

About the Book

As a best-selling novelist and respectable married man, Robert Louis Stevenson was haunted by memories of his earlier life in what he called the 'lamplit, vicious fairy land' of Edinburgh. A well-meaning Victorian editor would delete the word 'vicious', the first in a string of small suppressions and omissions that led to Louis being portrayed by many biographers as a saintly invalid who could do no wrong. This book attempts to remove the blue pencil and uncover the true, complex, charismatic but also maddeningly secretive genius whose work from *Treasure Island* to *Jekyll & Hyde* is still widely enjoyed today.

Anyone writing a new version of Stevenson's life has a giant totem pole of eminent shoulders on which to stand. I must thank and give due credit to all my predecessors, especially Ernest Mehew, whose painstakingly annotated, definitive Yale edition of Stevenson's letters is essential to our understanding of such a complex and charismatic character.

While recent biographies have chronicled Stevenson's last few years in the South Seas in considerable detail, I felt there was more to be said about Louis before he became an invalid, and about the Victorian city of Edinburgh - the 'lamplit, vicious fairy land' which never left him, haunting his imagination and inspiring his work to the end. Through a series of flashbacks I have sought to link the established writer in Samoa, living on his memories, with the struggling artist of the 1870s before achieving international fame. This involves a modicum of time travel for the reader, beginning with Stevenson's death in Samoa and ending with his final departure from Scotland, but I have tried not to make the journey too confusing.

Finally, a word about fact and fiction. While good fiction and good biography must be true to life, biography is obliged to be true to the facts also. Yet merely stringing together facts will not make a character live. For this, the biographer must tell a story that interprets the facts without resorting to fiction. The one part of the book where I have knowingly written fiction is the *Prelude*, where I wanted to recreate 'the walk down from Queen Street' into low-life Edinburgh. While this is a journey Louis made many times, the night I describe is a composite picture, drawing on as many contemporary records as I could find. It is the only place where I put words into his mouth. I wanted also to bring to life the conversation of Bob Stevenson, by all accounts a brilliant talker who could put even Oscar Wilde in the shade. Since Bob never committed any of his fantastical monologues to paper, I have drawn on the

memory of HG Wells, who knew Bob well and recreated one his brilliant flights of fancy in the novel Tono-Bungay, which I have lifted verbatim.

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