

# UPDATE

The Robert Louis Stevenson Club June 2023



THEY came from very different backgrounds, but Carol McKay and Robert Louis Stevenson were both inspired by the creative atmosphere they encountered in the little French village of Grèz-sur-Loing.

Louis came from a life of middle-class privilege, growing up an only child in Edinburgh's New Town, and found the companionship he needed at the Hotel Chevillon where artists would gather each summer to paint in the Forest of Fontainebleau.

Carol grew up in a bigger family in Glasgow's Drumchapel, where her love of books set her apart from her older siblings but led to a place at a selective girls' school, followed by university.

A career in librarianship followed, until her interest in creative writing took over and led in 2010 to her being awarded a Robert Louis Stevenson Fellowship to stay and develop her work at the present-day Hotel Chevillon.

And in March this year she shared her experiences there with RLS Club members at the Scottish Arts Club in Edinburgh's Rutland Square – where by coincidence Louis's friend Charles Baxter once lived.

Carol's full-time literary journey began 20 years ago with an MLitt degree in Creative Writing, run jointly by the Universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde. Since then she has taught creative writing, in community groups and then with the Open University.

When she arrived at the Hotel Chevillon in Grèz she kept a journal of her impressions, and the highlight of her talk for the club was her Powerpoint presentation of her stay, illustrated with photographs and accompanied by evocative readings of extracts from her journal.

She was deeply moved by a sense of privilege at being in Grèz, something which earlier generations of women, especially from her own family, could never have imagined. The opportunity to meet other creative people resident there added to the experience. In her journal she found herself empathising



*Space to write: Author Carol McKay by the old bridge at Grèz-sur-Loing*

## Inspired by RLS in Grez

with Stevenson and the life he and his artistic friends led in Grèz. This was deepened shortly after her return to Scotland when, reflecting on Louis's lifelong poor health and sudden, early death, she was diagnosed with Addison's Disease – a rare, debilitating and occasionally fatal condition.

Yet like Stevenson she learned to live with illness and follow a thriving career

as a poet, novelist, and writer of short fiction, creative non-fiction and memoir, including *Second Chance: True Stories of Living with Addison's Disease*, an account of her own and fellow sufferers' experiences.

Her books include a volume of poetry, *Reading the Landscape*, a short story collection, *Ordinary Domestic*, and two novels, *Incunabulum* and *White Spirit*, a crime novel set in the Scottish Highlands. It features a detective who, while investigating the murder of a young boy, is diagnosed with Addison's Disease.

Looking back, she reflects on how the RLS Fellowship enhanced her sense of validation and confidence as a writer, on which she has built ever since.

This year she has taken on the role of Scriever for the Scottish Federation of Writers (Scotland), with time for more experiences and more books to come.

### Annual General Meeting

**THE Annual General Meeting of the Robert Louis Stevenson Club will be held on Saturday June 24 at 10am in the Mackenzie Building of the Faculty of Advocates, Old Assembly Close, 172 High Street, Edinburgh, conducted by our Chairman Jon Cossar.**

**The AGM is your chance to elect Committee members and air your ideas for the Club's future development. See enclosed Agenda papers.**



## EVENTS



### JULY

AS part of *The Education of an Engineer*, RLS stayed at Cunzie House, pictured, in Anstruther while attempting to learn the business of harbour construction by the family firm of D&T Stevenon. Committee members have visited the Fife town to plan a Club event in early July – for further details contact Margaret Wilkie. It is hoped also to pay a September visit to Wick, where Louis made further attempts to become an engineer. Members interested should give their names to Margaret now.

### JULY 29

#### RLS IN THE GARDEN

MEMBERS are invited to an RLS Summer Garden Party at the Edinburgh home of Linda Dryden, an authority on Stevenson, who lives just around the corner from the former public house where Louis and his friend Charles Baxter once braved the grudging hospitality of the irascible Thomas Brash. Proceedings will be more seemly when Linda generously invites us into her beautiful garden between 3pm and 5pm – please notify Margaret Wilkie if you would like to attend.

### AUGUST 16

LOUIS felt a sense of kinship with that ‘other Rabbie’ Robert Burns, now celebrated in a musical event on the Edinburgh Fringe, featuring our own John Shedden with master fiddler Alastair Savage, Gregor Blamey and Ewan Robertson. *The Fiddle and Robert Burns* is at 6pm at St Cuthbert’s Church (venue 122). To enjoy the August 16 performance with other Club members and meet up afterwards, book tickets (£13, concessions £11) online via the Fringe website, then let Margaret know you will be there. **DIARY DATE:** The Club Lunch will be on Saturday November 18. Details in Autumn newsletter.

**BOOKING:** Call Margaret Wilkie, 0131 477 6738 or 07815 845586, email wilkiejl@blueyonder.co.uk

## Not quite what Louis imagined...



ISOBEL McArthur’s makeover of the RLS classic *Kidnapped* for the National Theatre of Scotland certainly got a lot of people talking when Club members attended performances at Edinburgh’s Royal Lyceum theatre.

There were those who loved it, those who hated it, and those who were bamboozled by the curious musical treatment, described by one member as a ‘pirated’ version of the serious Stevenson original.

It did at least provoke a reaction – something that would surely please any writer – and gave members more to talk about at the Club’s May coffee morning in the convivial surroundings of Valvona & Crolla.

## Ordered South to paradise on the Riviera



Palmy paradise: Menton in the South of France

ON Louis’s 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday he arrived in the Mediterranean resort of Menton, having been Ordered South by his doctors to escape the stress of religious rows with his parents.

Now the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his convalescence there in 1873 will be celebrated with events hosted by the town, and all lovers of Stevenson are invited to take part.

Commencing on November 10 with the Annual General Meeting of the European

Cultural Route In the Footsteps of Robert Louis Stevenson, there will be walks around the town of which Louis had happy memories. Recalling an earlier childhood holiday there, he wrote to his mother: ‘The hills, I am glad to say are unaltered; The sea makes the same noise in the shingle; the lemon and orange gardens still discharge in the still air their fresh perfume...’

Other events will include one featuring the poetry of Stevenson and of Katharine Mansfield, who lived and wrote in Menton before her death 100 years ago.

The highlight on Louis’s November 13 birthday will be the presentation to the Mayor of Menton of a plaque designed by the Club, to be mounted on one of the town’s fine Belle Époque buildings.

To take part, members should make their own travel arrangements – and look forward to a convivial weekend. More details in our Autumn newsletter.

### CONTACTS

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