

James Bremner... Men of the North

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MEN OF THE NORTH

“Trees are grown in the south
But men in the north.”

No. 1 JAMES BREMNER

“The pen is mightier than the sword,” so says the poet, or at least so sing **Messrs. Macniven and Cameron**, but we believe that it can be proved that the scissors is mightier than either or both put together, not only because of the importance of the cunning art of dressmaking, but by reason of the almost universal potency of the scissors in the press, on the platform, and in the pulpit. The amount of midnight oil that is consumed in the minister's study, especially during the forenoon hours, is wonderful to think upon, whilst his busy and overwrought fingers are plying the willing instrument, snip snipping, here a gem from **Cook**, there a “burst” from **Talmage**; and were the average newspaper to be deprived of “clipped out” matter, its appearance would resemble in appearance (*illegible*) Waterloo flag, riddled and torn by the bullets of all the Peninsular campaigns, or perhaps almost as porous as a herring net itself.

Our subject was no warrior of the pen, no knight either of the sword or scissors, and our reference to these implements is simply a sort of apology for some extracts, one lengthy passage from **Hugh Miller**¹ in particular, which we think will be found interesting and of no little importance to the people of Wick at the present time. A few preliminary paragraphs will be necessary before we get under way with our long quotations.

There is a genuine fresh Caithness breath about the name of **James Bremner**. His family had belonged to Caithness for generations, and on the shores of Keiss bay our hero began his earthly pilgrimage on the 25th September, 1784. There our bold rocky northern coast seems to relent its sternness (*sic*) of face, and subsides into a semi-circle of level links fringed for four miles by a fine stretch of sand. From his earliest years **James Bremner** knew (by sight, at least) the pyramids of Morven and the Maidens of Caithness that break the long level of the southern horizon, but he had a much closer companionship with the waves that beat into Keiss Bay, and many a rough tumble he had with these rude playmates, whose forces he was at a later time to measure his strength and skill against and to overthrow in fair and open fight. When a mere youngster he was discovered one fine morning, afloat in a washing-tub, paddling about on the bay, and no boy was half so venturesome as he in scrambling among the rocks and crags of the neighbourhood.

James was the youngest of nine children. His father had been a soldier in the Third Regiment of the Line – the famous Buffs – and had shared in their hard fighting in the West Indies. He was thrice wounded in action, and of 850 men who composed the regiment when it first went abroad, **Bremner** was one of twenty-seven who, after the lapse of ten years, survived to see their native land. After some service in Ireland during the Rebellion, **Bremner** got his discharge and settled in his native parish. He was a steady well-conducted man, and possessed of considerable energy and force of character.

After a very imperfect school education, when sixteen years of age, **James** entered the shipbuilding yards of **Messrs. Steele**, Greenock, where he served an apprenticeship of six years. He made two voyages to America, then returned to Caithness to commence business on his own account as a shipbuilder. He obtained at life lease of the building yard near the harbour of Pulteneytown, where he built in all some 56 vessels, ranging from 45 to 600 tons. He soon began to develop his power as an engineer, and in this capacity he made or improved no fewer than 19 harbours, of which that of Pulteneytown is one. He was

¹ Hugh Miller (1802-1856), self-taught Scottish geologist, specialist in Devonian fossil fish of Scotland. Despite his geological studies, Miller remained a Creationist.

ordered to London to be examined before a Committee of the House of Lords on the subject of harbours of refuge, and during the same visit took out a patent for harbour building.

James Bremner was born a king as regards power over physical forces. He made the strength of the sea and air bow to his will in a most remarkable way. Not only did he become famous as an engineer, but he attained celebrity as a raiser of wrecked and sunk vessels. The total which he lifted in deep water of took off the strand is said to have been 236. "Of these raised, the most remarkable was a large vessel which had sunk at Broadbay in the Lews. Her name was the *Unicorn*, of Sutherland, and her cargo was 700 tons of coal. She went down in eleven fathoms, and the aggregate weight of ship and cargo was over 1100 tons. After she had lain embedded in the sand for two years, and after three other engineers had failed to raise her, **Mr. Bremner** succeeded by employing means much the same as those for which he had obtained a patent for harbour building. He was successful with another vessel, the *Orion* of Pillau, which had sunk at Watersound in Orkney in 1825. The cargo consisted of 40,000 feet of timber, which with the wreck of the ship he made into a raft 450 feet long, 22 feet broad, and 16 deep, on which he constructed paddles wrought by manual labour, erected poles with sails, and after twice being driven through the Pentland Firth, he succeeded in bringing the whole to Pulteneytown Harbour."

Mr. Bremner was consulted by his professional brethren upon various important works, such as the Thames Tunnel and Dover Harbour. **Sir Charles Napier**² presented him with a massive gold ring as a mark of respect.

We now extract the following from one of **Hugh Miller's** most delightful books. He says of an account on a visit to the North in 1846: - "I took coach at Invergordon for Wick early in the morning of Friday; and, after a weary ride, in a bleak gusty day, that sent the dust of the road whirling about the ears of the sorely tossed 'outsiders,' with whom I had taken my chance, I alighted in Wick, at the inn door, after six o'clock in the evening. The following morning was wet and dreary; and a tumbling sea, raised by the wind of the previous day and night, came rolling into the bay; but the waves bore with them no steamer; and when, some five hours after the expected time, she also came rolling in, her darkened and weather-beaten sides and rigging gave evidence that her passage from the south had been no holiday trip. Impatient, however, of looking out upon the sea for hours under dripping eaves, and through the dimmed panes of steaming windows, I got aboard with about half a dozen passengers; and while the Wick goods were in the course of being transferred to tow large boats alongside, we lay tossing in the open bay. The work of raising box and package was superintended by a tall elderly gentleman from the shore, peculiarly Scotch in his appearance, the steam company's agent for this part of the country. 'That' said an acquaintance, pointing to the agent, 'is a very extraordinary man, in his own special walk, one of the most original-minded, and at the same time most thoroughly practical, you ever saw. That is **Mr. Bremner** of Wick, known now all over Britain for his success in raising foundered vessels, when every one else gives them up. In the lifting of vast weights, or the overcoming of *vis inertia* of the hugest (*sic*) bodies, nothing ever baffles **Mr. Bremner**. But come, I must introduce you to him. He takes an interest in your peculiar science, and is familiar with your geological writings.' I was accordingly introduced to **Mr. Bremner**, and passed in his company the half-hour which we spent in the bay in a way that made me wish the time doubled. I had been struck by the peculiar style of masonry employed in the harbour of Wick, and by its rock like strength. The gray ponderous stones of the flagstone series of which it is built, instead of being placed on their flatter beds, like common ashlar in a building, or horizontal strata in a quarry, are raised on end, like staves in a pail or barrel, so that at some little distance the work looks like as if formed by upright piles or beams jammed fast together. I had learned that **Mr. Bremner** had been the builder, and adverted to the peculiarity of his style of building. 'You have give a vertical tilt to your strata,' I said, 'most men would have preferred the horizontal position. It used to be regarded as one of the standing rules of my old profession, that the broad bed of a stone is the best, and should always be laid below.' 'A good rule for the land,' replied **Mr. Bremner**, 'but no good rule for the sea. The greatest blunders are almost always perpetrated through the misapplication of good rules. On a coast like ours, where boulders of a ton weight are rolled about with every storm like pebbles, theses stones if placed on what a workman wold term their best beds, would be scattered along the shore like a sea-wrack, by the gales of a single winter. In setting aside the prejudice,' continued **Mr. Bremner**, 'that what in indisputably the best bed for a stone of dry land is also the best bed

² General Sir Charles James Napier (1782-1853), best known for conquering Sindh provinces in what is now Pakistan.

in the water on an exposed coast, I reasoned thus: - The surf that dashes along the beach in times of tempest, and that forms the enemy with which I have to contend, is not simply water, with an onward impetus communicated to it by the wind and tide, and a re-active impetus in the opposite direction, the effect of the backward rebound and of its own weight when (illegible) ... above its average level of surface. True it is all of this; but it is also something more. As its white breath of foam indicates, it is a subtle mixture of water and air, with a powerful upward action, a consequence of the air struggling to effect its escape; and this upward action must be taken into account in our calculations as certainly as the other and more generally recognized actions. In striking against a piece of building, this subtle mixture dashes through the interstices into the interior of the masonry, and, by filling up all its cavities, has, by its upward action a tendency to *set the work afloat*. And the broader the beds of the stones, of course the more extensive are the surfaces which it has to act upon. One of these flat flags, ten feet by four and a foot in thickness, would present to this upheaving force, if placed on end, a superficies of but *four* square feet; whereas, if placed on its broader base, it would present to it a superficies of *forty* square feet. Obviously then, with regard to this aerial upheaving force, that acts upon the masonry in a direction in which no precautions are usually adopted to bind it fast – for the existence of the force itself is not taken into account – the greater bed of stone must be just ten times over a worse bed than its lesser one; and on a tempestuous foam-circled (*sic*) like ours, this aerial upheaving force is in reality, though the builder may not know it, one of the most formidable forces with which he has to deal. And so on these principles I ventured to set my stones on end – on what was deemed their *worst* not their *best* beds – wedging them all fast together like staves in an anker; and there to the scandal of all the old rules, are they fast wedged still, firm as a rock.’ ”

We would commend the foregoing to the serious attention of the new harbour Trustees of Wick. No man understood the power of the waves that break into Wick Bay or the difficulties of resisting them better than **James Bremner**, and his authority as a practical engineer was second to none in his day. It is a curious fact that men do not profit by the wisdom and experience of their fathers as they might and should. History shows this continually; the same mistakes are made time after time. The qualifications for some people for very difficult work are often of the same class as those of the man who, when asked if he could play the fiddle, answered “ I dinna ken; I think I could – I never tried.” It may be profane on our part to hint that the present Harbour Trustees and their chosen engineer have yet to prove their superiority to **James Bremner**.

In further conversation with **Hugh Miller**, **James Bremner** went on to say – “ I once raised a vessel – a large collier, choke full of coal, which an English projector had actually engaged to raise with huge bags of India rubber, inflated with air. But the bags, of course taxed far beyond their strength, collapsed or burst; so that when I succeeded in bringing the vessel up, through the employment of more adequate means, I got not only ship and cargo, but also a great deal of India rubber to boot.”

“Only a few months ,” says **Hugh Miller**, “ after I enjoyed the pleasure of this interview with the **Brindley**³ of Scotland, he was called south to the greatest feat in at least one special department – the raising and warping off of the Great Britain steamer from her perilous bed in the sand of an exposed bay on the coast of Ireland. I was conscious of a feeling of sadness, as in parting with Mr. Bremner I reflected that a man so singularly gifted should have been suffered to reach a period of life very considerably advanced, in employments little suited to exert his extraordinary faculties, and which persons of the ordinary type could have performed as well. **Napoleon** – himself possessed of great genius – could have estimated more adequately than our British rulers the value of such a man. Had **Mr. Bremner** been born a Frenchman, he would not have been the mere agent of a steam company in a third-rate seaport town.”

We do not like to see Wick termed a third-rate port, but of course with such firsts and seconds as Liverpool and Sunderland, Wick is a one-horse concern.

Mr. Bremner was tall, strong, and robust in build. Somewhat slow in speech and quick in temper, he was generous and hospitable in the extreme. In saving the lives of others in cases of shipwreck, he often risked his own; and when any distressing accident took place before his sight, he has been known to burst into

³ James Brindley (1716-1772), Canal builder in England, noted for his construction of the Bridgewater Canal. Brindley and Bremner shared their engineering expertise despite a lack of formal training in the field.

tears like a woman. When the sailors or fishermen were in danger, no man exerted himself more to save life than **Mr. Bremner**. Long, long ago, says one who knew him well, as far back as I can remember, one dark stormy night a large ship mistook a light in **Mr. Wares** house on the north side for the Pentland Skerries, and ran right in at the Odd. **Mr. Bremner** at once proceeded to muster a crew and pulled to the wreck. The seamen soon got on board the boat, but the captain would not leave his doomed ship upon any account, saying he would perish with her. All entreaty having failed, **Mr. Bremner** sprang on board and found the broken-hearted skipper sitting up to his knees in water, in the cabin.

“Well! Well! Captain,” said **Bremner**, “shake hands and goodbye.” As the captain raised his hand he found his wrist held in a grip like a vice, and **Mr. Bremner** drew him out of the cabin like a sillock. Catching hold of the rigging, however, he still seemed determined to be drowned, but his captor tore him off by superior strength and pitched him right over into the boat; so all were saved. This was the first occasion that **Mr. Bremner** came to the front in such work, and even after he was the lead in all life-saving enterprises.

(The next part of the newspaper clipping has been cut off on the right-hand margin.)

Our hero died in August, 1856. He had married in early life, and survived the loss of his wife (*missing*) months, leaving a large family to mourn (*missing*). His son **David** had given great promise as an (*missing*) and his death in early manhood was a great (*missing*) his parent who soon followed. **Mr. Bremner** attended the Parish Church of Wick and was interred in the kirkyard there. His dwelling (*missing*) was that large square –built detached building (*missing*) Pulteneytown, facing the north, and overlooking the old harbour. Among the older townsmen of (*Wick*) a few of his personal friends may be counted.

“ A prophet is not without honour save in (*missing*) country.” Strangers may come and go and (*missing*) learn that **James Bremner** is such a man even (*in*) Wick. No memorial of his adorns our (*missing*) generations may pass before such another (*missing*) arises. It would be small thing for a population like Wick to raise a modest monument (*missing*) **Bremner**, and we feel sure that our fishermen (*missing*) not be unwilling to subscribe of their (*missing*) winnings to commemorate the memory and the (*missing*) the brave kindly man who did so much to further the prosperity of Wick – who spent his days at (*missing*) harbour mouth, and who risked his life so (*missing*) them or for their fathers.”

(Such a monument was erected in December, 1903)