



Portrait of the Month: August Sir George Barclay Bruce (1821-1908)

by James Coutts Michie (1861-1919)

Apprenticed to Stephenson – designer of the ‘Rocket’ – Bruce’s career as an engineer saw him building railways in five continents, with ground-breaking insistence on using paid labour!



Sir George B Bruce, by James Coutts Michie
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Sir George Barclay Bruce, the son of a schoolmaster, was born in 1821 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He began his career as a civil engineer by serving an apprenticeship with Robert Stephenson, designer of the famous early steam locomotive *Rocket*, who was one of his father’s old pupils. After his apprenticeship, Bruce worked on the Newcastle and Darlington Railway, the Northampton and Peterborough Railway, and at 24 became Resident Engineer on the Royal Border Bridge over the Tweed at Berwick.

He married Helen Simpson in 1847 (and they later had five children together); but in 1851, he moved into a new sphere, becoming what his Institute of Engineers’ obituary described as “one of the pioneers of railway construction in India”: working on the construction of the East Indian Railway near Calcutta, and then on

the Madras Railway. And he carried out this work with a ground-breaking insistence on using free (paid), rather than forced, labour.

In 1856 he had to return to England due to ill health, but he then set up a consulting engineering business in London and designed railways in India, Canada, Germany, Spain, Argentina, and South Africa. He was elected a Member of the Institution of Civil Engineers in 1850, and was President from 1887-1889, at which point he was knighted by the Queen.

Bruce joined the Presbyterian congregation of the church at Regent Square, London, in 1856, but soon afterwards founded, with others, the church at St John's Wood, where he served as Elder for fifty years. He took an active part in the Union which created the Presbyterian Church of England in 1876, and as Convenor of its Home Mission Committee, saw the number of congregations in London double during the 30 years of his administration. He was also a generous benefactor of churches (indeed, his portrait shows him holding a picture of a church) and also of the English Presbyterian College, especially during its move from London to Cambridge in 1899, when it became known as Westminster College.

Portrait by James Coutts Michie (1861-1919).

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Helen Weller, Archivist
2020

Bibliography and Further Reading:

Memorial Minute in the *Synod Records of the Presbyterian Church of England 1909*

Obituary in the *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers 1908* (online at http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/George_Barclay_Bruce).

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