

ON THE ROAD: ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON'S VIEWS ON NATURE

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Robert Louis Stevenson is not one of the literary 'names' generally associated with discussions of attitudes to 'Nature', as expressed or indeed problematised in literary texts. Doubtless Stevenson's relationship to the natural world could be fitted into some topography of various possible attitudes to nature; however, it might turn out to be a rather uncomfortable fit. Stevenson is notoriously difficult to pigeonhole. As the creator of *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, he does have something of a monopoly on the idea of multiple identities. The present essay offers a kind of case study of Stevenson, who is interestingly positioned among a range of historical attitudes to science and the natural world. Heir to the achievements of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment and of nineteenth-century Scottish engineers, as well as to a strain of Calvinistic pessimism, he was also a kind of neo-Romantic who anticipated, and indeed helped to create, the neo-paganism and ruralism of the aesthetic 1890s. In addition, in the latter part of his short life, he extensively studied and wrote about the South Sea islands, where he settled at the height of the colonial period.

Robert Louis Stevenson's connection with 'the Lighthouse Stevensons' is well known, especially since the publication of Bella Bathurst's best-seller of that title.¹ The most celebrated of the Stevenson engineering dynasty was RLS's grandfather, Robert Stevenson, who built the Bell Rock lighthouse, and commissioned the famous picture by J.M.W. Turner to illustrate his account of its construction. Although Turner apparently never actually saw the Bell Rock, the picture he produced of the lighthouse during a storm is the epitome of the Romantic Sublime. Robert Louis Stevenson himself was capable of producing in words a similarly sublime picture of a storm at sea in his novel of 1892, *The Wrecker*.² This passage is based on a spectacularly dangerous voyage from Tahiti to Honolulu during the hurricane season.³ That Robert Stevenson senior was not the only Stevenson famed for his engineering exploits is made clear by the title of RLS's unfinished biography of his famous grandfather, *Records of a Family of Engineers*. Engineering was the Stevenson family business: RLS's father, his uncles and cousins, as well as Professor Fleeming Jenkin, a great family friend and a powerful influence on the young RLS, were all at the forefront of new developments in Victorian engineering.

However, the Stevensons were also prominent figures in meteorological circles as well as in the world of engineering. RLS's father, Thomas Stevenson, was an early member of the Scottish Meteorological Society, founded in 1855, and the first volume of the Society's Journal in 1864 contained an article by

1. Bella Bathurst, *The Lighthouse Stevensons: The Extraordinary Story of the Building of the Scottish Lighthouses by the Ancestors of Robert Louis Stevenson*, London, HarperCollins, 2000.

2. R.L. Stevenson and L. Osbourne, *The Wrecker*, vol.12 of *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson* (Tusitala Edition in 35 vols), London, Heinemann, 1924, pp188-93. All subsequent references to works by Stevenson will appear in parentheses as follows: (*T12* followed by page number).

3. See William Gray, *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Literary Life*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p123; also 'Stevenson's "Auld Alliance": France, Art Theory and the Breath of Money in *The Wrecker*', *Scottish Studies Review*, Autumn (2002): 54-65.

Thomas Stevenson about his invention of the louvred thermometer screen. As well as giving a paper 'On a New Form of Intermittent Light for Lighthouses', the young RLS also made contributions to the study of meteorology. In May 1873 he presented to the Royal Society of Edinburgh a paper 'On the Thermal Influence of Forests'. This paper discusses a pioneering proposal by David Milne Home, founder of the Scottish Meteorological Society, and a correspondent of Sir Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin, to use a plantation on Malta to research the impact of forests on the environment. The young Stevenson's interest in meteorological matters is further evidenced by the fact that the year before his paper 'On the Thermal Influence of Forests', when he was resident in Frankfurt-am-Main, he had written to his mother asking her to send money via Alexander Buchan, the secretary of the Scottish Meteorological Society, to enable him to join Buchan at a meteorological congress in Leipzig. RLS's involvement in discussions of scientific and environmental questions was no doubt largely due to his having been born into a particular caste, that of the educated *haute bourgeoisie* of nineteenth-century Edinburgh. But although RLS was rapidly to slough off any serious intention of joining the family business of engineering, it proved much harder to erase a certain scientific attitude from what his American wife Fanny, irritated by the impersonal and frankly unmarketable style of his quasi-anthropological South Seas book, called his 'Scotch Stevensonian head'.⁴

RLS's grandfather Robert was, however, a builder not only of lighthouses but also of roads. His appointment in 1813 as Engineer to the Convention of Scottish Burghs made him responsible for most of the public engineering work in Scotland.⁵ He endeavoured to bring an aesthetic sensitivity to his road building, laying out a road on Hogarth's line of beauty, as RLS tells us in his posthumously published biography of his grandfather (*T19* p215). RLS probably had his grandfather in mind when he wrote about road building in the first publication for which he was paid, his essay 'Roads'; this appeared in *The Portfolio* in 1873 under the name 'L.S. Stoneven', and was later collected in *Virginibus Puerisque and Other Essays*. Here the young Stevenson wrote: '[w]e remember ... some miles of fine wide highway laid out with conscious aesthetic artifice through a broken and richly cultivated tract of land. It is said that the engineer had Hogarth's line of beauty in his mind as he laid them down' (*T25* p186). He continues:

And yet there is something wanting. There is here no saving imperfection, none of these secondary curves and little trepidations of direction that carry, in natural roads, our curiosity with them. One feels at once that this road has not grown like a natural road, but has been laboriously made to pattern; and that, while a model may be academically correct in outline, it will always be inanimate and cold (*T25* p186).

There seems to be here a late Romantic reaction against the perfection of the eighteenth-century ideal (though ironically, of course, Hogarth with his

4. B.A. Booth and E. Mehw (eds), *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* (8 vols), New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994-5, vol. 6, pp303-4. All subsequent references to Stevenson's letters will appear in parentheses as follows: (*L6* followed by page number).

5. Bathurst, op. cit., p108.

serpentine ‘line of beauty’ was seeking something more ‘natural’ than the Palladian style which dominated eighteenth-century taste). Romantic too (and perhaps a version of ‘the pathetic fallacy’) is Stevenson’s suggestion that: ‘[t]he traveller is also aware of a sympathy of mood between himself and the road he travels’ (*T25* p186). Such sympathy is not merely egocentric anthropomorphism, however, but derives, Stevenson suggests, echoing yet another discrimination of Romanticism, from a kind of collective unconscious: ‘We might reflect that the present road had been developed out of a track spontaneously followed by generations of primitive wayfarers; and might see in its expression a testimony that those generations had been affected at the same ground, one after another, in the same manner as we are affected today’ (*T25* p186).

Yet Stevenson’s essay is also wary of the Romantic taste for the sublime. He warns against the false supposition that ‘no amount of excess in sublime mountain outline ... can do anything ... to weaken or degrade the palate’, and instead recommends moderation to his ‘rural voluptuary’ and ‘a regimen tolerably austere ... in scenery’ (*T25* p183). Actually Stevenson is here presenting an apologia for the Suffolk countryside that he had only just discovered during his lengthy walks there with his new mentor Sidney Colvin.⁶ The strangeness of the Suffolk landscape to the Scot can evoke a kind of ‘delighted wonder’, Stevenson acknowledged in his essay ‘A Foreigner at Home’, later collected in *Memories and Portraits* (*T29* p4). In contrast to any ‘youngling enthusiasm on hill-tops’, Stevenson recommended in ‘Roads’ that his ‘rural voluptuary’ try ‘the quieter kinds of English landscape’ (*T25* p184), and in particular the ‘quiet pleasure’ to be derived from ‘the character and variety of the road itself’, with its ‘lithic contortions’, ‘capricious sinuosities’ and ‘coquettish’ reticences (*T25* pp185; 187). Stevenson quotes approvingly Blake’s dictum in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: ‘Improvement makes us straight roads; but the crooked roads, without improvement, are roads of Genius’ (*T25* p185).⁷ There is in Stevenson’s essay a kind of (actually rather camp⁸) sexualization of the experience of being ‘on the road’ - Stevenson speaks of ‘a violent appetite’, ‘a beating heart’ and the difficulty in not ‘attributing something headlong, a sort of *abandon* [Stevenson’s italics], to the road itself’ (*T25* p187). This may in part derive from the young Stevenson’s intense reading of Walt Whitman, whose line from the ‘Song of the Open Road’ about ‘the cheerful voice of the public road, the gay fresh sentiment of the road’⁹ he naturally includes in his essay (*T25* p188).

Whatever anticipations there may be in this early essay by Stevenson of mid-twentieth-century celebrations of being ‘on the road’, the essay also anticipates by a good twenty years the so-called ‘ruralist’ movement in literary culture that emerged during the 1890s and lasted well into the twentieth century. Perhaps the summation of this movement is to be found in *The Open Road: a Little Book for Wayfarers* compiled by E.V. Lucas, first published by Grant Richards in 1899 (my own particular copy is the 42nd edition, published by Methuen in 1937). The ruralism of the neo-pagan movement

6. On RLS’s relationship with Colvin see Gray (2004), pp7-10 and *passim*.

7. See G.E. Bentley (ed), *William Blake’s Writings*, vol. 1, Oxford, Clarendon, 1978, p84.

8. On Stevenson and ‘campness’, see Richard Drury, ‘The Campness of the *New Arabian Nights*’, *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, No. 1, 2004.

9. Walt Whitman, ‘Song of the Open Road’, stanza 4, in Jerome Loving (ed), *Leaves of Grass*, Oxford, OUP World’s Classics, 1998, p122.

in general, and of Lucas's *The Open Road* in particular, had the misfortune to become popular, and is sent up in Chapter 14 of E.M. Forster's *Howard's End* (1910). The attempts at literary conversation by Leonard Bast, the autodidact clerk, merely amuse, and subsequently bore, the middle-class and educated Schlegels. Bast mentions *The Open Road* almost in the same breath as Stevenson's (admittedly over-written) *Prince Otto*, but only succeeds in eliciting groans from Helen and Tibby Schlegel for having had the bad taste to mention what they sneeringly refer to as another 'beautiful book'. Bast, who only manages to get half of the title of *Virginibus Puerisque* into the conversation before he is interrupted, has sought to emulate the exploits of his hero (referred to by the narrator as 'the tiresome R.L.S.') by taking the underground to Wimbledon, and walking off into the night. His nocturnal ramble proves to be considerably less glamorous than the walks described by Stevenson in 'Roads', and conspicuously - and ironically - lacking in the kind of cosy jollity evoked in the following lines from the eleventh of Stevenson's *Songs of Travel*, which are the epigraph to Lucas's anthology:

And this shall be for music when no one else is near,
 The fine song for singing, the rare song to hear!
 That only I remember, that only you admire
 Of the broad road that stretches and the roadside fire. (T22 139)

The Open Road includes several other poems by Stevenson, naturally 'The Vagabond', as well as some prose pieces, including a passage from the chapter 'A Night Among the Pines' in Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes* (1879).

In fact it was more through his travel writing than through his poems *Songs of Travel* (published posthumously in 1896) that Stevenson exercised a shaping influence on what has been called the cult of 'Pan and the Open Road'.¹⁰ A couple of years after 'Roads', Stevenson had another piece about country walking published in *The Portfolio*, entitled 'An Autumn Effect', which evokes in considerable detail the leafy countryside of the Chilterns, and its denizens, between High Wycombe and Tring. Stevenson's subsequent travel writing moved out of the South of England, but to nowhere more exotic than Belgium and Northern France. The 'rural voluptuary' is again on 'a regimen tolerably austere' as he canoes from Antwerp to Pontoise, just north of Paris. However, Stevenson's account of this canoeing expedition, *An Inland Voyage* (1878), was to become a cult classic of the neo-pagan movement that developed during the 1890s, not least on account of its frontispiece by Walter Crane depicting Pan lurking behind the reeds. While Crane's frontispiece for the 1878 Kegan Paul edition seeks to catch the spirit of the book as a whole, it is particularly relevant to the chapter entitled 'The Oise in Flood', where Stevenson writes apropos the trembling reeds: 'Pan once played upon their forefathers; and so ... he still plays upon these later generations down all the valley of the Oise; and plays the same air, both sweet and shrill, to

10. See William Greenslade, "'Pan" and the Open Road: Critical Paganism in R.L. Stevenson, K.Grahame, E.Thomas and E.M.Forster', in Lynne Hapgood and Nancy L. Paxton (eds), *Outside Modernism: In Pursuit of the English Novel 1900-30*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, pp145-61.

tell us the beauty and terror of the world' (T17 p49). Of the aspect of Pan that inspires terror, Stevenson writes a few pages later, after recounting an almost fatal boating accident: 'The devouring element in the universe had leaped out against me, in this green valley quickened by a running stream. ... I had heard some of the hollow notes of Pan's music. Would the wicked river drag me down by the heels, indeed? And look so beautiful all the time?' (T17 pp53-4) This dual aspect of Pan is also evoked in the essay 'Pan's Pipes' which Stevenson wrote at about the same time, and which was later collected in *Virginibus Puerisque and Other Essays* (1881). In this essay he writes:

The Greeks figured Pan, the God of Nature, now terribly stamping his foot, so that armies were dispersed; now by the woodside on a summer noon trolling on his pipe until he charmed the hearts of upland ploughmen. And the Greeks, in so figuring, uttered the last word of human experience. To certain smoke-dried spirits matter and motion ... and the hypothesis of this or that ... professor, tell a speaking story; but for youth and all ductile and congenial minds, Pan is not dead, but of all the classic hierarchy alone survives in triumph; goat-footed, with a gleeful and angry look ... [I]n every wood, if you go with a spirit properly prepared, you shall hear the note of his pipe (T25 pp125-6).

Here Stevenson practically provides a manifesto for neo-paganism of the 1890s, and in particular for the writings of Kenneth Grahame. Of the latter's *Pagan Papers*, first published as individual essays in the *National Observer* under the editorship of Stevenson's old crony and sparring-partner, W.E. Henley, and collected in book form in 1894, Peter Green writes: 'Much of *Pagan Papers*, both as regards style and theme, reads like a variant gloss on *Virginibus Puerisque*, where we also find essays on Pan, walking-tours, smoking and the pleasures of idleness'.¹¹ However Grahame has largely eliminated the terrible aspect of Pan, and the god has become - as in 'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn' chapter of *Wind in the Willows* - merely benevolent, evoked with a nostalgia that even in 1894 may have seemed rather cloying, as for example in the following passage from 'The Rural Pan': 'When the pelting storm drives the wayfarers to the sheltering inn, among the little group on bench and settle Pan has been known to appear at times, in homely guise of hedger-and-ditcher or weather-beaten shepherd from the downs'.¹² Grahame goes on to reassure his readers, despite the inroads of 'the iron horse' and 'Commercialism' into the countryside, that '[h]appily a great part is still spared ... in which the rural Pan and his following may hide their heads for yet a little longer, until the growing tyranny has invaded the last common, spinney, and sheep-down, and driven the kindly god, the well-wisher to man - whither?'¹³ Such nostalgic ruralism may be innately conservative, but not necessarily with a large 'C'. In modern political terms, Alison Prince has argued, Grahame was probably more of a Green than anything else¹⁴ - though in the most recent political climate, party lines have become blurred as the mainstream political parties have fallen over

11. Peter Green, *Beyond the Wild Wood: The World of Kenneth Grahame*, London, Grange Books, 1993, p85.

12. Grahame, Kenneth, *Pagan Papers*, London, Elkin Mathews & John Lane, 1894, p69-70.

13. *Ibid.*, p70-1.

14. Alison Prince, *Kenneth Grahame: An Innocent in the Wild Wood*, London, Allison & Busby, 1994, p66.

themselves in and at times ludicrously undignified scramble to plant their flag on the 'Green' ground. It was, however, out of precisely such a fin de siècle literary culture, including neo-paganism and 'ruralism', that conservation movements such as the National Trust (founded in 1895) emerged.

Far removed from such cosy evocations of the rural Pan in the English Home Counties was the much more sinister experience Stevenson had of the other, dark side of the great god Pan while working alone in the jungle in Samoa. Stevenson's solitary path-clearing expeditions into the jungle, struggling with 'the unconcealed vitality of these vegetables' and particularly with 'the toothed and killing sensitive' [tuitui or 'sensitive-plant'] which to Stevenson seemed 'semi-conscious', had a strange effect on him.¹⁵ Stevenson wrote in a letter to Colvin in 1890:

A strange business it was, and infinitely solitary: away above, the sun was in the high tree tops; the lianas noosed and sought to hang me; the saplings struggled, and came up with that sob of death that one gets to know so well ... Soon, toiling down in that pit of verdure, I heard blows on the far side, and then laughter. I confess a chill settled on my heart (*L7* p25).

This kind of experience fed into Stevenson's poem 'The Woodman', which begins conventionally enough. Then a native worker takes fright at some imagined ghost (doubtless of the kind described by Stevenson in the 'Graveyard Stories' chapter of *In the South Seas*), and flees. The poem's narrator remains unperturbed until he has an eerie vision of the wood as not so much 'red in tooth and claw' as - so to speak - 'green in noose and maw', with the vegetation itself engaged in a 'long massacre' in the terrible struggle for survival:

I saw the wood for what it was:
.....
Thick round me in the teeming mud
Briar and fern strove to the blood:
The hooked liana in his gin
Noosed his reluctant neighbours in:
There the green murderer strove and spread,
Upon this smothering victims fed,
And wantoned on his climbing coil.
Contending roots fought for the soil
Like frightened demons: with despair
Competing branches pushed for air:
.....
So hushed the woodland warfare goes
Unceasing; and the silent foes
Grapple and smother, strain and clasp
Without a cry, without a gasp (*T22* p163).

15. See Stevenson's poem 'The Woodman' in *Songs of Travel* (*T22* p162); also Janet Adam Smith (ed), *Robert Louis Stevenson: Collected Poems*, London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971, pp277; 514-5.

The Darwinian law of the jungle is here given a new inflection as the very flowers cannibalise themselves: ‘The rose on roses feeds’ (T22 p164). The Manichaeism of Stevenson’s Calvinist background is here extended from human nature to nature in its widest sense; not just humanity, but the natural world itself is radically fallen into a condition of ‘total depravity’, to use Calvin’s phrase. Stevenson’s verse may be technically unremarkable, but its vision of nature as a brutal *bellum omnium contra omnes* is one of remarkable bleakness.

However, if Stevenson’s Scottishness bequeathed to him on the one hand a bleakly Calvinist outlook on nature, he also inherited the more optimistic common-sense view of the Scottish enlightenment. Though his novels show a realistic awareness of the terrible nature of the Wilderness, whether of North America (as in *The Master of Ballantrae*) or of Scotland (David Balfour’s brutalising experience of the Scottish Highlands in *Kidnapped* is really neither Romantic nor picturesque), Stevenson does seem also to have a vision of the laird settled on his estate (or his ‘policies’, in Scots), whether this is David Balfour at the presumably much-improved House of Shaws at the end of *Catriona* (David Balfour in the American edition), or Robert Louis Stevenson himself at Vailima in Samoa. Stevenson seems in the end to return to the old Enlightenment imperative to cultivate one’s garden, or as he put it in one of the very the last pieces he composed: ‘[M]ake roads, and gardens, and care for your trees ...’¹⁶ These words come from Stevenson’s speech in October 1894, just weeks before he died, to the assembled chiefs of Samoa. In recognition of Stevenson’s support during the recent colonial war (Stevenson risked imprisonment and worse for his support of the Samoan struggle against colonial occupation), these chiefs had organised the building of a road linking Stevenson’s estate at Vailima with the main road to Apia. The voluntary construction of this ‘Road of Gratitude’ deeply moved Stevenson. In his speech of thanks at the opening of the road he took the opportunity of talking once more about what had been the subject of the first ever paid piece of writing - ‘Roads’. What was in effect one of Stevenson’s final pieces of writing echoes that first piece in an uncanny way, when Stevenson writes:

When a road is once built, it is a strange thing how it collects traffic, how every year as it goes on, more and more people are found to walk thereon, and others raised up to repair and perpetuate it, and keep it alive; so that perhaps even this road of ours may, from reparation to reparation, continue to exist and be useful hundreds and hundreds of years after we are mingled in the dust (T35 pp194-5).

Thus ‘the road’ as a metaphor for the co-operation of folk with one another, and with nature, in a community enduring over time, was central to Stevenson’s vision from the beginning to the end of his writing life.

However, such a positive vision by no means excluded Stevenson’s awareness of the terrible alternatives. In this final speech he warns the

16. ‘Address to the Chiefs on the Opening of the Road of Gratitude’, Appendix II, Tusitala edition of *Letters Vol. V* (T35), p191.

Samoans with an apocalyptic allusion to the depopulation and destruction of the Scottish Highlands as a living and working environment, through the Clearances. In the Scottish Highlands and islands, he tells the Samoans, ‘you may go through great tracts of the land and scarce meet a man or a smoking house, and see nothing but sheep feeding. The other people that I tell you of have come upon them like a foe in the night, and these are other people’s sheep who browse upon the foundation of their houses’ (T35 p192). Ironically, one of the chief architects of the Highland Clearances, General George Wade, was a great road-builder. However, Wade’s roads, like other military roads built for the subjugation of indigenous peoples and for the propagation of the Gospel and ‘civilisation’ (that is, commerce), tended not to be characterised by the spontaneous ‘lithe contortions’ and ‘capricious sinuosities’ created by the interaction of land and people in the growth of the ‘natural’ roads that so delighted the young Robert Louis Stevenson. While there is undoubtedly naiveté (and possibly worse) in the older Stevenson’s determination to find analogies at every turn between the South Sea islanders and the Scottish Highlanders and islanders,¹⁷ it is more difficult to gainsay his perception that both Pacific and Gaelic peoples, and their natural environments, were victims of the ruinous effects caused by the inroads of imperialist expansion.

17. See Gray Robert Louis Stevenson, *op. cit.*, pp116;121;132.

Actions (login required). View Item. Like us on Facebook. Follow us on Twitter. See our photos on Flickr. Watch us on Vimeo. Adventure Education. Dance. Some aspects of Robert Burns. To write with authority about another man we must have fellow-feeling and some common ground of experience with our subject. This, on the other hand, is Burns as he may have appeared to a contemporary clergyman, whom we shall conceive to have been a kind and indulgent but orderly and orthodox person, anxious to be pleased, but too often hurt and disappointed by the behaviour of his red-hot protege, and solacing himself with the explanation that the poet was "the most inconsistent."