

# A Ludicrous Travesty

## The Failure of James R. Napier as a Shipowner

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‘Do you know what a Ludicrous Travesty is?’ wrote James R. Napier to the editor of the *Ayr Observer* in December 1864. He was desperately trying to defend himself against the actions of a rival company which had placed a ship in opposition to his own steamer on the Ardrossan to Belfast trade. Napier had not originally intended to be a shipowner. He was a shipbuilder fallen on hard times with a vessel he could not sell. After a shaky start he managed to carve out a living transporting goods and passengers between Scotland and Ireland. However, he found himself caught in the middle of a power struggle with the Glasgow and South Western Railway who were trying to expand their empire into coastal shipping. Through fair means and foul the railway company joined with Napier’s agents to establish a rival steamship and forced Napier out of the trade. Two of James R. Napier’s copy letter books from this period survive in the collection of Glasgow Museums which provide a valuable insight into this bitter commercial, legal and personal battle.<sup>1</sup>

### **From Shipbuilder to Shipowner**

James Robert Napier (1821-1879) was the eldest son of Robert Napier, the famed engineer and so-called ‘father of Clyde shipbuilding’. Robert Napier had expanded his marine engineering business in 1842 with the opening of a shipyard at Govan. James R. Napier followed his father into the family business and took over the management of the shipyard around 1844. He and his brother John were made partners in 1853 to create Robert Napier & Sons.

Napier’s relationship with his father was rather fraught, both were rather prickly, plain talking men and James R. was described as being ‘a brusque man, with no tact’. Robert Napier is said to have quickly regretted making his sons partners and they openly quarrelled about the direction of the business. James R. was ‘indifferent whether a thing paid or not’ and his father soon realised that ‘his eldest son would never be any use to him in business’.<sup>2</sup>

James R. Napier was particularly interested in the scientific elements of the business. He gave the first of many scientific papers to the Glasgow Philosophical Society in 1854 on Bulkheads and Watertight Compartments of Steam Vessels. He served on various committees of the British Association for the Advancement of Science and was one of the founders of the Institute of Engineers in Scotland in 1857. His great scientific accomplice was W. J. Macquorn Rankine, professor of civil engineering and mechanics at the University of Glasgow and together they took out several patents and collaborated on numerous scientific investigations.

In 1855 Napier’s were awarded the contract to build the iron-clad floating battery HMS *Erebus*. This was a particularly onerous contract as the Admiralty wanted the vessel to serve in the Crimea and there were very high penalties for late

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<sup>1</sup> James R. Napier copy letter books: March – September 1863 (T.1937.8.n) & September 1864 – 1878 (unregistered).

<sup>2</sup> James Napier, *Life of Robert Napier of West Shandon* (Edinburgh, 1904), 190; George G Napier, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, (Glasgow, privately printed c.1938), 4.

delivery. Despite his father's poor opinion of him, James R Napier is credited with the successful completion of the ship in just three and a half months. However, 'this involved unusually severe mental and physical strain on the managing staff, and proved too much for James R. Napier, who never fully recovered from the effects'.<sup>3</sup>

Poor health is frequently cited as the principal reason for Napier's withdrawal from the family business, but his deteriorating relationship with his father was the real cause. He claimed that his position in the firm was 'absolutely unworkable' and that he could 'not again have my feelings and duty as a Son so severely tried and be forced in such direct opposition to you as I was on many occasions and particularly in the case of the *Erebus*'.<sup>4</sup> Robert Napier was very much a craftsman and took a very traditional and pragmatic approach to ship construction. James R. on the other hand wished to advance the art of shipbuilding through the application of empirical research and theoretical science. He gathered large amounts of statistical data on the speed and performance of the ships built at the yard and in 1856 worked with Rankine to develop a theory on the resistance of ships.<sup>5</sup> It is clear that he wished to use these principles in the design of Napier's ships and to guarantee their performance within the contracts. This was too risky an approach for Robert Napier and so in 1857 James R. left the family firm to establish his own shipyard which would specialize in building ships using scientific principles. This created a lot of ill feeling amongst the Napier family and James R. was to a certain extent ostracized. His sister Anne was apparently 'the only member of our family who took a reasonable view of my position with my Father'.<sup>6</sup>

The shipyard started reasonably well and by 1858 he had launched his first ship the *Admiral*. This was built for a company in Riga and was designed using a modification of John Scott Russell's wave line theory and its external appearance was noted as being 'very novel and striking'.<sup>7</sup> The technical press also commented on the novel form of contract which not only stipulated the principle dimensions and capacities, but also guaranteed the vessel's speed and fuel consumption which the builder 'could not possibly assure himself of fulfilling, except by being able to compute beforehand the resistance and propelling power of the ship at any required speed, *from the drawing of her lines*, with very great precision'.<sup>8</sup>

However, this acclaim did not translate into orders. We know of only one other commercial order, the *Athanasian*, built for a J. Hutcheson for the French wine trade. It was built using similarly novel design methods and completed in March 1860.<sup>9</sup>

With no further orders Napier built another small iron screw steamer on spec in 1861. He described the *Lancefield* as similar to the *Athanasian* except for the bow and 'other peculiarities'.<sup>10</sup> He understood that a propeller works most efficiently if deeply immersed in water and to achieve this he designed the keel with a crook down at the stern of 2½ feet. It was remarked that 'such a construction might appear

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<sup>3</sup> James MacLehose, *Memoirs and portraits of one hundred Glasgow men who have died during the last thirty years and in their lives did much to make the city what it now is*, (Glasgow, 1886), 237-240.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to his father, 14 March 1863.

<sup>5</sup> *Mechanic's Magazine*, 30 August 1856, 197.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to his sister Anne Hastie, 17 Nov 1864,

<sup>7</sup> The Steamer 'Admiral', *The Mechanic's Magazine*, 19 June 1858, 587.

<sup>8</sup> Presidential Address, *Transactions of the Institution of Engineers in Scotland*, Vol. 2, 1859, 4-5.

<sup>9</sup> James R Napier, 'On Sections of Least Resistance for ships of Limited Breadth and Draft of Water', *Proceedings of the Philosophical Society of Glasgow*, (Vol V, 1864), 217-221.

<sup>10</sup> Napier, 'On Sections of Least Resistance', 221.

objectionable, but in the *Lancefield* it has not proved so'.<sup>11</sup> An early passenger on the vessel described it as 'a most excellent vessel', but it did have its problems:

We cannot say much in praise of her appearance, and we would not much care to be on board of her as a steerage passenger, with a heavy head on sea. I think it would have improved her if the bows had been flammed out a bit, and a fuller stern aloft, but Mr James Napier has peculiar notions of his own, and could, we have no doubt, give an algebraic formula for the build of the vessel.<sup>12</sup>

Napier himself acknowledged that 'she is so very lively and rolls heavily in fair winds'. It was also rather slow, but it did prove to be economical to run both in terms of manning and fuel consumption.<sup>13</sup>

With such an unusual design and its sailing qualities rather suspect Napier was unable to find a buyer for the vessel. He acknowledged that it had 'too many economical dodges for the ship buying public who would only buy a common article at a common price' and so took it upon himself to operate the vessel on his own account.<sup>14</sup>

Napier had some experience of running a shipping company. He was one of the founding directors of the Great West of Scotland Fishery Company, a quasi philanthropic company established to exploit the growing demand for fresh fish and to provide much-needed employment in the Western Isles. The aim was to take the catch of local fisherman and transfer the fish live in the well of a steamer to markets in the Lowlands. It was established in 1856 amid much hype and having quickly raised the capital contracted with Robert Napier & Sons to build the *Islesman*.<sup>15</sup> By the spring of 1858 it was trading, but results were to prove very poor. Twice the board survived motions to wind up the company and despite operations continuing to be 'very unproductive' it managed to struggle on until the end of 1860 when it was finally would up.<sup>16</sup> Despite such an inauspicious record Napier at first put the *Lancefield* on a virtually similar trade:

The vessel then sailed from Glasgow about noon every Thursday for the Hebrides, lay in one of the lochs there from Saturday evening till Monday morning and arrived again in Glasgow on Wednesday, to recommence again on Thursday a similar voyage.<sup>17</sup>

However, the vessel was more suited to general cargo and passengers than fish. In November 1861 Napier tried a weekly service from Dublin to Glasgow, but that didn't last beyond December.<sup>18</sup> He then tried out the Glasgow Lisbon trade, making two trips in February and April 1862, bringing in a cargo of onions, but not

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<sup>11</sup> Alexander McLaine, 'On the Construction and Equipment of Vessels of War', *Transactions of the Institution of Naval Architects*, Vol. V, 1864, 176.

<sup>12</sup> T.W., 'Angling in Sutherlandshire', *Glasgow Herald*, 10 August 1861.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to John Napier, 19 Sep 1864.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Thos Nelson, Aire & Calder Navigation, Leeds, 29 March 1865.

<sup>15</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, 1 September 1856; 20 November 1857.

<sup>16</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, 19 November 1858; 3 November 1859; 7 December 1860.

<sup>17</sup> James R Napier, 'On the Incrustation of Marine Boilers', Read before the Institution of Engineers in Scotland, February 17, 1864, published in the *London Mechanics' Magazine*, November, 1864.

<sup>18</sup> *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 6 November 1861 and 11 December 1861.

making any money.<sup>19</sup> Napier was clearly struggling. He couldn't sell the steamer nor could he find a suitable trade that was profitable. It was at this point that he turned his attention to the trade between Ardrossan and Belfast.

### **The Ardrossan Belfast Trade**

The trade between Glasgow and Belfast was one of the first to be exploited by steamships. The boom in steamship traffic saw many rivals trying to establish themselves on the route in the 1820s and 1830s, but it was the firm of G. & J. Burns that came to dominate the trade, especially after being granted the mail contract in 1849.

When the railway connected the harbour of Ardrossan to Glasgow in 1840 it opened up the potential to considerably shorten the journey time between Belfast and Glasgow. Ardrossan harbour was initially developed by the 12<sup>th</sup> Earl of Eglinton in connection with a canal scheme that he hoped would take the majority of trade into Glasgow. The canal was never completed but the harbour was operational from around 1812. Further improvements and extensions were made in the 1840s to open it up to the larger steamers then operating, although it still remained relatively small and tricky for vessels to negotiate.

Despite an early attempt to run a steamship between Ardrossan and Belfast in 1841 it was not until the establishment of the Ardrossan Steam Navigation Company in 1844 that the trade became firmly established. However, by October 1855 notice was served that the service would cease and the steamers were put up for sale.<sup>20</sup>

These services had always been run in connection with the railway, but in 1855 the Glasgow and South Western Railway, which had taken over the line to Ardrossan, tried to gain powers to run steamboats on its own behalf. Their Bill was defeated in the House of Commons after objections from G. & J. Burns.

Despite this defeat they were determined to make the most of the potential of Ardrossan and in 1857 they linked up with Robert Henderson, the steamboat agent in Belfast who had served the previous Ardrossan-Belfast schemes, and John Moffat the manager of Ardrossan Harbour, to re-establish the trade. The *Adela* was built specifically for the service and was ready to take up business by September 1859.<sup>21</sup>

The railway interest in the steamer was not even thinly disguised. Adverts for the new service were placed under the railway's name and their manager of goods traffic, David Dickie, was cited as the chief agent. On the trial trip the principal guests were the owners and directors of the railway company and the first toast was to the 'Glasgow and South Western Railway and Sir Andrew Orr', the chairman of the company. William Malcomson the steamship owner from Waterford was introduced as the 'the principal owner of the ship' and he in turn responded by saying that the service 'came into their hands under circumstances to which he need not now allude'.<sup>22</sup> Clearly the railway was the chief promoter in the scheme even if they were unable to own the ship. But yet again the service proved to be difficult to crack and by

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<sup>19</sup> *Glasgow Herald* 7 & 11 March 1862, 8 April 1862. Napier later wrote 'I sailed her to Lisbon and lost there also', Letter to Earl of Eglinton, 29 July 1864.

<sup>20</sup> *Glasgow Herald* October 22, 1855.

<sup>21</sup> A chartered vessel *Cambria* operated the service from 1 June 1859 until the *Adela* took over. *Belfast News-Letter*, June 7, 1859.

<sup>22</sup> 'Trip of the *Adela*', *Glasgow Herald*, 31 August 1859.

March 1862 it was abandoned and the *Adela* was chartered more profitably as a blockade runner to the Southern States of America.<sup>23</sup>

With *Adela* gone and *Lancefield* failing to make a profit James R. Napier approached Robert Henderson in Belfast to see if he would take it off his hands, but Henderson would 'neither buy nor charter nor guarantee anything'.<sup>24</sup> Napier decided instead to run the service himself. He employed the same agents as the previous services, namely Henderson in Belfast, Robert Allison in Ardrossan and Dickie in Glasgow, and negotiated with the railway to run trains to meet with the *Lancefield's* sailing times.

The first sailing was made on May 24<sup>th</sup> 1862 and for the first year or so sailed relatively profitably.<sup>25</sup> *Lancefield* was smaller and slower but more efficient than the earlier vessels on the route which had tended to be high speed paddle steamers more suited for passenger traffic than cargo. He was able to boast that the *Lancefield* was 'paying me handsomely, solely from savings made in the fuel and wages and working expenses on a station abandoned for its losses by three preceding companies'.<sup>26</sup>

With lower costs Napier was able to make a living from a fairly meagre trade. He found that 'the voyage is so short that the labour of loading and discharging is the Chief expense. Therefore I take as much as I possibly can up on deck'. The cargoes that paid best were passengers and cattle, but he was unable to attract many of either due to *Lancefield's* poor sea keeping abilities and competition from G. & J. Burns' superior vessels sailing direct to Glasgow.<sup>27</sup> In April 1863 he noted that passenger traffic had become 'about nominal'.<sup>28</sup> Instead he carried pig iron and general cargo. He preferred not to carry coal as he considered that with general cargo it proved 'an awkward and expensive mixture'.<sup>29</sup>

The business was very fragile and it was only through undercutting the freight rates of his competitors that he was really able to make the service pay. This brought him into conflict with Robert Henderson who also had to satisfy the interests of the other steamers for which he acted as agent. However, after a few sharp words from Napier he agreed to forgo the rate fixing that had previously existed.<sup>30</sup> Napier later stated that:

If my steamer *Lancefield* had been from 30/- to 40/- per day more expensive to work the trade he [Henderson] gave me would have ceased as worthless – but the economy of my steamer saved it and having since forced on him my own views as to rates etc. etc. it has increased so as to be worth ... from £1000 to £1500 a year to me.<sup>31</sup>

No business records survive for the service, but in his letter books Napier transcribed a statement of the monies received from Robert Henderson (Table 1). Henderson was Napier's principle agent and business manager and he collated the accounts of the other agents in Ardrossan and Glasgow so the figures can be taken as for the business

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<sup>23</sup> Eric J. Graham, *Cyde Built: Blockade runners, cruisers and armoured rams of the American Civil War*, (Edinburgh, 2006), 208.

<sup>24</sup> Letter to Earl of Eglinton, 29 July 1864.

<sup>25</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, May 24, 1862.

<sup>26</sup> Letter to Carl Schmidt & Co Riga, 16 Sept 1863

<sup>27</sup> Letter to John Napier, 16 September 1864.

<sup>28</sup> Letter to Mr Johnstone, 13 April 1863.

<sup>29</sup> Letter to Robt McCracken, 2 January 1866.

<sup>30</sup> Letter to Robert Henderson, 16 September 1863.

<sup>31</sup> Letter to George Duncan, 24 September 1864.

as a whole, but exactly what they represent is unclear. The agents acted on commission, but out of their commission they needed to pay the wages of clerks at Ardrossan, Glasgow, Paisley and the owners office, which were reckoned at £11.3.4 per month.<sup>32</sup> Cartage was probably paid from their commission as well, but it is not clear whether the figures take into account the crew's wages, noted at £21.10 per week (c. £1000 p.a.) or the coals at around £500 per annum.<sup>33</sup>

	Gains per month	Sum of monthly gains		Gains per month	Sum of monthly gains		Gains per month	Sum of monthly gains
June 1862	153	153	1863	81	81	1864	322	322
July	172	325		176	257		-337	-15
August	167	492		264	521			
Sept	253	745		238	759			
Oct	131	876		297	1056			
Nov	137	1013		167	1223			
Dec	- 17	996		166	1389			
Jan 1863	83	1079	1864	104	1493			
Feb	138	1217		213	1706			
March	192	1409		317	2023			
April	91	1500		273	2296			
May	172	1672		303	2599			

*The gains of the Lancefield between Ardrossan and Belfast taken from Robt. Henderson & Sons monthly statements. From these have to be deducted insurance, depreciation and repairs and acts not paid by R Henderson & sons. By insurance and depreciation 15PC per ano, cost of vessel which repairs of 4 or 5 PC per ano. Total 20 PC.*

### Table 1. Monies received from Robert Henderson

Napier had a rather stormy relationship with his agents. He fought with Henderson in Belfast about freight rates. Allison in Ardrossan was severely admonished for not submitting his accounts on time and was threatened with dismissal and his Glasgow agent, David Dickie, was sacked, stating that 'your ideas and mine regarding the management of my steamer are so opposite that I have resolved to make a change'.<sup>34</sup>

His relationship with the Ardrossan harbour authorities was also far from harmonious. He complained to the harbour manager John Moffat: 'you did nothing or as little in my opinion as you possibly could do for the advancement of the trade'.<sup>35</sup> At one stage the *Lancefield* was badly damaged by another vessel bumping it against the quay and twice its propeller was damaged 'against a rock lying in a place where the authorities here said there were none'. He wrote to the Earl of Eglinton complaining that 'I am getting rather tired of my using Lancefield's propeller as a detector of rocks for the Ardrossan Harbour Co', and to Moffat he wrote curtly: 'deepen it at once'.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Letter to John Smith, 29 Sept 1864.

<sup>33</sup> Letter to Thos Nelson Esq, Aire & Calder Navigation, Leeds, 29 March 1865. Coal consumption was 9 cwt per hour and coal was around 10 -12 shillings per ton at this time. Assuming 8 hours steaming per day, 6 days a week gives approximately £500 per year.

<sup>34</sup> Letter to Robt Allison, 27 March 1863; Letter to David Dickie, 6 Jan 1864.

<sup>35</sup> Letter to John Moffat, 24 August 1864.

<sup>36</sup> Copy letter to Earl of Eglinton, 29 July 1864; Copy letter to John Moffat, 9 August 1864.

Despite these problems Napier was keen to expand the trade and saw the opportunity of putting on a second boat in order to provide a daily service. In July 1864 he had designed a vessel 'with special regard to the comfort of the present number of passengers and cattle, horses and pigs' and had obtained a price from the shipbuilder Barclay Curle.<sup>37</sup> Napier later explained what happened next:

My boat the Lancefield was doing well and I desired to do better by having two boats and daily communications between Ardrossan and Belfast. Neither Mr Henderson nor Mr Moffat nor any one to whom I spoke would join me except Mr Henderson's son. So I resolved to get the new boat and afterwards arrange about partners, but before ordering the new boat I wanted better harbour accommodation at Ardrossan and more convenient trains so I wrote Lord Eglinton and Mr Johnstone the Railway Manager. The answers of both were very unsatisfactory. So I went to Troon to negotiate for harbour accommodation there.<sup>38</sup>

The reason that the railway was unwilling to enhance Napier's business was that they were planning to go to Parliament in the next session to try again to get powers to run their own steamers. Napier went on to explain to the harbour manager at Troon that:

This statement has opened my eyes as to the position I have been in and will be placed in at Ardrossan. As I am now convinced that the harbour authorities at Ardrossan wish the business, my business, into the Railway Coys hands. Of course I am out as I shall not be servant to the Railway Coy working their vessels for a salary nor am I likely to contract to work their vessels for a tithe of what I can make by working my own property for myself. I am desirous therefore of coming to Troon.<sup>39</sup>

Troon was a much smaller harbour than Ardrossan. It was used largely for the shipment of bulk cargoes such as coal and pig iron and had little in the way of facilities for passengers. It too was served by the Glasgow and South Western Railway but it did not run passenger trains to tie in with any steamers there. However, Napier was keen to make Troon work. It was about ten miles nearer Ireland and the harbour authorities seemed keen to attract additional steamer traffic and trade to Ireland. For his scheme to work he needed the harbour to provide improved accommodation and for the railway to co-operate, neither of which happened. Instead Napier found himself in a fight to the death at Ardrossan.

### **Unseemly Competition**

As soon as John Moffat found that Napier had been negotiating with Troon he tried to stop him and insisted that the trade belonged to Ardrossan. A sense of the growing mistrust and animosity between the two men can be seen in Napier's letter to Moffat of 24 August 1864:

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<sup>37</sup> Letter to Mr Johnstone, 29 July 1864. He also enquired of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners if they would erect a crane at his berth so he could dispense with one on the new boat: Letter to Harbour Commissioners Belfast, 31 July 1864.

<sup>38</sup> Letter to R M Smith, 1<sup>st</sup> Oct 1864.

<sup>39</sup> Letter to James Woods, Troon Harbour, 25 August 1864.

I did not choose yesterday to say anything. I was thankful that for once in my life I did not get angry, that I had the sense to hear you out. Now however I deny the statement that the trade belongs to Ardrossan. ... I have no feeling whatever that I did anything underhand or ungentlemanly.

Napier saw an opportunity of offloading the *Lancefield* for a price that would allow him to order a vessel for the proposed Troon service and offered Moffat the vessel for £10,000 with a promise that he would give up the Ardrossan trade. The offer was valid for a week and within a few days Moffat came back with a much reduced offer and a direct provocation:

As you have already told me that you intended leaving Ardrossan immediately and as I have heard that you have made arrangements with the Troon Authorities it will not suit us to wait an indefinite period till it suits your convenience to leave us. I beg therefore to intimate that we shall have a steamer on the station on Wednesday, first, 14th inst. At that date the Belfast berth will be set apart for our boat and she will be sailed in connection with the train in order to carry on the Belfast trade.

In the meantime Robert Henderson in Belfast had proposed to Napier the creation of a joint company operating with two ships. Events were moving very swiftly and Napier had only till noon the following day to make a decision. Although Napier considered that Henderson's offer was 'no doubt one by which I would have made money with little labour and no care' he felt under threat and decided to stick to his guns.<sup>40</sup> If Troon came up with the goods he would move there with the hope that within six months he could cut off the entire Ardrossan Belfast trade. But in the short term he was determined to stick it out at Ardrossan.

Henderson instead joined forces with Moffat and they quickly chartered the *Oscar* and ordered a new vessel, the *Countess of Eglinton* for the trade. The *Oscar* was advertised to sail at exactly the same day and time as *Lancefield*. Napier promptly sacked Henderson and appointed A. C. Colvil as his new agent in Belfast, writing to him that:

By all means, prevent my boat from being put out of her berth. I shall not be driven from the station I have or shall be driven from the days I have accustomed to sail on by Messrs Henderson, Moffat and others. ... I have no intention whatever of abandoning the trade at present.<sup>41</sup>

On the 14<sup>th</sup> September both steamers duly sailed to Belfast, but on 16<sup>th</sup> September Napier placed an advert in the press intimating that 'in order to avoid such unseemly competition the *Lancefield* will be withdrawn for a week from the station, and will thereafter, until further notice, change her days of sailing and sail on the other three days of the week.'<sup>42</sup>

The reason *Lancefield* had to be withdrawn for a week was so that Napier could try and sort out the mess he had found himself in. The day before *Oscar*'s first sailing Napier's agent in Glasgow, John Younger, resigned and joined up with the

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<sup>40</sup> Letter to James Woods, 9 Sept 1864.

<sup>41</sup> Letter to AC Colvil, 14 September 1864.

<sup>42</sup> *Glasgow Herald* 16 September 1864.



rival concern.<sup>43</sup> In Belfast Henderson had used his influence to oust Napier from his usual berth. Napier wrote to the Belfast Harbour Commissioners pleading for fair play and on 20 September he appeared before the Commissioners to 'expose some more of Henderson's dirty work'.<sup>44</sup> In the end they came to a compromise whereby Henderson and Napier were to share the facilities, an arrangement which both parties felt would be inconvenient and confusing.<sup>45</sup>

Having reached a compromise in Belfast Napier returned to find a letter from William Johnstone of the Glasgow and South Western Railway stating that they would support the new service established by Henderson and Moffat 'with the concurrence of Lord Eglinton' and that they would therefore discontinue the special trains which connected with *Lancefield's* sailings. In a rather cruel twist of the knife he finished by saying the 'I can assure you that I personally regret very much that you should have been so ill-advised as to disturb an arrangement which was working so greatly to your advantage.'<sup>46</sup>

Napier was now under no illusion as to the situation he found himself in. He wrote to Colvil explaining the railway's letter and stated that 'If they or Messrs Henderson or Moffat are determined for war I am ready for them'.<sup>47</sup> He then embarked on something of a crusade on behalf of independent steamship owners, believing that 'by going straight I have innocently thwarted the plans of the crooked'.<sup>48</sup> Napier tried to bring all the influence he could bear on his and his father's contacts to try and drum up as much trade as possible:

I am fighting single handed Davie Dickie, John Younger, the Ardrossan harbour alias John Moffat, Robert Henderson & Son Belfast and the luke warmness of the Glasgow and South Western Railway if not their direct opposition – I require all the assistance I can get now.<sup>49</sup>

He quickly found, however, that his rivals were playing something of a dirty tricks campaign and that there seemed to be a secret agreement between the railway and Moffat and Henderson. Any goods not specifically marked were held over for the *Oscar* so Napier had to ask his contacts to label all goods 'per steamer *Lancefield*'. Napier also found that the steam crane was locked up to prevent him using it and was informed that *Lancefield's* gangways could no longer lie on the quay. The harbour dues of *Lancefield* were 'exorbitantly raised' far higher than the other steamers using Ardrossan and pilotage charges were also suddenly imposed. At the beginning of October the railway stopped running trains to meet the *Lancefield* and withdrew the concession of through fares for passengers, who now had to pay the higher local fares.

Napier was being squeezed dry: 'They have robbed me of my trade and would leave me nothing.'<sup>50</sup> He took up the legality of Moffat's actions and the new pilotage

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<sup>43</sup> Copy letter from John Younger, 12 September 1864.

<sup>44</sup> Letter to John Napier, 19 September 1864.

<sup>45</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, September 21, 1864.

<sup>46</sup> Copy letter from W. Johnstone, Glasgow & South Western Railway, 21 September 1864.

<sup>47</sup> Letter to A.C. Colvil, 22 September 1864.

<sup>48</sup> Letter to George Duncan, 24 September 1864.

<sup>49</sup> Letter to Messrs McFarlane, 22 September 1864.

<sup>50</sup> Letter to Victor Coates 13 October 1864.

charges with the Board of Trade, but they responded saying they knew nothing of the matter and that the Board had no powers to intervene in the case.<sup>51</sup>

Napier next sought to redress the preferential treatment that the railway was giving to Moffat and Henderson. On 22 November he submitted a petition to the Court of Session in Edinburgh to interdict the Glasgow and South Western Railway from treating the two concerns differently under the terms of the Railway and Canal Traffic Act (1854). However, the wheels of justice turned slowly and it was mid January before evidence began to be taken.

Napier was by now feeling the strain intensely. To compound matters the *Lancefield* was nearly wrecked at Ardrossan and had to be slipped and repaired, adding to his expenses and disrupting his trade even further. His resources were dwindling rapidly: 'I have got nothing but Law now to fatten me. I am going straight to pot at the present'.<sup>52</sup> He had earlier intimated that he was 'very tired at present and about unable and disinclined for work'.<sup>53</sup> By the time of the hearing in January it appears that the strain was beginning to tell on his mental health. He wrote a series of unsent spoof letters casting himself as 'the Madman', Johnstone as 'the Great South Western Lion' and Moffat as 'the Great Ardrossan Bear':

I beg to inform you that the Great South Western Lion and Ardrossan Bear have been confined for two days in Edinburgh jail Court of Session. That simple minded fool Napier who, it is said, has lately gone mad – saw them there paring their nails and betting their loss. When Sir William Johnstone asked the madman where Moffat was I am told that he said he had gone to 'Hell with the concurrence of Lord Eglinton'. When this Great Ardrossan Bear asked the Madman why in the name of all that was foolish had he quarrelled with his bread and butter the Madman was amazed at the Bear's ignorance, did he not know that on the 20 to 21<sup>st</sup> September an uncommon animal appeared for the first time in the harbour. Very likely it had come, the Madman thought, from Heaven or Hell and maybe the moon. It was an ugly tub of a beast, some called it Lancefield.

The Bear did not know what to make of it. So wrote to his friend and brother the Great South Western Lion. Sir William Johnstone enquires what he should do with this opposition beast that had dropped, as the madman said, from these other regions among them. So they agree to put their great ugly paws on the beast and crush it at once before it has time to escape to the nearest harbour, Troon, but what is very funny the beast has a very strong case and is enormously powerful and is very likely to crush up both the Great Lion and the Ardrossan bear and swallow them up at one bite, if not, at two.<sup>54</sup>

Napier, however, failed to crush them at one bite. There was no immediate result from the action at the Court of Session and so his second bite was to seek an interdict through the Sheriff Court in Glasgow. However, that court found that it did not have the power to make a decision on a case that was still being deliberated in a higher court and the case was dismissed. Napier struggled on for a few more weeks.

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<sup>51</sup> Letter to the Secretary of the Board of Trade, 12 October 1864; Letter to J H Farrer Esq, Board of Trade, 5 December 1864; Copy letter from James Booth, Board of Trade, 1 October 1864; Copy letter from J H Farrer, Board of Trade, 15 November 1864.

<sup>52</sup> Letter to J. D. Napier, 20 December 1864.

<sup>53</sup> Letter to A.C. Colvil, 24 September 1864.

<sup>54</sup> Letter not sent to Provost Barr of Ardrossan, 14 Jan 1865.

On 1 March the newly completed *Earl of Eglinton* entered service and there was now no way he could possibly compete.<sup>55</sup> After having ‘fought as long as I was able or may be a little longer’ he was forced to give up and withdraw the *Lancefield*.<sup>56</sup>

### **Aftermath**

With no source of income Napier sought to rebuild his relationship with his father. In a clearly agitated state of mind he wrote:

Regain my affection. Make it possible for me again to love you. Give me the position for which I am fitted by study, by experience, by the love of it, that position alone in the business whereby I can help myself, help you and help John.<sup>57</sup>

Robert Napier dismissed this plea citing his son’s poor state of health, but a few days later James R. again wrote asking to take over the running of the Vulcan Foundry in similarly emotional terms:

What has happened in the past has been an incessant ever present drag on all my energies both mental and physical. I have longed to be able to forget it to be in a position where I can truly love you as I once did and which I so ardently desire still to do. It is with these feelings that I submit the present proposal.<sup>58</sup>

Again nothing transpired from this proposal. The *Lancefield* was the only business asset that Napier had and he was forced to make the most of it: ‘I want to sell rather than charter the *Lancefield* – To Charter rather than have her laid up doing nothing’.<sup>59</sup> Despite his best efforts and dropping the price to £5,000 Napier could not sell the vessel and ended up scratching a living from short term charters. In July *Lancefield* went briefly to the Mediterranean and in August it took a works party from a weaving firm on a day trip down the coast.<sup>60</sup> A deal to sell *Lancefield* in December 1865 fell through after it had returned in poor condition from a ‘disappointing charter’. Napier was still trying to sell it in April 1867 by which time he had dropped the asking price to just £3,000, but there is no record of its final fate.<sup>61</sup>

The Court of Session finally came to a decision in July 1865, finding that the railway had indeed given ‘undue and unreasonable’ preference to the *Oscar* and they were interdicted from continuing in the same fashion. This was a hollow and ultimately short-lived victory. At the subsequent appeal hearing in November it was found that the Railway and Canal Traffic Act applied only to continuous communication by railway and canal and did not apply to through journeys across open seas. The Court therefore decided that the arrangements made by the railway company were ‘legal and perfectly reasonable’.<sup>62</sup> Napier further appealed to the House of Lords but his heart was no longer in the fight and it came to nothing.

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<sup>55</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 2 March 1865.

<sup>56</sup> Letter to A.C. Colvil, 4 March 1865.

<sup>57</sup> Letter to Robert Napier, 28 Feb 65.

<sup>58</sup> Letter to Robert Napier, 14 March 1865.

<sup>59</sup> Letter to Mr Gilchrist, 4 March 1865.

<sup>60</sup> *Glasgow Herald* 16 August 1865.

<sup>61</sup> *Lancefield* was not registered with Lloyd’s so cannot be traced through *Lloyd’s Register*.

<sup>62</sup> *The Scotsman*, 27 November 1865.

After his experience with the *Lancefield* Napier never again ran a business. He made a living by taking on occasional consulting jobs and touting his inventions to potential clients. In a telling letter to his friend, the Admiralty naval architect E. J. Reed, about his new patent rudder he explained that he regretted having to take out a patent for something he would not have done had he still been in the shipbuilding business, but that he could not ‘live without means nor wait till my rights as a son are restored’.<sup>63</sup>

He turned his mind very much to his scientific pursuits. He was elected President of the Institution of Engineers in Scotland in 1864 and continued to work with Rankine developing scientific theories and new inventions. In 1866 their *Shipbuilding, Theoretical and Practical* was published which drew heavily not just on Napier’s experience in designing and building ships, but also in operating the *Lancefield*. Over a number of years Napier published several papers relating to scientific observations of the design and performance of *Lancefield*, which he noted had ‘been made pretty notorious in Science and in Law’.<sup>64</sup> (**Table 2**)

Area of Investigation	Reference
Bilge pumps	James R. Napier, ‘On a Useful Addition to a Steamer’s Bilge Pumps’, <i>Transactions of the Institution of Engineers in Scotland</i> , Vol. VI, 1863, 66-67.
Incrustation of boilers	James R. Napier, ‘On the Incrustation of Marine Boilers’, Read before the Institution of Engineers in Scotland, February 17, 1864, published in the <i>London Mechanics’ Magazine</i> , November, 1864.
Design	James R. Napier, ‘On sections of Least Resistance in Ships of Limited Breadth and Draft of Water’, <i>Proceedings of the Philosophical Society of Glasgow</i> , Vol. V, 1864, 217-221.
Acidity of steam in boilers; sea keeping	James R. Napier, Presidential Address, <i>Transactions of the Institution of Engineers in Scotland</i> , Vol. VIII, 1865, 4-5.
Engine indicators	John Hannan, ‘Description of an Improved Steam Engine Indicator’, <i>Transactions of the Institution of Engineers in Scotland</i> , Vol. IX, 1866, 75-80.
Design	James R. Napier, ‘Demonstration of a Rule for Calculating the Displacement of Ships with Trochoid Water Lines and certain Forms of Midship Sections’, <i>Transactions of the Institution of Engineers in Scotland</i> , Vol. IX, 1866, 165-169.
Performance	James R. Napier, ‘On the most profitable speed for a fully-laden cargo steamer for a given voyage’, <i>Proceedings of the Philosophical Society of Glasgow</i> , Vol. VI, 1868, 33-38.
Ships’ Lights	James R. Napier, ‘On Ships’ Lights’, <i>Transactions of the Institution of Engineers in Scotland</i> , Vol. XX, 1869.

Table 2. Scientific Investigations undertaken using *Lancefield*

### Conclusion

James R. Napier was clearly no great businessman. He was crudely, although perhaps accurately described as ‘a very clever sort of inventor but ... perfectly useless in commercial matters’.<sup>65</sup> He knew and understood the shipbuilding business but he was far too caught up with his own scientific methods to pay much attention to what shipowners actually wanted. When his shipyard failed he was thrown into the world

<sup>63</sup> Letter to E.J. Reed, 1 February 1866.

<sup>64</sup> Letter to Mr Henderson, 18 December 1864.

<sup>65</sup> Napier, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, 7.

of commercial shipping with little knowledge or expertise of what was required: 'I profess to be an engineer, ship builder, mechanic and altogether out of my element as owner of the *Lancefield*'.<sup>66</sup>

With the application of a little scientific method to the *Lancefield*'s operation coupled with very competitive freight rates he was able to generate a modest profit. However it is clear that he did not have a commercial mind. He was far more at home using *Lancefield* as a test bed for scientific investigations than as a means of making money. He freely admitted that 'I cannot look over accounts. I never could'.<sup>67</sup> He relied heavily on his agents, but had such a stormy relationship with them that it was difficult to build a lasting relationship and in the end they turned against him.

Napier was also naïve in his understanding of the politics of commerce. It should not have come as any great surprise that the Glasgow and South Western Railway were interested in running their own steamers. They had already been to Parliament to seek permission and in March 1864 a House of Commons select committee investigating railway powers, including the power to run steamships, was hotly discussed in the press. At the same time the Ardrossan Harbour Bill was going through Parliament which gave it increased powers to develop the facilities in tandem with the Glasgow and South Western Railway.

His hope that 'truth and justice and straight forwardness will triumph' was equally naïve.<sup>68</sup> Napier had simply become an inconvenient obstacle to the headlong expansion of the Scottish railway empires in the 1860s, particularly their desire to extend their reach into steamer services. There is a great deal of truth behind Napier feeling that he was small private operator being crushed by the might of the 'Great South Western Lion'. Napier's irascible nature undoubtedly played a part in his downfall and it seems that the opposition were ready and waiting to seize on the slightest opportunity to be rid of him. A more experienced commercial operator could have turned the threat into an opportunity but Napier simply would not contemplate losing control of his own business to work for a salary or become a junior partner in a joint company.

The *Lancefield* business affected him deeply. His health deteriorated and he became increasingly bitter and irritable. He picked fights about such things as textbooks used in his son's school and about the suitability of certain appointments at the university. He even resigned indignantly from both the Institution of Engineers in Scotland and the Glasgow Philosophical Society over disagreements in their management. These were the very institutions which had provided his peer support and circle of scientific friends and he became increasingly isolated. His finances also suffered badly. In relation to his tax returns for 1872 he angrily scrawled 'I am in no trade or business and have no income'. He made what living he could from his contracting jobs and supplemented this with regular hand-outs from his father.<sup>69</sup>

The Glasgow and South Western Railway did eventually obtain powers to run steamboats, but not until 1891. Henderson and Moffat moved quickly to consolidate their trade and formalised their arrangement to create the Belfast and Ardrossan Steamship Company, latterly known as the Ardrossan Shipping Company. The *Earl of Belfast* joined the *Countess of Eglinton* in April 1866 to provide the daily service that Napier had originally proposed. They continued until 1882 when G. & J. Burns took over the route, which they operated, through various changes in ownership, until

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<sup>66</sup> Letter to Mr Henderson, 18 December 1864.

<sup>67</sup> Letter to Victor Coates, 13 October 1864.

<sup>68</sup> Letter to R. M. Smith, 1 October 1864.

<sup>69</sup> In a codicil to his will Robert Napier deducted £12,000 from his inheritance to reflect this fact.

1976. Napier's vision of Troon becoming the major port for Belfast finally came to fruition in 1999 although the catamarans now operating the service are a far cry from Napier's cranky little *Lancefield*.

*Acknowledgments*

I am greatly indebted to Sandra Gibbs for her tenacity and perseverance in transcribing the bulk of Napier's letter books.