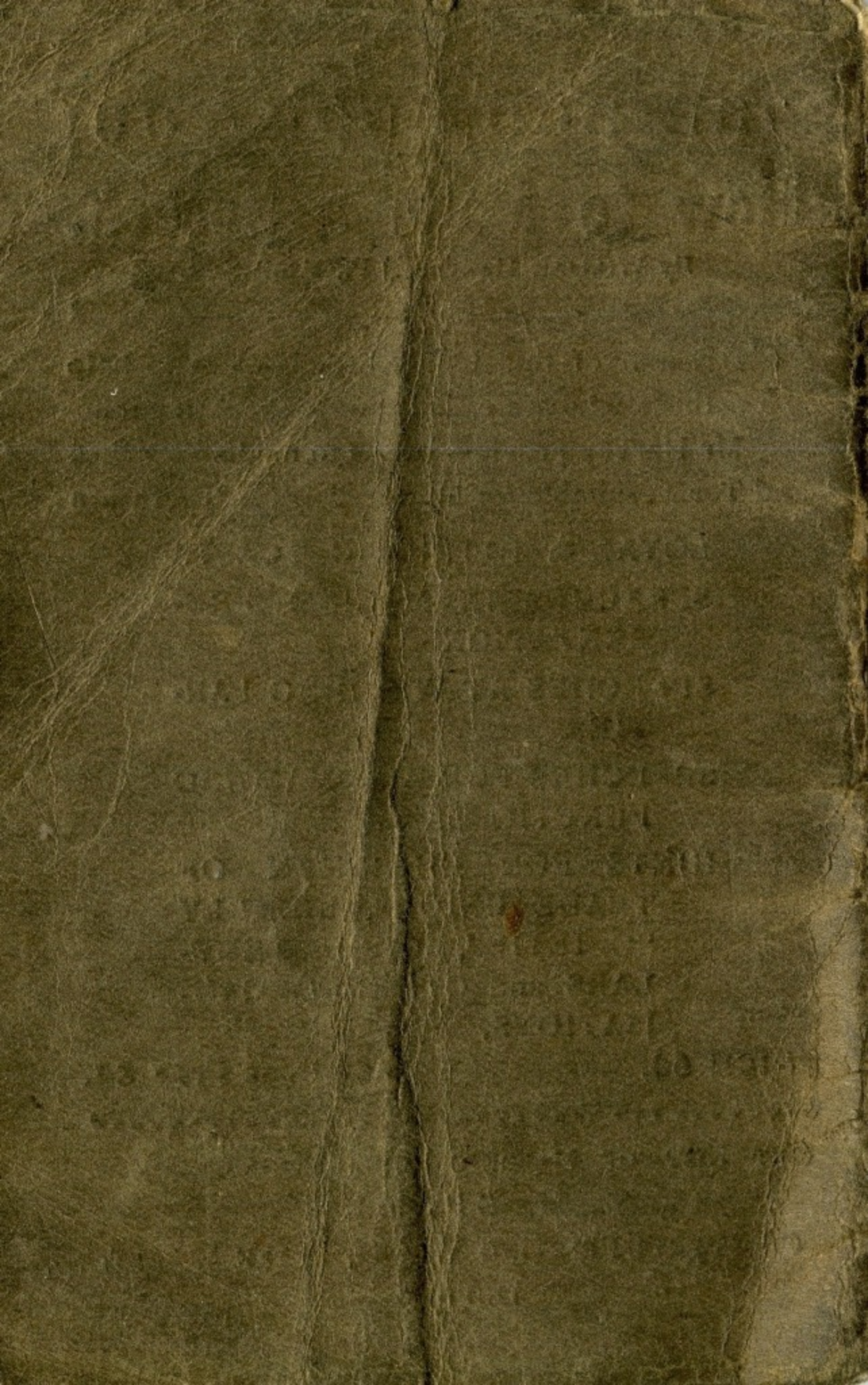
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## William Harvey, J.P., F.S.A. Scot. (1874-1936)

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His mother Lodge was Stirling Royal Arch No.76. He was a founding member of Lodge Progress No. 967, Dundee, and was R.W.M of that lodge from 1914 to 1916.

Installed as Provincial Grand Master of Forfarshire on the 23rd January 1935.

Born in Stirling in 1874 He was trained as a law clerk but moved from law to journalism and joined John Leng & Co, Ltd, Dundee. He was appointed general editor of the firms extensive series of novels. In 1904 he joined the staff of the 'Peoples Journal' and became assistant editor. From 1908 to 1912 he was literary editor of the 'Dundee Advertiser'.

He was a prolific writer of Masonic articles and books - his 'Harvey Manual of Degrees' is frequently used within the Lodges of Forfarshire.

He was at Glamis when H.R.H. The Duke of York (the future King George VI) became an affiliate member of the Lodge of Glamis No. 99

He died on the 5th July 1936



The occasion of the affiliation of H.R.H. The Duke of York (later King George VI) into the Lodge of Glamis No. 99 on the 2nd June 1936



# Provincial Grand Lodge of Forfarshire

## Provincial Grand Lodge of Forfarshire

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