

Was Robert Baden-Powell a Freemason?

W Bro. Tony Harvey, PJGD

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There has been much speculation that Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the Scouts, was a Freemason. This is partly due to the many parallels between Scouting and Freemasonry and partly because of the links he had with Freemasonry.

Robert Baden-Powell, or B-P as he was known, was born in 1857. A member of a “good family” with strict Victorian values, he was brought up by his mother, Henrietta Grace, after his father, the Revd. Baden Powell, Savilian Professor of Geometry at Oxford, died when B-P was just three years old. He followed school at Charterhouse with a direct commission into the 13th Hussars, one of the foremost Cavalry Regiments in the British Army, having come second in the Cavalry Examinations out of around 700 who sat the exam. Most of his army career was spent in India and Africa. He experienced rapid progression to Colonel, at which rank he came to public attention as the Hero of Mafeking, having led the defence of that town for 217 days. He did not marry during his years in the Army but enjoyed a good social life with his fellow Officers, spending his spare time excelling at sports and in amateur dramatics.

Freemasonry was very popular at this time, especially in India. Many British military men and civil servants joined local Lodges, normally choosing one under the English, the Scottish or the Irish Grand Lodge. For example, Rudyard Kipling was initiated as a Freemason into an English Lodge, Hope and Perseverance Lodge No. 782, in India in 1886. Baden-Powell and Kipling were good friends. They first met in Lahore in the early 1880's and remained close until Kipling's death in 1936. Bro Kipling's writings tell us much about the multi-cultural nature of Freemasonry in India during the period both he and Baden-Powell were there. It would have been entirely natural if Baden-Powell, this sociable “man's man”, had joined a Lodge and become a Freemason. Indeed, Alan Cooper suggests, “it was considered in those Victorian days a social essential for gentlemen to become Freemasons”.¹

But for some reason he did not. No record exists in the files of the United Grand Lodge of England, nor in the Grand Lodge of Scotland or that of Ireland, to indicate that Baden-Powell became a Mason.

Was it possible that he joined a Lodge under a different constitution? It would be unlikely for a British Officer to do so, given the number of military Lodges available at the time.

Baden-Powell was a prolific writer and many of his writings express similar values and principles to those found in Masonic ritual. For example:

“Try to leave this world a better place than you found it and, when your turn comes to die, you can die happy in feeling that at any rate you have not wasted your time but have done your best.”

And:

“The repression of self and the development of that love and service for others, which means God within, bring a total change of heart to the individual and with it the glow of true Heaven. It makes a different being of him.”

The style is different but the meaning is there.

¹ Cooper, Alan A. (1987), “The first ten years of Freemasonry in Mafeking / Mafikeng”, Austral Lodge, Mafeking.

Perhaps for this reason, many have assumed that B-P was a Freemason. He received two letters of congratulation from Masonic bodies in the days following the Relief of Mafeking. The first, from the District Grand Secretary of South Africa, Western Division, said:

“I am informed that you are a member of the Craft ... but if my information is incorrect, be assured that our congratulations of admirable skill remain sincere.”

The second, from Pollokshaws Royal Arch Lodge, Glasgow, makes a similar assumption. Even in more recent times some have claimed it to be so.

However, no evidence or record of his membership has ever been produced. Nor has any record of his attendance at a Lodge meeting been found. Freemasonry in India and South Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly in relation to the British military, was very well documented. If he had joined or attended a Lodge, surely evidence would have been produced by now.

Baden-Powell's wife, the World Chief Guide, Lady Olave Baden-Powell, *GBE*; his secretary, Mrs. Eileen Wade; his daughter, The Hon. Betty Clay, *CBE*; and his grandson, Michael, the fourth Baron Baden-Powell of Gilwell, have all confirmed that B-P was not a Freemason - the latter two to me personally.

However, B-P was friends with many Freemasons and had several contacts with Freemasonry over the years. To find out more, please read my book, “Scouting and Freemasonry: two parallel organisations?”²

So, no – Robert Baden-Powell was not a Freemason.

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² See Tony Harvey (2012), “Scouting and Freemasonry: two parallel organisations?”, The 2012 Prestonian Lecture, Carrfields Publications.