



*Langogne gathering: The Cevennes AGM and, right, Martin planting a rose*

## Travels with RLS around Europe

THE life of a President is a busy one, as Martin White revealed in a talk to members attending our first event of the year at Edinburgh's New Club.

As President of the European Cultural Route – In the Footsteps of Robert Louis Stevenson, he has been involved in attending or planning a string of events in France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland – and even England.

His first year took him to Menton, Brindisi, Bochum in the Ruhr, Bristol,

Erraid, Fontainebleau and the Route's AGM at Langogne in the Cévennes, celebrating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Association Sur Le Chemin de Robert Louis Stevenson.

The places varied greatly in outlook, but the welcome was always very friendly as Martin performed his presidential duties, from making speeches in French to planting commemorative Stevenson Roses.

The plaque commemorating Stevenson's time in Menton is now ready, and should be installed this summer. Martin is also in contact with people at Davos, with a view to raising Stevenson awareness there, and in Belgium and the top end of the Canals du Nord, preparing for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Louis's Inland Voyage next year.

He is also involved with projects in Bournemouth and the site of the Stevensons' villa there, and Doubs in France, where a conference is planned



around the work of Kenneth White, poet and Stevensonian – Martin brought along a copy of White's beautifully illustrated book about RLS.

Closer to home in Edinburgh, Martin spoke about the time spent there by Louis's American friends Henry James and Mark Twain.

He plans an audio guide based on James's account of his visit, with a narrative recorded by John Shedden and Vincent Guy.



*The Stevenson plaque for Menton*

**Inside: Lunch in a meteorological purgatory, Providence and a guitar, Louis's 'other woman'**



**EVENTS PROGRAMME****APRIL 10****RLS AND THE SEA**

MEET 10.30am at the New Club, Edinburgh for this talk by Professor Joe Farrell, author of *Robert Louis Stevenson In Samoa*. Cost including coffee and biscuits is £10 per person, payable to Margaret Wilkie on the day.

**APRIL 25****LIGHT ENTERTAINMENT**

MEET 10.30am aboard the former lighthouse vessel *Fingal* at The Shore, Leith for a talk on Stevenson Lighthouses by Charlie Granleese. Cost £20 includes coffee and biscuits, names to Margaret Wilkie by April 10. To book optional lunch, call Fingal Hotel, 0131 555 5566.

**MAY 9****THE ABSENT HEART**

ALI Bacon will discuss her new novel about Fanny Sitwell, Louis and Sidney Colvin at the Scottish Arts Club, 24 Rutland Square, Edinburgh. Coffee and biscuits from 10.30am, cost £10, payable to Margaret Wilkie on the day. To book optional lunch, call the Scottish Arts Club on 0131 229 8157.

**JUNE 16****MUCKLE FLUGGA**

HEAR Michael Pedersen read from his novel set in a Stevenson lighthouse, 4pm, the Marriott Courtyard Hotel, Baxters Place, Edinburgh. Free event, names to Margaret Wilkie by May 15. Food can be purchased before a 7pm for 7.30pm book signing at Topping & Co – cost £16.99, including book, payable in advance to Margaret.

For more information about *The Absent Heart* and *Muckle Flugga*, see back page.

**BOOK all events at least two weeks beforehand with Margaret Wilkie,**  
**wilkiejl@blueyonder.co.uk**  
**0131 477 6738 or 07815 845586**

# Lunching with Louis in a meteorological purgatory

THE 2024 annual Club lunch at the New Club was heralded by a miniature blizzard, reminding all of Edinburgh's reputation as a 'meteorological purgatory'.

In the absence of buses or taxis, Club chairman Jon Cossar and his wife Dora set out on foot for the New Club, where they were greeted by a convivial gathering of hardy souls celebrating the 174th birthday of Robert Louis Stevenson.

This year's special guest was author Nicholas Rankin, who revisited his travels as a young man that led to his seminal *Dead Man's Chest* book about RLS.

In an entertaining and informative speech he paid tribute to Stevensonians who inspired him – Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine poet, Ernest Mehew, editor of Stevenson's letters, and Mike Delahant, custodian of the Robert Louis Stevenson Cottage Museum in Saranac.

These were all instrumental in his long journey of discovery in Louis's footsteps, enabling him to write about Stevenson in a new way with many fresh perspectives.

He recalled also the days when the various Stevenson societies would send greetings telegrams to each other on Robert Louis Stevenson Day and, to revive the custom, he read out a message of greeting from Mike Delahant:



*Bleak scene: The view from the New Club and, right, guest speaker Nicholas Rankin*

'The Stevenson Society of America, founded in 1915, sends warmest best greetings to its younger sibling, the Robert Louis Stevenson Club of Edinburgh, founded in 1920. Both are institutions that cherish the memory and sustain the spirit of RLS and from the

other side of the Atlantic we hereby charge our British representative, Nicholas Rankin, to ask you, gathered at your annual lunch in Edinburgh, to hereby charge your glasses preparatory to a toast – to Robert Louis Stevenson, Greatheart.'



## Musical life's journey with Providence and the guitar

THE life of Robert Louis Stevenson took many twists and turns and close calls with death, along with strokes of good fortune which Providence had in store for him along the way.

At his childhood home in Heriot Row, folk singer and Stevenson biographer Jeremy Hodges took Club members on a musical journey in Louis's footsteps, with new settings of Stevenson poems for guitar.

From the fondly remembered Child's Garden of Verses to a grave on a mountain-top on the other side of the world, the songs chronicled Stevenson's times as an unruly student, a Bohemian in France, a desperate man on a train crossing the American continent, and then the hardworking author, nursed through numerous

encounters with 'Bluidy Jack', the disease that threatened to kill him during his long pilgrimage in search of health from America to Scotland, Switzerland, France, Bournemouth, Saranac and the South Seas.

Some of the tunes were Jeremy's own compositions, while others were adaptations of French and American folk music. There was even *The Dying Words of Captain William Kidd*, the Scottish pirate who may have been a model for Captain Flint in *Treasure Island*, set to the tune of a contemporary broadside ballad.

More familiar, perhaps, was *Sing Me A Song Of A Lad That Is Gone* to the tune of the Skye Boat Song, and the evening ended with the famous *Requiem*.



## Full house for RLS Day

ROBERT Louis Stevenson Day 2024 was celebrated in style at the Edinburgh Writers' Museum where a full house of visitors enjoyed a reading by Club members of Louis's letters from his tour of Scottish lighthouses.

The event was the last of three following The Education of an Engineer, with earlier trips to Anstruther and Wick preceding Louis's 1869 tour of Orkney and Shetland lights in the Northern Lighthouse Board yacht *Pharos* and 1870 stay on the island of Earraid.

Other RLS Day events included the launch of a new, small press edition of *The Body Snatcher* at Typewronger Books and talks on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Road To The Pentlands* at Laurieston Castle and *RLS And Katherine Mansfield In Menton* at the French Institute.

The National Library of Scotland hosted a presentation on Samoa and Stevenson including a film made by students in Samoa. At the library a rare illustrated edition of *Treasure Island* was also on display.

Anybody planning an RLS event on or around November 13 who would like it included in the 2025 online programme should email [jemhodes@gmail.com](mailto:jemhodes@gmail.com). Previous years' events can be enjoyed at [rlsday.wordpress.com](http://rlsday.wordpress.com)

## A friend to Louis

IT was with sadness that the Club learned of the death of Rosemary Johnson, one of its oldest members and a true friend of Robert Louis Stevenson throughout her long years in museums and galleries.

For six years of her career as a civil servant in the Scottish Office, working for George Younger and Malcolm Rifkind, Rosemary was seconded to the National Galleries of Scotland where she put her passion for the Arts to good use.

Like Louis she was also a Francophile, and liked to boast that she had once danced the Can-can in a play produced by the French Institute. Her fluency in the language enabled her to introduce in French various programmes being broadcast to France from the Edinburgh Festival.

For many years she was a volunteer guide in the Stevenson room at the Edinburgh Writers' Museum, where her language skills in French and Italian helped spread the word about her favourite author to a wide international audience. As a Scottish Tourist Guide she also led groups from Italy and France throughout Scotland.

More recently she took part in our RLS Day readings to celebrate the author's birthday, and enjoyed meeting up with her many friends in the Club, where she will always be remembered fondly.



# Louis's 'other woman'

## Love triangle brought to life

FANNY Stevenson has caught the imagination of numerous biographers and novelists – so much so that Stevenson's other loves have been all but airbrushed out of the story.

Yet Fanny Sitwell, trapped in an abusive marriage to a Church of England vicar, once played a crucial role in the development of the young author who poured out his soul in more than 100 surviving letters to her.

And while Stevenson's wife has long been celebrated – from a 1922 account of her life by her sister Nellie to last year's *A Wilder Shore* by Camille Peri – the self-effacing Mrs Sitwell has managed to stay out of the limelight.

At her insistence, her letters to RLS were all destroyed, leaving her side of their passionate but platonic affair a mystery. Now a new account of the love triangle involving Mrs Sitwell, the young author and his literary mentor Sidney Colvin – the man she would eventually marry – brings the story to life.

In *The Absent Heart*, historical novelist Ali Bacon makes judicious use of fiction, rooted in careful research, to reveal the emotional truth of a long and deep relationship in a way no biography can. The novel includes scenes, conversations and letters imagined by its author, yet these add to rather than detract from our factual knowledge of the relationship between the young Louis and a woman 11 years his senior.

Frances, as she is called in the novel to avoid confusion with Fanny Stevenson, had a troubled and often tragic life outwith the letters Louis wrote to her,



*Two loves: Fanny Sitwell was the first love of RLS but married Sidney Colvin, left*

which only hint at it. Her husband, the Rev Albert Hurt Sitwell, was a violent alcoholic and, to free herself from an abusive marriage, she had to petition his uncle, the Archbishop of Canterbury, for a separation.

At the time she had to cope with the death from consumption of her son Freddie, followed by that of his brother Bertie – Louis's young friend who died in Davos when the Stevensons were there. Her sense of desolation comes across painfully in the novel.

Through all this Mrs Sitwell's 'rock', in modern parlance, was Sidney Colvin – art critic, literary critic and curator – who took the fledgling author Louis under his wing. Apparently without jealousy, Louis came to accept that his

'Madonna' was pledged to his friend and would eventually marry him – albeit nine years after her first husband's death. Colvin's protracted and procrastinatory courtship comes across in the book as a cause of perplexity for Frances, who fears he may be gay.

They kept separate homes but in the novel they do sleep together before marriage, often after the highly successful literary salons over which Frances presided and fostered the careers of other young poets and authors.

For lovers of Stevenson, this engrossing read full of insights is a fitting tribute to the woman who first inspired him.

**JEREMY HODGES**

*The Absent Heart*, by Ali Bacon, is published by Linen Press, £9.99.

## Ghost writer Stevenson



THE ghost of Robert Louis Stevenson appears in a story set on a rocky Shetland outcrop by poet and Edinburgh Makar Michael Pedersen, pictured.

Pedersen's first novel, *Muckle Flugga*, features the North Unst Stevenson lighthouse visited by Louis and his father in 1869. The lighthouse is inhabited by the keeper, known as The Father, and his son Ouse. They are the only residents until the arrival of a writer from Edinburgh, whose chaotic presence tests the limits of the world to which the keeper and his son cling.

*Muckle Flugga* will be published by Faber & Faber on May 16. See Page Two for details of a special Club event.

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