

Summary: *The Founding of the Masonic District of British Burma – The British took Freemasonry to British India in 1730 when officers of the East India Company held their meetings in Fort William in Calcutta. The Lodge was given No. 72. It was not until 1847 before Burma had its own British Masonic Lodge. The Grand Master Thomas Dundas, the 2nd Earl of Zetland, in 1868 agreed to this request by the R. W. Bro. Col. Greenlaw, to establish a new District Grand Lodge of British Burma, with Colonel Greenlaw as the first District Grand Master for Burma with seven lodges under its jurisdiction. This paper reveals the Lost District Grand Lodge Minutes and an error in Grand Lodge records, which has since corrected.*

Introduction: Brethren can be excused for not knowing too much about the ‘Golden Land of Burma, now officially called Myanmar. Most Brethrens knowledge will be limited to news flashes of the Oxford educated Burmese Pro-democracy leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi being released from house arrest in November 2010, where she has been detained for 15 out of the last 21 years. However, the country was once part of the Britain Empire. This mainly Buddhist country is about the size of Britain and is surrounded by six countries, Bangladesh; the Indian state of Manipur; China; Laos; Thailand and Malaysia, whilst its southern borders have a coast line with the Bay of Bengal to the South East and the Andaman Sea to the South West.

The United Grand Lodge of England records show that Burma did not receive District Grand Lodge status until 1869, whilst a transcript of a meeting held in Rangoon in 1868 clearly establishes the fact that the District Grand Lodge was formed in 1868. The appointments of the first District Grand Lodge Officers are therefore not recognised by Grand Lodge and need to be acknowledged. This paper aims at correcting this omission.

Historical overview: Britain engaged in three military conflicts regarding trading rights and monopolies with Burma between 1823 and 1885, resulting in Burma being absorbed into the British Empire and administered by a combination of British and Indian forces and civil servants.

During the first conflict (1823-26) the British-led Indian troops suffered more than 15,000 fatalities. The second conflict in 1852 helped Britain secure a British teak monopoly in Lower Burma. The third conflict was sparked by Burmese negotiations with the French, which was seen as a direct threat to British teak monopolies in Lower Burma. The conflict raged during 1885 and Upper Burma was finally annexed on 1st January 1886.

Masonry in Burma:

The large number of military personnel shipped in to fight in the conflicts and to manage and administer the country, brought with them several travelling military lodges of English, Scottish and Irish constitutions. Masonry was practiced in the garrison towns of Burma, much as it was practiced in the 'Mother Land'. The controlling Masonic body in this part of Asia, under the English constitution was initially the Masonic District of British India.

It was between the first two Anglo-Burmese wars, in 1847, that the first English Grand Lodge warrant was issued to Lodge Philanthropy, No. 542, in Maulmain. Masonry in Burma flourished over the next 22 years with a further six warrants being issued to: Lodge Star of Burma No. 614, Rangoon; Arakan Lodge, No. 646, Akyab; Lodge Astroea No. 674, Thayetmyo (Pegu); Lodge Victoria in Burma No. 832, Rangoon; Lodge Greenlaw No. 1095, Tonghoo; and Lodge of the Isles No. 1103, Port Blair in the Andaman Islands.

In late 1860's Masons in the Province of British Burma had expanded sufficiently for the lodges to request the Grand Master to grant the Masons of Burma Masonic District status. So in 1868 the Grand Master Thomas Dundas, the 2nd Earl of Zetland, agreed to this request by appointing the R. W. Bro. Col. Greenlaw, the District Grand Master for British Burma. The new District Grand Lodge had seven lodges under its jurisdiction.

A ceremony was convened in the lodge rooms of Lodge Victoria in Burma No. 832, in the Masonic Temple, Budd's Road, Cantonment of Rangoon, (Pegu), East Indies. On Friday the 9th October A.L. 5868, a meeting was held to establish the District Grand Lodge for British Burma and to install R.W. Bro. Colonel Greenlaw as D. G. Master., with W.Bro. Major Duncan in the East Chair. After the lodge had been opened in the three degrees, the Masters of the Lodges presented the newly appointed District Grand Master. W.Bro. Duncan addressed him. The full minutes of the meeting are recorded in the Masonic Register for India, published in 1869 in Bombay.

Installing Master:

W.Bro. Major Duncan addressed the newly appointed District Grand Master, as follows:

Right Worshipful Sir, - The occasion which has called us together this evening is one which marks an epoch in the history of freemasonry in Burma,

There have been during the last few years many gatherings to open new degrees under your auspices and to inaugurate District Grand Lodge Encampments, but for long we have looked forward to the day when the Most Worshipful Grand Master would be pleased to constitute this a Masonic District in Craft Masonry; and at last our hopes have been gratified.

Looking at the material progress Masonry had made, we not unnaturally thought that an organization which would consolidate all Craft Lodges here, under one local head, would be of immense service to the Order, and would lead to a yet greater development of our institutions; but situated as we are at a great distance from the supreme authority, and at a considerable distance from our late rulers, it was a matter of difficulty to bring our wants and capacities to notice. I do not think we could have succeeded in this but for your exertions, and even had we shown the want of a District Grand Master, the supreme authorities might have hesitated in selecting any individual in (to them) an unknown province, for the high honour and responsible position of a District Grand Master.

Fortunately, although they did not probably know much of Burma, they knew at least one able and experienced Mason who was ready for the proposed office. When the Most Worshipful Grand Master conferred upon you the rank of a Past Senior Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of England, he stated it was to mark his recognition of your past services and to enable you still further advance the interests of the Craft.

It was an eminently fitting selection, therefore, when he appointed you our First District Grand Master. etc.

The installing Master then called the Brethren to order while he read out the Patent from the Most Worshipful Grand Master of England, nominating and appointing R. W. Bro. Col. Greenlaw, District Grand Master for British Burma; the R. W. Brother was called upon to give his assent to the charges, which having done, he was obligated as to the governance of the District of British Burma.

Address by R. W. Bro. Col. Greenlaw, District Grand Master for British Burma:

Brethren, I must first return my best thanks to W.Bro. Major Duncan for the able manner in which he has performed the ceremony of Installation, and to each and all of you for your kindness in being here this evening to assist him in the ceremony by which we now establish the District Grand Lodge of British Burma.

You are all aware of the earnestness of the Masons of British Burma in desiring to have a District Grand Lodge for their own Province, and therefore it must be a source of great gratification that after so long trying for it, and after much correspondence in which great energy has been evinced, that the Most Worshipful Grand Master of England has granted the prayers of the Masons of British Burma.

No one who has been any time in this Province can fail to have noticed the great progress Masonry has made in Burma during the last few years – and in a social point of view, that this country is fast developing itself into one of the most important Provinces under the British Crown.

It is therefore appears quite time that we should be free from the Masonic governance of Districts so far from us and so separated. In a few years hence, when Burma is what it is fast rising to be, Masonry invariably progresses, spreading far and wide its noble and enlightening principles. etc

Appointments:

- R. W. Bro. Col. Greenlaw went on to make the following appointments:
- Deputy District G.M. – W.Bro. Major Duncan

- W.Bro. C.J. Brown D.S.G.W.
- W.Bro. J.M. Webster D.J.G.W.
- Bro. the Rev. E.J. Marks D.G. Chaplain
- W.Bro. C. Aubrey D.G. Registrar
- Bro. J. Dawson D.G. Secretary
- W.Bro. C. Pascal D.G. Deacon
- W.Bro. H. Prince D.G. Deacon
- W.Bro. Dunn D.G. Superintendent of Works
- W.Bro. J. C. Brindley D.G. Director of Ceremonies
- Bro. Spearman D.G. Sword-bearer
- Bro. J. Heins D.G. Organist
- Bro. M. W. Paul D.G. Pursuivant

The District Grand Lodge then went on to elect a Board of General Purposes and a Charity Fund. The District Grand Master expressed the hope that all will put their shoulders to the wheel, to establish a good Masonic Charity Fund for the Widows and the Orphans.

The District Grand Lodge was then closed.

Conclusion:

Brethren, the above appointed Brothers deserve their place in the Masonic Records and I would hope that Grand Lodge will consider adding their appointments to the historical records of the Masonic District of British Burmah.

Cord Count including title: 1,490 (excluding the bibliography)

Please note: Burma was spelt Burmah in 1869, by the British. The country is now recognised by the United Nations by its new name of Myanmar.

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