

The RLS Club News



Issue No 54

Spring 2020



Past and present: Club committee members at The Refinery, site of the Goold Hall where the Club was founded in 1920

Celebrating a century

THE life and work of Scotland's best-loved author were celebrated this year when the club founded in his honour celebrated its 100th birthday.

On January 15, 1920, the Robert Louis Stevenson Club was set up by those who had known 'RLS' and loved the writings of the Edinburgh author whose books were read and enjoyed worldwide.

A century later, members of the Club committee met on Wednesday at The Refinery in St Andrew Square, site of the inaugural meeting at the Goold Hall, before joining fellow members and Stevenson fans for an evening of readings and scenes from the author's life at the Scottish Storytelling Centre.

Present chairman Mitchell Manson, who with treasurer Jim Wilkie hosted the event, welcomed office holders from the club's past including former chairman Alan Marchbank who recalled his mother reading *Treasure Island* to him by the fireside. Later, on a visit to the Cevennes where Stevenson went on his



Centenary Tribute: Devised by John Shedden, pictured with Lisa Strausz

Travels With A Donkey, an elderly Frenchman asked him what brought him there: 'I explained I had come because of a little-known Scottish writer called Robert Louis Stevenson.

'The old chap interrupted me with: "*Sacre bleu!* Every year the tourists come over the hill to here – with or without donkeys!"

'That was when I realised that my mother's-knee interest in RLS was actually a worldwide phenomenon.' Former

honorary secretary Alistair Ferguson WS, who worked at Edinburgh law firm Skene Edwards where Stevenson was once articulated during his short legal career, reflected on the Club's development over the century from its first annual dinner in 1920 when Stevenson's friend Edmund Gosse toasted 'the most beloved author of our time'.

Today, Mr Ferguson reflected, 'the explosion in the realm of mass communication has enabled the club to become part of a worldwide community' of Stevenson fans.

As members then made their way to the Storytelling Centre to enjoy the special dramatic Tribute to Robert Louis Stevenson, devised and performed by Club member John Shedden along with Peter Berry and Lisa Strausz, Dr Manson concluded: 'Our hope is that RLS would have welcomed our celebration here of a club founded 100 years ago to keep his memory green, and that of his splendid literary works.'

Inside: Centenary Message, Theatre Review, Club Events, RLS Day, Lunch Address

Keeping the memory of Stevenson green

AS the Club celebrates its Centenary year, may I as your Acting Chairman extend good wishes to all our members around the globe.

I should first explain that I took on the chairmanship following the sudden and unexpected resignation of our elected Chairman, Alan Taylor. Since then I and our dedicated Executive Committee have been hard at work on a programme of events to mark this special year.

This will include the release of a commemorative book containing contributions from a wide spectrum of enthusiasts for Stevenson much along the lines of a book produced by Rosaline Masson in 1922, gathering memories of people then who had actually met RLS.

In early May, Ian Gardiner will lead a pilgrimage walk to Stevenson's summer home at Swanson, a popular custom in the early years of the Club, then in June we will be holding our Annual General Meeting in Edinburgh, where you will have the opportunity to elect 'a fit

A Centenary Message from Mitchell Manson, Acting Chairman

and proper' Chairperson for the next two years.

Later in July we hope to hold a Garden Party in Queen Street Gardens by the main Stevenson home at 17 Heriot Row, courtesy of the present owner John Macfie.

September will see a Song Recital including a number of Stevenson's poems set to music and performed by two very talented recent graduates from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

Later in September, as part of North Berwick's Treasure Coast 2020 programme, Martin White is arranging an exciting trip on Saturday 12 to Fidra, a model for Stevenson's famous island.

In early October Jim Wilkie plans to lead a visit to California's bay area with the intention of visiting our sister Stevenson Club, Monterey and the Silverado Museum at

St. Helena, Napa. Those interested should contact Jim ASAP.

The climax comes in November with our Robert Louis Stevenson Day celebrations, including a meeting in the Northern Lighthouse Board offices on the 13th when Jon Cossar will provide an exciting visual programme entitled RLS – Travel, Health and other Ephemera.

Then on Saturday November 14, the Club will hold its Annual Luncheon, taking place this year at the Balmoral Hotel, formerly the North British Station Hotel where the first Celebratory Dinner was held on November 13, 1920.

The speakers will be Alexander McCall Smith who will give the toast to the City of Edinburgh and Roderick Watson, Professor Emeritus, University of Stirling, giving the toast in memory of RLS.

We hope as many members as possible will join in some, or all, of these events and keep green the memory of Robert Louis Stevenson and his writings.



Poetry in motion on RLS Day

A NEW portrait of RLS writing his poems and stories on a train was unveiled at a special Robert Louis Stevenson Day event at Colinton when parties of schoolchildren took a stroll through the disused railway tunnel to view the murals they are helping Scottish artist Chris Rutterford create.

Poetry was to the fore at a packed event at the Writers' Museum when Club members gave a series of readings designed to give Stevenson his rightful place alongside Burns and Fergusson as a fine poet in Scots and English and a balladeer to rival Scott.

The keynote event staged by Edinburgh Napier University and organised by Club member Professor Linda Dryden saw Stevenson biographer Nicholas Rankin giving a fascinating talk revealing the links between RLS and H Rider Haggard, followed by some Stevenson-inspired dramas written and performed by Napier students.

Other events from a musical evening at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery to a Bohemian poetry night at Typewronger Books concluded a successful day and we hope the event will be even better in this Centenary year.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Book of the Century

THE manuscript of our Centenary volume of essays by people from all walks of life who have been inspired by Stevenson and his writing is now with a publisher and is due to appear as a book later this year.

Contributors range from Sir Paul McCartney to First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, top academic authorities on Stevenson, authors such as Ian Rankin and Val McDermid and, of course, our own Club members writing of their love for RLS.

Further details in the summer Update.

French connections

The RLS Club is supporting RLS2020: Stevenson and Pleasure, the Academic Conference taking place in Bordeaux from June 18-20 when Club member Martin White will be among those taking part. For full details, including registration fees for those wishing to attend, visit <https://rls2020.sciencesconf.org/>

The AGM of the European Network In the Footsteps of Robert Louis Stevenson will take place during a 'Literary Ramble' of events from June 22 to July 5 in and around Le Puy en Velay in the Cevennes.

Going paperless

SOME members may prefer to have RLS Club News sent to them electronically instead of receiving the printed version. To receive each edition in PDF format for viewing on a PC (not easily readable on a smartphone), email Membership Secretary Tom Murison tamurison@hotmail.com

SUMMER EVENTS

MAY 1

SWANSTON AND COLINTON

IAN Gardiner will lead a guided walk to Stevenson's old haunts in Swanston and Colinton, meeting at 10am outside the entrance to Braidburn Valley Park on the corner of Morningside Crescent to follow 'The Stevenson Way' to Swanson. After coffee around 11.30 at Swanson Brasserie, we follow the path into Colinton for lunch at the Spylaw Tavern before viewing the new RLS murals in the old railway tunnel. Names to Margaret Wilkie by Monday April 20.

JUNE 20

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

A DATE for your diary. Come along and share your views on the Club at the AGM in Edinburgh, where a new chairman will be elected. Details in summer Update.

For more details, contact Events Secretary Margaret Wilkie, wilkiejl@blueyonder.co.uk or ring 0131 477 6738

A dramatic tribute to the man at his finest

IT was one of those rare occasions when a theatre audience senses the actors are inspired by their lines, knowledgeable about them and at the top of their form, so we left the Scottish Story Telling Centre in Edinburgh's Royal Mile floating a foot above ground.

In A Tribute to Robert Louis Stevenson, led and compiled by John Shedden, supported by Peter Berry and Lisa Strausz, we were treated to Stevenson at his finest.

John had dug deep in his research and in addition to short stories, extracts from novels, letters and essays, scary and humorous, and of course

some much-loved poems, there were lesser gems such as Lord Rosebery raising for the first time the question of a Stevenson statue.

The unusual reading of John Steinbeck's How Edith McGillicuddy Met Robert Louis Stevenson (a first-ever performance?) was particularly appealing and the chilling Thrawn Janet sent shivers down the spine.

Here was a memorable and fitting tribute to mark the Club's 100th birthday and worthy of a much bigger stage, so we hope John can find a suitable slot to perform it again at this year's Edinburgh Festival.

IAN NIMMO

Rare treasures at the NLS

RARE Books Curator James Mitchell welcomed Club members to the National Library of Scotland last October, when we were privileged to see – and handle! – various items connected with Stevenson.

James introduced us to the varied exhibits, then we were able to go round and study them ourselves, bringing back happy memories to some of us who had done something similar at the Beinecke Library at Yale six years ago.

The items on display ranged from very early illustrations by RLS of a 'Tale of Moses' done for a family competition when he was six, showing his early talent in drawing, with his text written out by his mother, to a first edition (with a letter from Sydney Colvin) and editions in several other languages of his final, uncompleted work, *Weir of Hermiston*.

We also saw books of illustrations of various works and copies of the early serialisations of *The Ebb Tide* in 'Today' and *Treasure Island*



Tiny islands: The story told in miniature

(as 'The Sea Cook') in 'Young Folks' as well as illustrations from several editions of Stevenson's work, *Moral Emblems*, and a file of manuscripts in various hands.

Looking at these, we realised how rarely we read handwriting nowadays and how some is

hard to decipher but it was also interesting to see typewritten proofs, edited in RLS's hand, on old-fashioned typing paper and annotation of where pieces of work were written.

We also saw evidence of his musical talent with a setting of a piece by Bach whose music he described as 'singularly unspewy'.

There were also miniature editions, my favourite being a tiny *Treasure Island* which looked about a centimetre square and would have fitted in beautifully in 'Red Brick Villa', the dolls' house my father made for me when I was a little girl.

We then went on to the Advocates' Library where we were given special access to view the portrait of Lord Braxfield, model for Archie Weir's father in *Weir of Hermiston* – most of us agreeing that the benign, fatherly expression of the man in the painting belied his nickname as 'The Hanging Judge'.

AILENE HUNTER

Debt Louis owed to his loving mother

STEVENSON'S mother Margaret Isabella Balfour has been a biographic omission for too long, but this was corrected at our December event by Alison Reid, ably supported by Ailene Hunter.

Much new material emerged in their widely researched presentation, with telling extracts from Margaret's own writings and those of family and friends.

Born in 1829 of gentry stock stretching back to the 15th Century, the cultured and classically good-looking Margaret graced her husband's side as a splendid hostess.

Her marriage to Thomas Stevenson was a love match, and with Sir Walter Scott, Lord Byron and Graham Greene among her distant relatives it was little wonder their son became a writer.

Margaret has been overlooked by biographers largely because she was also of-

ten plagued by poor health, which meant taking a back seat and delegating many of her motherly duties to RLS's nurse, Alison Cunningham, yet all the while she remained the devoted wife and loving mother in the background.

And after Thomas's death a new Margaret arose, with the same taste for travel and adventure as her son. Off to America, Australia and Samoa she went with RLS and his family, frozen stiff at forty below in Saranac or broiling under the Samoan sun, braving storms at sea, never blinking an eye at native nudity and, at 60, learning to ride a horse!

Our members were enthralled by the presentation – and the ensuing lively debate took our thoughts down all sorts of winding pathways.



IAN NIMMO *Neglected influence: Margaret Stevenson*

RLS, our first true global author

STEVENSON was never fully at home. Even his simplest pictures of his earliest homes in Heriot Row and his grandparents' house in Colinton show him split between here and there, home and away, the familiar and the unknown.

A *Child's Garden of Verses* shows the child Louis launching his paper ships in the millstream at Colinton, but at the same time thinking about their unknown destination:

*Away down the river,
A hundred miles or more,
Other little children
Shall bring my boats ashore.*

'Where will all come home?' he asks in this poem. This question lies behind so much of his writing – the little child who dreams of unknown places, and the emigrant who sought a home in the New World. His own travels took him far and wide across the world and are well-recorded by himself and others. So I will talk now about the sense of global space in his creative imagination.

In Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes Stevenson writes about the slum clearances in the Old Town. He was not yet an emigrant, but he understands the perspective of one as he thinks about the rapidly forming Scottish diaspora.

What unites Scots, he implies, is not a memory of their native land, but a sense that the Old World they have left is rapidly transforming, modernising, and wiping out the Edinburgh cityscape that they



Guest speaker at our RLS Club Lunch last November was Professor Penny Fielding of Edinburgh University. This is an edited version of her address.

remember. Far in the country, people saw a gap in the city ranks, and the sun looked through between the chimneys in an unwanted place. And all over the world, in London, in Canada, in New Zealand, fancy what a multitude of people could exclaim with truth: 'The house that I was born in fell last night!'

Stevenson was well aware of the modern communication technologies that narrowed global distance in the 19th Century. He was among the first writers – in *The Silverado Squatters* – to record the use

of a telephone. He wrote of Fleeming Jenkin's work on undersea cables. His account of the life and career of his grandfather, the engineer and lighthouse builder Robert Stevenson, acknowledges the rapid change in global communications that modern engineering had made possible: 'The profession was still but in its second generation, and had already broken down the barriers of time and space.'

After the family's move to the Pacific, Stevenson's sense of the broken barriers of time and space enter into his poetry and novels. In one poem he imagines holding a shell to his ear as a kind of poetic telephonic communication with the country he has left. In *The Ebb-Tide* the characters tell each other stories of a magic 'Traveling Carpet' that might transport them to London in 'the crack of a whip'.

So, as we celebrate the life and works of Stevenson here in Edinburgh, we should also make a toast to him as the first truly global author.

CONTACTS

RLS Club Contact: Mitchell Manson,
17 Huntingdon Place, Edinburgh, EH7
4AX. Tel: 0131 557 1933
Email: mitchellmanson@btinternet.com
RLS Club News Editor:
Jeremy Hodges, 21 Russel Street,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire, FK2 7HS.
Tel: 01324 613072
Email: jeremy.hodges@blueyonder.co.uk