Under the title **"Tit-Bit for a desperate Editor"** I was very grateful to receive an interesting communication from Brigadier J M Neilson who is the great grandson of the famous James Beaumont Neilson, already mentioned above:

It is generally thought that the **Suez Canal** was entirely a French project, but this is not so. The Encyclopaedia Britannica's (15th edition) reference to 'European labourers' should read 'Scottish contractors' who took on the job and created the canal by flooding and dredging as advised by Walter Montgomerie Neilson. Then to ensure that France got all the credit Ferdinand de Lesseps persuaded the said contractors to 'conceal their engagements' by allowing him to take over the machinery and tools. The evidence comes in a letter written by one George Turner to The Scotsman, which states "In 1863, after several years had been spent on the Suez Canal works, the canal was in a very bad way indeed, and but for timely help would have been entirely suspended. ..... French methods and machinery being quite unequal to the requirements. ... M. de Lesseps, in his dilemma, communicated with the late Walter Montgomerie Neilson, Glasgow, and a deputation of French engineers was sent to the Clyde to inspect the system there of excavating and dredging. Following on this, M. de Lesseps introduced a staff of Scotch engineers and qualified workmen; contracts being entered into with the former for the completion within five years from 1864 of that part of the Canal which had proved most troublesome. To save the credit of France as the sole constructor of the canal, M. de Lesseps, in 1865, after suitable plant and machinery had been laid down and set to work, and eventual success made certain, made overtures to the gentlemen named to secure concealment of their engagements, and offered to take over all the machinery, tools, etc. This was agreed to. Thus did the diplomacy of Ferdinand de Lesseps secure an apparent success for the French which was essentially British....."

W M Neilson himself wrote to the Glasgow Herald in 1882, about the deputation "having at that time visited me to ask my assistance in obtaining information as to the dredging machinery employed upon the Clyde, and some days were agreeably spent with these gentlemen in discussing the work to be done in Egypt." He went on to support a proposal for a new canal made and maintained under the entire control of the British Government, expressing his confidence that Clyde-built dredgers would be able to dig a new canal in less than half the time and at little more than half the cost of the first one.

De Lesseps' Suez Canal was begun on 25 April 1859 and employed 1.5 million Egyptian labourers of whom more than 125,000 died during the work. By 1863 little progress had been made; the Scotch contractors were engaged in 1865 and the canal was completed on 17 November 1869.

Bright Lights: the Stevenson Engineers 1752 - 1971; by Jean Leslie and Roland Paxton. 170pp, 125 illustrations and 4 appendices, bibliography and index. Published by the authors, Department of Civil and Offshore Engineering, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh EH14 4AS. ISBN 0 9535514 0 7.

This study of the work of five generations begins not with a Stevenson but with Thomas Smith, a maker of lamps who in 1787 was appointed by the Board of Commissioners of Northern Lighthouses as their first engineer. By a curious combination of marriages, Thomas was both stepfather and father-in-law to Robert Stevenson, who became the Commissioner's engineer in 1808, and whose chief, if disputed, claim to fame is for his construction of the Bell Rock lighthouse. Two of Robert's sons, a grandson and great-grandson, followed their father into the family consulting practice founded by Robert in 1810, undertaking the whole range of civil engineering in which lighthouse development remained the best known element. The family 'failure', another grandson Robert Louis, spent four years training as an engineer before embarking on his even more famous literary career, and his experiences of Erraid, the shore station for construction of the Ddu Harteach light, was romanticised as the location of Balfour's shipwreck in *Kidnapped*.

The joint authors come to this book from very different directions, and the text represents this by subdividing each chapter accordingly. Jean Leslie is herself a direct descendant of the Stevensons, and a combination of family papers and memories provides a deep insight into the private lives of the subjects. Roland Paxton's view of the engineering achievements is more dispassionate; as a professor in the Department of Civil and Offshore Engineering at Heriot-Watt University and chairman of the Institution of Civil Engineers' Panel for Historic Engineering Works, he provides a widely researched and balanced view of the Stevensons' achievements. Robert Stevenson's own splendid account of the building of the Bell Rock lighthouse, published in 1824 ignores the contribution of John Rennie as chief engineer, but Paxton has sought out Rennie's personal papers and diaries to set the record straight.

Each of the nine chapters deals with the life and work of one member of the family, sometimes a source of confusion as they often worked together and family christian names were repeated from generation to generation. Some of the illustrations are grouped at the end of the book, permitting colour at the cost of some discontinuity in narrative. These minor criticisms apart, the book and its excellent appendices is a splendid source of information on the private lives and public achievements of the Stevensons, and on the range and demands of engineering in their time. This is far from being just about lighthouses - Stevensons built bridges, harbour breakwaters, drainage schemes, dredged river estuaries, reported on civil engineering in America, examined the fallen Tay Bridge, and experimented with radio in the early 1890s. The Stevensons were indeed a remarkable dynasty of engineers.

Finally, may I repeat the Society's appeal for **material for publication**. Pieces for this Bulletin should be short, either announcements of forthcoming activities which may be of interest to our members (as long as they are in time) or shorts reports on what is happening or what has happened. Less ephemeral material, ie, pieces which are not time-sensitive, should aim to appear in the SIHS Review . We would like each issue of the Review to carry a variety of original articles, not too long and each with an illustration or two. Don't leave your editors, please, to rewrite existing material - we like variety in style too! No articles means, unfortunately, no Review. It's really up to you.

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