

## How it all Began

If a boy had to choose where to live for adventure, he might choose Portsoy in Scotland. Robert's family lived there because his father was a Customs Officer and Portsoy was a seaport. Mr Moffat's job was to make sure that the trading done in Portsoy was legal, that nothing illegal was landed or shipped and that all taxes were paid.

'There's nobody more imaginative than a smuggler,' Mr Moffat would often say, 'and nobody more stupid. Sometimes I wonder if they think my brain doesn't work.'

His wife knew that he must have a story to tell about his day's work because he always started his stories by saying exactly the same thing.

'What's been happening?' she asked.

Mr Moffat shook his head. 'I was checking a boat leaving with a cargo of grain. Tucked in a corner were some barrels, very carefully wrapped up in rags to stop them being damaged in a storm and surrounded by more rubbish than you can imagine. It was the rubbish I noticed first because most boats are tidy places.'

“What’s that?” I asked the Mate.

“It’s pitch,” he told me. “I never go out without some barrels of pitch on board for small repairs. There are boats at the bottom of the sea that would still be floating on top of it if they’d taken a barrel of pitch with them.”

Mrs Moffat knew that the Mate had made a mistake. Trying to crack a joke with a customs officer was usually a sign that there was something going on.

Her husband continued. ‘I told him that he’d wrapped his pitch up very comfortably for its voyage, and then suggested that it wasn’t pitch at all. I was right. It was whisky, illegally brewed whisky. He was none too pleased when I had it taken ashore and he had to pay a hefty fine and leave without his precious pitch.’

Portsoy was the perfect place to be a child, the perfect place to have adventures and the perfect place to go exploring. Robert’s older brothers must have kept a close eye on Robert as they hiked along the cliff-top path high above the small bay. Then there was the shore path, safe and dry at high tide and usually even safe at low tide. But in a storm! In a storm a man on a horse could have been washed away and never seen again. There were plenty of storms in Portsoy. There was also the busy harbour to explore. Boats came and went from all sorts of exciting places. Sailors spoke strange languages that Robert didn’t understand.

Then there were the sounds of Portsoy, and Robert would remember them years later when he lived far

away from Scotland. Gulls screeched to each other, sounding as though they were laughing at the fishermen from their rooftops. Chains rattled on the boats and a north-east wind blew the noise of their clanking much further than you would think. There was the slap of sails in the wind, especially wet sails, and the trundle of wheels as carts carried goods from the sailing boats up the very steep road from the harbour. Portsoy was small, busy and noisy – the ideal place to be a boy at the turn of the 18th century. Robert was born on 21st December 1795 and it was the years 1797 to 1806 that he spent in that wonderful village.

As there were no street lights, the Moffat boys and girls (there were eventually five boys and two girls in the family) did not go adventuring on dark winter nights. Instead they gathered in the customs officer's home around the open fire. There was a saying in those days that, 'the devil finds work for idle hands'. What that meant was that if people sat about wasting their time, the devil would tempt them to get up to mischief. There was not much time wasted in Robert's house. His mother had her hands full looking after her home and large family, but she still had time to teach them what she thought was important.

Those dark winter nights were spent round the fire with the children—boys as well as girls—learning to knit and sew. They darned their woollen socks and patched the holes in their clothes. As there was no spare money, nothing was thrown out that could be

used again. It's a very funny thing, but people in the 21st century think that they invented recycling. Mrs Moffat, in the year 1800, could have taught us all a thing or two. A jacket worn by Robert's eldest brother would pass down to the next oldest, and then maybe to Robert himself. When it was too raggedy to be worn by anyone, the sleeves might be cut off and worn under long woollen socks to keep the biting winter wind from causing chilblains. The rest could be cut into patches to be used on other worn-out jackets. And the tiny bits and pieces left over would be knotted into a rag rug and laid before the fire for the children to sit on.

Children in Robert's day had a game they played. They sat on the rag rug, closed their eyes and pointed to a bit of the rug. Then whoever in the family could remember told the story of that rag and the others all chipped in with their memories. It might have gone something like this.

'I remember Granddad wearing that jacket. I didn't like it because it was so scratchy when he gave me a hug.'

'And I remember when Mother cut it down and made it into a coat for me.'

'I remember that I fell into the sea when I was wearing it. The jacket drank up so much water, and was so heavy, that it nearly dragged me under.'

'And I remember a patch from it on my breeches.'

'And I'm wearing the breeches,' the youngest might have said. 'And the patch is right here on my knee!'

Mrs Moffat didn't only teach her children to knit and sew she also taught them about God. Jesus was her Saviour and she loved him very much indeed. Her husband did too and both parents prayed for their children as well as teaching them the Bible. They knew that the Bible is the most important book in the whole world and they wanted Robert and his brothers and sisters to know that too.

The Moffat home was a poor one and there was no spare money to buy books. But among the few that they had were the Bible and the Shorter Catechism. The Shorter Catechism wasn't really very short – at least not to a boy like Robert. It's a book of questions and answers about the Bible and it was used to teach children. Of course, they had to learn to read before reading the Shorter Catechism for themselves. But, by the time Robert could read, he would have known many catechism questions and answers because children learned them by heart. Sunday afternoons in the Moffat home would often be spent answering catechism questions. In fact, it was from the first page of the Shorter Catechism that Robert learned the letters of the alphabet!

While Sundays were spent at church and learning about Jesus at home, Mondays to Saturdays were mostly spent outside. And, for Robert, that often meant going down to the harbour and trying to make himself useful to the sailors in the port. You might be wondering if he ever went to school. Yes, he did, but just for a very

short time. There was no law in those days saying that boys and girls had to attend school, and many didn't. Robert went to the local school and was taught by a dominie (the Scottish word for a teacher in those days) whose name was Wullie Mitchell. Mr Mitchell was a stern man and not very patient with his pupils. Whether that had anything to do with Robert only staying a few weeks, nobody knows. Maybe it was more to do with the fact that the captain of one of the local boats liked Robert and sometimes took him out on his boat even as a young boy. Mr Wullie Mitchell probably didn't think much of that.

Robert was an adventurer at heart, and that must have given his mother and father a worry or two, especially when he decided to run away to sea. It's not clear when he did this, but it was certainly before he was eleven years old! Many years later he wrote, 'You would be surprised to hear how little I knew. I might have received a better education. My dear father and mother were not to blame, but I wanted to be a man before the time. I lived among shipping, and ran off to sea.'

The boy (remember he was younger than eleven!) set off to sea full of high hopes. 'No more school! No more lessons and no more being beaten by Wullie Mitchell's tawse!' A tawse was a leather strap used to punish school children. Their teacher smacked them across the hand with it and it was very sore.

For a while the young sailor's life was exciting, if very hard. Robert was expected to work like a man

even though he was only a boy. His muscles ached and his hands bled and blistered.

‘How can a tiny hack on your finger be so sore?’ he asked himself, for the hundredth time, as salt sea water made his hand hurt until he nearly cried. There were even times when he was glad of the salt spray for it stopped anyone seeing his tears. It didn’t take long for the boy to discover that a sailor’s life was not for him and he couldn’t wait for the boat to get back to his home in Portsoy.

‘I got disgusted with a sailor’s life,’ Robert wrote, when he was an old man.

When he was eleven his father changed jobs. Mr Moffat was appointed to a job at Carronshore, which must have seemed very, very different to the children. Instead of living at a seaport with towering cliffs above it and the wild north-easterly wind blowing down from the Arctic Circle, their new home was a long way from the open sea. It was still a port, but a port on the River Carron that went into the River Forth not far to the north. And the Firth of Forth, at that point, is not much more than a mile wide.

How Robert must have missed the crashing waves, his jaunts along the coast with his friendly captain and the view from his favourite look-out spot on the cliffs. There was, however, exploring to be done in Carronshore and some hi-tech discoveries to be made.

‘What’s that strange boat?’ Robert asked a new friend, as they found places to go and things to do.

‘That’s the famous *Charlotte Dundas*,’ was the reply.

‘She looks odd rather than famous,’ commented Robert. ‘What’s her story?’

His friend knew it all. Everyone in Carronshore knew about the *Charlotte Dundas*.

‘Well,’ said the boy, ‘coming from away up north you only know about sailing boats. But down here in the centre of things we know that the future is in paddle steamers not sailing ships.’

Robert was interested. This sounded good – though he might not quite have believed it.

‘Can you see the paddle wheels on either side of the boat?’ the boy asked.

Robert couldn’t miss them. They reached from above deck level down into the sea.

‘There’s an engine in the hull powered by steam,’ his friend continued. ‘And when the steam gets up it works a crank that drives the paddle wheels.’

Robert was puzzled. ‘What’s the hull built of?’ he asked. ‘If it’s wood there must be a danger of fire.’

The other boy shook his head. ‘It is wood,’ he admitted. ‘But it’s absolutely safe. You don’t think the shipyard at Grangemouth would build a ship that was a fire hazard.’

By now the boys were right up beside the *Charlotte Dundas* and Robert felt he was looking at the boat of the future. Having developed an exploring mind in Portsoy,

he now applied it to this amazing paddle steamer and wondered where in the world it could go.

‘Could you cross the Atlantic Ocean in it?’ he asked his friend.

‘Don’t be silly!’ was the reply. ‘You’d need to have so much coal on board to feed the engine that the vessel would sink. It’s only built to work as a barge towing sloops up the River Forth.’

Robert’s heart sank. He was an adventurer at heart not an inshore boatman!

It was while the Moffat family lived in Carronshore that Robert had his second experience of education, when he was sent with his older brother to Mr Paton’s school. He was eleven years old at the time and his schooling only lasted six months. The subjects studied there were very different to what an eleven-year old would learn today. Robert was taught book-keeping (that’s how to keep financial accounts) and mathematics. He was much more interested in astronomy, a subject that only the older boys were supposed to learn.

‘How do you know about the Great Bear and Orion?’ a friend asked him. ‘You’re not the right age for that class.’

Robert grinned. ‘It’s because we have such a long walk home from school. Father arranged with Mr Paton that I could stay behind and come home with my older brother. So I wait until the big boys are gathered round the teacher’s table and then I creep

up behind them and listen to what he's saying. If he's showing them anything interesting, I just push as far to the front as I can and spy on him without him seeing me.'

On dark winter nights he and his brother looked up to the stars and found the constellations they had heard about. Of course, in those days there was hardly any light pollution and the stars would have shone much more brightly than they do in towns and cities today.

It was by pushing forward through the older boys that Robert discovered that he liked geography too. He could never have enough. There was so much to learn about foreign places with strange names. The people there looked so different from Scottish people. They spoke languages hardly anyone understood. It was not only at school that the eleven-year-old heard about people from other parts of the world. Mrs Moffat learned about missionary work and told her children all she knew. Years after he left home he still remembered her reading a book to the family about missionaries working in Greenland and Labrador. It was exciting stuff!