

Death of William Brebner Esq.

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The citizens of Glasgow, and indeed the public of a much wider range of country than the West of Scotland will learn with the deepest regret of the sudden and unexpected death of **William Brebner Esq.**, Governor of the Prisons of Glasgow, and Superintendent of the Prisons of Lanarkshire. On Monday morning last, Mr. Brebner left this city by the half-past eight o'clock train for Edinburgh, where he was to attend a meeting of the Committee of the General Prisons' Board, for whom he had been called upon hurriedly to prepare some intricate official returns. **Mr. B.** arrived in Edinburgh, apparently in his usual state of health, and proceeded accompanied by a friend, to the Prison Board Rooms. He had just entered the office of the Clerk, and given the usual morning salutation when he suddenly fell down. Medical assistance was promptly called and **Professor Lizars** was almost immediately in attendance but professional services were found to be of no avail, **Mr. Brebner's** death having been instantaneous. For a considerable time previous to Monday, the deceased had been almost day and night occupied in making up these returns; but we have not heard that he experienced any illness in consequence, or even inconvenience worthy of notice. Immediately on the event taking place, the Secretary of the General Board sent off an express engine to the officials in Glasgow, that the melancholy tidings might be communicated in a becoming manner to **Mrs. Brebner** before public rumour had conveyed to her intelligence of her sad bereavement. The body was brought to Glasgow the same evening in charge of a relative; and being subjected to a post mortem examination the following day, it was ascertained that death was caused by a rupture of the vessels in the heart.

The sudden demise of this estimable public servant cannot be regarded otherwise than as a general loss, which will not easily be repaired. For the period of 40 years, during which he had been connected with the Bridewell, and latterly with the prisons of Glasgow and Lanarkshire, his whole existence was devoted to the devising and carrying into execution schemes for the moral rescue and amelioration of the thousands and thousands of unhappy beings committed during that period to his charge; and often and again they have stated that – remove **Mr. Brebner**, and they had no friend in the wide world besides. His efforts were not only devoted to reclaiming these outcasts, and teaching them habits of industry, within the walls of a prison, but in fostering and encouraging them in their resolutions for good, when they had recovered their liberty; and could we collect the concentrated expressions of the gratitude of those whose course be arrested when on the high road to penal settlements or the gallows, they would form a monument more enduring than brass, and an epitaph more to be envied than that over the proudest conqueror. For, in verity, his conquests were the conquests of peace and love over the worst passions of the most depraved of human kind. One great element of this success was the talent which enabled him intuitively to find the key to that part in every prisoner's disposition which was assailable for good, and the disposition to work out his reforms in a spirit of kindly firmness. He readily won the affections of the most obdurate prisoners; and the endearing accents which they were wont to address him, as, "Oh, Maister," showed that he was regarded by them not as the jailor and taskmaster, but as the father and friend. **Mr. Brebner**, as the Governor of Glasgow Bridewell, commenced his system of prison discipline and amelioration long before there were any acts of Parliament to encourage and help him. For a lengthened period of years, the Bridewell here has been regarded as the model prison of the kingdom; and scarcely a work of reform has commenced in any of the jails of Scotland in which his advice has not been asked, and taken; and in Ireland, also, the benefits of his aid have been readily acknowledged. Among the philanthropists of the United States of America, his name is as well known as amongst the people in our own city, and it is admitted that, in that country, the system of which he is the originator has been found the most successful in reclaiming the depraved. But more than this, the detail of his plans has been requested by the Institute of France, and more than once formed the subject of the approving comment and discussions of the Members. An all of this while, **Mr. Brebner**, as a private citizen, moved so noiselessly and unobtrusively out and amongst us, that, but for the recital of his good deeds, which came from others, not himself, we might have been unaware that such a man formed a member of our community.

Mr. Brebner was a native of the parish of Huntly, in Aberdeenshire, and his age, we believe, was a year or two beyond sixtyⁱⁱ. For a time he filled a situation in a shipping office in Aberdeen; but when he was still a very young man, he removed to Glasgow, and became the Clerk and Assistant of the Bridewell in College Street, and afterwards in Duke Street. We may mention episodically that in 1792 the Magistrates acquired a lease from the College as a part of their property in High Street; now occupied by College Street, and fitted it up as a place of confinement for dissolute characters; but as this was only a temporary arrangement, they erected a permanent Bridewell in Duke Street, which was opened on 8th May, 1798 and supported by the Corporation funds for upwards of 24 years afterwards. This building, which is now exclusively occupied by females, contains 115 cells, and forms the nucleus round which the additional extensive wings have been raised, giving a total of 415 cells. This extended structure, which accommodates County, as well as City prisoners, and is supported by assessment, was partly opened on 25th December, 1824; the last wing having been only completed four or five years ago. On the demise of **Mr. Andrew**, about 36 years ago, **Mr. Brebner** succeeded him as Governor of Bridewell, which situation he filled till his death. Subsequent to the passing of the recent Prisons Act of Parliament, **Mr. B.** was appointed Governor of the Jail also, the names being changed respectively to North and South Prison. He was at the same time charged with Superintendent of all the Prisons in Lanarkshire.

The deceased has left a widowⁱⁱⁱ to deplore a loss which the world cannot make good, although it may be some consolation to his relatives to know that he has died beloved more extensively and sincerely than falls to the lot of ordinary men. On the day following **Mr. Brebner's** death the Prison's Board Committee for the Lower Ward met and recorded their deep sorrow at the dispensation which had deprived them of the assistance of such a valuable servant and coadjutor. The emoluments enjoyed by **Mr. B.** of late years were 500 guineas per annum, free residence, &c., and no man earned his reward more honestly and laboriously. Although it is possible that the Prisons Board will not feel called on to continue that sum to the Governor who will in due course fall to be appointed, all we can say is that will be difficult to find a successor like unto the deceased at any price. The remains we understand are to be interred on Monday first.

ⁱ Date of death was 6th January 1845.

ⁱⁱ Glasgow Burial Index gives age as 61.

ⁱⁱⁱ Margaret Andrew married in Glasgow in 1811.