

Fleet Paymaster John Bremner, RN

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The Career of a Distinguished Gentleman

By Thomas Sinclair, 1898

In a London newspaper the following announcement has appeared, to the regret and dismay of relatives and friends:- " Died on the 30th day of September, 1898, **John Bremner**, R.N., Fleet Paymaster, *H.M.S. Centurion*, China Station, aged 59."

A man of great physical and mental vigour, with the most genial temperament in all circumstances and on every occasion, no one who knew him assumes anything but that he should be of the grand old men, and not drop out of life in the strength of his fine manhood.

He was a Caithnessman of the very best type, about five feet ten inches in height, large chested, well limbed, with a full, smiling face of power that gained patiently whatever his wide brain and generous heart wanted, his hair and complexion of the average between dark and fair, characteristic of the Scandinavian parts of Scotland. Some biography of so distinguished an example of the persistent, brave, yet gentle, qualities of northerners, can not but be inspiring for others to follow similar lines to distinction, if the paths of the world are opening to them. Those in years always enjoy a satisfaction in the deeds of countrymen, as if they themselves had been the doers in some sense, by deputy or vicariously.

John Bremner was born in Canisbay parish, Caithness in 1837, the youngest son of **Alexander Bremner**, farmer in Freswick and **Catherine Sutherland**. Through father and mother he had good traditions to help the inspirations which soon showed themselves in action. At sixteen, after getting all the education his neighbourhood could give him, he went to London to pass his examinations for the navy. His luck was so noticeable in all things he tried, that when a boy he used to be put out of lottery, raffle or chance games, his comrades saying that they had no chance against him. How by his own instinct of courage he secured his first step in the naval service, was one of the many puzzles, which he solved unaided. The shores of the Pentland Firth, from which he watched the handsome passing vessels, were the scene to stimulate such a spirit, and the wide world became early the object of his secret efforts to reach.

How one of the gallant **Elphinstones**, a Scottish lord and a British admiral, spoke kind words to the country boy in the throes of examination (remaining ever after his hearty friend) was cherished remembrance. He was at the taking of Sebastopol in the Crimean war, and the finest person, then a youth of eighteen, who landed from the fleet in the deserted town.

For his services there he had the medal much prized by naval and military officers. During the dreadful winter of the siege he was more on shore than aboard, and consequently he had a heavy burden of experiences to recount of that tragical time. The subsequent 'piping times of peace' gave him no further change of being under

fire on the large scale; but in naval detail he was so steadily occupied, that less fortunate half-pay men used to joke him as having some mysterious back-door influence, to get him practically continuous full pay from 1854 till 1896, his year of retirement to have been 1897. Of the normal rifle and pistol adventures to which gunboat, cruiser and battleship officers in all parts of the world are open, he had good share. Whether it was meeting Mexican yellow-bellies at unexpected moments and in lonely places, or being shadowed by a Red Indian with unerring rifle for days in a hunting single-man expedition on the Pacific coast, **Bremner** had many experiences of the kind to summon his native nerve. One of his favorite but often dangerous amusements was to follow up rivers on the American, African or Chinese coasts in his, usually, canvas-made boat, which only carried himself. It was not fool-hardiness that created the habit, for the need of storing the vessel to which he was attached required knowledge of the resources of whatever neighbourhood was touched. In pure holiday, however, he used to make trips, especially in Spain and his native Scotland. A row through the lochs of the Caledonian canal gave him Highland knowledge which he related with enjoyment, an incident of which was his capture from his sleeping canoe by a local laird of title, whose dinner dress was kilt.

There were few parts of the world where he had not troops of friends, and no people did he think more of than the Dutch of the Cape of Good Hope, the Boers included. The Chinese and Japanese were favourites especially the latter, whom he knew in their towns and homes intimately. To converse with him on peoples made the whole earth congenial as a family party, and quite compassable for the imagination. When he had leisure he made his canvas boats, if not with his own hands, under the closest personal inspection, the mechanical ingenuity of his Bremner relatives very manifest and effective in him.

The rank of paymaster he obtained 26th December 186?, at the age of 29, and on 17th February, 186?, he was made fleet-paymaster. In the "Navy List" he appears among the officers entitled to wear medals on their uniforms. Had he lived until 14th April, 1897, he would have completed his three years' engagement on the *Centurion*, and retired as paymaster-in-chief at 60, the limit of age in the service, a pension of 450 pounds a year his reward from his country. A fleet-paymaster of his seniority, on full pay in duty, has 602 pounds per annum, with extras which run up to nearly another hundred, so that his salary from Her Majesty is 700 pounds a year. His pay runs about that of a Royal Navy captain, who is of the same rank as colonel in the navy and lieutenant-colonel of the army, but he has a much better income than either. These details and others can be amplified by reference to Whitaker's "Almanac" and the "Navy List".

It would be interesting to note all of the ships to which he was appointed. [The Ganges, a huge vessel of the wooden type of ship](#), must have been one of his earliest attachments. On the 31st of December, 1890, he has the appointment of district-paymaster of the *Devonshire* from Weymouth, and went round the Cornish coast, at the same time attached to *H.M.S. Alexandra*, his residence at Falmouth. He completed his three years' term as pay-master of the naval coast guard on 1st February 1894, and 14th February thereafter had the flag ship of the China station, the *Centurion*, with the complement of about 900 men, put under his financial care, the vessel new and a first-class battleship, with the latest improvements in gunnery and every other department. Its admiral was **Sir Edmund Freemantle**, youngest son of **Lord Cottesloe**, Buckinghamshire.

Fleet-paymaster Bremner has done notable land as well as sea service. For his personal exertions in saving a powder magazine from fire which consumed a range of stores, he had a complimentary gift of 50 pounds from the Admiralty, as unexpectedly as deservedly, and other such examples of readiness and resource were familiar to his naval comrades. Ability was his sole backstairs influence, and it stood him well afloat and ashore. He was Her Majesty's naval representative at Vancouver's Island, North America, and he held a similar position over the Island of Ascension for eight years, in married happiness, for he met in Vancouver Island, his wife, who at sixteen became the true helpmeet. At Hong Kong also they enjoyed a period of land duty, with united visits to the capital of Japan and other foreign scenes.

She was **Miss Skinner** of an Essex county family. Her father had a Canadian position offered him, and she left England at three years of age. Her ancestor, **Cyrus Skinner**, was Milton's beloved comrade, and she holds affinity to **Lord Coke**, England's greatest lawyer of olden days, while in the present, the **Bishop of Norwich** is her relative. Of their sons and daughters something can be said without invading reserve. The eldest, **Ernest Alexander Bremner** was made assistant-paymaster 23rd July, 1889, and he is now one of the pay-masters of H.M.S. Majestic, the newest and best ship in the navy, it is said. The second was **Eric Sinclair Bremner**, who died at the age of 20 at Falmouth in 1891, after showing the very powers as a scholar at Weymouth College, by taking prizes, passing first in exams, and mastering whatever he undertook. The third son **Archibald** is learning shipbuilding with the famous Dumbarton firm of Denny, his tendency towards mechanism and invention constitutionally strong. **Mrs. Robinson**, the eldest daughter has two delightful young children; her husband a paymaster in the navy, and at intervals holding the coveted position of secretary to admirals of flagships.

Hilda Bremner has finished her education in the famous Roman Catholic nunnery on the continent, which admits Protestant pupils with whose beliefs they in no manner interfere. Edith the youngest is being educated at a ladies' boarding school in the west of England. No father or mother could desire better of brighter representatives of themselves.

There is a local connection which asks treatment particularly. A biography would be a fitting tribute to **Fleet-paymaster Bremner**, and only in such space could justice be done to him. But these somewhat irregular references will be welcome to loyal Caithnessmen, and who of them is not appreciative of distinguished county individuals? In the burying ground of Canisbay Church there is a grave stone with the following inscription:

*"Erected by **John Bremner**, Pay-master, R.N., in memory of his father **Alexander Bremner**, late farmer in Freswick, who died February 3rd 1859, aged 62 years; also his mother, **Catherine Sutherland**, who died March 4th, 1865, aged 66 years." Beside the headstone lies an ancient flat stone with a coat of arms, three mullets over two quarters of a shield, the other two blank, supported by the letters I and M, the inscription reading, " Here is the monument of **Isabel Mowat**, daughter to the **Laird of Bochollie**, the --- the of Stanstill, who departed the 19th day of May, 1601".*

Of these two memorials hang considerable genealogical lore of trustworthy character as illustrated by oral information gleaned in the district in 1893. The mother of the fleet-paymaster was daughter of a **Sutherland** who married **Margaret Mowat**, a

known relative of the above lady of Stanstill, **Mrs. William Bruce**. Nor was this his only connection with the laird class, Sutherland's father was a proprietor of Ross-shire, who, because he took the side of Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1745, had to flee for hiding to Caithness to save his life. His grandson **David Sutherland** aged 86 in 1893, was an authority for the Ross-lairds history, in which he was well posted and well assured. But the **Bremner** side had its distinctions. The fleet-paymaster used to say that he remembered his father and uncles going to Wick 1856 to the funeral of [James Bremner, C.E. the builder of Wick harbour and the famous raiser of sunk ships](#). They went as his near relatives he a native of Keiss, and married to one of the **Sinclairs** in Ragra. Connection with the higher, as now known, the highest branch of the Sinclair family exists through the marriage of **Helen Bremner** to the **Hon. Robert Sinclair**, burgess and merchant of Wick. This from the parish registers is illustrative, "**Donald**, baptized, son to **Robert Sinclair** and **Helen Bremner** in Freswick, 18th, November 1770.

Their daughter **Isabella** was the heroine of an elopement from her father's house in Wick to Duncansbay, of which much has already been written. The child **Donald** was named after **Hon. Robert's** father, **Donald the Sailor**, son of Earl John's sole brother, the **Hon. David Sinclair** of Broynach and Janet Ewing. **Helen Bremner** was a sister of the fleet-paymaster's paternal grandfather or great grandfather. His sister, **Mrs. Banks**, Harrow, said there were Irvings also connected with the **Bremners**; and his own impression was that Stroma Island was the earliest known home of his father's people. In Canisbay parish register there is an entry thus: "November 17th 1716, **John Bremner** in Stroma contracted with **Ursula Irving** there." And it was pretty certain they were forbears.

In his own time, a **George Bremner** there traced kinship if not cousinship, to him, and one of **George's** sons was in the navy on *H.M.S. Wasp* and fell in capturing an African slave-dhow at the age of 30, about a generation ago. **Sidney Bremner**, Achow, Lybster, Latheron, is one of the same Bremners; and the fleet-paymaster has by another link to the House of Caithness, the Broynach **Sinclairs**. Through **Cormacks**, these Latheron, formerly Wick, **Bremners** were in affinity with the **Hon. John Sinclair**, son of **James**, the **Earl of Caithness**, known best as the chamberlain of Thrumster House. **The Hon. John's** son **George Dunbar Sinclair** was the father of **Thomas Sinclair**, the writer of these notes on the happy life and lamented death of his beloved friend, **John Bremner**, one of the manliest of men.

He was presented to the Queen by her admiral son, **Prince Alfred**, Duke of Edinburgh, now sovereign of Cobourg, who as his ses chum aided him on that occasion, even to the equipping him with his own sword. Naval officers see all the royal and other personages everywhere, and a reception in Russia was a special remembrance. Another of the memories he held dear was the hospitality he received from **James** the lord of Barrogil Castle, famous for his motor car and compass, when on a visit with **Mrs. Bremner**, many years ago to his native place.

Ruined Bucholly Castle was of so much interest that, at great trial to his nerves, his English wife examined with him its most difficult and precipitous parts, over the giddy unrestful waves. But **Bremner's** warmhearted reminiscences (his temperament not only poetic passively, but actively, in pleasantly-flowing rhymes) would fill volumes if they could be so collected. As he will always remain a Caithness notable, so lengthened a newspaper notice of his is entirely appropriate, and the hope is that his substantial biography may soon have its place on library shelves.

It may be of solace to his disconsolate widow at Alverstoke, near Portsmouth, in the select home she was busily decorating for him on his return to her from public duties, alas, never to be enjoyed by them in the dignity of union and leisure, to know that she and their family have the strong sympathy of her distinguished husband's countrymen of the north, where his brave eyes first saw the light.

My thanks to Fiona Bremner in Ottawa who provided me with this document.

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