

no doubt [made her] very Miserable'.<sup>16</sup> Madalena was buried in the family plot in Wimbledon Churchyard. She had at last become a member of the clan. The tragedy was that she virtually had to die to do it.

Misery became the order of the day. David went into mourning, shedding 'many a Tear'. Young Davie, then six and the only child old enough to really know his mother, was also particularly badly affected.<sup>17</sup> On top of everything, on Christmas Day 1785 David experienced his first crippling attack of gout.

The mourning lasted two years. In 1787 David took off 'the chain my Magdalen gave me when I left Venice' and laid it and other mementoes of her aside for his son, saying that from now on he would love her memory.<sup>18</sup> They had had just eight years together. But those years were past, and having drawn a line under them, David turned to face the future.

### Childish things

After Madalena's death David needed a governess and a nanny (and indeed a wet nurse for young Madalena). He found Louisa Sabonadiere, an educated, intelligent French émigré who had fled to London to escape the revolution. He was lucky to have done so. As a friend wrote, 'I think it scarcely possible you could have met with a person in whom so many amiable qualities are united'.<sup>1</sup> Mme Sabonadiere was exactly what the children needed. She became 'like a mother' to them, and a friend and perhaps more to David.<sup>2</sup> People certainly talked, and when Richard confronted David with the 'scandalous reports' then circulating, and suggested that he might think of employing another governess, David exploded:

if I have any agreeable woman... to educate my daughters, the scandalous part of mankind... will insinuate such things... I must beg you to justify me<sup>3</sup>

Which of course is not quite a denial.

Another threat to his domestic contentment was Louisa's idealistic husband, Monsieur Sabonadiere. Although 'his friends at Paris have mostly fled or have been guillotined',<sup>4</sup> Sabonadiere made a leap of faith and returned to France to take up a position with the revolutionary regime, leaving David undecided as to whether he was 'sanguine or mad', and fearful that he might unexpectedly appear at any time, and spoil everything. Louisa had apparently ceased to care for him, and as David confided to Richard, self-interestedly, 'if he was no more it would be lucky for her'.

During the 1790s Louisa Sabonadiere lived as one of the family and under her guidance the children flourished.<sup>5</sup> David described her as 'very capable of forming the children and... very fond of them'.<sup>6</sup> Louisa gave them the kind of encouragement and unconditional affection that their father may at times have found difficult to express. She mostly had oversight of



the girls, 'Lais Demoiselle Ker', but by being there and being what she was, she must also have done much for young David, who had felt the loss of his mother keenly, and was perhaps the most brittle of the four. She also worked wonders with Sophia, whose 'Temper & indeed Happiness' improved greatly as a result of her love and example.<sup>7</sup>

*The daughters of David Ker, by Francois Xavier Fabre, Florence, 1793. (l-r) Madalena, Frances and Sophia. (Ker family)*

### Grooming the heir

Young David was also giving cause for concern. Being a boy, being the only boy, everything was different for him. Where his sisters learned accomplishments, he got a thoroughgoing education at the most prestigious school in the land. However, his progress at Eton disappointed. When his father asked a friend to test his Latin & Greek, the boy became so frightened that the man did not dare to do it. At the same time he dropped hints to his father about going into trade. This really set the paternal alarm bells ringing, being:

so unlike a well read Eton boy that... I am apt to think he has unfortunately... got nothing at Eton but the reputation of being there.<sup>1</sup>

However, David is unlikely to have been idling. If anything, he could probably have done with being more of an idler. David was a sensitive and conscientious boy, and he was being unwittingly crushed by the weight of parental expectation. In 1791 it all got too much, and at the age of twelve he had something akin to a nervous collapse in Bath.<sup>2</sup>

A marble bust of the mature David survives. It depicts him as a titan, the very picture of solidity and robustness. In life he was anything but. Poor health dogged him. As late as 1806 we find Louisa Sabonadiere