

The RLS Club News



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Memories of the Manse revisited

FOR lovers of RLS, a visit to Colinton Manse is a sentimental journey, haunted by the friendly ghosts of young Louis and his Balfour cousins.

As Club members were shown around the grounds of the manse and the church by caretaker Alasdair Mac-

Kenzie there were echoes of poems from *A Child's Garden of Verses* in which Stevenson recalled a golden childhood while staying there with his grandfather, the Rev Dr Lewis Balfour, and his mother's sister Jane.

Before the tour, four of these poems were read over coffee and scones at the Swing Café by Jon Cossar (*The Swing*, hanging from the ancient yew as it was in Stevenson's day), Ailene Hunter (*Keepsake Mill*, by the Water of Leith), Isobel Reid (*The Moon*, shining through the Manse bedroom windows) and Dora Cossar (*From A Railway Carriage*, now celebrated in art adorning the Colinton Tunnel).

Jeremy Hodges then read extracts from Stevenson's descriptions of his Colinton childhood in *Memories and Portraits* and *Memoirs of Himself*, bringing to life the 1850s when many Balfour cousins would stay at the



Young Louis: The RLS statue

Manse, sent home to escape the fierce heat of India where their fathers served the British Empire.

Alasdair then showed members the manse, considerably altered since Stevenson's day, and its gardens where the cousins played, rampaging across flower beds, then altering their footprints to avoid being identified by their shoes, put out for cleaning each night.

The tour then passed by the RLS statue to the church and churchyard where Louis's grandfather lies buried

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Balfour grave: Alasdair MacKenzie

Inside: 175th Anniversary RLS Day, Australian past of Louis's muse, RLS road novel revived



Celebrate 175 years

THIS year's Robert Louis Stevenson Day marks the 175th anniversary of Stevenson's birth, and members have a chance to celebrate with a series of events on and around November 13.

Our main club event on the afternoon of the big day will be *Bluidy Jack's Prisoner*, a series of readings at the Writers' Museum celebrating the power of Louis's imagination, transforming a Bournemouth sickroom into the crucible of creativity that produced *Kidnapped*, *A Child's Garden of Verses*, *Jekyll & Hyde* and so much more. To take part, email jemhodes@gmail.com

Details of other events, including a luxury *Jekyll & Hyde* dinner aboard the former light-house tender *Fingal*, pictured, can be found at rlsday.wordpress.com



Stevenson's Paris

THE 2025 Annual General Meeting of the European Cultural Route In The Footsteps of Robert Louis Stevenson will be held in Paris, a city RLS visited many times and stayed there with his wife Fanny.

Organised by the Fontainebleau territory association 'R.L. Stevenson from Barbizon to Grez', the celebrations will run from November 4-6.

The AGM itself will be hosted on November 5 at the French parliament, l'Assemblée Nationale, with delegates welcomed by Sophie Pantel, Member of Parliament for Lozère, before a tour of this emblematic site and a working session.

After a buffet lunch and the afternoon working session, the day will conclude with a dinner at a restaurant in the Montparnasse district frequented by Stevenson and his Bohemian friends.

On November 6 there will be a short, narrated afternoon walk through Montparnasse and the Latin Quarter before delegates make their way home. Anyone wishing to attend, arranging their own travel and accommodation, should contact Martin White, martiniwhiter26@gmail.com

WANTED: Part one of the Kessinger Publishing edition of *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson to His Family and Friends*, ed. Sidney Colvin. Contact valeriepellatt888@btinternet.com

Garden of memories

From Page One

along with his wife Henrietta Scott Smith. Their grave also commemorates their children, including Henrietta Traquair who died at the age of 27.

Her children Willie and Henrietta, left motherless, were Louis's favourite cousins and he recalled them fondly in *A Child's Garden*: 'You in a garden green/ With me were king and queen./ Were hunter, soldier, tar./ And all the thousand things that children are.'

He would also recall how they terrified each other by peering into a crack in the graveyard wall by the 'Witches' Walk' and imagining they could see a burning eye looking back at them – was it the eye of a dead man sitting up in his coffin or simply that of a bird?

Looking back, he wrote: 'I simply believe that we saw nothing at all. The fact is, we would have given anything to have seen a ghost, or to persuade ourselves that we had seen a ghost...'

As today's visitors approach the house it is easy to imagine the young Louis hiding in the bushes: 'Once as I lay, playing hunter, hid in a thick laurel, and with a toy gun upon my arm, I worked myself so hotly into the spirit of

TO ANY READER

*As from the house your mother sees
You playing round the garden trees,
So you may see, if you will look
Through the windows of this book,
Another child, far, far away,
And in another garden, play.
But do not think you can at all,
By knocking on the window, call
That child to hear you. He intent
Is all on his play-business bent.
He does not hear, he will not look,
Nor yet be lured out of this book.
For, long ago, the truth to say,
He has grown up and gone away,
And it is but a child of air
That lingers in the garden there.*

my play, that I think I can still see the herd of antelope come sweeping down the lawn and round the deodar.'

But many years divide the author from those who love his work today and only imagination can bridge the centuries to glimpse the ghost of a child captured in the pages of *A Child's Garden of Verses* who 'long ago, the truth to say ... has grown up and gone away'.



In Louis's footsteps: Club members in the manse garden where the children played

Farewell, Mitchell, you did RLS proud

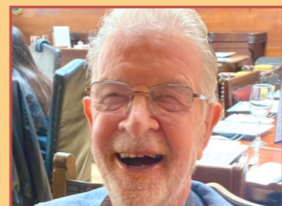
IT was with great sadness that the club learned of the death of our former chairman Mitchell Manson, 88, a stalwart friend of RLS and all who love his work.

His infectious enthusiasm and indomitable spirit made him a fine chairman, steering the club through

the Covid pandemic to celebrate its centenary in style at the Balmoral Hotel.

On club adventures, from California to Caithness, he was a leading light and shared his love of whisky, proudly quoting from *The Scotsman's Return from Abroad*: 'The king o' drinks,

as I conceive it, Talisker, Isla, or Glenlivet!' Mitchell was a kind and friendly man with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. The club, and the world, will not see his like again.



LOVERS of Stevenson met up with our new chairman Joe Farrell in September to enjoy a coffee morning gathering at Valvona and Crolla in Edinburgh.

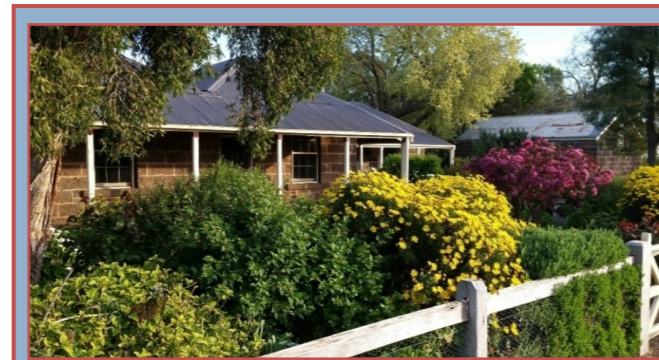
BEFORE becoming the young Robert Louis Stevenson's muse, Fanny Sitwell had lived many other lives, including a spell in Australia.

Now Wes Rogers, present day custodian of her home there – Correagh, in Hamilton, Victoria – offers some insight into that brief period before her first marriage.

Born in Ireland in 1839, she was the fourth daughter of Cuthbert and Susan Fetherstonehaugh, living on the family estate in County Westmeath.

But soon the family sold up and moved to live more cheaply in Germany, until fear of revolution brought them back to Ireland, where at 16 Fanny met Albert Sitwell, then studying for the church. A shared love of music led to their engagement.

Yet as conditions in Ireland declined, the family sailed for Australia aboard the clipper ship



Correagh: Home of Fanny Fetherstonehaugh, right



Australian past of Louis's secret love

James Baines, arriving in Melbourne at the peak of the Gold Rush. Fanny's father, after some failed speculations and a term as a Goldfields Commissioner, was appointed Police Magistrate at Hamilton, where the family settled and built their

colonial home. Yet Fanny's time in Australia was but a brief interlude before returning to Ireland to marry Albert. In a departure letter to her brother, she wrote: 'We go on board tomorrow morning, so this is our last day in Australia. I wish

there was no one in it I cared for.' One brother confessed he 'blubbered like a child', knowing he would never see his favourite sister again.

Fanny wrote that Albert was 'full of hope' for their future together but in time their marriage became abusive and led to separation. Wes Roger reflects: 'Had Fanny found her match in Australia, like her siblings, we might have had a different RLS from the one we know today.'

EVENTS PROGRAMME

NOVEMBER 10
FROM CANONMILLS
TO CORAL ISLANDS

FROM his first day at school in Edinburgh to his last day in Samoa, Robert Louis Stevenson led a remarkable life. Join folk singer and RLS biographer Jeremy Hodges at 2.30pm for a musical journey through that life, in the little building where Louis started school, now Canonmills Church. Free public event marking Stevenson's 175th birthday.

NOVEMBER 15
ANNUAL LUNCHEON

AT the New Club, Edinburgh, where our guest speaker is author Stuart Campbell, who has just completed Stevenson's unfinished novel *The Great North Road*, see back page. Full details in accompanying papers.

DECEMBER 10
COFFEE AND MINCE PIES

FESTIVE gathering at Valvona and Crolla, Elm Row, Edinburgh, 10am–12 noon.

PROJECTED events include A talk on *The Three Roberts* by David Purdie, a visit to view RLS material at Kelvin Hall Film and Photography Library in Glasgow and a trip to JM Barrie's birthplace in Kirriemuir where John Shedden and Peter Berry will present Stevenson's correspondence with Barrie. Details to come via email or contact Margaret Wilkie to join a waiting list.

BOOK events with Margaret Wilkie, wilkiejl@blueyonder.co.uk
0131 477 6738 or 07815 845586

Highway adventures in fictional romance

Unfinished RLS novel completed

FOR 140 years it lay unfinished, a tale of highwaymen and the open road that 'never got beyond Highgate'. But now *The Great North Road* has been completed from Robert Louis Stevenson's original storyline.

Author Stuart Campbell has developed Stevenson's initial chapters into a complete tale of adventure, published to mark the 175th anniversary of Stevenson's birth.

'It will upset the purists, no doubt,' admits Stuart, who became fascinated by the unfinished tale when he chanced upon it during the Covid lockdown.

His story begins with the original eight chapters by Stevenson, but where to go from there? He contacted the Beinecke library at Yale university, whose manuscript collection yielded Stevenson's own list of the characters along with 25 chapter headings.

'It was a real challenge to fit the narrative around the headings and the characters,' said Stuart, who found he was hearing various characters' voices in his head.

'A lot of the headings were quite vague, like "Wise Counsel Is Given" but others



Portrait of the author:
Stuart Campbell by Will Williams



**Highwayman: One of the
book illustrations by
Charles Keeping**

were more specific: "The End of Mr Archer".'

The second part of Stuart's book is an imaginary conversation with and between the characters, similar to Stevenson's own *Fable* entitled *The Persons of the Tale*. One kept asking: 'Do you think you're Stevenson? You couldn't hold a candle to the man.'

But Stuart persevered and the third part of the book is his completion of the tale, following the characters and chapter headings as faithfully as possible.

'I was very aware of not trying to write like Stevenson, because I can't. I incorporated the characters' words into the text.'

So why was *The Great North Road* never finished, despite Stevenson's initial enthusiasm? It deals with the duality of man, and may have been superseded by *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

But Stuart has a hunch that the relationship between Nance, the mysterious Mr Archer and her cousin Dick Holdaway may have evoked memories of a romance between Stevenson and his cousin Katharine who ended up marrying Sydney De Mattos. 'Stevenson reached a point

where he had to resolve a love triangle between the two protagonists and Nance. What if it was just too much for him and he backed off?'

Stuart Campbell will be this year's guest speaker at the Club's annual luncheon on November 15. See accompanying papers for booking details.

The Great North Road, by Robert Louis Stevenson and Stuart Campbell, illustrated by Charles Keeping, is published by Rymour Books, price £11.99., and will be launched at 7pm on the eve of RLS Day, November 12, at Blackwells bookshop in Edinburgh

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