



## A Centennial year that nearly never was

THE past year has not been a normal year for the Club – and not just because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Last year's AGM had ratified the nomination of Alan Taylor as our chairman for the following three years, chosen as someone well experienced to oversee publication of the Club's forthcoming Centennial book.

At the first meeting of the Executive Committee he demonstrated his energy and enthusiasm to get the project underway – so it was totally unexpected when in September last year he announced he felt unable to continue. This left the Committee at a loss as how to proceed, but the situation was partially resolved after I agreed to act meantime as Acting Chairman and Elaine Greig as Minute Secretary.

The remainder of 2019 then proceeded more or less as normal, with a visit to the National Library of Scotland, a successful series of events around Robert Louis Stevenson Day with Club members giving readings of Stevenson's poems at the Edinburgh Writers' Museum, and our well-attended Annual Luncheon with the Lord Provost in attendance and the address given by Professor Penny Fielding.

We held two events in December – a thorough and fascinating account of the extraordinary life of Stevenson's mother by Alison Reid, aided by Ailene Hunter, and an 'RLS at the Movies' event at The Pear Tree, the well-known student retreat near Edinburgh's George Square. Two films, both starring Michael Caine, were shown – a swashbuckling version of *Kidnapped* and a rumbustious *The Wrong Box*.

Our Centennial Year began with a Drinks Reception for members of the Executive Committee and several past office bearers, held in the The Refinery in South St Andrew Square, the exact site of the Club's inaugural meeting at the Goold Hall in 1920, followed by a performance at the Scottish Storytelling Centre by our own



### Notice any resemblance?

**THE wide-set eyes and elfin expression seem strangely familiar, but what does this glamorous young woman have to do with RLS? There were in fact two best-selling novelists in the Stevenson family, but Dorothy Emily, daughter of Louis's cousin Davie, is less well-known today. Rediscover her in our special feature on Page 4.**

Jack Shedden, supported by Peter Berry and Lisa Strausz, of 'A Tribute to Robert Louis Stevenson' written by Jack.

But after such a promising start, our events programme was brought to a sudden halt when the UK Government announced a total lockdown throughout the country in an attempt to stem the spread of the virulent coronavirus. All of the activities planned for our Centennial Year had to be cancelled and arrangements for publishing the planned Centennial Book also had to be put on hold.

Also, it is with great regret that I have to report that the Executive Committee came

to the inevitable conclusion last month that this year's Annual Luncheon should also be cancelled. The Balmoral Hotel has agreed to transfer our reservation to RLS's birthday on Saturday November 13, 2021.

But there is some good news to end with – for Stevenson Week (November 9-14) the Robert Louis Stevenson Club will be moving online – details elsewhere in this newsletter. Despite the disappointments our Centennial Year had its moments, and we look forward to members meeting up again in 2021.

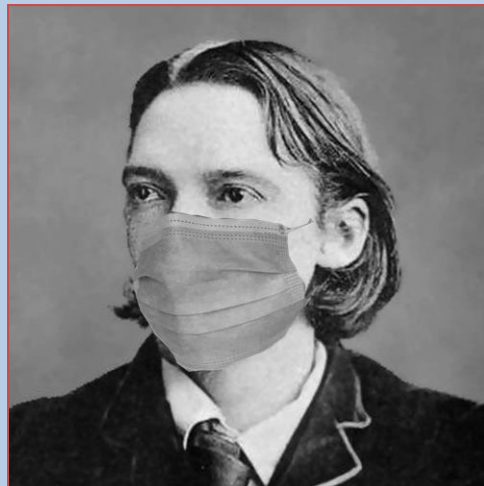
**MITCHELL MANSON**



## Our celebrations continue online

ROBERT Louis Stevenson was far too vibrant a force to be defeated by a virus and, although the present pandemic has forced cancellation of the annual RLS Day programme of events in Edinburgh and elsewhere, the celebrations will be staged online.

These will include readings by a selection of Stevenson lovers worldwide, brought together by Club member Martin White in



*Louis in lockdown: But still being celebrated an hour-long video to be released online during Stevenson Week in November.*

Louis's birthday, November 13, will see the release of a presentation on the author's life by Club member Jon Cossar, moved online after the event in Edinburgh had to be cancelled.

Your point of reference to see these, along with a collection of unusual items relating to Robert Louis Stevenson, is the RLS Day 2020 website at <https://rlsday.wordpress.com>

This will be updated regularly with links to all the online items as the list grows, so please keep checking the website between now and November 13.

Anyone with an item or event they have posted online and would like to share with Stevenson lovers via the website should email [robertlouisstevenson@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:robertlouisstevenson@blueyonder.co.uk)

As Louis himself reflected: 'It is better to live and be done with it, than to die daily in the sick-room.'

# Inside Skerryvore

IT was the first proper home that Robert Louis Stevenson and his wife Fanny had together, and the house where he wrote two of his greatest stories – but little is known of Skerryvore, the villa in Bournemouth where the couple lived from 1885 to 1887.

Bought by Louis's father as a wedding gift to Fanny, Skerryvore welcomed a string of famous visitors and would probably be preserved today as literary tourist attraction – had it not been destroyed by a wartime bomb in 1940.

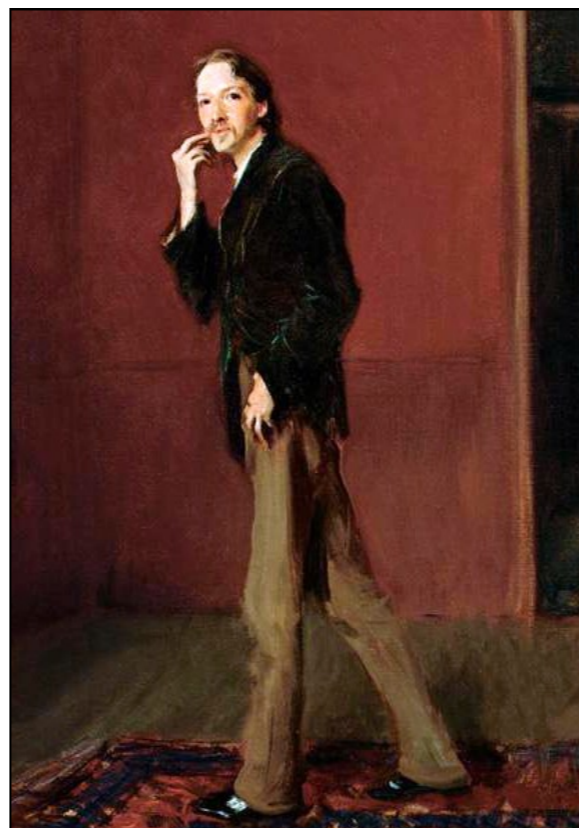
All that remains of the house where *Kidnapped*, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *A Child's Garden of Verses* were written are the foundations and some plans discovered recently by Michael Stead of Bournemouth Libraries.

Now Stevenson scholar Professor Richard Dury has pulled these together with various eye witness accounts to bring to life the interior of the Stevensons' home where various visitors called, including the author Henry James – mistaken by the maid for a carpet salesman.

The plans, drawn up for Captain Best, the previous owner of the house in Alum Chine Road, show a new bay window overlooking the garden and an enclosed porch, complete with WC and some pictures by the Stevensons' American artist friend Hiram Reynolds Bloomer.

It was here that the Stevensons' star-struck young neighbour Adelaide Boodle called with her mother in great trepidation and rang the bell, which appeared to be faulty, 'and in that hospitable porch, all prepared with seats, we had to wait for several minutes and finally to pull a second time'.

Dury's researches include inventories of the décor and contents of the main rooms, including a 'blue room' and



*Red room: John Singer Sargent's portrait of RLS*

a 'red room', the latter being the dining room where the society artist John Singer Sargent painted Louis in characteristic animated pose, pacing up and down as he spoke to his guests.

Dury's researches include inventories of the décor and contents of the main rooms, including a description by



the critic William Archer of the 'buccaneering weapons' on display in the dining room 'some of which were presented to Mr Stevenson as having belonged to Pew and Long John Silver'.

In conclusion, Dury muses: 'If we visit the site of Skerryvore today, the stones might at first seem uneloquent, but we need to use a little imagination, stand in the space behind the south-west bay window where the drawing room was (easy to identify), and think hard that it was in the bedroom above this that Stevenson wrote two masterpieces both published in 1886, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Kidnapped*.'

To read Dury's full findings on Stevenson's Bournemouth visit <https://edrls.wordpress.com/2020/06/18/stevensons-bournemouth/>



*Music legend: Sir Paul McCartney*

## Famous names inspired by RLS

OUR Centennial volume of tributes to Robert Louis Stevenson by people whose lives or work he has influenced continues apace, despite setbacks caused by coronavirus.

These included a change of publisher and a year's delay in publishing the book, which was due to be launched on RLS Day this year. It is now due to be produced by publishing students at Edinburgh Napier University and published next year by Merchiston Press.

Fascinating contributions come from all quarters, from Sir Paul McCartney and author Val McDermid, both inspired by

*Treasure Island*, to Inspector Rebus creator Ian Rankin confessing that without *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* he might never have written his best-selling novels.

Other contributions come from all walks of life, from eminent lawyers to the First Minister, plus critical assessments by the world's top Stevenson scholars.

But some of the most revealing come from ordinary people, Club members and otherwise, who share their personal reasons why Stevenson will always hold a special place in their hearts.

This book is a long-awaited treat in store.



*Best-selling author: Val McDermid*

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### New French twist on Travels With A Donkey

A NEW French film inspired by Stevenson's *Travels With A Donkey* sees a young teacher called Antoinette hiking across the Cevennes in search of her married lover, with a donkey called Patrick as her companion.

The romantic comedy follows the route taken by Louis and Modestine the donkey in 1878, when his married lover Fanny Osbourne had returned to California and he had no idea how their affair would end.

To read a review and view a clip, visit <https://cineuropa.org/en/video/rdid/389261/>

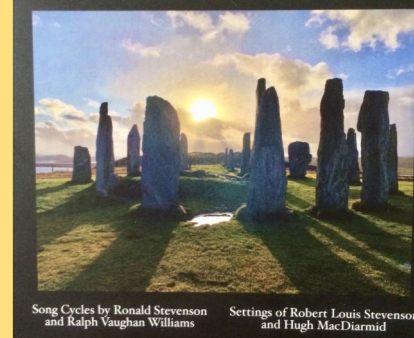
### Walking with Louis

CLUB member Martin White is putting the finishing touches to two new audio walking trails following in Stevenson's footsteps around Edinburgh.

Martin is working on the project with the leading audio tour providers VoiceMap. You can read more about their tours at <https://voicemap.me/>

### Songs of Stevenson

Brian Bannatyne-Scott (Bass)  
Jan Waterfield and Alan Jacques (Piano)



Song Cycles by Ronald Stevenson and Ralph Vaughan Williams  
Settings of Robert Louis Stevenson and Hugh MacDiarmid

A CANCELLED highlight of our events programme this year was a Song Recital including RLS poems set to music and performed by soloists including the award-winning bass Brian Bannatyne-Scott.

But the Ralph Vaughan Williams settings of *Songs of Travel*, and a *Hills of Home* song cycle with music by Scots composer Ronald Stevenson, can be enjoyed on CD, available from Amazon at £11.99.

### CONTACTS

RLS Club Contact: Mitchell Manson,  
17 Huntingdon Place, Edinburgh, EH7  
4AX. Tel: 0131 557 1933

Email: [mitchellmanson@btinternet.com](mailto:mitchellmanson@btinternet.com)

RLS Club News Editor:

Jeremy Hodges, 21 Russel Street,  
Falkirk, Stirlingshire, FK2 7HS.  
Tel: 01324 613072

# Discovering DES, the literary cousin of RLS

**DOROTHY** Emily Stevenson, born in 1892, was a best-selling novelist who wrote almost a book a year from the 1930s onwards, when she found her first success, until a few years before her death in 1973.

Known as DES, she was a relative of Robert Louis Stevenson and like her namesake grew up in Edinburgh. She was the wife of an army officer and a mother, when these roles together constituted a full-time job in her upper-middle class world, yet she still managed to produce 45 books with worldwide sales of seven million.

As a child, she had already been discouraged by her family when she told them she hoped to become a writer. Her father was David Alan Stevenson who, unlike his cousin RLS, became a lighthouse engineer and joined the Stevenson family firm. When he learned of his daughter's ambitions, he refused to send her to university, saying he did not want a 'blue stocking' (that is, an intellectual woman) in his family.

'My father was a first cousin of Robert Louis Stevenson and they often played together when they were boys,' she wrote in an autobiographical sketch, found after her death. 'So it was that from my earliest days I heard a good deal about "Louis" and, like Oliver Twist, I was always asking for more, teasing my father and my aunts for stories about him.'

She began writing at the age of eight, and created a hideout to make this possible: 'My head was full of stories and they got lost if I did not write them down,' she said. 'So I found a place in the box room between two large black trunks with a skylight overhead and I made a little nest where I would not be disturbed. There I sat for hours – and wrote and wrote.'

What a wonderful picture this gives us of a writer – with stories literally bursting from her brain – and I never would have encountered it, nor the author herself, had it not been for the coronavirus pandemic, which closed public libraries throughout California.

Desperate for reading material, I began to forage for books in those wooden, free-standing, Little Free Libraries full of used books people have placed in front of their homes. In a Little Free Library in Carmel, California, I found the curiously titled *Miss Bunclie Married*, a paperback reissue of a 1936 book by Dorothy Emily Stevenson.

Intrigued, I took it home and discovered a deft comedy of manners about a young writer from an English village. It was so funny, at one point I had to set it down: I was laughing so hard I could no longer see. When I researched the author, I learned of her familial connection to RLS. I immedi-

ately contacted Mitchell Manson, a retired geneticist who under normal times is a docent at the Writers' Museum of Edinburgh and knows about RLS. I met Mitchell in 2018, when he spoke to the Robert Louis Stevenson Club of Monterey. I found he, too, was unfamiliar with DES and delighted to hear of my discovery. Was it

ready, plunged into *Miss Bunclie's Book*, the prequel to *Miss Bunclie Married*. The style is a bit like Jane Austen – if Austen's books could have been co-authored by a humorist like PG Wodehouse.

The plot was about a writer, which made it doubly interesting. *Miss Bunclie's* publisher, Mr Abbott, ponders that 'he had never before read a novel about a woman who wrote a novel – it was like a recurring decimal, he thought, or perhaps even more like a perspective of mirrors such as tailors use, in which the woman and her novel were reflected back and forth to infinity. It made your brain reel if you pursued the thought too far, but there was no need to do so, unless you wanted to, of course. So much for the main theme.'

A few of DES's most popular titles began to be rediscovered in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When her 1934 novel, *Mrs Tim of the Regiment*, was reissued in 2009, the *New York Times* gave it a rave review: 'Miss Stevenson has spiced this tale of British army life with unobtrusive, effortless wit, which often proves deceptively sharp.'

In 2011, her granddaughter, Wendy Simpson, found a box in the attic of the family home in Moffat in the Scottish Borders that held a number of unpublished DES manuscripts. Since then, four of these novels have been released along with a fifth book, appropriately titled *Found in the Attic*, using other material DES stashed away.

More than 40 of her books are now available on Amazon in various digital formats. Like RLS, DES has inspired fans around the world. Hers call themselves 'DESSies' and discuss her work online and at regional gatherings. It is an amazing afterlife for a novelist who has been dead for almost half a century and lies buried in the churchyard in Moffat with her husband, Major James Reid Peploe.

He gets top billing on the headstone, ahead of 'his wife Dorothy Emily', but below this, almost as if in parentheses, are the words 'Authoress DE Stevenson.' It seems appropriate – and just a little bit funny – that this witty writer should receive this footnote on her final citation.



*Witty author: Dorothy Emily Stevenson*

nature or nurture, I asked him, that produced two such successful authors in two generations of one family? He pointed out that her relationship to RLS – first cousin, once removed – meant she would have shared 6.25 per cent of his DNA.

'Not very much, you say,' he added. 'But then perhaps just enough to share some characteristics.'

He thought it more likely she was inspired by the stories and success of RLS and his relationship to her family.

We learned that Edinburgh City of Literature Trust had installed a commemorative plaque in 2016 to mark her childhood home in the city, and Mitchell immediately went out to photograph it at 14 Eglinton Crescent in the New Town.

Once my local library in Silicon Valley reopened, I learned it had copies of six DES titles. Feeling like a glutton, I put in reservations for all of them, and when they were