

Dr John Adie, surgeon, R.N.: a biography (Part two)

by Chris Adie



The old house of Voe, on the left of Brungasta.

Photo: Shetland Museum and Archives.

Up until 1820 John seems to have managed to pay £42 annually every Whitsunday for the rent of the small estate he had leased at Stenness, Walls. However, in May 1820 he asked Thomas Smith for more time to pay, so he would not have to borrow the money from friends. Smith (knowing John's history of financial difficulties) immediately raised an action in the Sheriff court, demanding immediate payment on pain of instant eviction. John's friends rallied round, and he managed to gather together enough cash and 'good bills' to meet the rent.

John needed to pay back his friends. In March 1820, he had attended the sickbed of Thomas James Thomson, the twelve-year-old son of local minister Reverend David Thomson. Sadly John was unable to save him, and the boy died on 22 March. In August, John wrote to the minister, demanding the substantial –indeed excessive – sum of £30 8s for 'eleven days attendance', and threatening prosecution if not paid within three days. The minister's wife had to borrow the money from a relative.

In addition to the fishing and the doctoring, John was also involved in trading quoys and stots – female and male cattle – buying them from local crofters and selling on to merchants such as Hay and Ogilvy for slaughter and transport south. However, despite these attempts at turning a profit, he found himself in debt again – not an uncommon problem for small lairds at the time.

In 1822, John's creditors William Baillie and Gilbert

Robertson obtained writs to 'arrest' (ie impound as security for debt) some goods which John had arranged to be sent from Leith. These articles (perhaps fishing gear?) were held by Charles Ogilvy (of Hay and Ogilvy), but somehow John managed to have the goods delivered to him. This led in 1823 to a complicated legal action by Robertson and Baillie against Ogilvy, involving also Robert Leslie, vendor of the goods in Leith, and William Taylor, agent for the sloop which transported the goods from Leith to Lerwick. John Adie, who had caused all this trouble, chose this time to vanish from Shetland.

Seafaring 1823 -1826

In 1813, the East India Company (EIC) lost its monopoly on trade with the Far East and India (with a few exceptions) and from then on privately-owned ships, known within the EIC as 'interlopers', were able to trade there. Large profits could be made, not only by the shipowners but by individuals on board, trading privately on their own account. As well as the usual deck officers and seamen, the interlopers also required specialist officers such as masters, purasers and carpenters. And surgeons.

As a half-pay naval officer, John was expected to remain in Britain, available for service should war break out. However, in July 1823 he wrote to the Admiralty requesting two years leave of absence from

March 1824, in order to accept a situation as surgeon on board a ‘private trader’ going to the East Indies. Permission was granted, subject to various conditions.

By September 1823, John was in London with his elder son James, then fifteen. Under his father’s direction, James signed up as an apprentice with ship owners Thomas and Robert Brown of Church Row, Fenchurch Street, to learn ‘the Art of a Mariner’.

Exactly when and on which ship John and his son departed for the East Indies is unknown. The voyage round the Cape of Good Hope to India could take four months or more, and, if they went to Malaysia, even longer. It’s likely that they returned to London in 1825 but departed again on a second voyage. By March 1826 John had run out of Admiralty leave, but it was not until October 1826 that, having asked for a year’s extension, he was given two years – but his half-pay was stopped.

Eventually, in November 1826, John and young James returned from Bombay to London. John dispatched their luggage to William Hay at Lerwick, making arrangements to disguise its ownership because ‘the peasantry are rather inquisitive’ and so that his creditors would not impound it. Strangely, he made sure to let Hay know that the trunks contained his soiled underclothes, unwashed since Bombay. Perhaps this was to discourage investigation and pilferage of other, more valuable, contents!

(In his letter to William Hay, John boasts that he and ‘Melbie’, presumably John Scott of Melby, Sandness (1760-1850), had wined and dined the previous day with the Duke of Clarence, younger brother of the then king, George IV. The duke was well known for his informality and dislike of pomp. He had served as a naval captain under Nelson, and he and John had a mutual acquaintance in George Elliot, former captain of HMS *Aurora*, so the two men would have had more in common than you might think. In 1830 the duke succeeded to the throne as William IV, the ‘Sailor King’)

A few days later, on 10 December 1826, John set off from London for home. For the three and a half years of his absence, Mary Ann had carried on at Stapness, not only looking after the household, but also the estate and the fishings. She of course had no tiny babies to nurse during this period, though (as the doctor’s wife) she does seem to have been relied on by the local midwife for help. She was careful with money, which she seems to have had enough of, despite pressure from her husband’s creditors.

Voe 1827-1837

It seems that John’s trading voyages were profitable, for there were no more litigious creditors – presumably

he managed to pay off his debts. Disinclined to carry on with estate and fishing business, he resumed his medical work. The north of the islands, particularly Northmavine, seems at the time to have lacked a medical practitioner, and Christopher Sandison of Eshaness got up a petition to persuade Dr Adie to settle at Voe, from where he could reach much of the north mainland by sea.

As a freemason, John would have socialised with many of the local lairds, and Arthur Gifford of Busta (whose estate included much of Northmavine and Delting) also seems to have encouraged John to move.

Arthur Gifford’s father Gideon had evicted a number of crofters around Olnafirth some time in the late 18th century and turned the area into a huge sheep farm. A Mr Welch was engaged as the manager or shepherd, and a house was built for him. The ‘Old House of Voe’, as it came to be known, was located immediately west of the present-day house of Brungasta (built 1903), and it survived until the early years of the twentieth century. The sheep farm eventually failed due to disease and, in the summer of 1827, John and his family moved into the Old House of Voe at Gifford’s invitation.

In January 1828 Mary Ann had another boy child. Gifford’s patronage (and probable financial support) must have been of great assistance to John, who named his new son Arthur Gifford Adie in Busta’s honour.

If you were unwell in 19th century Shetland, you had two options, just like today: either you could go to the doctor, or the doctor could come to you. Unless you lived very close by, the latter option was available only if you had enough money. In practice, only the lairds could afford to send for the doctor.

In 1827, John inherited over £80 from his maternal aunt, Ann Sanders. This capital must have helped him build a ‘new house’ the following year, part of which was used as a preaching house for visiting ministers and as a Sunday school. This ‘new house’ is likely the smaller building abutting the west gable of the old house, visible in the photograph (p.17). Teachers in the Sunday school included John’s daughters Eliza and Harriet, then aged 15 and 20.

Sadly their eldest sibling Amelia died at Voe in March 1830, aged 27. Born in 1803 when John was still in the navy, we know nothing about her life, nor indeed her death and burial, which went unrecorded in the parish register.

John’s half pay resumed in 1829 and there was enough money to send John and Mary Ann’s second son, Thomas, to school in Ayrshire. Thomas had not done well at school in Lerwick but in Ayrshire he flourished academically. From there he wrote (under the headmaster’s supervision) very carefully composed and neatly handwritten letters to his proud parents.

He informed them that, due to poor eyesight, he was disinclined to become a surgeon like his father, and instead had decided to become a merchant.

On leaving school in August 1831, Thomas started in business, in partnership with brother James. They used part of the house – presumably the extension recently built by John – as a shop. There is not space here to record the early days of what eventually became T M Adie & Sons, but it is clear that profit from the brothers' mercantile activities was an important source of income for the family.

Harriet married in July 1830, and Eliza married in April 1831. Their departure, and the birth of Mary Ann's last child Robina Hunter Adie in June 1832, made for a household of seven children: James (23), Thomas (17), Margaret (15), Jean (13) George Ann (10), Arthur (4) and baby Robina.

John was no more faithful to his wife than previously. Writing in 1859, Thomas explains:

... how I have tried to guard her [his mother] from her troubles she can tell – I have had it all to do there was none else who could - and while my father lived at home my presence in the house was all that made it supportable from the excited state of his mind at times – I have seen him at my mother's feet imploring her forgiveness & still he went on sinning ...

We shall hear later what came of this infidelity.

Home affairs

One of the most intriguing documents in the Adie family papers is a scroll setting out the descent of John Adie from the Home family of Kello in Berwickshire. The rolled-up document is brownish-yellow and appears to have been varnished after it was written, presumably to stop the ink fading. It is written in a fine and careful hand, not John's. There is significant damage, but it is still quite legible. Internal evidence dates it to between 1825 and 1833. The scroll's intent seems to be, in part, to show how well-connected the Home of Kello family is:

The Humes or Homes claim very Ancient and noble descent and the family by several matches intermarried with many of the most considerable families in the Kingdom as well as the Blood Royal

There follows lists of Dukes, Marquesses and Earls with whom relationship is claimed. The descent of the Home of Kello family starts with Sir David Home of

Wedderburn, killed at the Battle of Flodden (1513), and includes Sir George Home, Lord Provost of Edinburgh from 1698-1700. The scroll asserts that ownership of substantial lands and rents in Shetland passed to Jean Home (1713 -1779) and her sister:

96 Merks land in the Fair Isle, 96 in Quendale, 66 in Hellwell, 88 in Garth &c and Island of Moussay, holms called Colsay & all lying within the parochines of Dunrossness, Sandwick, Cunningsburgh & sick like &c and in like manner the hail parsonage and vickarage Tiends of said parochines also umboth Duty of Walls, Sandness, Foula and Papa and umboth Tiends thereto belonging.

John Adie was the great-grand-nephew of Jean Home, the heiress of Kello, and direct descendant of her brother David Home of Kello. In the late 1820s, following the death of a childless second cousin, John arranged to have himself legally recognised as heir to the long-dead Jean Home, and thus inherited what remained of her property. This amounted merely to a tenement in Liberton's Wynd, Edinburgh, which was standing in the way of the construction of George IV Bridge. It was not until 1834, after construction of the new bridge was finished, that the sale of the (presumably by then demolished!) property to the Commissioners for City Improvements was completed. The £140 proceeds from the sale must have been a welcome boost to John's resources.

John would in his youth have known his grandmother Janet Home, who died when John was 16. He was probably well aware of the property in Shetland which her father had owned, and we can speculate whether this knowledge, and the prospect of an inheritance, influenced his decision to move there. However, the Shetland property must have been disposed of before John was able to inherit it.

Hunters and Bruce

One of the most striking episodes in John Adie's life is his relationship with Helen Joanna Bruce, daughter of Robert Bruce of Symbister, and her husband Robert Hunter of Lunna.

Helen Bruce was born in Symbister in November 1803. Her paternal and maternal grandmothers were sisters, daughters of Robert Hunter of Lunna (1710-1777) and Ursula Bruce. Helen's parents were thus first cousins. In eighteenth-century Shetland, the number of landowning families was relatively small, and it was almost impossible to avoid marrying your cousin. There had been much intermarriage between the Bruce

and Hunter families, and Helen's antecedents included Bruce landowners in Sumburgh as well as Whalsay.

Another first cousin of Helen's parents was Robert Hunter of Lunna (1768-1833), the third of his name. He lived for several years in England, and on his return home to Lunna he married, in August 1824, the twenty-year-old Helen Bruce, 35 years his junior. According to rumour at the time, Hunter believed his young wife was to inherit (or be given) about £10,000 from her father and, presumably in expectation of this, the marriage settlement provided for an annuity of £200 to Helen in the (likely) event of Robert predeceasing her. This was quite a large sum, roughly half the annual income which Robert was believed to derive from the estate of Lunna. The expected £10,000 did not materialise, and the relationship between Robert Hunter and his father-in-law (and first cousin) Robert Bruce of Symbister was rumoured to be consequently somewhat cool.

Robert Hunter was, 'though eccentric in some things, of a very benevolent and mild disposition', while his wife had a very different character; their marriage was not thought to be 'so happy as could be wished'. Nevertheless, the couple had four children, though their three sons died in infancy, only their daughter, Robina (born 1829) surviving into adulthood.

Robert Hunter was 'occasionally subject to severe attacks of illness in his head'. He would send word to Lerwick for Dr Arthur Edmonton to attend him at Lunna. However, as travel to and from Lerwick was slow and difficult, particularly if weather prevented sailing, sometimes Dr John Adie at Voe would be sent for instead.

John seems to have spent much time at Lunna. He was only 14 years younger than Robert, so the two men would have had more in common than John had with Helen, 21 years younger than him. In fact, John named his youngest daughter (born in 1832) Robina Hunter Adie, after his friend (and likely creditor).

In late summer 1833, Robert was unwell, and called for Dr Edmonton, who attended for a short time. About a fortnight later, he was again ill, and John Adie was either sent for, or happened to be in the house. After a few days confinement to bed, Robert Hunter of Lunna died on 26 September 1833, aged 65.

Then the rumours started. After only a few days, placards were posted up in Lerwick on window shutters and doors, insinuating that Robert Hunter had met his death by foul means. The placards did not specify who the murderer might be, but suspicion had fallen on John Adie.

John was devastated by these rumours. About four weeks after Robert's death, he wrote in great agitation a Will, in which he expressed his feelings at length, with little regard to sentence construction. Here is an extract:

In the name of God, Amen - I, John Adie, Surgeon in the Royal Navy, finding my bodily health and strength becoming impaired in consequence of diseased action of my System excited by fatigue of Body and Mind, from want of rest, and anxiety in the performance of my professional duty and which I feel is becoming still more so through the very base and most malignant insinuations of sanguinary and diabolical malice invented and published by some Hell-hound of an Enemy or Enemies for the evident purpose, if possible, of for ever destroying my heretofore untainted Medical Reputation for assiduity of attention tenderness of care and sympathy of affection, which has been co-existent for ever with my nature, and manifested by my conduct to all and Sundry, High and low, Rich and poor, who favoured my humble pretensions or regarded by Medical Skill...

Etcetera for several paragraphs (or what might have been paragraphs if composed in a calmer state of mind).

Meanwhile, the Procurator Fiscal in Lerwick had taken notice of these placards. Although reluctant to proceed on the basis of an anonymous and unsubstantiated rumour, he enclosed one of the placards in a letter to John Bruce of Sumburgh, Robert Hunter's nephew and first cousin of his widow. John Bruce was then at Lunna, with Helen's father and brother from Whalsay, comforting the (presumably) sorrowing Helen. Bruce's response conveyed no suspicions, and the Fiscal (bearing in mind that the Bruce men were all Justices of the Peace) let things be.

It is possible that the Bruce family may not have been excessively sorry at Robert's death. As we've seen, there was some antipathy between him and the Whalsay Bruces and, given that young Helen was inheriting a substantial income, they may well have been quite satisfied with how things had turned out.

Elopement

John Adie continued to visit Lunna after Robert's death. Helen Bruce perhaps required medical attention. While Dr Adie was by some accounts 'without any bodily or mental attractions to recommend him to the notice of women', she nevertheless found him a charming and engaging companion. Despite their substantial age difference, friendship seems to have blossomed into love, and Helen fell pregnant.

This occasioned much social opprobrium, and some sniggering among the young. A relation of Helen's wrote to an acquaintance:

I have just heard a nice little bit of Scandal, which is almost too good for vulgar ears, that Mrs Hunter of Lunna ... is near her confinement - it must be a wondrous babe, since it has been at least three years in forming, her husband being dead at least that time

John Bruce Adie was born in February 1837, and John Adie acknowledged paternity. A great deal of stigma was attached to women who were not married to their child's father, and there is little doubt that Helen would have been seriously affected by the disapprobation of Shetland's gentry, to an extent that is difficult to appreciate fully from today's perspective. John Adie came in for severe criticism and probable ostracism, given that he was already married. Chief among the sufferers from his adultery was, of course, Mary Ann.

The rumours of foul play which had circulated in 1833 now returned with much greater force. Was it possible that Helen and John had conspired to poison her husband, to conduct more readily their illicit relationship? Captain William Cameron of Belmont, Unst certainly thought so. His wife Margaret Mouat was yet another first cousin to the deceased Robert Hunter, and he wrote to the Procurator Fiscal, sternly demanding to know what action had been taken to investigate the rumours. Dissatisfied with the Fiscal's reply, Captain Cameron wrote to his Edinburgh lawyer setting out the circumstances, accusing the 'monster' John Adie, and seeking advice. The cautious lawyer, aware of the possible financial consequences of slander, advised that no action be taken, and Cameron seems to have dropped the matter. It is through their exchange of letters in 1837 that we know so much about what happened.

The social pressure on both Helen and John must have been enormous, and they fled Shetland together, taking their baby son. Helen left behind her seven-year-

old daughter Robina, while John abandoned his wife and large family. He was never to return to Shetland.

By August 1837 they were established in Gardners Crescent, Edinburgh. They seem to have lived off Helen's £200 annuity from her late husband's estate, and John's meagre naval surgeon's half-pay. John maintained communication with his family in Voe, and there survives a brief and pathetic letter to his five-year-old daughter Robina, who was fretting for her father. In January 1838, Helen and John's baby died, and it was probably after this that John's young son Arthur Gifford Adie joined his father in Scotland.

In early 1839, John bought South Bank House, in the grounds of an old brewery between Auchendinny and Penicuik, south of Edinburgh. The purchase price of £370 was paid in three annual instalments, funded by Helen's annuity.

It appears that John and Helen initially pretended to be father and daughter – the difference in their ages made the deception quite credible. Helen seems to have used her middle name Joanna at this time, to avoid being linked to the Shetland scandal. Unfortunately for them, suspicions were aroused despite these precautions. John found it necessary in August 1840 to arrange a sham marriage between 'my daughter Joanna Adie and Richard Bell, solicitor-at-law, Bowchurch Yard, London'. He paid the Session Clerk £1 (rather an excessive amount, so probably a bribe) to have the banns proclaimed at the parish church, and to enter the marriage into the register. There is no independent evidence of the existence of Richard Bell.

Sadly, the young Arthur Adie died in October 1840, aged 12, leaving John and Helen alone in the house apart from a teenage servant girl (whose virtue, we are obliged to assume, was undoubtedly at risk from her employer).

In November 1840, John wrote to Thomas at Voe, and his letter reveals some of his feelings about his family. He laments the death of his son Arthur, who 'was the only child ... that paid the deferential love

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to me as a father'. He contrasts Arthur's love for him with another, unnamed, child (not Thomas) who had written a stinging letter of rebuke, and describes the estrangement he felt from family life even when living at Voe. He writes:

the moment a meal was swallowed I would be left alone when at home and not infrequently my family assembled in convivial enjoyment in a separate apartment above when I was never invited or asked to participate

As an afterthought on the outside of the letter, he bemoans the heavy pressure from his creditors and ingratiatingly asks his son for a loan of £30 to £40, promising to repay with interest the following July. My initial hope that Thomas ignored this outrageous plea was dashed by the discovery that he lent his father several sums of money over the next few years, at least some of which loans were repaid using Helen's money.

Death

By 1844 John was in failing health. On 22 January 1845, Helen Bruce composed a letter, as from John to Thomas his son, informing the latter that John wished to leave all his property to their four-month-old son Lawrence (surnamed Bruce not Adie), or to Helen Bruce herself, should Lawrence predecease her. At the foot of the letter, a clearly very ill John scrawled his signature, perhaps under duress, or in ignorance of its content. One week later, on Wednesday 29 January 1845, John Adie died aged 62.

On John's death, Helen cleared South Bank House of furniture and most other moveable property, but the house itself was held in John's name, so she could not sell it. At that time, 'heritable property' such as a house could not be bequeathed in a will – it passed to the heir of the deceased, usually his oldest son. Helen therefore raised a summons against James Mitchell Adie for the cost of the house, and for some money which she had given John. There was an out-of-court settlement (negotiated it seems by Thomas), and James got about £100 from the proceeds of the house sale. Thomas recovered about £40 from John's account in the Commercial Bank of Scotland, which was distributed among Mary Ann and John's other children.

In September 1846, Helen Bruce (or Hunter, Adie or Bell - take your pick) married Dr Thomas Richmond, a surgeon from Paisley, thus adding another surname to her collection. (Baby Lawrence had apparently died by this time.) After a spell in Campbeltown, Argyll, the couple emigrated to Ontario in 1848, where Dr Richmond worked in Gananoque on the St Lawrence

river. Following her disgrace and adventures with John Adie, this Canadian period must have been a welcome era of respectability and prosperity for Helen.

Thomas Richmond died in Gananoque in 1870. Helen stayed on in Canada, where she was soon joined by her niece Andrina Bruce and husband John Harrison of Lerwick. Their first child was born there in 1875. Shortly afterwards, the Harrisons, together with Helen, moved back to Lerwick, where Helen used her accumulated capital to establish John Harrison as manager in a fish-curing business under the name of Richmond and Company.

My great aunt Mona, who died in 1965, remembered seeing Mrs Richmond in a black cloak and red bonnet at church in Lerwick when she was a child – this must have been about 1880. Mona's parents were scandalised that 'that woman' was bold enough to drive around town in her carriage, instead of hiding herself in shame!

Helen Joanna Bruce died in the Harrison family home at 89 Commercial Street, Lerwick on 6 May 1881, in her late seventies. Her estate was valued at over £3,000, mostly invested in ownership or part-ownership of fish-curing stock and fishing vessels. She had led a life almost as erratic and eventful as her erstwhile paramour, John Adie.

Epilogue

This account of John Adie's life is seamed through with 'it seems that ...', 'perhaps ...' and 'we can surmise that ...'. There is much we still don't know for sure. Why did John really come to Shetland? Did he and Helen really conspire to poison her husband?

What we do know of his life comes from a diverse assortment of sources, mostly in faint brown handwriting, which have somehow survived down the years. Some sources (eg the naval records) are meticulous, factual and presumably unbiased; to rely too heavily on some others, however, is to accept a possibly skewed perspective. For instance, some of our knowledge rests on scrupulously preserved legal documents, which give undue prominence to dispute and conflict. The Adie family papers comprise documents which John's immediate descendants thought worth keeping, and which perhaps tend to support a less-than-charitable view of his life.

Although it is rather difficult to find evidence in any of these sources of John's good character, we can perhaps rely on visitors' accounts of Dr Adie's hospitality. Robert Dunn, an ornithologist who visited Shetland in the early 1830s, wrote regarding Olafirth:

anyone visiting the place must be indebted to the kindness and liberality of Dr Addy, who has a

neat comfortable house near the town, and whose door is always open to strangers visiting the country. Many others along with myself can bear testimony to his hospitality.

Similarly, Mr McIntosh, an itinerant Methodist preacher, writes in 1828:

Near three miles, in an easterly direction from Grobness, a little from the head of Olnasfirth - Voe, the residence of Dr Adie. I often call at this gentleman's house, and always meet with a hearty reception, and a comfortable home; so do all the preachers when passing this way. There we have a fine society.

From these accounts, John comes across (at this time in his life) as an outgoing, sociable individual, well able to command the confidence of his friends and patients, despite the ineffective and sometimes dangerous remedies he administered.

In contrast, plenty of evidence of John's bad behaviour is available – his chronic infidelity, his indebtedness and disdain for his creditors, and even grossly overcharging his patients. It does seem that the embarrassment his family felt was justified.

Perhaps the real hero of this lengthy and somewhat subjective chronicle is not John but his mysterious wife, Mary Ann Westile. Born somewhere in England in the early 1780s, she was shipped out to India at a very early age. Her education was evidently neglected and she remained illiterate. Her parents may have died, and the teenage girl was sent (or escaped) back to a homeland she hardly knew. Pregnant, she was fortunate that her young lover married her. After a few years in London, Mary Ann and her daughter were uprooted by her frequently-absent husband and transported to remote and chilly Lerwick. The contrast with India could hardly be greater.

For the next fifteen years, she was constantly either pregnant or nursing a baby, and while her children and the household economy would have been her main concerns, she was also expected to look after business when her husband was away. In the 1830s, after the death of her eldest child, and subsequently the birth of her youngest, Mary Ann's other children gradually married and left home – the exception of course being Thomas who, with his wife Willa, was clearly a great support to her. That support must have helped Mary Ann to cope with her husband's ongoing adultery and eventual flight in 1837, but the death of her second child Harriet later that same year must have been another devastating blow. Five of her eleven children predeceased her.

As a widow Mary Ann was entitled to a small pension of about £27 per annum from the Admiralty, meaning she no longer had to depend quite so much on Thomas. Towards the end of her life she moved with her two remaining unmarried daughters to Dunning in Perthshire, to live with her youngest daughter Robina, the young widow of the local minister. There Mary Ann died in 1861, much lamented and loved by her family, unlike her despicable husband.

Brisk

Creeping out under its unwashed blanket
rays of silvered light rain down
on a cobalt ocean of beaten iron.
Puffy cumulus scud across an azure blue,
they breeze along on an invisible wind,
drab browns turn to golden hue,
washed out greens, sharpen, take on a sheen
and all the way from glaciers on Iceland
the first flakes of winter fall.

James Sinclair

Every day I'm a carer

I care for my mum who is 89. I often have to take her to doctors' appointments because she struggles to travel on her own.

