

The RLS Club News



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Glittering occasion: Club members and guests gather at last to celebrate the Centenary at the Balmoral Hotel

A Century plus one

FINALLY and miraculously, in the brief window between the second and third spikes of the coronavirus pandemic last November, we succeeded in celebrating the Centennial of the Robert Louis Stevenson Club.

Although a year and a half late, the event took place appropriately and in real style during Stevenson Week.

Among the celebratory events on the eve of Robert Louis Stevenson Day was the launch of *Fortunate Voyager*, an impressive volume compiled by the Club and containing 61 essays, each a testament to the way Stevenson inspired the contributing writers.

Many of the contributors gave readings at the launch at Augustine United Church, but instead of reciting their own words they read from *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson* – the unique collection of living memories of RLS,

compiled a century earlier by Club founder member Rosaline Masson, which inspired the new book.

Earlier in the day a dramatic presentation of the correspondence between JM Barrie and RLS during the latter years of Stevenson's stay in Samoa was given by John Shedden and Peter Berry at Café Edinburgh on the High Street.

The newly-discovered Barrie side of the correspondence was published in 2020 as *A Friendship in Letters* compiled by Dr Michael Shaw of the University of Stirling.

The high point the following day, Stevenson's 171st birthday, was a splendid luncheon served in the five-star, elegant and historic setting of the Walter Scott Suite at the Balmoral Hotel – formerly the North British Station Hotel where in 1920 the newly-founded Club held its inaugural celebratory meal. Just under a hundred

present members and their guests attended the lunch at which the principal speaker was Rory Watson, Professor Emeritus at the University of Stirling.

In giving the traditional toast 'To the Memory of Robert Louis Stevenson' he reflected that a century ago the writings of RLS had been very much out of fashion – but since then there has been an international explosion of interest in Stevenson and a 'take off' in academic studies of his strengths as a writer.

For this revival the Club can take some credit in keeping the memory of Stevenson alive and promoting an interest in his life and work.

Opening the programme after lunch was a young poet inspired by RLS. Michael Pedersen read his poem 'When she came to me in Grèz-sur-Loing', contained in his anthology *Oyster*,
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Inside: Strange Case of RLS, news from Vailima, Fable competition and Club Events revived

FORTUNATE VOYAGER

A CELEBRATION OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON



Book sales boom

SALES of our *Fortunate Voyager* anthology are booming, with more than 200 copies accounted for already since the RLS Day launch.

The book has been enthusiastically received, with one RLS authority saying: 'I was especially taken by the "creative" contributors, those professionals writing fiction or for the radio and screen, and found their observations often revealing. In short, you've done a terrific job.'

Copies are still available at £9.99 from Typewronger Books in Haddington Place, Edinburgh. For mail order email info@typewronger.com

Speeches and songs

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published following a five-week residency at Grèz as a Stevenson Fellow, awarded by the Scottish Book Trust.

Next on the programme, Allan Little, former BBC Special Correspondent and present Chairman of the Edinburgh International Book Festival, gave the toast to the City of Edinburgh.

He highlighted RLS's affection for Edinburgh, besides sharing some personal glorious Edinburgh moments, reflecting its civic values and its commitment to literature.

Replying on behalf of the City of Edinburgh, Lord Provost Frank Ross paid tribute to the Club and conveyed his good wishes on its centenary.

He referred to Edinburgh's achievement in becoming the first UNESCO City of Literature, for which he chairs the City of Literature Trust, and also to the City's Writers' Museum – an important part of Edinburgh's literary landscape where Stevenson features prominently.

Following Professor Watson's address, our celebrations concluded with a musical entertainment. Kenneth Maciver, baritone, and John Walker, piano, regaled us with a performance of three of Stevenson's *Songs of Travel* set to music by Ralph Vaughan Williams.

They then concluded with Stevenson's *Requiem*, set to music by Sydney Homer – thus reviving a custom at the closure of the early annual lunches in the 1920s.

A vote of thanks by Club member David Clapham to the speakers, entertainers, Club committee organisers and hotel staff brought a wonderful Centenary event to an end.

MITCHELL MANSON



Guest speakers: Former BBC Special Correspondent and Edinburgh International Book Festival Chairman Allan Little and Frank Ross, Lord Provost of Edinburgh. Photos courtesy of Edinburgh Life

PROFESSOR Rory Watson spoke of the 'strange case' of Robert Louis Stevenson's critical reputation in the years following his death. It is indeed strange that Stevenson's standing as a serious writer actually declined for more than 75 years despite the fact that he has always been popular with the ordinary reading public.

Several reasons were suggested for this decline, most especially the narrow cultural vision of academic circles at the time, which held popular fiction, and what we would now call 'genre' fiction, in contempt – unworthy of serious critical attention. There was also a reaction against the popular image of Stevenson as a charming and romantically doomed figure who refused to adopt the role of a 'serious' man of letters.

So it was that in the 1920s (from the very year that the Edinburgh Stevenson Club was founded) new generations of literary critics, keen to embrace the 'modern' world (and indeed 'modernism' as a literary movement) dissociated themselves from the 1890s, and from the author whose essays had entertained so many readers with his 'light touch'. The 'literary' essay, and Stevenson himself, were suddenly out of fashion.

Professor Watson quoted several examples of the most scathing attacks on Stevenson as a serious writer, despite the fact that his writing is now held in the highest esteem. Indeed, the last 60 years have seen a radical

Strange Case resolved by time



Stevenson's critical reputation has suffered then revived over the past 100 years. Here in a summary of his speech RORY WATSON celebrates Louis's literary longevity

reevaluation of his work and his novella *The Ebb Tide* is now judged by many literary critics to be a modernist masterpiece on a par with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

But how did this critical change come about? Professor Watson explained that critical boundaries and areas of academic study have hugely expanded in relatively recent times. For example, the modern Scottish literary renaissance in the 1920s brought about a new emphasis in Stevenson's Scottish novels, suddenly relevant to a nation newly aware of its own history of cultural, difference and religious and linguistic divisions. Then new disciplines in critical theory and cultural criticism

(pioneered by Roland Barthes' studies in *Mythologies* in 1957) made it intellectually acceptable to study all aspects of popular culture – even books such as *Treasure Island*, once dismissed as 'mere boys adventure fiction'.

The rise of Post-colonial Criticism in the 1980s found rich material in Stevenson's fiction and essays about the South Seas, not least his scathing exposure of the ugly side of the imperial project in works such as *The Beach of Falesá*, and later novels such as *The Ebb Tide* and *The Wrecker*. In just the same way, the rise of Gothic Studies in the 1980s and 1990s, with its interest in psychoanalytical analysis, found much to study in Steven-

son's fiction. All these various developments have brought Stevenson back into contention as an important writer of our time, worthy of serious academic attention. To illustrate this startling change, Stevenson critic Dr Richard Dury listed no fewer than 14 major monographs on Stevenson between 1996 and 2007, a span of only eleven years, with many more since.

The RLS website hosted by the Napier University is another example of this change, along with the launch of the *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, from the Centre of Scottish Studies at the University of Stirling, and a succession of biennial international conferences, eight to date, that have brought together Stevenson scholars from all over the world.

The quality of Stevenson's writing is now a fully appreciated aspect of his work, regardless of his settings and the genre he chose, just as his fascinating engagement with duality, ambiguity, and instability has proved to be especially relevant to modern critics and readers.

Professor Watson ended with a toast to the continuing appreciation of Stevenson – and to the next 100 years of the Robert Louis Stevenson Club.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Can you write a fabulous Fable?

THE story count is mounting steadily in our competition for writers to try their hand at a modern-day version of Stevenson's Fables.

Writers from 80 countries around the globe have already shown interest in the competition and many are now working on their entries. Some entries received already are quite good, but there is plenty of room for more and better Fables, so why not try your hand? So study the master, enjoy his style – and give it a go.

The competition ends on April 2 in this great Scotland's Year of Stories. We want you to add a few more to the tally. Full details can be found on the mrrls.com website, along with all manner of RLS activities around the Lothians and more on the way.

But click on 'Find Out More' below the Fable Competition Poster at the home page. Study it well – and get writing!

News from Vailima

WITH the stream of visitors to the RLS Museum in Samoa drying up during the pandemic, the £770 raised through our Vailima appeal has given vital help to cover running costs.

In a letter of thanks to Professor Joe Farrell, who organised the donations, museum general manager Margaret Silva Felise writes: 'The museum is still very quiet. We depend on our venue hire for events and function so hopefully the restricted 30 people for public gatherings will be okay with our bookings.

'We are in a very difficult situation right now and we are still hoping for a miracle for things to change. We pray that somehow we will find a solution to this problem we are all facing so we could get back on our feet and continue to work hard again.

'Joe, we thank you for love and support. We appreciate the donations. God bless!'

In Louis's footsteps

IF you haven't tried them yet, what better time than Spring to put a spring in your step along our two guided Stevenson trails in Edinburgh? Get your smartphone out, download the routes and enjoy the two walks with a commentary from our very own John Shedden and the voice of RLS courtesy of Vincent Guy.

Google Voicemap Edinburgh for Robert Louis Stevenson's Edinburgh Trail: The Childhood Years and Robert Louis Stevenson's Edinburgh Trail: The University Years. All proceeds go to RLS Club funds, so get walking!

Every day is RLS Day

MANY of last year's Robert Louis Stevenson Day events are still available online. To enjoy them, visit rldsday.wordpress.com

Recalling long-lost friends

THEY lie in separate Edinburgh graveyards, half a world away from the mountain-top in Samoa where their famous friend has his last resting place.

Yet in life Walter Simpson and Walter Ferrier were both dear to the heart of Robert Louis Stevenson, each playing an important part in his formative years.

Sir Walter Simpson, who inherited a baronetcy from his father Sir James, the eminent gynaecologist and pioneer of chloroform anaesthesia, was a steadying influence in RLS's giddy youth

Simpson's home in St Colme Street was a refuge for Louis whenever his home situation was unhappy, and the two spent many happy hours besides in boating exploits, including a yachting cruise around the Western Isles and the Inland Voyage canoe trip.

Stevenson in his early twenties was in awe of Walter Ferrier, the golden youth with glittering literary connections who invited him to help launch a college mag-

Best of friends: RLS and, inset, Sir Walter Simpson



azine. He was related not only to the novelist Susan Ferrier, a friend of Sir Walter Scott, but also to John Wilson, 'Christopher North' of Blackwood's Magazine fame.

Ferrier had a two-volume novel published before any by RLS appeared – yet as Louis's star rose, his friend's fell, blighted by the alcoholism that killed him at the age of 33.

Our Grave Matters visit to St Cuthbert's graveyard and Warriston Cemetery will include visits to the graves of both Simpson and Ferrier. And at our Literary Lunch in March, RLS biographer Jeremy Hodges

will reveal the full extent of the tragedy that left Louis distraught at Ferrier's fate – which might easily have been his own when, as a despairing unknown, he had 'hoped (if I did not take to drink) I should possibly write one little book'.

Simpson went on to marry his mistress and they lived happily until a scandal over his 'illegitimate' daughter Flo's presentation to Queen Victoria led to them being shunned by Edinburgh society. But he continued to enjoy golfing and his book, *The Art of Golf*, remains a classic.

OUR Club events now feature a monthly Coffee Morning to enjoy the company of other RLS fans. Full programme here:

MARCH 8 COFFEE MORNING

FROM 10-11.30am at Valvona & Crolla, 19 Elm Row, Edinburgh. Number limit 20.

MARCH 22 LITERARY LUNCH

JOIN RLS biographer Jeremy Hodges to learn more of Louis's friendship with the gifted but doomed Walter Ferrier. Price £22 includes coffee at 10.30 and two-course lunch at 12.30. Courtyard by Marriott, 1-3 Baxter's Place, Edinburgh. 30 places only.

APRIL 12 COFFEE MORNING

FROM 10-11.30am at Valvona & Crolla, 19 Elm Row, Edinburgh. Number limit 20.

APRIL 26 GRAVE MATTERS

TOUR St Cuthbert's graveyard and Warriston Cemetery with Mitchell Manson, visiting the graves of Walter Ferrier,

Thomas de Quincey, Sir Walter Simpson and Sir James Young Simpson, whose statue by St John's church in Princes Street is the 10.30am meeting place. Later by bus to Warriston, then the option of coffee or lunch by the Royal Botanic Garden.

MAY 10 COFFEE MORNING

FROM 10-11.30am at Valvona & Crolla, 19 Elm Row, Edinburgh. Number limit 20.

**MAY 21
HERIOT ROW HOMECOMING**
ATTEND the unveiling at 12 noon of a new display board opposite 17 Heriot Row, the

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home where Stevenson grew up. Step inside to enjoy readings about life there, hosted by John Macfie who will share his personal experience of living in the home of a famous author. Event includes a buffet lunch with wine, price £18. Number limit 30.

**JUNE 7
STEVENSON IN SCHOOLS**
STEP into the classroom with Isobel Reid, former Principal Teacher of English and contributor to *Fortunate Voyager*, who will discuss teaching RLS in secondary schools. The venue is Stevenson's old haunt of Rutherford's, now part of the *Treasure Island*-themed Hispaniola section of Ciao Roma at 64 South Bridge. Coffee available from 10.30 before 11am start. Those requiring lunch afterwards should book ahead through Margaret Wilkie.

BOOKING ESSENTIAL
All events must be booked at least a week beforehand through Events Secretary Margaret Wilkie
wilkiej@blueyonder.co.uk
or ring 0131 477 6738