

ROBERT BURNABY

District Grand Master for British Columbia under the Grand Lodge of England.
First Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of British Columbia.

By Bro. G. Hollis Slater, Victoria-Columbia, No. 1

Although Robert Burnaby was not a charter member of Victoria Lodge, No. 1085 (later re-numbered 783, E.R.), the first lodge on the northern Pacific coast, he was, however, the first Installing Master, assisted by W Bro. Aguilar, Past Master of Lodge Good Report, No. 158, ER, who was at that time (August, 1860) a Lieutenant on board HMS Grappler, stationed at Esquimalt.

Robert Burnaby was born 30 November 1828, the seventh child of a family of ten sons and five daughters of the Rev. Thomas Burnaby, Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. His mother, Sarah, was a daughter of Andrew Meares of Daventry. The family is a very old one, tracing its ancestry back to the time of the Norman Conquest.

Robert was educated at St. Paul's School, London, and was employed in the Controller's Office of HM Customs when he decided to come to Victoria and try his luck in the new gold fields. On arriving here he secured the appointment of Secretary to Col. Moody, and as such he was practically Deputy Land Commissioner, head of the office staff, and laid out the first lots in the new settlements of Queensboro (now New Westminster), Fort Yale, Hope and Port Douglas. He held that position for a little more than a year when he entered into business relations with an old school-fellow, William Henderson, and they operated as commission agents at Victoria.

He was initiated into Freemasonry in the Frederic Lodge of Unity, No. 661, ER, then meeting at Thames Ditton (now No. 452 meeting at Croydon), on 30 May 1854, at the age of twenty-six years. Advancement in the lodge must have been rapid as he was JW in 1855 and Master in 1857. He joined the Royal Somerset House and Inverness Lodge No. 4 in 1856, and was a subscribing member of both lodges until 1859. He was also a Past Prov. Gr. Dir. Ceremonies for Surrey.

At the first regular meeting of Victoria Lodge he applied for affiliation, and was elected the following month. When Union Lodge (New Westminster) was constituted June, 1862, he was the Installing Master.

He was Master in Victoria Lodge in 1863, and again in 1865. A great event during his first term of office was the laying of the foundation stone of the Jewish Synagogue in Victoria, now the oldest continuous place of worship in the City, and in all probability the oldest synagogue in the Dominion. The laying of this stone was a great event in the annals of Freemasonry, as in conjunction with Dr. I. W. Powell, then W Master of Vancouver Lodge, No. 421, SR, was formed, the first Provisional Provincial Grand Lodge to be held in what is now British Columbia. In 1866 a second meeting of this Provisional Grand Lodge was held on 25 June, the occasion being the dedication of the new lodge room built by Bro. Edward Stamp on Government St., Victoria, where View St. is now located. It was in this building that the Grand Lodge of British Columbia was formed in December, 1871, and it was in continuous use until the present temple was built in 1878.

Although there had been agitation to form a District Grand Lodge from the time Victoria Lodge was formed, it was not until September 1867, that a patent was issued to form such a lodge with Burnaby as District Grand Master. A few months later Dr. Powell was authorized to form a Provincial Grand Lodge under the register of the Grand Lodge of Scotland.

When the Grand Lodge of British Columbia was formed Dr. I. W. Powell was elected Grand Master and Robert Burnaby Immediate Past Grand Master. A little over two years later Burnaby was stricken with such a severe illness that he returned to England, and passed away at Woodthorpe, Leicestershire, in January 1878, at the comparatively early age of 49 years. Before his departure for England he presented to Victoria Lodge the massive silver candelabra which now adorns the lodge room in Victoria Temple on nights of Installation and on other festive occasions.

In church life Bro. Burnaby was a member of the Church of England, being attached to St. John's (old iron) Church and was prominently associated with the formation of the parochial system of the present diocese. He was also a member of the Legislative Assembly for several terms and took a leading part in crystalizing public opinion in favour of locating the Provincial Parliament Buildings in Victoria. He was also founder of the Victoria Board of Trade. He never married.

The Grand Secretary, RW Bro. Eli Harrison, said of Burnaby: "In knowledge of the English ritual Bro. Burnaby has never been surpassed by any brother in the Craft in this province. His kind and courteous bearing whilst presiding over the Craft, and his liberality and goodness of heart endeared him to all who came in contact with him. May he rest in peace."