

He was supposedly a diligent student at the University of Edinburgh: but in reality, Robert Louis Stevenson was trawling through the fleshpots of Leith

The secret double life of Mr Jekyll and Hyde



lonely garret became too much to bear, he sought solace in the arms of two-franc 'French bitches'. On returning to Edinburgh, he adopted a similar lifestyle along with his cousin.

As they discussed art and literature, love and life in the smoky din of Collett's shebeen, they would have found it hilarious that the Scottish Association for the Suppression of Licentiousness was trying to stamp out nude modelling at Edinburgh School of Art, where Bob was now a student.

To them, it was another symptom of repressive Edinburgh, where in the 1870s sex was sanctioned only within the confines of a marriage settlement, subject to the groom's social and financial status. While neither cousin was particularly proud of his love life, the alternative was years of lonely chastity.

Apart from a wealthy father, Louis had little to commend him in the marriage market. On the verge of dropping out of university and practically unemployable, he seemed interested in little beyond scurrilous French novels and the 'immoral' poetry of Walt Whitman.

An eight-stone weakling whose clothes hung loose on his 5ft 10in frame, he lacked the physique to impress the eligible young ladies his parents invited to Heriot Row, where his witty displays of verbal

pyrotechnics left them confused and a little bored. He might fancy himself in love with one or two of them but was tongue-tied when it came to expressing his feelings.

When permitted to walk the lovely Flora Masson home to her university professor father's home in Regent Terrace, he could only adore from afar as she turned to say goodnight at the front door, blue eyes shining in the lamplight, before disappearing inside. And when later he screwed up the courage to send her a letter proposing marriage, she gently turned him down.

There was no such embarrassment with the working girls in Leith Street, who were flattered to find a young gentleman who treated them as people rather than commodities. He visited them by day as a friend, not a customer, chatting with them in the brothel kitchen as they washed their white stockings and dried them by the fire in readiness for the night's work.

While the girls viewed most of Edinburgh's Mr Hydes with contempt, they liked Louis and felt unusually inhibited about taking him as a customer. At least one turned him down. Some may even have been a little in love.

Later, he would reveal that a girl called 'Mary H', an occasional prostitute when not in work at a

factory on Leith Walk, had tried to make him jealous: 'It never occurred to me that she thought of me except in the way of business.'

It was only years later they had a long chat in a pub and realised they had been dear friends without knowing it: 'We had much to talk about, and she cried - and so did I.'

The one girl Louis did fall in love with in Leith Street was Kate

'There was no embarrassment at working girls'

Drummond, or so the myth says. When a close friend of his youth gave her name to a biographer in the 1920s, the story seemed incredible.

Kate may have been a prostitute, or simply a girl caught up in the seedy side of life on Leith Street. The story goes that Louis wanted to marry her but abandoned her after his furious father threatened to throw him out of the house.

But was it just a story? Census records show a Peter Drummond had a tailor's business in Leith Street - and a niece called Kate,

possibly left to her own devices in Edinburgh after her family moved to Glasgow. She came originally from Crieff in Perthshire, not far from the Braes of Balquhider, although her mother's family were from Prestonpans.

Balquhider was the historic homeland of James Mor MacGregor or Drummond, the son of Rob Roy, who fought bravely for the Jacobites at Prestonpans. When Louis in his forties wrote his novel Catriona, he made James Mor's daughter the heroine, with whom David Balfour falls in love.

Yet the real daughter of James Mor was called Malie. Were Louis's reasons for changing the name to Catriona Drummond - Kate in Gaelic disguise - cosmetic or personal?

There is certainly hard evidence that he turned his back on a working class girl who could barely afford the postage for the many letters she sent him, c/o Wilson the tobacconist.

Perhaps under pressure from his father, he did not reply and eventually burned them all. In confessing this to a friend, he was racked by guilt, saying: 'Don't I deserve the gallows?'

With that, Kate Drummond slipped away into the mists. Louis eventually followed Bob to the artist colony of Grez-sur-Loing near Paris, where at the age of 25

he met the woman that he would marry. True love and sexual fulfilment came at a price.

In following Fanny Osbourne to California and persuading her to divorce her faithless husband, Louis caused a scandal so severe at home that his distraught parents contemplated leaving Edinburgh to escape its moral censure.

Edinburgh society could go hang for all Louis cared but he did regret aspects of his youthful conduct. In 1894, he confessed in a last letter to Bob that he wished he had been 'more chaste' before marriage and had 'honoured sex more religiously'.

Shortly afterwards, at his new home on the South Sea island of Samoa, the 44-year-old author died suddenly of a stroke - possibly the result of syphilis contracted at the age of 22. It robbed the world of untold works of genius.

As headlines worldwide paid tribute to the memory of a great man, Victorian Edinburgh basked in reflected glory - smiling sweetly on her newfound favourite son, as if nothing unpleasant had ever happened.

● *Lamplit, Vicious Fairy Land* by Jeremy Hodges is serialised free online by the Edinburgh Napier University team at www.robert-louis-stevenson.org