

Family recollections

Charles wrote,³²

'Louis came along countless times to play with us' [at 25 Royal Terrace]. He had a passionate affection for his Aunt Elizabeth, and he wrote this of her to his cousin David:

'From La Solitude, Hyres-les Palmas, Var. Dec 31st.
[Louis was then 33 years old.]

My Dear Davie,

At the beginning of the end of this year, I had many thoughts of the past, many of yourself and many of your Mother who was the idol of my childhood. I had it in my mind to write to Uncle David but I thought it might be merely an importunate intrusion and decided to write rather to yourself. [Our father was entering into his last illness at North Berwick at that time.] The way in which life separates people is very painful. It is nearly a year since we had a New Year's walk; but I have not forgotten the past, and your Mother I shall never forget. I am profoundly a Stevenson in the matter of not giving presents. Once only that I can remember did I of my own notion, give a present; and that before '57 when I 'asked leave' to give a present to Aunt Elizabeth, and I do not suppose a greater testimony could be given to her extraordinary charm and kindness. I never saw anybody like her; a look from Aunt Elizabeth was like sunshine. Please accept this very blundering scrawl; understand what is unsaid, and accept for yourself and all the family, my most sincere good wishes,

Your affectionate cousin,

Robert Louis Stevenson.³⁴

The back garden of our house in Royal Terrace was filled with sweet smelling gillyflowers, roses, honeysuckle, geranium, fox-gloves, cotoneaster and wisteria. Willow and elm trees found a place too. Louis with his bright most welcome presence invented endless games for the children. One he called 'The Rope of Good Hope', and he changed the rules every time! Flower pots were upturned on the seven steps and had to be negotiated on tip-toe, and a rope at the end had to be caught at a brisk run. Here too he taught us 'Inky, Tinky, Tetherly, Netherly, Bamfyl, Evil, Oval, Doval, La Ta Touche, Ding Ding Domino, Black Fish, White Trout, Eerie, Orie, You Are Out!!!'

At the top of the garden, well away from adult eyes, was a trellis arbour with unusual glazed *hollow* bricks for the path and these were ideal 'hidey holes' for our tobacco pipes when it was supposed we did not know anything about smoking! On the slopes of the semi-public garden of the Calton Hill we got superb views of Arthur's Seat, North Berwick Law and the Lomonds in Fife. The drawback for me to our house was the long distance to the Edinburgh Academy. Louis, from Heriot Row, was much closer.³³

Both Charles and David were at the Academy at the same time as Louis. Only a few hundred yards to the south of Royal Terrace lay the heart of Louis' Edinburgh playground in his adolescent years and he shared it often with these younger cousins. Every part of Holyrood and of Arthur's Seat they made their own. Charles' map gives a superb illustration of the ground they covered from the Haggis Knowe to Dunsappie Loch. Passing Dunsappie Louis always identified a non-existent cave

and called it Dick Hatterick's Cave. [After the cave in Guy Mannering.] Probably he was also remembering the Grotto known to him in Italy, which he had visited with Bessy (oldest sister to David and Charles). She had arranged this whole trip in 1863 at the request of her Uncle Thomas. She went with a heavy heart because the Royal Archers Annual Ball was just coming up and she was hoping to get engaged to Alexander James Napier. She was very pretty and she need not have worried as he popped the question immediately on her return! Cummy's famous Diary of the continental trip had been given to her by Cashie. They were close friends all Cashie's life. Cashie, otherwise Catherine Doherty, later Fisher, died on March the 16th, 1899. Agnes ['Aggie'] Wilson, the other nurserymaid, ended her life at Marshall's Court, Edinburgh, where Cashie stayed with her for a while before her death in 1872.⁵

To explore Edinburgh the boys could turn either to the right or left at the end of the garden in Royal Terrace and following one of the many paths laid round the Calton Hill by their grandfather Robert after the soldiers had returned from the Napoleonic wars, they would arrive in a few minutes at Waterloo Place—the east end of Princes Street.

Many hundreds of thousands of people who *know* a great deal about Louis' life *know* that at least until he went to Samoa he had always expected to die and be buried in Scotland, either on the Pentlands or else in the 'gated cell' where his father already lay. Even in Samoa he was hoping to die in his native country. However it was not to be. When he realised he could never return he requested his family to have him buried on the top of Mount Vaea.

Blows the wind today, and the sun and the rain are flying,
Blows the wind on the moors today and now,
Where about the graves of the martyrs the whaups are crying,
My heart remembers how!
Grey recumbent tombs of the dead in desert places,
Standing-stones on the vacant wine-red moor,
Hills of sheep, and the howes of the silent vanished races,
And winds, austere and pure.
Be it granted me to behold you again in dying,
Hills of home! and to hear again the call;
Hear about the graves of the martyrs the peewees crying,
And hear no more at all.⁶

The three boys often visited the Old or New Calton Cemeteries, Louis on several occasions flirted with a maid who waved from one of the windows of the Waterloo Hotel, and David and Charles stopped always to admire their grandfather Robert's 'Panoramic Improvement' as Charles called it.

North Berwick

Here is what Louis writes in his 'Essay on the Lantern Bearers':

'... and say that I came upon such business as that of my Lantern bearers on the links; and described the boys as very cold, spat upon by flurries of rain, and drearily surrounded, all of which they were; and their talk as silly and indecent, which it certainly was. I might upon these lines, had I Zola's genius, turn out a page or so, a gem of literary art, render the lantern light with the touch of a master, and lay on the indecency with the ungrudging hand of love; and when all

was done, what a triumph would my picture be of shallowness and dullness! How it would have missed the point! How it would have belied the boys! To the ear of the stenographer, the talk is merely silly and indecent; but ask the boys themselves and they are discussing (as it is proper they should) the possibilities of existence. To the eye of the observer they are wet and cold and drearily surrounded; but ask themselves, and they are in the heaven of a recondite pleasure, the ground of which is an ill-smelling lantern.⁶⁷

Anchor House was one of the venues where the boys gathered as 'Lantern Bearers' met.

Louis was helping David at the camera on the day a photograph was taken. It shows Thomas standing next Elizabeth, my mother, Bessie, Jane, Georgina and Mary, and Gina, David and Charles and an *unknown* boy are there—Thomas holding tight to 'Coolin' whose arrival into the household at 17 Heriot Row altered the life of all its occupants.⁵

Louis states:

'Four or five would sometimes climb into the belly of a ten man lugger, with nothing but the thwarts above them—for the cabin was usually locked, or choose out some hollow of the links where the wind might whistle overhead. There the coats would be unbuttoned and the bull's eyes discovered; and in the chequering glimmer, under the huge windy hall of the night, and cheered by a rich stream of toasting tinware these fortunate young gentlemen would crouch together in the cold sand of the links or on the scaly bilges of the fishing-boat, and delight themselves with inappropriate talk. Woe is me that I may not give some specimens—some of their

foresights of life, or deep inquiries into the rudiments of man and nature, these were so fiery and innocent, they were so richly silly, so romantically young. But the talk at any rate, was but a condiment; and these gatherings themselves only accidents in the career of the lantern-bearer. The essence of the bliss was to walk by yourself in the black night; the slide shut, the top-coat buttoned; not a ray escaping, whether to conduct your footsteps or to make your glory public; a mere pillar of darkness in the dark; and all the while, deep down in the privacy of your fool's heart, to know you had a bull's-eye at your belt, and to sing and exult over the knowledge.⁶⁷

In his essay called 'The Character of Dogs', Louis writes of 'Coolin':

'I knew another little Skye, somewhat plain in appearance, but a creature compact of amiability and solid wisdom. His family going abroad for a winter, he was received for that period by an uncle in the same city. The winter over, his own family home again, and his own house (of which he was very proud) reopened, he found himself in a dilemma between two conflicting duties of loyalty and gratitude. His old friends were not to be neglected, but it seemed hardly decent to desert the new. This was how he solved the problem. Every morning, as soon as the door was opened, off posted Coolin to his uncles, visited the children in the nursery, saluted the whole family, and was back at home in time for breakfast and his bit of fish. Nor was this done without a sacrifice on his part sharply felt; for he had to forego the particular honour and jewel of his day—his morning's walk with my father. And perhaps from this cause, he gradually wearied of and relaxed the practice, and at length returned to his ancient habits. But



[82] Tantallon Castle, before restoration by James Richardson.

the same decision served him in another and more distressing case of divided duty, which happened not long after. He was not at all a kitchen dog but the cook had nursed him with unusual kindness during the distemper; and though he did not adore her as he adored my father-although (born snob) he was critically conscious of her position as 'only a servant'-he still cherished for a special gratitude. Well the cook left, and retired some streets away to lodgings of her own; and there was Coolin in precisely the same situation as any young gentleman who has had the inestimable benefit of a faithful nurse. The canine conscience did not solve the problem with a pound of tea for Christmas. No longer content to pay a flying visit, it was the whole forenoon that he dedicated to comfort her solitude until (for some reason which I could never understand and cannot approve) he was kept locked up to break him of the graceful habit ... There are not many dogs like this good Coolin, and not many people.'⁶⁸

Charles continued, 'Louis had his little grey friend, called after the range of hills in Skye with serrated peaks of great grandeur, for about 12 years. He is buried with his own tombstone in Swanston. Louis was to own many other dogs and he and his father always had a special relationship to their canine friends but to 'The Davids', as Louis always called the whole family, and to him Coolin was always very special and quite irreplaceable. It was to the nursery at 25 Royal Terrace that this little grey bundle would arrive at breakfast time when Louis was abroad escorted by David's eldest daughter Bessie'.

The photographs of Tantallon Castle, that proud fortress of the Red Douglasses, show the building as it was in the days when Louis and his gang of cousins would spend a whole day there armed with sandwiches for lunch. [82] With the tide out they could walk along the beach from North Berwick and on the rocky foreshore right beneath the towering ruin could still find arrow-heads made from flint and also occasional coins from the Stuart period. It was very unsafe and unstable and much was still slipping into the sea until the restoration by the 'Office of Works' in this century. One memorable day a yell from Louis brought Charles running to his side in one of the small chambers. 'Look, Chug', he said, 'at these feudal remains in the corner!' Remains indeed, but not very feudal! He was always in a state of great excitement with his imagination running very high. Tantallon has a deep well which was of brackish water brought in wooden piping from Auldham, 130 feet above the castle. Years later, near the end of his life, and thousands of miles away in the tropic island of Samoa, Louis in his novel *Catriot* brought his hero David Balfour into the castle of Tantallon.⁶⁹

'At last we came again within the sound of the sea. There was moonlight, though not much; and by this I could see the three huge towers and broken battlements of Tantallon, that old chief place of the red Douglasses. The horse was picketed at the bottom of the ditch to graze, and I was led within, and forth into the court, and thence into a tumbledown stone hall. Here my conductors built a brisk fire in the midst of the pavement, for there was a chill in the night. My hands were loosened, I was set by the wall in the inner end, and (the Lowlander having produced provisions) I was given oatmeal bread and a pitcher of French brandy. This done, I was left once more alone with my three Highlandmen. They sat close by the fire drinking and talking; the wind blew in by the breaches, cast about the smoke and flames, and sang in the tops of the towers; I could hear the sea under the cliffs, and my mind being reassured as to my life, and my body and spirits wearied with the day's employment, I turned upon one side and slumbered.

I had no means of guessing at what hour I was wakened, only the moon was down and the fire low. My feet were now loosed, and I was carried through the ruins and down the cliff-side by a precipitous path to where I found a fisher's boat in a haven of the rocks. This I was had on board of, and we began to put forth from the shore in a fine starlight.'⁶⁹

Louis' incredible smile, and bright happy temperament meant that he was always given a very warm welcome when he visited Anchor House. It was summer holidays and the teen-age girls usually had their various friends to stay. On the dark or moonlit warm September evenings they would go down to the sands and march up and down singing 'catches' which were

topical and amusing... Many happy hours these girls had. Louis took it into his head that he would give the young ladies some fun, so one very still dark night with just the soft sound of the ripples of the sea on the sand, he got unseen between them and the water and a voice was heard, 'Blud'. Funny did you hear that? Again, 'Blud-a-Blud, Blud-a-Blud' in tragic tones and spacing. One girl dashed off in a panic and then another fled, and another, terrified-off to Anchor House for safety! The more hardy remained to learn in a few seconds that it was only Louis, who appeared petrified and dismayed at the end result of his practical joke.⁷⁰

In North Berwick Louis attended the old parish church of North Berwick on the rising ground just behind the High Street. He wrote the 23 verses of 'A Lowden Sabbath Morn' about this church.

The prentit stanes that mark the deid,
 Wi' lengthened lip, the sarious read;
 Syne wag a moraleesin' heid,
 An' then an' there
 Their hirplin' practice an' their creed
 Try hard to square.

It's here our Merren lang has lain,
 A wee bewast the table-stane;
 An' yon's the grave o' Sandy Blane;
 An' further ower,
 The mither's brithers, dacent men!
 Lie a' the fower.⁷⁰

Charles continued, 'The two ministers he sat under were the Rev. Peter McMoyland and the Rev. Dr Sprott. Of the first Louis

in a note says, 'I have a special reason to speak well of him', and of the second, 'I have often met him in private and long (in the due phrase) sat under in his church and neither here nor there have I heard an unkind or ugly word upon his lips'. The preacher in the poem's verses has thus no original in the North Berwick parish church. Louis sometimes sat in the loft which was allocated to Sir Hew Dalrymple of Leuchie opposite the pulpit. A smaller loft was given over to Sir George Grant-Suttie of Balgone whose family, sons and daughters, attended regularly for many years. The pews of the church were mostly long benches with doors, but some of them were formed into squares, also with their own door, and these were allocated mostly to the owners of large farms in the parish such as Wamphray, Congalton, Bonnington, etc. The name of the farm was painted on the box. These boxes were a much more friendly method for a family attending church than the long bench of seats.'

Louis, David and Charles generally sat in the panelled loft of the darkest oak, and they came into the churchyard by the small wicket gate in the 'lang loan benorth the Kirkyard'. It is a dark bogle-infested lane within hand clutch I would say of the dead over the low wall and besides that the church itself had always an ill name since the days of James VI. According to Louis 'the devil's cantrips played therein when the queen was on the seas'.

The minister was opposite this dismal den with the precentor, and David, below him. The minister was adorned on each side by marble tablets to the dead. The sermons and prayers were all long and terribly dreary, the singing uninspired. The only redeeming feature was that the den was free from the admixture of peppermints, and humanity dressed in their 'Sunday best'. Also fixed in Charles' mind's eye forever was the

beautiful and smiling face of Sir George Grant-Suttie's younger daughter, many years older than himself, sitting in the gallery nearly opposite the den.

There is no doubt at all that Louis got the bone structure of his nose from his mother my Aunt Maggie, but his long fingered delicate hands are identical with those in the portrait of our grandmother Jane. His eyes were absolutely unique in our family. When he looked directly at you and spoke to you it seemed possible to see directly into his soul. Many people have asked me to describe Louis down the years since his death. No photographs have been able to show his graceful movement and living expression. Perhaps today [1940] with the modern moving camera techniques if it could catch him completely unaware that he was 'on camera' a true likeness could be recorded. He did not come across from the stage as I have said as a particularly good actor.

The best representation that I know of him is certainly the two portraits that the famous painter John Singer Sargent did of him walking up and down in the drawing room in Bournemouth, and also the one where he is sitting down cross-legged that his wife Fanny is said to have destroyed. In my memory he is always happy and alive and indeed perfectly well. Our family have resented that he has so often been referred to as a more or less permanent invalid. He certainly had all the childhood illnesses that we all got some time or other and also a chest weakness that was greatly aggravated by the Edinburgh climate. His mother had this too, and both of them did well to escape the winter and head for the South of France. It is generally accepted today that Louis had bronchiectasis which did eventually cause severe haemorrhages but he made a good

recovery from all the attacks. His death I think was an isolated stroke. He walked many miles on a daily basis and on some walking tours notched up 30 miles without undue fatigue. He had a very strong constitution indeed to withstand all the physical blows life dealt him.⁷⁵

All the Stevenson family worked hard at their vocation but none harder than Louis in the 44 years he had in life.

When the family was first torn apart by the struggle for shares in the business in 1872 Louis was only 22. The second struggle boiled up in 1887 he was 37 and now showed that he had a shrewd grasp of the situation. Letters which he wrote to James Dick of 10th and 12th April reveal that his legal training was employed on behalf of his father and mother. In a letter to his lawyer friend Charles Baxter of the 29th of April he says:

'My dear Charles,

Thank you for yours, the first decently supportable communication I have had in this matter. My idea is first of all, to compromise: secondly, to compromise as fairly as we are able. I don't think my father should be worried, nor my mother, nor yet me: and I don't think we fight for anything important, as I think ill of my father's health. This gives you a free hand, I think; I will back up almost anything. ...'⁷⁶

A professional aspect

Although Louis never became a civil engineer, until he reached the age of 21, his parents hoped that he would follow in this family tradition and he was educated accordingly. In November 1867 he took a tentative step in this direction by enrolling as a student in the Arts faculty at Edinburgh University. It was not however until 1869/70 that he studied any

engineering related subjects, namely mathematics and natural philosophy, continuing with these in 1870-71 together with the engineering classes of Professor Fleeming Jenkin (1833-85) which, being unable to follow, he refrained from attending.

By April 1871 after some three and a half years of dutifully, if increasingly half-heartedly, pursuing this career he felt unable to continue and announced his decision to give up engineering. This outcome was accepted with disappointment but also with *wonderful resignation*⁷⁷ by his father, no doubt recalling similar youthful tussles, on the understanding that Louis read for the bar, instead of writing literature, which he considered no profession! Engineering's loss proved outstandingly to be literature's gain, but Louis's writings benefited immeasurably from his maritime engineering experience both in context and detail.

Some of Louis's published writings even related directly to engineering such as his paper on *A new form of intermittent light for lighthouses*, his *Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin, Records of a family of engineers* and an essay, *The education of an engineer*. Louis and his father enjoyed corresponding on literary matters, each claiming to have improved some of the other's writings. Louis considered that he had *materially helped to polish the diamond* of his father's presidential address to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1885 and *ended by feeling quite proud of the paper as if it had been mine; the next time you have as good a one, I will overhaul it for the wages of feeling as clever as I did when I had managed to understand and helped to set it clear.*⁷⁸

Louis's intermittent light paper, read to the Royal Scottish Society of Arts on 27 March 1871, was a creditable effort and earned him a silver medal of the Society. It also prompted his

jaunty farewell *To the Commissioners of Northern Lights*, which concluded with the thought that as a future advocate he might one day be a commissioner himself!

I send to you, commissioners,
A paper that may please ye, sirs,
(For troth they say it micht be worse
An' I believe't)
And on your business lay my curse
Before I leav't

I thocht I'd serve wi' you, sirs, yince,
But I've thocht better of it since'
The matter I will nowise mince,
But tell ye true:
I'll service wi' some ither prince,
An' no' wi' you.

I've no been very deep, ye'll think,
Cam' delicately to the brink
An' when the water gart me shrink
Straucht took the rue,
An' didna stoop my fill to drink-
I own it true.

I kennt on cape and isle, a light
Burnt fair an' clearly ilka night;
But at the service I took fright,
As sune's I saw,
An' being still a neophite
Gaed straucht awa'.

Anither course I now begin,
The weeg I'll cairry for my sin,
The court my voice shall echo in,
An' - wha can tell? -
Some ither day I may be yin
O' you mysel!⁷⁴

Louis's engineering education at Edinburgh University seems to have been characterised more by truancy and a very tolerant Professor Fleeming Jenkin than any serious acquisition of knowledge. Professor Jenkin, against his better judgement after much pleading by Louis for a class attendance certificate and after having at first told him *It is quite useless for you to come to me, Mr. Stevenson. There may be doubtful cases, there is no doubt about yours. You have simply not attended my class,*⁷⁵ provided him with one containing a form of words for his father's eyes indicative of his having satisfactorily completed the class-work in engineering.

Louis wrote, *I am still ashamed when I think of his shame in giving me that paper. He made no reproach in his speech, but his manner was the more eloquent; it told me plainly what dirty business we were on; and I went from his presence, with my certificate indeed in my possession, but with no answerable sense of triumph.*⁷⁵ There seems to have been no question of Louis graduating. This was the *bitter beginning* of his great friendship with Jenkin of whom he wrote in 1885 *'I never knew a better man'*⁷⁶ and on whom he bestowed to posterity a remarkable if not very comprehensive biography.

During the long summer vacations Louis gained practical experience of harbour and lighthouse engineering operations, particularly of pier construction at Anstruther and Wick in

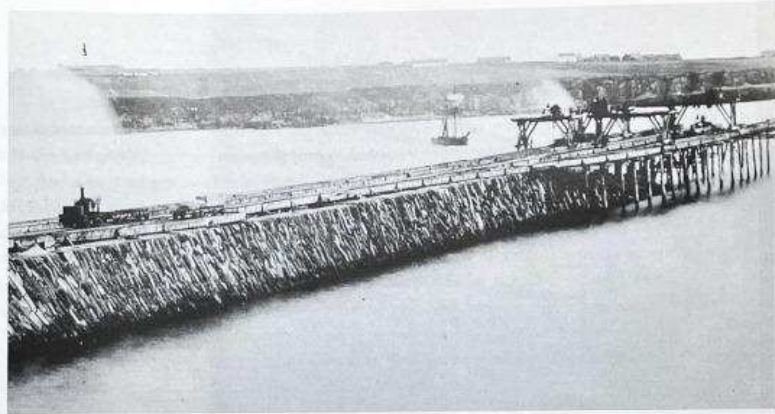
[83] Wick breakwater c.1865. Note the travellers and jennies at end.

1868. He was fascinated by the experience of sea diving but, in general, found the site work physically demanding and uncongenial. He wrote to his father from Anstruther on 2 July 1868, *bring also my paint box. . . I am going to try the travellers and Jennies, and have made a sketch of them and begun the drawing. After that I'll do the staging.* The travellers were timber gantries that moved along the pier and ahead of its temporary end, on rails supported on

piles at each side of the pier. The Jennies were cranes, which moved backwards and forwards transversely on top of the travellers, used for lifting and lowering stones into position.

Tomorrow I will watch the masons at work at the pier foot and see how long they take to work that Fifeness stone you ask about: they get sixpence an hour; so that is the only datum required. . . It is awful how slowly I draw and how ill: I am not nearly done with the travellers and have not thought of the Jennies yet. When I'm drawing I find out something I have not measured, or, having measured, have not noted, or, having noted, cannot find; and so I have to trudge to the pier again, ere I can go further with my noble design." [75]

Of his experience at Anstruther Louis wrote, *What I gleaned, I am sure I do not know; but indeed I had already my own private determination to be an author; I loved the art of words and the appearances of life; and travellers and headers, and rubble, and polished ashlar [squared masonry], and pierres perdues [rubble stone], and even the thrilling question of string course [of masonry set out by string line], interested me only (if they interested me at*



all) as properties of some possible romance or as words to add to my vocabulary. . . though I haunted the breakwater by day, and even loved the place for the sake of the sunshine, the thrilling sea-side air, the wash of waves on the sea-face, the green glimmer of the divers helmets far below, and the musical chinking of the masons, my one genuine pre-occupation lay elsewhere, and my only industry was in the hours when I was not on duty.

Then northwards. Into the bay of Wick stretched the dark length of the unfinished breakwater, in its cage of open staging; the travellers (like frames of churches) over-plumbing all [83]; and away at the extreme end, the divers toiling unseen on the foundation. On a platform of loose planks, the assistants turned their air mills; a stone might be swinging between wind and water; underneath the swell ran gayly; and from time to time a mailed dragon with a window glass snout came dripping up the ladder. . . To go down in the dress, that was my absorbing fancy; and with the countenance of a certain handsome scamp of a diver, Bob Bain by name, I gratified the whim. . . Some twenty rounds below the platform, twilight fell. Looking up I saw a low green heaven

mottled with vanishing bells of white; looking around, except for the weedy spokes and shaft of the ladder, nothing but a green gloaming.

Thirty rounds lower [at a depth of about 30 ft], I stepped off on the *pierres perdues* of the foundation; [76] a dumb helmeted figure took me by the hand, and made a gesture (as I read it) of encouragement; and looking in at the creature's window, I beheld the face of Bain . . . how a man's weight, so far from being an encumbrance, is the very ground of his agility, was the chief lesson of my submarine experience . . . As I began to go forward with the hand of my estranged companion, a world of tumbled stones was visible, pillared with the weedy uprights of the staging; overhead, a flat roof of green: a little in front, the sea-wall, like an unfinished rampart.

And presently, in our upward progress, Bob motioned me to leap upon a stone . . . Now the block stood six feet high; it would have been quite a leap to me unencumbered; with the breast and back weights, and the twenty pounds upon each foot, and the staggering load of the helmet, the thing was out of reason. I laughed aloud in my tomb; and to prove to Bob how far he was astray, I gave a little impulse from my toes. Up I soared like a bird, my companion soaring at my side. As high as to the stone and then higher, I pursued my impotent and empty flight. Even when the strong arm of Bob had checked my shoulders, my heels continued their ascent; so that I blew out sideways like an autumn leaf, and must be hauled in hand over hand, as sailors haul in the slack of a sail, and propped upon my feet again like an intoxicated sparrow . . . Bain brought me back to the ladder and signed me to mount . . . Of a sudden, my ascending head passed into the trough of a swell. Out of the green I shot at once into a glory of rosy, almost of sanguine light - the multitudinous seas incarnadined, the heaven above a vault of crimson. And then the glory faded into the hard, ugly daylight of a

Caithness autumn, with a low sky, a gray sea, and a whistling wind.

Diving was one of the best things I got from my education as an engineer: of which however, as a way of life, I wish to speak with sympathy. It takes a man into the open air; it keeps him hanging about harbor-sides, which is the richest form of idling; it carries him to wide islands; it gives him a taste of the genial dangers of the sea; it supplies him with dexterities to exercise; it makes demands upon his ingenuity; it will go far to cure him of any taste (if ever he had one) for the miserable life of cities. And when it has done so, it carries him back and shuts him in an office! From the roaring skerry and the wet thwart of the tossing boat, he passes to the stool and desk; and with a memory full of ships, and seas, and perilous headlands, and the shining pharos, he must apply his long-sighted eyes to the petty niceties of drawing, or measure his inaccurate mind with several pages of consecutive figures. He is a wise youth, to be sure, who can balance one part of genuine life against two parts of drudgery between four walls, and for the sake of the one, manfully accept the other.⁷⁸

In a letter to his mother on 20-21 September, Louis wrote, I was awakened by Mrs S. at the door [of the New Harbour Hotel, Pultneytown - now a Customs office] *There's a ship ashore at Shaltigoe! I got up, dressed and went out. The mizzled sky and rain blinded you . . . Some of the waves were twenty feet high. The spray rose eighty feet at the new pier . . . The thunder at the wall when it first struck - the rush along ever growing higher - the great jet of snow-white spray some forty feet above you - and the 'noise of many waters', the roar, the hiss, the 'shrieking' amongst the shingle as it fell head over heels at your feet. I watched if it threw the big stones at the wall; but it never moved them.*

[next day] *The end of the [breakwater] work displays gaps, cairns of ten ton blocks, stones torn from their places and turned*

[84] Wick mail coach in 1874 as familiar to Louis.

right round. The damage above water is comparatively little: what there may be below, on 'ne sait pas encore'. The roadway is torn away, cross-heads broken, planks tossed here and there, planks gnawn and mumbled as if a starved bear had been trying to eat them, planks with spales lifted from them as if they had been dressed with a ragged plane, one pile swaying to and fro clear of the bottom, the rails in one place sunk a foot at least. This was not a great storm, the waves were light and short. Yet when we are [were] standing at the office, I felt the ground beneath me quail as a huge roller thundered on the work at the last year's cross-wall . . . [To] appreciate a storm at Wick requires a little of the artistic temperament which Mr. T.S.C.E. [Thomas Stevenson Civil Engineer] possesses . . . I can't look at it practically however: that will come I suppose like gray hair or coffin nails . . . Our pole is snapped: a fortnight's work and the loss of the Norge schooner all for nothing! - except experience and dirty clothes.⁷⁹

When leaving Wick, Louis, in a letter to his cousin Bob Stevenson, paints an indelible picture of the mail coach journey by night to the most northerly railway terminus, then at Golspie about 50 miles to the south. [The railway did not reach Wick until 1874.] [84] *The Wick Mail then, my dear fellow, is the last Mail Coach within Great Britain, whence there comes a romantic interest that few could understand. To me, on whose imagination positively nothing took so strong a hold as the Dick Turpins and Claude Duvals of last century, a Mail was an object of religious awe. I pictured the long dark highways, the guard's blunderbuss, the passengers with three-cornered hats above a mummery of great-coat and cravat; and the sudden 'Stand and deliver!' - the stop, the glimmer of the coach lamp upon the horseman - Ah! we shall never get back to Wick.*



All round that northern capital of stink and storm there stretches a succession of flat and dreary moors absolutely treeless, with the exception of above a hundred bour-trees [elders] beside Wick, and a stunted plantation at Stirroke, for the distance of nearly twenty miles south. When we left to cross this tract, it was cloudy and dark. A very cold and pertinacious wind blew with unchecked violence, across these moorlands. I was sick sleepy, and drawing my cloak over my face set myself to doze. Mine was the box-seat, desirable for the apron and the company of the coachman, a person in this instance enveloped in that holy and tender interest that hangs about the 'Last of the Mohicans' or the 'Derniers Bretons'.

And as this example of the loquacious genus coachman was more than ordinarily loquacious I put down my hood again and talked with him. He had a philosophy of his own, I found, and a philosophy eminently suited to the needs of his position. The most fundamental and original doctrine of this, was as to what constitutes a gentleman. It was in speaking of Lockyer of Wenbury that I found it out. This man is an audacious quack and charlatan,

destined for aught, I know, to be the Cagliostro [Italian charlatan] of the British Revolution; and, as such, Mr Lockyer is no favourite of mine: I hate quacks, not personally (for they are not men of imagination like ourselves?) but because of their influence; so I was rather struck on hearing the following. 'Well sir', said the coachman, 'Mr Lockyer has always shown himself a perfect gentleman to me, sir - his hand as open as you'll see, sir!' In other words, half-a-crown to the coachman!

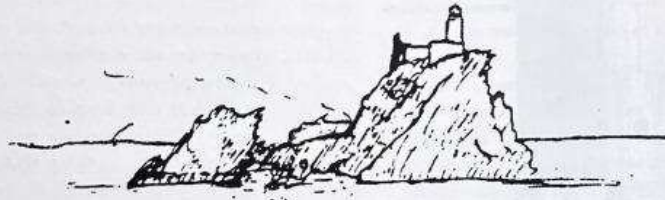
As the pleasures of such philosophical talk rather diminished and the slumber increased, I buried my face again. The coach swayed to and fro. The wind battled and roared about us. I observed the difference in sounds - the rhythmic and regular beat of the hoofs as the horses cantered up some incline, and the ringing, merry, irregular clatter as they slung forward, at a merry trot, along the level.

First stage: Lybster. A Roman catholic priest travelling within, knowing that I was delicate, made me take his seat inside for the next stage. I dozed. When I woke, the moon was shining brightly. We were off the moors and up among the high grounds near the Ord of Caithness. I remember seeing a curious thing: the moon shone on the ocean, and on a river swollen to a great pool and between stretched a great black mass of rock: I wondered dimly how the river got out and then to doze again. When next I wake, we have passed the low church of Berridale, standing sentinel on the heathery plateau northward of the valley, and are descending the steep road past the Manse: I think it was about one: the moon was frosty but gloriously clear. In another minute -

Second stage: Berridale. And of all lovely places, one of the loveliest. Two rivers run from the inner hills, at the bottom of two deep, Killiecrankie-like gorges, to meet in a narrow bare valley close

to the grey North Ocean. The high Peninsula between and the banks, on either hand until they meet, are thickly wooded - birch and fir. On one side is the bleak plateau with the lonesome little church, on the other the bleaker, wilder mountain of the Ord. When I and the priest had lit our pipes, we crossed the streams, now speckled with the moonlight that filtered through the trees, and walked to the top of the Ord. There the coach overtook us and away we went for a stage, over great, bleak mountains, with here and there a hanging wood of silver birches and here and there a long look of the moonlit sea, the white ribbon of the road marked far in front by the newly erected telegraph posts. We were all broad awake with our walk, and made very merry outside, proffering 'fills' of tobacco and pinches of snuff and dipping surreptitiously into aristocratic flasks and plebeian pint bottles.

Third stage: Helmsdale. Round a great promontory with the gleaming sea far away in front, and rattling through some sleeping streets that shone strangely white in the moonlight, and then we pull up beside the Helmsdale posting-house, with a great mountain valley behind. Here I went in to get a glass of whiskey and water. A very broad, dark commercial said: 'Ha! do you remember me? Anstruther?' I had met him five years before in the Anstruther commercial room, when my father was conversing with an infidel and put me out of the room to be away from contamination; whereupon I listened outside and heard the man say he had not sinned for seven years, and declare that he was better than his maker. I did not remember him; nor did he my face, only my voice. He insisted on 'standing me the whiskey' 'for auld lang syne'; and he being a bagman, it was useless to refuse. Then away again. The coachman very communicative at this stage, telling us about the winter before, when the mails had to be carried through on



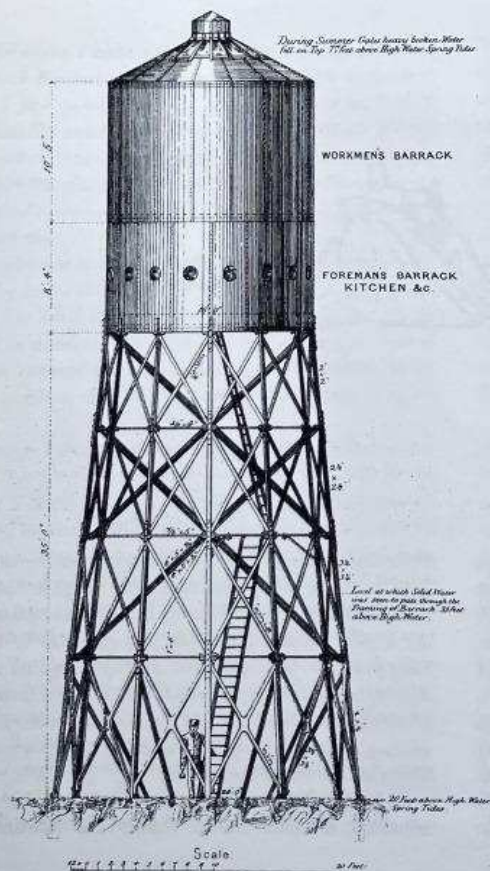
[85] Louis's sketch of Muckle Flugga, 1869.⁸¹

horseback and how they left one of their number sticking in the snow, bag and all I suppose. The country here was softer, low, wooded hills running along beside the shore and all inexpressibly delightful to me after my six months of Wick barrenness and storm.

Fourth stage: name unknown. O sweet little spot, how often I have longed to be back to you! A lone farm-house on the sea-shore, shut in on three sides by the same, low, wooded hills. Men were waiting for us by the roadside, with the horses - sleepy, yawning men. What a peaceful place it was! Everything steeped in the moonlight, and the gentle plash of the waves coming to us from the beach. On again. Through Brora, where we stopped at the Post-

Office and exchanged letter-bags through a practicable window-pane, as they say in stage directions. Then on again. Near Golspie now, and breakfast, and the roaring railway. Passed Dunrobin, the dew-steeped, tree-dotted park, the princely cluster of its towers, rising from bosky plantations and standing out against the moon-shimmering sea - all this sylvan and idyllic beauty so sweet and new to me! Then the Golspie Inn, and breakfast and another pipe, as the morning dawned, standing in the verandah. And then round to the station to fall asleep in the train . . .⁸⁰

In June 1869 Louis accompanied his father on a voyage of inspection of lighthouses in Orkney and Shetland in the



[86] Workmens barrack at Dhu Heartach. From Thomas's *Lighthouse construction and illumination 1881*.

lighthouse steamer and provided his mother with a detailed account of his *sore journeying and perilous peregrination*. For example, we sighted North Unst Lighthouse, the most northerly dwelling house in Her Majesty's dominion. The mainland rises higher, with great seams and landslips; and from the northwestern corner runs out a string of shelving ledges, with a streak of green and purple seaweed and a boil of white foam about their feet. The lighthouse stands on the highest - 190 feet above the sea; . . . the reefs looked somewhat thus . . . [sketch 85,63]. We were pulled into the creek shown in the picture between the Lighthouse and the other rock, down the centre of which runs a line of reef. . . This is very narrow, little broader than a knife edge; but its ridge has been cut into stone steps and laid with iron grating and railed with an iron railing. It was here that we landed, making a leap between the swells at a rusted ladder laid slant-wise against the raking side [of] the ridge. Before us a flight of stone steps led up the two hundred feet to the lighthouse in its high yard-walls across whose foot the sea had cast a boulder weighing twenty tons. On one side is a slippery face of clear sound rock and on the other a chaos of pendulous boulder and rotten stone. On either side there was no vegetation save tufts of sea-pink in the crevices and a little white lichen on the lee faces.⁸¹

During his summer vacation of 1870 Louis spent three weeks on the isle of Erraid [off Mull], from which he visited Dhu Heartach Lighthouse

then under construction 15 miles to the south-west. [62] Two years later, although then pursuing his law classes at University, he managed in the summer to produce a lively account of the project. *Even before the work was sanctioned, he wrote, Dhu Heartach had given the engineers a taste of its difficulties. Although the weather was fine, Messrs Stevenson failed to effect a landing and had to send in their preliminary report based merely upon what they could see from the deck of the vessel. But even this had not prepared them for the continual difficulty and danger which accompanied every landing from the beginning to the end of the work. Favoured by the smooth egg-shaped outline of the rock, which is about [130] feet broad, [240] feet long and 35 feet above high water at its summit, the swell breaks at the one end, runs cumulating round each side, and meets and breaks again at the opposite end, so that the whole rock is girdled with broken water. There is no sheltered bight. If there be anything to aggravate the swell, and it is wonderful what a little thing it takes to excite these giant waters, landing becomes impossible . . . The probability is that the very height of Dhu Heartach rock, by causing the waves to rise, is what makes them so dangerous at a considerable elevation; in short the destructive character of a wave as regards level depends upon the relation between the height of the wave, the height and contour of the obstacle and the depth of water in which it acts.*

The first object of the Messrs. Stevenson was to erect a temporary barrack for the residence of the workmen . . . it was decided that the structure - a framework thirty-five feet high, supporting a plated cylinder or drum twenty feet high and divided into two stories - should consist entirely of malleable iron. [86] The shore station was placed on Isle Erraid . . . On the twenty-fifth of June . . . they first took possession of the rock and disturbed the seals, who had been its

former undisputed tenants. The work during this first season was much interrupted. Even when a landing was effected, the sea rose so suddenly and there was such a want of appliances upon the Rock itself, that the men had sometimes hard enough ado to get off again. The season which began so late closed finally on the third of September, and the first tier of the barrack framework was left unfinished.

All the winter of 1867-68, a band of resident workmen were carrying on at the shore station with its bothies, cottages, quarry and the workyard where every stone was to be cut, dressed, fitted and numbered before being sent out to the rock to be finally built into the tower; and on the fourteenth of April, the 'Dhu Heartach' steamer came back to her moorings in Earraid Sound. The result proved that she was too early; for there was no landing at all in April; only two in May, giving between them a grand total of two hours and a half upon the rock; and only two once again in June. In July there were thirteen, in August ten, in September eleven: in all, thirty-eight landings in five months . . . On the twentieth of August, the malleable iron barrack was so far advanced and the weather gave such promise of continuing fine, that Mr Alan Brebner C.E. (of Edinburgh) and thirteen workmen landed on the rock and took up their abode in the drum . . . A sudden gale however sprung up and they could not be communicated with till the 26th [August 1868] during the greater part of which time the sea broke so heavily over the rock as to prevent all work and during the height of the storm the spray rose far above the barrack and the sea struck very heavily on the flooring of the lower compartment which is 35 feet above the rock and 56 feet above high water mark.

The third season, that of 1869, saw the work properly commenced. The barrack had come scatheless through the winter.

and the master-builder Mr Goodwillie with between twenty and thirty workmen took up his abode there, on the twenty-sixth of April. On Isle Earraid, there was a good quarry of granite, two rows of sheds, two travelling cranes, railways to carry the stones, a stage on which, course after course, the lighthouse was put experimentally together and then taken down again to be sent piece-meal out to the rock, a pier for the lighters [stone carrying boats], and a look out place furnished with a powerful telescope by which it could be observed whether the weather was clear [and] how high the sea was running on Dhu Heartach as so judge whether it were worthwhile to steam out on the chance of landing. In a word, there was a stirring village of some [fifty] souls, on this island which, four years before, had been tenanted by one fisherman's family and a herd of sheep.

The life in this little community was highly characteristic. On Sundays only, the continual clink of tools from quarry and workyard came to an end, perfect quiet then ranged throughout the settlement, and you saw workmen leisurely smoking their pipes about the green enclosure, and they and their wives wearing their Sunday clothes (from association of ideas, I fancy) just as if they were going to take their accustomed seats in the crowded church at home. As for the services at Earraid, they were held in one of the wooden bothies, the audience perched about the double tier of box beds or gathered round the table. Mr Brebner [The Engineer] read a sermon and the eloquent prayer which was written specially for the Scottish Lighthouse service, and a voluntary band and precentor led the psalms. Occasionally a regular minister came to the station, and then worship was held in the joiner's shop.

On fine weather, before the sun had risen behind Ben-More, the Dhu Heartach steamed out of the bay towing a couple of heavy,

strong built lighters laden with the dressed and numbered stones. It was no easy or pleasant duty to be steersman in these lighters, for what with the deck-cargo and the long heavy swell, they rolled so violently that few sailors were able to stand it. Dhu Heartach itself on some such calm, warm summer day presented a strange spectacle. This small black, almost out of sight of land in the fretful, easily irritated sea, was a centre of indefatigable energy. The whole small space was occupied by men coming and going between the lighters or the barrack and the slowly-lengthening tower. A steam winch and inclined plane raised the stones from the water's edge to the foot of the building; and it was a matter of no little address and nicety, to whip one of these great two-ton blocks out of the lighter, as it knocked about and rolled gunwale-under in the swell, and bring it safely up to the tower, without breaking it or chipping off some corner that would spoil the joint. Then, there would come the dinner hour; and the noise was incontinently quieted, there was no more puffing of the steam engine or clink of mallets on the building; the men sat scattered in groups over their junk [salt meat] and potatoes and beer.

By the end of this season, the tower had reached the height of eight feet four inches . . . But the heaviest end of the work was now over. In the fourth season, 1870, there were sixty-two landing days, and the white tower soon began to top its older brother the iron barrack. By the end of the season it was forty-eight feet high, the last stone was laid next summer, and during the present summer, the lantern and internal fittings have also been brought to completion. Before the end of 1872, the light will have been exhibited. For the tower . . . Messrs Stevenson adopted the form of a parabolic frustrum, to a hundred and seven and a half feet high, 36 feet in diameter at the base and 16 feet at the top all built of granite . . .

The entire weight of masonry is 3,115 tons . . . The light will be fixed dioptric with a range of eighteen miles in addition to which there is machinery which rings during fogs a hundredweight bell.

Anticipating possible future discomforts arising from the difficulty of landing supplies, he concludes: *Shortly before the light was first exhibited [at nearby Skerryvore Lighthouse] . . . a long track of storms extending over seven weeks prevented the tender from getting near the reef; and before the weather had moderated, the stock of tobacco in the tower was quite exhausted. On the morning of this catastrophe, the [workmen] ceremoniously broke their pipes and put up a chalk inscription over the mantle shelf in the kitchen: 'Such-and-such a date, Tobacco done - Pipes Broken.' Let us hope that no such 'memor querela' may ever be read over the chimney of Dhu Heartach.⁸²*

It is doubtful whether Louis's delicate health would have allowed him to become a successful engineer even if he had had the inclination and had persevered with his engineering education. Fortunately for posterity he gave reign to what was undoubtedly his greater talent, but it was not to prove a decision which was to bring him complete peace of mind. At the age of 43, in the last year of his life, he wrote to W. H. Low in a fit of depression, that his literary achievements had been inadequate for 'the top flower of a man's life. . . Small is the word; it is a small age and I am of it. I could have wished to be otherwise busy in this world. I ought to have been able to build lighthouses and write 'David Balfours' too. *Hinc illae lacrymae* [hence these tears]'.⁸³