



## Scottish Poets and Poetry

### Robert Louis Stevenson

Stevenson was born Robert Lewis Balfour Stevenson, in Edinburgh, Scotland, on November 13, 1850. His father was Thomas Stevenson, and his grandfather was Robert Stevenson; both were distinguished lighthouse designers and engineers, as was his great-grandfather. It was from this side of the family that he inherited his love of adventure, joy of the sea and for the open road. His maternal grandfather, Lewis Balfour, was a professor of moral philosophy and a minister, and young Stevenson spent the greater part of his boyhood holidays in his house.

"Now I often wonder", says Stevenson, "what I inherited from this old minister. I must suppose, indeed, that he was fond of preaching sermons, and so am I, though I never heard it maintained that either of us loved to hear them.

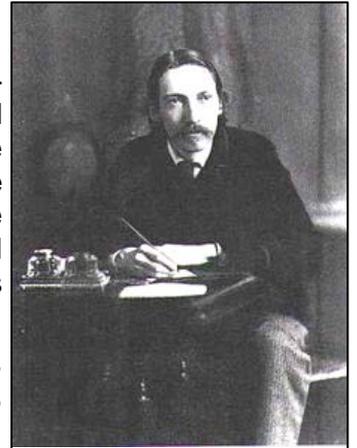
From his mother, Margaret Balfour, he inherited weak lungs (perhaps tuberculosis), that kept him constantly in "the land of the counterpane" during the winter, where his nurse spent long hours by his bedside reading from the Bible, and lives of the old Covenanters. During the summer, he was encouraged to play outside, where he proved to be a wild and carefree child, and by the age of eleven his health had improved so that his parents prepared him for the University of Edinburgh by attending Edinburgh Academy, planning for him to follow his father as a lighthouse engineer. During this period, he read widely and especially enjoyed Shakespeare, Walter Scott John Bunyan and *The Arabian Nights*.

He entered the University of Edinburgh at seventeen, but soon discovered he had neither the scientific mind nor physical endurance to succeed as an engineer. When his father took him for a voyage, he found — instead of being interested in lighthouse construction — that his mind was teeming with wonderful romances about the coast and islands which they visited. Although his father was stern, he finally allowed him to decide upon a career in literature — but first he thought it wise to finish a degree in law, so that he might have something to fall back upon. Stevenson followed this course and by the age of twenty-five passed the examinations for admission to the bar, though not until he had nearly ruined his health through work and worry. His father's lack of understanding led him to write the following protest:

"Say not of me that weakly I declined  
The labours of my sires, and fled the sea  
The towers we founded and the lamps we lit,  
To play at home with paper like a child."

### Marriage and travels

The next four years were spent mostly in travel, and in search of a climate that would be more beneficial for his health. He made long and frequent trips to Fontainebleau, Barbizon, Grez, and Nemours, becoming a member of the artists' colonies there. He made frequent trips to Paris visiting galleries and the theatres. It was during this period he first met his future wife Fanny Vandegrift Osbourne, and made most of his lasting friends. Among these was included Sidney Colvin, his biographer and literary agent; William Henley, a collaborator in dramatic composition; Mrs. Sitwell, who helped him through a religious crisis; Andrew Lang, Edmund Gosse, and Leslie Stephen, all writers and critics. He also made the journeys described in *An Inland Voyage* and *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*. In addition,



he wrote twenty or more articles and essays that appeared in various magazines. Although it seemed to his parents he was wasting his time and being idle, he was in reality constantly studying to perfect his style of writing and broaden his knowledge of life, emerging as a man of letters.

When Stevenson and Fanny Vandegrift Osbourne met in France in 1876, it was love at first sight. A few months later when she returned to her home in San Francisco, California, Stevenson was determined to follow when he learned that she was sick. His friends advised against the journey; knowing his father's temper, he sailed without even notifying his parents. He took steerage passage on the *Devonian*, in part to save money but also to learn how others travelled, and to increase the adventure of the journey. From New York City, he travelled overland by train to California. He later wrote about the experience in *An Amateur Emigrant* and *Across the Plains*. Although it was good experience for his literature, it broke his health, and he was near death when he arrived in Monterey. He was nursed back to his feet by some ranchers there.

In December 1879, he had recovered his health enough to continue to San Francisco, where for several months he struggled "all alone on forty-five cents a day, and sometimes less, with quantities of hard work and many thoughts," in an effort to support himself through his writing; but by the end of the winter his health was broken again, and he found himself at death's door. Vandegrift — now officially divorced from her husband and recovered from her own illness — came to Stevenson's bedside and nursed him to recovery. "After a while," he wrote, "my spirit got up again in divine frenzy, and has since kicked and spurred my vile body forward with great emphasis and success." When his father heard of his condition he cabled him money to help him through this period.

In May 1880, he was married, when, as he said, he was "a mere complication of cough and bones, much fitter for an emblem of mortality than a bridegroom." With his new wife and her son, Lloyd, he went into the mountains north of San Francisco in Nappa Valley, and spent a summer honeymoon at an abandoned mining camp; this experience he published in *The Silverado Squatters*.

At one point he met Charles Stoddard, co-editor of the *Overland Monthly* and author of *South Sea Idylls*, who urged Stevenson to travel to the south Pacific, an idea which would return to him many years later. In August 1880, he sailed from New York with his family back to Great Britain, and found his parents and his friend Sidney Colvin, on the wharf at Liverpool, happy to see him return home.

Gradually his new wife was able to patch up differences between father and son and make herself a part of the new family through her charm and wit.



Portrait by Girolamo Nerli, 1892.

### Journey to the Pacific

For the next seven years between 1880 and 1887, Stevenson searched in vain for a place of residence suitable to his state of health. He spent his summers at various places in Scotland and England; for his winters, he escaped to sunny France, where, for a time, he enjoyed almost complete happiness. "I have so many things to make life sweet for me," he wrote, "it seems a pity I cannot have that other one thing — health. But though you will be angry to hear it, I believe for myself, at least, that is best. I believed it all through my worst days, and I am not ashamed to profess it now."

In spite of the blood on his handkerchief and the medicine bottle at his elbow, his optimistic spirit kept him going, and he produced the bulk of his best known work: *Treasure Island*, his first widely popular book; *Kidnapped*; *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the story which established his wider reputation; and two volumes of verse, *A Child's Garden of Verses* and *Underwoods*.

On the death of his father in 1887, Stevenson felt free to follow the advice of his physician to try a complete change of climate. He started with his mother and family for Colorado; but after landing in New York they decided to spend the winter in the Adirondacks. During the intensely cold winter, Stevenson wrote a number of his best essays, and began

*The Master of Ballantrae*, and light-heartedly planned, for the following summer, a cruise to the southern Pacific Ocean. "The proudest moments of my life," he wrote, "have been passed in the stern-sheets of a boat with that romantic garment over my shoulders."

In June 1888, Stevenson chartered the yacht *Casco* and set sail with his family from San Francisco. The vessel "ploughed her path of snow across the empty deep, far from any hand of help." The salt

sea air and thrill of adventure for a time restored his health; and for nearly three years he wandered the eastern and central Pacific, visiting important island groups, stopping for extended stays at the Hawaiian Islands where he became a good friend of King David Kakakaua with whom Stevenson spent much time. Furthermore, Stevenson befriended the king's niece Princess Victoria Kaiulani who was of Scottish Heritage. During this period he completed, *The Master of Ballantrae*, composed two ballads based on the legends of the islanders, and wrote *The Bottle Imp*.

### **Last years**

In 1890, he purchased four hundred acres (about 1.6 square kilometres) of land in Upolu, one of the Samoan Islands. Here, after two aborted attempts to visit Scotland, he established himself, after much work, upon his estate, which he named Vailima ("Five Rivers"). His influence spread to the natives who consulted him for advice, and he soon became involved in local politics. He was convinced the European officials appointed to rule the natives were incompetent, and after many futile attempts to resolve the matter, he published *A Footnote to History*. This was such a stinging protest against existing conditions that it resulted in the recall of two officials, and Stevenson feared for a time it would result in his own deportation. When things had finally blown over he wrote a friend, "I used to think meanly of the plumber; but now she shines beside the politician."

In addition to building his house and clearing his land and helping the natives in many ways, he found time to work at his writing. In his enthusiasm, he felt that "there was never any man had so many irons in the fire."

For a time during 1894, Stevenson felt depressed; he wondered if he had exhausted his creative vein and completely worked himself out. He wrote that he had "overworked bitterly". He felt more clearly, with each fresh attempt, that the best he could write was "ditch water". He even feared that he might again become a helpless invalid. He rebelled against this idea: "I wish to die in my boots; no more land of counterpane for me. To be drowned, to be shot, to be thrown from a horse — ay, to be hanged rather than pass again through that slow dissolution." He then suddenly had a return of his old energy and he began work on *Weir of Hermiston*. "It's so good that it frightens me," he is reported to have exclaimed. He felt that this was the best work he had done. He was convinced, "sick and well, I have had splendid life of it, grudge nothing, regret very little ... take it all over, I would hardly change with any man of my time."

Without knowing it, he was to have his wish fulfilled. During the morning of 3 December 1894, he had worked hard as usual on *Weir of Hermiston*. During the evening, while conversing with his wife and straining to open a bottle of wine, he suddenly fell to the ground, asking "What's the matter with me? What is this strangeness? Has my face changed?" He died within a few hours, probably of a cerebral haemorrhage, at the age of 44. The natives insisted on surrounding his body with a watch-guard during the night, and on bearing their Tusitala (Samoan language for "Teller of Tales") several miles upon their shoulders to the top of a cliff overlooking the sea, where he was buried.