

ROSLYN JOLLY

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON IN THE PACIFIC: TRAVEL, EMPIRE AND THE
AUTHOR'S PROFESSION (Ashgate, 2009) x + 193 pp.

Reviewed by John Lyon

Robert Louis Stevenson has long dwelt at the margins of nineteenth-century studies, and has only in recent years been moving to a more prominent place. He has been marginalized for many inter-related reasons. For one, he was Scottish when, for a long time, canonized writers were either English or American. (Contrariwise, American indebtedness to Scottish writers is now increasingly recognised and discussed.) But the main reason for the marginalization of Stevenson is that the dominating story of nineteenth-century literary prose in English is a story of the rise and decline--a decline sometimes manifesting itself as crisis--of realism. (Crisis over, we move merrily to Modernism.) Stevenson, it is generally held, eschewed realism from the start. He refused to play by its rules. As an alternative, all he offered was play-wrought to the utmost. Child's play. Coming at the end of a dynasty of lighthouse builders, he kept his Calvinist inheritance even though he had lost his religious faith. Viewing the world as a dark and chaotic place, he set his art against it. He offered style and simplification, boys' adventure stories, self-consciously archaic romances, strange uncanny tales, essays often masquerading as gossip, arabesque narratives (what we might more colloquially call shaggy dog stories), children's verse, and verse of a lyricism verging at times on song and so retaining only a vestige of seemingly trivial content. For much of the twentieth century, critics took Stevenson at his own word, and treated or ignored him accordingly.

Now things have changed radically. An established disaffection with realism has rehabilitated Stevenson. The great eight volume edition of Stevenson's letters edited by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Meheew appeared in 1994-95. The *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, born at the turn of the millennium, is thriving. A new Edinburgh Edition of the Complete Works of Stevenson under the general editorship of Stephen Arata (Virginia), Richard Dury (Bergamo) and Penny Fielding (Edinburgh) is in preparation. An *Edinburgh Companion to Stevenson* edited by Penny Fielding is in press. Both the Complete Works and the *Companion* involve Roslyn Jolly, the author of this new book on Stevenson in the Pacific.

Why the Pacific? It remains a truism of Stevenson studies that when Stevenson sailed from Europe in 1887 for what was to be the last time, he himself became a figure of romance, like so many of the characters in his own writing, 'wholly of the stuff that dreams are made of,' as Henry James described him in February 1893 (*Letters*, vol. 8, ed. Leon Edel [1980] p. 406). Indeed, as Roslyn Jolly conclusively demonstrates, even before Stevenson's death, attention to his writings was being displaced by attention to the man, remote and romantic in the Pacific, and that man was being refigured as Tusiata, a celebrity and creature of myth, a magical Prospero. Of the late writings, only those set in Scotland – *Catriona* and the unfinished *Weir Of Hermiston* – merited much attention. The hard work of writing and the hard Pacific matter about which Stevenson wrote were occluded in favour of the image of the easy, idling teller of tales. Only in recent years has Stevenson criticism begun to challenge such myth-making and myth-sustaining biography. Until now it has not fully grappled with the paradoxical fact that when Stevenson settled in the Pacific, specifically in Samoa, his writing turned more and more

towards realism. Roslyn Jolly's important book enlivens and brings rich particularity to this aspect of the later Stevenson's work.

According to Jolly, the turning point in Stevenson's career was the death of Thomas Stevenson, his father, in May 1887 and his departure from Europe later in the same year. Opening a geographical distance between the writer and his readers, this move radically changed the relationship between them. Whereas hitherto Stevenson had written to render the familiar strange, uncanny or fantastic, he now found himself writing to make the unfamiliar and strange intelligible to a northern readership. In other words, his writing became more realistic and altogether more overtly political. The Pacific islands were not to be presented as an Arcadia, but rendered instead in precise analytical detail. Stevenson was emancipated by the death of his engineer father, against whom he had always struggled to justify his life of writing, and on whom he had remained financially dependent. In saying that Stevenson became a man, Jolly is invoking some assumptions about gender, not least gender in the context of Empire, but she chiefly stresses the distinction between writer as child and writer as adult. Jolly finds in the later fiction – 'The Beach of Falesá' and *The Ebb-Tide*, for example – an unexpected move 'towards the realistic, even naturalistic representation of contemporary life' (p. 27). However, Jolly's argument takes her main focus away from fiction to the more discursive, non-fictional works of the later Stevenson, specifically *In the South Seas*, *A Footnote to History*, and his letters to the *Times*. Here she finds Stevenson writing as an historian, an anthropologist, and a lawyer. In biographical terms, his life is also seen to diversify as the writer becomes a plantation owner working the land, managing labor and servants, and intervening in the politics of the island and the politics of empire.

Stevenson came to realism by degrees. While many—including Stevenson himself – thought him averse to it, Jolly reveals that the earlier Stevenson had written with ‘harsh realism’ (p. 3) of conditions aboard the *Devonia* on a transatlantic crossing as part of his earlier American travel book, *The Amateur Emigrant*; Stevenson’s friends and family, pre-eminently his father, rushed to suppress this book, ostensibly because it might damage the writer’s reputation and image but also, Jolly argues, because it ‘might have offended the ship’s owners, with whom Thomas Stevenson had connections’ (p.3). Later on, freed of his controlling father, Stevenson could at last take a hard look at the strange but hard world of the Pacific. Turning scientific and legalistic, he wrote what was meant to be called *The South Seas* but what was posthumously published with the more diminutively protective title, *In the South Seas*. Here Jolly shows how Stevenson makes anthropological use of his early Scottish legal training, particularly in Roman law. A Scot at the margins of the Roman Empire, he could understand and make coherent sense of cultural systems such as the workings of *tapu* (related to ‘taboo’), which seemed unintelligible or savage to English imperial eyes. With a remarkable modernity of insight, Stevenson saw the damage that encroaching imperialism inflicted on native culture. As Jolly documents fully, his book largely disappointed a readership seeking the stylishness of a romancer, and a similar fate awaited *A Footnote to History*, which analyzes the war in Samoa. Yet as Jolly shows Stevenson here takes the lead in changing historiography itself. Exposing what was done in Samoa by the ‘Three Powers’ – Germany, the United States and Great Britain – he reveals their rapacious and destructive folly. Stevenson makes elaborate use of indirect historical evidence, examining extensively both the Samoan language and ‘the physical evidence of landscape and the

built environment' (p. 86). But none of this moved readers accustomed to Stevensonian romance. However impassioned and however forensic, *A Footnote to History* became merely a footnote in the minds of readers for whom Samoa and Samoan concerns were simply too remote and too small to awake in them what had been awoken in Stevenson – a sense of the writer as a man of civic duty with civic responsibilities.

Stevenson's readers might have thought they could take comfort in *Catriona*, the sequel to *Kidnapped*, set in an eighteenth-century Scotland that was—to be aptly oxymoronic – familiarly romanticised. But Jolly brilliantly discomfits such readers by showing how the legal struggles which engage David Balfour in that remote Scottish setting correspond with the fierce, politically engaged letters about Samoa—in the present---that Stevenson was simultaneously writing to the *Times*. For Stevenson was by now as much concerned with the utility of writing as with the free play of the imagination. In a phrase of searching and percipient critique, he denounced “the progressive de-civilisation of these islands” (136). Though he did succeed in getting some imperial figures removed from office, the larger sorry situation remained unchanged, and yet again, Stevenson's readers predictably proved unwilling to countenance him as a public statesman and passionately engaged politician. In Jolly's somewhat chilling terms, they easily repossessed him as Tusitala, a beloved and charming romancer.

In saying so much, I have scarcely indicated the density of Jolly's lucid elaborations and the telling subtleties of her particular analyses. This new book complements the fine explications to be found in her earlier one, *Henry James: History, Narrative, Fiction* (1993). Both books scrutinize the tensions between fiction and

history, romance and realism, style and politics, art and utility. Handsomely produced, this book marks a major new turn in Stevenson studies.

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