



Stevenson masterclass: The weekend ranged from Durisdeer to Ballantrae, where RLS stayed at the inn

## In the steps of the Master

UNDAUNTED by a forecast of heavy rain and October gales, 22 staunch Stevensonians assembled on the banks of the River Nith for a Master of Ballantrae weekend.

Based at Blackaddie House Hotel in Sanquhar, the event was masterminded by Nigel McMurray, whose love of the novel dates back to childhood. After a superb first-night dinner from Michelin-starred chef Ian McAndrew, Nigel posed some puzzles about the novel's locations, while Gillean Arjat considered literary influences and Ian Nimmo reflected on Stevenson's writing processes.

Friday's tour called first at Durisdeer, home of the fictional Durie family, and



House of Durie: Borgue in ruins

visiting the local parish church with box-pews dating from the time of the '45.

Durisdeer church also brought back memories to John Shedden, who once occupied the pulpit as the Rev Micah Balwhidder in a TV production of John Galt's *Annals of the Parish*.

At Irongray Parish Church, visited by Stevenson in 1873 with his father, we found the tomb of Helen Walker, the presumed original of Jeanie Deans. Stevenson wrote: 'One gravestone was erected by Scott (at a cost, I learn of £70) to the poor woman who served him as heroine in the *Heart of Midlothian*.'

Father and son later visited Dumfries, where we followed in their footsteps to the Bard's last home. Stevenson recorded: 'We saw Burns's house – a place that made me deeply sad.' But our spirits were raised at Burns's local Globe Inn, with a memorised rendering of *Tam O'Shanter* before the open fireplace.

Then it was on to Kirkcudbright, thought to be Stevenson's model for St Bride's in *The Master*. At the Stewartry Museum we viewed the light from the

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Meenister and Session Clerk

## Club conducts its own Kirk Session

ON the Sunday nine of us went to Durisdeer Parish Church for the 11.45am service, only to find it was being held in another church.

But our leader Nigel McMurray's wife Linda is a retired Methodist minister and, appointing Mitchell Manson as session clerk and choirmaster, she conducted the service there as planned.

We all sang lustily, to the astonishment of one somewhat puzzled visitor, who was happy to join in. For some of us, that inspired little service in the hills in farming country and Linda's most appropriate words was one of the most meaningful of our lives.



# A Homecoming for two Robbies

FOR a once-forgotten young poet it was a happy Homecoming, honoured in his home town by two of Scotland's greatest writers who both acknowledged their debt to his genius.

Robert Louis Stevenson and Robert Burns both paid tribute to Robert Fergusson and were anxious to ensure a fitting memorial in the Canongate kirkyard where the author of Auld Reekie lies buried following his untimely death at 24.

And in September just under 30 Club members met at the Robert Fergusson statue by the Canongate Kirk to pay fresh tribute as Ian Nimmo introduced a special Homecoming event.

At his signal the spirits of the two other Robbies appeared – John Shedden as RLS and Peter Berry as Burns – to transport us on a delightful journey of nostalgia and discovery on the Royal Mile.

It began by the gravestone of Fergusson, then moved to the nearby resting-place of Burns's muse Clarinda, followed by an amusing rendition of *Death and Doctor Hornbook* for two voices.

Heading up the Royal Mile, Ian regaled us with the history of the wynds and closes (The Playhouse and Paisley Close) until we paused in the secluded garden behind the Scottish Book Trust to hear the love poems of both writers – plus a spirited sequence from



Literary tour: John Shedden, top right, and Peter Berry, right, as RLS and Fergusson, above



Kidnapped for which the Robbies transformed into Alan Breck and Uncle Ebenezer.

At Carrubers Close the actors performed a rather tipsy A Mile and a Bittock, then on to Advocates and Anchor Closes, with a dedication to Scots at home and abroad, before crossing to the steps by St Giles described in *Edinburgh Picturesque Notes*, followed by *To a Louse*, *The Spaewife*, and *Holy Willie's Prayer*.

Last stop was outside the Writers' Museum for a powerful rendition of Dr Jekyll's Final Statement by John, rounded off with A Man's a Man for A' That, Requiem, and Auld Lang Syne.

The party then retired to Vittoria's restaurant for a splendid lunch at which the actors could deservedly wet their thrapples!

## Remembering Fergusson

EACH year the Scottish Arts Club organises a service and readings around Robert Fergusson's grave in the Canongate, with contributions on October 16 this year from Burns and Stevenson expert David Purdie.

Members of the Robert Louis Stevenson Club are always invited to attend the 11am event in memory of the young man with whom Stevenson felt such affinity, and once confided: 'I believe Fergusson lives in me'.

## Young writers inspired by Stevenson



Poetry: Ysabella with James Robertson

CLUB members were out in force for this year's presentation of awards to the young winners of our RLS Writing Competition, co-sponsored by Edinburgh Napier University.

Overall winner of the George Addis Memorial Trophy was Alexandra Lane of Banchory Academy for her short story *Hidden Skin* – an original and sensitive reworking of the Selkie myth in poetic English, with confident use of dialogue in Scots.

The poetry award was won by Ysabella Solen Arnaud of Glenalmond College, with her poem *Return to Scotland*, in

which RLS in Samoa imagines a spiritual return, with a skilful interplay of Samoan imagery and Scottish history and myth.

The presentation day, hosted by Edinburgh Napier University, also featured the Writers' Workshop with selected entrants by poet and author James Robertson, to whom we owe a great debt for his continued support. Along with the trophy and certificates he presented winners with texts by RLS and himself.

The Club is indebted also to Professor Linda Dryden and her colleagues at Napier for their support at every stage.



Winner: Alexandra with James

## Day-long journey of discovery



THE Club will celebrate RLS Day in Edinburgh this year with Stevenson's Travels, an all-day reading of Louis's travel writing at the Scottish Storytelling Centre.

Join us on November 13 for morning coffee and Edinburgh Picturesque Notes, then a stroll in Buckinghamshire before taking the boat train to Bohemian Paris. By lunch we'll be canoeing on an Inland Voyage before *Travels With A Donkey In The Cevennes*.

By early afternoon we'll be joining the Amateur Emigrant to New York and Across The Plains to California for further adventures in Monterey, San Francisco and Silverado. Finally, after a brief health trip to Switzerland, we'll embark on a last voyage to the South Seas.

This is a free, drop-by event from 11am to 6pm. To take part, email [jeremy.hodges@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:jeremy.hodges@blueyonder.co.uk)

WHEN they buried Robert Louis Stevenson 120 years ago on the summit of Mount Vaea, it was truly a labour of love for the Samoans who cleared the rainforest and carried the world's best-loved author safely to his last resting place.

Anyone who has stood by the grave, crafted from tons of concrete carried up the same steep and slippery slope, can only marvel at the dedication of the friends Louis made, nearly 10,000 miles from home in Edinburgh.

For Club member Jeremy Hodges it was the final stage of a biographical pilgrimage stretching back 20 years to when, as a journalist working in Scotland, he first began researching the life of a charismatic but complex author.

At the same time, 100 years after the death of RLS, the Robert Louis Stevenson Museum opened its doors in Samoa at Louis's last home Vailima, lovingly restored to its former glory.

To mark the two anniversaries, Jeremy presented museum general manager Margaret Silva with the RLS Club's best wishes and a gift – a special edition of *Edinburgh Picturesque Notes*, kindly donated by Club treasurer Eric Wishart.

As well as being shown around Vailima, Jeremy and his wife Christine were personally conducted to the top



Summit: Jeremy Hodges and Toetu by Stevenson's grave

## 10,000 miles, 120 years from home

of Mount Vaea by the patient and courteous Toetu, stretching out a helping hand and fanning them with banana leaves!

It was a hard slog, repeated by numerous Samoans in 1914 when the ashes of Stevenson's wife Fanny were carried up to be interred in the grave with her beloved husband.

At the summit in 2014, Toetu sang a Samoan version of Requiem, to which Jeremy responded with the familiar words set to a Scottish air: 'Home is the sailor, home from sea, and the hunter home from the hill.'



Edinburgh: Margaret Silva with Picturesque Notes



# Cummy and the Duchess

THE day is Wednesday, August 19, 1908, and Alison Cunningham sits outside Swanston Cottage receiving an important visitor – the young Duchess of Sutherland in a magnificent hat.

Cummy was 90 years of age at the time and well used to receiving Scotland’s great and good at her door during those twilight years. Two years after the picture was taken, Cummy took a fall, broke her leg and died soon afterwards.

But why did the Duchess visit her and what were the circumstances? What was the connection? What was the conversation?

Walter Blaikie, who had Cummie as his nurse before she went to work for the Stevensons, provided the answer in his contribution to I Can Remember Robert

Louis Stevenson. He recalled: ‘In her later days she became very deaf and could only communicate with strangers in writing. She always carried a pencil and note-book [clearly visible in the picture] for this purpose and became very proficient in this one-sided form of conversation.

‘She was much lionized, chiefly by American visitors who came to visit Cummy and rather gushed over her. It did not seem to turn her head, she seemed more amused and amazed than flattered.

Among other visitors was the Duchess of Sutherland, who was photographed along with her.

“Look at that, Mr Walter,” she said. “Fancy me being photographed with a duchess and me sitting while she’s standing.”



## Funding for RLS poetry in motion

THE ‘Walk with RLS’ and Poetry Trail at Colinton will be unveiled on October 25, with thanks to the RLS Club for its recent cheque for £400.

The money goes to Colinton Community Conservation Trust which has put up plaques along the walk down the Long Steps from the decorative arch, featuring poems from A Child’s Garden of Verses.

Our picture shows Pat Watt receiving the cheque from Club treasurer Eric Wishart at the New Club, with Neil Ross looking on.

### HAPPY BIRTHDAY, IAN

THE newsletter could not pass up the chance to congratulate its former editor Ian Nimmo on his recent 80th birthday, and to wish him and Grace every happiness in their new life together in Fife.

## Ballantrae Country

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Muckle Ross lighthouse on the Solway, designed by Stevenson’s father, along with various documents.

Across the firth we inspected the atmospheric ruins of Borgue House, possibly a model for the Durie home, built for the Blair family in 1689.

Today its gaping windows and cheerless fireplaces lie open to the elements but through thinning trees and pouring rain, white horses racing shoreward amid leaden-grey waves, you could imagine Captain Crail’s free-traders landing their contraband.

Back at the hotel, John Shedden and Peter Berry entertained us after dinner with a rendition of Ephraim Mackellar and the Master aboard the *Nonesuch*, followed by a BBC Radio Scotland recording of Jack in the same role.

On Saturday the sun broke through and in our coach we followed Stevenson’s 1876 six-day Winter’s Walk in Carrick and Galloway, from

Ayr south along the coast to Stranraer, then east by Glen Luce and Kirkcowan to Wigtown, whence he returned to Edinburgh by train. Only the first part of his trip survives in the essay.

We passed the ruins of Crossraguel Abbey and the castle in Maybole, then on to Turnberry where, as Stevenson wrote, Ailsa Craig loomed ‘like a refraction, magnified and deformed of the Bass Rock’.

In Ballantrae, where Stevenson stayed at the King’s Head, the landlord regaled us with tales of smuggling. Out in the bay the breakers rolled in as we sped on through moorland and hilly pasture to Wigtown and its alluring bookshops.

After dinner back in Sanquhar we heard a recording by the American musician Rita Leonard of her ballad, *The Heart of Ballantrae*, and a convivial weekend was rounded off with John Shedden’s unique rendition of *Ticonderoga*.

**GILLEAN SOMERVILLE-ARJAT**

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