

REVIEW: SCOTLAND AND RLS

Mario Relich

Tom Hubbard and Duncan Glen (eds.), **Stevenson's Scotland**, Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2003, 159 pp, pb, £9.99, ISBN 184183 0569.

Stevenson's Scotland, a collection of various writings by Robert Louis Stevenson on the land he called, perhaps not quite nostalgically, 'that grey country, with its rainy, sea-beat archipelago' in his essay 'The Scot Abroad', demonstrates that for all his visual power and topographical accuracy, Stevenson's country was not that of sightseeing tourists on the lookout for famous landmarks, but the sheet-anchor of his powerfully cartographic imagination. The editors, Tom Hubbard and Duncan Glen, usefully provide a map of Scotland indicating the places described or mentioned by him. The rationale for their selection is not chronological, but spatial and bracingly exploratory. As they put it, '[w]e have arranged our selection from Stevenson's topographical writings on Scotland in the form of a journey, starting in Edinburgh and heading north-east. From Shetland we head south-west through the Highlands as far as Dumfries, then return to the Edinburgh area'. But they also allow for the unexpected: 'There are a number of detours on the way'. Hubbard's introduction relates these writings to Stevenson's visual sensibility, while Glen's biographical sketch deftly avoids clichés about the author of **Treasure Island**.

The heart of the selection is Stevenson's early work, **Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes** (1878), in its entirety, a very welcome text as reprints have been hitherto hard to find. **The Scotsman** critic at the time described the tone of the young Stevenson to be that of 'a well-bred loungeur, a *flaneur*', and condemned what he took to be the 'divine complacency ... deeply veiled in the cynical humour which he cultivates' about Edinburgh. Stevenson's sin evidently was his cheek in daring to write anything about Edinburgh which

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was not entirely complimentary. And if Stevenson was a ‘flaneur’, of Dr. Jekyll vintage, then he was in very good company, a *connoisseur* of the delights of city life, especially along Lothian Road, and pubs like Rutherford’s, rivalled perhaps only by the Hyde-like Baudelaire. One chapter which particularly strikes a chord now, ‘The Villa Quarters’, and which could have been written yesterday, is Stevenson’s attack on builders, really what we would now call developers. His sarcasm reaches its highest pitch in the following observation: ‘It is no use asking them to employ an architect; for that would be to touch them in a delicate quarter ...’ And in his chapter on the New Town, he talks about ‘the infuriate zeal of builders’. But, on the whole, reading it now, any controversy about **Picturesque Notes** has long faded. What makes it still very readable is that it remains picturesque in the most literal, and positive, sense of that word, in that he makes us vividly *see* what Victorian Edinburgh was like, not least its panoramic views from Calton Hill, and how much of it still remains, both architecturally and socially. Also, as Hubbard points out, in a comment equally applicable to RLS on Edinburgh: ‘There remains that ambivalence about Scotland, and the reader will come across passages that would not feature in a holiday brochure’. Stevenson himself, at least according to his great admirer, the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges who quotes him, was more blunt about travel as a merely leisure pursuit: ‘Sightseeing is the art of disappointment’.

Stevenson’s earliest published work, paid for by his father, was his booklet on **The Pentland Rising** (1866), written when he was just sixteen years old. The short extract here already shows his historical imagination at work, as the landscape described is viewed from the perspective of trapped Covenanters: ‘... they beheld a deep-shaded amphitheatre of heather and bracken’. Historical vision and topographical description merge magnificently in extracts from **Kidnapped**. A less familiar example of Stevenson’s antiquarian sensitivity comes from one of his last essays, the very evocative, and sadly unfinished ‘A Winter’s Walk in Carrick and Galloway’. At one point, he tells a rather grim story associated with ‘the black voute of Dunure’, a vault in which the kidnapped Allan Stewart, Commendator of Crossraguel Abbey, was roasted over ‘a large fire in the vaults’, as Glen’s notes put it, by henchmen of the Earl of Cassillis in 1570, in order to force him to hand over various deeds belonging to the abbey. Stevenson, however, does not dwell unduly on the torture. He concludes very humanely, and in a lofty manner worthy of his predecessors among Enlightenment historians like David Hume and William Robertson, as follows:

It is one of the ugliest stories of an ugly period, but not, somehow, without such a flavour of the ridiculous as makes it hard to sympathize quite seriously with the victim. And it is consoling to remember that he got away at last, and kept his abbacy, and, over and above, had a pension from the Earl until he died.

But that he could *admit* he found an element of humour in the story makes him also glancingly akin to Tarantino.

Much of Stevenson's travelling in Scotland is also recorded in his letters, and, even by Victorian standards, he was an inveterate letter-writer. Letters written in 1873 to his great friend Mrs Frances Sitwell, so close that a later letter even addresses her as 'My dearest Mother', reveal much about his relationship to his father. One letter describes son and father leisurely walking 'along the shore between Granton and Cramond', and the other their visit to Burns's house ('a place that made me deeply sad') in Dumfries. Both contain idyllic descriptions of the respective surroundings, but always with a hint of emotional tension. The Cramond jaunt ends with: 'I am glad to say that the peace of day and scenery was not marred by unpleasantness between us two; indeed I do think things are going a little better with us ...' The Dumfries visit ends with a more curt statement: 'By good fortune, too, it was a dead calm between my father and me.' These letters are, in fact, very long, more like journal-entries. Mrs Sitwell certainly stimulated an expansive love of the natural world, and of landscape in its historical resonance, both of which evidently helped him to stoically endure his difficult father. Of course, as Glen points out, 'filial relationships that involve tension' are prominent in two of his best novels, **The Master of Ballantrae** and **Weir of Hermiston**.

In his essay, 'The Coast of Fife', Stevenson recollects a tour of lighthouses with his father, who was undoubtedly trying to get him interested in the family business, namely engineering, but it is priceless for the description of St. Andrews and its university, which is worth quoting at some length:

... There was a crashing run of sea upon the shore, I recollect, and my father and the man of the harbour light must sometimes raise their voices to be audible. Perhaps it is from this circumstance that I always imagine St. Andrews to be an ineffectual seat of learning, and the sound of the east wind and the bursting surf to linger in its drowsy classrooms and confound the utterance of the professor, until teacher and taught are alike

drowned in oblivion, and only the sea-gull beats on the windows and the draught of the sea-air rustles on the pages of the open lecture. ...

There seems to be much displacement here of Stevenson's ambivalent feelings towards his father, and of his past longing for freedom from the constraints of a suffocating respectability.

He may have found one key to the freeing up of his imagination in his mother's family. His maternal grandfather was the Rev Dr Lewis Balfour, minister in Colinton village, of whom he wrote in 'The Manse' (1887). In this essay he comes up with an intriguing view of how we relate to our forebears: 'But our ancestral adventures are beyond even the arithmetic of fancy; and it is the chief recommendation of long pedigrees, that we can follow backward the careers of our *homunculos* and be reminded of our antenatal lives'. While Robert Fergusson is not likely to be one of his ancestors, Stevenson treats the Edinburgh poet, 'who died insane while yet a stripling', both in **Picturesque Notes** and in a letter from Vailima to Charles Baxter in the last year of his life as a kind of avatar, or alter-ego in the past. As for judgmental views about the impecunious Fergusson's dissolute life, Stevenson had this ironic sally to make: 'A Scot of poetic temperament, and without religious exaltation, drops as if by nature into the public house. The picture may not be pleasing, but what else is a man to do in this dog's weather?' His letter to Baxter voiced concern, happily unnecessary, about the state of Fergusson's grave in the Canongate, and how much he identified with him: 'I had always a great sense of kinship with poor Robert Fergusson – so clever a boy, so wild, of such a mixed train, so unfortunate, born in the same town with me, and, as I always felt rather by express intimation than from evidence, so like myself.' Certainly, Stevenson's appreciation of the Scottish past, and how it manifests itself in the landscape, was second to none, not even Walter Scott's.

Stevenson's Scotland is no ordinary anthology of Stevenson's writings, still less a drily academic one. It will appeal to the general reader, just as much as to dedicated Stevensonians, and it significantly advances our understanding, in many cases our love, of this major writer. He belongs to the world, not just to Scotland, but his essays and letters about his country deserve to be more widely known.

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