



### **The Fitzgerald Cairn at Manson Creek, BC**

The following notes comprise all the available information on William Henry Fitzgerald, the cairn, and his funeral in April 1873—noteworthy as the first masonic funeral in northern British Columbia. The Royal British Columbia Museum has little information on him other than his daybook and diary kept while he was a member of William G. Cox’s Alexandria Expedition in pursuit of the perpetrators of the Bute Inlet massacre.<sup>1</sup>

Retired miner, Johnnie Bryant, whose reminiscences were published in 1914, supplied the first published report of Fitzgerald’s funeral:

I returned to Germansen to prepare for the summer’s mining in the month of April. About this time men were beginning to arrive on the creek from the outside. Two weeks after my return to town, Capt. Fitztubbs and Gold Commissioner W. H. Fitzgerald arrived from Fort St. James, on Stuart’s Lake, where they had passed the winter.

About two weeks after his arrival, Fitzgerald died very suddenly one morning, of heart failure. For days before he died he would warn us about burying him alive. He used to say to us: “Now, boys, if anything happens to me, do not do the same as they did with the Indian chief at Fort St. James, last winter, and bury me alive. Be sure I am dead before you put me in the ground.”

We obeyed his instructions, and his body was kept in the Government office until signs of decay set in.

His reference to the burial alive of the Indian chief was this: A prominent Indian chief had died (so they supposed) at the fort, and was buried a short time afterwards. His kloodchman when sitting the same night on the top of the grave, wailing, heard, so she said, knocking in the grave beneath her. She rushed back, and told the chief’s

relatives what she had heard, and next morning they exhumed the coffin, and on opening it found that he had turned over in his box. The story made a great impression on Fitzgerald, and he was constantly in dread of it occurring in his case. Fortunately, poor fellow, he died suddenly, so his last moments were spared the mental dread of being buried alive.

As the late gold commissioner had been a member of the A. F. and A. M. word was sent down to Mansen [*sic*] Creek, where there were a number of that worthy order, and they came up in a body and took charge of his funeral, consigning his body to the grave with full Masonic honors. His grave and coffin were made by me. He was interred within fifty feet of my cabin. A neat head-board was placed over his grave, but I fear the elements have long since destroyed it. Fitzgerald came from Kingston, Ontario.”<sup>2</sup>

While Bryant does not report the actual date, masonic historian, John T. Marshall, wrote in 1967:

No story of Cariboo Lodge, No. 4, would be complete that did not make reference to the first Masonic funeral in Northern British Columbia, of a man who died on April 26, 1873, at Germansen Creek, in the Omineca District, and who was buried with full Masonic Honours by Freemasons from Manson’s Creek—the grave was marked with a “headboard.”

Marshall does not supply the source of the date, but does add to the story:

In 1949, the Grand Historian, R.W. Brother W. G. Gamble, reported the placing of a monument near Manson’s Creek [*sic*], in the Omineca Country, to the memory of Brother W. H. Fitzgerald, who, was one of the Charter Members of Cariboo Lodge, No. 469, G.L. Scot. He had been a Constable and Assistant Gold Commissioner in the Cariboo District, and was evidently transferred from Barkerville to Germansen Creek, in Omineca District—official appointment notice being dated April 12, 1872, confirms him as Gold Commissioner and Stipendiary Magistrate.

The grave had been located by an Indian Chief, Louis Billy Prince, at the of request of Dr. J.B. Munro, Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Past D.D.G.M. for District, No. 1, Victoria, B.C.<sup>3</sup> It has been marked by the following inscription, and one in the Indian language of the District, which were put between two pieces of plate-glass, framed in cement and placed on the grave:

REQUIESCAT IN PACE !  
HERE LIE THE REMAINS OF WILLIAM HENRY FITZGERALD GOLD  
COMMISSIONER AND STIPENDIARY  
MAGISTRATE FOR OMINECA  
DISTRICT.  
BORN IN IRELAND ABOUT 1835.  
DIED AT OMINECA 1873.  
A MEMBER OF ALBION LODGE, NO. 2, A.F. and A.M., G.R.Q.  
ALSO A CHARTER MEMBER OF CARIBOO LODGE,

No. 469 G.R.S.  
(LATER CARIBOO LODGE, NO. 4, G.R.B.C., A.F. and A.M.)  
ALWAYS REMEMBERED.  
MORS NON SEPARABIT!

The inscription placed over the last Remains of Brother W. H. Fitzgerald as written in the Carrier Indian Tongue, reads:

TENEZACHO WILLIAM HENRY FITZGERALD  
UKWENNE HWOTEN-NELREL-NE  
OMENEKHOH-KET  
1835 HWOSTLI  
1873 TAZSAI  
AHWYIZ-UNA-TNIH  
REQUIESCAT IN PACE!

On May 25, 1949, R.W. Brother Munro went to Manson's Creek, about 170 miles to the north of the town of Vanderhoof, and took with him about 150 pounds of cement and a piece of sandstone rock, to which was affixed a plate with an inscription engraved by Worshipful Brother Trevett, a Past Master of St. Andrew's Lodge, No. 49, Victoria, B.C.<sup>4</sup>

On a plot of cleared land by the side of the road which passes by the Manson's Creek Hudson's Bay store, Brother Munro, with the assistance of Chief Louis Billy Prince, Wasse Leon and others, built a cairn, about 3 feet by 3 feet and 6 stones high, and to this the tablet was firmly affixed and cemented. It was considered best to have the cairn erected in an accessible place rather than at the grave, which was several miles from any trail.

Of the Ceremony, Brother Munro reported: "The residents of the old town of Manson's Creek [*sic*], including Mr. Baer, District Superintendent of the Hudson's Bay Company; Mr. McIntosh, local Hudson Bay Storekeeper; Mr. William Steele, formerly Gold Commissioner (a resident of Manson Creek since 1896); and others, such as Mr. Batch; a Frenchman, called 'Big Wilfrid'; two Indians; and myself, held a brief dedication ceremony over the monument, which we have left there in the wilderness for every passerby to see."<sup>5</sup>

Much of this was repeated in Marshall's *History of Grand Lodge of BC* (1970) although, with a corrected date:

The first Masonic funeral in northern British Columbia was for William Henry Fitzgerald, one of the charter members of Cariboo Lodge No. 469, SR who had died on April 20, 1873, at Germansen Creek in the Omineca District, on April 26, 1873, with full Masonic Honours by Freemasons from Manson's Creek".<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps Marshall had reread William Gamble's earlier research:

On April 20th of that year, William Henry Fitzgerald, a Charter Member of Cariboo Lodge died at Germansen Creek and, on the day appointed for the

funeral, Freemasons came from Manson's Creek and bore the body of their late brother to a suitable burying place, and interred it with Masonic Honours. William Henry Fitzgerald, Engineer, at the age of 22, was initiated in Albion Lodge, No. 17, now No. 2, G.R.Q., on June 12th, 1857, passed on July 12th, and was raised on August 14th. He served as Inner Guard from the Annual Meeting following until June 17th, 1858, after which there is no mention of him in the Lodge minutes but he is recorded in the records of the Grand Lodge of Scotland as a Charter Member of Cariboo Lodge, Barkerville. On April 12, 1872, he was appointed Gold Commissioner and stipendiary magistrate of Omineca, and he spent the following winter at Fort St. James, but having received a complaint from the Department, relative to his wintering there, he wrote: "Since I have had charge of this District, I have endeavoured to distribute my services and those of the officials under my control, with a view to meeting the requirements of the public service." Bro. W. H. Fitzgerald should be remembered as one of the pioneer Freemasons of the Cariboo, as a pioneer of Northern British Columbia, as a Brother who was a true Freemason, and as a man who was faithful unto death.<sup>7</sup>

Albion Lodge No. 17 was originally under an English warrant in Québec City. The lodge became No. 2 under the Grand Lodge of Quebec on 27 December 1869. Today the lodge works in French.

There are local reports that Fitzgerald was buried near the commissioner's office and not Bryant's cabin, although the lack of records and remaining landmarks could make that impossible to determine. Kildare Gulch may be a good place to start. The glass-plated plaque is extant, and is in the possession of local historian, Joyce Helweg,<sup>8</sup> she having acquired the papers and effects of one Billy Steele who arrived in the area in 1896 and stayed until his death in 1953. Unfortunately Billy does not appear to have recorded where he found the plaque.

Further research may locate William Henry Fitzgerald's birthdate and other biographical details, but there is little chance of locating his final resting spot, or identifying the brethren who conducted the masonic funeral, unless some record of it remains in the minute book of Cariboo Lodge in Barkerville.

*Compiled by Trevor W. McKeown, 2020/06/20*

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1. Royal British Columbia Museum, BC Archives. Fonds PR-0897 - William Henry Fitzgerald fonds. Also called the Chilcotin War, William George Cox (c. 1821 – 6 October 1878) was Gold Commissioner for the Cariboo and Boundary Districts.
  2. Johnnie Bryant, "A Sturdy Prospector". *Stories of Early British Columbia*, W. Wymond Walker MD. Vancouver : News Advertiser, 1914. pp. 198-99.
  3. Dr. John B. Munro, a member of Confederation Lodge No. 116, served as DDGM in 1939.
  4. See photo, above.
  5. *Cariboo Gold*, John T. Marshall. Toronto : Canadian Masonic Research Association, 1967. pp. 36-37.
  6. *History of Grand Lodge of British Columbia*, John T. Mashall. Vancouver : Grand Lodge, 1970. p. 410.
  7. *A History of the Early Days of Freemasonry in British Columbia*, William G[eorge]. Gamble. Victoria : Victoria Centennial Committee, 1959. p. 22.
  8. Personal telephone conversation and email, Jun 6, 2020, at 6:19 PM.