

## The Rev'd Dr. William Dodd 'the Macaroni Parson'

The story of Dr. William Dodd is a strange one, full of coincidences and bad luck. Really bad luck. He is of interest to the Masonic historian because he was a famous Mason who was hung in exceptional circumstances. Dodd was the Prebendary of Brecon (*a Canon of a Cathedral Church*), had a living in East Ham (*income*) and was Chaplain in Ordinary to His Majesty King George III. He was also the third Grand Chaplain - his being the first official position in the Craft - and in June 1777 he was hung for forgery at Tyburn. How did such an illustrious man come to such a terrible end?

### A Pillar of Society

Dr William Dodd was both a respected man of the cloth and a ceaseless worker for charity. Among other things he instituted an unmarried mothers home (*The Magdalen*) for 'reclaiming young women who had swerved from the path of virtue'; The Humane Society (*for the recovery of persons apparently drowned*); and the Society for the Relief of Poor Debtors.

He caused considerable scandal in one incident, when he was seen at French race courses in clothes which were, in the 18<sup>th</sup>. century more fitting for today's hippie generation. For this he was given the nickname the "Macaroni Parson". And he was less than popular at court because he associated with the notorious **MP John Wilkes** - another well-known mason who went to prison.

Brother Dodd was initiated into St. Alban's Lodge No. 29 in 1775. Dodd became the Junior Warden of his lodge, and in 1775 became the first Grand Chaplain - there were two previous Chaplains, but they were unofficial titles.

### Beginning of the End

Despite the fact that he was controversial and unconventional, he was patronised by the King. However, although he had lucrative church appointments, he spent more than he earned. The vultures were circling, and Dodd was forced to sell his living in East Ham in order to avoid the bankruptcy courts and the possibility of the debtors prison. By January 1776 things had become critical and he was hard pressed by his creditors. By this time his late pupil and current patron, the Earl of Chesterfield, had just become of legal age; so Dodd devised a plan to use the Earl's name to borrow the money he needed.

This was simply to find a broker to inform the financiers that the young Lord urgently needed to raise money by presenting a bond; but as he was only just coming into his inheritance, and required the utmost confidentiality he did not desire to be present at negotiations but would use the highly reputable Dr. Dodd as his representative.

This proved difficult, because few were willing to risk the bond as they would not be present at the signing. But the broker found two solicitors who would advance the sum of \$8,000 upon receipt of a bond signed by the young Lord and witnessed by the good doctor. The bond was drawn up and Dodd took it away for signing. He brought it back signed and witnessed by himself.

The broker, realising that the solicitors would not be happy, and relying on the integrity and reputation of Dr. Dodd, signed his name at the bottom of it, and the money was

advanced. But the solicitors had immediate doubts, and took the bond to Lord Chesterfield - who naturally rejected the bond immediately. This of course caused quite a scandal in the City of London. Dr. Dodd was told that the only way out of his predicament was to return the money PDQ and throw himself on the mercy of the court. He duly returned most of the cash, making up the remainder with two bank drafts and judgements on his assets. But despite the promises he was held for trial at the Old Bailey on the charge of publishing a forged and counterfeited bond, knowing it to be such.

### **Bad Luck**

So on the 19<sup>th</sup>. of February 1777, Dr. Dodd was put before the bar. His main defence was that he had made full restitution, no crime had in fact been committed. He also showed that he had the means to repay the bond during it's six month term - so that no intent to permanently deprive anyone of money could be proven in law. He also pleaded leniency because Lord Chesterfield did not want him to loose his life over the affair; that he had been offered immunity on condition he returned the money; and that his death would punish both his wife and a number of tradesmen to whom he owed money.

Nonetheless, the jury took just 15 minutes to find him guilty - but with a recommendation for mercy. Unfortunately for Dodd, the court had no power to grant mercy, so he was sentenced to be hung, with a reminder that he could petition the King for mercy. Such was Dodd's popularity that the Lord Mayor and the Court of Common Councilmen went as a body to see the King and ask for mercy. A petition was raised of some 23 sheets of signatures and the newspapers were full of letters and articles in favour of Dr. Dodd.

But luck was not on Dodd's side. The previous year, two twin brothers, had been hung for exactly the same offence; even though it was general knowledge that the crime had been committed by the wife of one of the brothers - and she had disappeared. These circumstances made it inadvisable for the King to offer mercy to Dodd, who had after all admitted his guilt. So the King did not offer a pardon, and on 27<sup>th</sup>. June the sentence was carried out.

### **Double Bad Luck**

But bad luck was still dogging Dodd. As was usual practice for the time, those who could afford it would pay for the executioner to steady the body from swaying while suspended from the gibbet - and to cut the body down pretty quickly. Then the body would be placed in a coach and rushed to an undertaker nearby. There a surgeon, and a hot bath, would be waiting in an attempt to revive the body. It didn't always work, but it was better than nothing.

The executioner kept his part of the bargain. Ironically, Dodds was so popular, and the crowd so incensed at his death, that they mobbed the coach, with his body still in it and held it up for two hours, making any attempt at resuscitation impossible. Dodds was buried at Cowley, Middlesex.

Even more ironic, is the fact that Dodd had written a sermon a few years previously titled "The frequency of Capitol Punishment inconsistent with Justice, sound policy and religion", in which he attacked the haphazard application of the death penalty.

He was also said to have been in the process of writing a history of Freemasonry - whatever happened to the papers? - he must have done some work on it, because he had advertised it in certain newspapers.

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