The *Buchan Lecture,* Tain - 3rd October 1997 - by Prof. Roland Paxton.

Extracts from two letters written at Wick in 1868 by seventeen-year-old Robert Louis Stevenson, when gaining harbour engineering experience at Wick Breakwater with the family firm, D.& T. Stevenson.

[To his mother]...*This morning* [Sunday 20th September] *I was awakened by Mrs S. at the door* [of the New Harbour Hotel, Pultneytown] *'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.*

[continued Monday 21 September] *The end of the* [breakwater] *work displays gaps, cairns of ten ton blocks, stones torn from their places and turned 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. How could noster amicus M. maximus appreciate a storm at Wick. It requires a little of the artistic temperament which Mr. T.S.C.E. possesses some, whatever he may say. 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.'* [Construction on the breakwater for the British Fisheries Society, with the Stevensons as engineers had commenced in 1863. Further gales in 1871-72 caused even greater damage and the work was finally abandoned in 1874. RLS wrote in his essay on his father *'The harbour of Wick, the chief disaster of my father's life, was a failure; the sea proved too strong for man's arts; and after expedients hitherto unthought of, and on a scale hyper-cyclopean, the work must be deserted and now stands a ruin in that bleak, God forsaken bay.'*]

[To Bob Stevenson 17 November 1868 - Description of Mail Coach journey by night from Wick to Golspie about 50 miles south - the railway did not reach Wick until 1874]:

'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 Stirkoke, 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 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...

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