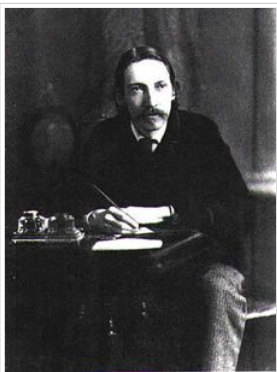


# Robert Louis Stevenson

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**Robert Louis (Balfour) Stevenson** (November 13, 1850–December 3, 1894), was a Scottish novelist, poet, and travel writer, and a leading



Robert Louis Stevenson

representative of Neo-romanticism in English literature. He was the man who "seemed to pick the right word up on the point of his pen, like a man playing spillikins", as G. K. Chesterton put it.

He was also greatly admired by many authors, including Jorge Luis Borges, Ernest Hemingway, Rudyard Kipling and Vladimir Nabokov. <sup>[1]</sup> Most modernist writers dismissed him, however, because he was popular and did not write within their narrow definition of literature. It is only recently that critics have begun to look beyond Stevenson's popularity and allow him a place in the canon.

## Contents

- 1 Early life
- 2 Marriage and travels
- 3 Journey to the Pacific
- 4 Last years
- 5 Modern reception
- 6 Bibliography
  - 6.1 Novels
  - 6.2 Short story collections
  - 6.3 Short stories
  - 6.4 Other works
  - 6.5 Poetry
  - 6.6 Travel writing
  - 6.7 Island literature
    - 6.7.1 Non-fiction works on the Pacific
- 7 Works in Scots

- 8 Musical compositions
- 9 Notes
- 10 Sources
- 11 Further reading
- 12 External links

## Early life

Stevenson<sup>[2]</sup> was born Robert Lewis Balfour Stevenson,<sup>[3]</sup> 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. Through his mother he was descended from Gilbert Elliott, 1st Baronet of Minto, and was related to Arthur St. Clair. His maternal grandfather, Lewis Balfour, was a professor of moral philosophy and a minister, and 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 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 Cévennes*. In addition he wrote twenty or more articles and essays which 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



Stevenson paces in his dining room in an 1885 portrait by John Singer Sargent. His wife Fanny, seated in an Indian dress, is visible in the lower right corner.

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 traveled 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 health 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 heavy thoughts,"<sup>[4]</sup> 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 traveled north of San Francisco to Napa Valley, and spent a summer honeymoon at an abandoned mining camp on Mount Saint Helena. This experience he published in *The Silverado Squatters*. He met Charles Warren 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 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.

## **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, including Westbourne, Dorset; for his

winters, he escaped to sunny France, and lived at Davos-Platz and the Chalet de Solitude at Hyeres, 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



Portrait by John Singer Sargent, 1887.

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*.

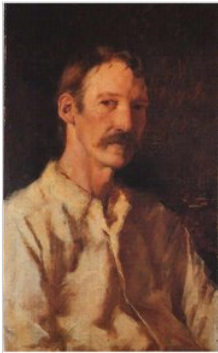
On the death of his father in 1887, Stevenson felt free to follow the advice of his physician to try a complete change of climate. He started with his mother and family for Colorado; but after landing in New York they decided to spend the winter at Saranac Lake, in the Adirondacks. During the intensely cold winter Stevenson wrote a number of his best essays, including *Pulvis et Umbra*, he began *The Master of Ballantrae*, and lightheartedly 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 Kalakaua, with whom Stevenson spent much time. Furthermore, Stevenson befriended the king's niece Princess Victoria Kaiulani, who was of Scottish heritage. He also spent time at the Gilbert Islands, Tahiti and the Samoan Islands. During this period he completed *The Master of Ballantrae*, composed two ballads based on the legends of the islanders, and wrote *The Bottle Imp*. The experience of these years is preserved in his various letters and in *The South Seas*.

## 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



Portrait by Girolamo Nerli,  
1892.

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 he 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." He wrote *The Beach*

of *Falesa*, *David Balfour*, and *Ebb Tide*, as well as the *Vailima Letters*, during this period.

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 that, with each fresh attempt, 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  
December 3, 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



Stevenson's tomb on Mt. Vaea

changed?" He died within a few hours, probably of  
a cerebral hemorrhage, 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 for "Story Writer") upon their  
shoulders to nearby Mt Vaea and buried him on a  
spot overlooking the sea. A tablet was placed there,  
which bore the inscription of his 'Requiem', the  
piece he always had intended as his epitaph:

Under the wide and starry sky,  
Dig the grave and let me lie.  
Glad did I live and gladly die,  
And I laid me down with a  
will.  
This be the verse you grave for

me:  
*Here he lies where he longed to  
be;  
Home is the sailor, home from  
sea,  
And the hunter home from the  
hill.*

## Modern reception

Stevenson was a celebrity in his own time, but with the rise of modern literature after World War I, he was seen for much of the 20th century as a writer of the second class, relegated to children's literature and horror genres. Condemned by authors such as Virginia Woolf and Leonard Woolf, he was gradually excluded from the canon of literature taught in schools. His exclusion reached a height when in the 1973 2,000-page *Oxford Anthology of English Literature* Stevenson was entirely unmentioned, and the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* excluded him from 1968 to 2000 (1st–7th editions), including him only in the 8th edition (2006). The late 20th century saw the start of a re-evaluation of

Stevenson as an artist of great range and insight, a literary theorist, an essayist and social critic, a witness to the colonial history of the South Pacific, and a humanist. He is now being re-evaluated as a peer with authors such as Joseph Conrad (whom Stevenson influenced with his South Seas fiction) and Henry James, with new scholarly studies and organizations devoted to Stevenson.<sup>[5]</sup> No matter what the scholarly reception, Stevenson remains very popular. According to the Index Translationum, Stevenson is ranked the 25th most translated author in the world, ahead of Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde and Edgar Allan Poe.

## Bibliography

For a detailed list see bibliography.

### Novels

- *Treasure Island* (1883) His first major success, a tale of piracy, buried treasure, and adventure, has been filmed frequently. It was originally called *The Sea-Cook*. Its most famous character, Long John Silver, has even given his name to a chain of restaurants.



- *The Black Arrow: A Tale of the Two Roses* (1883) An historical adventure novel and romance set during the Wars of the Roses. This novel presents the Wars of the Roses, as it were, in miniature.
- *Prince Otto* (1885) Stevenson's second full-length narrative, an action romance set in the imaginary Germanic state of Grunewald.
- *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), a novella about a dual personality much depicted in plays and films, also influential in the growth of understanding of the subconscious mind through its treatment of a kind and intelligent physician who turns into a psychopathic monster after imbibing a drug intended to separate good from evil in a personality.
- *Kidnapped* (1886) is a historical novel that tells of the boy David Balfour's pursuit of his inheritance and his alliance with Alan Breck in the intrigues of Jacobite troubles in Scotland.
- *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), a masterful tale of revenge, set in Scotland, America, and India.
- *The Wrong Box* (1889); co-written with Lloyd Osbourne. A comic novel of a tontine, also filmed (1966). A tontine is a group life-insurance policy in which all the benefits go

to the last survivor. Both in the novel and in real life, it is an incentive to murder, and no longer legal in most countries.

- *The Wrecker* (1892); co-written with Lloyd Osbourne.
- *Catriona* (1893), also known as *David Balfour*, is a sequel to *Kidnapped*, telling of Balfour's further adventures.
- *The Ebb Tide* (1894); co-written with Lloyd Osbourne.
- *Weir of Hermiston* (1896). Unfinished at the time of Stevenson's death, considered to have promised great artistic growth.
- *St. Ives: being the Adventures of a French Prisoner in England* (1897). Unfinished at the time of Stevenson's death, the novel was completed by Arthur Quiller-Couch.

## Short story collections

- *New Arabian Nights* (1882)
- *More New Arabian Nights: The Dynamiter* (1885); co-written with Fanny Van De Grift Stevenson
- *The Merry Men and Other Tales and Fables* (1887)
- *Island Nights' Entertainments* (also known as *South Sea Tales*) (1893)

## Short stories

List of short stories sorted chronologically. Note: does not include collaborations with Fanny found in *More New Arabian Nights: The Dynamiter*.

Title	Date	Collection	Notes
"A Lodging for the Night"	1877	<i>New Arabian Nights</i>	Stevenson's first publish fiction when he was 22 years old.
"The Sire De Malétroits Door"	1877	<i>New Arabian Nights</i>	
"An Old Song"	1877	Uncollected	
"Edifying Letters of the Rutherford Family"	1877	Uncollected	
"Later-day Arabian	1878	<i>New Arabian</i>	Seven interconnect stories in tw cycles: <i>The Suicide Clul</i>

"Nights"		<i>Nights</i>	(3 stories) as <i>The Rajah's Diamond</i> (4 stories).
"Providence and the Guitar"	1878	<i>New Arabian Nights</i>	
"The Pavilion on the Links"	1880	<i>New Arabian Nights</i>	Told in 9 mini-chapters. Conan Doyle in 1890 called it the first English short story.
"The Story of a Lie"	1882	Uncollected	
"The Merry Men"	1882	<i>The Merry Men and Other Tales and Fables</i>	
"The Body Snatcher"	1884	Uncollected	First published in the Christmas 1884 edition of the <i>Pall Mall Gazette</i> .

"Markheim"	1885	<i>The Merry Men and Other Tales and Fables</i>	
<i>Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde</i>	1886	Uncollected	Often called short story c a novella.
"Will O' the Mill"	1887	<i>The Merry Men and Other Tales and Fables</i>	
"Thrawn Janet"	1887	<i>The Merry Men and Other Tales and Fables</i>	
"Olalla"	1887	<i>The Merry Men and Other Tales and Fables</i>	
"The Treasure of Franchard"	1887	<i>The Merry Men and Other Tales and Fables</i>	
"The Misadventures of John"			

Nicholson: A Christmas Story"	1887	Uncollected	
"The Bottle Imp"	1891	<i>Island Nights' Entertainments</i>	
"The Beach of Falesa"	1893	<i>Island Nights' Entertainments</i>	
"The Isle of Voice"	1893	<i>Island Nights' Entertainments</i>	

## Other works

- *Virginibus Puerisque, and Other Papers* (1881)
- *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (1882)
- *Memories and Portraits* (1887), a collection of essays.
- *Father Damien: an Open Letter to the Rev. Dr. Hyde of Honolulu* (1890)
- *Vailima Letters* (1895)
- *The New Lighthouse on the Dhu Heartach Rock, Argyllshire* (1995). Based on an 1872 manuscript edited by R. G. Swearingen. California. Silverado Museum.

## Poetry

- *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885), written for children but also popular with their parents. Includes such favourites as "My Shadow" and "The Lamplighter". Often thought to represent a positive reflection of the author's sickly childhood.
- *Underwoods* (1887), a collection of poetry written in both English and Scots.
- *Songs of Travel and Other Verses* (1896)
- *Ballads* (1891)

## Travel writing

- *An Inland Voyage* (1878), travels with a friend in a "Rob Roy" canoe from Antwerp (Belgium) to Pontoise, just north of Paris.
- *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (1879), solo hiking in the mountains of Cévennes (south-central France), one of the first books to present hiking and camping as recreational activities. It tells of commissioning one of the first sleeping bags.
- *The Silverado Squatters* (1883). An unconventional honeymoon trip to an abandoned mining camp in Napa Valley, California with his new wife Fanny and her son Lloyd.
- *Across the Plains* (written in 1879–80,

published in 1892). Second leg of his journey, by train from New York to California (then picks up with *The Silverado Squatters*). Also includes other travel essays.

- *The Amateur Emigrant* (written 1879–80, published 1895). An account of the first leg of his journey to California, by ship from Europe to New York. Andrew Noble (*From the Clyde to California: Robert Louis Stevenson's Emigrant Journey*, 1985) considers it to be his finest work.

## **Island literature**

Although not well known, his island fiction and non-fiction is among the most valuable and collected of the 19th century body of work that addresses the Pacific area.

## **Non-fiction works on the Pacific**

- *In the South Seas*. A collection of Stevenson's articles and essays on his travels in the Pacific.
- *A Footnote to History, Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa* (1892).

## **Works in Scots**



Stevenson also wrote poetry and prose in Scots.  
See ScotsteXt

## Musical compositions

Stevenson was an amateur composer who wrote songs typical of California in the 1880s, salon-type music, entertaining rather than serious. A flageolet player, Stevenson had studied harmony and simple counterpoint and knew such basic instrumental techniques as transposition. Some song titles include "Fanfare", "Tune for Flageolet", "Habanera", and "Quadrille". Robert Hughes in 1968 arranged a number of Stevenson's songs for chamber orchestra, which went on a tour of the Pacific Northwest in that year. [1]

## Notes

1. ^ R.H.W. Dillard, *Introduction to Treasure Island*, by Signet Classics, 1998. ISBN 0-451-52704-6. See Page XIII
2. ^ Unless otherwise noted, the biography of Stevenson in this article, from birth to death, was adapted from James Cloyd Bowman (1918) (see sources)

3. ^ When Stevenson was around 18 years old he changed the spelling of 'Lewis' to 'Louis'.
4. ^ *The Amateur Emigrant*
5. ^ Stephen Arata (2006). "Robert Louis Stevenson". David Scott Kastan (ed.). *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*. Vol. 5: 99-102

## Sources

- Bowman, James Cloyd (1918). *An Inland Voyage and Travels with a Donkey*.
- O'Brien, Robert. *This Is San Francisco*, 1948, reprint Chronicle Books 1994

## Further reading

Claire Harman, *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Biography*, HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-711321-8  
[reviewed by Matthew Sturgis in *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 March 2005, page 8]

## External links

- **Sources**
  - Works by Robert Louis Stevenson, at The Online Books Page

- Works by Robert Louis Stevenson at Project Gutenberg
- Essays by Stevenson at Quotidiana.org
- 151 poems by Robert Louis Stevenson, at Poetry Archive
- "Henry David Thoreau: His Character and Opinions", by Robert Louis Stevenson
- *Fables*, by Robert Louis Stevenson, at The University of Wisconsin Digital Collections Center.
- Works by Robert Louis Stevenson in PDF at Ria Press.
- **Biographies and commentaries**
  - There are over 200 published biographies of RLS
  - *Robert Louis Stevenson: a record, an estimate, and a memorial*, by Alexander H. Japp
  - *Robert Louis Stevenson*, a biography by Sir Walter Raleigh
  - Robert Louis Stevenson: a memoir (1895), by Edmund Gosse who knew Stevenson personally.
  - Robert Louis Stevenson: biography (1911), by Edmund Gosse, from the *Encyclopædia Britannica Eleventh Edition*
  - Robert Louis Stevenson, biography

from the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 1987.

- Robert Louis Stevenson, the composer
- **Misc**
  - Robert Louis Stevenson Website. Extensive information including the most complete collection of derivative works. Maintained by editor of the *Journal of Stevenson Studies*.
  - The bell rock lighthouse and the Stevenson : the history of an old sea tower and a family of engineers
  - Robert Louis Stevenson trail GR70
  - Silverado Museum, California, 'Devoted to Robert Louis Stevenson'.
  - The Genealogy of the Balfour Family
  - Discover Stevenson's journey with a donkey in the Cévennes, France
  - WorldCat Identities page for 'Stevenson, Robert Louis 1850–1894'
  - Edinburgh Law School Official Site

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Categories: Robert Louis Stevenson | 1850 births | 1894 deaths | Alumni of the University of Edinburgh | Edinburgh Academical | Scottish historical novelists | Lallans poets | People from

Edinburgh | People from Napa County, California |  
Scottish children's writers | Scottish horror writers |  
Scottish novelists | Scottish poets | Scottish  
Presbyterians | Scottish short story writers |  
Scottish travel writers | British non-fiction  
outdoors writers | Deaths by cerebral hemorrhage

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