



Celebrating at last

AFTER 27 long, drawn-out months, the Club was at last able to rise above the Covid pandemic and hold an Annual General Meeting in Edinburgh on September 4.

Those attending were able to approve the accounts presented by our Treasurer Jim Wilkie, and to hear various reports on the past year.

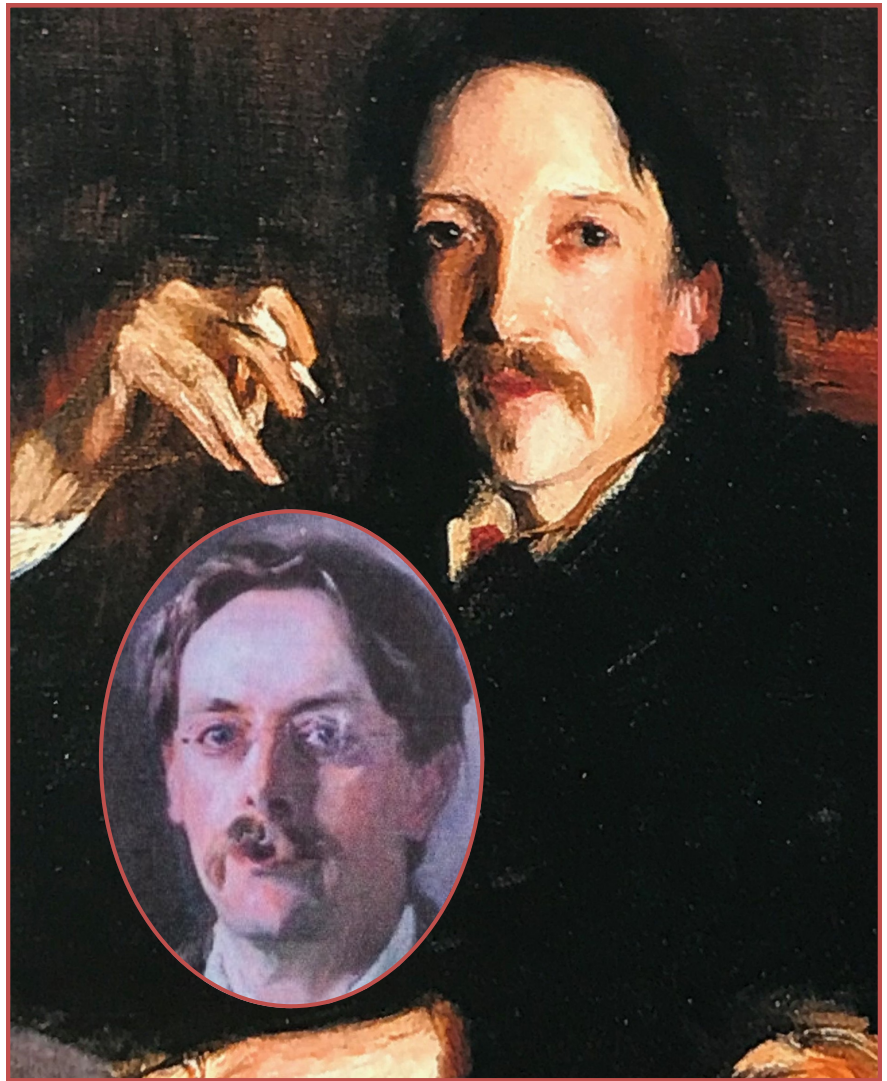
It was also an opportunity to consider and approve membership of the Executive Committee and to elect a 'fit and proper' person as Chairman of the Club. As I had served as Acting Chairman over the past two years I was delighted to receive the backing of the meeting to continue in office and I thank all those who supported my nomination.

We can now make preparations for our special Centennial luncheon, postponed from last year, in the Holyrood Suite of the five-star Balmoral Hotel – formerly the North British Hotel where the Club held its first commemorative meal on Stevenson's birth date in 1920.

I have before me one of the original table menus signed by several of the great and the good, including Professor James Young Simpson, great-nephew of the pioneer of chloroform anaesthesia.

The proposer of the principal toast to RLS was his friend Edmund Gosse, poet, author and critic, who spoke of 'the Club so energetically founded and so sympathetically supported'. Gosse went on to observe that he did not think Edinburgh sufficiently appreciated that it had 'produced from its midst the most beloved of all authors of our time'.

Our first speaker on Saturday November 13, giving the toast to the City of Edinburgh, will be former BBC journalist Allan Little, latterly the Corporation's Special Correspondent on the



Friends: RLS and Edmund Gosse, both painted by John Singer Sargent

Scottish Independence Referendum and prior to that its African Correspondent.

Giving the principal toast 'to the memory of Robert Louis Stevenson' will be Professor Emeritus Rory Watson of the University of Stirling, a well-known Scottish poet and currently co-editor of the *Journal of Stevenson Studies*. We look forward also to ending our proceed-

ings with a song and a poetry reading from two outstanding young performers.

I myself am greatly looking forward to members meeting again in person, guided by the hotel's Covid precautions. Fuller details are in the enclosed form, and I hope to see as many of you as possible for our long-awaited day of celebration.

MITCHELL MANSON

A pilgrimage in Louis's footsteps

OUR first outing since the easing of Covid restrictions revived the annual pilgrimage to Swanston, made by members of the newly-formed Robert Louis Stevenson Club in the 1920s.

This took us along the Braid Valley Burn to Swanston, continuing later to Colinton, and was the first outing we had been able to make to celebrate the founding of our Club a century ago.

On one of the early pilgrimages, an address was given in the Swanston Schoolhouse by author and RLS biographer Rosaline Masson, sister of Flora Masson, a friend of RLS in the 1870s.

On this year's pilgrimage, Miss Masson's address was recreated from records in Edinburgh Central Library by Club member Dr Dora Cossar, quoting her observation that despite Louis's travels worldwide 'it is here, in this little cup in the Pentlands, with the ever-changing Scottish skies over our heads and the caller Scottish air in our faces, with the black rooks cawing and the white gulls screaming, it is here that we are nearest to Stevenson and to the best that was in Stevenson...'

Dora explained that when Stevenson's father took the lease of Swanston Cottage in 1867, the suburbs of Edinburgh had yet to begin the creep up the hill from the toll at Morningside. There were no buses and certainly no ring road – RLS would journey there on foot, often by the path we had just walked, or sometimes in the family carriage.

Miss Masson recreated 'a July day when the Stevenson carriage started as it did every morning, to take Stevenson père to his office, and any of the family



Being Miss Masson: Dora Cossar at Cummy's home by Swanston cottage, top

or visitors who wanted to go into town, and Louis to his classes or other ploys.

'On this fateful July day, it took him to Parliament House to his examination for admission to the Faculty of Advocates.

'At the little gate that used to be at the end of the narrow footpath, then the only entrance to Swanston, two laughing girl visitors leant, and one slipped off her shoe and threw it after Louis for luck. Louis leapt from the carriage, secured the little slipper and drove off waving his triumph.'

It was 1875. Stevenson passed his examination, but this was a watershed in his life as he abandoned the law and concentrated on his chosen art. His parents had accepted his desire to be a writer and his father agreed to support him financially. His years at Swanston inspired much of his writing, and his love of the

hills and countryside is demonstrated in poetry and prose.

In 'Pastoral' he writes of 'that nameless trickle that springs in the green bosom of Allermuir and is fed from Halkerside with a perennial teacupful, and threads the moss under the Shearer's Knowe and makes one pool there, overhung by rock, where I loved to sit and make bad verse.'

He was also inspired by the tales of John Tod, known locally as the 'Roaring Shepherd' because of his loud voice and temper. Stevenson initially antagonised him by walking his dog through the sheep, but he mended his ways and they became firm friends.

Miss Masson moved forward four years in which Louis 'had rough-hewn his life irrevocably. He was standing had he known it, on the edge of a huge

chasm. And on the edge of that future, he was here at Swanston alone with Henley, and full of the joy of writing creative literature – of literary comradeship and sympathy. One night, here in the little cottage, they finished Act III of their "Deacon Brodie" play... It was a mad night, my masters – and the stars above.'

Finally Dora gave us Miss Masson's account of the married Louis visiting Swanston shortly after his father gave up the lease on the cottage: 'Swanston was no longer the Stevensons' summer home: it was let to strangers. Louis Stevenson, a confirmed invalid, a married man, came as a mere stranger.

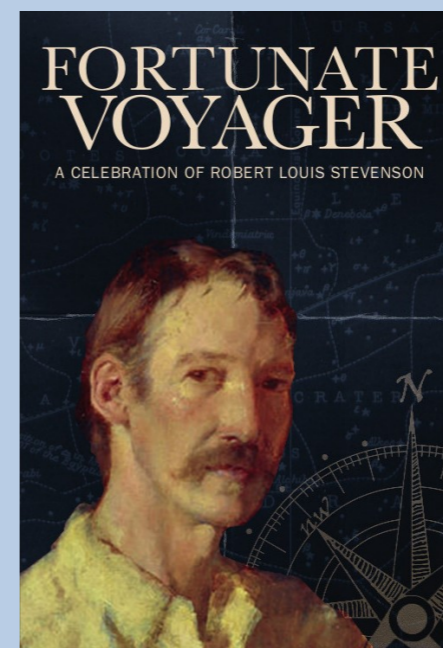
'He had brought his wife to see the place. It did not belong to the years she could claim – she was no part of it. She sat indoors talking to the hosts and Stevenson slipped out alone...

'Presently she went out to her young husband, and she found him. He was standing on the knoll above the quarry among the firs, oblivious of the present, lost in his dreams, looking – and it was for the last time – at the Hills of Home. And so she turned and left him there.'

Miss Masson did not mention the presence of Cummy, then living with her brother in the Waterman's cottage. She and Fanny would remain friends until Cummy's death, when Fanny paid for her headstone in Morningside Cemetery.

Dora ended her address by calling on John Shedden to recite RLS's poem 'Ille Terrarum', written in Lowland Scots with the Latin title taken from a line by Horace: 'This corner of the earth pleases me more than any other.'

That, Dora concluded, says it all.



Book now for an unbeatable offer

FORTUNATE VOYAGER, the Club's special Centenary volume of essays showing how Stevenson continues to inspire people from all walks of life today, is already attracting interest with more than 100 members taking advantage of our pre-publication offer.

Contributors to the book range from authors such as Ian Rankin, Val McDermid and Michael Morpurgo to eminent academics, politicians and pop royalty, with a message from Sir Paul McCartney.

To order copies with a £2 discount on the £9.99 cover price, plus free postage, contact Club membership secretary Tom Murison, email tamurison@hotmail.com or by letter to 19/13 Roseburn Maltings, Edinburgh EH12 5LL. Send no money at this stage, as you will be contacted with payment details once the book is printed, when you will also confirm your postal address.

All orders received from members by the end of October will qualify for our special pre-publication offer, after which the book will go on sale through bookshops and online at the full price of £9.99 plus postage.

Just the ticket to save Vailima

EVERYONE will have their own store of cherished memories, some purely private others semi-public, and each individual will enjoy ranking them in some hierarchy of their own making. I offer only one of my own favoured memories, the experience of first seeing Vailima, Robert Louis Stevenson's home in Samoa.

The purchase of the flight from Melbourne to Samoa, where my wife and I were staying, was obstructed by the young lady in the travel agency who endeavoured to convince us of the superior charms of Fiji. She was not initially moved by the information that Samoa had been the home of RLS since she had never heard of him, but being of the internet-savvy generation she Googled him and came up with the news that he was author of *Treasure Island*. This gave us authorisation to make the trip.

The sight of Vailima was enriched by associations: Mount Vaea, where Stevenson is buried, glowers overhead; the road up was the one he had taken with his horse, Jack, from his home to Apia, and the beautifully tended lawn and gardens were largely those laid out by Fanny, an indefatigable botanist and gardener. RLS assisted, telling Sid-



Empty house: Vailima has lost its visitor income Colvin that 'nothing is so interesting as weeding'. He called Vailima as 'a home for angels'.

The angels are still in residence, but they are troubled. The house is a museum, lovingly supervised by Margaret Silva, who escorts visitors around and may delight them with her singing of 'Under the wide and starry sky...'. At least she did so until the coronavirus struck, the borders were closed, cruise ships dropped Samoa from their itinerary and visitors no longer came. The impact on income indispensable for Vailima's upkeep has been devastating.

The future of the house-museum itself is guaranteed for the next ten years by a Foundation established by two American benefactors, Rex Maugham and James Winegar, both of whom sadly died this year – but running costs are separate and here is the problem.

There being no tours of the house and no sales in the shop, there is no income stream to cover day-to-day expenses. The present appeal is being made to RLS enthusiasts to ensure the smooth running of Vailima and to keep available the experience of visiting. You are invited to make a contribution to the RLS Club account, specifying that it is intended for that purpose. Thank you.

Make your donation payable to Robert Louis Stevenson Club. For bank transfers use sort code 83 20 02, account number 00234613, adding your name and the word Vailima as the reference. Cheques to treasurer Jim Wilkie, 59 Pentland View, Edinburgh EH10 6PY.

JOSEPH FARRELL

RLS DAY



Keeping Robert Louis Stevenson Day alive

THE challenge of keeping RLS Day alive as an annual celebration of Stevenson's life and work continues this year as the country emerges slowly from the effects of the Covid pandemic.

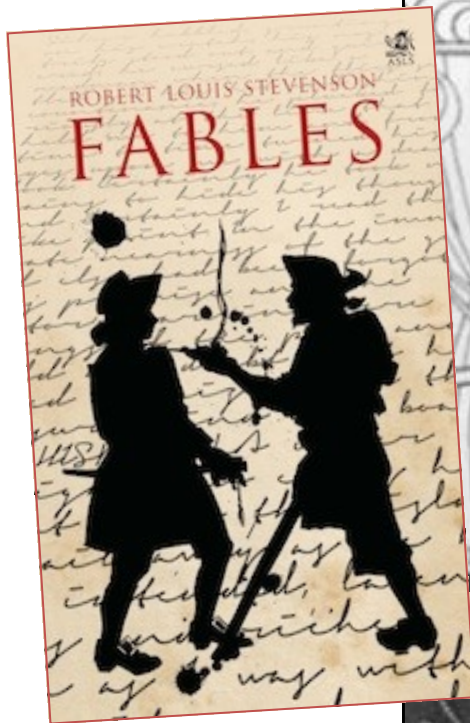
Last year's RLS Day had to be staged online as the normal venues shut their doors to public gatherings, and some of this year's events will also be virtual rather than physical, while reaching a wider, worldwide audience on the web. Anyone with Stevenson

related material which they would like to have placed online and included in the events programme should visit the Robert Louis Stevenson Day website at rldsday.wordpress.com for more information.

Events planned already range from the unveiling of our *Fortunate Voyager* collection of essays about RLS to the launch of a handsome new hardback edition of *Edinburgh Picturesque Notes*. This year's collection of readings by Club members and friends will be from

I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson, the collection of living memories of RLS compiled by the Club in the early 1920s, which inspired us to commission *Fortunate Voyager* as a special Centenary volume.

If you would like to do a reading, please contact RLS Day co-ordinator Jeremy Hodges by emailing jeremy.hodges@blueyonder.co.uk. We hope to have a physical venue in Edinburgh but, failing that, arrangements will be made to do the readings online.



Inspiration: The author Robert Louis Stevenson creating Long John Silver and, above, the free ASLS edition of *Fables*



Write a fabulous Fable

COULD you write a brief story inspired by the Fables of Robert Louis Stevenson – and win a £500 first prize?

Our competition to write a fable for the 21st century in the style of RLS will launch on his November 13 birthday and run until April 2 next year.

Entries are limited to 350 words, which puts them right into the hugely popular territory of Flash Fiction.

Stevenson would have surely approved of little stories cleverly told with sparing use of words and a moral undertone.

Here is one such fable that flowed from his own pen, entitled *The Tadpole and the Frog*, with which he makes his point skilfully in just 28 words:

'Be ashamed of yourself,' said the frog. 'When I was a tadpole, I had no tail.'

'Just what I thought!' said the tadpole. 'You never were a tadpole.'

With this Louis might well have won our competition – he would surely impress our international judging panel chaired by author and journalist Alan Taylor.

Here's how to enter the competition:

First study Stevenson's *Fables* – a free version is available online from the Association for Scottish Literary Studies at asls.arts.gla.ac.uk/Fables.html

For Robert-Louis Abrahamson's podcasts analysing each Fable visit rldsday.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/fables-index.pdf. Next, write your Fa-

ble following the rules and guidance. It will be judged on the criteria of pleasure to the reader and conformance to Stevenson's fable style.

Send your entry as an email to mrrls.fable@yahoo.com – ensuring the email title is the name of your Fable, and that you have included your own name at the foot of your email. Then sit back, follow progress and find hints on Twitter [@mrrlsfable](https://twitter.com/mrrlsfable), showing your appreciation by liking the posts.

The full details of the competition including rules and guidelines are available at www.mrrls.com/fable.

The overall winner and runner-up will be announced at the RLS Conference in Bordeaux on June 16-18 next year.



PRECIOUS Stevenson relics at Baker's Cottage in Saranac have been saved, thanks in part to a £1,000 donation from the Club. The section of roof in danger of collapse has been replaced, see left, and the rest can be repaired over time.

Stevenson Society of America President Rita Leonard said: 'A heartfelt thanks to the RLS Club of Edinburgh, the Monterey club and all of the independent souls who supported us'.

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