

# George Bremner, Graaff-Reinet and “A State of Feeling”, 1848-1859

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## *Abstract*

This article explores a young Scottish teacher’s attempt to implement the ambitious plans for government education in Graaff-Reinet in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Designed for the whole population, the New System (or Established System) represents a moment in the racialised history of South Africa when there was an imagination of an inclusive, though very British, education system. The focus of the article is on the identity of an able, well-qualified teacher attempting to fulfil his charge in Graaff-Reinet, a town of growing affluence and regional importance. While Bremner, as government teacher, proves to be a catalyst for local efforts to improve the quality of education, this is largely a sad story of frustration and failure. Entrenched racial attitudes, class aspirations, and the failure of the state adequately to resource the New System combine to undermine his ambitious efforts and challenge his personal worldview. So too does the teacher’s fiery defence, particularly in his public writing, both of his project and the status and reputation which he believed to be his due.

**Keywords:** Graaff-Reinet; 19<sup>th</sup> century Cape Colony; Government education; Teacher identity; Race; Class; Respectability; George Bremner.

## **Introduction**

It is appropriate to start the discussion with a quote from George Bremner:

So perfectly satisfied am I in my own mind, that a Free School, conducted by only one Teacher, in which an Education equal if not superior to any that can be obtained elsewhere, and which is expected to render such education to all alike without distinction of class, color or race, is so incompatible with the general tastes & habits, and repugnant to the genius of the people of this country, that I look upon the success of a School under such conditions to be a priori a demonstrable impossibility. (George Bremner to Superintendent-General of Education (SGE)Langham Dale, 10 December 1859).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In Cape Archives, Roeland Street, Cape Town (hereafter CA): Superintendent-General of Education (hereafter SGE)1/4, Letters received by the Superintendent-General of Education, 1851-1859, from Humansdorp, Uitenhage, Port Elizabeth, Bathurst, Grahamstown, Cradock, Graaff-Reinet, Colesberg & c.

This case study charts the career of a young Scottish teacher attempting to implement an ambitious new system of state education at Graaff-Reinet between 1848 and 1859, the defining years of his career. As a local history, it shows the way in which Graaff-Reinet shaped the teacher and his enterprise in interesting ways. While it is largely a story of alienation and failure, the study also points to the way in which Bremner as government teacher acted as a catalyst for more ambitious schemes of education in the town.

In the opening quotation, Bremner captures the essence of the system of free government schools set up by the Cape colonial government in 1839. He also sets out his views, after eighteen years in the system, as to why it was failing. Established in the wake of slave emancipation, the New System (or Established System) was one of the earliest ventures by a British government in financing state schooling. The Cape's twenty-one government schools were free for all races and classes at the elementary level. Of these, seventeen were "first-class" schools, where well qualified teachers were also to offer the "higher branches" in the classics and mathematics to secondary pupils.<sup>2</sup>

The central issue in this case study is a battle between Bremner and the Graaff-Reinet élite over the nature and control of "superior" schooling in the town. Bremner's is clearly not a tale of quiet discouragement. The very fact of a government inquiry being set up to investigate the first-class school at Graaff-Reinet in April 1858 indicates his capacity to disturb.<sup>3</sup> His identity was bound up with the government system. He embraced its original vision. In its implementation, however, the frailties of the New System frustrated and undermined him and he saw the school's failure as lying beyond his control. But Bremner used words as weapons in his attempt to contest his powerlessness. His most vivid writing appeared in his newspaper, and the following analysis of the New System on 18 August 1858 is a good example of Bremner in full flow:<sup>4</sup>

SOME eighteen or twenty years ago, the Government of this Colony introduced a scheme of public education into South Africa, which promised much for the future benefit of the country. The scheme was drafted by Sir John Herschel, one of the first men of the day; and in liberality and catholicity of range, it was perhaps as much ahead of existing systems, whether in Europe or

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2 G.24-63, Cape of Good Hope (hereafter CGH). *Report of a Commission of Inquiry, in accordance with addresses of the legislative Council and House of Assembly, to inquire into the government educational System of the Colony* (hereafter *Report of Watermeyer Commission*), Government Minute, 23 May 1839, Appendix V, p. 498.

3 A7SC-1858, CGH, *Report of the Select Committee Appointed for the purpose of inquiring into and reporting upon the present condition of the First-Class School at Graaff-Reinet*. May, 1858.

4 Anon., "The Karroo College", *The Midland Province Banner*, Graaff-Reinet, 18 August 1858.

elsewhere, as its author takes precedence of mankind generally. South Africa received the scheme with open arms, and cordially welcomed the introduction of the highly-educated gentlemen who were invited from Europe to carry it out. Sir John, however, left the Colony before the scheme was in working order, and, unfortunately, when the Schoolmasters arrived, the master-mind was gone. The arrangements and detail of the system were accordingly left to be carried out by Colonial bunglers, who either could not, or would not understand the principles of that liberal system of general education that the master-mind of Europe, untrammelled by sectarian influences and unfettered by party bias, had elaborated from its own rich and varied resources. A giant, verily, was born to South Africa; but his infancy and pupilage being intrusted to dwarfish nurses and pigmy guardians, his physical development was restrained and crushed in his infancy, his intellectual vigor and energy were cramped and paralysed. The consequence is, that he has waxed old before his time and gone down into a premature grave, leaving behind him a wretched lot of helpless, rickety children to do battle against the combined array of that ignorance, folly, presumption, and prejudice which, while it killed the parent, still offers a miserable asylum for the orphan children.

This narrative provides a metaphor for both the New System and Bremner himself – “crushed”, “restrained”, “cramped”, “paralysed”, “helpless”, “rickety”, “orphaned”. He was abandoned by the visionary author of the New System, Sir John Herschel;<sup>5</sup> left to the devices of incompetent administrators; and faced with obstructive townspeople who did not value the liberal and universal discourse he claimed to represent.

The Cape Colony’s first Superintendent General of Education (SGE), James Rose Innes, was for Bremner chief among the “dwarfish nurses” and “pigmy guardians”, but seems never to have taken offence at his teacher’s angry complaints. The leaders of the Graaff-Reinet community were, however, offended by him, and “such a state of feeling” developed between them and Bremner that small issues became unbridgeable chasms.<sup>6</sup> The identity of a “superior” British educator, that of an increasingly affluent white small town elite in a multiracial setting, and the incapacity of the colonial state to manage its educational project efficiently, are all central to this tale of woe.

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5 The first teachers of the New System regarded Herschel as its chief architect, although Colonial Secretary John Bell and editor John Fairbairn had combined with him in its design. Herschel returned to Britain in 1838. WT Ferguson and RFM Immelman, comps., *Sir John Herschel and education at the Cape, 1834-1840* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 25-27; “Memorandum, or Suggestions, of Mr John Fairbairn for the Advancement of Education at the Cape, 19 February, 1838”, EG Malherbe, *Education in South Africa I, 1652-1922* (Cape Town & Johannesburg, Juta, 1925), pp. 86-87.

6 A7SC-1858, *Report of Select Committee on Graaff Reinet School...*, “Report”, pp. iv-vi.

## **Graaff-Reinet and the Graaff-Reinet Government School**

A graduate of Aberdeen University, George Bremner was twenty-one years old when recruited by Innes in 1841 to be a first-class teacher at the Cape.<sup>7</sup> In 1848 he was promoted from Paarl to Graaff-Reinet Government School, by which time he was married to a Simon's Town resident, Johanna Wikboom, and father of two infant sons.<sup>8</sup>

Graaff-Reinet is located about 700 kilometres to the north-east of Cape Town and about 300 kilometres north-west of its closest port, Port Elizabeth. Encircled by the Sundays River, it was an oasis in the semi-desert Karoo. To the north lay the Sneeuwberge whose foothills supplied good grazing for cattle.<sup>9</sup> Trekboer expansion and settlement throughout the eighteenth century had resulted in the breakdown of pastoralist Khoikhoi communities, these becoming a dispossessed "coloured" labouring population of continuing importance in the history of Graaff-Reinet. Graaff-Reinet was established by the ruling VOC in 1786 as the magisterial centre of a new district; this in an attempt to regulate the conflict between boers and certain Xhosa chiefdoms, essentially over access to grazing rights. The construction of the drostdy (magistracy) and Dutch Reformed church in the late eighteenth century represented twin centres of authority, legal and moral, in this community.

The departure of a substantial number of Dutch-speaking farmers from the district on the "Great Trek" of the 1830s created a space for farmers and townsmen of British origin to take their place. By the 1840s the frontier had shifted firmly eastward as a result of British military intervention, and Graaff-Reinet itself was positioned more tranquilly in what many considered a "midland" district. Graaff-Reinet's situation as an interior junction connecting all main roads between the interior and the coast aided her commercial expansion.

Bremner's arrival at Graaff-Reinet coincided with probably the most prosperous period of its history. Saul Dubow's analysis of the economy of this rural town and district points to the emergence of progressive commercial wool and mohair farming by the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> The establishment of

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7 CA:CO 499, JR Innes to Col Sec Bell, 13 March 1841.

8 E Bull, "Ratray and Black: Two Scottish schoolmasters", *Familia* XXVII, 3 (1990), p. 60; CA:CO 574, G Bremner to JR Innes, 6 January 1848; CA:CO 775, L Dale to Acting Col Sec, 10 August 1861.

9 A de V Minnaar, *Graaff-Reinet, 1786-1986* (Pretoria, HSRC, 1987), p. 1.

10 S Dubow, "Land, labour and merchant capital in the pre-Industrial rural economy of the Cape; The Experience of the Graaff-Reinet District, 1852-1872" (BA Honours research report, University of Cape Town, 1981).

banks and of branches of Cape Town and Port Elizabeth merchant houses in Graaff-Reinet with attendant credit facilities drew wool farmers into extensive marketing and credit networks. Coinciding with an upturn in the world wool market and the introduction of merino sheep well-suited to the Karoo, the 1840s and 1850s were a period of affluence for many in the town and district of Graaff-Reinet.

In 1848, with a population of 2 500, the new Municipal Board of Commissioners in Graaff-Reinet could count on 200 households to pay rates.<sup>11</sup> From the mid-1850s the English population of the town increased significantly<sup>12</sup> and by 1865 it was the third largest town in the Colony.<sup>13</sup> Despite this, Graaff-Reinet appears to have been groping her way to civic dignity and respectability in the mid-nineteenth century. Municipal services were poor, voting for councillors half-hearted and participation in national politics, languid. The town was described in 1854 in its main newspaper as "a Slow Village" where the Dutch Reformed minister [Revd Andrew Murray sen] "exercis[ed] undisputed sway amongst his devoted and reverential parishioners".<sup>14</sup> Murray, responsible for a far-flung parish, may be seen to represent a well-established, sober and literate Christian respectability. To succeed in Graaff-Reinet, Bremner was to discover, was to take careful account of Murray and his congregants.

At the same time the growth in commercial activity and wealth brought with it new distinctions of class (and by association, colour). The demand for land in Graaff-Reinet, as its prosperity grew, resulted in subdivision of the town's urban smallholdings and the increasing impoverishment of the original Dutch-speaking proprietors. The town came to reflect the class divide, with the poorly educated urban agriculturalists living in the west of the town, and the richer German- and English-speaking residents in the east. It was the latter who participated in municipal politics, contaminated by a fair amount of "irregularity".

The period of this case study coincides with the granting of new representative institutions in local and central government. Thus it was that the Graaff-

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11 A de V Minnaar, *Graaff-Reinet...*, p. 13.

12 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, W Long to Select Committee, 20 May 1858, p. 40.

13 H Fransen, *Old towns and villages of the Cape: A survey of the origin and development of towns, villages and hamlets of the Cape of Good Hope* (Jeppestown, Jonathan Ball, 2006), p. 27.

14 CG Henning, *Graaff-Reinet: A cultural history 1786-1886* (Cape Town, TV Bulpin, 1975), p. 36; A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, W Long to Select Committee, 20 May 1858.

Reinet élite was able to acquire access to forms and levels of political influence not possible in the autocratic VOC and early British administrations. Dutch- and English-speaking leaders would be united in their concern to have access to institutions of education that reflected their growing affluence and status. This was particularly important as Graaff-Reinet fought for recognition as a significant political centre, attempting to counter the dominance of the other eastern centres, Graham's Town and Port Elizabeth, in the new colonial parliament.<sup>15</sup>

It is not easy to open up, to any extent, the state of race relations in Graaff-Reinet and the wider district prior to Bremner's arrival, but there are clues that all was not well. Wayne Dooling has demonstrated the strain placed on master-servant relations in the immediate post-emancipation era.<sup>16</sup> He shows that the withholding of their labour by former slaves in the western districts was paralleled in the eastern districts by a withholding of labour by Khoisan servants after Ordinance 50 was passed in 1828. He indicates that there was also a greater physical mobility of workers, squatting on crown land and breaking of contracts by labourers of colour; something that Dubow sees as a feature of the Graaff-Reinet district as late as 1857.<sup>17</sup>

While in Cape Town itself mission schools catering for the "poorer classes" invariably served both white and coloured children, it seems that Graaff-Reinet's poorer Dutch-speaking white residents attended Mr Luckhoff's church-funded school. The coloured community was offered a separate DRC mission school from 1819 and a LMS mission school from the late 1840s.<sup>18</sup> It was said of Bremner's predecessor, the Revd Thomas Jones Paterson, that his failure to win success for the government school was linked to his "concern" for the coloured people.<sup>19</sup> In 1858, while considering the history of the government school in the town, Member of the Legislative Council (MLC) Mr S Probart commented: "At Graaff-Reinet there is considerable prejudice against allowing the children to mix with each other."<sup>20</sup>

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15 A de V Minnaar, *Graaff-Reinet...*, pp. 14, 40.

16 W Dooling, *Slavery, emancipation and colonial rule in South Africa* (Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg, UKZN Press, 2007), pp. 116-120.

17 S Dubow, "Land, labour and merchant capital..." p. 34.

18 A de V Minnaar, *Graaff-Reinet...*, pp. 111-112.

19 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee into Graaff-Reinet School, W Long to Select Committee, 20 May 1858, p. 31.

20 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee into Graaff-Reinet School, SA Probart to Select Committee, 7 May 1858, p. 31.

Image 1: *Parsonage Street, Graaff-Reinet. The Drostdy stands at the crossroads, the LMS chapel at the centre of the picture. The school was probably located on the opposite of side the LMS chapel*



Source: Photograph taken by EH Ludlow, December 2008.

According to Minnaar, the Dutch Reformed church council built the first school in Graaff-Reinet in 1798 on a site in Parsonage Street where the library stands today. This building was probably taken over by the government and used, initially, as a free English-medium monitorial school (1822-1828);<sup>21</sup> subsequently by the first-class government school.<sup>22</sup> Bremner was the third government teacher at Graaff-Reinet under the New System, his predecessors recruited, like Bremner, in Scotland to staff the government schools.<sup>23</sup> Paterson left in 1846 to become a missionary for the LMS and in April 1848, Bremner was sent to revive the teacherless school in Parsonage Street.

### **The teacher: "A man of abilities and acquirements"**

Before continuing with this tale of the loss of zeal and failure, it is important

21 A de V Minnaar, *Graaff-Reinet ...*, p. 99.

22 While the government rented most of its school buildings, no such payments for the Graaff-Reinet schoolroom are ever recorded in the CA:CO correspondence. See, for example, CA:CO 518, JR Innes, 6 October 1843; CA:CO 540, JR Innes to Col Sec, 7 April 1845.

23 A1SC-1857, CGH, Report of the Select Committee Appointed to Consider the Subject of Education, p. 6; A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee into Graaff-Reinet School, p. 31.

to note that not only did Bremner regard himself as “a highly educated gentleman from Europe”, but that he was generally recognized to be an able teacher. Innes stated: “I know not a more efficient teacher than Mr Bremner.” He was “a well-educated and talented man” to whom the “boys” were extremely attached.<sup>24</sup> Even those with whom Bremner was to clash noted that he was clever and accomplished, while sometime school commissioner, Church of England clergyman Revd William Long, was impressed by the performance both of Bremner’s pupils and the teacher himself:<sup>25</sup>

He is a kind-hearted man, and has a very interesting mode of teaching, - peculiarly so. I have listened with great attention to his lessons on physical science. He has a remarkably easy way of teaching the children.

Bremner described the “object” of his “mode of instruction” as being “to develop the intellect of the youth under experiment.”<sup>26</sup> The success of his methods is evident in the October 1858 report on a quarterly examination of the Government School in the town’s main newspaper, the *Graaff-Reinet Herald*:<sup>27</sup>

SCHOOL EXAMINATION. – An inspection of the Graaff-Reinet Government School by the Divisional Council took place on Wednesday, the 30<sup>th</sup> ultimo. The Divisional Council was represented by only one of its members, Mr JF Ziervogel, and the Secretary, Mr Ford, - Mr Berrangé unfortunately being indisposed, Mr Cloete away at Cape Town, and the state of the weather preventing the attendance of the other members. There were only sixteen boys present, though the number on the roll is 43, and the average attendance is 21. The public probably knew nothing at all of the examination, as the only visitors were ourselves and two friends. The exercises commenced by all the boys reading in turn from Chambers’s Introduction to the Sciences. The reading did credit to the ability of the teacher, and from the manner in which it was performed, it was evident that the boys understood the subject. To make assurance doubly sure, however, the teacher, Mr Geo Bremner, questioned them upon what they had read, and also upon what they had learned of physical science. The intelligent replies, and ready illustrations given by the boys, were interesting, and showed a greater amount of proficiency than could reasonably have been expected – considering the desultory manner in which the school is carried on. Two scholars, more advanced than the remainder of the

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24 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee into Graaff-Reinet School, JR Innes to Select Committee, 27 April 1858, pp. 3, 11, 12.

25 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee into Graaff-Reinet School, W Long to Select Committee, 20 May 1858, pp. 34-35.

26 A1SC-1857, CGH, Appendix to the Report of the Select Committee appointed to consider the subject of education, G Bremner, “Graaff-Reinet School”, p. 9.

27 The article was reproduced verbatim in the first edition of Bremner’s *The Midland Province Banner*, 7 October 1858.



sixteen, were then examined in trigonometry, algebra (quadratic equations), and Latin. A class consisting of eleven boys then went through some exercises in English grammar, which were very well done. The usual dry and repulsive style of this study was entirely done away with by the ingenuity and skill of the teacher; and the conjugation of verbs and declension of pronouns, as well as the application of strong adjectives, backed by powerful adverbs, was amusingly and cleverly performed. It is to be regretted that the parents of the pupils did not attend. We know not whose business it is to invite them to the examination by the Government School, when inspected by the Divisional Council; but it would much promote the education of their children, if the parents showed a proper interest in the matter, to say nothing of the healthy stimulus and encouragement afforded to the schoolmaster himself by their presence. – *Graaff-Reinet Herald*.

The skill and humour evident in the teacher's performance obviously delighted this observer, probably the editor of the newspaper. At the same time the report touches on several problems with a long history: small numbers of pupils actually at school, a poor turn-out of examiners, a school carried on in a "desultory manner" and the absence of any parents to admire and encourage the teacher's efforts. As Long, a lone sympathetic voice, commented, there was much at Graaff-Reinet to "discourage, dishearten, and to disgust" the government schoolteacher. "But," concluded Mr Watermeyer at the 1858 inquiry into the school, "whatever talents he may be possessed of, he is a most injudicious man..."<sup>28</sup>

The way in which Bremner negotiated his role and relationship with the Graaff-Reinet community can be discerned in two key periods. The first was between 1850 and 1852, when Bremner was faced with what he considered to be a defining crisis in his school. The second key period was one of heightened protestation by the teacher between 1856 and 1858. This included his foray into journalism and culminated in the Inquiry into his school in May 1858. 1859 marked the lowest point of his career – three pupils left in the school, a reputation of having failed, and the recommendation that he be transferred elsewhere.

### **The first crisis: 1850-1852**

On moving to Graaff-Reinet, Bremner inherited a school that had been

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<sup>28</sup> A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee into Graaff-Reinet School, W Long to Select Committee, 20 May 1858, pp. 12, 30.

without a teacher for almost a year.<sup>29</sup> “[W]hen I opened School here ... only 19 children, six of whom members of one family – paupers – presented themselves for enrolment – of this number only one could read or write,” he later reported. But there was clearly a willingness to give Bremner’s school a chance and from 1848 numbers grew rapidly, reaching a climactic 150 in 1849. They remained high in 1850, but in December of that year Bremner signalled a crisis in the government school. Respectable inhabitants were beginning to remove their children in significant numbers and if urgent remedies were not applied, the damage to the government school might become irreparable.

### ***The challenge of all grades and large pupil numbers in one classroom***

The challenges for one teacher of managing five year-olds to fifteen year-olds in all stages of progress - from “ABC” upwards to the higher departments of mathematics, Latin and French - were immense. The social mix at the Graaff-Reinet School was another challenge. Here the free government school received boys from all levels of society and the teacher felt that “social and conventional distinctions [could] not well be respected within the wall of a *public* school-room”. In dividing pupils into classes and affording status to them, “disregard [was] necessarily shewn to wealth and social position of parents”.<sup>30</sup> [The author’s emphasis.]

For the first three years, Bremner coped with the burgeoning numbers with the assistance of a former pupil from Paarl.<sup>31</sup> It was the decision of his assistant to leave teaching to become a land surveyor that plunged the school into crisis. No replacement could be found, the low stipend being a major obstacle.<sup>32</sup> SGE Innes’s seeming inability to overcome this and other problems would fuel Bremner’s frustration.

Not only was there a large number of boys of all classes and ages to teach without adequate assistance, but the schoolroom itself was a liability. In 1850, at the time of his impassioned request for a new assistant teacher, Bremner also wrote that if the school were allowed to remain in its existing condition,

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29 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee into Graaff-Reinet School, JF Ziervogel to Select Committee, 7 May 1858; W Long to Select Committee, 20 May 1858, pp. 15, 32.

30 CA:SGE 1/4, G Bremner to JR Innes, 13 December 1850.

31 G.16-’57, CGH, Report on public education for the year 1855, and the first half of 1856, JR Innes, p. xix; A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee into Graaff-Reinet School, W Long to Select Committee, 20 May 1858, p. 33.

32 G.16-’57, Report on Public Education..., JR Innes, p. xix.

"every respectable parent would eventually feel himself compelled to withdraw his children".<sup>33</sup>

The schoolroom was a gabled, whitewashed, thatched building<sup>34</sup> which stood in one of the more prestigious streets in Graaff-Reinet (at the head of which was the drostdy and the foot, the Revd Murray's parsonage). But sporadic and limited attention had been paid to keeping it in a state of functionality let alone of respectability. Bremner recognized the problematic pedagogic discourse represented by his schoolroom but was unable, for many years, to harness resources to make significant improvements. By 1858 the schoolroom would be described as "cheerless" but in good order,<sup>35</sup> but between 1845 and 1852 it seems to have been in a particularly poor condition. Revd Long was familiar with the schoolroom and considered its "very bad state of repair" to be one of the causes of the "diminution" of Bremner's numbers:<sup>36</sup>

When I first went [to Graaff-Reinet in 1845], I used the school for morning service; an adjoining room was the only "necessary" provided for the children, and the smell was so disagreeable that I was obliged to leave the place ... There was also a very large hole in the thatch which, to the best of my knowledge, remained for a long time after Mr Bremner was there ... I think if Mr Bremner had had a proper school provided for him, a properly divided school-room, and competent assistance, there would have been a better state of things ... He has told me himself that he was obliged to mend the windows at his own expense; and I am not sure that he did not have the school cleaned at his own expense.

Practical considerations aside, the 1850 crisis was thus also marked by a failure of the government to present a commanding public face to the Graaff-Reinet community; one that supported its claim to be the site of a superior education. At the end of his career, Bremner reflected on school buildings:<sup>37</sup>

I am of opinion that had there been suitable school-buildings, properly furnished, and suitably and efficiently assisted from the commencement, the scheme introduced in 1839 might have commanded the education of the towns and villages, and supplied teachers for the country for a long period; but it was bungled at the very outset. The schools never realized the prestige formed of them. They had no air of respectability about them, and accordingly

33 CA:SGE 1/4, G Bremner to JR Innes, 13 December 1850.

34 CA:CO 540, Tender of Mr Edwd Punchon in Innes to Col Sec, 15 August, 1845.

35 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee into Graaff-Reinet School, SA Probart to Select Committee, 7 May 1858, p. 29.

36 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee into Graaff-Reinet School, W Long to Select Committee, 20 May 1858, p. 32.

37 G.24-'63, Report of Watermeyer Commission, G Bremner, "Teachers' Answers", p. 8.

soon fell into public disrepute...

As it was, Bremner rearranged his classes, cut down on the subjects offered, and soldiered on alone. Two consequences of his rearrangements can be inferred from his later writings on the problems he faced. The large numbers in the school hindered pupils from making the kind of progress their parents expected. At the same time, with the school being free and there being no way to enforce attendance, erratic attendance disrupted learning.<sup>38</sup> On top of that, what disturbed some of the higher standing members of the community was that their children were being outperformed by those of the lower classes. Bremner wrote that:<sup>39</sup>

... in my experience it has more than once happened that the cleverest boy has been the son of a humble artisan. This was a clear invasion of the vested rights of respectability, and, therefore not to be borne. The leading pupils are accordingly summarily withdrawn; and the rest either spontaneously, or from a desire to “follow my leader,” or from some other extraneous cause, disappear also...

In his discussion of markers of status within respectable society, Robert Ross includes a number which appear to apply to those in Graaff-Reinet wanting to distance themselves from residents of lower status; even those with a common Christian religion and Dutch language.<sup>40</sup> Pride and prestige – or “the vested rights of respectability”- required a “gentrified landscape”. School buildings not only needed to proclaim their value through their external appearance, but allow for moral training and regularity through their layout. The undifferentiated cramming together of boys of all ages and classes in the stinking shambles of the government schoolroom would create an unacceptable literal physical proximity.

Bremner’s distress over the failure to receive much needed assistance was linked to his recognition that his school needed to be exceptionally good if he was to retain all classes of pupils. This moment of failure was seen by him as pivotal and referred to as such repeatedly over the years.<sup>41</sup> From 1850 onwards he experienced the loss of the families described by MLA William Southey as

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38 Letter to Editor, *Graaff-Reinet Herald*, 10 October 1857.

39 G.24-’63, Report of Watermeyer Commission, G Bremner, “Teachers’ Answers”, 3 December 1862, p. 9.

40 R Ross, *Status and respectability in the Cape Colony, 1700-1879: A tragedy of manners* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999) pp. 80, 88.

41 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, G Bremner, letter quoted by JR Innes, p. 3; A1SC-1857, Appendix to Report of Select Committee on Public Education, “The memorial of George Bremner, ... Master of the Government school of Graaff-Reinet”, 25 March 1857, pp. 28-29.

liking “to keep their children a little select”.<sup>42</sup>

***The teacher and the School Commission: Resisting “local espionage”***

For Bremner, SGE Innes’s failure, not only to provide assistance, but to be seen to be trying to assist, was deeply demoralising. Adding to his discouragement, was a destructive quarrel in 1851 with the school commission which had, since 1842, comprised the Civil Commissioner (CC), the District Clergyman, Revd Andrew Murray, and its secretary, Anthony Berrangé.<sup>43</sup> This body had the duty to inspect and report on the government school every quarter, but no direct authority over the teacher.

A troubled relationship between teacher and commissioners was linked to conflicting views of status, authority and respect. In September 1851, for example, Bremner refused, in an irritated and officious manner, a request to delay by a few days the quarterly examination of the school when both commissioners would be out of town. His response was:

Under these circumstances, I fear the examination, like its predecessors for the last Eighteen Months and more, will have to take place in the absence of the School Commission.

Berrangé reported this exchange to Innes, concluding:

We have therefore to express our regret that Mr Bremner has again thought proper not to meet the wishes of the school commission, in consequence it was impossible to attend the examination.

He also observed that the commission’s non-attendance of examinations in the past eighteen months “did not arise with them”.<sup>44</sup> It appears to have been from this point that the school commission “refused to act, and ceased to act as such.”<sup>45</sup>

What is the meaning of this *impasse*? On his 1852 tour of inspection to Graaff-Reinet, Innes attempted to patch up the relationship between the school commission and Bremner which he represented as a “misunderstanding that had for some time existed”.<sup>46</sup> The actual content of his advice to both

42 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, W Southey to Select Committee, 7 May 1858, p. 23.

43 CA:CO 510, JR Innes to [Acting Col Sec] Craig, 24 March 1842, gives original nominees.

44 CA:SGE 1/4, Sec of Graaff-Reinet School Commission to JR Innes, 10 October 1851, with enclosures, A Berrangé to G Bremner, and G Bremner to A Berrangé, 23 September 1851.

45 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, JF Ziervogel to Select Committee, 7 May 1858, p. 15.

46 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, JR Innes, “Report on the case of the Government teacher at Graaff-Reinet”, 11 November 1857, pp. 48-51.

parties<sup>47</sup> is not recorded, but Innes later observed:<sup>48</sup>

I ought also to state that Mr Bremner, as well as others of the first-class teachers, whom I selected in 1840, belonged formerly to the parochial school establishment of Scotland, where the nature, extent, and character of the supervision differs widely from that which obtains in the school establishment of this colony. I have impressed on the minds of those gentlemen the duty which devolves both on them and me to respect all constituted authority with which we may be called upon to co-operate, or required to obey, so long as we retain the offices we hold. Still, a feeling of repugnance does exist, in more instance than one, which accounts for in some degree, though it does not justify, the proceedings upon which I have been called to report.

There is an indication here that Innes, while not condoning the hot-temperedness of his fellow Scot, understood the attempted assertion of the teacher's independence; he was a capable and autonomous individual who chafed at the attempts of those whom he did not particularly respect to supervise or regulate him. Detached from the local élite who were abandoning his school, and lacking direct accountability, Bremner declined to pay much attention to them.

For their part, the school commission was understood to represent the most "respectable" inhabitants and would have felt itself able to voice their interests and concerns. For all that they lacked the power of direct intervention, the school commission and leading citizens generally were shapers of opinion and mobilizers of resources. If he lost their favour, Bremner's position was deeply compromised.

### ***The Superintendent General and the community, June 1852***

The visit of Innes in 1852 is important because it provided a moment when things could have turned out differently. Bremner was, for the moment, silent, in the background. It was a point at which the local élite could have been rallied to the cause of government education and its lofty intentions. Instead the visit would prove influential in confirming their decision to abandon the government school. Subsequent developments indicate that the Graaff-Reinet leaders were mindful of the advantages of the kind of schooling that the New

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47 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, JF Ziervogel to Select Committee, 7 May 1858, p. 18.

48 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, JR Innes, "Report on case of Government teacher at Graaff-Reinet," p. 51.

System offered but not in the form that we have seen it to be taking. It appears that certain “of the most respectable inhabitants of the town” had written a letter of complaint about “the unsatisfactory state of the school”. A number of parents sought a meeting with Innes, as they thought his visit “a good opportunity of inquiring whether anything could be done to mend the state of the school”.<sup>49</sup>

Revisiting the 1852 meeting in the midst of an even hotter controversy in 1858, JF Ziervogel was at times uncertain of details, but his evidence is helpful in trying to understand the increasingly heightened “state of feeling” between Bremner and the residents of Graaff-Reinet. Present were those most concerned about the school, at the same time practically all the men who held the highest civic positions in town and district in the 1850s – mayor, Chairman of the later Divisional Council, four sometime Members of Parliament and the two leading clergymen.<sup>50</sup> These gentlemen were highly critical of Innes himself, and the meeting ended with the assertion that he had “grossly neglected his duty to the Graaff-Reinet School”:

It is in a very miserable state, and it appears to be admitted that the teacher does not take any great interest in it; and now, knowing all this, it is for the parents to know whether this is a state of things that ought to be allowed to continue.

At the meeting, “Dr Innes gave us a long lecture ... in which there was as usual a good deal about Sir John Herschel but nothing to any very good purpose ...”. Innes informed the meeting that he could only act if specific charges against the teacher were submitted to him in writing. As no written complaint was ever delivered to him, Innes took the matter no further than to inform “the teacher personally of what had taken place”.

While Innes’s actions in 1852 appear to have been intended to calm the situation, his visionary lecturing and principled stand did little to save the government school. It amounted to a lack of practical support for Bremner and at the same time, as far as the parents were concerned, was seen as evidence of lack of authority over him.

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49 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, has details of this meeting, JF Ziervogel to Select Committee, 7 May 1858, pp. 16-18; A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, JR Innes’s “Report on case of Government teacher at Graaff-Reinet,” p. 50.

50 In 1854, JF Ziervogel and TNG Muller were elected as Members of the Legislative Assembly. After one session Muller was replaced by CH Grisbrook. Ziervogel was “the one constant”, representing Graaff-Reinet for many years in distant Cape Town; A de V Minnaar, *Graaff-Reinet...*, p. 41.

Despite the absence of written grievances, serious charges were made at the meeting. These amounted to Bremner losing interest in the school, being frequently absent during school hours, and “that the children did not make the progress which [the parents] thought they could make, and ought to make, and that the school had fallen off in consequence”.<sup>51</sup>

In a separate interview in 1858, Revd Long was again more sympathetic towards the teacher, while observing that he thought the mix of class and age in one school a mistake. “People are fickle; and generally think their own children exceedingly clever; so that the fault is thrown entirely on the teacher, if they do not succeed and become good scholars.” Asked about the alleged absence of the master, he said he heard it remarked long after Bremner had first come that he was habitually half an hour late in the morning – but not habitually absent.<sup>52</sup>

So the rumours and voiced but unwritten charges generally constructed Bremner as an obstructive and neglectful teacher. At the same time the failure or inability of the SGE to intervene effectively to assist the teacher may in large part have been because of limited financial and administrative resources at his disposal. This indicates that the system of state schooling was already, after ten years, showing itself to be faulty; evidence of the failure in governmental regularity that was to pervade the system under the Innes superintendence.

### ***Competition for the First-Class Government School***

June 1852 appears to have marked a parting of the ways between the Graaff-Reinet élite and government schooling. It was an indictment of the first-class government school that it should be replaced by a fee-paying school which intended to replicate its role, although for the wealthier residents alone. It seems that the advantage of being able to “have some voice in the management of the school, and exercise a kind of control over the teacher himself”<sup>53</sup> outweighed the financial cost. The result was the establishment of a private grammar school, towards which the founding trustees each subscribed £5. Its role was neatly described as providing “a superior school for a district

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51 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, JF Ziervogel to Select Committee, 7 May 1858, pp. 16-18; 20.

52 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, W Long to Select Committee, 20 May 1858, p. 38.

53 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, SA Probart to Select Committee, 7 May 1858, p. 29.



of wealth... and daily growing mercantile importance.”<sup>54</sup>

Revd Andrew Murray was a leading figure in establishing the new school<sup>55</sup> and Bremner later maintained that it had “the powerful influence and support of the Dutch Reformed Church” and came to be “patronized by the local Members of Parliament” and several Divisional Council members.<sup>56</sup> For all its support, the Grammar School seems only ever to have had about 36-40 pupils. It was also financially unsustainable, closing as the financial hardships of the 1860s set in.<sup>57</sup> For Bremner, though, it was a bitter symbol of his school’s failure.<sup>58</sup>

### **1853-1856: Lull before the storm: The schoolmaster turns his spare moments to account**

No town has made greater progress during the last ten years than Graaff-Reinet ... From an island village it has sprung up to a great commercial centre and exercises an influence on the surrounding districts, second to that of no town in the Colony. (*EP Herald*, 1854).<sup>59</sup>

The fact that Bremner taught in Graaff-Reinet at a time of growing affluence made it difficult for him to attract and retain pupil-teachers and assistants. They had more financially rewarding options, while the inadequacy of the government teachers’ salaries led to the “necessity for the schoolmaster to turn his every spare moment to account, in order to earn a livelihood.”<sup>60</sup>

Reluctantly or not, Bremner seems to have gained some influence in local affairs and turned this to his own benefit. He appears to have become aligned

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54 CA:CO 695, JJ Meintjes to Col Sec, 27 June 1857, and attached “Memorial of inhabitants of the town and division of Graaff-Reinet”, 3 January 1857.

55 CA:CO 695, He signed the “Memorial” and was in correspondence with the government about the Grammar School, see separate notes, JC 14/1/58 with “Memorial of Inhabitants of Graaff-Reinet, 3 January 1857”.

56 *The Midland Province Banner*, 28 April 1858.

57 A de V Minnaar, *Graaff-Reinet...*, p. 101. There were many short-lived educational enterprises in Graaff-Reinet, but the Grammar School was symbolically important. Its demise saw a brief revival of the government school until it closed in 1862.

58 It is probable that Bremner was initially offered the position of grammar school teacher. A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, JR Innes to Select Committee, 7 April 1858, p. 11. This suggests that the managers felt him to be worth employing if under their authority. His refusal may well have been a combination of pique, commitment to inclusive public schooling and recognition that there was greater financial security in remaining in government employ. A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, JR Innes to Select Committee, 7 April 1858, p. 11.

59 S Dubow, “Land, labour and merchant capital...”, p. 15.

60 A1SC-1857, Appendix to the Report of the Select Committee on the Subject of Education, G Bremner, “Graaff-Reinet School”, p. 9.

with the wealthier commercial farmers as provisional secretary to the Graaff-Reinet Flockmaster Association.<sup>61</sup> He was more especially linked with the German-Jewish merchants of the town and district, as distinct from the older Dutch families. This is evident in a number of roles, probably earning him honoraria, where his facility with words made him a natural choice - as secretary, spokesman and editor.

In 1853 Bremner was secretary to the campaign committee backing William Fleming, a Cape Town merchant in the Stockentröm camp, as representative of the district on the new Parliament's Legislative Council.<sup>62</sup> He also became secretary to the board of the newly established South African Central Bank in January 1854 which was well capitalised but marked by "unsound business principles". The directors of the bank - JL Leeb, M Lilienfeld, MH Benjamin and the Chairman, SE Wimble, among them - financed *The Midland Province Banner*, a short-lived rival the *Graaff-Reinet Herald*<sup>63</sup> which Bremner edited between 1857 and 1860.

The few items of correspondence on file between Bremner and the government between 1852 and 1856 relate to returns and repairs.<sup>64</sup> This may reflect a teacher "getting on with things" – at the same time the SGE was ill and communication with his teachers suffered as a result. He also requested [unreasonably] extended leave to take his ill wife on the long journey by "mule wagon" to Simon's Town while the schoolroom was being repaired. The tone of the single piece of correspondence for 1855 is classic Bremner, and includes his presumption [not accepted by Innes] that he could defend departing before having obtained authorisation for the trip:<sup>65</sup>

As the saving of time is a saving of considerable expense to me at the present moment, having to forage my cattle, feed my boys, and pay them wages besides, I shall presume on your extending my leave of absence and start for Cape Town on Friday next ... Trusting that if I must needs have an official rap over the knuckles for my imprudence, I shall have fortitude enough to take

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61 A1SC-1857, Appendix to the Report of the Select Committee ..., G Bremner, "Graaff-Reinet School", p. 43; S Dubow, 'Land, labour and merchant capital...'

62 *Graaff-Reinet Herald*, 1 August 1853, National Archives, Kew, London, CO 53/43, (available at: <http://genealogieworld.net.settlers.herald.html>, accessed 21 March 2009). Minnaar observes that local political animosities were papered over in an attempt to win for Graaff-Reinet better representation in Parliament. Graham's Town, it was felt, was given a disproportionate amount of Eastern Province representation. A de V Minnaar, *Graaff-Reinet...*, p. 41.

63 CG Henning, *Graaff-Reinet...*, pp. 47, 71.

64 CA:CO 637, JR Innes to Acting Col Sec, 6 May 1854; G Bremner to JR Innes, 15 June, 1854, 4 October 1854; CA:SGE 1/4, G Bremner to JR Innes's clerk, 24 November 1854.

65 CA:CO 656, G Bremner to JR Innes, 7 July 1855.

it like a Trojan, and that I shall have undergone the infliction in your own drawing room within three weeks from this date...

That Bremner was the owner of cattle and employer of "boys" adds to his repertoire of extra-pedagogical economic activities. So, too, does his taking in of boarders from time to time. It probably also provides some explanation for a late commencement of his teaching day.

### **1857-1858: A new crisis for the Graaff-Reinet First-Class School**

The context of the next crisis involving the government teacher was the changing nature of both central and local accountability. The new colonial parliament held its first session in 1854 and by 1855 had begun to review the state of education in the Colony through a number of select committees.<sup>66</sup> In 1857 the focus turned directly on the government schools as John Fairbairn chaired a review of these based on the reports or "Returns sent to the Superintendent-General of Education, from all the First-class Teachers for the year 1856".<sup>67</sup> Then, because of the inclusion among these returns of George Bremner's injudicious 1856 report, a further select committee was called upon in April 1858 specifically to investigate the Graaff-Reinet first-class school.<sup>68</sup> A member of the above 1857 select committee was JF Ziervogel, the longest serving MLA for Graaff-Reinet and, as a member of the Graaff-Reinet Divisional Council, a member, too, of the reformed Graaff-Reinet school commission from its commencement in 1855.<sup>69</sup> He was also called to give evidence at the 1858 enquiry. All of this unnerved George Bremner in whose imagination Ziervogel became the embodiment of a local conspiracy against his school. Revd Andrew Murray, the other bastion of Graaff-Reinet society, came a close second.<sup>70</sup> Certainly both were powerful men in Graaff-Reinet, exercising a patriarchal authority in the community notwithstanding the increasing trappings of mercantile success and representative democracy.<sup>71</sup>

66 EG Malherbe, *Education in South Africa I: 1652-1922* (Cape Town & Johannesburg, Juta, 1925), pp. 92-93.

67 A1SC-1857, Report of the Select Committee Appointed to Consider the Subject of Education, June 1857; Appendix, November 1857.

68 A7SC-1858, Report of the Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School.

69 CA:CO 656, JR Innes to Col Sec, 14 June 1855.

70 H Murray, "The Andrew Murray family register" (S.I.s.n., 1931), p. 13. These two powerful families were related by marriage, with John Murray, eldest son of Andrew Murray senior married to Maria Anna Ziervogel.

71 C Henning, *Graaff-Reinet...*, p. 36; A de V Minnaar, *Graaff-Reinet...*, pp. 39-41.

### ***The teacher's state of mind***

With the establishment of the Divisional Council in 1855, the government school came under the somewhat erratic surveillance of a popularly elected local authority. The new school commission was formed from Divisional Council members in the place of SGE nominees, and generally their level of education was lower than that of the clergy, who no longer served, except in an interim role in the transition period. From its inception, the Graaff-Reinet Divisional Council played at best a cautious role with regard to the government school,<sup>72</sup> adding to Bremner's sense of isolation. There were to be many occasions when Bremner would carry out his examinations with few or no Divisional Council members present.<sup>73</sup> However strained or otherwise the relations between the new Divisional Council and Bremner might have been in 1855, a new chain of events involving them, the SGE and Parliament was to "widen the breach" irrevocably by 1856.

The year 1856 also saw a resurgence of the frustrations felt so strongly by Bremner in the early 1850s, despite a good performance by the 35 boys examined before the visiting SGE and "several members of the [new] Divisional Council and other inhabitants" on 8 February.<sup>74</sup> Bremner was angry at the inability of government to pay successive assistants finally appointed by Innes, and by their consequent departure.<sup>75</sup> This was compounded by the disrespect he felt evident from Murray who was assisting at the September 1856 examination.<sup>76</sup> It appears that Bremner had only one pupil engaged in the higher branches and led him through a virtuoso performance but "hurried over" the other classes so that Murray "could not say what the boys knew, or did not know".<sup>77</sup> Bremner, who did not have access to Murray's report on the examination, became obsessed with the idea of it being very damaging to his reputation.<sup>78</sup> Although it is unclear when Bremner's own controversial 1856 Report on the Government School at Graaff-Reinet was received by Innes, the issues identified in it relate to the matters described above. This

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72 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, JF Ziervogel to Select Committee, 20 May 1858, p. 44.

73 For example, CA:SGE 1/4, G Bremner to JR Innes's clerk, 7 November 1857.

74 G.16-'57, Report on Public Education for 1855 and First Half of 1856, JR Innes's full report on the Graaff-Reinet Government School, pp. xviii-xix.

75 CA:CO 676, JR Innes to Col Sec, 23 April 1856; CA:SGE 1/4, G Bremner to JR Innes, 30 October 1856, 10 January 1857; CA:CO 695, JR Innes to Col Sec, 29 September 1857.

76 A1SC-1857, Appendix to Report of Select Committee on Education, G Bremner to JR Innes, 30 October 1857; G Bremner, "Graaff-Reinet School", p. 8.

77 A7SC -1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, cited by JF Ziervogel, 7 May 1858, p. 22.

78 CA:SGE 1/4, G Bremner to JR Innes, 30 October 1856.

report, intended for the SGE’s eyes only, would accidentally be placed before Parliament uncensored and this would put the cat among the pigeons.

### *The SGE’s state of health*

Innes’s growing incapacity to manage all the affairs that fell to him, due to ill health and overwork, was the context in which Bremner’s angry report became an “event”. At that very time, Innes was attempting to resign his position as SGE. He had suffered repeated episodes of exposure to the sun on his tours of inspection, and by December 1856 felt incapable mentally and physically of carrying on the exhausting duties of SGE.<sup>79</sup> Innes’s resignation was refused by a severely disapproving Colonial Secretary, Rawson W Rawson.<sup>80</sup> Instead Rawson demanded that he immediately submit to the Parliamentary Education Committee the “annual returns for 1856, which had been received from the first-class teachers of the establishment”. This he did on 27 April 1857 without having them copied or checking their contents, being preoccupied with the final compilation of a late report on all schools in the Colony for the previous year. When the select committee met, it would find among its papers both this return, and a memorial [petition], dated 28 April 1857, submitted by Bremner to Parliament just as it convened.

### *The offending report*

The allegations in Bremner’s 1856 report that outraged the residents of Graaff-Reinet were those that disrespected their “intellectual culture” and their commitment to education, and hinted at a conspiracy amongst their leaders to crush the government school. He asserted that nine-tenths of the town’s residents had a limited “intellectual culture”, satisfied by reading only the Bible and the *Zuid Afrikaan*. They valued education very little beyond getting a “smattering of English, a very partial acquaintance with figures, and a ready faculty in handling a pen”:<sup>81</sup>

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79 CA:CO 695, JR Innes to Col Sec, 19 March 1857.

80 WL Nell, “James Rose Innes as Educationist at the Cape, 1822-1859” (DEd thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1973), pp. 296-298; 396, 446.

81 A1SC-1857, Appendix to Report of Select Committee on Education, G Bremner, “Graaff-Reinet School”, pp. 8-10.

We are practical people, and set no value on education beyond its practicality. Not educated ourselves, we cannot, for the life of us, see the use of paying for books, to bother our children's heads with, - geometry and algebra, and such like nonsense. Even our parson asks our schoolmaster, at the public examinations, amidst the approving smiles of the few spectators, 'What is the use of teaching such things?'

Here, as in most other colonial towns, the people are clamorous for education ... Their representatives head a crusade against the Government Schools, and are disposed ... to crush the local school, by sending their sons to a Government school some hundreds of miles off...

To cloak all this manouevering, they (I mean those who really value education) are particularly zealous in getting up proprietary elementary schools, which the public assist in paying for...

A second theme was the need for the government to come forward and play the role in diffusing "a higher grade of education" that only it was capable of playing. As they stood, the schools were fast becoming "pauper schools". They needed to become "locally respectable" and that would require a "liberal" investment in good buildings, equipment, staffing and salaries.

Bremner would have been unaware that his Report would come before Parliament; not so the memorial. It restated, in more moderate tones, many of the problems mentioned in the Report, and the same remedies – but added one new suggestion. This was conciliatory and recognised for the first time that working with the community instead of against it might make a difference to the success of the government school. As in his later newspaper articles, he emphasised the value of well-qualified teachers, arguing that their salaries should be guaranteed by government and adequate to enable them:<sup>82</sup>

... to maintain themselves in that position and rank in society to which their superior education and the highly responsible character of their office clearly gives them a claim...

### ***The teacher uses his journalistic skills to fight his cause***

By the time, three months after its first submission, that the attention of the Governor had been drawn to the outrageous content of the Bremner

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82 He republished this memorial verbatim as "The Teacher's Petition" in *The Midland Province Banner*, 31 March 1858.

Report,<sup>83</sup> it had been sent to the Government Printer. This was so that it could be included in an Appendix to the *Report of the Select Committee on Education for 1857* to be placed before parliament. By this indirect means, it came to the attention of MLA Ziervogel, and through him a copy reached the Graaff-Reinet Divisional Council. Offended by its content, the Divisional Council "resolved to request the Government to institute an inquiry into the truths of the statements and charges contained in the report".<sup>84</sup>

In the meantime Bremner had commenced a new phase of his public life. In October 1857, the first edition of a weekly newspaper edited by Bremner, *The Midland Province Banner*, rolled off the presses. While the intention of the newspaper's directors was to give publicity to their business interests, it provided a public platform for Bremner as editor to make pronouncements on a range of political and educational issues. In the very first edition he republished the *Graaff-Reinet Herald's* report on his most recent examination (reported above. See p. 8-9) and in November wrote scathingly of the high expectations but low value placed by the colonial government "on the character and accomplishments" of a first-class teacher who was "a graduate of an European university".<sup>85</sup> In January 1858, he linked Rawson with the contemptuous neglect of the government teachers as well as rallying opposition to "the general diffusion of an extensive and liberal education". He also argued that the answer to Parliament's quest for good education was to have a teacher of quality in every town – by implication, men such as himself:<sup>86</sup>

It is perfect nonsense to say that the youth of Africa, or of any other country, can be instructed by systems, or taught by Government schemes of education. They can only be taught by teachers. But teachers who are worthy of the name, and qualified to undertake and carry out such an important trust, are not to be conjured up from the vasty deeps of a wish to have them ... They seem not to be indigenous to South Africa, nor ought they to be culled from the ranks of those who have proved themselves, in other countries, unfit for every other enterprise or profession. ...

The *Banner* was a compromised public platform as Bremner attempted to keep his editorial identity concealed. He was, however, rapidly unmasked by the opposition *Graaff-Reinet Herald* and instructed by the Colonial Secretary

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83 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, RW Rawson to JR Innes, 25 July 1857, p. 45.

84 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, A Berrangé CC to Col Sec, 19 November 1857, p. 46.

85 Anon., "Government Patronage of Education," *The Midland Province Banner*, 18 November 1857.

86 *The Midland Province Banner*, 8 January 1858.

he must give up this position if he wished to remain a government teacher.<sup>87</sup> It appears as if Bremner initially ignored this warning. As late as August 1858, articles appeared in the *Banner* which were manifestly written by him.

Throughout this time Bremner had continued to teach and in April 1858 had about 30 boys in his school, six in the higher branches.<sup>88</sup> How Bremner learnt of the inquiry is not revealed, and he was not invited to appear before the select committee which sat in Cape Town. Its advent precipitated a shift in the focus of his writing, however, and he became involved in an intense campaign to defend his reputation and career. On the one hand he wrote agitated letters to the SGE warning of Ziervogel's intentions to undermine him.<sup>89</sup> On the other he fought through the pages of *The Midland Province Banner*. Here, too, he continued to warn of conspiracy against the government schools by a faction represented in Parliament (Ziervogel clearly the head of this). From April through to August 1858, the focus of his articles was the latest educational project of the Graaff-Reinet élite, a Graaff-Reinet College on the model of Cape Town's South African College. This he quickly decried, associating its location in a desiccated landscape with an intellectual desert and dubbing it the "Karoo College". Bremner viewed the establishment of a Graaff-Reinet College as the beginning of the end for a first-class government school. He also saw the petition in favour of the college led by CC Berrangé and seconded by Revd Andrew. Murray as an attempt to influence the sitting Parliamentary Select Committee against him:

The easy, off-hand way in which [the Petition] treats the Government School is not very complimentary to its Teacher. The present Government School, says the Petition, "does not meet the requirements of the locality". In what ways it may be asked? Is the Teacher not up in classics, or is he unable to come up to the Karroo standard of mathematics? Or is it not, rather, that our members of Parliament require some little local agitation, to strengthen their hands in the manly onslaught they are at present engaged in, with the Government Teacher?

Bremner questioned the genuine commitment to education of the "projectors of the scheme". He patronised the colonists generally as not being "the best judges of ... the manner in which their children ought to be educated" and

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87 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, JR Innes to RW Rawson, 11 November 1857, p. 51; A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, RW Rawson to JR Innes, 20 November 1857, p. 52. He referred to a Government Notice of 15 December 1852, framed by Acting Col Sec Richard Southey as forbidding civil servants to write on "political subjects in any newspaper".

88 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, "Report", p. iii.

89 For example, CA:SGE 1/4, G Bremner to JR Innes, 6 March 1858 and 17 April 1858.



claimed that it was “the most monstrous absurdity to imagine that such an institution could flourish” where there was a lack of elementary schools and the standard reached “in nine cases out of ten, is partial mastery of the three ‘R’s”. “Depend upon it the Karroo College is a veritable *joke* ...”<sup>90</sup> He also implied further impropriety of leading citizens in proposing their own properties be rented to the new institution. It is little wonder that the combined impact of his public and professional writing was the permanent alienation of Bremner and the Graaff-Reinet leaders.

### ***The Select Committee inquires and reports on the First-class School, 1858***<sup>91</sup>

The Select Committee sought to understand why “the usefulness of this school to the inhabitants [had] been constantly diminishing during the last six years or more”. By 1858, it noted, there were a mere six pupils in the higher branches. This took them back to the beginning of Bremner’s career in Graaff-Reinet, and their evidence has already been used in this article to flesh out those years. There is, in fact, very little to add to what has already been shown to be the state of feeling between the residents and Bremner. The 1856 Report, with its “extremely inconsiderate language”, had simply “widened the breach previously existing”.

The question then was, was the decline of the school the teacher’s fault? The conclusion was that it was not. Bremner emerged from the inquiry as a man of admirable achievement. It was circumstances that had contrived to fan the embers of small “personal” and “political” differences into larger flames than warranted.

The Select Committee also judged Bremner to have been wrong about the residents’ lack of commitment to education. The real problem had been faults in the education system, more specifically the lack of local supervision. This meant that there was no capacity to deal with small issues before they escalated, and no-one to provide the necessary warm interest in the school. The committee felt that there were no major charges concerning Bremner’s

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90 Anon., “The Educational Petition”, *The Midland Province Banner*, 28 April 1858; Anon., “The Karroo College”, *The Midland Province Banner*, 18 August 1858.

91 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School. Members of the Select Committee were P Bosman (chairman), Attorney-General W Porter, J Fairbairn, Mr Watermeyer, Mr Loedolff. Called to testify between 22 April and 20 May were JR Innes, Revd W Long, and MPs for Graaff-Reinet, JF Ziervogel, W Southey and SA Probart, pp. iii, vii-viii.

running of his school, and certainly none impugning his character. The “state of feeling” between him and the community was, however, so great that they recommended he be transferred to another post.

The Committee concluded that annual government spending of £330 on a government school was no longer justified. There were sufficient “gratuitous” mission and other schools capable of delivering the level of elementary schooling that the Government School had provided. It should instead be incorporated as the preparatory section of the new College; the government role limited to a lesser amount of aid and perhaps some bursaries for poorer children of merit.<sup>92</sup>

### ***George Bremner moves on***

Despite the sympathetic verdict of the Select Committee and the recommendation that Bremner be transferred to another position, he was left in limbo until the end of 1859. By September 1859, Bremner was left with three pupils, his two sons and a coloured boy.<sup>93</sup> Finally it was agreed that Bremner should move to Swellendam where the first-class teacher had died of a stroke, and the replacement teacher was not up to standard.<sup>94</sup>

Bremner was reluctant to accept the transfer, suspecting (correctly as it turned out) that in Swellendam, too, the respectable residents would not support government schools in their present condition. He finally departed having been assured that he would be given an assistant teacher and necessary apparatus.<sup>95</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The Graaff-Reinet Government School was closed on Bremner’s departure but, as he had predicted in the *Banner*, there were delays in getting the Graaff-Reinet College off the ground. Until it was, the school was reopened for a

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92 A7SC-1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, “Report” of the Select Committee, 31 May 1858, pp. iii-vi.

93 KW Smith, *From frontier to midlands: A history of the Graaff-Reinet District, 1786-1910* (Grahamstown, Rhodes University Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1976), p. 72.

94 CA:CO 767, L Dale to Col Sec, 27 January 1860.

95 CA:SGE 1/4, G Bremner to L Dale, 10 December 1859.

period under a newly graduated recruit from Glasgow.<sup>96</sup>

To Bremner’s name, he himself stated, was attached “the reputation of having failed in Graaff-Reinet”.<sup>97</sup> Yet amidst the conceit and contempt, Bremner had identified some important realities. The first was that the “Herschel Scheme of Education” had the capacity to disturb existing social relationships and in so doing to upset those who had the power in society:<sup>98</sup>

Add ... the inevitable disturbance in the social equilibrium which the general diffusion of knowledge would bring in its wake, and one can easily imagine how the local magnates that are, and generally the “powers that be”, should have set their face against the system of universal education propounded by Sir John Herschel, and which, if thoroughly carried out, would long ere now have compelled many of them to withdraw to that hazy obscurity in which they were born...

As Mr Watermeyer of the Select Committee on the Graaff-Reinet School discerned when attempting to account for the failure of the government teacher and school:<sup>99</sup>

I think you [Revd Long] have described two evils as existing at Graaff-Reinet school, quite independently of the individual who had charge of it. – the mixture of ages and colors in the school, and the want of local supervision.

Differently stated, while many Graaff-Reinet residents may not have valued an education above that needed for church membership, those who did wanted it to be “somewhat select” and under their control. The disruptive potential of an inclusive popular education at the hands of a liberal but / and condescending intellectual was not to be contemplated. Bremner also correctly discerned that in moving towards relinquishing education of the poor to missions and supporting the establishment of private, though state aided, higher institutions of learning, the state was giving up on “the education of the people generally”.<sup>100</sup>

96 CA:CO 767, L Dale to Col Sec, 19 March 1860.

97 CA:SGE 1/4, G Bremner to L Dale, 10 December 1859.

98 “The Karroo College”, *The Midland Province Banner*, 18 August 1858.

99 A7SC–1858, Report of Select Committee on Graaff-Reinet School, Chairman Watermeyer interviewing W Long, 20 May 1858, A7SC–1858, Report of Select Committee..., p. 39.

100 CA:SGE 1/4, G Bremner to Secretary to the Divisional Council, 8 April 1859. JR Innes was author of a “Memorial on the proposed establishment of a ‘Collegiate Institution’ at Graaff-Reinet”, dated 1 August 1858 (in CA:CO 720). In this he notes that it is at the instruction of His Excellency [Sir George Grey] that he makes his suggestions as to how such an institution could function. There is a likelihood that Governor Grey was on his own educational mission, rather than using his influence to promote the existing government schools. He endowed the Grey Institution in Port Elizabeth, where there was already a government school, and considered doing the same at Caledon (CA: 3/CAL/5, CC Caledon to Municipal Commissioners, 21 October 1857.)

As regards Bremner's personal contribution to raising an awareness of the advantages of the type of education he represented, two small items of evidence are telling. In the early 1860s, the Watermeyer Commission was charged with deciding whether the New System of education should continue at all. Revd Andrew Murray senior made a terse and brief response to its enquiries, and despite his disaffection with the Graaff-Reinet Government School, did affirm that in colonial towns, "the qualifications [of a teacher] should be the same as the first-class teachers have hitherto possessed."<sup>101</sup>

The most famous alumnus of Bremner's school was probably the controversial and idealistic Revd TF Burgers, president of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) from 1872-1877. Schooled in English in Graaff-Reinet by the Scot, he later invited Bremner to come and teach in the Transvaal. This was as part of his plans to modernize the ZAR through a reformed, secular education system.<sup>102</sup> Unable to accept the invitation because of poor health, Bremner was perhaps gratified to have received this measure of recognition from the lad to whom he had given a grounding in the classics and mathematics.

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101 G.24-'63, Report of Watermeyer Commission, "Answer from Rev A Murray senior", p. 49.

102 TF Burgers was born in 1834 on a farm in the Graaff-Reinet District. He left to study theology in Utrecht in 1853, so could have spent up to five years under Bremner. *Dictionary of South African biography I* (Pretoria, NCSR, 1968), p. 133; E Bull, "Ratray and Black", *Familia* XXVII, 3 (1990), p. 60.