The Vanishing Lighthousemen of Eilean Mór

by Mike Dash

The unexplained disappearance of three Scottish lighthousemen from their lonely station in the Flannan Isles, to the west of the Outer Hebrides, over Christmas 1900 may be likened to the mystery of the Mary Celeste. *The cases share several motifs – the half-eaten meal, the living quarters left in good order, the utter absence of life – though the Flannans' weird reputation has led several authors to speculate that the missing keepers may have been snatched by some supernatural power. But is there a simpler explanation? Mike Dash, a contributing editor to* Fortean Times, *has conducted fresh research in the archives of the Northern Lighthouse Board and the British Newspaper Library, and finds flaws in the popular retellings of this famous mystery.*

THE EMPTY LIGHTHOUSE

Joseph Moore stood in the bows of the lighthouse tender *Hesperus*'s longboat as it bobbed in the freezing grey swell of the North Atlantic. Gingerly, the men at the oars inched him towards the 150-foot cliffs of Eilean Mór, the largest of the Flannan Isles, which loomed from the water a few hundred yards away. It took only a minute or two for the boat to come alongside one of the two small landing-places carved from the islet's solid rock. As it did so, Moore leaped ashore and scrambled up the steep flight of hand-hewn steps that led up the cliff face to a grassy bank at the summit. While he climbed, he must have wondered what he'd find when he reached the top.

Four keepers operated the newly-opened light on Eilean Mór. Three were on duty at any given time, while the fourth took a fortnight's leave. This day, 26 December 1900, it was Moore's turn to relieve one of his colleagues and resume his watch. But the worrying signs were that something was badly wrong on the little island. There had been no activity at the lighthouse as the *Hesperus* hove into view and sounded a blast on her steam-whistle, and a rocket fired from the tender to announce her arrival had gone unanswered.

Emerging at the top of the steps, the lighthouseman could see ahead of him the ruins of an ancient chapel and, beyond that, the bulk of the new stone-built lighthouse itself. But there were no signs of life, no men advancing down the slope to greet him, even though the recent bad weather meant the relief was overdue.

Increasingly anxious now, Moore went over to the living quarters and looked inside. There was no one there. The lighthouse was equally deserted, and its lamp unlit. There was nowhere else on the island that his colleagues could conceivably be. Three lighthousemen had disappeared – and, judging from the fact that every clock on the island had wound down and stopped, they seemed to have been missing for several days.

Convinced now that some tragedy must have occurred, Moore retraced his steps to the landing-place and requested the help of the *Hesperus*'s second mate, McCormack, who returned to the lighthouse with Moore and another seaman to conduct a second search, More thorough this time but equally fruitless. Eventually the men gave up and rowed back to the tender to report to her master, Captain Harvie.

Knowing that his first duty was to ensure the Flannan light was relit, Harvie ordered Moore to return to Eilean Mór to take over the operation of the lamp and, if possible, ascertain the fate of the missing lighthousemen. With him went three

volunteers – Allan Macdonald, the buoymaster, and seamen Campbell and Lamont. When they had been safely landed on the rock, Harvie turned the *Hesperus* about to Breascleat, in Lewis, the site of the nearest telegraph station, and sent an urgent telegram to his employer, the Secretary of the Northern Lighthouse Board in Edinburgh. 'A dreadful accident,' he began, 'has happened at Flannans...'[1]

The three men who had disappeared so completely were all experienced lighthousemen, among the best employed by the Northern Lighthouse Board[2]. The Principal Keeper was James Ducat, 43, who came from Arbroath and had spent two decades in the lighthouse service. He was a married man and had four children. Ducat had been selected to run the Flannan light while the lighthouse was still under construction, and had spent a total of 14 months on Eilean Mór, becoming familiar with all its moods. His companions were the second assistant keeper, Thomas Marshall, who was 28 and unmarried, and an occasional keeper named Donald McArthur, 40, a married man from Breascleat. McArthur was an old soldier and was standing in for the fortunate William Ross, the first assistant keeper, who was on extended sick leave[3].

The keepers had to be good, for the lighthouse on Eilean Mór was among the most exposed of all the NLB's stations, as well as the newest. The frequently appalling weather and rough seas around the Flannans had considerably delayed construction, which had taken four years, rather than the expected two, not least because of the difficulty of landing building materials; despite frantic work throughout the summer and autumn of 1899, the 140,000 candle-power lamp, which stood 275 feet above sea level and was visible to shipping up to 24 miles away, was not lit for the first time until 1 December[4]. But the men who ran the Northern Lighthouse Board do not seem to have thought the Flannans actually dangerous, and with some reason. Though lighthouse-keeping is lonely, tedious and occasionally physically arduous work, it is only rarely deadly; the last disaster of comparable magnitude suffered by the NLB occurred around 1850, when a boat carrying a relief crew to the lighthouse on Little Ross was swamped and lost with all hands off Kirkcudbright[5].

Yet there is some reason for believing that James Ducat, the most senior of the keepers, felt Eilean Mór could be a dangerous place. According to the recollections of his daughter Anna some nine decades later (she was eight years old at the time of her father's disappearance), he had to be prevailed on to accept the post. 'He said it was too dangerous, that he had a wife and four children depending on him'[6].

To a landsman, Ducat's reservations seem understandable. The Flannan Islands are a bleak place indeed to live and work: a group of barren crags rising from the waters of the north Atlantic about 17 miles north west of Gallon Head, at the westward tip of the Hebridean island of Lewis[7]. To the south, the nearest land is the

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[1] Documents 1-3, 9.
[2] Document 9.
[3] Documents 1, 6, 7. Moore's rank is given as third assistant keeper, making him the most junior of the four keepers on the Flannan Isles [Document 9].
[4] Documents 3, 9.
[5] Document 5.
[6] Document 11.
[7] They are also known as 'The Seven Hunters' [Document 3]. In fact a large scale Ordnance Survey map indicates that there are at least 20 islets and rocks in the group, and it is difficult to discern which seven among them might be considered sufficiently larger than their neighbours to make this name an obvious and a valid one. John Michell, who draws attention to this anomaly in his *The Flying Saucer Vision* (London: Abacus 1974 p.126), points out that the number seven is generally held to be a magical and significant one. 'A group of seven islands,' he writes, 'often stands in fairy stories for the

abandoned isle of St Kilda, 40 miles away; to the west, it is the coastline of North America, More than 2,000 miles off. Consequently, the Flannans are exposed to the full fury of the frequent North Atlantic gales; because of this, the environment is a hostile one and the isles have seldom if ever supported a permanent human population. For the last several centuries, at least, they have remained deserted, and even before that, before the Highland Clearances which reduced the local population and the pressure on land, they seem to have been visited mostly during the summer months, when a few Hebridean farmers would graze sheep there or gather down and eggs from sea-birds' nests. The ruins of a few crofter dwellings still stand on Eilean Tighe[8], but Eilean Mór[9], which is by some way the largest of the Flannans[10] was, prior to the construction of the light, last certainly occupied in the seventh century[11] by St Flannan, the Irish missionary-bishop after whom the islands are named, and for whom the ruined chapel on the island was dedicated[12]. In the intervening years, it seems quite likely that the Flannans also occasionally became the last resting place for seamen shipwrecked on their shores, who died of starvation or exposure[13].

The remoteness, the isolation, the desolation of the Flannans must have contributed to the considerable awe which the islands aroused in the men of Lewis who visited them each summer. As late as the end of the seventeenth century, the antiquarian Martin Martin, who wrote a book describing the folklore and traditions of the Hebrides, asked a man who had sailed there on many occasions 'if he prayed at home as often and as frequently as he did in the Flannan Islands'. Martin's informant 'plainly confessed that he did not, adding, further, that these remote islands were places of inherent sanctity, and there was none ever yet landed in them but found himself More disposed to devotion there than anywhere else.'[14] St Flannan's residence in the islands presumably accounts in part for this reputation, but the crofters of Lewis retained – at least in the seventeenth century – a belief in several other bizarre superstitions associated with them. According to Martin, 'there has been many small bones dug out of the ground here, resembling those of human kind More than any other. This gave ground to a tradition, which the natives have, of very low-statured people living once here, called Losbirdan, i.e., pigmies.' In consequence, Eilean Mór was sometimes known as 'The Isle of Pigmies' or 'The Isle of Little Men'. (Several secondary authorities claim there was a belief that the Flannans were inhabited by fairies or nature spirits; this speculation appears to have

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islands of paradise, islands such as the seven islands of Wak, which Hasan, the hero of the Arabian Nights Story, visited in search of his swan-maiden bride.'

[8] The name means 'Isle of Houses'.

[9] This name, which is Gaelic for 'Big Island' (and not 'The Isle of the Dead' as some secondary sources have erroneously and sensationally translated it) is among the most common place names in the Highlands.

[10] Though still very small. It is approximately 800 yards long by 500 wide, and surrounded on all sides by cliffs between 150 and 200 feet high [Documents 3, 11].

[11] And not the seventeenth century, as several secondary sources incorrectly have it.

[12] He used it as a retreat or hermitage.

[13] Michell, op.cit. p.129, recounts the legend of John Morisone, a seaman who was marooned on Eilean Mor in the seventeenth century, but survived: 'During his stay, he allowed his fire to go out, and had no means of relighting it. He was in despair, for without a fire he seemed certain to perish, when suddenly he was confronted by a man. Without explaining who he was, the man told John Morisone to look for fire on the altar of the chapel. On the altar a flame was burning, and John Morisone was able to light a fire from it and preserve himself until he was relieved.'

[14] Quoted in Document 3. The original work, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, was published in 1695, the passages on the Flannans appearing in a chapter devoted to the 'Inferior Islands' in the vicinity of Lewis.

its origin in Martin's story, although the antiquary does not specifically state that the Hebrideans supposed there was anything supernatural about the Flannan pigmies[15]).

The other principal superstitions associated with the Flannans have been also been presumed to suggest the isles were considered in some way otherworldly. Martin records that several peculiar customs were scrupulously observed by the men of Lewis who visited Eilean Mór:

> The inhabitants of the adjacent lands of the Lewis, having a right to these islands, visit them once every summer, and there make a great purchase of fowls, eggs, down, feathers and quills. When they go to sea they have their boat well manned, and make towards the islands with an east wind; but if before or at the landing the wind turn westerly, they hoist up sail and steer directly home again. If any of their crew is a novice, and not versed in the customs of the place, he must be instructed perfectly in all the punctilioes observed here before landing, and to prevent inconveniences that they think may ensue upon the transgression of the least nicety observed here, every novice is always joined with another that can instruct him all the time of their fowling; so all the boat's crew are matched in this manner... When they are got up into the island, all of them uncover their heads, and make a turn sun-ways round, thanking God for their safety.
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> The biggest of these islands is called Island More; it has the ruins of a chapel, dedicated to St Flannan... When they are come within about twenty paces of the altar, they all strip themselves of their upper garments at once, and their upper clothes being laid upon a stone, which stands there on purpose for that use, all the crew pray three times before they begin fowling; the first day they say the first prayer, advancing towards the chapel upon their knee; the second prayer is said as they go round the chapel; the third is said hard by or at the chapel; and this is their Morning service. Their vespers are performed with the like numbers of prayers. Another rule is that it is absolutely unlawful to kill a fowl with a stone, for that they reckon a great barbarity, and directly contrary to ancient custom. It is also unlawful to kill a fowl before they ascend by the ladder. It is absolutely unlawful to call the island of St Kilda (which lies thirty leagues southwards) by its proper Irish name, Hirt, but only the high country. They must not so much as once name the islands in which they are fowling by the ordinary name, Flannan, but only the country. There are several other things which must not be called by their common names, e.g., Visk, which in the language of the natives signifies Water, they call Burn; a Rock, which in their language is Crag, must here be called Cruey, i.e., Hard; Shore, in their language expressed by Claddach, must here be called Vah, i.e., a Cave; Sour in their language is expressed Gort, but must here be called Gair, i.e., Sharp; Slippery, which is expressed Bog, must be called Soft; and several other things to this purpose. They count it unlawful also to kill a fowl after evening prayers. There is an ancient custom by which the crew is obliged not to carry home sheep suet, let them kill ever so many sheep in these islands. One of their principal customs is not to steal or eat anything

[15] Several secondary authorities claim there was a belief that the Flannans were inhabited by fairies or nature spirits; this speculation appears to have its origin in Martin's story, though the antiquary does not specifically state that the Hebrideans supposed there was anything supernatural about the Flannan pygmies (below). Cf. Carey Miller, *Baffling Mysteries* (London: Pan 1976) pp.19-25; Michael Harrison, *Vanishings* (London: NEL 1981) pp.119-23.

unknown to their partner, else the transgressor (they say) will certainly vomit it up, which they reckon as a just judgement.

It appears that the traditions did not survive the three centuries that separated the disappearance of the three lighthousemen in 1900 from Martin's fieldwork in the 1690s, since none of the well-informed local newspapers which covered the tragedy made any reference to them, other than by reprinting the antiquary's original passage without editorial comment, and they contain several recognisable motifs which are quite common in folklore: prohibitions on food, killing and naming all feature strongly in many narrative traditions. Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt that the Seven Hunters were at one time regarded as a special place by the men of Lewis. Whether they were still so regarded by anyone in 1900, and whether the old traditions have any bearing on the disappearance of Ducat, Marshall and McArthur is another matter.

THE PHYSICAL LOCATION

Eilean Mór is, as has already been noted, the largest of the 20 or so rocks and crags which comprise the Flannan Islands. It is egg-shaped, and the peak of a submarine mountain which rises almost vertically from the sea to form a series of cliffs at least 150 feet in height. Above the cliff line there is a steep grassy bank sloping from south to north, which carries the land to a height of over 200 feet at the northern end. On this side of the island the cliffs fall straight down to the Atlantic.

At the southern end of the island the rock walls are less vertiginous and relatively easy to climb. It is from this direction that the early crofters must have landed to raid the birds' nests along the cliff-tops. Nevertheless, when the Northern Lighthouse Board decided to erect a light on Eilean Mór they first found it necessary to hack stairs into the cliff faces to make it easier to ascend.

Because the Flannans experience frequent bad weather, the NLB constructed two landing places on Eilean Mór, one on the west side of the island and the other on the east, so that whatever the prevailing wind it would be possible to find a lee and effect a landing. Consequently there are two zig-zag flights of stairs leading to the grassy bank. These were supplemented by two 'trolley tramways', miniature funicular railways operated from the lighthouse and powered by a small steam engine, which were used to hoist stores up the cliffs. The stores themselves were unloaded, in calm weather, direct from the *Hesperus* with the help of cranes mounted halfway (somewhere between 70 and 110 feet[16]) up each cliff face over the landings.

Of the three buildings on Eilean Mór, the oldest was the ruined chapel located just below the lighthouse at the northern end of the grassy bank. Dedicated, apparently, to St Flannan, this building is of uncertain provenance and age but was already a ruin at the end of the seventeenth century.

The island's lighthouse, which still stands though it has been automated since 1971, was erected at the highest point on the island, on the north-eastern side of the grassy bank. It is about 75 feet high, circular in section and built of stone to enable it to resist the gales which blow in from the Atlantic. The station had no wireless or

[16] These conflicting heights are given in Documents 6 and 9. Document 9, the Superintendent's report on the disaster, which gives the height of the crane above the normal high-water mark as 70 feet, is to be preferred.

telegraph apparatus in 1900, but signalling devices, consisting of balls on poles projecting from the lighthouse balcony, were fitted to enable the keepers to signal any emergency to a watching station on Lewis. The keepers' accommodation, which stands at the foot of the tower, is a single storey building surrounded by a fence. The path leads to a front door opening, via a short passage, straight into the kitchen. The building also contained bedrooms, a kitchen, a storeroom and a living area[17].

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED

Two reports, written shortly after the discovery of the disappearances by Joseph Moore and Robert Muirhead, the Superintendent in overall charge of the Flannan light, survive (though the former is presently accessible only in part[18]) to give us a fair idea of what steps were taken by the men on the spot to solve the mystery of the vanishing lighthousemen and what may actually have occurred on Eilean Mór.

Moore, who dated his memorandum 28 December – two days after returning to the island – began by reporting the first signs that something was wrong on Eilean Mór. The lighthouse flag, normally hoisted to welcome the *Hesperus*, was not flying, and there was no response to several blasts on the steamer's horn. He continued:

> Captain Harvie deemed it prudent to lower a boat and land a man if it was possible. I was the first to land, leaving Mr McCormick, the Buoymaster, and the men in the boat till I could return.
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> I went up to the lighthouse and on coming to the entrance gate I found it closed. I made for the entrance door leading to the kitchen and storeroom and found it also closed, and the door inside that. But the kitchen door itself was open. On entering I looked at the fireplace and saw that the fire was not lighted for some days. I entered the rooms in succession and found the beds empty, just as they left them in the early morning.
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> I did not take time to search further, for I naturally well knew that something serious had occurred.
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> I darted outside and made for the landing. I informed Mr McCormick that the place was deserted. He with some men came up so as to make sure, but unfortunately the first impression was only too true. Mr McCormick and myself proceeded to the light room, where everything was in proper order. The lamp was clean, the foundation[19]full, blinds on the windows, etc.

That night Moore made sure that the lamp was lighted at the proper time, and next morning he and his companions searched the whole of the small island in the hope of finding some clue as to how and why his colleagues had vanished.

At the east landing, they found everything in order and the mooring ropes properly secured in their shelter. But on descending the cliff path to the much more exposed west landing, which looked out to the North Atlantic, they found signs of storm damage. The iron railings of the trolley tramway, he wrote, 'had started from their foundations and broken in several places'. And the box containing the mooring ropes had vanished, despite having been firmly wedged into a crevice and then anchored[20]. Evidently the west landing had been exposed to heavy weather at some

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[17] Documents 3, 9.
[18] See the section on sources at the end of the paper for an elucidation of this point.
[19] A reservoir of oil fuel.
[20] Report cited in Document 10.

time between the previous relief, on 7 December[21] and Moore's return on 26 December.

Robert Muirhead, who made his way to Eilean before the end of December to conduct his own investigation, confirmed these initial findings and noted further evidence of very heavy weather which had blown in from the Atlantic. In an undated report, apparently written a few weeks after the event, he noted:

> On the Thursday and Friday the men made a thorough search over and round the island and I went over the ground with them on the Saturday. Everything at the East landing place was in order... and the lighthouse buildings and everything at the Station was in order. Owing to the amount of sea, I could not get down to the [west] landing place, but I got down to the crane platform about 70 feet above the sea level... The crane... was found to be unharmed, the jib lowered and secured to the rock, and the canvas covering the wire rope on the barrel securely lashed around it, and there was no evidence that the men had been doing anything at the crane. The mooring ropes, landing ropes, derrick landing ropes and crane handles, and also a wooden box in which they were kept and which was secured in a crevice in the rooks 70 feet up the tramway... were displaced and twisted. A large block of stone, weighing upwards of 20 cwt., had been dislodged from its position higher up and carried down and left on the concrete path leading from the terminus of the railway to the top of the steps. A life buoy fastened to the railing along this path, to be used in case of emergency, had disappeared, and I thought at first it had been removed for the purpose of being used but, on examining the ropes by which it was fastened, I found that they had not been touched, and as pieces of canvas were adhering to the ropes, it was evident that the force of the sea pouring through the railings had, even at this great height (110 feet above sea level), torn the life buoy off the ropes[22].

From this, and his investigations at the light itself, Muirhead was able to form a working hypothesis concerning both the date and time that the three men had vanished, and their probable fate.

THE TIMING OF THE DISAPPEARANCES

Despite initial uncertainty concerning the precise date of the disappearances, the evidence provided by the station's log-book, the state of the living quarters when the relief arrived, and reports from passing skippers make it possible to estimate the likely time to within an hour or two.

Captain Harvie's initial supposition, which was taken up and reported by the local Highland papers, was that the tragedy probably occurred on 20 December 1900, six days before his arrival at Eilean Mór. He based this estimate on the fact that every clock on the island had wound down and stopped, and on the knowledge that a great storm battered the whole west coast on the 20th and caused considerable disruption to the north among the vessels of the Shetland fishing fleet[23].

The closer investigations of Moore and Muirhead, however, soon led the likely date of the disaster to be moved back to 15 December. Certainly it could have

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[21] Ibid.
[22] Document 9.
[23] Documents 2, 3, 5.

occurred no earlier than 9am on the afternoon of that day, as an entry was made in the log at that time (see below). Nor, given the punctiliousness of the keepers, does it seem likely they would have fallen far behind in keeping up this record. A date later than 16 December therefore seems unlikely.

In fact, it would appear that the actual time of the disappearances must have been the early afternoon of Saturday 15 December. Muirhead observed that the morning's work, including the trimming of the lamp and the filling of the oil fountains, had been completed and the men had eaten their dinner – then the midday meal – and done the washing-up[24]. And, since the standing orders issued to the men on the island forbade all three to be out together after dark, leaving the light burning but untended, it must have been before nightfall – which, at that latitude, and that time of year, occurs before 4pm[25].

The argument that the disappearance did indeed occur before dark on 15 December is strengthened by Muirhead's observation that Captain Holman of the steamer *Archtor*[26] had passed Eilean Mór at midnight that evening and noticed that the light was not lit – something the missing men would surely never have allowed[27].

Several secondary sources have suggested that the weather off the Hebrides that day was calm, and that the disappearance was therefore unlikely to be a consequence of bad weather[28]. Certainly it is true that the greatest of that winter's storms did not strike the Flannans until 20 December, almost a week later. Nevertheless, there is no contemporary local evidence that the weather on the 15th was indeed 'calm', and the notion that the weather could not have been the culprit is not supported by other seamen or the local newspapers of the time. While it is certainly true that much of the extensive damage discovered to the railings at the landing site could have been inflicted by the great storm of 20 December, Holman of the *Archtor* reported the weather conditions just off the Flannans on the evening of 15 December as 'clear, but stormy'[29].

THE PROBABLE CAUSE OF THE DISAPPEARANCES

Over the years, many theories have been advanced to explain the mystery of the vanishing lighthousemen. These include:

1. The men were washed away by giant waves. This is the generally accepted explanation[30].

2. The men were blown off the island by high winds. This was Superintendent Muirhead's initial supposition[31].

3. One of the three keepers went mad and ran over the edge of a cliff pursued by his comrades; or murdered the other two and threw their bodies and then himself into the sea[32].

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[24] Document 9.
[25] Document 5.
[26] Not , as Vincent Gaddis has it, the SS *Archer* (Gaddis, op.cit. p.182).
[27] Documents 4, 9.
[28] e.g., Gaddis op.cit. pp.181-2; Harrison, op.cit. pp.121-2.
[29] Document 4.
[30] Documents 3, 9–11.
[31] Documents 2, 3, 9.
[32] Document 10.

4. The men were lost while attempting to aid a vessel in distress[33].

5. The men were removed from the island by a passing ship for some reason[34].

6. Among other, extremely tenuous, suggestions, are the theories that Ducat, Marshall and McArthur

– were plucked from the island by giant birds[35]
– unwittingly became a human sacrifice to some sort of supernatural agency[36]
– were abducted by aliens[37]
– were turned into giant birds by the 'little people' of Eilean Mór[38]

To deal with these explanations in increasing order of likelihood, it is first necessary to note that there is no evidence whatsoever to support any of the exotic solutions listed in (6), which are generally the product of the false assumption that the conditions at the time of the disappearance were so fine that poor weather cannot explain the mystery. Nor, though (5) is marginally more plausible, does there seem to be any reason why the keepers should have been abducted in this way. There is certainly no evidence that any of the vessels in the vicinity called at Eilean Mór on 15 December, and given the generally poor weather conditions around that time it would probably have been difficult to effect a landing in any case.

The idea that one of the three keepers went insane and killed or caused the deaths of the other two is superficially more attractive, and certainly not altogether impossible. Nevertheless, no evidence of any violence was discovered on the island, and neither Moore nor Muirhead, both of whom knew the station intimately, reported the absence of anything that could conceivably have been used as a murder weapon.

It is certainly more likely that the disappearances were the result of the men venturing out in poor weather. There is plentiful evidence that Eilean Mór was battered by strong winds and high seas coming in from the west around the time the lighthousemen vanished. The rails of the western trolley tramway were damaged, and a box of mooring ropes securely anchored 70 feet up the west cliff face had been

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[33] Document 5.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Document 11.
[36] Michell, op.cit. p.131 hypothesises: 'In the light of what we can deduce of the ways of worship and sacrifice of the past, the disappearance of the Flannan Island lighthouse keepers may be seen as an extraordinary repetition of an ancient sacrificial ceremony. The men were taken over from the Long Island near Callernish and ferried over to the island of the dead, Eilean Mór, where they were installed in a tower, similar to those once used for human sacrifice... In the same way as a magic ritual, if properly carried out, may have a predictable result, the sequence of events involved in taking the lighthouse keepers to the Flannan Islands tower resulted in their disappearance. The ritual of human sacrifice to the little gods of the western islands was re-enacted.'
[37] Mark Fraser, 'The Flannan Isles', Haunted Scotland 7 (1997).
[38] This suggestion was made by the children's mystery writer Cary Miller in *Baffling Mysteries: a Collection of Weird Problems and Unsolved Riddles* (London, 1976), who writes (pp.24-5): 'The local people, who knew more about the history of the Flannans than did the investigators, have a different theory which continues to be passed down from generation to generation. They say that an unseen force on the island of Eilean Mor would not tolerate intruders and got rid of them. They say that when Joseph Moore flung open the door of the lighthouse and called out the names of his friends, three enormous black birds the like of which have never been seen before launched themselves from the top of the tower and flew out to sea.' It seems hardly worth pointing out that this 'theory', which is unreferenced and based on who knows what source, fails to account for the fact that none of the dozens of light-keepers who succeeded Ducat, Marshall and McArthur as custodians of the Flannan light also disappeared, and that Moore's original report makes no mention of any such weird occurrence.

washed away. Further still up the cliffs, a life buoy fastened to a railing 110 feet above sea level had been torn from its moorings, and a heavy stone block, weighing some 20 cwt., had been dislodged and fallen onto the concrete path below[39].

Could such damage have been caused by high winds alone? It seems unlikely. Muirhead

> considered and discussed the possibility of the men being blown by the wind, but, as the wind was westerly, I am of the opinion, notwithstanding its great force, that the More probable explanation is that they have been washed away, as, had the wind caught them, it would, from its direction, have blown them up the Island and I feel certain that they would have managed to throw themselves down before they had reached the summit or brow of the Island [42].

After examining the ropes that had attached the missing lifebuoy to the railings, the Superintendent found further evidence to support this contention, noting: 'As pieces of canvas were adhering to the ropes, it was evident that the force of the sea pouring through the railings had... torn the life buoy off the ropes.'[40] Moore added that the iron railings on the path down to the west landing 'had started from their foundations and broken in several places'[41]. This evidence implies that waves at least 110 feet high – created, presumably, by local conditions along the cliffs of Eilean Mór – had smashed into the island during the storms of December.

There can be no doubt waves of this magnitude would have been More than capable of sweeping away any men unfortunate enough to have felt even a fraction of their full force. And, since contemporary investigation produced some evidence of their existence, it would appear that the puzzle of the vanishing lighthousemen has a fairly plausible solution. Why then, one is entitled to ask, has it become such an enduring mystery of the sea?

In part, the answer to this question is that most authors who have written up the disappearances have not consulted contemporary sources or had access to the official reports of Muirhead and Moore. Nevertheless, waves of 110 feet or more do not exist in the open sea, and are very seldom created even in the most extreme of local conditions, so it has always seemed permissible to doubt that such monstrous walls of water actually exist off the coast of Scotland. And if they do, it has always been difficult to imagine what could have driven the missing keepers out in such appalling weather conditions. Experienced lighthousemen, who know their primary duty is to keep their lamps burning, rarely go outside at all in heavy weather, certainly not all together. And then there are the various anomalies associated with the story – details so strange they seem to defy a reductionist solution to the mystery.

ANOMALIES ASSOCIATED WITH THE VANISHING LIGHTHOUSEMEN

Accounts of the disappearances on Eilean Mór typically draw attention to one or more of four anomalies that have become associated with the case, each of which appears to suggest that the solution to the puzzle is not as straightforward as it at first appears. Before considering the 'giant wave' theory in more detail, it is necessary to consider each of these mysteries in turn.

The mysterious logbook entries

[39] Document 9.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

Of all the strange circumstances surrounding the disappearance of the three light-keepers, perhaps the most peculiar is the reputed existence of odd and even mystical entries in the station's log.

Vincent Gaddis[42], who based his account on a 1920s American pulp magazine article 'derived from English sources'[43], states that the mysterious logbook entries were written in Thomas Marshall's hand and read as follows:

> Dec. 12: Gale, north by north-west. Sea lashed to fury. Stormbound 9pm. Never seen such a storm. Everything shipshape. Ducat irritable. 12pm. Storm still raging. Wind steady. Stormbound. Cannot go out. Ship passed sounding foghorn. Could see lights of cabins. Ducat quiet. McArthur crying.
>
> Dec. 13: Storm continued through night. Wind shifted west by north. Ducat quiet. McArthur praying. 12 noon. Grey daylight. Me, Ducat, and McArthur prayed.
>
> Dec. 15: 1pm. Storm ended. Sea calm. God is over all.

Several writers who repeat or *précis* these entries, including Gaddis and Michael Harrison, assert – not unnaturally – that they are extremely strange. Gaddis observes that 'the men could hardly have been swept away by [the] storm, if there had been one, for according to the log the storm had passed when the last entry was made. The storm was over and peace had come.' He adds:

> Ducat, usually very good-natured, had just returned from his leave on shore. Why should he be irritable?... McArthur, a hardened, veteran seaman[44] who had weathered the sea's worst blows, well known as a lusty, fearless brawler on land, crying! What could have been the mysterious, extraordinary situation that would make strong McArthur weep?[45]

And Harrison, always inclined to the sensational, labels the log 'disturbing' and puts himself in the position of the three light-keepers:

> Whatever was happening, or whatever ghastly doom seemed to be threatening [on 14 December], now included the log-keeper, Marshall, in its menace. For on the following day, this was the solitary, brief and sinister entry: 'Grey daylight. Me, Ducat and McArthur prayed.'
>
> It was all but the last entry, and with that last mysterious entry – 'God is over all' – made on 15 December, the log closed, and the three terrified, praying men vanished for ever from this world[46].

It is probably best to state, first, that it remains possible to read the entries as unusual but explicable descriptions of nothing more sinister than the effects of depression on three isolated men. However, the supposed log book entries are mysterious in several

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[42] Gaddis, op.cit. pp.177–83.
[43] In a note, Gaddis (ibid p.248) cites an article by Ernest Fallon in *True Strange Stories* of August 1929. He appears to have been the first author to draw attention to the existence of this piece. I regret I have not been able to obtain a copy of the original article.
[44] This is not true; he was a former army man. Document 5.
[45] Gaddis, op.cit. p.181.
[46] Harrison, op.cit. p.122.

ways beside their potentially supernatural overtones. There is at least one error – the log for 12 December in which the entry for 12pm follows one for 9pm – which would be incredible in a typically precise nautical log, and suggests either a clumsy hoax or, at best, careless copying which might put the accuracy of the rest of the information in doubt. It is also odd that the log is said to have been kept exclusively by Thomas Marshall, who as Second Assistant Keeper was both the youngest and – since McArthur was doing duty for William Ross, the First Assistant, technically the most junior of the three men on Eilean Mór[47]. (The standard nautical practice is for each officer of the watch to make his own entries in the log.)

Moreover, the whole tone of the supposed document is quite peculiar. It is, for example, difficult to believe that Marshall would have made insubordinate notes about his superior, Ducat, in an official log. His suggestion that the Principal Keeper had been 'irritable' would be read not only by the Commissioners of the Northern Lighthouse Board – who might conceivably require him to justify his comments – but presumably also by Ducat himself, who might certainly object to their being presented to the Board in Edinburgh. Marshall's supposed musings actually read like entries in a diary, though no authority has ever suggested they are anything other than a dry official log.

Indeed, the whole point of log books is that they are places for noting simple facts: dates, times, weather conditions, the height of waves and so on. They are certainly not intended to record the times prayers were said, or mere impressions, such as 'sea lashed to fury', much less something as unimportant – indeed irrelevant – as the passing moods of men. It would hardly be peculiar, during a routine and tedious turn of duty, for a lighthouseman to be 'quiet', so why would Marshall think to note the fact? Sensationalist writers have hinted that the notes were made because the men were increasingly aware of looming, supernatural disaster. I believe they point, rather, to the entries being a fabrication. Ducat's and Macarthur's moods of 12 and 13 December are significant only because of what happened to them on the 15th. To me that implies all three entries were written *after* 15 December 1900.

Such criticisms are, admittedly, mere conjecture. But firm evidence of fraud does exist – once one returns to original sources not readily accessible to a lazy hoaxer. Both the records of the Northern Lighthouse Board and contemporary press reports make it clear that Flannan station's log book was kept only up to 13 December, with subsequent entries being noted, in chalk, on a slate for later transfer to the book; the notion of a log extending as late as 15 December is a fallacy. Even if we are charitable, and count the entries on the slate as part of the log proper, it is explicitly stated that the lighthousemen's last notes (a simple record of the weather conditions) were written at 9am on the morning of 15 December[48]. The contemporary record is clear that no entry was made as late as 1pm. This must imply that the supposed log whose entries are quoted so frequently in the Fortean secondary literature is a hoax.

The half-eaten meal and the over-turned chair

Several secondary sources report that the three lightkeepers' final meal was found half-eaten in the living quarters when Moore and his companions searched the building on 26 December. For example, the generally sober *Oban Times* of 5 January 1901 reported (on no known authority):

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[47] Document 9.

[48] Documents 1, 9.

> The blinds were drawn. The keepers' beds were unmade, just as they had risen from them, and their half-finished breakfast was on the table[49].

It is sometimes said that the final meal was of 'salted mutton and boiled potatoes'[50].

This unsettling detail not only suggests that the fate which overtook the missing men was sudden and overwhelming; it also greatly heightens the sense of mystery surrounding the disappearances on the Flannan Isles because it consciously echoes the case of the most notorious of derelicts, the *Mary Celeste*, which was found abandoned in the North Atlantic on 4 December 1872, several days after the last entry was made in her log book, no trace being found of her 10 passengers and crew. Retellings of this famous case often report that hot food, and cups of still-warm tea or coffee were found on the cabin table, and the stove in the galley was lit.

In fact, it is definitely established that the living quarters on Eilean Mór were clean and tidy, just as there is no doubt that no final meal or hot drinks were found aboard the *Mary Celeste*[51]. This fact was commented on by Robert Muirhead, who wrote

> The pots and pans had been cleaned and the kitchen tidied up, which showed that the man who acted as cook had completed his work[52].

Nor is there anything in the reports of Moore and Muirhead to support the contention that the beds were left unmade[53].

The suggestion that one of the lighthouse chairs was found tipped over, which features heavily in an epic poem about the disaster written by WW Gibson[54] is likewise unsubstantiated, and appears to originate in a suggestion by the *Oban Times* that the chairs around the kitchen table were 'pushed aside, as if [the men] had hurriedly risen and gone out'[55]. Neither Moore nor Muirhead mentions making any such discovery. Nevertheless, the idea that at least one of the missing men left the lighthouse in a hurry is not at all improbable, as will be seen.

Missing oilskins and unused outdoor clothing

Each of the men stationed on Eilean Mór had a set of wet-weather clothing for use near the landings in high seas or other poor conditions[56]. Ducat, the Principal Keeper, had sea boots and a waterproof, while Marshall had sea boots and oilskins[57]. The third man on the island, McArthur the occasional, was not so well provided. In his report on the disaster, Joseph Moore noted that he owned no oilskins, only an old coat known to his companions as his 'wearing coat'[58].

When Moore and his companions searched the lighthouse on 26 December, they discovered that Ducat's waterproof and Marshall's oilskins were missing.

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[49] Document 7.
[50] Document 11.
[51] Charles Fay, citing contemporary testimony before the Vice-Admiralty Court in Gibraltar , lists 'food on the cabin table' and 'warm galley stove' among 16 'Common errors and misperceptions' in an appendix to his scrupulously-researched work *The Story of the Mary Celeste* (New York 1988) p.187.
[52] Document 9.
[53] Documents 9,10.
[54] See Document 11.
[55] Document 7.
[56] Document 9.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Document 10.

McArthur's 'wearing coat', however, was still on its peg, 'which shows,' Moore noted, 'as far as I know that he went out in his shirtsleeves'[59]. It does not seem likely that the Occasional would have done this willingly in weather bad enough to have caused his companions to don their waterproofs, and this suggests that, whatever happened to the three missing men, it must have happened to Ducat and Marshall first, and that McArthur ran out of the lighthouse to aid them without waiting to don his coat.

Finally, it is worth noting that the *Oban Times*, in its flawed report of 5 January 1901 which also contained two other significant errors (see above), also claimed that 'an oilskin' (which would have had to be Marshall's) was found 'fixed to the wreckage' of the crane above the west landing[60]. I have found no corroboration for this statement.

The secret language

Martin Martin's 1695 account of the peculiar customs practised by the men of Lewis on their annual visit to the Flannan Isles has been used by several writers to imply that there was something unearthly about Eilean Mór – and that it was home to some preternatural power which might have had a hand in the disappearance of the three lighthousemen. John Michell, undoubtedly the best-read of the secondary authorities, recounted the superstitions and comments in his *The Flying Saucer Vision*, remarking:

> 'Evidently the islands were thought of as a kind of other world, haunted by supernatural creatures and the spirits of the dead... Probably the Flannan Islands were the islands of the dead, the place to which people were ferried and never returned. This would explain their extreme holiness and their baleful character. It might also shed some light on [what] happened there early this century...'[61]

Certainly the weirdest and most unusual of the Lewis-men's customs was their use of alternate words to describe the physical features and conditions on the island. It will be recalled that Martin wrote:

> They must not so much as once name the islands in which they are fowling by the ordinary name, Flannan, but only the country. There are several other things which must not be called by their common names, e.g., Visk, which in the language of the natives signifies Water, they call Burn; a Rock, which in their language is Crag, must here be called Cruey, i.e., Hard; Shore, in their language expressed by Claddach, must here be called Vah, i.e., a Cave; Sour in their language is expressed Gort, but must here be called Gair, i.e., Sharp; Slippery, which is expressed Bog, must be called Soft; and several other things to this purpose.'[62]

Michell comments of this passage:

> Most extraordinary of all, the men had to speak in a different dialect to that which they used at home. Certain things were called by different names, as if

[59] Document 11.
[60] Document 7.
[61] Michell op.cit. p.127
[62] Cited in Document 3.

> the memory of a long vanished language was being perpetuated. Words never used elsewhere were kept for the annual visit to the Flannan Islands[63].

Sadly, this is to misinterpret Martin Martin. The alternates he lists are everyday Gaelic words – simple synonyms for the forbidden phrases, not words in some extinct tongue. 'Burn', for example, is plainly *bùrn*, meaning water – a word that has entered common English usage since Martin's day, and is used nowadays to mean a Scottish stream. The antiquary's 'Cruey' is *cruaidh*, cruel or hard in Gaelic, and 'Vah' is presumably *uamh*, which does indeed mean cave. 'Gair' can be identified as *geur*, sharp, and so on.

The reasons that the men of Lewis had for insisting on the use of these synonyms are certainly mysterious, and likely to remain so, but they are not a 'memory of a long vanished language'. Nor is there any reason to suppose that they were kept solely for use during the annual visit to the Flannans; on the contrary, they could have been heard all over the Highlands in Martin's day, which is why his famous passage, read carefully, presumes that the synonyms will be familiar to at least some of his readers.

Furthermore, it is important to stress that the Flannans were not the only islands in which the peculiar prohibitions were practised. Martin specifically mentions that St Kilda, 40 miles to the south, could never be called 'by its proper Irish name, Hirt, but only the high country'[64]. It would therefore be difficult to argue, from the antiquarian evidence at least, that Eilean Mór and its sisters were considered to be uniquely strange and forbidding by the Hebridean islanders.

In short, there is no reason to suppose that the prohibition on the use of certain Gaelic words in the Flannan Isles was connected to the 'fairies' or 'pygmies' supposed to dwell there, or to the disappearance of Ducat, Marshall and McArthur.

CONCLUSION: A LIKELY SCENARIO

If, as appears probable, the four anomalies normally associated with the mystery of the vanishing lighthousemen actually had no bearing on their disappearance, two questions remain: could waves capable of sending water up to 110 feet up a cliff face have battered Eilean Mór that December, and, if they did, could they account for the apparently simultaneous disappearance of all three of the missing lighthousemen?

The answer to the first question appears to be a definite 'yes'. After examining the remains of the missing life buoy, Superintendent Muirhead was convinced that "the force of the sea pouring through the railings had, even at this great height (110 feet), torn the lifebuoy off the ropes"[65], and his conclusions were supported by the remarkable research of another lighthouseman, Walter Aldebert, who served as Principal Keeper on Eilean Mór between 1953 and 1957.

Aldebert, who was well aware of the story of the vanishing lighthousemen, observed that in story weather "even the lamphouse, 300 feet up, can be splashed with spray"[66]. Convinced that giant waves could account for the disappearance of his predecessors, he repeatedly took a camera out in appalling weather conditions to record the height of the largest waves striking the island, exposing 30 reels of film in

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[63] Michell, op.cit. p.127.
[64] Document 3. In fact, St Kilda is a much better candidate than the Flannans for the role of an isle of the dead held in awe by generations of Hebrideans. Its Old Irish name, *Hirta*, means 'dangerous' or 'death–like'. Haswell–Smith, op.cit. p.261.
[65] Document 9.
[66] Document 10.

total[67]. On one occasion, crouching on the shoulder of the island some 200 feet above sea level, he himself was nearly washed off the cliff:

> A coil of rope, lying on top, and too solid to be shifted by the wind, was washed off. The water lay a foot deep after the wave receded…
>
> My pictures do not show the highest waves, but they give some idea of their immensity. Perhaps these poor fellows, being fairly new to the Flannans, did not realize the extreme danger[68].

Is it possible, though, that all three lighthousemen could have been caught simultaneously by such a wave. And why would McArthur have braved the storm in his shirtsleeves? Aldebert had a theory to explain this too:

> While I was at Flannan… I would often sit there, putting myself in the place of the Principal. A storm is raging, and Mr Ducat is worried about his landing ropes. Nobody goes out of a lighthouse in bad weather, but if he loses his ropes relief may be impossible, and he must save them if he can.
>
> After diner the wind starts to drop. Leaving the cook to wash up, he and the other man[69] put on their sea boots and coats and make their way to the west side, as there is no hand-rail by the railway. They come to the safety path which has a hand rail, reaching the path which runs at right angles to the stairway and, seeing the path dry, they continue towards the crane where the box for stowing the landing ropes is situated.
>
> Suddenly a wave much bigger than the previous one comes in and sweeps one of the men back into the sea.

Aldebert hypothesized that the survivor – there is no means of saying who it was – then ran back up the 45 degree track leading to the lighthouse to summon the help of McArthur:

> The cook, who has just sat down after clearing the dinner, knocks his chair from under him and rushes out – without his coat. Grabbing a heaving line, the two men make their way back to the west side, hoping to throw the line to their unfortunate comrade. Then comes another huge wave, sweeping both men into the sea[70].

I find this a plausible solution, which neatly explains the mystery of how McArthur came to leave the lighthouse without his 'wearing coat', and fits all the other known facts of the case. There is no need to assume that every one of Aldebert's details is correct — McArthur might or might not have knocked over a chair in his haste, for example. Similarly, Anna Ducat remembered that, six months before the tragedy, the keepers were fined five shillings by the Commissioners of the Northern Lighthouse Board because tackle at the west landing had been damaged during an earlier storm. She believed that her father and Thomas Marshall went out not to save their mooring

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[67] The processed film was submitted, with a report, to the Commissioners of the Northern Lighthouse Board. Unfortunately no trace of them can be found in the NLB records now at the Scottish Record Office.
[68] Document 10.
[69] ie Marshall.
[70] Document 10.

ropes, but to inspect what damage had been done by the bad weather and make the repairs necessary to avoid another fine[71].

A few minor puzzles remain. If McArthur was in a terrible hurry, for example, it may seem odd that Moore found the gate, the front door and an inside door leading to the kitchen all closed[72]. But it is not impossible that all were blown shut by the high winds of the 15th or 20th. And the coincidence of two big waves in succession plucking three men — two of them forewarned — from Eilean Mór remains striking. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely we will, at this late stage, arrive at a more workable solution than the one proposed by a man with long experience of the Flannan Isles, who risked his life to secure the evidence he required to back it up.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Although in many respects the evidence available for a study of the Flannan Islands lighthouse disaster is rather good – comprising as it does contemporary primary material in the archives of the relevant marine authority and reliable contemporary local newspaper reports – certain frustrations have attended my research into the matter.

The first has been a lack of time, relatively, to pursue every lead that emerged during the writing of this paper. For this deficiency I can only apologise and express the twin hopes that the material I have assembled will prove adequate as a preliminary study, and that in the longer term it will be possible for some researcher to devote more time to a fuller assessment.

An additional problem has been the inaccessibility of primary material in the archives of the Northern Lighthouse Board in Edinburgh. When I commenced my research, these archives remained in the Board's headquarters, and were not open directly to researchers. Happily Brenda Purvis, administrative officer, and Lorna Grieve, information officer, were able to send me transcripts of some of the papers from the archives, together with a fact sheet; these would appear to have been prepared at an earlier date to meet a fairly regular demand for information from researchers and children working on school projects. Unfortunately, however, attempts on my part to pursue some even More valuable archival material – including the contentious log book and Walter Aldebert's important unofficial report and photographs – drew a blank. Some of the material may actually have been lost, as Ms Purvis noted [private communication 11 November 1996, author's files] that 'with regard to the Station Log and other details, some were not returned from the courts after the inquiry'.

Thankfully, a small portion of the surviving but unexcerpted material was made available, around 1960, to a journalist named Frank Walker who included quotations from it in an typescript article that *was* included among the papers that were sent to me. As the remainder of this article is quite accurate, I have felt able to accept these (frustratingly brief) quotations as correct.

During the course of my research, the NLB decided to transfer the bulk of its archives to the Scottish Record Office in Edinburgh, where they are notionally more readily available to researchers. Unfortunately, as is the way in such matters, the papers were inaccessible, awaiting cataloguing, at the time of writing. More recent research, by Paul Chambers, has indicated that the logbook and Aldebert report are not among the materials sent to the SRA.

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[71] Document 11.
[72] Document 10.

Another source of information that would almost certainly come to light with a little more research is the report of the Crown enquiry into the disaster. This is supposed [Document 10] to have been made in July 1901, but a search of all the local newspapers, plus *The Times*, *The Scotsman* and the *Inverness Courier* for that month have failed to turn up any contemporary reports of it, and there was no copy in the material supplied to me by the NLB. I doubt, however, that any of its conclusions would differ significantly from those of Superintendent Muirhead.

So far as the secondary sources go, I regret that I have not been able to track down a copy of Ernest Fallon's piece in *True Strange Stories* of August 1929, the pulp magazine referred to by Vincent Gaddis, which might have helped me to pin down the obscure origin of rumours of strange entries in the station log, nor had the time to make a sufficiently general search among the Fortean literature and produce a worthwhile preliminary bibliography. It is, however, worth noting that by far the most worthwhile secondary source available to me was an article published by *The Times* on the 90th anniversary of the discovery of the disaster [Document 11], which was based on an interview with the surviving daughter of James Ducat, one of the three dead men. Otherwise, Gaddis's account in *Invisible Horizons* (New York, 1965) is at least referenced, mentioning accounts in Edward Rowe Snow's *Mysteries and Adventures Along the Atlantic Coast* and the popular works of Harold T Wilkins and Frank Edwards. Some original, if rather mystical, suggestions were made by John Michell in chapter 6 of his *The Flying Saucer Vision* (London 1967), and I also had to hand an account in my battered old copy of the children's book *Baffling Mysteries* (London, 1976), by Carey Miller, a typically sensationalist passage in chapter 11 of Michael Harrison's Vanishings (London 1981), and a short article, 'The Flannan Isles' by Mark Fraser, which appeared in the privately-printed magazine *Haunted Scotland* (issue 7, 1997). Otherwise, accounts of the mystery were relatively hard to come by – even an encyclopaedia such as the Orbis partwork *The Unexplained* (London, 1980-83) mentions the case only in a photo caption – and all appear to have been based on retellings of earlier accounts, without benefit of even the few original details available from the NLB and the contemporary press.

I would like to thank the Northern Lighthouse Board and Mark Fraser, Richard Furlong, Fiona Jerome, Joe McNally and Ronnie Scott for their help during the preparation of this paper.

Calendar of Sources

Document 1

Flannan Islands Lighthouse – Disappearance of three Lightkeepers on 15 December 1900

[Undated [c.1990?], anonymous, Northern Lighthouse Board information sheet. Northern Lighthouse Board, 84 George Street, Edinburgh EH2 3DA]

1. The keepers were:–

James Ducat, Principal
Thomas Marshall, 2nd Assistant
Donald McArthur[73], Occasional Keeper – doing duty for William Ross, 1st Assistant, on sick leave.

2. Their disappearance was discovered only as a result of the routine visit of the Lighthouse Tender *Hesperus* on 26 December 1900.

3. It is the case that a vessel[74] passed the Flannan Islands about midnight on 15 December and on arrival in port reported that the light was not seen, but this fact was not communicated to the Commissioners until the disappearance of the keepers had been discovered on the visit of the Lighthouse Tender.

4. Captain Harvey[75] was in command of the *Hesperus*. He reported that on arrival at the Flannans during the afternoon of 26 December there was no sign of life to be seen on the Island, and no response was made to a rocket fired from the ship. The relieving keeper, Joseph Moore, who was landed on the Island, went up to the lighthouse, but found no one there. Moore reported the facts to the Master and then returned to the Island, along with Mr Macdonald, Buoymaster (who was on board the vessel at the time) and Seamen Lamont and Campbell, all three having volunteered to remain on the Island with Moore for the time being to keep the light in operation.

5. The Master of the *Hesperus* was not an eye witness of the condition of the lighthouse when found deserted, Moore was the first person to be landed, and when he went back to the Island for the second time he was accompanied by the three men referred to in (4).

6. The disappearance was immediately investigated, and from the traces which were evident of very bad weather which had been experienced on the Island it was

[73] The spelling of this surname is uncertain, being variously given as MacArthur, Macarthur and McArthur. Superintendent Murihead, who ought to have known, spells it McArthur, which is the version adopted in this paper.
[74] The *Archtor*, out of Philadelphia [Document 10].
[75] Also given as Harvie in more contemporary reports.

concluded that the men must have left the lighthouse for some purpose or other, probably to secure some gear or to ascertain what damage had been done at one of the landing places, and been caught by an unexpectedly large roller and swept into the sea.

7. The last written entries in the log were for 13 December, but particulars for 14 December and of the time of extinguishing the light on 15 December, along with barometer and thermometer readings and the state of the wind taken at 9am on 15 December, were noted on the slate for transference later to the log.

8. The contractor for the work of building the lighthouse on the Flannan Islands was Mr George Lawson. The lighthouse stands on Eilean Mor, one of the Flannan Islands about 18 miles from Gallan Head, West Coast of Lewis, and the light was exhibited[76] on 7 December 1899.

Document 2

Telegram from Captain Harvie, Master of the Lighthouse Tender Hesperus, reporting an accident at Flannan Islands Lighthouse

26 December 1900

[Northern Lighthouse Board archives]

A dreadful accident has happened at Flannans. The three Keepers, Ducat, Marshall and the Occasional, have disappeared from the Island. Fired a rocket but, as no response was made, managed to land Moore, who went up to the Station but found no keepers there. The clocks were stopped and other signs indicated that the accident must have happened about a week ago. Poor fellows, they must have been blown over the cliffs or drowned trying to secure a crane or something like that. Night coming on, we could not wait to make further investigation but will go off again tomorrow morning to try and learn something as to their fate. I have left Moore, Macdonald, Buoymaster, and two Seamen on the Island to keep the light burning until you make other arrangements. Will not return to Oban until I hear from you. I have repeated this wire to Muirhead in case you are not at home. I will remain at the telegraph office tonight until it closes, if you wish to write me[77].

Document 3

The Scotsman
28 December 1900

DISASTER AT A LEWIS LIGHTHOUSE

THREE MEN DROWNED

[76] *ie* lit for the first time.
[77] The telegram was addressed to the Secretary of the Northern Lighthouse Board; see Document 9.

A telegram was received yesterday morning from Callernish, Isle of Lewis, by the Northern Lighthouse Commissioners, stating that disaster had overtaken the three lighthouse keepers on the Flannan Islands. This group of rocky islets lies off the mouth of Loch Roag. They are seven in number and are sometimes called 'The Seven Hunters'. On the largest of them – Eilean Mohr, as it is called – the Northern Lighthouse Commissioners erected a lighthouse, which was first lighted on the 7th December 1899. Designed by Messrs. D&C Stevenson, C.E.[78], Edinburgh, the Commissioners' engineers, it took four seasons to build, partly on account of the stormy waters around it, and also from the difficulty there was landing stones and material.

This island, which is egg-shaped, has cliffs all round of not less than 150 feet in height. Above the cliff line there is a steep grassy bank facing south, which carries the land of the island to a height of over 200 feet. On the north side the cliffs have a straight descent to the sea. The lighthouse was erected on the highest land, and was a stone structure fitted to resist the gales that blow in wildly from the Atlantic. There is no land between the Flannan Islands and America. The tower of the lighthouse rises 75 feet above the island, and the light, which is of 140,000 candle power, could be seen for 24 nautical miles. The chief purpose it served was to give a lead and direction to vessels going from the Atlantic by the Butt of Lewis to the Pentland Firth, or coming from the Firth to the Great Western Ocean[79]. The Commissioners made two landing places, one at the east side and the other at the west, to be used according to the way the wind was blowing. From these they had to cut a zig-zag stair up the face of the cliffs to the grassy slope already referred to. And they also constructed a trolley tramway, worked from the lighthouse by an engine and rope, for the purpose of taking stores from the landing stages to the lighthouse. At each of the landing stages, but higher up the cliff, is a crane for unloading stores from the Commissioners' steamers. There are, it may further be explained, four lighthouse men attached to this station. Three of them are always on the rock attending to the light. Each of the four in turn is six weeks on the island, and a fortnight on the mainland. During that fortnight they reside in the township of Breasclete[80], on the north side of Loch-Roag, where the Commissioners have built substantial cottages for their staff, their wives and families, or other relations. The Flannans are visited every fortnight by the Commissioners' steamer *Hesperus*, and it was on this vessel, which is under the command of Captain Harvey, making her usual call at the lighthouse with stores on Wednesday[81], that the unfortunate discovery was made that the whole of the lighthouse staff were missing. But for the lighthouse men these rocky and lonely islands are uninhabited.

The *Hesperus* left Oban on Monday[82], and took on board the keeper, who after his fortnight on shore was returning to relieve one of his comrades. On the boat's crew landing at Eilean Mohr no one was to be seen. The tower and residences of the keepers was searched, but none of the men could be found. A rocket was fired, but there was no response, and the painful conviction was forced home that the lighthouse keepers had been swept off the island and drowned. All the clocks in the building were stopped, from which it is considered possible that the disaster occurred about ten days ago – presumably on Thursday last, the 20th – the day of the terrific

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[78] *ie* 'Civil Engineers'.
[79] Presumably a synonym for the Atlantic.
[80] Today given by the Ordnance Survey as Beaclete, on the island of Great Bernera, which bisects Loch Roag and East Loch Roag on the north-west coast of Lewis.
[81] 26 December 1900.
[82] 24 December 1900.

gale which did so much damage all over Scotland and wrecked part of the Shetland fishing fleet. How the disaster occurred to the lighthouse men is only as yet a matter of conjecture. When the first intimation of it arrived in Edinburgh it could only be guessed that they had been blown over the cliffs, as nothing was said about any damage to the lighthouse itself. What they were doing outside in such a gale could not be conjectured. The names of the men missing are James Ducat, principal keeper, who is married and has a family of four[83]; Thomas Marshall, unmarried; and an occasional keeper, Donald Macarthur, who is married, and who had temporarily taken the place of one of the regular keepers who is ill on shore. The relief keeper, whose name is more[84], and three of the crew of the *Hesperus* were left on the island to attend to the light, while the vessel returned to anchorage for the night to Loch-Roag. On Thursday[85] the *Hesperus* again made for the Flannans, but the sea was too rough for a landing to be effected at either of the stages. Captain Harvey, however, got into signal communication with the men on the island, and learned that one of the cranes already referred to on the cliff had been destroyed, and it is now thought that the unfortunate men could have ventured out of the lighthouse in the gale in order to try and save the crane, and been washed away. It seems that at Breasclete, on the mainland, there is a look-out station, from which the Flannans Lighthouse can be seen. The signalman there, seeing no adverse signal from the lighthouse, apprehended nothing wrong, though he did not see the light for these last few nights past. That he attributed to the thickness of the atmosphere. This, it seems, is quite an unprecedented calamity in the history of the Northern Lighthouse Commission. The last disaster was nearly fifty years ago, when an attending boat, running between Kirkcudbright and the Little Ross Lighthouse, was lost with all hands.

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Telegraphing last night, our Stornoway correspondent states that during the day information of the disaster was received there, though nothing definite beyond the fact that the three lighthouse keepers had lost their lives, was known. The people of that part of Lewis which is nearest the Flannan Islands, he adds, were alarmed when for two or three nights past they could see no trace of the Flannan light – a fact which was communicated by telegraph to the Lighthouse Commissioners.

The Flannan, or 'Flannel Isles', as they are called in the Statistical Account of Scotland, are rather interesting rocky islets, and are supposed to have been the residence of ecclesiastics in the time of the druids. They are called by Buchanan *Insulae Sacrae*[86]. There is at least one ruin on Eilean Mohr of some small ecclesiastical chapel – known as the 'blessing chapel' – just below the spot on which the lighthouse is now erected. The islands, which are attached to the parish of Uig, are, as has already been stated, a rocky cluster, seven in number, with narrow water ways between them. The total area they cover would be about two miles by a quarter of a mile, the long way being east and west. The largest of the group, Eilean Mohr, is barely a quarter of a mile across. The cliffs are of gneiss[87]. Nearly all the members of the group have this in common: that their sides are precipitous. Formerly, a few sheep belonging to people on the main land were grazed on the islands, but this has been given up for many years. McCulloch[88] speaks of the islands as being a great resort for

[83] See Document 11.
[84] Sic.
[85] 27 December 1900.
[86] *ie* 'Holy Islands'.
[87] A laminated rock of quartz, feldspar and mica [OED].
[88] Reference obscure.

sea birds, but people who lately visited them say that in this respect there is nothing very remarkable about them. With connection with what has been said as to the association of the Druids with this lovely group of rocky islands, it may be recalled that at Callernish, near the head of Loch Roag, are the celebrated Druidical standing stones – forming one of the most complete remains of the kind in the kingdom, while at the neighbouring town of Carloway is one of the largest and most perfect Danish[89] forts or dounes to be met with in Scotland. It was on the sand of the bay of Uig in 1831 that a number of small sculpted ivory figures, resembling chessmen, were found, and being of great antiquity, were transmitted to the Antiquarian Society of Edinburgh[90].

AN OLD ACCOUNT OF THE FLANNAN ISLANDS

In Martin Martin's volume, 'A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland', dated 1695, a chapter is devoted to 'Inferior Islands' adjacent to Lewis. Dealing with the subject, the writer says:–

'Near to the north-west promontory of Carloway Bay, called Gallenhead, are the little islands of Pabbay, Shirem, Vaxay, Wayn, the Great and Lesser[91]. To the north-west of Gallenhead, and within six leagues of it, lie the Flannan Islands, which the seamen call North Hunters; they are but small islands, and six in number, and maintain about seventy sheep yearly. The inhabitants of the adjacent lands of the Lewis, having a right to these islands, visit them once every summer, and there make a great purchase of fowls, eggs, down, feathers and quills. When they go to sea they have their boat well manned, and make towards the islands with an east wind; but if before or at the landing the wind turn westerly, they hoist up sail and steer directly home again. If any of their crew is a novice, and not versed in the customs of the place, he must be instructed perfectly in all the punctilios[92] observed here before landing, and to prevent inconveniences that they think may ensue upon the transgression of the least nicety observed here, every novice is always joined with another that can instruct him all the time of their fowling; so all the boat's crew are matched in this manner. After their landing, they fasten their boat to the sides of the rock, and then fix a wooden ladder by laying a stone at the foot of it to prevent its falling upon the sea, and when they are got up into the island, all of them uncover their heads, and make a turn sun-ways round, thanking God for their safety.

The biggest of these islands is called Island More; it has the ruins of a chapel, dedicated to St Flannan[93], from whom the island derives its name[94]. When they are come within about twenty paces of the altar, they all strip themselves of their upper garments at once, and their upper clothes being laid upon a stone, which stands there on purpose for that use, all the crew pray three times before they begin fowling; the first day they say the first prayer, advancing towards the chapel upon their knee; the second prayer is said as they go round the chapel; the third is said hard by or at the chapel; and this is their morning service. Their vespers are performed with the like numbers of prayers. Another rule is that it is absolutely unlawful to kill a fowl with a stone, for that they reckon a great barbarity, and directly contrary to ancient custom.

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[89] Today we would say Norwegian. The Western Isles were part of the territories of the Norwegian Crown between 1098 and 1266.
[90] This is a reference to the celebrated Lewis Chessmen, now in the British Museum.
[91] Today Pabay Mor, Geodha nan Calman, Vacsay, Floday, Vuia Mor, and Vuia Beag.
[92] The nicer points of ceremony [OED].
[93] St Flannan, fl. 6th century, was a Scottish monk who lived on the islands which now bear his name. Today the 'chapel' is nothing more than a small pile of heavily weathered drystone bricks.
[94] *ie* the Flannans, not Eilean Mor ['Big Island'] itself.

It is also unlawful to kill a fowl before they ascend by the ladder. It is absolutely unlawful to call the island of St Kilda (which lies thirty leagues southwards) by its proper Irish name, Hirt, but only the high country[95]. They must not so much as once name the islands in which they are fowling by the ordinary name, Flannan, but only the country. There are several other things which must not be called by their common names, e.g., Visk, which in the language of the natives signifies Water, they call Burn; a Rock, which in their language is Crag, must here be called Cruey, i.e., Hard; Shore, in their language expressed by Claddach, must here be called Vah, i.e., a Cave; Sour in their language is expressed Gort, but must here be called Gair, i.e., Sharp; Slippery, which is expressed Bog, must be called Soft; and several other things to this purpose. They count it unlawful also to kill a fowl after evening prayers. There is an ancient custom by which the crew is obliged not to carry home sheep suet, let them kill ever so many sheep in these islands. One of their principal customs is not to steal or eat anything unknown to their partner, else the transgressor (they say) will certainly vomit it up, which they reckon as a just judgement. When they have loaded their boat sufficiently with sheep, fowls, eggs, down, fish, &c., they make the best of their way home. It is observed of the sheep of these islands that they are exceedingly fat and have long horns.

'I had this superstitious account not only from several natives of the Lewis, but likewise from two who had been in the Flannan Islands the preceding year. I asked one of them if he prayed at home as often and as frequently as he did in the Flannan Islands, and he plainly confessed to me that he did not, adding, further, that these remote islands were places of inherent sanctity, and there was none ever yet landed in them but found himself more disposed to devotion there than anywhere else. The Island of Pigmies – or, as the natives call it, the Island of Little Men, is but of small extent. There has been many small bones dug out of the ground here, resembling those of human kind more than any other. This gave ground to a tradition, which the natives have, of very low-statured people living once here, called Losbirdan, i.e., pigmies.'

Document 4

Inverness Courier
1 January 1901

DISASTER AT A LEWIS LIGHTHOUSE

[*After giving the majority of The Scotsman's account of the disappearance (Document 3), the* Courier *added*:]

'Late on Saturday night[96], Mr Murdoch, secretary to the Northern Lighthouse Commissioners, received a telegram from Callernish, giving some further particulars as to the disaster which occurred at the Flannan Islands, by which three men lost their lives. The telegraph stated that the *Hesperus*, the Lighthouse Board's steamer, had

[95] It is important to note that this implies the strange customs described by Martin were not related solely to the Flannan Isles but concerned some of the other bleak islets off the Hebrides, since several popular authors have used this account to suggest that there was something inherently and uniquely strange and sinister about the Seven Hunters.

[96] 29 December 1900.

been at the Flannan Islands on Saturday, and that the crew found that the crane, which it had been supposed had been washed away, was still standing at the west landing, but that a box in which the west landing ropes had been stored had been washed away, and the railings at that landing damaged. The sea-boots and oilskins of the two lighthouse-keepers, Ducat and Marshall, were missing. These were only worn when the unfortunate men were employed at the landing, and this would point to he men being washed away from the west crane platform, after securing the landing gear. The third man who also, unfortunately, lost his life, was only occasionally employed at the lighthouse. The last official entry in the lighthouse-keepers' journal had been made on 15th December, when a great storm seems to have raged on the west coast[97]. As further pointing to the disaster having occurred on the 15th, it may be stated that the captain of a Leith-owned vessel, which went ashore near Anstruther, has reported that in passing the Flannan Islands at midnight that day no light was visible on the islands, though the night was clear, but stormy.

Document 5

Northern Chronicle
2 January 1901

Mysterious Lighthouse Disaster off the Lewis

The Northern Lighthouse Board received intelligence in Edinburgh of a terrible disaster that had occurred on the Flannan Islands, which are about 44 miles west of the Butt of Lewis, and 40 miles north of St Kilda. The lighthouse is one of the rock stations where three men are constantly stationed, fortnightly reliefs being given. The three men stationed on the lighthouse were named James Ducat, the principal keeper; Thomas Marshall and Donald McArthur, the last-named being an occasional keeper, employed in this instance during the illness of one of the regular staff[98]. The relieving keeper, Moore, was landed on the island by the Board's steamer, and the absence of all the men showed that a dreadful occurrence had happened. So far as is presently known, the men have vanished, and nothing definite is known of their fate. It is, however, surmised that the calamity happened during the great storm of last week[99]. As the regulations provide that during the night one man must remain in constant attendance on the lights, it is regarded as practically certain that the accident occurred in daylight, and it is suggested as one probable cause that the men have been blown over the cliffs and drowned while trying to secure the crane. Another theory is that they may have been trying to give assistance to a fishing boat or other vessel in distress. The relieving keeper, Moore, was left at the lighthouse with three other men to keep the light burning pending permanent arrangements. The Flannan Islands are a group of seven small precipitous islands, sometimes called the 'seven hunters', covering an area of about three miles by two. The east-most is 17 miles of Gallon

[97] This storm, which is not referred to elsewhere, must not be confused with the later storm of 20 December, which was initially supposed to have cost the three lighthousemen their lives. It is unfortunate that the paper is not more precise as to its source of information here – it is not even clear whether the storm actually occurred, or was simply the subject of conjecture by a journalist looking for an explanation for the disaster. At any rate, it must have been more local, and perhaps less fierce, than the storm of the 20th.
[98] The regular man's name was William Ross [Document 1].
[99] *ie* that commencing on 20 December.

Head, in Lewis, and the islands lie near the track of vessels bound from the westward, and making to take the north passage through the Pentland Firth. The light, which was first lighted on 1st December of last year, is seen 24 miles off in clear weather. A system of signalling, in case of need, exists between the lighthouse and the nearest point on the main islands, from whence the light is visible in clear weather. It is explained that the absence of signalling gave rise to no suspicion that anything was wrong, and that it would be taken for granted that the light could not be seen on account of the recent bad weather. Of the three men lost two were married men, Ducat and Macarthur. The former's wife and family reside at Breascleit, in Lewis, to which place Macarthur, who was an old army man, belonged. It is understood that no such occurrence ever before happened in the history of the Board, the most serious previous disaster being the loss of the attending boat, with all hands, on a run between Kirkcudbright and the Little Ross some years ago.

Document 6

Oban Express
3 January 1901

DISASTER AT A LEWIS LIGHTHOUSE

THREE MEN DROWNED

[After reprinting the *Scotsman*'s text (Document 3), the *Express* added:]

No further communication concerning the disaster was received at the offices of the Northern Lighthouse Commissioners in Edinburgh on Friday[100]. James Ducat, the principal keeper of the Flannan Islands Lighthouse, was an Arbroath man, being a son of Mr James Ducat, Lochland Street. In his youth the late lighthouse-keeper was for some time a clerk in the employment of Messrs Muir, Son & Patton, coal merchants, Arbroath. About 20 years ago he entered the lighthouse service, and during that time he has been stationed at various lighthouses both on the east and west coasts of Scotland. He was appointed principal keeper of the lighthouses at the Flannan Islands, and went there in October last year to make arrangements for the opening of the lighthouse, which took place in December a year ago. Mr Ducat, who was about 40 years of age, leaves a wife and three children. A correspondent writes:– Many years ago a ship bound for a distant foreign port was passing the Flannan Islands, and the captain, seeing that he had insufficient food and water on board, anchored on one of them which was stocked with sheep, but there were no people staying there at the time. He told the sailors to ship the sheep on board his vessel, which was done, and the owner (who was informed by a shepherd who went to the islands occasionally), that the flock had entirely disappeared, wondered for many a day what had become of them. Long afterwards the captain, with his ship, returned to England. After discharging cargo he travelled as far as Stornoway, and inquired about the owner of the sheep from the Flannan Island. He was fortunate in getting the information, and having ascertained the full value of the sheep he remitted it to the owners, with particulars of the circumstances under which they were taken.

[100] 28 December 1900.

[A summary of the information given in the telegram from Callernish, also reported by the *Inverness Courier* [document 4] followed. The *Express* continued:]

The Lighthouse Commissioners steamer *Hesperus* (Captain Harvey) returned to Oban on Monday morning[101] from the Flannan Isles. On Saturday she placed three trained light-keepers on the islands, took off Mr MacDonald the buoymaster, and two men of the steamers' crew, who had volunteered for duty on the islands on the discovery of the disaster. From additional information received from the men who landed on the rock, there appears to be no doubt that the men lost their lives in an attempt to save the crane gear at the western side of the island, on Saturday the 15th ult.[102]. It was evident, as the lamps were trimmed and the forenoon duties all completed, that they had gone out after dinner – two of the men having taken their sea boots, which they never wear except for duty at the landing stages. The third man, Macarthur, had, it is presumed, been hurriedly called out, as he had gone without his jacket and vest.

The crane gear which it is believed, they had gone to save, was fixed about 110 feet above the ordinary high water-mark, and portions of it were afterwards found strewn about the rocks below. As evidence of the heavy sea breaking upon the place it is stated that a large boulder, estimated to be over a ton in weight, which had lain near the crane gear was found deposited on the concrete footpath about a hundred feet below. Mr MacDonald, Oban, and the two men who were with him, daily searched the creeks but found no trace of the bodies of the keepers.

Document 7

Oban Times
5 January 1901

FLANNAN ISLES LIGHTHOUSE DISASTER

Staff swept away – three lives lost

From information received at Stornoway last week it appears that a disaster occurred at the Flannan Isles on Friday, 14th, or Saturday, 15th ult., in which three lighthouse keepers lost their lives. The Flannan Isles, which are uninhabited, are situated about 16 miles off Mallon Head, on the west coast of Lewis, and in connection with the lighthouse established there about a year ago there are keepers' buildings at Breasclete on the mainland of Lewis, where the keepers periodically reside when they have been relieved from duty on the lonely islands where the lighthouse is erected.

The people residing at the part of Lewis opposite the Flannans were alarmed when, for two or three nights in succession, they could find no trace of the Flannan light, and word was telegraphed to the Lighthouse Commissioners. The Flannans are visited every fortnight by the Commissioners' steamer *Hesperus*; and it was on this vessel, which is under the command of Captain Harvey, making her usual call at the lighthouse with stores on Wednesday, that the unfortunate discovery was made that the whole of the lighthouse staff were missing.

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[101] 31 December 1900.
[102] *ie* last month.

The *Hesperus* left Oban on Monday, 31st[103], and took on board the keeper, who after his fortnight on shore was returning to relieve one of his comrades. On the boat's crew landing at Eilean Mhor no one was to be seen. The tower and the residences of the keepers were searched, but none of the men could be found. A rocket was fired, but there was no response, and the painful conclusion was forced home that the lighthouse keepers had been swept off the island and drowned. All the clocks in the building were stopped, from which it is considered possible that the disaster occurred at least a week ago – presumably on Thursday, the 20th, – the day of the terrible gale. How the disaster occurred to the lighthouse men is only as yet a matter of conjecture.

The names of the men were – James Ducat (43), Thomas Marshall (28) and Donald MacArthur (40). MacArthur was an occasional member of staff who had taken the place of a sick member. Of the three men lost, Ducat and MacArthur were married, the wife and family of the former residing at Breasclete, to which place MacArthur, who is an old army man, belongs.

The Flannan Islands are a group of seven islands near the track of vessels coming from the west to Pentland Firth passage. Gaston Head, in Lewis, 17 miles off, is the nearest land. No such disaster has ever happened in the history of the Lighthouse Board, and it is fortunate that the loss of the lighthouse staff has not resulted in disaster to any passing vessels, as owing to fog it was impossible to see from the nearest land whether the light was burning in the lighthouse or not.

ANOTHER REPORT

Intimation was received on Thursday last[104] by the Northern Lighthouse Board, Edinburgh, of the loss of the lighthouse staff at the Flannan Islands Lighthouse. It is surmised that they were swept away during the storm of last week, either when attempting to save the crane, or when trying to render assistance to some vessel in distress. The relief keeper, with three other men, have been left on the island, pending permanent arrangements.

A telegraph which was received by the Lighthouse Board on Thursday night tends to strengthen the impression that the men lost their lives when trying to save the crane. The *Hesperus* went out on Thursday, but owing to the heavy seas could not make a landing. The captain was, however, able to speak[105] with the men put on the island, and he learned from them that the crane was away.

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It is now beyond doubt that the three lighthouse keepers at the Flannan Isles, Ducat, Marshall and MacArthur, perished. The Northern Lighthouse steamer *Hesperus* effected a landing on the island on Wednesday[106], and found the place deserted. The blinds were drawn on the windows. The keepers beds were unmade, just as they had risen from them, and their half-finished breakfast[107] was on the table, with the chairs pushed aside, as if they had hurriedly risen and gone out [36]. On the east and west sides of the island there are large cranes, used for hauling stores up the precipitous cliffs on the top of which the lighthouse is erected. It was discovered that one of these cranes on the west side had been carried away by the storm, and as an oilskin was

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[103] The *Times*'s journalist is out by a week here – the date should read 24 December (Document 3).
[104] 27 December 1900.
[105] A nautical term meaning simply communicate - in this case presumably by semaphore or signal lamp.
[106] 2 January 1901.
[107] The investigators' report states the meal was actually dinner (ie lunch). (Document 9).

found fixed in the wreckage, it is believed that the men were endeavouring to secure the crane, when they were either blown or washed off [37]. The disaster must have occurred on the Saturday forenoon [38], for the last entry in the log book is made on the morning of that day.

Document 8

Oban Times
12 January 1901

FLANNAN ISLES LIGHTHOUSE DISASTER
Mr Weir, MP, having written to the Northern Lighthouse Board in regard of the provision to be made for the families of the three light-keepers who lost their lives in the recent storm, has been informed in reply that the relatives of the two light-keepers who were permanent servants of the Commissioners will receive the proceeds of certain life insurance policies, and that one of the two men being married, his widow will also receive pension and gratuity under the Superannuation Act. The widow of the third man, who was only temporarily employed, will probably receive gratuities under the Superannuation Act; but as the amount can only be small, it will have to be supplemented in some other way not yet determined on.

Document 9

Flannan Isles Lighthouse Disaster

Report by Superintendent on Disaster at Flannan Islands Lighthouse

Undated (c.January 1901)

[Northern Lighthouse Board archives]

On receipt of Captain Harvie's telegram on 26 December 1900 reporting that the three keepers on Flannan Islands, viz James Ducat, Principal, Thomas Marshall, second Assistant, and Donald McArthur, Occasional Keeper (doing duty for William Ross, first Assistant, on sick leave), had disappeared and that they must have been blown over the cliffs or drowned, I made the following arrangements with the secretary for the temporary working of the Station.

James Ferrier, Principal Keeper, was sent from Stornoway Lighthouse to Tiumpan Head Lighthouse and John Milne, Principal Keeper at Tiumpan Head was sent to take temporary charge at Flannan Islands. Donald Jack, the second Assistant Storekeeper, was also dispatched to Flannan Islands, the intention being that these two men, along with Joseph Moore, the third Assistant at Flannan Islands, who was ashore when the incident took place, should do duty pending permanent arrangements being made. I also proceeded to Flannan Islands where I was landed, along with Milne and Jack, early on the 29th ulto.

After satisfying myself that everything connected with the lighthouse was in good order and that the men landed would be able to maintain the light, I proceeded to ascertain, if possible, the cause of the disaster and also took statements from Captain Harvie and Mr McCormack, the second mate of the *Hesperus*, Joseph Moore,

third Assistant Keeper, Flannan Islands and Allan Macdonald, Buoymaster, and the following is the result of my investigations:—

The *Hesperus* arrived at Flannan Islands for the purpose of making ordinary relief about noon on Wednesday, 26 December and, as neither signals were shown, nor any of the usual preparations for landing made, Captain Harvie blew both the steam whistle and the siren to call the attention of the Keepers. As this had no effect, he fired a rocket, which also evoked no response, and a boat was lowered and sent ashore to the East landing. There being still no signs of the Keepers, the boat was backed into the landing and with some difficulty Moore managed to jump ashore. When he went up to the Station he found the entrance gate and outside doors closed, the clock stopped, no fire lit, and, looking into the bedrooms, he found the beds empty. He became alarmed at this and ran down to the boat and informed Mr McCormack, the second mate, that he Keepers were missing. McCormack and one of the seamen managed to jump ashore and with Moore made a thorough search of the Station but could discover nothing. They then returned to the ship and informed Captain Harvie who told Moore he would have to return to the Island to keep the light going pending instructions, and called for volunteers from the crew to assist in this. He met with a ready response and two seamen, Lamont and Campbell, were selected and Mr Macdonald, the Buoymaster, who was on board, also offered his services, which were accepted, and Moore, Macdonald and these two seamen were left in charge of the light while Captain Harvie returned to Breasclete and telegraphed an account of the disaster to the secretary.

The men left on the Island made a thorough search, in he first place, of the Station and found that the last entry on the slate had been made by Mr Ducat, the Principal Keeper on the morning of Saturday, 15 December[108]. This is borne out by information which was received (after news of the disaster had been published) that Captain Holman had passed the Flannan Islands in the steamer *Archtor* at midnight of the 15th ulto, and could not observe the light, although from the conditions of the weather and his position, he felt satisfied that he should have seen it.

On the Thursday and Friday[109] the men made a thorough search over and round the island and I went over the ground with them on the Saturday. Everything at the East landing place was in order and the ropes which had been coiled and stored there on completion of the relief on 7 December were all in their places and the lighthouse buildings and everything in the Station was in order. Owing to the amount of sea, I could not get down to the landing place, but I got down to the crane platform about 70 feet above the sea level. The crane originally erected on this platform was washed away during last winter, and the crane put up this summer was found to be unharmed, the jib lowered and secured to the rock, and the canvas covering the wire rope on the barrel securely lashed round it, and there was no evidence that the men had been doing anything at the crane. The mooring ropes, landing ropes, derrick landing ropes and crane handles, and also a wooden box in which they were kept and which was secured in a crevice in the rocks 70 feet up the tramway from the terminus of the tramway to the concrete steps up from the West landing, were displaced and twisted. A large block of stone, weighing upwards of 20 cwt., had been dislodged from its position higher up and carried down to and left on the concrete path leading from the terminus of the tramway to the top of the steps. A life buoy fastened to the railing along this path, to be used in case of emergency, had disappeared, and I

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[108] This specifically contradicts the notion that it was Marshall who kept up the log, as is stated in most secondary sources. As Principal, log–keeping would certainly have been Ducat's duty.
[109] 27 and 28 December.

thought at first that it had been removed for the purpose of being used but, on examining the ropes by which it had been fastened, I found that they had not been touched, and pieces of canvas were adhering to the ropes, [and] it was evident that the force of the sea pouring through the railings had, even at this great height (110 feet above sea level), torn the life buoy off the ropes.

When the accident occurred, Ducat was wearing sea boots and a waterproof, and Marshall sea boots and oilskins, and Moore assures me that the men only wore those articles when going down to the landing of the proximity of it.

After a careful examination of the place, the railings, ropes etc and weighing all the evidence which I could secure, I am of the opinion that the most likely explanation of the disappearance of the men is that they had all gone down on the afternoon of Saturday, 15 December to the proximity of the West landing, to secure the box with the mooring ropes, etc and that an unexpectedly large roller had come up on the Island, and a large body of water going up higher than where they were and coming down upon them had swept them away with resistless force.

I have considered and discussed the possibility of the men being blown by the wind, but, as the wind was westerly, I am of the opinion, notwithstanding its great force, that the more probable explanation is that they have been washed away as, had the wind caught them, it would, from its direction, have blown them up the Island and I feel certain that they would have managed to throw themselves down before they had reached the summit or brow of the Island.

On conclusion of my enquiry on Saturday afternoon, I returned to Breasclete, wired the result of my investigations to the Secretary and called on the widows of James Ducat, the Principal Keeper and Donald McArthur, the Occasional keeper.

I may state that, as Moore was naturally very much upset by the unfortunate occurrence, and appeared very nervous, I left A. Lamont, seaman[110], on the Island to go to the lightroom and keep Moore company when on watch for a week or two.

If this nervousness does not leave Moore, he will require to be transferred, but I am reluctant to recommend this, as I would desire to have at least one man who knows the work of the Station.

The Commissioners appointed Roderick MacKenzie, Gamekeeper, Uig, near Meavaig, to look out daily for signals that might be shown from the Rock, and to note each night whether the light was seen or not seen. As it was evident that light had not been lit from the 15th to the 25th of December, I resolved to see him on Sunday morning, to ascertain what he had to say on the subject. [His son is] an intelligent lad of the gamekeeper class, who actually performs the duty of looking out for signals — and I had a conversation with him on the matter, and I also examined the Return Book. From the December Return, I saw that the tower itself was not seen, even with the assistance of a powerful telescope, between the 7th and the 29th December. The light was, however, seen on 7 December, but was not seen on the 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th. It was seen on the 12th, but was not seen again until the 26th, the night on which it was lit by Moore. MacKenzie stated (and I have since verified this), that the lights sometimes cannot be seen for four or five consecutive nights, but he was beginning to be anxious at not seeing it for such a long period, and had, two nights prior to its reappearance, been getting the assistance of the natives to see if it could be discerned.

Had the lookout been kept by an ordinary Lightkeeper, as at Earraid for Dubh Artach, I believe it would have struck the man ashore at an earlier period that something was amiss, and, while this would not have prevented the lamentable occurrence taking place, it would have enabled steps to be taken to have the light re–

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[110] Archibald Lamont of the *Hesperus*'s crew [Document 10].

lit at an earlier date. I would recommend that the Signalman should be instructed that, in future, should he fail to observe the light when, in his opinion, looking to the state of the atmosphere, it should be seen, he should be instructed to intimate this to the Secretary, when the propriety of taking steps could be considered.

I may explain that signals are shown from Flannan Islands by displaying balls or discs from each side of the Tower, on poles projecting out from the Lighthouse balcony., the signals being differentiated by one or more discs being shown on the different sides of the Tower. When at Flannan Islands so lately as 7th December last, I had a conversation with the late Mr Ducat regarding the signals, and he stated that he wished it would be necessary to hoist one of the signals, just to ascertain how soon it would be seen ashore and how soon it would be acted upon. At that time I took a note to consider the propriety of having a daily signal that all was well — signals under the present system only being exhibited when assistance of some kind is required. After carefully discussing the matter, and discussing it with the officials competent to offer an opinion on the subject, I arrived at the conclusion that it would not be advisable to have such a signal, as, owing to the distance between the Island and the shore, and to the frequency of haze on top of the Island, it would often be unseen between the 7th and 29th December, and an 'All Well' signal would have been of no use on this occasion.

The question has been raised as to how we would have been situated had wireless telegraphy been instituted, but, had we failed to establish communications for some days, I would have concluded that something had gone wrong with the signaling apparatus, and the last thing that would have occurred to me would have been that all the three men had disappeared.

In conclusion, I would desire to record my deep regret at such a disaster occurring to Keepers in this Service. I knew Ducat and Marshall intimately, and McArthur the Occasional, well. They were selected, on my recommendation, for the lighting of such an important Station as Flannan Islands, and as it is always my endeavour to secure the best men possible for the establishment of a Station, as the success and contentment of a Station depends largely on the Keepers present at its installation, this of itself is an indication that the Board has lost two of its most efficient Keepers and a competent Occasional.

I was with the Keepers for more than a month during the summer of 1899, when everyone worked hard to secure the early lighting of the Station before winter, and, working along with them, I appreciated the manner in which they performed their work. I visited Flannan Islands when the relief was made so lately as 7th December, and have the melancholy recollection that I was the last person to shake hands with them and bid the adieu.

Robert Muirhead
Superintendent

Document 10

Undated [c1960], anonymous typescript of newspaper article

[Northern Lighthouse Board archives]

[The first page is missing from the typescript] The first surprise was that the lighthouse flag was not hoisted in the traditional welcome.

Wrote Moore: “We though they had not perceived us. The steamer’s horn was sounded several times – still no reply.”

A rocket was also fired, then at last “Captain Harvie deemed it prudent to lower a boat and land a man if it was possible.

“I was the first to land, leaving Mr McCormick, the Buoymaster, and the men in the boat till I could return.

“I went up to the lighthouse and on coming to the entrance gate I found it closed. I made for the entrance door leading to the kitchen and storeroom and found it also closed, and the door inside that.

“But the kitchen door itself was open. On entering I looked at the fireplace and saw that the fire was not lighted for some days. I entered the rooms in succession and found the beds empty, just as they left them in the early morning.

“I did not take time to search further, for I naturally well knew that something serious had occurred.

“I darted outside and made for the landing. I informed Mr McCormick that the place was deserted. He with some men came up so as to make sure, but unfortunately the first impression was only too true.

“Mr McCormick and myself proceeded to the light room, where everything was in proper order. The lamp was clean, the (oil) foundation full, blinds on the windows, etc.”

Back on the Hesperus, Moore was ordered to take ashore a party to man the light, while the tender returned to Lewis to wire news of the disaster to the secretary of the Northern Lighthouse Board.

The telegram read: “A dreadful accident has happened at Flannan…”

Meanwhile (wrote Moore): “We proceeded up to the light room and lighted the light in the proper time that night, and every night since.”

Moore describes how, the following day, he “traversed the island from end to end, but still nothing to convince us how it happened.”

Everything appeared in order at the east landing, ropes all in place inside the shelter, as they had been at the last relief on December 7.

But there was damage at the west landing stage, about 100ft above the sea, a platform with a crane, with a tramway for winching stores to the shoulder, about 280ft up.

“The iron railings,” wrote Moore, “had started from their foundations and broken in several places.”

An old box for holding mooring ropes was gone. Higher up the rock face, this box had been wedged in a crevice and anchored.

The obvious inference was that three men had been washed off the landing stage by a gigantic wave. But what were they doing there at the height of the storm? And why all three?

To pluck men off a stage, the wave would have had to be at least 150ft high, and not spray but a heavy flow of water.

Perhaps the strangest point of all was that one of the keepers was apparently “in his shirt sleeves,” as Moore described it.

The two regular keepers, James Ducat and Thomas Marshall, were wearing seaboots and either oilskins or waterproofs. Their storm clothing was missing from the lighthouse.

The occasional, there because another keeper was on sick leave, had no oilskins, only an old coat. But this ‘wearing coat’, as Moore calls it, was handing on a peg, “which shows as far as I know that he went out in his shirtsleeves.”

Moore concluded in his report: “There is nothing to indicate how the poor men lost their lives.”

But there was plenty of evidence as to when the accident happened. The logbook was written up to December 13, and other weather readings were marked on a slate, obviously for later transfer.

The last entry on the slate was December 15, 9am, readings of barometer and thermometer, wind direction. It must have happened that day - probably after dinner - because from that night the lighthouse was blacked out.

About midnight on the 15th the steamer *Archtor* from Philadelphia passed within six miles of the Flannans and the light was not seen. The *Archtor* reached Leith on the 18th, but the captain did not report until the disaster had been discovered.

He wrote: “Very heavy sea, night stormy but clear, and we should have seen the light.”

On the coast of Lewis, a gamekeeper was employed to report any failure of the light. Questioned later, he agreed it had not been seen after the 14th, but explained that from nearly 20 miles away, often in poor visibility, there were many nights when the Flannans light could not be seen.

Concerned, he got his two teenage sons to look for it with keener eyes, and called on other islanders to keep their telescopes trained to the west.

But he never reported it, and it was 11 days after the tragedy before the normal relief ship discovered it.

Thus began the controversy that has not yet been settled, but for the first time in a newspaper I am able to quote from the official report made by Superintendent Robert Muirhead.

He confirmed the time given by Moore, the afternoon of Saturday, December 15. The cleaning and preparation of the light proved that the forenoons’ work had been done. The washing up of pots and pans, [and] tidying of the kitchen, showed that the man acting as cook had cleared up after dinner.

Everything at the lighthouse buildings and station was in order, but Muirhead describes in detail the damage around the west landing. After the loss of the rope box, 100ft above the sea, the ropes were strewn in crevices near the crane platform, but still coiled up.

He writes: “The iron railings round the crane platform were from the terminus of the tramway to the concrete steps were displaced and twisted.

“A lifebuoy attached to the railings had disappeared, and I thought at first it had been removed for an emergency, but it was clear from the ropes and canvas adhering to them that the force of the sea pouring through the railings had even at this great height torn the lifebuoy away.”

The Superintendent’s conclusion was: “The men had all gone down to secure the box with the mooring ropes, etc., and an unexpectedly large roller had come up the island. A large body of water going up higher than they were and coming down on them, it swept them away with resistless force.”

Muirhead discounted the idea that any wind, however strong, could have blown the men off the stage, or twisted the railings. But many people experienced islanders among, refused to believe in such a mountainous wave. There were many other theories, some of them supernatural.

The commonest was that one man had a brainstorm and ran out of the lighthouse (in his shirt sleeves), and was chased by the others, all of them falling into the sea.

Another version was that one murdered the other two, and after throwing their bodies over the cliff, jumped into the sea himself.

There were tales, too, of a foreign ship visiting the island and taking off the three keepers.

The bodies were never recovered, but there has never been any evidence of human violence, kidnapping or desertion.

Some of the fanciful theories are scotched by Superintendent Muirhead, who had-picked Ducat and Marshall for the new light, which they helped to establish only one year earlier.

He wrote: “I always endeavour to secure the best men possible, as the success and contentment of a station largely depends on the keepers present at its installation.

“I knew Ducat and Marshall intimately, and the Occasional McArthur well. I was with the keepers for a month during the summer of 1899, when everyone worked hard to secure the early lighting of the station before winter.

“The Board,” he added, “has lost two of its most efficient keepers and a competent Occasional.”

The superintendent’s report concludes with feeling: “I visited the Flannan Isles when the relief was made on 7th December and I have the melancholy recollection that I was the last person to shake hands with them and bid them adieu.”

The Crown spent months studying reports by Muirhead and others, and in July, 1901, it was announced: “After careful consideration, Crown counsel have decided to take no further proceedings.”

Case closed? Even dismissing the many sinister theories, there appeared to be weaknesses in Muirhead’s conclusion, apart from doubts about the titanic wave.

The key questions were:

Why should all three keepers leave the lighthouse together?

In mid-December with a storm raging, would any sane man go out without a coat, and descend to an exposed platform?

Now, after 60 years or so, comes an alternative account, reconstructed by a man who spent four and a half years as a keeper on the Flannans.

Walter Aldebert, now principal keeper at St Abb’s, Berwickshire, risked his life many times to prove his theory. His report, unofficial and personal, until now unpublished, is lodged, together with a set of his photographs, with the Commissioners of Northern Lighthouses in George-Street, Edinburgh.

Said Mr Aldebert: “While I was at Flannan from 1953 to 1957, I would often sit there, putting myself in the place of the principal.

“A storm is raging, and Mr Ducat is worried about his landing ropes. Nobody goes out of a lighthouse in bad weather, but if he loses his ropes relief may be impossible, and he must save them if he can.

“After dinner the wind starts to drop. Leaving the cook to wash up, he and the other man put on their sea boots and coats and make their way to the west side, as there is no hand-rail by the railway.

“They come to the safety path which has a hand-rail, reaching the path which runs at right angles to the stairway and, seeing the path dry, they continue towards the crane where the box for stowing the landing ropes is situated.

“Suddenly a wave much bigger than the previous ones comes in and sweeps one of the men back into the sea.”

Mr Aldebert believes the survivor – there is no means of saying which one – then made his way as quickly as possible up the 45 degree track to [the] shoulder and along the top to the lighthouse, shouting through the doorway that his mate has disappeared.

"The cook who has just sat down after clearing the dinner, knocks his chair from under him and rushes out – without his coat.

"Grabbing a heaving line, the two men make their way back to the West side, hoping to throw the line to their unfortunate comrade.

"Then comes another huge wave, sweeping both men into the sea."

Mr Aldebert used 30 spools of film – many of them ruined with water – to illustrate the size of waves striking the rock face. Repeatedly he went out in storms – the worst photographic conditions – crawling on his hands and knees, to get the shot that would prove that waves rose, not just 100ft high, not 150ft, but 200ft and more – well above the crane platform at the west landing.

On the shoulder of the island, 200ft up, he was himself nearly washed off. He said: "A coil of rope, lying on top, and too solid to be shifted by the wind, was washed off. The water lay a foot deep after the wave receded.

"Even the lamphouse, 330ft up, can be splashed with spray in a storm. My pictures do not show the highest waves, but they give some idea of their immensity.

"Perhaps these poor fellows, being fairly new to the Flannans, did not realise the extreme danger."

Is the Aldebert version the solution to the mystery of the Flannans? We will never know.

Joe Moore, the first man to tell the story, lived to a good age. He died in Partick ten years ago, aged 83. All his life he believed in the big wave.

Captain Harvie and the crew of the *Hesperus* are dead too. One, who became a temporary keeper with Moore, was Archie Lamont, who died in Mull in 1952, aged 92.

And there's a strange little story about Lamont too, for Archie was reported dead in 1949. The explanation was that there were two Archie Lamonts about the *Hesperus* – brothers with the same name, an occasional practice in the Western Isles.

Has keeper Aldebert now solved the mystery of the Flannan Islands? We will never know.

Document 11

The Times
26 December 1990

Boxing Day at Flannan Rock

by Joan Simpson

The Flannan Isles are a wild and lonely place, no more than seven jagged rocks clawing out of a boiling ocean which batters cruelly at the bleak and craggy outcrops. Atlantic waves bigger than houses explode against them and hold the secret of a tragedy which happened there 90 years ago.

On the largest rock a lighthouse stands silent witness to the tragic events which deprived Anna Ducat of her father when she was just eight years old. Today Miss Ducat, now 98 and living in Edinburgh, is believed to be the last direct link with the mystery which has passed into legend among the superstitious folk of the Outer Hebrides, and which has been immortalised in an epic poem by W.W. Gibson.

Miss Ducat's father, James Ducat, was one of the three keepers of the Flannan Isles lighthouse who vanished without trace on a dark December Saturday in 1900.

Their disappearance has never been fully explained. There have been fantastic tales of madness and murder. But in the end, it is most likely a story of stoicism and duty, perhaps of heroism, and almost certainly of a merciless sea which played a final cruel trick on the three men.

The tragedy was discovered on Boxing Day, when the lighthouse ship Hesperus called on a routine visit. It was about noon and the crew were surprised that the tiny rock showed no sign of life. The landing stage was not prepared for the ship, the flagstaff was bare and there was no response when they fired a rocket, though it should have brought the keepers running out.

Against the heavy swell of the sea a boat was lowered and Joseph Moore, the relieving keeper, was landed to scramble up the hundreds of steps hewn out of the precipitous cliffs above the landing stage. His own report of the time states: 'On entering the kitchen... I saw that the fire had not been lighted for some days. I then entered the rooms in succession, found the beds empty just as they had left them...'

Alarmed and distraught he 'darted back' to the boat to fetch the others but 'unfortunately the first impression was only too true'. The clock had stopped, the lamp was trimmed and clean ready for lighting. Some accounts say a meal of salted mutton and boiled potatoes lay on the table, half eaten, and a chair was toppled over on the floor. Official reports state that the kitchen had been tidied after the midday meal. But of the keepers there was no sign.

Gibson describes the chill moment of discovery in his poem:

'Of the three men's fate we found no trace
Of any kind in any place
But a door ajar and an untouch'd meal
And an overtoppled chair.'

Sea boots and oilskins belonging to two of the men were missing from the hook in the cupboard, but the third man must have run out in his shirt sleeves, perhaps toppling the chair in his haste.

The lighthouse station's routine had carried on normally until December 15. the official report from the investigating superintendent tells us: 'The last entry on the slate had been made by Mr Ducat, the Principal keeper on the morning of Saturday 15 December. The lamp was trimmed, the oil fountains and canteens were filled up and the lens and machinery cleaned which proves that the work of the 15th had been completed.'

This superintendent, Robert Muirhead, had persuaded Ducat to take on the job as principal when the Flannan Isles light had first been lit a year earlier; and had, with a heavy heart, recorded that he had visited the Flannans only a week before the disappearance, and that: 'I have the melancholy recollection that I was the last person to shake hands with them and bid them adieu.'

Miss Ducat remembers her father's reluctance to go to the Flannans. 'He said it was too dangerous, that he had a wife and four children depending on him, but Mr Muirhead persuaded him because he had such faith in him as a good and reliable keeper.'

The Ducat family lived at Breasclete, a shore station on the island of Lewis. About 15 miles to the west were the Flannan Isles and the lighthouse, built on the largest of the seven rocks, only 800 yards and 500 yards wide.

Miss Ducat clearly remembers the day her father left Breasclete for the last time. 'It was a lovely sunny day and my brother Arthur and I were playing in the high walled gardens. My father came out of the house and picked each of us in his arms

and gave us a kiss, then he walked very quickly away. We ran after him shouting ‘Daddy, daddy’ and he stopped at the road end and waited for us, picked each of us up again and gave us another kiss. I have always wondered if he had some kind of premonition that he would never see us again.’

Oblivious to the coming tragedy, the Ducats busily prepared for a late Christmas, wrapping presents for their father, due home at the end of the month. ‘We were so excited because there was to be a wedding on the island on Hogmanay and we children had never been to one.’

Miss Ducat is still willing to listen to new theories about what befell her father and his two companions – the assistant keeper Thomas Marshall and an occasional keeper, Donald McArthur, who came from the island of Lewis and was doing duty for a third keeper who was on sick leave. But she is not impressed by the fanciful stories of phantoms or giant seabirds plucking the men to their deaths. She prefers a more straightforward explanation.

Six months before the tragedy, the keepers had been fined five shillings by the commissioners because landing tackle at the west landing stage had been damaged during a storm. Severe weather had lashed the islands during December and the keepers worried that similar damage might occur again.

So when the winds moderated on Saturday, December 15, Mr Ducat and Mr Marshall dutifully went to inspect what damage had been done and make repairs. They donned boots and oilskins and left Donald McArthur in the kitchen.

Perhaps only McArthur, being a local, would have known about the freak wave pattern that builds up in the gully under the west landing stage after severe storms, and which sends a sudden torrent of sea tearing up the cliff face to crash against the stage. Maybe he remembered, suddenly, and ran out in shirt sleeves to warn his companions, only to be caught with them as the sea swept them to their deaths.

Keepers continued to serve on the Flannans until 1971, when the light was automated. Those who served there after the tragedy must have reflected often on Gibson’s lines:

‘We seem’d to stand an endless while
Though not a word was said
Three men alive on Flannan Isle
Who thought on three men dead.’