

'A Heaven to Me' - Robert Louis Stevenson
 Holidaying in Peebles in 1860s.

Louis tells in 'Popular Authors' (about penny dreadful papers and their hack writers), how he and a girl cousin dallied away an afternoon in 1864 in the firwood at Neidpath Castle, which stood:

[...] bosomed in hills, on a green promontory; Tweed at its base running through the gamut of a busy river, from the pouring shallow to the brown pool. [...] there dwelt in the upper storey of the castle one whom I believe to have been the gamekeeper on the estate. The rest of the place stood open to incursive urchins; and there, in a deserted chamber we found some half-dozen numbers of Black Bess, or the Knight of the Road, a work by Edward Viles. So far as we are aware, no one had visited that chamber (which was in a turret) since Lambert blew in the doors of the fortress with contumelious English cannon. Yet it could hardly have been Lambert (in whatever hurry of military operations) who had left these samples of romance; and the idea that the gamekeeper had anything to do with them was one that we discouraged. Well, the offence is now covered by prescription; we took them away; and in the shade of the contiguous fir-wood, lying on blaeberris, I made my first acquaintance with the art of Mr. Viles.

Compiled by Neil Macara Brown 2015



Sources: Margaret Stevenson: Diary (unpublished); Rosaline Masson (ed):
 I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson (1922)

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Louis visited for the last time, when he stayed at the sunless Stobo manse, in the summer of 1882. Ill from the start, he was soon sent to London for consultation, returning only briefly, en-route for Kingussie. By 1882, the essay series under 'R.L.S.', appeared in *Cornhill* magazine, but he did not write from April to August that year. However, he did send some letters from Stobo - 'but a kirk and a mill', he called it. He had high hopes for his holiday, writing excitedly before departure:



Postcard of Stobo Kirk and Manse

From Stobo, you can conquer Peebles and Selkirk, or to give them their old decent names, Tweeddale and Etrick. Think of having been called Tweeddale, and being called PEEBLES! Did I ever tell you my skit on my own travel books? 'We understand that Mr. Stevenson has in the press an-other volume of unconventional travels: Personal Adventures in Peeblesshire.



An early view of Peebles High Street.

Louis never forgot Peebles: the town, and parts around, enjoy mentions in *Kidnapped*, *Weir of Hermiston*, and *St. Ives*, where, in one scene, the hero encounters a crusty farmer, who says:

*"Ye'll be from Leadburn, I'm thinkin'?"
 "Put it at Peebles," said I, making shift to pull the shawl close about my damning finery."
 "Peebles!" he said reflectively. "I've never ventured so far as Peebles. I've contemplated it! But I was none sure whether I would like it when I got there."*

'A Heaven to Me'

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Holidaying in Peebles in 1860s.

In the days when I was thereabout, and that part of the earth was made a heaven to me by many things now lost, by boats, and bathing, and the fascination of streams, and the delights of comradeship, and those (surely the prettiest and simplest) of a boy and girl romance - in those days of Arcady...

(*'Popular Authors'*, 1888)



Neidpath Castle and the River Tweed.

Louis Stevenson spent the summers of 1864 and 1865 at 'Elibank', Springhill, south of the Tweed. Some of his youthful escapades there are noted in his mother's diary, others were told later by friends.

1864 was a 'delightful summer, dry and warm', according to his mother; but she forbade swimming for his health that year. His antics in the Tweed in 1865, though, were recalled by Jamie Milne:



A young Louis with fishing rod.

Five or six of us were bathing in the Duckats, a rocky pool below Neidpath. It was a hot sunny day with a cold wind, and we did not waste much time in getting our clothes on; but Louis would continue to run about and play the fool in a state of nudity after all the rest of us were dressed.

During 1864 Louis fished the 'Keystone Pool' under Tweed Bridge, but gave up, his mother said.



Boys fishing under Tweed Bridge.

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Louis and his cousin, Bob, led a gang of boys tricking the neighbours by tapping on their windows at night. He was 'very well and wild and happy' in 1864. Too wild: a dress, which he burnt in a house with ironing left unattended, had to be replaced' - but only after he himself had a verbal scorching!



Kingsmuir House.

Another friend, who lived at Kingsmuir House, was Bobby Romanes, a son of Robert Romanes, of the Edinburgh drapers, Romanes & Paterson, royal tartan makers to Queen Victoria. Bobby attended Bonnington Park School, but Louis was taught at the Burgh School by Mr. Cameron, who claimed he was 'without exception the most intelligent and best-informed boy' he had ever known.



Robert Louis Stevenson in 1865.

Louis and Bobby, who became a major in the KOSB, were long notorious for their pistol duel held on the King's Muir, later recalled by Patrick Campbell, an Edinburgh schoolfriend who heard about the incident.

They had real pistols and real powder, but no real bullets - not even a charge of redcurrant jelly to add to the apparent tragedy of the encounter.

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In 1864, Louis and Bobby began to write a story, which did not come to anything. However, Louis first wrote seriously at this time: a grisly tale, 'The Plague Cellar', was penned between both visits to Peebles; and his first published work, *The Pentland Rising*, on the Covenanters, appeared in 1866. In 1887, he confessed that, aged thirteen, he had 'tried to do justice to the inhabitants of the famous city of Peebles in the style of the 'Book of Snobs', a serial which he found in *Punch*.



An illustration from the Punch serial, originally written anonymously by William Thackeray.



An 1859 sketch of Tweed Green showing two schools at the foot of School Brae. The one on the left was known as the English School and the Grammar, or Burgh School which Louis attended, is on the right.

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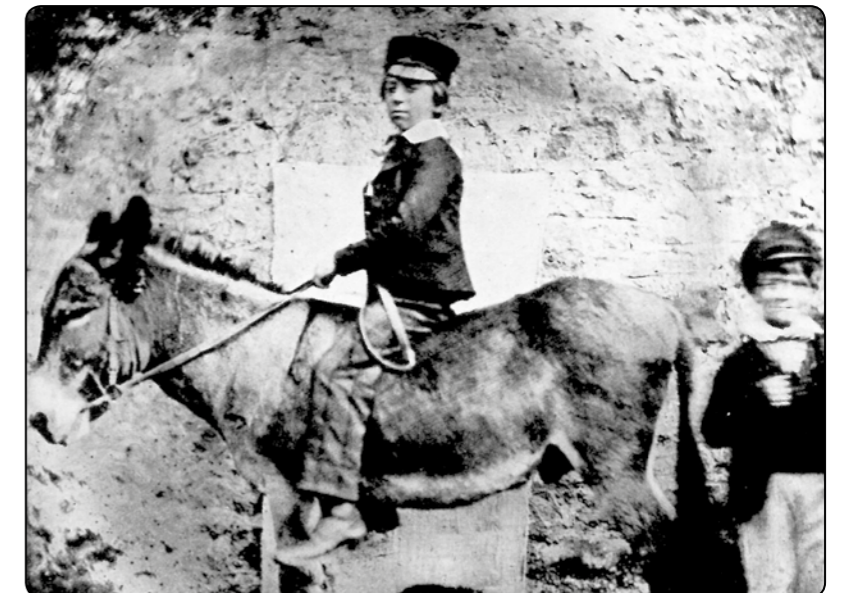
Louis's literary precociousness was recalled by Louise Moinet, an Edinburgh girl visiting Kingsmuir:

When my friend Leila Romanes and I were seated among the branches of a tree in the garden, reading the exciting adventures of Midshipman Easy, taken from the library of the Chambers Institute at Peebles, we thought it a great trouble to be interrupted by Louis Stevenson... who came with pencil and note-book, begging us to write something for him. He scribbled a great deal in these days, but we never thought of reading anything of his then, so I don't know what we lost.



Title vignette from Mr. Midshipman Easy, an 1836 novel by Frederick Marryat set during the Napoleonic Wars.

In 1865, Louis rode a pony 'uncouthly rather than gracefully', accompanied by Janey and Bob, children of Ralph Murray, manager of Sir Adam Hay's sawmill, who lived at Bridgend. Janey said: *My strongest recollection of Louis is when my brother Bob and he and I used to ride together at Peebles.*



A young Robert Louis Stevenson on a pony.

Bob had a black pony and Louis called it 'Hell': his own one was brown and was called 'Purgatory', while mine was named 'Heaven'. The two boys used to gallop off together and I followed after them in great fear and trembling - once they galloped right through the Tweed on the way to Inverleithen and I had to follow in fear of my life: poor 'Heaven' had the worst of it on that occasion.