CHAPTER I.

EARLY LIFE.

1772—1798.

Birth—Mr. Smith's improvements in Lighthouse illumination—Origin of the Scottish Lighthouse Board—Acts as Assistant to their Engineer—Student at Andersonian Institution, Glasgow, and University of Edinburgh—Succeeds Mr. Smith as Engineer to the Northern Lighthouse Board—Tour of inspection of English lights in 1801—Is taken for a French spy.

ROBERT STEVENSON, maltster in Glasgow, was born in 1720, and, as stated on his tombstone, in the burial-ground of the Cathedral, died in 1764.

His fourth son, Alan, was partner in a West India house in Glasgow, and died of fever in the island of St. Christopher, in 1774, while on a visit to his brother, who managed the foreign business of the house at that place.

The only son of Alan Stevenson was Robert, the subject of this Memoir, who was born at Glasgow on the 8th of June 1772.

When his father died, Robert Stevenson, then an infant, was left in circumstances of difficulty, for the same epidemic fever which deprived him of his father carried off his uncle also, at a time when their loss operated most disadvantageously on the business which they conducted; and, strange to say, on account of

legal difficulties, nearly half a century elapsed before any patrimonial funds in which my father had an interest were realised.

Under these circumstances his mother (Jean Lillie, daughter of David Lillie, builder in Glasgow, who died, as stated on his tombstone, in the Cathedral burying-ground, in 1774) resolved to go to Edinburgh to reside with a married sister, and when her son reached the age of being able for school she wisely took advantage of one of the hospitals in that city for his education; and the spirit of the man is well brought out by the fact that he devoted his first earnings in life, at the Cumbrae Lighthouse, to making a *contribution* to the funds of the Orphan Hospital in payment of what he regarded as a *debt*.

It appears from "Memoranda" left by my father for the information of his family, that his mother was a woman of great prudence and remarkable fortitude, based on deep convictions of religion; and, even in their time of trial, which lasted over his school days, he says, —"My mother's ingenuous and gentle spirit amidst all her difficulties never failed her. She still relied on the providence of God, though sometimes, in the recollection of her father's house and her younger days, she remarked that the ways of Providence were often dark to us. The Bible, and attendance on the ministrations, chiefly of Mr. Randall of Lady Yester's Church, afterwards Dr. Davidson of the Tolbooth,[1] and at other churches,

[1] Mr. Randall assumed the name of Davidson after succeeding to the estate of Muirhouse.

where I was almost always her constant attendant, were the great sources of her comfort.

"Her intention was that I should be trained for the ministry, with a view to which I had been sent, after leaving my first school, to Mr. Macintyre, a famous linguist of his day, where I made the acquaintance of Patrick Neill, afterwards the well-known printer, and still better known naturalist, who remained my most intimate friend through life, and of William Blackwood, the no less celebrated publisher."

Circumstances, however, occurred which entirely changed my father's prospects and pursuits. Soon after he had attained his fifteenth year his mother was married to Mr. Thomas Smith—son of a shipowner, and member of the Trinity House of Dundee,—who himself was, my father says, a "furnishing iron-merchant, shipowner, and underwriter" in Edinburgh, and who being also a lamp-maker and an ingenious mechanician, appears at a very early date to have directed his attention to the subject of lighthouses, and endeavoured to improve the mode of illumination then in use, by substituting lamps with mirrors, for the open coal-fires which were at that early time the only beacons to guide the mariner.

Mr. Smith's improvements attracted the notice of Professor Robison, Sir David Hunter Blair, and Mr. Creech, the publisher and honorary secretary to the Chamber of Commerce. I find from the minutes of that body, that in 1786, a complaint was made to them by shipmasters as to the defective state of the coal light on

the Isle of May, which was a "private light" belonging to the family of the Duke of Portland.

The Chamber sent a deputation of their number to inquire into the truth of the objections that had been made, who fully confirmed the justice of the complaints.

When the result of the examination was reported to the Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Smith submitted to them "a plan for improving the light by dispensing with the coal-fire," and after fully considering his suggestions, the Chamber, at their meeting of 24th May 1786, resolved "that while they allowed much ingenuity to Mr. Smith's plan of reflectors, they were of opinion that a coal light should be continued."

The Board of Northern Lighthouses was constituted by Act of Parliament in 1786; its members were the Lord Advocate and Solicitor-General, the chief magistrates of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Inverness, and Campbeltown, and the Sheriffs of the maritime counties of Scotland. These Commissioners, happily for the interests of navigation, took a more enlightened view of their duties than the Chamber of Commerce of Edinburgh, and after hearing and considering Mr. Smith's proposals, formally appointed him their Engineer.

The preamble of the Act constituting the Northern Lighthouse Board, states that it would greatly conduce to the security of navigation and the fisheries if *four* lighthouses were erected in the north part of Great Britain. Such, it would seem, was the limited state of trade in Scotland, that the erection of these four lighthouses was

all that was contemplated, on a coast, extending to about 2000 miles, of perhaps the most dangerous navigation in Europe. It is now marked by sixty lighthouse stations for the guidance of the sailor, but new claims continue to be made, and new lighthouses are still admitted to be required.

The newly established Lighthouse Board at once entered on its important duties, and the first light they exhibited was Kinnaird Head, which was designed by Mr. Smith and lighted in 1787.

These pursuits being very congenial to my father's mechanical turn of mind, he had rendered himself useful to Mr. Smith in carrying them out, and was intrusted, at the early age of nineteen, to superintend the erection of a lighthouse on the island of Little Cumbrae, in the river Clyde, according to a design which Mr. Smith had furnished to the Cumbrae Light Trustees. This connection soon led to his adoption as Mr. Smith's partner in business, and, in 1799, to his union with his eldest daughter by a former marriage.

During the cessation of the works at Cumbrae in winter, my father, who had determined to follow the profession of a Civil Engineer, applied himself, as appears from class note-books in my possession, with great zeal to the practice of surveying and architectural drawing, and to the study of mathematics at the Andersonian Institution at Glasgow. Of the kindness of Dr. Anderson, who presided over that Institution, he ever entertained a most grateful remembrance, and often

spoke of him as one of his best advisers and kindest friends, and in the Memoranda already noticed he records his obligations to him in the following words:—"It was the practice of Professor Anderson kindly to befriend and forward the views of his pupils; and his attention to me during the few years I had the pleasure of being known to him was of a very marked kind, for he directed my attention to various pursuits, with the view to my coming forward as an engineer."

After completing the Cumbrae Lighthouse he was further engaged, under Mr. Smith, in erecting two lighthouses on the Pentland Skerries in Orkney, where, in view of what lay before him at the Bell Rock, he had the useful experience of living four months in a tent on an uninhabited island, and arranging the landing of the whole of the materials of the lighthouses in the difficult navigation of the Pentland Firth. But here also he had a personal experience of God's overruling Providence, which clung to him through life, and, as we shall find, proved his stay in times of danger, when personal resources had ceased to prove availing. In returning from the Pentland Skerries, in 1794, he embarked in the sloop 'Elizabeth' of Stromness, and proceeded as far as Kinnaird Head, when the vessel was becalmed about three miles from the shore. The captain kindly landed my father, who continued his journey to Edinburgh by land. A very different fate, however, awaited his unfortunate shipmates. A violent gale came on, which drove the 'Elizabeth' back to Orkney, where she was totally wrecked, and all on board unhappily perished.

Notwithstanding my father's active duties in summer, he was so zealous in the pursuit of knowledge that he contrived, during several successive winters, on his return from his practical work, to avail himself of the Philosophical classes at the University of Edinburgh. In this manner he attended Professor Playfair's second and third Mathematical courses, two sessions of Robison's Natural Philosophy, two courses of Chemistry under Dr. Hope, and two of Natural History under Professor Jameson. To these he added a course of Moral Philosophy under Dugald Stewart, a course of Logic under Dr. Ritchie, and one of Agriculture under Professor Low. "I was prevented, however," he remarks, in the Memoranda, "from following my friend Dr. Neill for my degree of M.A. by my slender knowledge of Latin, in which my highest book was the Orations of Cicero, and by my total want of Greek." Such zeal in the pursuit of knowledge, and views so enlarged of the benefits and value of a liberal education, were characteristics of a mind of no ordinary vigour; so that, early trained to practical work, and inspired with a true love of his profession, it was not unnatural that on the resignation of Mr. Smith the Board should have appointed Mr. Stevenson to succeed him as their Engineer.

The first annual report made by him to the Board is dated June 1798, and he continued annually to prepare one up to the time of his resignation in 1843.

The first occasion on which he was sent by the Board on a special mission was in 1801, when he was deputed by the Commissioners to visit and report on the Light-

houses on the coasts of England, Wales, and the Isle of Man. The report he submitted to the Board is a most elaborate and valuable document. After describing upwards of twenty Public, Private, and Harbour lights which he had examined, he proceeds fully to discuss the different systems of management in use, and particularly to compare the system adopted by the Scotch Board with that practised in England by the Trinity House, most readily advising the adoption of what seemed improvements in the administration of the Southern Board. In reporting as to the Isle of Man he takes occasion to suggest that the lighting of that island should be taken up by the Northern Commissioners—a proposal which was acted on in 1815. He says :—

"I had several communications with William Scott, Esq., Receiver-General of the Customs, upon the subject of Lighthouses. At his request I went to the Point of Langness, and to the Calf of Man; the former a very dangerous point of land, the latter a situation that seems every way answerable to the general purposes of a site for a lighthouse.

"As this island occupies a middle situation between Great Britain and Ireland, and is not included in any of these Acts of Parliament which relate to the erecting or maintaining of Lights, on either side of the Channel, perhaps it might answer to include the Isle of Man under the same Act which refers to the Northern Lighthouses; and by extending your powers this island might no longer stand a monument of darkness, and a great obstruction to the navigation of St. George's Channel, particularly from the want of a light upon the Calf of Man.

"Such a light, together with the late improvement of the

Copeland light, and the erection of the Kilwarlin light upon the Irish coast, would in an eminent degree improve the navigation of the Irish Channel. From the central situation of the Isle of Man, a light would soon pay itself, by serving the trade of Maryport, Workington, Whitehaven, Lancaster and Liverpool, on the one side of the Channel, with Dublin and Newry on the other."

With reference to this suggestion the Commissioners, in January 1802, adopted the following resolution :—

"In the above report Mr. Stevenson has stated very strongly the great utility of a lighthouse upon the Calf of Man; but not being within the jurisdiction either of the Trinity House of London, or of the Commissioners for the Northern Lighthouses, both of them are thereby prevented from accomplishing an object so much wished for by mariners, as it would prove a great additional security to the navigation between a great number of the ports on the west of England, and Dublin, and other ports in Ireland. In order therefore that this circumstance may not be overlooked, the Commissioners directed this notice to be taken of it in their Minutes, in order that if any application to Parliament shall at a future period be deemed necessary, the Commissioners may judge how far it may not be proper to apply for power and liberty to erect a lighthouse upon a situation so very eligible as the Calf of Man, being the southmost point of that island."

The report was illustrated with plans of Douglas, Milford, Longships, and Portland Lighthouses. The somewhat formidable journey he had undertaken, involving 2500 miles of travelling, occupied eight weeks in its performance, and the following amusing incident shows what peaceful travellers, in those troubled times, had sometimes to encounter :—

"I left the Scilly Islands considerably instructed by the examination of the machinery and apparatus of this lighthouse, and very much gratified. I took my passage in a vessel bound for Penzance, where, however, I had not been long landed, when I met with a circumstance which, while it lasted, was highly disagreeable, and as it is somewhat connected with the object of the journey, I beg your indulgence while I lay it before you.

"Finding that I could not get any convenient mode of conveyance from Penzance to the Lizard Lights, I set off on foot for Marazion, a town at the head of Mounts Bay, where I was in hopes of getting a boat to freight. I had just got that length, and was making the necessary inquiry, when a young man, accompanied by several idle-looking fellows, came up to me, and in a hasty tone said, 'Sir, in the King's name I seize your person and papers.' To which I replied that I should be glad to see his authority, and know the reason of an address so abrupt. He told me the want of time prevented his taking regular steps, but that it would be necessary for me to return to Penzance, and there undergo an examination, as I was suspected of being a French spy. Had I not been extremely anxious to get on my journey, I would not have objected to this. I therefore proposed to submit my papers to the examination of the nearest Justice of Peace, who was immediately applied to and came to the inn where I was. He seemed to be greatly agitated, and quite at a loss how to proceed. The complaint preferred against me was, 'That I had examined the Longships Lighthouse with the most minute attention, and was no less particular in my inquiries at the keepers of the lighthouse regarding the sunk rocks lying off the Land's End, with the sets of the currents and tides along the coast: that I seemed particularly to regret the situation of the rocks called the Seven Stones, and the loss of a beacon which the Trinity Board had caused to be fixed upon the Wolf Rock: that I had taken notes of the bearings of several sunk rocks, and