

The Lighthouse Stevenson

Bella Bathurst

Published by Harper
Perennial

Extract

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Yarmouth

Captain George Manby had reached the age of forty without having contributed significantly to life. His childhood in Yarmouth had been undistinguished, his military career nondescript, and by early middle age he had sunk deeply into debt. Apart from an incident in 1800 when he appeared wild-eyed at the Secretary at War's door offering to assassinate Napoleon – an offer which the Secretary politely declined – Manby seemed an unlikely candidate for immortality. His naval colleagues also noted cynically that the only battle scar he had yet earned was a gunshot wound, allegedly sustained while running away from a duel.

The death of Nelson during the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 changed all that. Manby had been at school with Nelson, and although the two had not been friends, Manby still regarded the admiral with affection. When Nelson died, Manby was spurred into action. Inspired by his hero's example and impressed by the public grief over his loss, Manby concluded that his best chance of fame lay in saving lives; in particular, saving lives at sea. It was a startling choice. Manby's only marine experience until then had been an unsuccessful spell as a naval lay captain on a frigate heading for Dublin. The ship had foundered off the Irish coast, and, once embedded upon the lee shore, began sinking fast. Manby wrote later that 'the striking of the ship was the most awful and momentous period I had hitherto experienced. The immediate hallooing of all hands on deck; to the pumps, plumb the well, cut away the masts, throw

the guns overboard. And amid all this activity, the dismal moans of some, the screams of the women.' The crew hurled everything moveable over the sides and the rising tide finally pulled the ship back to the sea's uneasy safety. Once back in Portsmouth, Manby reflected on his experience and concluded that the sea and he were not well suited to each other. Instead, he applied for a post as barrack master, a position which allowed him to keep his military honours while staying safely on dry land.

Manby did admittedly have good reason to be cautious. Two centuries ago, almost a third of all British seamen died pursuing their trade, being either killed by the punishment of life on board ship or sacrificed to storms and drownings. Nearly everything the modern mariner relies upon – competent maps, accurate instruments and adequate communication – was either unreliable or non-existent. The major sea lanes around Britain were crowded and collisions were frequent. What is now fixed and understood was then debatable, and navigation was more a matter of art than science. Sailors depended on experience or luck to avoid danger, and when they did run into trouble there was no kindly lifeboat service to deliver them. Until the mid-nineteenth century, it was made harder to assist victims than it was to collect the proceeds from wrecks. Previous legislation had defended the salvagers, not the mariners, and neither government nor shipowners devoted much attention to the consequences of nautical disaster. Most efforts were aimed at protecting cargo rather than ensuring that the crew returned intact with the goods. For several long centuries, lives lost at sea were regarded by much of Europe as so much natural wastage. Accounts still exist of sailors watching slack-handed from the gunwhales while one of their colleagues drowned. Once a person had fallen overboard, so the thinking went, he had been claimed by the sea, and it was not for mankind to challenge that claim. Such superstition was only an ideological response to an uncomfortable fact; the sea did kill people in great

numbers, year after year. And, short of refusing to leave the safe shores of Britain, there was almost nothing that could be done about it.

Manby seized on the belief that something more must be done to prevent the deaths of shipwreck victims beached on the indifferent shores of Britain, if not for compassionate reasons, then certainly for civilised ones. The destruction of the gun-brig *Snipe* off the coast of Yarmouth in 1807 only confirmed his views. One hundred and forty-four lives were lost after the ship ran aground during a gale less than one hundred yards from the shore. Manby watched the ship beat itself to death on the rocks, and listened impotently to the cries of those still on board as they died. Over the next few months, he began experimenting with possible solutions. He concentrated his efforts on the idea of throwing a line from the shore to a distressed ship, using a rope fixed to the end of a canon ball. Several early versions failed spectacularly: the rope was either burned through by the gunpowder, or, in those rare instances when the ball and rope successfully reached their target, only managed to set what remained of the ship on fire. At the same time, he tinkered with the notion of an unsinkable boat. During a storm, small row-boats which were used to ferry survivors from the wreck to the shore almost invariably sank, either capsized by the seas or flooded by waves. Manby sealed several small wooden barrels with pitch and fixed them to the sides of a small, undecked boat, providing primitive but workable buoyancy chambers.

By the summer of 1807, his prototype mortar line was ready for testing. Until then, his colleagues and neighbours had watched Manby's eccentric experiments with derision. But once he produced something that threatened the wreckers, who took their livelihoods from the plunder of injured ships, he became a more serious danger. As the wreckers saw it, he was not only removing their prized source of income, he was also directly contradicting the will of God. God, they reasoned, had sent the

storm that had wrecked the ship which they took as their reward. Any interference was therefore a form of devilish meddling. And so, helped by the knowledge that Manby could not swim, the wreckers tried to drown him. Several local sailors volunteered to help Manby demonstrate his boat and mortar line, and, when the boat was a good way from the shore, deliberately capsized it. Manby, just managing to keep afloat, was finally saved by his own efforts and two conscience-stricken spectators.

His determination was, if anything, increased. In 1808, the small brig *Elizabeth*, carrying a crew of seven sailors, became snared on the sandbanks near Yarmouth during a storm. Manby, seizing his opportunity, positioned himself and his mortar line on the shore and managed to fire the line successfully onto the ship. To do so required accurate calculation, since visibility was minimal and the mortar risked being damaged by both rain and salt water. Manby fired; the rope coiled outwards to sea. There was a pause, and then, slowly, the rope tautened. Someone, it seemed, was still alive and had taken up the line. Once he was confident that the link from ship to shore was secure, Manby sent out one of his ballasted row-boats. When it finally groped its way back to shore, seven sodden survivors crawled exhausted onto the beach. As they later testified, all of them would have almost certainly drowned without the help of the mortar line. Manby, all his heroic intentions vindicated, knelt on the sand and wept.

During the next forty years, it was later calculated, upwards of 1,000 people were rescued from disabled ships by the mortar line. But if Manby thought that his battles had ended there on the darkened beach, he was wrong. His inventions did not meet with the esteem he had hoped for. Despite his energetic lobbying in Parliament, the Admiralty remained suspicious, and the local sailors agitated loudly for his removal. Other, more credible competitors came forward, claiming either to have invented the line before Manby or to have improved it far beyond his

original designs. Even his later attempts to establish a lifeboat service to rescue those victims of shipwreck who were stranded farther out to sea met with disapproval or silence. Manby was present at the inaugural meeting of the Royal Society for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck in 1824, at which the first decision was to award five gold medals: one to the King, one to the Duke of York, one to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and one each to Manby and Sir William Hillary. Manby took the medal, but not the credit. Hillary, a boastful but enterprising Yorkshireman whose career bore a strong resemblance to Manby's, is now generally honoured as the founding father of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. Admittedly, Manby did not always help his own cause. He could be pompous and grasping, and was hopelessly vain. His journals and letters are littered with moments when he 'considered his fortune made' by the platitudes of a minister or the flattery of a courtier. His efforts often had more to do with his own self-advancement than they did with more generous motives. But for all his deluded grandeur, Manby did achieve great things. After the invention of the mortar line, he spent the rest of his life searching for the recognition he felt he deserved. Just before his death aged eighty-nine, he decided to build a monument commemorating both himself and the mortar line. When completed, he offered it to the town of Yarmouth, which had already built and paid for a statue of Nelson in the town centre. Manby's memorial was rejected; he was left with nowhere to put it but his own front garden.

From Berwick to the Solway, including the sea lochs of the west, the Scottish coast runs for 4,467 nautical miles. By the late eighteenth century, that coast had gained an ominous reputation. Most mariners stayed well clear, and those who sailed there often chose to continue travelling all night instead of

looking for landfall after dark. Not only is Scotland girdled by two opposing seas – the North Sea and the Atlantic – but her ragged island archipelago provides a major obstacle course for the best of sailors, even now. In the past, the sea was considered so dangerous in winter that one early Act had forbidden ships stocked with essential goods from leaving Scottish ports between the end of October and the beginning of February. The reasoning was obvious. As well as the sandbanks and treachery of the English coast, Scotland is moated by an awkward brew of conflicting tides and currents. The North Sea, which in the eighteenth century gave the only access to the Continent, Scandinavia and Russia, is a dark place of streams and sudden climatic switches. In the Pentland Firth, where the North Sea meets the Atlantic, sailors face riptides, cross winds and breakwaters on the water, and sandbanks, skerries and reefs underneath. Often, the competing tides set up currents that run at ten knots or more, each of which is troublesome enough to have earned its own title: Duncansby Bore, the Merry Men of Mey or the Swilkie. The Pentland Firth itself is still known simply as ‘Hell’s Mouth’. The names that still speckle marine maps represent more than just picturesque history. The Black Deeps and Blackstone Banks took their percentage of dead, year after year. Farther south, the Solway Firth is riddled with quicksands and the Firths of Tay and Forth are notorious for rocks. In the 1870s, Thomas Stevenson, a man not given to hyperbole, calculated the pressure of the breakers on the coast at up to 6,000 pounds per square foot.

Even when captains were confident they were clear of the cross-currents near the isles, there were reefs and rocks – Sule Skerry off Cape Wrath, the Torran Rocks off the coast of Iona and Skerryvore beyond Tiree. The entrance to the Forth is guarded by three separate obstacles – the Isle of May, the Bass Rock and Inchkeith – all of which stick directly in the path of shipping on its way to the port of Leith. A little farther north-east, there is the infamous Bell Rock, submerged at high tide

and a confusion of serrated rocks at low tide. Round on the west coast, the entrance to the Clyde is calmer but prone to shallows and awkward weather patterns thrown off by the surrounding islands. Where the placid Gulf Stream soaks into the Atlantic, the area is notorious for races, currents and 'standing waves' (water flowing over submerged objects which gives the impression of immobility), while the whirlpool of Corrieveckan between Jura and Scarba is considered the most dangerous tide in Europe. Even on a clear day, crossing Corrieveckan involves careful calculation. Boats making the passage cling nervously to the shoreline only to find themselves speeding through at fifteen knots or more. In a dirty sea, the gully resembles Scylla and Charybdis, sucking boats down into the eddy or spitting them out to the shores on either side. Sailors who know the area well enough to avoid the centre frequently wreck themselves on the nearby coasts trying to escape.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, navigation remained a ramshackle skill. Sailors within sight of the shore depended on being able to recognise the coastline. A church roof, a solitary copice or a coastal hamlet were reference points as dependable as any more thorough knowledge of the sea's geography. In England, Elizabeth I had made altering or dismantling the most significant coastal landmarks a criminal offence. The law had little effect. After dark, without lights, landmarks were of only the most limited help. Many accounts of shipwrecks from the time note laconically that the pilot had mistaken one bay or harbour for another, and ended up paying for it. Even when the first primitive fires were lit on headlands to mark the way, they could easily be confused with stubble fires or temporary beacons. Nor was it possible to rely on written evidence. Even now, with the benefits of sonar and satellite surveying, there is no such thing as a definitive chart. Some parts of the Scottish coastline have not been surveyed for 150 years or more; others could be surveyed till the end of time and still not keep pace with the shiftiness of the sea. In the late eighteenth century,

charts, maps and pilot books were drawn up by trial and painful error, and they were as often produced by merchants or traders as by any regularised state system. It was not until 1750 that Murdoch Mackenzie published a sea chart of Orkney and Lewis based on a rigid triangulation framework. Farther south, the situation remained poor for several more decades. In 1788, Murdo Downie, the Master of HM *Champion* at Leith, was complaining to the government that he could find 'no chart published of the East Coast of Scotland that could in any degree be relied upon'. The old cherub-covered maps, with their foreshortened coasts and squint-eyed headlands, might look endearing now, but for several long centuries they were the only detailed information on the British coast available. When Daniel Defoe made his tour of Scotland in the 1720s, he discovered that the Forth and Clyde did not, in fact, run into one another, as his map suggested. 'When I came more critically to survey the ground,' he complained, 'I found the map-makers greatly mistaken, and that they had not only given the situation and courses of the rivers wrong, but the distances also.' Farther north, in 'that mountainous, barren and frightful country', the Highlands, things were even worse. 'Our geographers seem to be almost as much at a loss in the description of this north part of Scotland, as the Romans were to conquer it,' Defoe noted disconsolately, 'and they are obliged to fill it up with hills and mountains, as they do the inner parts of Africa with lions and elephants, for want of knowing what else to place there.'

Matters improved erratically, if at all, in the nineteenth century. In 1837, an indignant committee of Edinburgh societies complained to the Treasury that even the best maps and charts of Scotland were so inaccurate that 'in some charts, the large island of Arran is laid down as six miles from Bute, in others as nine miles, and in a third as 12 miles distant from the island. Pladda Island light in charts is placed at 16° north of Ailsa Craig, where its true distance is only 10°20'. These last are

serious errors at the entrance of so important a river as the Clyde.' Many of the roughest hazards remained unmarked, those that were noted were often wrongly placed, and the pilotage rules, with their 'Fifty fathoms black ooze and black fishey stones among', could often be more poetic than practical. Areas given as 'safe anchoring' were revealed to be notorious shipwreck spots; ports and harbours were awkward to approach and littered with the bones of old ships.

Not that adversity deterred Scotland's swelling population from turning away from the land and onto the sea. Like the rest of Britain, Scotland needed it, fed off it, took employment from it and profited by it. From the sixteenth century onwards, the nautical traffic around Britain increased steadily, while the numbers of shipwrecks and groundings rose in tandem. Aside from farming and manufactures, the sea provided one of the principal sources of employment for a large swathe of the population until well into the nineteenth century. Directly, it provided subsistence, fish and trade; indirectly, it provided strength, funds and political muscle. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Britain was also spending a significant amount of her time and money waging wars across it. The navy grew threefold, and with it grew the pirates, privateers and press gangs of legend. Though the end of the Napoleonic wars meant the dwindling or abolition of all three, for the moment they remained a constant threat. The escalation of trade meant the escalation in war to protect that trade. In the century between 1650 and 1750, England was engaged in six major European wars. Old routes were travelled more frequently; new ones were marked out. By the 1750s, Scotland and England had separately built up a regular trade in subsistence goods – corn, coal, livestock – with France, Scandinavia and the Baltic. The French, meanwhile, were involved in so many wars at the time that they were forced to scale down their navy and resort to privateers instead, many of whom spent their time raiding the British coast. At the same time, Scotland in particular depended on the Scandinavian

countries as trading partners and maritime allies. The traffic between the two places, always constant, escalated with the growth of industry and the spread of free trade. From the Clyde ports there was the journey to the New World, which by the 1750s was providing a useful new source of tobacco, sugar, manufactured goods and slaves. To the north and south, there were the whaling grounds and beyond the Continent there were the exotic dangers of a new empire. In each direction, there were prizes to be taken and claims to be staked.

Scotland contributed her own heavy percentages to the traffic in other ways. Union with England had brought benefits, albeit slowly. Immediately after 1707, the changes were mainly internal: cattle sales to English markets, corn to English mills or men to English employment. But after the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion, Scotland's trade with Europe accelerated and the age of the Great Improvers began. Landlords in the Highlands cleared the straths for sheep, packed off the protesting population to stony coastal settlements, taught them how to fish and left them to make a life for themselves. Some of the settlements died quietly, others took root and became export centres for wool, flax or fish. The subjugated regiments joined English wars and British battles or went south to the new shipbuilding yards in Glasgow or Greenock. Several thousand Highlanders left for the New World on leaky ships, some of which did not last the journey. Edinburgh functioned as both Continental trading post and garrison town, providing goods for export and men for war. When the press gangs sought fodder for their frigates, they looked first to the Scottish capital. For whatever cause, the population of Scotland was on the move in a way that it had not been before, and much of that movement was by sea.

And as the sea cluttered up with shipping, so it accumulated shipwrecks. In the 1790s, an average of 550 ships were wrecked every year on British shores; by the 1830s, the numbers had risen to well over two a day. The vast increase in nautical traffic

around Europe had not yet been matched by any improvement in safety. There was no regulated distress code and only the most clumsy and primitive of aids: heavy leather lifejackets or inadequate row-boats. By 1800, Lloyds of London estimated that one ship was lost or wrecked every day around Britain; between 1854 and 1879, almost 50,000 wrecks were registered. The figure is probably ludicrously low. Many wrecks never reached the attention of the local Admiralty officer, either through difficulties in communication or, more likely, through deliberate concealment. Both the navy and the merchant ship-owners learned through bitter experience to expect a certain percentage of their ships to sink every year they sailed. With the mortality rate so high and conditions so bad, the sailors themselves could only cultivate a brutal fatalism about their work. They lived in a twilit world, with their own jargon and codes; most did not expect to live beyond the age of forty. They regarded the government with suspicion, the law with indifference, and their landlubber compatriots with derision. They were accustomed to shipwreck or injury, they accepted that the sea was unsafe, and they remained suspicious of men who promised salvation.

Given such an ominous background, it was evident that changes would have to be made. By the 1780s, the swell of public agitation had become too strong for the government to ignore any longer. But it is notable that the pressure for light-houses did not emerge from the sailors most at risk or indeed the organisations best equipped to provide lights. The pressure came from the shipowners and the naval captains, both of whom were keen to minimise the risks in sending precious cargo to sea. Their crews, the men who did the dying, seemed either so pessimistic about their chances for survival or so sceptical of innovation that it took several decades to convince them of the need for lights. It was the captains, the money men and the merchants who agitated most fiercely for action. Finance, as usual, took precedence over compassion. But out of such

necessity came something more exceptional than the usual desultory efforts to mark the places between the sea and the land. Though the drive to build the Scottish lights was commonplace enough, the men who came to fill that role were made of rarer stuff.