

Colonel Alexander “Alick” John Fraser C.B.

1821-1866

By [LeeAnne Bloye](#)

April 2022

Alexander “Alick” John Fraser was born in Edinburgh on April 18, 1821. His parents Dr. William Fraser and Mary Ann Leslie (alias Ord) had married the year before. Mary Ann Leslie already had a three-year-old daughter known then as Ann Ord. Alick’s father was born in Inverness, the second of two surviving sons of merchant Alexander Fraser and Annabella Munro.

Dr. William Fraser, Alick’s father, was a surgeon with the Honourable East India Company. Four months after his son was born, while travelling aboard the *Caledonian* from India to Scotland, he died at the age of 25. He left very little to his widow and her two children. Mary Ann Fraser died in 1832 of asthma, leaving 14-year-old Ann and 11-year-old Alick orphans. A few months later, the Edinburgh Sheriffs Court held Ann and Alick responsible for their deceased mother’s debts.

It isn’t clear what happened to the children after the death of their mother. Nothing is known of Mary Ann’s ancestry but Dr. William Fraser came from a successful merchant family. It is possible that his brother John, or one of William’s three surviving sisters, provided for the children. In 1843, Ann married James Prentice, gardener at Sunnyside Lodge near Lanark. Despite previously being named “Ord” Ann’s name on her marriage record and gravestone is recorded as “Fraser”.

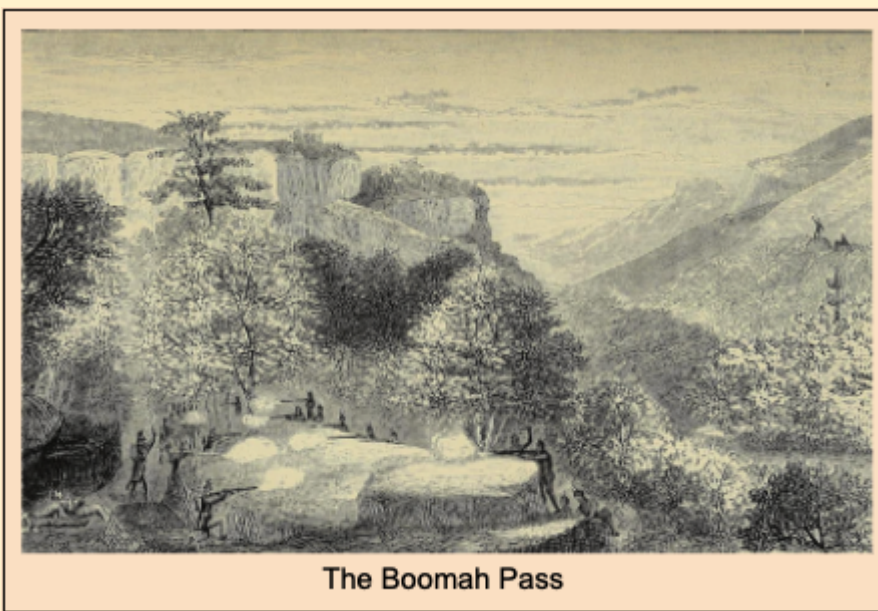
In 1838 Alick attended King’s College, and then Marischal College in 1841. It is quite likely he was acquainted with his cousins Donald and Alexander Fraser. They were enrolled in Dr. Tulloch’s Aberdeen boarding school and both cousins also attended Marischal College in the winter months. Donald finished his schooling there in 1842 at the age of 16, and left Scotland to join his father John in Canada.

After qualifying as a doctor, Alick enlisted as a surgeon with the British Army Medical Service and was sent to the Cape of Good Hope in 1843. In 1846 and 1847 he served in various wars, actions and skirmishes, receiving a medal. He was present at the Battle of the Boomplaats on 29 August 1848. In 1850 he was appointed Assistant Surgeon to the 73rd Regiment.

On Christmas Eve in 1850, a column of British troops moved into the Amatola Mountains with the goal of capturing Sandile, a Xhosa king. The column consisted of about 700 men. Alick - now Dr. Fraser - was travelling near the rear guard with the pack horses that carried the medical supplies. The area was very wild with only footpaths and animal trails. In order to reach Keiskammahoek, they had to go through the Boomah Pass, a slender boulder-strewn trail flanked by cliffs, bush hills and the Keiskamma river. Some sections were so narrow that the troopers had to dismount and go through single-file. About a quarter of the column had made it through when the Xhosa attacked the rear.

Captain John Jarvis Bisset had made it through the pass, but because he had experience fighting in that terrain, he volunteered to go back and take command of the infantry. Making his way on horseback while dodging oncoming soldiers and fleeing pack horses, he re-entered a narrow section and was shot. The bullet went into his lower thigh but passed out near his hip. He continued riding towards the end of the column, where he fell from his horse. He was given assistance by a fellow officer who applied a tourniquet, then fetched Dr. Fraser.

Captain Bisset’s own words from his book *Sport and War*:



The Boomah Pass

Dr. Fraser, one of the finest officers in the service, who was the second medical officer, soon arrived on the spot; but the excitement and anguish of mind had been too much for him, and as he kneeled down to examine my wounds he fainted. Grand, fine fellow ! It was not from the sight of my wounds that he did this, but from the knowledge that he had to leave the dead and dying in the pass to the merciless tortures and mutilations of the savage enemy. I always carried a flask of cold tea with me in the field, which I managed to take off, and offered it to Fraser. The cool beverage soon recovered him, and his first exclamation was, " Oh, my God, I was obliged to leave Stewart." Now I must here record to the honour of Dr. Fraser that he is one of the most conscientious and bravest men in the service, and in the hurry-scurry of the attack in the bush he would 'not leave his horse with the medical panniers; and he was lugging this brute along in the rear when a ball killed the horse and he fell. Fraser had then to hurry on, and it was while passing the dead and dying that were being mutilated by the enemy that the doctor heard a voice exclaim, "For

God's sake, Fraser, don't leave me." Had he hesitated for one moment his throat also would have been cut, and he was obliged to pass on in order to over-take the rear of the column. In his imagination he thought that it was Dr. Stewart who had appealed to him, and this made the agony of the moment still more painful. On this point, however, I was enabled to relieve his mind, for in pointing to my jacket, I asked him what the spots were: and on his seeing that it was human brains, I told him that they came from Stewart's head. Nevertheless, he could not overcome the agonising thought of having been obliged to leave the wounded men.

Once through the pass, the surviving troops headed to Keiskammahoek, where they made camp for the night. The next morning they departed for Fort White, and after a rest, headed to Fort Cox (they didn’t catch Sandile on this foray). Fraser was left at Fort White to care for the badly wounded, including Bisset. Again in Bisset’s words:

Dr. Fraser was most kind and attentive to the wounded; and I was plugged and bandaged up in a most comfortable manner.

.....

The suppuration from my wound was so great that without sustaining food [turkey eggs] I must (sic) have died. My pulse was 130; I was in a high state of fever, and delirious for days; and next to the turkey, I am indebted to my kind friend, Dr. Fraser, for my life. His attentions were unremitting; by night or day he never left my side. On the fourteenth day secondary haemorrhage took place at night. I was lying, under the influence of morphia, in a sort of trance; Fraser was lying in the hut near me. My eyes were fixed, yet I had my senses. Fraser heard what he thought a sort of rattle in my throat and started up. I appeared more to feel than see all this. He rushed to my bed, felt my pulse, and looked scared; ran to his little kit, and brought back a small round looking-glass, and held it to my mouth, dropped it, and rushed for a little vial, from which he poured drops down my throat, and I soon became more conscious. He then threw open my blanket, and found me saturated in blood. He told me afterwards that I was in too weak a state for him to cut down and re-tie the artery, and that he was obliged to keep me suspended between life and death until coagulation had stopped the bleeding. The course of the bullet had cut the sciatic nerve in two. During this period my leg became doubled up, and as I could not be moved, it became fixed in that contracted position. Ultimately I had to be sent home by a medical board to have an operation performed.

After resigning from the Medical Service, Fraser began laying the foundations for his future as a British diplomat. Wearing various official hats, he participated in events that contributed to the forming of the Orange River Sovereignty, a small South African British colony in which he owned a substantial amount of farmland. The Sovereignty's capital was Bloemfontein, and Fraser Street (now Lane) was named for him. Fraser's conduct particularly impressed the Governor of the Cape of Good Hope, who repeatedly pointed out Fraser's merits to the British government.

In 1852 the British Government announced its intention to renounce its rule from the turbulent colony, and withdraw its troops. Reverend Andrew Murray and Dr. Fraser were appointed to deliver a petition to the British Parliament in London, advocating a reversal of the decision. The two men left Cape Town on 21 January 1854 aboard the steamer *Queen of the South*. However, as they were travelling, the independence of the colony was formally agreed upon. Rev. Murray made his way back to South Africa and Fraser stayed in London. The two men must have formed a strong friendship as Murray was Fraser's executor and attorney in South Africa.

Between 1855 and 1863 Fraser's career as a diplomat continued. He was sent by the British Foreign Office to the Middle East on various sensitive military and social assignments. He was on assignment during the Crimean War, and assisted as the Russians surrendered Khars. He also was a member of the European Commission that took what is now remembered as an historically important step with its intervention during the atrociously violent Syrian Crisis of 1860-61.

Despite his substantial responsibilities, Fraser occasionally found opportunities to explore some of the fascinating sites in the areas he was working. Case in point, in 1856 he joined a party seeking to climb to the summit of Mount Ararat.

Of the five men in the party, Mr. Theobald and Mr. Evans were experienced alpine climbers, but Rev. Thursby, Maj. Stuart and Fraser were not. Worse for Fraser was that he was inexperienced with snow. On the day of the climb, Rev. Thursby was ill, so he stayed in the camp. At 3 a.m. on 12 July, the others set off, and three hours later their guide brought them to the foot of Mount Ararat's snow cap. Theobald and Evans, followed by Stuart, forged ahead, but Fraser chose to avoid the snow as long as possible and took a different route. This decision almost cost him his life.

The words in quotations in the following paragraph are Fraser's own, taken from a letter he wrote a few weeks afterward.

Having climbed within 1000 feet of the summit, Fraser was on a ridge of rocks, looking down a sheer precipice onto Georgia, some 4000 feet below. The wind had picked up and fearing being blown over the precipice, he had no choice but to cross a snow-covered area. The snow, only centimetres deep, hid an "almost perpendicular glacier" on which he lost his footing and fell. With "the speed of lightning" he "shot" back down the mountain, spinning on his back, and fighting to keep his head pointed toward the top. Between spinning, speed and the thin air that hampered his ability to breathe, Fraser became disoriented.

Fraser slid about 1000 feet, but his momentum was finally stopped by the buildup of snow in his crotch. Amazingly, he was mostly unhurt. He picked himself up and, using the ice-staff that he had somehow held onto, carefully made it off the ice and climbed back to the height he had fallen from three hours earlier.

As he again neared the summit, he saw and signalled to Theobald and Evans. They had already reached the top and were making their way back down. After reaching the summit, Fraser was alone in the bitterly cold and thin air, which caused him to lose consciousness three times. One can only imagine the fortitude it took for this frostbitten man to rouse himself and make the descent back down that windy and icy snow cap. Slowly he followed Theobald and Evans' tracks to where the ridges of solid rock and loose stones began, but by then it was dark, and he became lost. Eventually he found - or was found by - a guide, and at midnight he was reunited with his friends, not to mention the warm tents that he had left 20 hours earlier.

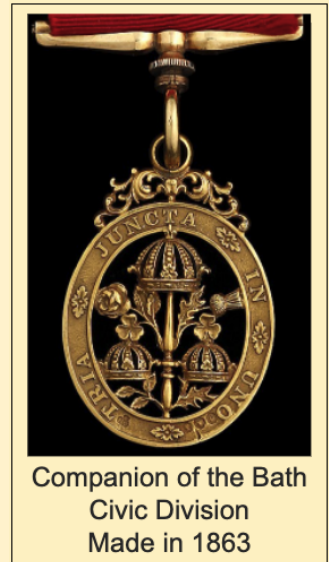
In 1862 the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) was touring the Middle East. Fraser rode out from Beirut to meet the royal entourage. When the entourage failed to show, Fraser instead went hunting on the southeastern slope of Mount Carmel. The boar he shot was found dead on the holy site of El Mukhrakah, important to many religions whose followers were part of the hunting party. All were deeply angered to discover that a Catholic chapel had been built over the site, and foundations had been laid for a larger building.

Upon his return to Beirut - and after attending a small dinner party at which the Prince of Wales was present - Fraser immediately took steps to stop the construction on El Mukhrakah. Back in England a few years later in 1866, Fraser spoke at a meeting of the Palestine Exploration Fund. He said it was "a source of great satisfaction" when in the Middle East he was occasionally able to "prevent the destruction or appropriation of interesting sites" and said he thought he had succeeded in keeping El Mukhrakah "open to the sky" for all religions to freely use for worship.

In 1863, Fraser was made an honorary Colonel and a Companion of the Order of the Bath.

At the age of 45, in 1866, Colonel Alexander "Alick" John Fraser C.B. died in Scotland. His death - probably from a perforated intestine, according to the doctor who signed the death record - occurred only a few months after his previously mentioned speech at the meeting of the Palestine Exploration Fund. He was buried with his Fraser and Russell relatives in Chapel Yard, Inverness. On the monument later erected to the memory of his cousin Rev. Donald Fraser D.D. (1826 -1892) is the inscription:

In memory of Alick John Fraser, M.D. Colonel in the Army, Companion of the Bath, born at Edinburgh in 1821, died at Auchmacoy, Aberdeenshire, 7th November 1866. Served in South Africa and in Turkey.
Represented HM Government in Syria from 1860 to 1863.



After such a remarkable life, Alick Fraser bequeathed money for the education of his housekeeper's children, his Fraser and Russell cousins, Rev. Andrew Murray, and Miss Buchan of Auchmacoy. For his sister Ann - referred to in his will as Mrs. Ann Prentice of Sunnyside Lodge near Lanark - Fraser instructed that £4000 be invested and the interest go to providing Ann a secure life-long income, and that upon her death she could bequeath the principal to her husband James Prentice and her children. However, it was later decided in court that she could not leave any of the principal to her grandchildren, which is [a whole other story](#).

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