# This is the Biography of William Cairncross (1829-1921)

# written by Wm. Cairncross (c1874).

*This document was sent to me by Jean Hartle, in an email early 2014. She also sent me another biography; this one by William Cairncross (1829-1921) of his great grandfather Alexander Cairncross (1758-1856).*

## Preface

Biography of William Cairncross and family, as may in time come to be of interest to all, whom it might concern, and not only that, but it may be profitable at some future time to trace back our ancestor, how much time it might save, and no one knows where he might travel, and who he might meet.

William was named after his Grandfather!

William Cairncross was born in Broughty Ferry, Forfarshire, Scotland in the Parish of Mannafeath (Monifieth), on December 19, 1829, in a house facing the River Tay, in what was termed the fishers Doors, the row of houses facing the [sea. My](http://sea.my) father hadbeen a fisherman, but at the time of my birth he was in the coast guard service, and remained in ituntil I was six years of age**,** he then moved to the down of Dundee where my father was employed as a dockgate man at the Carl Gray dock and worked there for 13 years. Our home wasin the Porters Land a tenementhouse on Queens Street where we resided until we came to America. I had two brothers, Alexander and Stewart, and two sisters, Barbra and Frances S. My earliest days were spent on the water as all the inhabitants of Broughty Ferry were either Fishermen or sailors as it was a second nature, to be either on boats or ships,or playing in the water.

I received but little education as it wasexpensive, the utmost time I had in school did not exceed two years. I went to work at the hackel machine, when but a little over 10 years of age, for it was necessary that all must work in order to make ends meet. The first wages I got was one shillinga week (25c) - then after a time it was raised to two shillings, which was fair wages at that time for a boy, but after a little over a year I was taken sick with Dropsy of the chest on account of close confinement, and the work, and was sick for nearly nine months. My parents often despairing of me ever getting over it, but finally did recover - it being thefirst case ever being cured by medicine on record. I then worked in the linen factories for after working three or four months I was discharged for being under age. No boy or girl was allowed to work in a factory under 13 years of age. But I went to work the next day in Low's factory, and passed my­self off as 13 years of age, although I was small for that age.

I worked for force three years in the factories, I received at first two shilling a week, and when I left 1 was getting three (75c) shillings a week as oiler and belt lacer. I had the care of 60 spinning frames and each frame had 60 spindles, and each spindle had a belt, besides the main belt, and two counter shafts that ran the whole length of the mill. Each spindle had to beoiled twice a day, so between lacing belts and oiling there was no time for play. The hours were long from half past four till seven at night, with forty minutes for break­fast and dinner - breakfast was at 9 o'clock and diner at 2 o'clock. Saturday we quit at 3 o'clock in the afternoon., and the mill started in the morning at half past five, and I had a lot of hands to waken in themorning, for which l got a penny a week (2c), and I generally had from 10 to twenty to call, which I had for pocket money. I merely mention this to show what wages was for boys at that time.

After working three years in the factory, I got tired of it and wanted something better. So nothing would suit me but to be a sailor, although my parents were much opposed to it, but came to the conclusion that it was for the best as I had got to be a source of great trouble to them, as it was often said that I was the wildest boy in the city, and my father had complaints about me almost every day for some mischief or other to tell of the many scrapes I got into would be of little interest to them that may have an interest in it.

I was taken (out of the) factory and sent to school in the hope that it might get me to change. My grandfather William Cairncross, for whom I was named, paid for three months schooling at a private school where an old teacher kept a few scholars, teaching the higher branches of education. Such as navigation and book keeping and such branches - I went to school and learnt very rapidly. The teacher told my after I left home that he had taught school for forty years, and I learned the fastest of any boy he ever had been to school about two months, when coming out of school one night I came up to some of the scholars that was abusing a little fellow by throwing his bonnet on the street and shoving him around and he was crying, I told them to stop it, and I was not as big as some of them, they all laughed at me, and one of them shoved another against me, and it did not take me a minute to give them a broken face, and when I was done with them three of them run back to school and told­ the school master.

I went to school next day the boys were there before me and they were beauties. I had used them up badly for the short time I was at them and the boy I had taken his part told me their parents had been to the teacher and made acomplaint against me and I was to have put out of school and I was to be arrested for it. I left my books in the school and went out before the teacher came in I went down to the harbour and played around for two or three days my father thinking I was in school but the teacher went to my father and asked why I had not come to school. When I went home at night my father did not know what to say or do with me. This affair - although it seems trifling, and you may wonder why I speak of it - was the ruination of my life. It was my Grandfather that had taken me from the factory andsent me to school intending to take me in with him into the government service. He was for forty years Bond House Keeper atDundee for all the goods that were brought to that place that had to pay a tariff. He had 10 pounds a monththat is ($50.00) and that was big wages at that time- my father was getting 4 pounds a month and that was ($20.00) and that was good wages. Had I stayed in school.

I could not be prevailed upon to go back to school so Father and Mother con­cluded to let me go to sea and my got me on a bark named the Clansman of Glasgow. She was small in comparison to the ships built now - she was be­tween 300 and 400 tons but had been in east India trade before that - but was chartered to go to Quebec for a load of timber. I was hired for three years but before leaving the old country my father told me if the captain did not use me right or if I did-not like the sea or the ship, that if I had a chance to run away as he was thinking at that time of coming to America in a short time after, so my mother got my clothes ready and father gave me his hammock and sea chest that he had saved for many years after he left sailing- and I went to work about the first of May 1845. I helped to rig out the ship, siting up the mast and yards and putting on the sails and taking on ballast, and we sailed on the 12th of May. We anchored in the river opposite the place where fathers folks and himself had lived for I don't know how long.

We finally set sail in two days after and it was then when under way and had a little time to think and the old familiar places began to disappear and the presentment that I should never see them again. Then I began to feel the situation I had placed myself in, as I stood looking a few tears ran down my cheeks but I was soon roused from my thoughts by the mate ordering me and one of the men, William Alexander, the carpenter of the ship, who took a liking to me, and I for him, and we had worked a good deal together in the harbour be­fore leaving, and had become fast friends, and his kindness has never been forgotten. We were ordered to let go the main top galent sail and royal, the two highest sails on the ship, although I had helped to put them sails on in the harbour, it was a different thing in handling them out at sea and I can’t describe the strong sensation that crawled over me then, as she raised up and fell down over the waves, and being about one hundred to a hundred and fifty feet above the sea, it was no easy task, but my attention was soon taken from thinking to the work I was at, and then we got down on deck. We passed the bell rock that a great deal has been written about - it used to be the most dangerous place on the East cost of Brixton - it stands about twenty miles from Dundee, and when we went a sailing in a small boat, we had been there in before this way, the last place that I knew, and when that went out of sight and darkness came on, I felt lonely and the watches being set larbord watch with the first mate. I watch went to bed first, but I did not sleep much, my thoughts were on home and Mother. It was then that I knew the want of her care. The bell rang every half hour, two taps and so on till eight strokes of the bell, being four hours and the watch was changed.

When I came on deck at 12 o'clock all was dark and we were running along north with a south west wind. We had nothing to do the first watch and at four o'clock day was breaking, and we went to bed till 7 o'clock, got breakfast and all hands were set to work, me and the carpenter to work fastening the irons for the studing sails yards on the ends of the other these studing sails extend out from the other sails, and are set when there is a fair wind. We were up aloft, as it is called, nearly a whole day, first on one yard and then on the other, except when we came down for dinner, and by the time we were done I became familiar with the work aloft, that I thought nothing of it, no matter she rolled and pitched it never troubled me after. I should have mentioned before this, the number of men and boys on the ship, there was the Captain, Mr. Peck, he was a small humpbacked English man, and was part owner of the ship. He had fallen from the rigging sometime and hurt his back, and we used to call him humphey. He was a good seaman, but a little cranky at times.

The first mate was Mr. White, he belonged to Dundee, he was a good sea­man, but would get drunk every time he could get liquor, and I will speak of it hereafter, the second mate, I disremember his name, he was a young man, very quiet, and had not much to say to anyone. There were twelve men, called men before the mast, and three boys, a cook and a stewart, the oldest boy was on the starboard watch, and the other boy and me were on the other watch. The other boy on our watch was a little trecky in regard to work, and if there was any chance to get around and throw it on to me and the men soon seen it.

We soon reached the north of Scotland, and at sunrise I was shown the much noted House, John O'Groats House on the very north most point of Scotland, we were then in the Pentland Firth, we then started west.

We worked our way through the firth that day and the pilot us about 4 ­o'clock in the afternoon, and then we went out in the broad Atlantic Ocean. I came on watch at 8 o'clock, we were running along with a south­west wind and before 12 o'clock the last light of the light-houses and Bonney Scotland had gone out of sight. After that every day’s work was the same with nothing to speak of - sometimes it was perfectly calm with scarcely wind enough to feel it - and at other times a good breeze that came in every point of the compass.

The watches were changed every 24 hours from 4 to 6 o'clock in the afternoon - it is called the dog watch - and all hands are on deck with nothing to do in general, when we got supper at, what was called 4 bells, the officers of the watch with two of the boys, or a man and a boy heaves the log, this done by a long line, about the size of a close line with knots at equal distance on it. It is wound up on a reel with a shaft through it, can run out as fast as necessary. There is a small board attached to the end of the line loaded on one edge and a hole in the center for a pin to go into. There are two lines on the end of the of the line and one is fastened to the log, so that when it is thrown overboard it sets in the water straight up and down there is a half-minute sand glass that gives the time that the line runs out. One holds the glass, one the real that the log line is on, and the officer of the watch casts it out, and tells how fast the ship is running. This is done every two hours, and the men take regular turns steering, so that 4 bells and 8 bells the log is heaved, and the man at the wheel is changed, and the second dog-watch on at 6 o'clock and stands to 8 o'clock. This changes the watches every day, so that one watch gets 4 hours the one night and 8 hours the next. The watch on deck from 4 o'clock to 8 inthe morning must wash the deck off, and it don't make any difference if it was raining so hard that it washed the deck as clean as it could be made, or if the sea was dashing over it, and every wave sweeping everything off it. The watch on the morning must go through the performance by sweeping the water off, and cailing (cleaning, l think) up any mops that may be out of order in the night from 8 o'clock in the forenoon till 4 in the afternoon. All hands were kept at work fixing blocks, mending sails, taking up pinch mats and putting on new ones, painting, scrubbing, scraping, and one would wonder where all the work came from that could keep so many men working, but the captain kept us all busy.

I was first sent to work braiding pinch mats. These were made by taking old raps apart, and taking the twine and braiding them in a wide mat, from 6 to 12 inches wide, to put in the rigging where the yards came against them to keep them from wearing, and when they got worn through the old ones were taken up and new ones put on. Sometimes I had to help the men to serve the rigging, it was winding twine around the rope to keep it from wearing. So that one day was like another, until we had been out about 2 weeks, I think it was the third Sunday, we had a fair wind and every stitch of canvas that could be set to catch the wind was set. We had had the studding set sometimes on one side and sometimes on the other before, but this was the first time they were set on both sides. It was a pleasant warm day, and we were never asked to do anything on Sunday, except work the ship. We washed our clothes and ourselves; the men shaved and cleaned themselves, the same as if they were ashore. We heaved the log at 12 o'clock and we were running 12 knots, and at 4 o'clock we were running 14 knots, and at 6 o'clock we were running 15 knots. Mr. White, the mate, and the other boy and me heaved the log. He could hardly believe she was making that speed. We had hardly got the log line wound up on the real when the mate and captain came aft and the mate heaved it again to make sure he was right and it proved the same. The wind had increased so strong that some of the old men thought that something would break the studding, sail yards bent like whipstalks, so that we had to put on preventer braces, (that was raps in the middle of the yards to keep them from bending and braking). After supper a big black cloud began to rise in the west, and I noticed the men sitting on the windless out forward looking at it and talking.

Every man was out forward ready for any emergency. I was sitting on the spares, alongside of the long boat, and when I seen them I walked out forward among them. One of them told me to get my sweater and oil skins ready, and stand by for a surge, which was a common expression when anything unusual was going to happen . It was but a short time when a murmur of discontent began to spread among the men. One would say is the d--- old humphy back, son of a sea cook, going to carry all this sail till the last minute. Another would ask if he was asleep.

At last, David Gillitly an old sailor, he had been mate on several vessels before, but whisky had got away with him. He proved to be a better navigator than any one on the ship. He had kept the ships recoming from the start, just to keep himself in practice, walked aft where the mate was standing, and said something. The mate began looking up at the weather, and at the sails and around, then asked the captain if-we hadn't better shorten the sail. Old Humphy did not to seem to like to be told what to do, but one could see that things were getting pretty seamy. At last the order came to shorten sails; the studding sails were all taken in and everythingmade snug. Everyone could see that it was going to rain, and that with the rain the wind would change to the west, but how hard it would blowwas a mystery. As it began to rain the wind calmed down, and at eight bells the watch was ordered to go below. When we get down and I was about to get in my hammock, the carpenter told me not to take of my clothes, for he was sure we were to have a storm. We were siting chatting for about twenty minutes when we heard the order to port the helm just then the gale struck us and the ship reeled over almost on her beam ends. All hands were ordered up to shorten sails.

I had hardly got on deck when the carpenter and me were ordered to take in. the main royal and top galent sail, we let it go (lowered it) and clued it up then ran up to make it fast, before I got up to the royal yard I began to think it was all up with me, it blowed so hard that I thought I would be torn from the rigging, and it rained in torrents, and the thunder and lightning was terrible.

When I got on the royal yard it was all I was able to do was to hold on, and the carpenter would catch me sometimes to keep me on, but after a while we got it rolled up and made fast, and got down to the top galent sail and another man was sent up to help us and we got along better. We were not very particular about it, and rolled it up the best way we could and got down an dock. While we were doing this the rest of the men were taking in the Flying Jib and Stay sail.

We were bad but they were worse being down near the water, they were not only drenched with the rain but went down over the waist in the sea several times, and had hard work to keep from being washed off. We got the fore-sail taken in, and the fore topsail (fore top sail, the sail above the top sail) close reefed the main top sail, and got the main sail closed up, and all hands were ordered up to stow it away. I jumped in the rigging with the rest of the men and the carpenter told me I could do no good, and to stay on deck. I jumped down on deck but had hardly touched the deck when the captain, who had been close to me, seen me, for it was as dark as it could be, and raining as heavy as ever. He hollowed at me if I heard the order. I answered "Yes, but I was told to stay on deck". He hollowed at me to get up there and at the same time wanted to know who the hell commanded this ship.

I did not wait to answer but got there. When I got to the guard the boatswain told me to go up to the top, and stay till they got through. It was a terrible job; they got it up on the yard two or three times, and it got away from them again. It had got so wet and heavy, and so stiff as a board that it was almost impossible to do anything with it. At last it broke away from them, and the wind caught it and bursted it like a paper sack into ribbons, with a report like a cannon. They got it up again and it took all the men were able to do to hold on to it, without being able to make it fast the stuncehil yards was laying on the top, and I threw the end down to one of the men, and when they got it round the sail, I took a turn round the mast and as the men rolled it up I hauled in the slack and held it till it was made fast. When we got down then, the Spanker (the fore and aft sail on the mast, nearest the stern of a square rigged ship) was to be taken in. This was generally about the easiest job of all, but it proved this time to be the worst, for when we went to clue it up the threat latch got fouled and we had to take it in by hand, it was not only a hard job, but the most dangerous of them all, for there is nothing to keep it steady, and the yard swings back and forth with the roll of the ship. One of the men went up to make it fast, but he could not roll it up and tie it at the same time. I was ordered up to make it fast. I had to climb up the rigging and out on the boom and up over his back while he lay flat on the boom, the whole length of him.

By hard work we got it made fast, I thought but little of it at the time I was at it, but when done and I looked what we had done, and the risk and danger of the work it made me tremble. The wind was a perfect hurricane by that time, and the waves were dashing ever her, it was impossible to walk the deck. We had to hang on to something to keep from washing over-board, the men began to talk of the masts breaking, when the captain called to stand by ready to strike the masts (that was to take the top masts down). The carpenter ran and got his tools, and stood by ready, and I was afraid I would have to go up and help him in anything he had to do, but it began to clear up in the west and we knew it would soon be over.

All this time there had not been any thought of running into any other ship, and if there had been we could not have helped ourselves much, for we were completelyat the mercy of the weather, but a lookout had to be set. We were- standing amidships and under the rail to keep the sea and rain off of us as much as we could, for we were all as sweet as water could make us. The mate came along and lead me out forward and taking the end of a rope tied it around under my arms and making it fast to the rail. He told me to keep a look out for anything I could see or hear, and to report if I either see or hear anything. The night was dark and the waves by this time mountains high, I thought he was imposing on me because I was a boy and thought he ought to have sent sum of the men there, but I learned after the reason I was out there, a boy, if he is bright can see and hear a great deal quicker than a man.

Almost every wave would dash over me, but I would hang or to the rope and duck under the rail to save myself as much as possible and then take a look out to see if anything was in sight. The mate or someone would come along to see if I was watching, and ask if I seen something. I was kept there for two hours and by that time the wind had died down considerable. I was just getting relieved when I heard something and told one of the men, he hollered out to the captain something to windward, and the captain ran out, got his speaking trumpet and was up in the rigging in a minute. We could not see anything for a while and I was afraid I had made a mistake and would get reprimand for it. The man I told it to was up in tine region too when he seen a large ship coming down before the wind right for us, with her masts broken and her rigging and sails all hanging, and her men clearing away the wreck. The sound I heard must have been a block or something falling on her deck. She was a full sized ship from Quebec loaded with timber bound to Greenack, the wind struck her before they had time to take all their sails in, and it carriedaway nearly everything. She passed under our stern, and we had not much time to talk to her.