

As with any history, there will be certain mysteries that can never be fully unravelled. One of the greater mysteries for me (from a personal family history perspective) revolves around the circumstances and reasons behind Mary Ann Ritch's immigration to the Peace River Country to marry Peter Gunn. There are certain facts in evidence that make me cautious regarding the family's version of the story. According to the family 'memory' there was an assumption that Mary and Peter were engaged while living in Scotland. This would mean they were engaged before June, 1883 and lived apart for eight years before Mary finally made her way to the Peace Country in 1891. It adds a bit of romantic drama, but pining away for each other for eight long years does not seem to me to be realistic. In 1883, the year Peter joined the Hudson's Bay Company (enticed by the wages of 6 pounds per year), Mary would have been 18 and Peter 19. It is possible that they became engaged before he left for the Canadian Northwest, and it may well have been his intention to return to Mary when his contract expired in five years. However, the existence of Isabella Bremner makes this possibility quite unlikely. On December 23rd of 1883, about seven months after Peter and her brother Charles sailed for Canada on the HBC's Prince Rupert, she gave birth to daughter Mary. She and Peter (in his absence) were later found guilty of anti-nuptial fornication and were admonished by the Kirk Session of the Parish of Hoy (admonishment was a requirement before the child of such an act could be baptised).

Based on the evidence, at some point between April of 1881 and February of 1883, Peter moved from Thurso, on the northern coast of Scotland in the County of Caithness, to the Orkney Island of Hoy. In 1881, at the age of 17, according to the Scottish census, Peter worked as a shepherd with or for Alexander Miller at Ham in the town of Dunnet, in northern Caithness (very close to Thurso), and according to Peter's HBC biographical record, on February 26, 1883 he was living in the Parish of Hoy. The HBC's Prince Rupert did not set sail until late May or early June, 1883 (according to Francis Worth Beaton, he, John Sutherland, Charles Bremner - brother to Isabella - and Peter Gunn joined the HBC and sailed to Canada on the same ship at the same time; and Francis Beaton did not join the HBC until May 24, 1883 - as per his HBC biographical record), so the timing works. It is conceivable and likely that Isabella and Peter were together in late March or early April. However, there is no evidence to suggest whether it was a short or long term relationship.

In 1881, Charles Bremner was working as a farm servant at Orgil, Hoy (Orgil, Linksness, Tuefies, Greenfield, and New Stead all hover around the Bay of Quoys, about three miles north of Rackwick), and on February 28, 1883, according to his HBC biographical record, he lived on a steddung farm in Hoy, Orkney. According to census information, Charles Bremner's parents lived at Tuefies in 1881. I must assume that Isabella, at the age of 26 at this time, was living and working somewhere in the area (it isn't clear where she was at this time according to the online census data). Assuming that she was impregnated by Peter, she must have been somewhere in Hoy. Pulling the facts together, the most likely scenario is that Peter came to the Island of Hoy to work on a farm or as a fisherman where he met up with Charles and Isabella. It is also possible that he had met Mary around this time as well - she lived in Rackwick, only three miles away

from the Bremners (but I must assume, giving Peter the benefit of the doubt, that it would have been on a casual basis only - although impregnating one girl and promising marriage to another is not beyond the range of possibility).

Given the circumstances, I believe it is also possible that Isabella lied about the father of her illegitimate daughter to protect the real father – this would have been relatively easy as Peter Gunn was not around to defend himself. Another possibility is that she and Peter did plan to marry when he returned from Canada, but when he decided not to return, Isabella sought comfort with another man (she married William Omand on February 24th, 1887 and gave birth to a son seven months later - She was once again admonished by the Kirk Session regarding this birth, suggesting a pattern of behaviour). I cannot find a direct connection between Mary's and Peter's families, and therefore I am not completely comfortable with the idea of an arranged marriage. However, it is possible that the Bremners were friends of the Ritch family, and as a favour to the Bremners, Mary's parents could have arranged for her marriage to Peter (after Isabella decided not to follow Peter to Canada and married William Omand instead). Mary's grandmother was a daughter of Donald Gunn, born in 1766 in Wick of the County of Caithness, but Peter's mother is descended from another branch of the Gunns who originated from the Kildonan area.

I cannot comprehend of any reasonable circumstances that would have Mary and Peter engaged before he left, unless he was not the father of Isabella's child. And even then, I would wonder why Mary would wait eight years to join Peter (if he planned to return to Hoy after five years with the HBC, why wouldn't Mary have joined him in 1888 or 1889?) To remain a friend of Charles for the rest of his life, I must also assume that Peter intended to do the 'right' thing regarding Charles' sister. Another small piece of evidence also suggests that Peter, through his friend Charles, provided financial assistance to his daughter's grandparents (Charles sent his HBC earnings back to his parents, who raised Isabella's daughter as their own).

The facts are that Peter, Isabella, Charles and Mary were all in Hoy at the same time. Isabella became pregnant in late March or early April of 1883 and gave birth to a daughter on December 23, 1883. Isabella identified Peter Gunn as the father. Isabella married William Omand in February, 1887. Peter's contract expired in 1888 but he decided to stay in Canada. Mary emigrated to Canada in 1891 to marry Peter. Peter and Charles were life-long friends.

Mary Bremner lived with her grandparents in Tufessies until after her grandfather John's death in August, 1902. She then moved to Edinburg. Betsy Ritch married George Robb in 1893 and they lived in Quoys (Betsy died there in 1947). So, it is clear that the Ritch's and Bremner's knew each other quite well.

At the age of seven, Peter was living with his grandparents. Mary, daughter to Peter, lived with her grandparents her whole life. She apparently thought of her grandparents as her parents, as did her descendents until they uncovered the Kirk Session records. In those days apparently, illegitimate children did not live with their mother. Illegitimate children were, however, quite

common. Peter, Isabella's daughter, and Mary's sister Betsy's first child were all illegitimate, and they were all raised by their grandparents.

It is clear that antinupual fornication was prohibited in northern Scotland in the 1800's. This is no surprise, as this was the case for most of the West until the later 1900's. Arranged marriages were also apparently quite common, so it is possible that Mary, at the spinsterly age of 26 was sent off as directed by her father to Canada to marry Peter. To know of Peter, they had to have known the Bremners, or Mary and Peter knew each other before he left. This leaves two equally possible scenarios. The likely scenario is that in and around 1888, Peter Gunn was looking for a wife, and Mary, at the age of 26 was a prime candidate. She and her family were living in poverty, and when the Ritch's become aware of Peter's circumstances, Mary, who may have met Peter in 1883, decided, or agreed in the best interests of her family, to emigrate to Canada and marry a virtual stranger.

Hughina, younger sister to Peter, lived with her father's (William MacDonald) relatives after the death of her mother Barbara in 1890. She later married a William Swanson and immigrated to Edmonton, Canada in 1906. Their daughter is the niece who was quoted as recalling the emergency visit from Lac St. Anne by Peter and dying daughter Barbara Jessie in 1911.

Hoy is only 10 miles long by 5 miles wide. In 1900 there were 80 residents in Rackwick, a crofting township (<http://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/hoy/hoy/index.html>) but only five people live there today. The Islands likely experienced a population surge, due to the Highland Clearances, as former crofters pushed off their lands for sheep, tried their lot at fishing. John Bremner himself came over to Hoy from Caithness in 1848 and settled in Saltness with his new wife. The Island of Hoy, however, could sustain only so many crofters and fishermen, and the population likely peaked in the 1850's. Later on, croft farming and fishing (after the Russian revolution) also likely became generally unsustainable occupations in Hoy, and as sheep farming took over here as well, the population slowly moved to Orkney towns such as Stromness and Kirkwall. Some of the more adventurous likely moved to Edinburg or Glasgow, while others joined the Hudson's Bay Company. The population of the Orkneys was at a high in the 1850's at 26,000 but it had declined to about 19,000 by 2001. By 2001, the population of the entire Island of Hoy was only 272. One hundred and twenty years earlier, the population was likely quite a bit higher, but given the lack of differentiation in surnames, I would suspect that everyone was related to everyone else.

We see a similar pattern with the town of Rochfort Bridge. A bustling town in the mid 1900's, with the advent of advanced farming methods and 'corporate farming' it, as with many other towns, suffered significant declines and today it is a ghost of what it once was.

At almost 59' latitude, Rackwick lies at about 70 miles south of the same latitude as the northern border of the Province of Alberta. However, its weather is moderated by the Gulf Stream and as such it does not suffer harsh winters, although temperatures will occasionally dip below zero.

On the other hand, summers are cooler than in northern Alberta, normally reaching maximum highs of only 19 degrees Celsius. If an Orkneyan were to arrive in Alberta in the summer he or she would be overjoyed at the difference. Both places would receive about the same amount of sunshine – hardly any in winter, and too much in the summer. If an Orkneyan were to lie on the beach at Rackwick Bay or in the Peace River Valley on a late summer night, and look upward, he could fool himself into believing he had never left home. The night sky in Fort St. John and in Rackwick Bay would be identical. I imagine that the Great Bear and Polaris guided our forefathers in the Orkneys and Caithness just as they guide us in northern Alberta. The always there Great Bear would be a constant reassurance that the world is as it always was. The Aurora would be another reminder of home, and perhaps in a quiet moment one would think of his or her relatives living thousands of miles away on an old rock bay. A bay in which their ancestors had lived for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years.

According to available census data, the Ritch and Sinclair families lived in and around Rackwick since at least the mid 1700's. The Clans Sinclair and Gunn have Orkney and Northern Scotland origins all the way back to the eleventh century. The Picts were in the Orkneys long before the Vikings and the residents before them – and likely longer still as descendents of the Vikings – and perhaps even longer still as descendents of the Picts – and perhaps even longer still as descendents of those who built the Dwarfie Stane in 3000 BCE.

Those who built the Dwarfie Stane in Hoy in about 3000 BCE, were likely infiltrated by the Picts in the early Middle Ages. After several centuries of mixing things up, the Vikings took up residence and added their DNA into the mix. The Scottish Sinclairs took up residence in Northern Scotland and the Orkneys at some time in the twelfth century, and the Viking Gunns settled in Sutherland and Caithness sometime in the thirteenth century.

Stocking Knitter, Fellow Servant, Salmon Fisher, Fisherman's Daughter, Crofter, Farm Servant, House Servant. "Pauper at death". Paupers all. In class conscious Scotland, they were born paupers and paupers they remained – generation after generation. Had they chosen to stay in Scotland, and migrate to Edinburgh or Glasgow, they would have stayed paupers – instead of Farm Servants, Fishermen, and Stocking Knitters they would have been factory labourers and bar maids. But, they chose to come to Canada. Paupers at first, yes. But they were among equals. And as the years passed they built their lives, and their towns and cities grew, and they forgot hunger and they knew warmth, and their houses became larger. And yet they were still among equals, but in a world where the equal had all they could ever need.

Rackwick is apparently one of the most beautiful locations in the Orkneys. And just 3 or so miles from the Bay of Quoy, they had relatively quick access to Stromness – half a mile across the strait to Graemsay, a mile across the island and then another half a mile across another strait to the Mainland.

Hugh Ritch once owned a bed and breakfast at Rackwick.