

AN IMMORTAL LITTLE GIRL

By Martin Gostwick

It has been a long road to make a short path. it is a journey which has touched many hearts. And it is a story about a little girl whose memory should never die. Her name: Eliza Logan Miller.

The path is a new landmark we in The Friends of Hugh Miller have unofficially named "Eliza's Path," consisting of an elegant, ornamental railing, on relaid ground at the ancient St Regulus Burial Ground, situated on Cromarty Hill on the eastern outskirts of the town. It is fitting for such a sacred site. It is soft in line, strong in form, and flows gracefully like a gentle wave up the steep slope to the tombs.

This Friends of Hugh Miller project really began all of 30 years ago, with the National Trust for Scotland's appointment of Mrs Frieda Gostwick to look after Hugh Miller's Birthplace Cottage, and Frieda's own mission to revive the reputation of the great geologist and writer.

Eliza's tragic, rapid death of a fever aged just under 17 months old (28 November 1837 - 25 April 1839) has to count as a relatively minor episode in her father's tumultuous life. He and his wife Lydia went on to have four more children, yet she has left a lasting mark in Cromarty's history.

In the 1990s Frieda began the journey, going up to Eliza's grave to tend it at regular intervals, and leaving a bowl of assorted flowers. This was definitely not in her NTS job description, since it lies not on Trust property, but on the grounds of the Cromarty Estate. The trudge up that steep gradient was always a voluntary act, but she felt compelled by Miller's own account of his and Lydia's tragic loss when she found it in his autobiography, *My Schools and Schoolmasters*.

She continued to preserve Eliza's memory after ill-health forced her early retirement in year 2000, ensuring that her story would feature in Miller House, the new museum the Trust was then planning next door to the Cottage.

LYDIA'S CAUSE

Miller House also presented a new opportunity to highlight the key role of Eliza's mother, Lydia Falconer Fraser, for which her great great grand-daughter, the late

Marian McKenzie Johnston, and her husband Henry had long campaigned. They collaborated with Black Isle-based historian Elizabeth Sutherland to publish a major biography establishing her as a substantial author in her own right.

Lydia is the centre of attention in the Miller House "family parlour," situated in what had actually been the Millers' sitting room. Her portrait, aged 22 and in love hangs over the fireplace. Her musical talent is reflected in folksong-inspired piano music. Albums carry memoirs of the family's three momentous years there, including Eliza's tragic fate.

Upstairs, in one of the two rooms where Miller studied his fossil collection, Frieda installed a window box of spring flowers such as Eliza herself had loved, with interpretation telling how the infant girl used to look out and wave to her father as he returned from work at the local bank.

The effects of these artefacts on two visitors, a retired couple from Stirling, retired child psychologist Lillemore Jernqvist, and her partner, Derek Lancastser-Gaye, were to have great rewards for the Miller family which are still with us today.

Lillemor recalled how she was filled with curiosity when she saw the flower box perched somewhat precariously on a window ledge high up on a Miller House gable end. She remembered "There was also in the Parlour a copy on a clothes horse of the dress Lydia wore in her portrait, and a studio shot of their four other children. Lydia I saw as a woman just like me who had experienced love and joy, but also great sadness and I realised what a devoted family man Hugh was."

From then on, the couple revisited the Museum for several years and struggled to climb Cromarty Hill to leave flowers for Eliza. They contributed handsomely with other donors to conservation work on it in 2015.

Lillemor's greatest contribution to Lydia's cause, was to choose her to be one of the 100 great Scotswomen featured on three great plaques in the Scottish Parliament. Her romantic dedication reads: **"The only surviving picture of her is a portrait of a young woman in love."** Lillemor appears in the permanent *Travelling the Distance* digital exhibition about the plaques at Holyrood, pictured at her request beside Eliza's grave.

Sadly, her own declining health eventually made it impossible for her to reach the grave, as did Frieda Gostwick's own loss of mobility. Their misfortune did, however, cause the Friends to undertake the "Elizah's Path" project. We *had* to improve the access to the site somehow to give the chance for all the less ambient to reach and enjoy this historic, tranquil spot..

Several features of the 16-metre long railing are especially pleasing. One is the curvilinear shapes of the rails, especially the inward incline from vertical of the top rail. They are made of mild galvanised steel, with a sober black-paint finish appropriate to a

burial site. They have already proved their worth functionally with the top rail smooth and easy on the hand.

The artistic merit lies the dog rose motif in the balusters (supports), a wild flower much admired by Robert Burns and Hugh Miller alike, and chosen for its strong romantic associations in folklore with love and purity. It is also often found in medieval heraldry, which makes it appropriate at the ruins of a 14th Century clan chiefs' chapel. It both celebrates life and mourns death.

CREDITS

The Friends itself met a quarter of the £16,000 cost. Other principal funders were the House of Fraser Foundation with £2,000 for the improved access and educational value, and £1,000 from The Highland Council (Ward Budget). Five individual donations were received of £500 each, nine of £100 or over, and five of £50; donations numbered some 21 in all.

Landscape architects LDN of Forres produced working drawings, later modified by the chosen contractor, bespoke blacksmith Sam Barlow of Mooreworks.co.uk (see other Works on his firm's website) and approved on behalf of Cromarty Estate by the landowner, John Nightingale. Highland Galvanisers, Elgin, treated the steel, and Sam assembled the sections at his workshop in Lairg, Sutherland. The new gravel path was laid by Martin Gill of Avoch.

We hope our members, like the public at large, will be able to enjoy this amenity on future visits to Cromarty, and take pride in a very tangible fruit of this charity's labours on behalf of the Miller family.