

## “Mr Lyall’s boy”: the Lyall family and the Stephens Island Wren

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David Lyall (1849–1911) is credited with the discovery of the world’s only flightless songbird, the extinct Lyall’s Wren (*Traversia lyalli*). The hitherto undocumented lives of David Lyall and his family are investigated and the roles of David Lyall’s sons, Andrew Lyall (b. 1879) and William Mail Lyall (b. 1882) are discussed. Andrew Lyall, who died in 1972, is here credited with being the last person to have seen Lyall’s Wren alive.

**Keywords:** Andrew Lyall, David Lyall, extinct birds, lighthouses, Lyall’s Wren, mammalian predators, Stephens Island/Takapourewa, *Traversia lyalli*

### Introduction

The apocryphal story of ‘Tibbles’, the killer domestic cat (*Felis catus*) that single-handedly wiped out the only known flightless songbird Lyall’s Wren (or the Stephens Island Wren) on Stephens Island (Takapourewa), is well known (Galbreath and Brown 2004; Medway 2004). The collection of the corpses killed by this cat and their subsequent gifting to Walter Lawry Buller, or sale to Henry H Travers who on-sold them to the famous British naturalist Lord Rothschild, earned the lighthouse keeper David Lyall the distinction of being forever honoured with the little extinct bird’s species name, *Traversia lyalli* (Fig. 1). However, due to several unsubstantiated stories, the reputation of the lighthouse keeper and his family have taken quite a hit in the intervening 130 years.

In recent years historians (i.e. Medway 2004, Galbreath and Brown 2004) have concluded that the cat probably did not have a name, or if it did it is not recorded. These researchers also concluded that a wild population of cats became established during the building of the light and thus a lighthouse keeper’s cat did not single-handedly wipe out the world’s last population of Lyall’s Wren. Nor was it solely responsible for the extinction of the island’s unique

subspecies of the Piopio (*Turnagra capensis minor*), and exterminated the island’s South Island Saddleback (*Philesturnus carunculatus*) population.

However, the point of this article is not to rehash the facts about Lyall’s Wren but to examine what we know about the Lyall family who are honoured with not just the scientific name for this extinct bird but, in recent years, its English name.

### The Lyall Family: Lighthouse Keepers ‘through and through’

David Lyall was born at Kinnaird Head Lighthouse station (Fig. 2) in Fraserburgh, Aberdeenshire, Scotland on 7 March 1849. His father Andrew (1821–1903) was the son of a lighthouse keeper and was born at Start Point Lighthouse on Sanday Island in the Orkney Islands.<sup>1</sup> David’s mother, Agnes Souter (1829–1861) was also the child of a lighthouse keeper and was born and raised on the Isle of Man.<sup>2</sup> Andrew and Agnes married and had David whilst Andrew was keeping at the Kinnaird Head Lighthouse but by 1851 the family were stationed on the west coast of Scotland at the



**Figure 1.** Lyall's Wren as engraved by John Gerrard Keulemans. Labels 2 and 2a on the image are from the original publication and refer to adult and juvenile plumages respectively. Source Buller 1906. Reproduced from <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/54726>

Cairn Point Lighthouse on the shores of Loch Ryan.<sup>3</sup> David Lyall's life was governed by his father's postings. During his childhood, his father was also stationed at Cantick Head Lighthouse on Hoy in Orkney;<sup>4</sup> Girdle Ness Lighthouse in Aberdeenshire;<sup>5</sup> The Mull of Kintyre Lighthouse in Argyllshire;<sup>6</sup> Skervuile Lighthouse on the Island of Jura, Argyllshire<sup>7</sup> and the Rhinns of Islay Lighthouse, Portnahaven in Argyllshire.<sup>8</sup> Such was the attraction to islands and isolated places that Andrew retired to and died on the tiny Isle of Great Cumbrae in the Firth of Clyde.<sup>9</sup>

### **David Lyall: Adulthood and Immigration**

David did not apparently train or aspire to be a lighthouse keeper. In the 1871 Scottish census he is listed as a "ships carpenter (apprentice)" and as living in Peterhead, Aberdeenshire with

his aunt and uncle and his cousin William Lyall Birnie who is also listed as a ship's carpenter (apprentice).<sup>10</sup> Throughout his life, when stating his profession, David generally was called a shipwright rather than a lighthouse keeper (for example on his son's birth certificate and even his own death certificate). In September 1878 he married Orkney-born Martha Mail (1855–1922) in Bristol.<sup>11</sup> Remarkably Martha was herself the daughter of a lighthouse keeper and this fact may have determined their future profession. David may have got a temporary lighthouse position to be near his family when his father was stationed as principal keeper-at-large at the nearby Rhinns of Islay Lighthouse. David and Martha's first son Andrew was born at the small Loch Indaal Lighthouse on 27 July 1879, 31 km by road from the Rhinns of Islay.

David and his family took passage for



**Figure 2.** A contemporary image of David Lyall’s birthplace, Kinnaird Head Light. Drawn and engraved by William Daniell. Reproduced from Daniell and Ayton (1814)

**Table 1.** A list of David Lyall’s appointments whilst working for the New Zealand Marine Department (Source: New Zealand Government archive File ADOE 16618 4/4: David Lyall Employment summary).

Station	Coastline	Role	Appointment
Puysegur Point	Fiordland	Probationary	25 August 1881
Puysegur Point	Fiordland	Assistant	1 March 1882
Godley Head	Canterbury	Assistant	1 January 1885
Brothers Island	Cook Strait	Assistant	1 May 1890
Stephens Island	Cook Strait	Assistant	12 December 1893
Cuvier Island	Outer Hauraki Gulf	Principal	9 June 1896
Cape Saunders	Otago	Principal	1 November 1900
Waipapa Point	Foveaux Strait	Principal	29 November 1903
Taiaroa Head	Otago	Principal	16 April 1907



**Figure 3.** The only known photograph of David and Martha Lyall and their children (one son absent). The boy in this photo is likely to be William Lyall, only 6 years older than Elizabeth, as the older brother, Andrew, was 9 years her senior. Reproduced from <https://www.ancestry.com>

New Zealand in the Autumn of 1879 and by 25 December 1879, a David Lyall and family are found boarding a coastal steamer in Port Chalmers bound for Bluff.<sup>12</sup> Despite David's aversion to calling himself a lighthouse keeper, on 25 August 1881 he was employed as Assistant Lighthouse Keeper at Puysegur Point in Fiordland – probably the most remote lighthouse in New Zealand and at the time one of the most remote lights in the world. His salary was £90.<sup>13</sup>

Over the next 30 years David was a full-time employee of the New Zealand Marine Board (later the Marine Department) and his list of appointments is given in Table 1.

The couple stayed at Puysegur Point until 31 December 1884 (Bain 2010: 11) and their second son William Mail Lyall was born in Invercargill on 13 November 1882 during a leave of absence from Puysegur. In 1885 the family moved to the Godley Head Lighthouse Station near Christchurch City where their daughter Elizabeth Sandison Lyall was born on 18 May 1888 (Fig. 3). Marine Board records show they remained there until April 1890.

## Stephens Island

David Lyall's fame is defined by his stay on Stephens Island which sits at the western edge of the notorious Cook Strait. It had long been a goal of the New Zealand Government to establish a light there. David had been stationed at the smaller light on the nearby Brothers Island from May 1890 and he was appointed to the larger staff on Stephens Island in December 1893. The Stephens Island light began operating on 29 January 1894, with a staff of three keepers (Fig. 4). With their families and a teacher for the children there were 17 people living on the island and bush was cleared and sheep and cattle brought in to establish a farm (Lukins 1894). At this time one or more cats were also brought to the island (Galbreath and Brown 2004). We know that David was accompanied by his wife and their three children (Medway 2004). Although David Lyall is credited with having the foresight to collect the specimens brought in by cats and to forward them to Walter Buller, it is clear from Travers's account that it was in fact one of Lyall's boys (Andrew or William, see below) who took the greatest interest in this. Travers states in a letter to Rothschild:

*I did not get any specimens of the bird I went specifically for, although Mr Lyall's boy gave me a specimen that had been found just alive by the owner of the cat that had caught the others, and this his father had put into spirit.* (Correspondence: Travers, 1895, Natural History Museum Archives TM/1/16/21; United Kingdom)

This paragraph identifies another interesting issue that was pointed out by Medway (2004); it was not Lyall's cat which caught the birds but a cat belonging to one of the other families on the island.

## David Lyall: the Final Chapter

David and family left Stephens Island on 16 January 1896. As far as we are aware David did



not collect any further natural history specimens in any of his other postings. After more than 15 years of service, David was promoted to Principal Lighthouse Keeper and he began his first senior post in the warm climes of Cuvier Island in the outer Hauraki Gulf of Auckland Province in June 1896. Cuvier also had a feral cat population introduced by lighthouse keepers. However, unlike Stephens Island, the cats were introduced for a purpose, namely to control the Pacific rats (*Rattus exulans*) introduced hundreds of years earlier. Cats on Cuvier wiped out North Island Saddleback (*Philesturnus rufusater*), Tomtit (*Petroica macrocephala*), Tui (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*) and Red-crowned Parakeet (*Cyanoramphus novaezelandiae*) (Merton 1972) before they were removed in September 1993 (Towns and Broome 2003). Lyall subsequently held Principal Keeper roles at two other sites (Cape Saunders and Waipapa Point in the deep-south) before he began his role as Principal Lighthouse keeper at Taiaroa Head on the Otago Peninsula near Dunedin (Fig. 5). It is intriguing to think that Lyall may have witnessed the first arrivals of Northern Royal Albatross (*Diomedea sanfordi*) that, in later years, began to breed and thrive due to protection afforded to them by the lighthouse surrounds. However, during his tenure at Taiaroa Head his health deteriorated. He was forced to take sick leave from 14 November 1910 and took up lodgings in Port Chalmers.

On the evening of 26 January 1911, David Lyall suffered a heart attack. Although he lasted the night he died the following morning. He was buried at 3:15 pm at Port Chalmers New Cemetery on 29 January 1911.<sup>14</sup> He was 61 years old and had served as a New Zealand Marine Service lighthouse keeper for more than 30 years. On 15 March and 29 August 1911 the House of Representatives of New Zealand, through an Order in Council, granted a gratuity of £180 (the equivalent of one year’s salary) to Martha Lyall in lieu of a pension. Martha went to live with her son Andrew and his wife in Invercargill and she died there in May 1922. She is buried beside her husband in Port Chalmers New Cemetery.<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 4.** Stephens Island lighthouse at the time David Lyall was assistant keeper. The man on the right appears similar to the only existing photo of David Lyall. Thus the boy in the photograph may be either Andrew or William Lyall. Photographer unknown. Hocken Library. Hocken Snapshot; Stephens Island lighthouse. Reproduced 21 June 2021 from <https://hocken.recollect.co.nz/nodes/view/14646>. CC BY 4.0

### David Lyall’s Children

The two younger Lyalls, Elizabeth and William, died in 1930. William Mail Lyall was an engineer who lived in Dunedin all his life. He married Agnes Lawrie Kinnaird (1880–1953) in 1906 and had two girls (Iris May and Edna Melva). To his second wife, Gertrude Margaret Medlin (1892–1959), he had a son David James Lyall (1925–2017). Elizabeth Sandison Lyall also lived in Dunedin and married William Andrew Fraser (1888–1974) in 1920. They had one son Leslie. The eldest of David’s sons, Andrew Lyall, lived in Invercargill all his life. In 1908 he married Rachel Elizabeth Nichol Wilson (1880–1961)<sup>16</sup> and they had no children. In 1933 he donated a weta



**Figure 5.** Tairaroa Head lighthouse and houses, c 1910, at the time David Lyall was head keeper. Photographer: Edgar Richard Williams (1891–1983). Ref: 1/4-055534-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/30662216>

specimen and some tuatara eggs from Stephens Island to Southland Museum.<sup>17</sup> He presumably had collected these during his childhood years on the island, showing that he had been a keen naturalist in his youth. This makes it likely that he was Travers's informant, “Mr Lyall's boy”. Andrew was a crack shot winning many national competitions and was a long-time member of the Southland Rifle Association. He seems to have had several jobs including being a foreman in an engine-fitting business, but for the later part of his life was a garage proprietor. On 8 March 1972 he died peacefully at his home in Invercargill. He is buried in the Eastern Invercargill Cemetery.<sup>18</sup> With his passing probably went the last person to have seen Lyall's Wren alive.

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Endnotes**

- 1 Scotland Births and Baptisms, 1564–1950 database, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:VQQL-R8R> : 12 March 2021)
- 2 Isle of Man Births and Baptisms, 1607–1910 database, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:X5P3-2L3> : 12 March 2021)

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- 3 1851 Scotland Census; Parish: Inch; ED: 2; Page: 4; Line: 10; Roll: CSSCT1851\_215; Year: 1851
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