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Articles

Sir George Stodart Blackie (1834–1881) in the Museum Collection of Cherkas Global University: Commemorating the 190th Anniversary of His Birth

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Abstract

This work is a tribute to the 190th anniversary of the birth of Sir George Stodart Blackie (1834–1881). It provides a biographical account of his life, with a special focus on his service with Masonic organizations in the United States.

The source base comprised the following two groups of materials: 1) annual reports of the Masonic order of Knights Templar (specifically, the annual reports of the Grand Commanderies of New York and Louisiana); 2) photographs from the museum collection of Cherkas Global University (specifically, the photograph of G.S. Blackie represented by Exhibit No. 006).

The study's findings revealed that Sir George S. Blackie was an outstanding man. An Edinburgh University graduate, he moved in 1856 to the United States (Nashville, Tennessee), where he got involved with a local university and a number of local Masonic organizations. During the American Civil War, he served as a surgeon in the Confederate States Army. Afterwards, he resumed his academic and social work. At the height of his career with Masonic organizations in 1871–1872, he held the office of Grand Commander of Knights Templar of Tennessee. A participant in the 18th Triennial Conclave of the Knights Templar of the United States, held at Baltimore, Maryland, in September 1871, he later criticized the Order's leadership for the ostentatious pomp and display with which that event was organized.

Keywords: Sir George Stodart Blackie (1834–1881), Grand Commandery of Knights Templar of Tennessee, biography, University of Nashville.

1. Introduction

April 10, 2024, marked the 190th anniversary of the birth of Sir George Stodart Blackie (1834–1881), who was an esteemed Mason and Past Grand Commander of Tennessee. Although his life was brief, he left a significant mark on the history of Edinburgh University (which he attended), the American Civil War, the University of Nashville, and the Masonic movement of his era. The present work offers a biographical account of the life of this esteemed man, with a special focus on his Masonic activity.

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2. Materials and methods

The source base comprised the following two groups of materials: 1) annual reports of the Masonic order of Knights Templar (specifically, the annual reports of the Grand Commanderies of New York and Louisiana) ([Proceedings of the Grand Commandery, 1872](#); [Proceedings of the Grand Commandery..., 1869](#); [Proceedings of the Grand Commandery..., 1872](#); [Proceedings of the Grand Commandery..., 1874](#); [Proceedings of the Grand Commandery..., 1874](#)); 2) photographs from the museum collection of Cherkas Global University (specifically, the photograph of G.S. Blackie represented by Exhibit No. 006 ([Figure 1](#))).

In the photograph, G.S. Blackie is dressed in the uniform of the Masonic order of Knights Templar wearing the insignia of Grand Commander. The picture was taken in Nashville, Tennessee, at the studio of C.C. Giers. Its reverse side is inscribed with the negative number (No. 24967) and the last name of its owner – Blackie. It is trimmed at the top, with only a portion of G.S. Blackie's written name visible.



Fig. 1. Photograph of G.S. Blackie (front and reverse) (Exhibit No. 006)

Use was made of the biographical method and content analysis to search for relevant information and construct a coherent picture of G.S. Blackie's life based on discrete biographical accounts. The work has a special focus on the man's Masonic activity.

3. Discussion

The historiography quite abounds with biographical accounts of G.S. Blackie's life. Of particular note are the article by J. Sibbald, 'Obituary Notice of Professor George Stoddart Blackie, M.D.' ([Sibbald, 1883](#)), the work by E.W. Goodell, 'History of Columbian Commandery No. 1, Knights Templar, State of New York: From 1810 to 1910 Inclusive' ([Goodell, 1910](#)), and the work by J.D. Richardson, 'Tennessee Templars: A Register of Names, with Biographical Sketches, of the Knights Templar of Tennessee, and Brief Histories of the Grand and Subordinate Commanderies' ([Richardson, 1883](#)). G.S. Blackie's Masonic activity specifically is covered in the last of those three publications only, and that account contains a couple of factual inaccuracies. For instance, it says there that G.S. Blackie joined the Masonic order of Knights Templar in

Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1857, whereas in actual fact at that time he was already living and working in the United States (Richardson, 1883: 14).

Thus, the subject under examination continues to be one of interest to the academic/pedagogical community and is worthy of further research.

4. Results

G.S. Blackie was born on April 10, 1834, in Aberdeen, Scotland (Richardson, 1883: 14). He studied medicine at Edinburgh University, where he received the degree of M.D. in 1855. During his time at university, G.S. Blackie evinced a keen interest in botany, and even received a gold medal for the best herbarium (Sibbald, 1883: 282). In 1851, he became a member of Botanical Society of Edinburgh.

In 1856, G.S. Blackie moved to the United States. He took up residence in Nashville, Tennessee. That same year, 1856, he was appointed Professor of Botany at the University of Nashville, and in 1857, Professor of Chemistry and Natural History there. In April 1857, G.S. Blackie joined the Masonic order of Knights Templar (Richardson, 1883: 14).

As early as 1858, G.S. Blackie was appointed Assistant Editor with *The Nashville Journal of Medicine and Surgery*.

On June 28, 1858, G.S. Blackie married Martha Eliza Cheatham. On June 15, 1859, they had a daughter, Elizabeth Blackie, and on September 19, 1860, they had a son, Berrien Lindsley Blackie. That same year, 1860, he became a member of Nashville Commandery No. 1, KT (Nashville, Tennessee) (Richardson, 1883: 14).

Nashville is where he was when the American Civil War broke out, and as early as October 18, 1861, he was appointed Surgeon in the Provisional Army of the Confederate States (Figure 2).

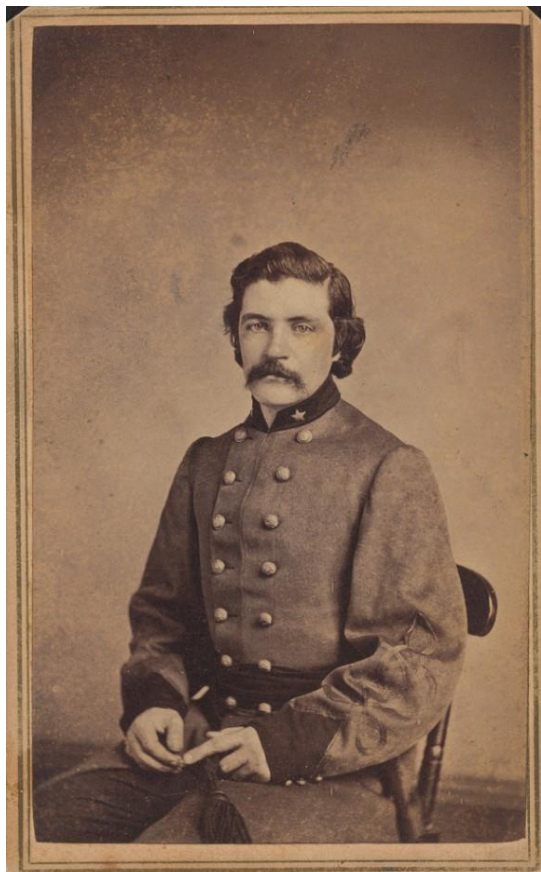


Fig. 2. Surgeon George Stodart Blackie of Confederate States Medical Staff in uniform. Circa 1862

After the end of the Civil War in 1865, G.S. Blackie was Librarian and Professor of Natural Science at Montgomery Bell Academy.

On November 24, 1867, the Blackies had a daughter named Marion Greeve, and on December 22, 1869, they had their fourth (and last) child – a son named George Frederick. On July 8, 1870, G.S. Blackie returned to the post of Professor of Natural History in the Medical Department of the University of Nashville.

From that time, he actively combined academic work with activity in Masonic organizations. In 1869, he was appointed Chairman of Committee on Foreign Correspondence ([Richardson, 1883: 14](#)). A glimpse of his service can be found in the 1869 report *Proceedings of the Grand Commandery of KT and Appendant Orders, of the State of Louisiana*: “The report on Foreign Correspondence was submitted by Sir George S. Blackie, and gives a courteous and impartial synopsis of the proceedings of twenty Grand Commanderies, our own for 1868 included. He advocates a uniformity in drill, is opposed to ministers of the Gospel receiving the Orders gratis, and favors the England ritual, but, in regard to the Red Cross, remarks: “We much fear that the removal of the degree to its proper place – that is, in our opinion, out of the Commandery – would injure the attendance on the Commandery, as for reasons which the Knights know, the Red Cross ceremonies have attraction peculiarly their own; but yet we would sacrifice pleasure to truth in history” ([Proceedings of the Grand Commandery..., 1869: 38](#)).

In 1870, G.S. Blackie became Knight Commander of Grand Priory of Scotland, and as early as 1871–1872 he was Grand Commander of Knights Templar of Tennessee ([Richardson, 1883: 14](#)). In fact, Photo No. 006 from the photo collection of Cherkas Global University is dated to 1871–1872. In the 1872 report *Proceedings of the Grand Commandery of KT and Appendant Orders, of the State of Louisiana*, G.S. Blackie is present in the list of all Grand Commanders KT as Grand Commander of Tennessee. On a side note, the Grand Commandery of Tennessee was established on October 12, 1859, with headquarters in Nashville ([Proceedings of the Grand Commandery..., 1872: 31](#)). While in charge of the Knights Templar in Tennessee, Grand Commander George S. Blackie had a new commandery established on May 23, 1871 – DePayens Commandery No. 11 ([Richardson, 1883: 270](#)).

At the 10th Annual Conclave of the Grand Commandery of Tennessee, held at Lebanon, Tennessee, on May 14, 1872 ([Proceedings of the Grand Commandery, 1872: 50](#)), Grand Commander Sir George S. Blackie expressed strong resentment of the ostentatious pomp and display with which the 18th Triennial Conclave of the Knights Templar of the United States was organized. On a side note, the 18th Triennial, which convened at Baltimore, Maryland, on September 19, 1871, was attended by representatives of 28 Grand Commanderies KT and those of subordinate Commanderies from all over the United States. In accordance with the event’s program, 76 Commanderies, 4,300 Sir Knights, and 700 musicians participated in the escort to the Grand Encampment, with the pageant being brilliant in the extreme ([Chicago Illustrated..., 1880: 65](#)). G.S. Blackie must have found the celebrations overly lavish, all the more so given that the country was still recovering from the Civil War. Here is what is said regarding this in the 1873 report *Proceedings of the Grand Commandery of KT and Appendant Orders, of the State of Louisiana*:

“Sir George S. Blackie, Grand Commander, in his address, thus alludes to the displays made at the triennial meetings of the Grand Encampment:

Although I fear the tendency of such magnificent displays is to lead to an extravagance which is the forerunner of effeminacy and decay, and am in favor of a more modest style of welcome, yet I do not presume to judge of the actions of others. I trust, however, that the good sense of the Order will prevent an attempt to eclipse the magnificence of the Baltimore reception, and that the triennial gatherings will gradually decline until they are remarkable rather for talent in the dispatch of business than for glitter and display. I think the tendency of the Order in America since October is rather to curb the spirit of display, and to devote itself to deeds of more exalted usefulness. The lessons of charity taught them by the sufferings of their Fraters in Chicago have not been without their influence on the whole character of the Order.

Many public banquets were given, but my bad health prevented my attending any, save that tendered by Mary Commandery, of Philadelphia, to the Grand Body. It was a scene which can hardly be forgotten.

Our frater thus beautifully closes a very admirable and elaborate address:

Some say that the age of Chivalry is passed, that the spirit of Romance is dead. But they are wrong. The age of Chivalry is never past, so long as there is a wrong unredressed on earth, and a man or woman left to say, “I will redress that wrong, or perish in the attempt”. The age of Chivalry

is never past, so long as we have faith enough in God and Christ to say “God will help me to redress that wrong, or if not me, those that come after me.” The spirit of Romance will never die, as long as there is a man left to say that the world might and can be better, fairer, wiser, happier in all things than it is now, that God’s will will be done on earth. “Thy will be done on earth” is the utterance of the prayer we have by his instruction pronounced around the altar. He who bade us ask that boon for ourselves and generations yet unborn was “very GOD of very GOD.” Do you think that He would have bidden us ask a blessing which He knew would never come? ([Proceedings of the Grand Commandery..., 1873: 48](#)).

A resolution was adopted that General Order No. 8 be published for information, and a strict conformity thereto enjoined.

Grand Commander Blackie furnishes the report on Foreign Correspondence, in his usual excellent style, and cordially notices our proceedings for 1871. He thinks that because we have a Grand Master resident in the State, the number of the Knights should be increased. We hope that it may be soon, but do not want the increase to come upon us too quickly.” ([Proceedings of the Grand Commandery..., 1873: 49](#))

The above record indicates that G.S. Blackie was already experiencing health problems at that time, having to be absent from a few of the less significant events. Despite those problems, he continued to serve the Order as Chairman of Committee on Foreign Correspondence. The 1874 report *Proceedings of the Grand Commandery of KT and Appendant Orders, of the State of Louisiana* mentions G.S. Blackie as follows: “The report on Foreign Correspondence is again by Sir George S. Blackie. Our proceedings of 1872 are kindly noticed. Relative to our report, he quotes: “He says he sees a speck of trouble in the present position of the Red Cross in Canada; so do we, and we will always see trouble until we cut loose from that mongrel degree altogether.” We think that opinion is growing.” ([Proceedings of the Grand Commandery..., 1874: 47](#))

On June 24, 1874, he attended a conclave held by Columbian Commandery No. 1 as a distinguished guest and Past Grand Commander ([Goodell, 1910: 36](#)).

In the late 1870s is when one of the last photographs of G.S. Blackie ([Figure 3](#)) was produced. It later appeared in J.D. Richardson’s ‘Tennessee Templars: A Register of Names, with Biographical Sketches, of the Knights Templar of Tennessee, and Brief Histories of the Grand and Subordinate Commanderies’.

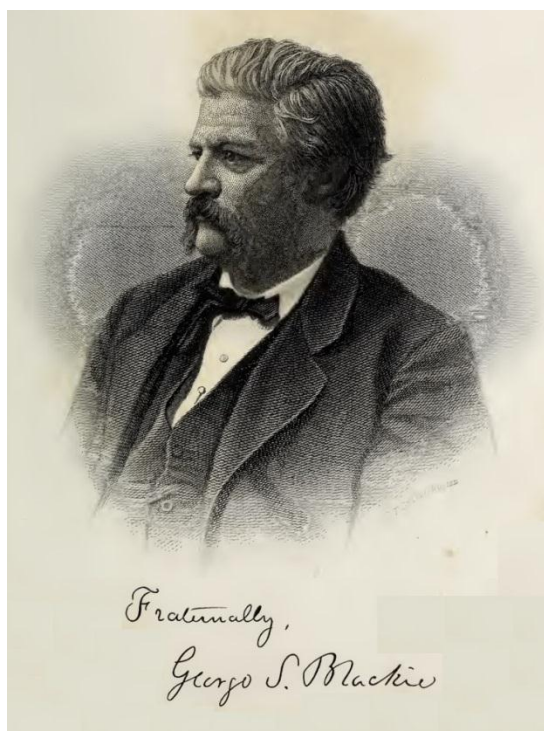


Fig. 3. G.S. Blackie. Late 1870s ([Richardson, 1883: 15](#))

Over the course of his service with Masonic organizations, G.S. Blackie occupied a variety of positions, including Assistant Grand Recorder of all Grand Bodies, Master of Lodge, High Priest of Chapter, and President of Masonic Board of Relief, Nashville, and was an honorary member of Grand Lodges of England, Scotland, Ireland, Portugal, Brazil, Canada, Three Globes (Prussia), Friendship (Prussia), New Brunswick, Georgia, South Carolina, Florida, and Washington Territory, Lodge No. 360 (Glasgow, Scotland), Grand Chapters of Georgia, Illinois, Canada, and Maryland, and St. Louis Commandery, Missouri ([Richardson, 1883: 14](#)).

Despite his good education and talent for both academic and administrative work, he was not granted a long life. His illness progressed and on June 19, 1881, G.S. Blackie passed away at the age of 47 ([Richardson, 1883: 14](#)).

5. Conclusion

Sir George S. Blackie (1834–1881) was an outstanding man. An Edinburgh University graduate, he moved in 1856 to the United States (Nashville, Tennessee), where he got involved with a local university and a number of local Masonic organizations. During the American Civil War, he served as a surgeon in the Confederate States Army. Afterwards, he resumed his academic and social work. At the height of his career with Masonic organizations in 1871–1872, he held the office of Grand Commander of Knights Templar of Tennessee.

A participant in the 18th Triennial Conclave of the Knights Templar of the United States, held at Baltimore, Maryland, in September 1871, he later criticized the Order's leadership for the ostentatious pomp and display with which that event was organized. He had a worldview that emphasized the need to make the world a better place, which he expressed in the following words: "Some say that the age of Chivalry is passed, that the spirit of Romance is dead. But they are wrong. The age of Chivalry is never past, so long as there is a wrong unredressed on earth, and a man or woman left to say, "I will redress that wrong, or perish in the attempt".

A Mason and scholar, G.S. Blackie passed away on June 19, 1881, at the age of 47 after a long progressing illness. He had so much to accomplish in his life only to leave so soon.

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