

Expanding Horizons: To California with Robert Louis Stevenson

By Ken Simpson



Travel was vitally important to Stevenson the man and the writer. It accorded with his temperament, affording a conduit for his rebelliousness, his reaction against both paternal influence and the constraints of the Scottish cultural and religious background (of which he wrote, 'One thing, indeed, is not to be learned in Scotland, and that is the way to be happy').¹ Equally, the fluctuation of narrative perspective and formal fragmentation of some of his novels and stories reflect a desire to challenge conventional fictional practice. Stevenson was a man who crossed boundaries, as Andrew Noble noted;² this applied to both the life and the writing.

Some of Stevenson's travels were motivated by matters of the heart. In August 1878 Fanny Osbourne returned to the USA, prompting Stevenson to head to France and make the journey documented in *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*. Through the winter of 1878-9 he collaborated with W.E. Henley on the play, *Deacon Brodie*, which he hoped - in vain, as it transpired - would fund a visit to America and reunion with her. On 7 August 1879 Stevenson sailed from Greenock to New York on the *Devonia*, a steamship of the Anchor Line. Entitled *From the Clyde to Sandy Hook*, the account of the voyage was written up later that year from his notes. *Across the Plains*, recording his rail journey from New Jersey to San Francisco, followed a few months later. Together they formed *The Amateur Emigrant* published in 1895 after his death, his father having paid for the suppression of *From the Clyde to Sandy Hook* as unworthy of

him. The texts describe Stevenson's encounters and experiences and his responses to them. Inevitably the account reveals the personality and values of the writer. Narrative eye meets narrative I.

'We are a race of gypsies, and love change and travel for themselves' (219), writes Stevenson in *Across the Plains*. In *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes* he admitted to being 'after an adventure' (32) all his life. Meeting stowaways on the *Devonia*, he remarks with obvious admiration, 'the career of these sea-tramps partakes largely of the adventurous' (150), while hoboos riding the emigrant train prompt the comment, 'These land stowaways play a great part over here in America, and I should have liked dearly to become acquainted with them' (225). Stevenson's responses are coloured by his love of movement: on deck a lively but ugly child 'might fairly be called beautiful when he was in motion...a little triumph of the human species' (110) defying the hardships of steerage.

Despite the wilfulness of Modestine, in *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes* Stevenson, as solitary traveller, had a measure of control over his progress. By contrast, in *From the Clyde to Sandy Hook* he is one of the inhabitants of 'a small iron country' (107) with little stimulation beyond observation of his fellow-travellers. Though steerage contains 'a mixture' (168) and each nationality has its own territory, there are experiences beyond the shared containment that unite the group. Stevenson writes movingly of the unifying effect of singing harmonizing with the 'general embrace' (113) of the movement of the ship.

With abundant opportunity to study his shipmates, Stevenson presents an array of characters. An Irish-American original, vividly depicted, has the grotesque physicality of a Smollett caricature. While some are mere cameos, others are complex individuals and evoke mixed responses from their observer. One, named Mackay, is intelligent and articulate but Stevenson is unsparing in his identification of the man's weaknesses: 'He was almost tedious in the cynical disclosures of his despair' and he is the victim of 'a cheap, school-book materialism' (130) rather than alcoholism. Another Scot, Alick, boasts of his expertise in lying and prompts Stevenson to remark, 'the more you saw of Alick the more...you learned to despise him' (156). Yet, as a 'Homeric talker' (149) he achieves a vividness of representation which Stevenson, comparing him with Burns, plainly admires, and he concludes, 'at the bottom of all his misconduct there was a guiding sense of humour that moved you to forgive him' (157). It is

revealing that Stevenson is drawn, despite their flaws, to characters who might be termed writers *manqués*; and with a partner, Jones, in the scrutiny of their shipmates, Stevenson, in a moment of exquisite irony, realizes that he and Jones are also engaged in mutual assessment.

On board, Stevenson's status is ambivalent: he shares the experiences of the emigrants but is also the detached observer. Their resentment of the intrusion of the cabin passengers with their 'swaying, elegant superiority' (123) strikes a chord with him. But he is rigorous in his appraisal of the values and conduct of his companions: their persistent complaints about the food lead him to revise his opinion of the working-classes whose 'herding traditions' (118) he deplores. Despite the sympathy for the 'soul[s] tragically shipwrecked' (129), Stevenson suggests that his shipmates' certainty of success in America may be self-delusion, given that they have been failures at home.

There is further evidence of the fluctuations in the writer's distance from his material in Stevenson's engagement with that other community - his readers, to whom he offers practical advice: we should memorize a riddle as it will be useful; a book is recommended in an echo of Sterne's narrator, Tristram Shandy; at one point we are informed that it will be to our advantage to read on; and guidance is given on the management of the currency, should we reach California. Stevenson is a self-conscious narrator, acutely aware of his role and responsibilities: while obliged to gratify public favour, he must preserve authenticity, noting of his attempts to describe the conditions in the immigrant reception-centre, 'I shall have a difficulty to make myself believed' (188). There are occasions where he engages in dialogue with the reader, and in one remarkable passage he addresses in turn his American readers and Benjamin Franklin, whom he has just cited. Such shifts in focus keep the reader on the alert on the journey through the text.

An astute reader of Stevenson's work, Henry James caught its stylistic nuances. In 1887 he remarked of *Across the Plains*, 'He has never made his points better than in that half-humorous, half-tragical recital'.³ The poised quality of Stevenson's prose can be observed in this extract from the description of the dancing in steerage:

In the one balcony, five slatternly Irish lasses sat woven in a comely group. In the other was posted Orpheus [the fiddler], his body, which was convulsively in motion, forming an odd contrast to his somnolent, imperturbable Scots face (116).

Stevenson is both of the group and an outsider looking on; and his status as writer, which prompts amusement, sets him apart (similarities with the situation of Burns in this respect are striking). Paying second-class fare to ensure a table on which to write, he spends his time among the steerage-class passengers. When he proposes escaping the unhealthy conditions by sleeping on deck a dozen others agree to do likewise. Come nightfall, he finds himself the sole participant and comments, 'I felt saddened at this defection, and yet half-pleased to have the night so quietly to myself' (111); and, later, he acknowledges that he was mocked for his 'choice of roosting-place in an active draught upon the cabin floor' (164).

The mystique surrounding him suits Stevenson well. 'Out of my country and myself I go' (161) he exclaims. Paradoxically, the self which he cannot escape is that which is preoccupied with identity because uncertain of it. Stevenson's progress to self-identification, of which this journey forms a key part, involves experimentation with roles and a cherished self-concealment. He relishes the fact that each shipmate projects upon him their own occupation and identity and is secretly satisfied when those who take him for a seaman or a mason ignore the evidence of his hands. Likewise, he delights in passing 'for nearly any thing you please except an educated gentleman' (162). There is more than a hint of self-irony informing Stevenson's presentation of his concern with identity. A brass plate between decks defines saloon passengers as gentlemen and ladies, while steerage are men and women. To it Stevenson has recourse on several occasions to reassure himself that he is 'still a gentleman' (103).

As a learning experience, Stevenson's journey forces him to shed illusions and confront realities. In his perceptive biography, J.C. Furnas commented that Stevenson 'had thought of emigrants as energetic Vikings setting out to ransack a new world for wealth'.⁴ Such illusions were rapidly subverted. Stevenson has to face not just the squalid conditions endured in steerage but - even more importantly - the economic and social effects of industrial recession. Seeing his shipmates as 'a shipful of failures, the broken men of England' he admits, 'it was only now, when I found myself involved in the rout, that I began to appreciate how sharp had been the battle' (109). As the voyage progresses, Stevenson is increasingly moved to offer social analysis, prompted by incidents such as the reactions to a sick passenger: a steward responds, "That's none of my business" (141); to the cook "It's only a passenger" (142); whereas the 'gruff, cruel-looking' bo'sun (143) is unexpectedly sympathetic and Stevenson warms to him.

For Stevenson the foremost cause of society's ills is slavish worship of money. 'We must see the rich honest, before we need look hopefully to see the poor considerate' (132), he affirms. Ironically, it is the sick man, no emigrant but a successful fisherman en route to visit his brother, who offers the most revolutionary political views. Stevenson's attitude is forthright:

if the polity is to be subverted and the state's pedestals thrown down, let it be by clear-seeing people strung up by inborn generosity to the task, and not by waifs and beggars exasperated by external and perhaps well deserved reverses (148).

This note recurs; sympathy for victims is qualified by the belief that they have contributed to their downfall. Stevenson comments,

Nothing is perhaps more notable in the average workman than his surprising idleness, and the candour with which he confesses to the failing (171)

and of the 'many good talkers' on board he writes, '[they] use their reason rather as a weapon of offence than as a tool for self-improvement' (172-3), perhaps evidence of the legacy to everyday life of the Scottish flyting tradition.

Stevenson's social conscience becomes especially evident in *Across the Plains*. Transfer at Council Bluffs to a Union Pacific train solely for immigrants evokes a trenchant account of how the immigrant is 'branded...sorted and boxed for the journey' (200). Representation of the diverse attitudes of those attempting to sleep on the bare boards of the train has a compassion redolent of such studies of groups by Dickens (himself a commentator on American life in previous decades). The emigrant train, which 'gets through on sufferance' (204), becomes a poignant correlative of the status of its human cargo. With relief Stevenson changes at Ogden to the Central Pacific line, having spent over ninety hours on a train which 'had begun to stink abominably...our nostrils were assailed by rancid air...as the dwelling-cars drew near, there would come a whiff of pure menagerie, only a little sourer, as from men instead of monkeys' (215). If here there are echoes of Smollett on the physical realities of social gatherings, there are also clear affinities with the unsparing realism of Zola (himself a topic of debate between Stevenson and James). Justifiably, Furnas deems *The Amateur Emigrant* 'a work of prophetic merit',⁵ pointing forward to the later fictions which foreground man's abuse of his fellow-beings. In 1893 Stevenson would write of *The Ebb-Tide*, 'If the admirers of Zola admire him for his pertinent ugliness and pessimism, I think they

should admire this', only to lament, 'Alas! Poor little tale, it is not even rancid'.⁶

Stevenson's crossing of America widens his horizons both literally and metaphorically. When a drunk is thrown off the train Stevenson realises that he 'had come among revolvers' (198). A misunderstanding in a hotel in Council Bluffs moves him to observe, 'although two nations use the same words and read the same books, intercourse is not conducted by the dictionary' (199). Various preconceptions are unsettled by reality: the waiter who serves him in Pittsburgh is 'strikingly unlike the negroes of Mrs. Beecher Stowe, or the Christy minstrels of my youth' (193). Confessing that his intention had been to assure the man that he was racially unprejudiced, Stevenson notes with endearing self-irony, 'I put my patronage away for another occasion' (194). Stevenson pre-empts any charges of superiority by precisely such ironic self-observation. Unimpressed by Chicago ('a great and gloomy city' (196)) he recalls that he had contributed to the rebuilding fund after the 1871 fire and wonders if he might have his sixpence back. Similarly, he avoids charges of unsubstantiated generalisation by taking care to root his observation of American characteristics in the evidence of specific experiences. In welcoming the absence of the constraining influence of European behavioural codes, he observes that lack of formality produces what he terms 'that uncivil kindness of the American' (206), a judgment supported by the evidence of a range of encounters with conductors, newsboys, and the like.

Above all, the journey across America brings home to Stevenson the importance of perspective, and this is reflected in the nature and substance of his narrative. In *From the Clyde to Sandy Hook* Stevenson had stressed the importance of 'the nicety with which we can perceive relations' (169). The discriminatory capacity of his intelligence is fully exemplified in *Across the Plains*. Appropriately for a scion of the great lighthouse family, the motif of light recurs. After the monotonous expanse of ocean he notes how spirits rise when the sun illuminates the detailed landscape of Pennsylvania; and, later, he expresses concern about the inefficacy of the train's lamps - for Stevenson it is essential to see. He becomes ever more aware of the vastness of America and its range of vistas. 'At sea...on the plains of Nebraska' he looks 'in vain for something new' (207). Stevenson empathises with the earliest settlers who, confronted by 'the mocking, fugitive horizon' (208), had nothing by which to measure their progress; and he notes that there is 'a sickness of vision peculiar to these empty plains' (209). In a telling irony which reflects the inter-involvement of movement and relativity of perspective, though he had

'longed for the Black Hills of Wyoming...like an ice-bound whaler for the spring' (210) he finds them 'a worse country than the other [the plains of Nebraska]', while acknowledging that by this point on the journey he was ill. In a masterly piece of counterpointing, he then offsets his own discomfort with reproduction of the letter of a boy whose brother has been killed in an Indian raid. Such expertise in the structuring of narrative substantiates James's observation that Stevenson 'had been launched into the world for a fighter with the organism of, say, a "composer", though also, it must be added, with a beautiful saving sanity'.⁷

Equally astute was James's identification of 'the love of brave words as well as brave deeds - which is simply Mr. Stevenson's essential love of style'.⁸ Stevenson is a master stylist in the best sense of the term: his style does not draw attention to itself as style but renders perfectly its material. This applies to detailed observation (the sound of grasshoppers is like clock-winding; the wooden houses of Nebraska are still sweating from the axe); but it applies equally to the rhythms and broad sweep of his prose in passages reminiscent of Walt Whitman in their celebration of the scale and diversity of the United States. It is evident also in the finely modulated prose in which Stevenson offers discerning judgement. In a section entitled 'Despised Races' he makes a spirited defence of the Chinese and their culture; likewise, there is a moving account of a family of Native Americans 'disgracefully dressed out with the sweepings of civilisation' that concludes,

The mission church is in ruins; the Rancherie, they tell me, encroached upon by Yankee newcomers; the little age of gold is over for the Indian; but he has had a breathing-space in Carmel valley before he goes down to the dust with his red fathers (223).

It is almost as if his experience of the vastness of America has fostered in Stevenson a breadth of perspective and a humane acuity of insight. James was right: 'the great note is the heroic mixture - the thing he saw, morally as well as imaginatively'.⁹

References & Further Information

¹ Robert Louis Stevenson, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes and The Amateur Emigrant*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Christopher MacLachlan (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p.134; page references hereafter

appear within the text.

² Andrew Noble, ed., *From the Clyde to California: Robert Louis Stevenson's Emigrant Journey* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1985), p.6.

³ Janet Adam Smith, *Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson: A Record of Friendship and Criticism* (London: Hart-Davis, 1948), p.148.

⁴ J.C. Furnas, *Voyage to Windward: The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), p.147.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.146.

⁶ Janet Adam Smith, *Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson*, p.225.

⁷ Janet Adam Smith, *Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson*, p.258.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.133.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.258.

(c) *The Bottle Imp*