

Book Reviews

Northern Lights

by Dr. Alison Morrison-Low

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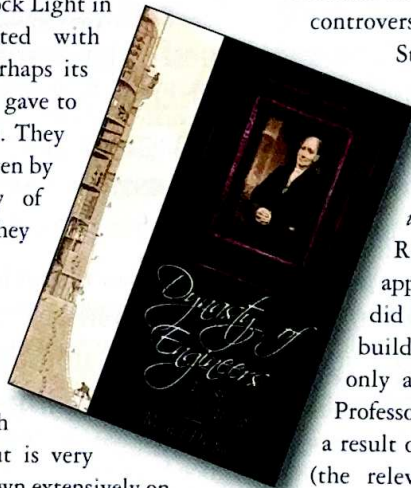
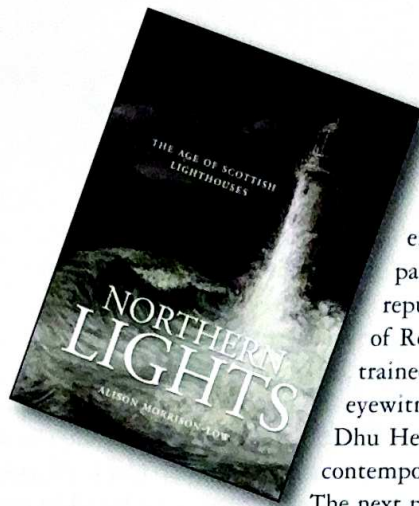
Dynasty of Engineers

By Professor Roland Paxton

The bi-centenary of the lighting of the Bell Rock Light in February 1811 is being widely celebrated with exhibitions, lectures and conferences but perhaps its most lasting memorial will be the stimulus it gave to the publication of these two wonderful books. They are very different-but complementary and written by two acknowledged experts in the history of lighthouses and the people who built them. They cannot be praised too highly.

Dr Morrison-Low has written a magisterial overview of Scottish lighthouse history, which, by its nature, means an overview of lighthouse history generally. It is scholarly, with a full bibliography and list of references but is very readable and beautifully illustrated. She has drawn extensively on the evidence in the National Museum of Scotland's world class lighthouse collection, of which she is the Curator, but goes wider than that and draws also on many other sources. She begins with the early history of navigation, charts, and other aids to navigation and then discusses the efforts to build the Eddystone light (on which the NMS has a surprisingly strong collection) and its relevance to the building of the Bell Rock light. There is an excellent summary of developments in Scotland before 1800 and she continues with a full account of the building of the Bell (to which she appends a list of 99 references!). The rest of the book charts the achievements of the Stevenson family, and those who worked with them, in Scotland and around the world - in Newfoundland, Canada, Chile, Japan, Singapore, Burma, India and even England. The book is not just about the buildings - there is ample discussion too of the developments in optical science and technology, and the battles between a cantankerous but brilliant Sir David Brewster and the more conservative Commissioners, advised by Robert Stevenson. She concludes with a chapter about the NLB as we know it now, and the future for lighthouses in an age of GPS and Automatic Identification Systems (AIS). This is truly an excellent book written by a leader in the field and it is hard to see how it can be bettered.

The same is true of Professor Paxton's book, in a very different way. Professor Paxton is widely known as an expert on civil engineering history and has become a specialist on the Stevenson family and their engineering legacy - he co authored *Bright Lights*, which he published in 1999, which gave a full account of the Stevenson family's engineering work, going beyond lighthouses. This book takes that work further. He begins with the republication of the articles he wrote for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB) in 2004 about the eight engineering



members of the family. Thus for the first time in readily accessible form, are the definitive factual biographies of this remarkable family, from Thomas Smith onwards, who contributed so much to engineering, and lighthouse engineering in particular. In addition, for completeness, here republished, is the author's fascinating account of Robert Louis Stevenson's time as a reluctant trainee engineer - including some excellent eyewitness accounts by RLS of work at Wick and Dhu Heartach (sic). All this - with some excellent contemporary illustrations, readily bears repetition. The next part of the book is however completely new. Professor Paxton tackles the long running (since 1848!) controversy between the descendants of Robert Stevenson and John Rennie as to their respective roles in the building of the Bell light. RLS summarised his family's view thus; "It will be enough to say that Rennie did not design the Bell Rock, that he did not execute it, and that he was not paid for it". In riposte, the Rennie family pointed to their forefather's appointment as Chief Engineer, and that Robert did not publish his definitive account of the building of the Bell, in which Rennie is given only a bit part, until after John Rennie died. Professor Paxton throws new light on an old tale as a result of extensive research in the Rennie archives (the relevant papers have disappeared from the Stevenson archive), and has produced an answer which few will challenge on the evidence he has unearthed. He thus answers a question posed, but not resolved by Dr Morrison-Low. To find the answer - read the book! It is well illustrated with a range of fascinating contemporary illustrations, some of which have not been seen before. The book concludes with an up to date catalogue of all the NLB Stevenson lighthouses. It is truly a work of scholarship and detective work and should be indispensable to anyone interested in the wonderful Stevenson legacy.

So one book is an excellent overview in a world context of the development of lighthouse and navigation science and technology, drawing together in a masterly and readable way the historical, scientific, technical and cultural threads. The other focuses more sharply on one family and their technical achievements and brings new research to bear to answer an old question in a way which will necessarily lead to many established accounts having to be revisited. So they are complementary and together they should answer the question of what to give a lighthouse enthusiast for Christmas and birthday.

In conclusion, this reviewer should declare an interest. Like Dr Morrison-Low, he is a Trustee of the *Northern Lighthouses Heritage Trust*, which is also a sponsor of the excellent exhibition, curated by her, at the NMS (running until 3rd April 2011). The Trust is also co publisher with *Whittles* of Professor Paxton's book (which we hope will be published shortly after Christmas), and he has very generously donated any royalties to the Trust, to help promote its objectives of raising awareness of, and promoting education about, our wonderful lighthouse heritage.

Reviews by Peter Mackay CB