

Douglas Brymner (1823-1902), Dominion Archivist

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"Historical Archivist of the Dominion, was born in Greenock, Scotland in the year 1823. He is the fourth son of **Alexander Brymner**, banker, originally from Stirling, where the family held for many years, a prominent position. The elder **Brymner** was a man of fine intellectual attainments, an enthusiast in letters, and refined in his tastes and feelings. He had great influence over his children, and took every opportunity to instil into their minds a hearty love for literature in all its branches. They had the additional advantage of frequent intercourse with living men of letters, and their acquaintance with the writings of the most eminent and esteemed authors of the time soon became extensive. The mother of **Douglas Brymner** was **Elizabeth Fairlie**, daughter of **John Fairlie**, merchant in Greenock, who died at an early age, leaving his widow and family in comfortable circumstances. The subject of our sketch was educated at the Greenock Grammar school, where, under the skilful tuition of **Dr. Brown**, he mastered the classics and higher branches of study. After leaving school, **Mr. Brymner** received a thorough mercantile training. He began business on his own account, and subsequently admitted his brother **Graham** as a partner, on the return of the latter from the West Indies, where he had been engaged for some years. The brothers were highly successful, the younger filling, in later years, several important offices, such as justice of the peace for the County of Renfrew, and chairman of the Sanitary Commission for his native town. He died in 1882, from typhus fever, contracted in the discharge of his duties as chairman, universally regretted by all.



In 1853, **Mr. Brymner** married **Jean Thomson** (who died in 1884), daughter of **William Thomson**, of Hill End, by whom he had nine children, six of whom survived. The eldest of these is [William, a rising artist](#) of an excellent school, who has studied for several years in the best studios of Paris, and whose recent exhibits have received general praise. The second son, **George Douglas**, is one of the accountants in the Bank of Montreal, and **James**, the third son, is in the North-West. Two daughters and a son are at home. In consequence of ill health, induced by close application to business, **Mr. Brymner** was compelled to retire from the partnership in 1856."



Complete withdrawal from mercantile cares for a year having restored him to something like his former self, he removed to Canada in 1857, and settled in Melbourne, one of the Eastern Townships. Here he filled the office of mayor for two terms with conspicuous ability. On both occasions he had been elected without a contest, and without having solicited a single vote from any one, his belief being that an office of this sort ought to be conferred by the unmasked suffrage of the constituency. He declined to serve for a third term, although earnestly requested to do so. While mayor, he introduced various improvements in the mode of conducting business. Like many other immigrants possessing capital, he found his means vanishing before the financial crisis of 1857. **Mr. Brymner** drifted into what seemed to be his natural calling- literature, for which his early training and continuous study well qualified him. On the acceptance by **Dr. Snodgrass** of the office of Principal of Queen's College, the post of Editor of the *Presbyterian*, the official journal of the Church of Scotland in Canada, became vacant. It was offered to **Mr. Brymner**, his fitness for the position having been recognized by the leaders of the church, he having been an active member of the Church Courts as a representative elder, and his numerous contributions to the discussion of important religious topics being esteemed and valuable. Under his guidance,

his editorials being written in a straightforward, independent spirit, the paper at once took a high place. Many of **Mr. Brymner's** articles on ecclesiastical questions were in particular much admired, and leading religious journals often made lengthy quotations from them. About the same time he joined the staff of the Montreal *Herald*, where in a little he was appointed associate editor with the **Hon. Edward Goff Penny**. Often, owing to the severe indisposition of **Mr. Penny**, **Mr. Brymner** had sole editorial charge of the *Herald*. He was noted as one of the most efficient and hard-working members of the Press Gallery at Ottawa, and in 1871, the Presidency of the Press Association devolved upon him. A year later, in 1872, it having been resolved to establish a new branch of the Civil Service, namely, the collection of historical records of the Dominion and its Provinces, **Mr. Brymner** with the approval of men of all political shades, received the appointment. Before leaving Montreal for Ottawa, an address, signed by leading men in the professions, in business, and of the different nationalities, was presented to **Mr. Brymner**, accompanied by a munificent testimonial. No better selection could have been made for the office of Archivist than that of **Mr. Brymner**. He had peculiar fitness for the task imposed upon him. His extensive historical knowledge, unwearied industry, patience, and love for research, his power of organizing and arranging materials for reference etc., were all admirable qualifications, and these he possessed to a remarkable degree.

His reports are models, and present in clear and terse language the results of his labours. The story of the origin of the office, and the important part played in its construction by **Mr. Brymner**, will be found in the Archivist's report for 1883. In 1881, The Public Record Office (London) authorities republished the whole of **Mr. Brymner's** report as part of their own, owing, as the Keeper of Records, **Sir William Hardy**, said to the importance of the information it contained. Every year since then, copious extracts have been made from **Mr. Brymner's** reports. Perhaps it will not be out of place to insert here the following excerpt from the preface to the admirably annotated publication of "*Hadden's Journal and Orderly Books*" by **General Horatio Rogers**, who says:-

" I cannot refrain from referring from the unwearied zeal and unflinching courtesy of **Mr. Douglas Brymner**, the Archivist of the Dominion of Canada, in affording me the fullest and most satisfactory use of the Haldimand papers and the other manuscripts confided to his charge. Would that all public officials in custody of valuable manuscripts might take a lesson from him!" **Mr. Brymner** is an adherent of the Church of Scotland, to which he has always belonged, and he has been one of the most formidable opponents of union. His evidence before the Senate Committee, on the 24th and 26th of April, 1882, which is substantially the argument of the non-contents on the union question, was presented with great power and skill. It can be found in a pamphlet of over forty pages, published by Hunter, Rose & Co; Toronto, 1883. The greater part of his literary work is anonymous. He possesses a fund of caustic humour, some of which found vent in his letters in Scotch, under the name of **Tummas Treddles**, an octogenarian Paisley weaver, originally contributions on curling to the Montreal *Herald*, but afterwards extended to subjects in the *Scottish American Journal*. These have ceased for some years, doubtless from the pressure of other and more serious occupations. His translations of the Odes of Horace into Scotch verse were happy *Imitations*. A favourable specimen "The Charms of Country Life" is in the *Canadian Monthly* of 1879, the others having appeared in newspapers, and, so far as is known, have never been collected. He is another illustration of the fallacy of **Sydney Smith's** statement, that it requires a surgical operation to get a joke into a Scotchman's head."

Volume II of the same biographical encyclopedia adds the following:

"**Mr. Brymner** well is gaining, year by year, in reputation with scholars and students. **Dr. Poole**, chairman of the American Historical Association says that the archives "under the care of **Mr. Brymner** forms the most valuable collection of manuscripts for historical purposes to be found on this continent" (*Library Journal* for 1877, p 458). **Dr. George Stewart**, president of the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec says in *Canadian Leaves*, "**Mr. Brymner** has really created the department of archives, and made it one of the most efficient in the public service of Canada." Other historical writers express the highest opinion of the value of the work in progress, and the annual reports are now eagerly looked for."

from "*A Cyclopaedia of Canadian Biography*", edited by George Malcolm Rose; publ. Rose Publishing Co., Toronto 1886

Additional Information:



Douglas Brymner (1823-1902) was one of 10 children to banker **Alexander Brymner** and his wife **Elizabeth Fairlie**. **Douglas** married **Jean Thomson** (1832-1884) in Greenock in 1853. Of their other children, **George Douglas Brymner** (1857-1923) and **Robert Thomson Brymner** (1875-1948) were bankers. **James Greenshields Brymner** (1861-1930) was a prison warden in New Westminster, British Columbia.

(above, James G. Brymner, 1861-1930)

[View a detailed genealogy of this family...](#)

Here's an interesting article that delves more into the history of [Brymner's career with the Canadian Archives](#).

